

THE BIBLE AND THE PAINTING THAT CAME TO LIFE  
by Eddy Hall

I love the Bible. It amazes me how some preachers (not all, by any means) can take the most exciting book in the world and make it boring, how some Sunday school teachers (just some, mind you) can present Scripture in such a way that you wonder if Sunday school class will ever end. Making the Bible boring ought to be a crime.

Not that I've always felt this way. When I was in junior high, I accepted my pastor's challenge to read the Bible through in a year by reading three chapters on weekdays and five on Sundays. Two years in a row I did this. I was a fast reader, so I zipped through my three chapters of King James English in, oh, about 14 minutes a day. Not that I got much out of it. But I had (and this was the point, I thought) been a "good Christian" by doing my Bible reading.

And perhaps there is the clue. If I approach Bible reading as my "Christian duty," as something I do because that's what good Christians are supposed to do, I suspect I miss the point. Because I'm looking at it the wrong way, I fail to see what there is to see, and so it's boring.

### **A handbook for living**

When I was in college, I set out on an ambitious Bible study project. I set up a notebook that I alphabetized by topic. As I went through the Bible, whenever I came across something that I could apply, I recorded that Scripture under the relevant topic.

My goal was to do this with the whole Bible. When I was done, I would have collected all the Bible had to say about each topic. So, if I wanted to know what the Bible said about lawsuits, for example, I could turn to the L's in my notebook, read those Scriptures, and by following those guidelines, be confident that I was responding to a lawsuit in the way good Christians were supposed to. At least that was my theory.

Somewhere along the way, my project lost steam and I never finished it. Today I know that even if I had finished it, that notebook would more than likely be collecting dust somewhere. Because, even though a topical listing of Scriptures might be useful for some purposes, I now realize that as a handbook for daily life, that kind of notebook almost completely misses the point. That's partly because I've learned that Scriptures, to be rightly understood, have to be read in context, and my study method uprooted every Scripture passage from its context. But there's an even more fundamental problem with the way I was going about my Bible study. A problem rooted in the fact that I misunderstood the main purpose of Scripture.

## **Lucy's picture**

In recent years, I've come to see the Bible in a much different and much more exciting way than as a handbook for the Christian life. The first chapter of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, one of C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, opens in little Lucy's bedroom. She and her brother Edmund and their cousin Eustace were looking at Lucy's favorite picture, a framed painting of a Narnian ship. As they looked at the picture, the water and the ship began to move and before long the three children had gone through the picture frame and entered the land of Narnia.

I think the Bible is a lot like that painting. We tend to spend a lot of time looking at the Bible, studying it, analyzing it, treasuring it, even applying it. But so long as it remains lifeless, I've come to believe we're not really seeing it. Because the Bible does not exist primarily to be studied, mastered, even obeyed. The Bible is a window into the spiritual realm. It is a window through which God reveals himself to us.

As I sit in my study today, I can look at my window and notice the raindrops, some dust, a cobweb. But so long as I just study my window, the window is not serving its purpose. The window is not there to be the focus of my attention; it is there to let me see what is happening on the other side.

So it is with the Bible. The Bible doesn't exist to be the focus of our devotion. God has given us the Bible as a window through which he is revealing himself to us. Through the Bible, God opens up to us the whole spiritual realm. He invites us to see the world and life, not through just physical eyes, but through spiritual eyes, from his point of view. And then he invites us to step through the picture frame into that other realm and join him in his kingdom adventure.

## **The old and new covenants**

These two vastly different ways of coming to Scripture--as a handbook of rules and as a window through which God reveals himself to us--correspond to the two covenants. The new covenant, Paul writes, "is a covenant, not of written laws, but of the Spirit. The old way ends in death; in the new way, the Holy Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6, NLT). It is all too possible to approach the gospel as a system of written laws. Perhaps laws with the provision of grace for when I fail, but as a system of laws nonetheless. That's exactly what I was doing in my college-days Bible study project. But, Paul says, that path ends in spiritual death.

This was how the teachers of the religious law and the Pharisees of Jesus' day came to Scripture. These were the Bible scholars, the theologians. They devoted their lives to memorizing and meticulously applying the Scripture--and the rules they had derived from it--to their daily lives, and trying to get others to do the same (Matt. 23:15). Sounds pretty spiritual, doesn't it?

Yet it was to these Bible scholars that Jesus said, "Your problem is that you don't know the Scriptures, and you don't know the power of God" (Matt. 22:29). How could this be? Many of

these men could probably quote as much Scripture as Jesus could! They had devoted their lives to Scripture! Yet Jesus said they didn't know the Scripture.

Their problem was that they were reading the Scripture the wrong way--primarily as a rule book, rather than as a window through which to see God. As a result, they didn't truly know the Scripture nor did they know God or experience his power in their lives.

This is not to say, you understand, that the rules don't matter at all. It is to say that they're not the main thing. Jesus affirmed the Pharisees for keeping the rules. Then he scorched them for making the rules, rather than God's purposes, their focus (Matt. 23:23-24).

The Christian life, you see, is not a relationship with a Book. It is a relationship with a Person. The Book is priceless precisely because it is a window through which we are invited to see, then enter, to get to know the Person. If we reduce the Bible to a rule book, we've missed the point.

Christians sometimes refer to the Bible as the "ultimate authority" in our lives. This is, no doubt, well-intended, but it's simply not biblical. The Bible is authoritative because it is inspired by and because it reveals the One who is the Ultimate Authority in our lives. If I consider the Bible my ultimate authority, I am at grave risk of relating to the Bible as the Pharisees did--as little more than a rule book. The Bible only becomes God's Word to me when the Spirit gives it life, when it becomes a window on the eternal through which God is revealing himself and his purposes and his perspectives to me.

### **Can you see the ship moving?**

Don't settle for a lifeless Bible. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring it alive for you, to open up for you through the Scripture what he wants to show you of himself, his heart, his way of seeing things.

Keep asking until the picture comes to life, till you can see the ship moving, till you can feel the spray of salt water on your face and taste it on your tongue. When that happens, you'll know that you're no longer looking at the window; you're looking *through* the window into the universe on the other side.

Then, if you dare, step through the picture frame into that other world.

Then you will truly be getting into the Word.

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