

**Reading the Bible for Deep Delight**  
First Methodist Church of Tulsa  
Spring 2024

**“I see people, but they look like trees, walking”  
Understanding the Bible.**

**Mark 8:22-26** And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. <sup>23</sup> And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Do you see anything?” <sup>24</sup> And he looked up and said, “I see people, but they look like trees, walking.” <sup>25</sup> Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. <sup>26</sup> And he sent him to his home, saying, “Do not even enter the village.”

**Observations:**

**Philippians 2:1-11** So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup> Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

**Observations:**

## Questions for Reading the Bible by Alastair Roberts

### FOR NARRATIVE TEXTS

1. Are there any details, terms, or expressions that surprise you or jump out at you?
2. Are there any aspects of the passage that remind you of another passage or passages? Where have you read various details before?
3. Are there discernible literary structures?
4. If you didn't know what happened next, what would you expect? Why?
5. Choose three characters in the narrative: how do you think they are perceiving events?
6. By what means does the text characterize key figures within its narrative?
7. If you were telling this story yourself, how might it differ from the biblical account?
8. Are there any surprising omissions or absences in the story?
9. How does this narrative provide background for, anticipate, or even foreshadow later narratives?
10. To what larger narrative movements does this narrative belong? How does it serve their ends?
11. Are there other biblical narratives or texts that cite or allude to it?
12. If this narrative were removed, what would be lost to the book it is in and to the biblical narrative?

### FOR EPISTLES

1. How, in your own words, would you summarize the argument of this chapter?
2. How does this follow from or relate to the argument of the letter as a whole, or from that of the preceding chapter(s)?
3. How would you define the boundaries of this passage? Why?
4. Imagine you held the position that Paul is arguing against here: how would you argue for it? Why would it be persuasive to you?
5. Are there key metaphors underlying the argument of this passage?
6. Are there key terms or families of terms in the vocabulary of this passage?
7. What rhetorical strategies is the writer using? What is he doing in particular statements (rebuking, exhorting, encouraging, etc., etc.)?
8. How are the hearers of the epistle implicated within this text?
9. What can we discern about the implied audience from this passage?
10. What literary structures/devices do you recognize in this passage?
11. What is the structure of this passage? What literary features help us to divide and order it?
12. What scriptural allusions do you recognize in this passage?
13. Why, of all the arguments he could have made, does Paul use the arguments that he does here? If we had never read this particular passage, is this the argument that we would most likely make if we faced the same challenges? If not, why not?

## **A thousand questions to ask of the text**

### **Words**

What are the significant words?

If they are Greek, what are the Hebrew equivalents?

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Are there words that share the same root as this word?

Does this word have a picture or image or practice that it comes from?

Are there any word plays, puns, or innuendo that come from this word?

Where else is it used in the Bible? Where does it first occur?

Is it common? Is it rare? What does it tell me?

### **Places**

Where does this story, event, passage take place? What was it known for?

What does this place look like, feel like, what pictures can I show of it?

What else happened in this place, both in Bible and in history?

What would the original audience have thought of when they thought of this place?

What does the name of this place mean?

### **The metanarrative**

Where does this text fit into the larger story?

Where is it on the arc, on the progressive preparation of a people God can dwell in the midst of?

What does this have to do with what God is doing today?

Where else in the Bible does God say this, Do this, act like this? Is this the normal pattern, or is it unusual?

Does Jesus engage with this idea, subject, tradition, or place?

### **Tension**

Where is the rub?

Where does the vision of life with God given in this text clash with the worldviews around us?

Why was this text revolutionary when it first began to circulate? Was it?

### **The Moment**

What is the controlling idea?

What is the plot, and what are the subplots and minor movements?

How much do I give away from the start?

How much do I need to keep concealed in order to serve my larger arc?

How does this text confront?

What about this hurts if we take it seriously?

How does this text comfort? How does it bring hope? How does it redeem?

## **“I see people, but they look like trees, walking”- Understanding the Bible.**

Can we ever really and fully understand the Bible? No. Can we get close? Yes. The real point, as we talked about last time, is for the text to get me.

We'll look at this passage in a bit, but I want to read from Mark 8 and say something about understanding the Bible.

Leaving interpretation aside, this is a metaphor for me in reading Scripture. I read, God acts, and I have blurry vision of something going on there. I keep reading, God acts, and the image gets sharper. The more we look over the text, the more of it we see. This is what I mean when I said “meditation is mastication.” We wrestle it until it masters us.

*How to Use the Bible by Fred Sanders:*

- 1) For Communion with God - A means of grace. Meditative reading. Spiritual Memorization. Devotion. Lectio divina.*
- 2) For Practical Guidance - Seeking principles. How-To books. Topical sermons. "Searching the Scriptures" with specific situations in mind.*
- 3) For Knowledge Of its Contents - Book by book. Hermeneutics. Mastery. Stable information and insight.*

*Here's the thing: Column 1 is closest to the truth of why Scripture exists.*

*Column 1 has infinite value & depth, which Christian undergrads know but need to grow deeper into. But column 3 is (a) normative for the content of column 1 and (b) the proper business of a university.*

I would also add, column 3 is what we think about when we think about *Bible Study*, so it's not just the proper business of the university, but also of teaching and reading in the life of the church SO THAT we can participate in the heart formation that comes with column 1.

So, let's talk about how we understand the Bible. And by “how we understand” I mean, what are the tools available to us to understand the Bible.

First, there's no substitute for sitting down and reading in personal study. Read, read, read. Second, don't jump to Google or commentaries before you've put your butt in a chair and chewed the text. That's the very last step. What I've found is that after wrestling with the words and sentences and paragraphs, that when I've written down what I know, 9 times out of 10, it's pretty close to what the commentaries say. That's not a brag, but a reality of the fruit of the labor. This is the work of plowing and plodding and it is RICH work! It's satisfying and it leads not only to greater insight and understanding, but when you apply it to yourself, as you pray it, oh man, it is so, so good.

Now let's work the exercises.