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Education in Serious Joy



JOHN PIPER

Foundations for Lifelong Learning

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Foundations for Lifelong Learning

Education in Serious Joy

John Piper

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To
Tim Tomlinson
Founding President
Bethlehem College and Seminary
2009–2021

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Preface

THIS BOOK ATTEMPTS TO GIVE A GLIMPSE into the way we think about education at Bethlehem College and Seminary (www.bcsmn.edu). I hope students in high school, college, and seminary will read it.

But, as a matter of fact, the way we think about education makes the book relevant for all who want to grow in wisdom and wonder for the rest of their lives. Our aim is to equip students for lifelong learning. Therefore, this book is for anyone, at any age, who refuses to stagnate intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally.

Bethlehem College pursues this goal by focusing, as we say, on “the Great Books in light of the Greatest Book for the sake of the Great Commission.” We agree with the late David Powlison when he explained why he loved the great novels and histories:

Because you learn about people. You gain a feel for human experience. You come to understand riches and nuances that you could never understand just from knowing the circle of people you happen to know. You come to understand the

ways that people differ from each other, and the ways we are all alike—an exceedingly valuable component of wisdom. You become a bigger person with a wider scope of perception. All those things you come to know illustrate and amplify the relevance and wisdom of our God (see below, p. 36).

But what do we do with such books? And all books? And the Bible? And nature? And the world? That's what this book is about.

Six habits of mind and heart describe what we do with God's word and God's world—all of it. Observation. Understanding. Evaluation. Feeling. Application. Expression. Undergirded by a God-centered worldview, and guided by the authority of Scripture, we believe these six habits of mind and heart are the foundations of lifelong learning.

While Bethlehem College focuses on the great books in the light of the greatest Book, Bethlehem Seminary focuses with assiduous attentiveness on the great Book with the help of great pastor-scholars. We like to say that the seminary is “shepherds equipping men to treasure our sovereign God and sacred book for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ.”

But whether for those in college, or in seminary, or in the marketplace, this book is about the foundations of lifelong learning beneath all those phases of life. The book is not about the subject matter of our curriculum, but what we *do* with it—indeed what we do with the subject matter of life. How do we deal with *all* subject matter in such a way that the outcome is ever-maturing disciples of Jesus who glorify him in every sphere of life?

PREFACE

Why we call it “Education in Serious Joy” is what the introduction is about. Such an education is a lifelong joy; it never ends. We are still on the road. We invite you to join us.

Introduction

Education in Serious Joy

THIS BOOK IS FOR SERIOUS seventy-somethings and seventeen-year-olds, and everybody in between, who share our excitement about what we call “education in serious joy.” It is the overflow of our exuberance with the habits of mind and heart that we are trying to build into our lives and the lives of those we teach. We believe these habits are the pursuit of a lifetime, and therefore relevant for every stage of life.

Serious Joy

In our way of thinking, “serious joy” is not an oxymoron. “Serious joy” is not like “hot winters” or “cold summers.” It’s what the apostle Paul was referring to when he used the phrase “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” in 2 Corinthians 6:10. We believe this is really possible. It’s the experience of people whose love is big enough to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice—even at the same time, if not in the same way.

These are the kind of people we want our students—we want you, young and old—to be. Most readers probably have enough people in their life that someone is always happy and someone is always sad. So every shared happiness happens while there is sadness. And every shared sadness happens while there is happiness. When you rejoice while someone is weeping (for there is no other time in this world), this will be “serious joy.” Not sullen joy. Not morose joy. Not gloomy joy. But *serious* joy. Being serious is not the opposite of being glad. It’s the opposite of being oblivious, insensible, superficial, glib.

Joy So Prominent?

Why do we make joy so prominent in our understanding of education? Why do we even have the phrase “education in serious *joy*”? The reason has to do with the ultimate questions of why the world exists and why we exist in it. We believe that everything in this universe was created by Jesus Christ. He owns it. He holds it in existence. It exists to put his greatness and beauty and worth (his glory) on display for the everlasting enjoyment of his people.

In fact, we believe that our joy in treasuring Christ *above* all things, and *in* all things, is essential in displaying his glory. Education is the process of growing in our ability to join God in this ultimate purpose to glorify Jesus Christ. That’s why we give joy such a prominent place in our understanding of education. That’s why we have a phrase like “education in serious joy.”

Biblical Pillar

The biblical pillar for this understanding of our existence is Colossians 1:15–17:

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For *by him* all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and *for him*. And he is before all things, and *in him* all things hold together.

Christ is the beginning, the middle, and the end. He is Creator, sustainer, and goal. The words “created *for him*” do not mean for his improvement. He doesn’t have deficiencies that need remedying by creation. “*For him*” means for the praise of his glory (cf. Eph. 1:6). His perfection and fullness overflowed in creation to communicate his glory to the world.

He made it all. So he owns it all. “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof” (1 Cor. 10:26). Abraham Kuyper, who founded the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880, said in one of his most famous sentences, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’”¹ As with all ownership, therefore, the world exists for the purposes of the owner. That is, for the glory of Christ.

That is the deepest foundation of education in serious joy: all things *were made by* Christ, *belong to* Christ, and *exist for* Christ. Humans exist to magnify Christ’s worth in the world. But he is not magnified as he ought to be where humans are not satisfied in him as they ought to be—satisfied in him *above* all things, and *in* all things. Therefore joy, serious joy, is at the heart of Christ-exalting education.

1 Abraham Kuyper, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

Soul Satisfied, Christ Magnified

If that's a new thought for you—namely, Christ being magnified by our being satisfied in him—be assured its roots go back to the Bible. Paul said that his eager expectation and hope was that Christ would be magnified by his death (Phil. 1:20). Then he explained how this would happen: “for to me . . . to die is gain” (1:21). In what sense would his death be gain? He answers: “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (1:23). Death is gain because death is “better”—that is, death brings a more immediately satisfying closeness to Christ.

How then will Paul magnify Christ by his death? By experiencing Christ as gain—as satisfying—in his death. Christ will be magnified by Paul's being more satisfied in Christ than in the ordinary blessings of life. This is why we think serious joy is essential to Christ-magnifying education. Christ is *magnified* in us by our being *satisfied* in him, especially in those moments when the satisfactions of this world are taken away.

We are not the first to draw out this essential truth from Scripture. It was pivotal, for example, in the thinking of Jonathan Edwards, the brilliant eighteenth-century pastor and theologian in New England. Here is how Edwards said it:

God glorifies Himself toward the creatures also in two ways: 1. By appearing to . . . their understanding. 2. In communicating Himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in, and enjoying, the manifestations which He makes of Himself. . . . *God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in.* When those that see it delight in it, God is

more glorified than if they only see it. His glory is then received by the whole soul, both by the understanding and by the heart. . . . He that testifies [to] his idea of God's glory [doesn't] glorify God so much as he that testifies also [to] his approbation of it and his delight in it.²

There it is: "God is glorified . . . by [his glory] being rejoiced in." The difference between Edwards's expression and the way we like to say it is that ours rhymes: "God is most *glorified* in us when we are most *satisfied* in him." Christ's worth is magnified when we treasure him *above* all things and *in* all things.

Joy in a World of Suffering

This happens in the real world of suffering—*our* suffering and the suffering of *others*. Christ's worth shines the more brightly when *our* joy in him endures through pain. But what about the suffering of *others*? How does their suffering relate to our joy in Christ? We start with this observation: Christ-exalting joy in us is a living, restless, expanding reality. Then we observe this remarkable fact about our joy: it becomes greater in us when it expands to include others in it. So when we see the suffering of others, the effect it has on us is to draw out our joy in the form of compassion that wants others to share it. Joy in Christ is like a high-pressure zone in a weather system. When it gets near a low-pressure zone of suffering, a wind is created that blows from the high-pressure zone to the low-pressure zone trying to fill it with relief and joy. This wind is called love.

2 Jonathan Edwards, *The "Miscellanies,"* vol. 13, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 495, miscellany 448; emphasis added.

This is what happened among the Christians in Macedonia: “In a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy . . . overflowed in a wealth of generosity” (2 Cor. 8:2). First, joy in the gospel. Next, affliction that does not destroy the joy. Then, the overflow of that joy to others in generosity. That overflow is called love. Paul assumes that without the expanding impulse of joy toward others in need, there would be no love.

Putting it all together, I would say that the great purpose of lifelong learning—education in serious joy—is to magnify Christ by enjoying him *above* all things and *in* all things, with the kind of overflowing, Christlike joy, that is willing to suffer as it expands to include others in it. I know that’s a complex sentence. Please read it again slowly and let it sink in. The name for that process—the aim of lifelong learning—is love (cf. 2 Cor. 8:8).

Enjoying Christ *in* All Things

At least four times in the preceding paragraphs I have said that we should enjoy Christ not only *above* all things, but also *in* all things. Why do I say it like that? The first (enjoying Christ *above* all things) is obvious: if we prefer anything above Christ, we are idolaters. If he is not our supreme treasure, we devalue him. Jesus said, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:37). Paul said, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil. 3:8).

But why do we say that the aim of lifelong learning is to enjoy Christ *in* all things? One reason is that God created the material

world so that we would see him and savor him *in* it—the world itself for what it is. God did not create the pleasures of the world as temptations to idolatry. They have become that, because of sin. After the fall of the world into sin, virtually every good can be misused to replace Christ as our greatest treasure.

Sex and Food as Revelation

This is not how it was from the beginning. And this is not how it should be for those who are being made new in Christ. We know this because of the way the apostle Paul speaks about the enjoyment of created things—like food in moderation, and sex in marriage. In 1 Timothy 6:17, he says that God “richly provides us with everything to enjoy.” And he gets specific with regard to food and sex in 1 Timothy 4:3–5. He warns against false teachers who “forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.”

The enjoyments of sex in marriage and food in moderation are “richly provided” by God. They are not simply temptations. They are occasions for worship—namely, Godward thankfulness. They are “created . . . to be received *with thanksgiving*.” Created things are “made holy by the word of God and prayer.” “Those who believe and know the truth” receive them as undeserved gifts from God, feel gratitude to God for them, and offer God prayers of thanks that acknowledge him as the merciful giver. In this way, potential means of idolatry become holy means of worship.

This is what Paul has in mind when he says, “Whether you eat or drink . . . do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Eating and drinking can *replace* God or *reveal* God.

Thus, education in serious joy aims for Christ to be magnified *above* and *in* all things. But not just “in all things” as the giver to be thanked; also “in all things” as the good to be tasted. God did not create the countless varieties of enjoyments of this world only to receive thanks. He also created those enjoyments to reveal something of himself in the very pleasures. “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good” (Ps. 34:8) means that God gives his people a spiritual palate that can discern more of what God is like through the way he has revealed himself in the created world.

For example, honey reveals something of the sweetness of God’s ordinances: they are “sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb” (Ps. 19:10). The rising sun reveals something of God’s glorious joy: “The heavens declare the glory of God. . . . In them he has set a tent for the sun . . . which . . . runs its course with joy” (Ps. 19:1–5). The expectant thrill we feel at weddings is part of the pleasure we will have at the “marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev. 18:7, 9; also Matt. 22:2). The morning dew reveals something of his tender coming to an unfaithful people: “I will be like the dew to Israel” (Hos. 14:5). The fruitful showers reveal something of God’s life-giving mercies: “He will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth” (Hos. 6:3). Light (John 8:12), thunder (Ps. 29:3), vultures (Matt. 24:28), lilies (Matt. 6:28), ravens (Luke 12:24)—these and thousands of other created things were made by God not only as gifts to elicit our thanks, but also as revelatory tastes of his perfections.

Focus of Our Study

When we speak of enjoying God *in* all things, the things we have in mind include both the *word* that God inspired and the *world* that God made. We have honey and sunshine and weddings and dew and rain and light and thunder and vultures and lilies and ravens. We know these things not first from God's *word* but from his *world*. Yet I cited a Scripture to go with each one. The significance of that interweaving of world and word is that it points to our answer to the question, What is the focus of our education in serious joy? What do we actually study? If God's aim in creating and governing the world is the display of his glory, where should we focus our attention? Where will we see the glory?

Our answer is that God has two books: his inspired *word* and his created *world*. This is what we study: the Bible, on the one hand, and the whole organic complex of nature and history and human culture, on the other hand. We are not the first to call creation and Scripture God's two books.

For example, in 1559, Guido DeBrès wrote the *Belgic Confession* for the Dutch Reformed churches and said in Article 2, under the title "The Means by Which We Know God":

We know [God] by two means: first, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as *a most elegant book*, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate the invisible things of God, namely, his power and divinity, as the apostle Paul saith, Romans 1:20. All which things are sufficient to convince men, and leave them without excuse. Secondly, he

makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his *holy and divine Word*, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to his glory and our salvation.³

God created the world to communicate truth about himself. “His invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:20). But man has suppressed the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18).

God’s answer to this blindness was not to spurn the world, but to speak the word. He did this through the inspiration of Scripture and the sending of his Son. “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:1–2). We are rescued from our sin and blindness not by the revelation of God in the world, but by the heralding of the word of Christ: “Since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21).

God’s Word Sends Us to God’s World to Learn

But the decisive, saving power and authority of God’s word does not cancel out God’s world. The Bible gives the decisive meaning of all things. But the Bible itself sends us over and over again into the world for learning.

Consider the lilies; consider the birds (Matt. 6:26, 28). “Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise” (Prov.

3 Belgic Confession, Christ Reformed Church (website), accessed January 4, 2023, <https://www.crcna.org/>; emphasis added.

6:6). “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). “Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these?” (Isa. 40:26). And God says to Job, if you would be properly humbled before your God, open your eyes and consider the oceans, the dawn, the snow, the hail, the rain, the constellations, the clouds, and lions, and ravens, and mountain goats, and wild donkeys, and oxen, and the ostrich, and horse, and hawk, and eagle (Job 38–39).

In fact, think about the way the prophets and apostles and Jesus himself used language. They used analogies and figures and metaphors and similes and illustrations and parables. In all of these, they constantly assume that we have looked at the world and learned about vineyards, wine, weddings, lions, bears, horses, dogs, pigs, grasshoppers, constellations, businesses, wages, banks, fountains, springs, rivers, fig trees, olive trees, mulberry trees, thorns, wind, thunderstorms, bread, baking, armies, swords, shields, sheep, shepherds, cattle, camels, fire, green wood, dry wood, hay, stubble, jewels, gold, silver, law courts, judges, and advocates.

In other words, the Bible both commands and assumes that we will know the *world*, and not just the *word*. We will study the *general* book of God called *nature and history and culture*. And we will study the *special* book of God called *the Bible*. And the reason is that God has revealed his glory in both—and means for us to see him in both, and savor him in both, and show him to the world through both.

The two books of God are not on the same level. The Bible has supreme authority, because God gave the Bible as the key to unlock the meaning of all things. Without the truth of the Bible,

the most brilliant scholars may learn amazing truths about nature. And we may read their books and learn from them. But without the special revelation of God, they miss the main point—that everything exists to glorify Christ. Not just some generic deity, but Jesus Christ, God’s Son, the eternal second person of the Trinity. Without the special revelation of the gospel of Christ through Scripture, we remain blinded by sin. We do not see that we need a Savior and that Christ came into the world to save sinners. We do not see that the whole universe gets its ultimate meaning in relationship to him. When we miss the main reality, everything we think we have learned is skewed.

So, for Christians, lifelong learning—education in serious joy—is permeated by the study of the Bible. The Bible gives the key that unlocks the deepest meaning of everything else.

What Do We Do with God’s Books?

If we are going to spend a lifetime focusing on the glory of God revealed in these two books—the word that God inspired and the world that God made—what should we do with these two books? We hope that you put out of your mind the thought that lifelong learning is about getting degrees behind your name (whether BA, MA, DMin, or PhD). They are incidental to real learning. We also hope that you don’t think of education mainly as acquiring money-making skills. Of course, skills that enable you to function productively in your calling are important. But that is not mainly what *lifelong learning* is about. That is not mainly what we want you to do with God’s world and God’s word.

Our aim is to help you grow in the habits of mind and heart that will never leave you and will fit you for a lifetime of increasing

wisdom and wonder through all the sweet and bitter providences of life. The well-educated person is not the one with degrees, but the one who has the habits of mind and heart to go on learning for a lifetime. Specifically, to go on learning what we need in order to live in a Christ-exalting way for the rest of our lives—whatever the vocation.

Six Habits of Mind and Heart

Lifelong learning for the glory of Christ calls for continual growth in six habits of mind and heart. These are the habits we seek to instill in our students so that their education does not stop when their schooling stops. These are the habits we seek to grow in ourselves. Helping you grow in these habits over a lifetime is why I have written this book.

These habits of mind and heart apply to everything we experience, but most importantly the Bible, because the Bible provides essential light on the meaning of all other reality. Growing in these habits can be summed up like this:

We seek to grow continually in the ability:

- to *observe* the world and the word accurately and thoroughly;
- to *understand* clearly what we have observed;
- to *evaluate* fairly what we have understood by discerning what is true and valuable;
- to *feel* with proper intensity the worth, or futility, of what we have evaluated;
- to *apply* wisely and helpfully in life what we understand and feel;

- to *express* in speech and writing and deeds what we have observed, understood, evaluated, felt, and applied in such a way that its accuracy, clarity, truth, worth, and helpfulness can be known and enjoyed and applied by others for the glory of Christ.

So the habits of mind and heart are:

- observation
- understanding
- evaluation
- feeling
- application
- expression

Whether you are looking at a passage in the Bible, or at the US Constitution, or the double helix of DNA, or a mysterious pattern of scratches on your car, the habits of mind and heart are the same.

1. Observation

We want to grow in our ability to *observe* the world and word accurately and thoroughly—as the world really is. We think it is crucial to see what is really there. If we fail in this, the failure is called delusion or blindness. Not to see what is really there with accuracy and thoroughness is to enter an illusory dreamworld. Such dullness to the facts before us is not a virtue. It is not only a fault in itself, but it also will result in the distortion of our understanding and evaluation.

2. *Understanding*

We want to grow in our ability to understand clearly what we have observed. Understanding involves the severe discipline of thinking. The mind wrestles to *understand* the traits and features of what it has observed. We may observe that certain kinds of violent crime dropped from one year to the next. Then comes the step of understanding: Why did this happen? Or we might observe in the Bible that four women are mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah. Then comes the step of understanding. Why these four?

The aim of understanding when reading the Bible is to discern what the author is trying to communicate. We aim to think the author's thoughts after him. Or, more accurately, we aim to see the reality his thoughts are seeking to communicate. We aim to understand the author's purpose—ultimately, God's purpose. Otherwise, education simply becomes a reflection of our own ignorance.

3. *Evaluation*

We want to grow in our ability to evaluate fairly what we have observed and understood. We don't want to make value judgments prematurely. But neither do we want to shrink back from the judgments that must be made about truth and value on the basis of careful observation and accurate understanding.

Here is where our Christian worldview will make all the difference. We believe in truth and goodness and beauty. We believe that with the guidance of the Scriptures and the help of the Spirit, we can know the truth. Not infallibly but really. God's word is

infallible. We are not. We believe that it is virtuous for right observation and right understanding to *precede* evaluation. The opposite is to say that our judgments do not need to be based on reality. This is called prejudice. We don't like it when people evaluate us without true observation and understanding. Therefore, we ought not do it to others.

4. *Feeling*

We want to grow in our capacity to feel properly in response to what we have observed and understood and evaluated. Our feeling should be in accord with the truth and worth of what we have observed and understood. If we have observed and understood a terrible reality like hell, our feeling should be some mixture of fear and horror and compassion. If we have observed and understood a wonderful reality like heaven, then our feelings should be joy and hope and longing.

I tried to show earlier in this introduction that God is glorified not just by being known, but also by being loved, treasured, enjoyed. Therefore, our emotional response to his glory (and what opposes it) has ultimate significance. Some people think that emotions are marginal in the task of education. We regard them as essential. This means that prayer and reliance on the heart-changing power of the Holy Spirit are indispensable for lifelong education in serious joy.

5. *Application*

We want to grow in our ability to apply wisely and helpfully what we have observed and understood and evaluated and felt. It takes wisdom, not just factual knowledge, to know how to wisely and

helpfully apply what we are learning. Suppose a person is led by true observation and understanding and evaluation of his own life to feel earnestly that he should redeem the time (Eph. 5:16). Now what? What is the *application* of that insight? Only wisdom informed by Scripture and counsel and self-knowledge and circumstantial assessment and prayer-soaked meditation will lead to a fruitful application of Ephesians 5:16. A lifelong learner seeks to grow in the wise life-application of all he learns.

6. *Expression*

We want to grow in our ability to express in speech and writing and deeds what we have seen, understood, evaluated, felt, and applied. Yes, the line between application and expression is fuzzy. Expression, one could say, is a kind of application. But we hope to show why the habit of expressing what we know and feel through speaking and writing is worthy of a distinct focus. In a Christian worldview, the aim of expression is that our observation and understanding and evaluation and feeling and application will be made useful for others. In other words, as with other kinds of application, the aim is love. Throughout our lives, we long to grow in our effectiveness in expressing ourselves in a way that helps others see and savor and show the glory of God.

Invitation to Join Us

This brings us back to our original reason for being. God created his *world* and inspired his *word* to display his glory. A well-educated person sees the glory of God in the word that God inspired and in the world that God made. An educated person understands God's glory and evaluates it and feels it and applies

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it and expresses it for others to see and enjoy. That outward bent is called love. Therefore, the aim of lifelong learning is to grow in our ability to glorify God and love people. We think the six habits of mind and heart are a description of that process of growth. We invite you to join us.

Observation

We want to grow for a lifetime in our ability to observe the world and the word accurately and thoroughly.

BY *OBSERVING*, WE MEAN seeing or hearing or tasting or smelling or touching what is really there.

But that could be misleading. We don't mean that the only reality is what we experience by our five natural senses. The Bible speaks of the "eyes of the heart," not just the head. May "the *eyes of your hearts* [be] enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you" (Eph. 1:18). There are unseen realities that Christians hope for.

This conviction pervades the Bible. Jesus indicted some people in his day because "seeing they do not see" (Matt. 13:13). Paul said that Christians in this age "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). Hebrews 11:1 says that "faith is the conviction of things not seen." Peter says, "Though you have not seen [Christ], you love

him” (1 Pet. 1:8). All these texts teach us that there is reality that is not immediately observable by our five senses.

But that does not mean it can't be known by “observation.” We just need to make sure that we don't have a constricted view of observation that arbitrarily limits the kind of reality that we can observe. All five of our natural senses have spiritual counterparts. There is spiritual seeing, spiritual hearing, spiritual touching, spiritual smelling, and spiritual tasting.

Seeing

For example, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:4 that “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from *seeing* the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” This implies that with *natural* sight, we see the facts of Christ's life as they appear in the story of the gospel. But Satan works in such a way that our *spiritual* sight fails to see in that story the “light . . . of the glory of Christ.” God turns this around in 2 Corinthians 4:6: “God . . . has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” In other words, natural seeing has its counterpart in spiritual seeing.

Hearing

Paul says that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). But why is it that many hear and do *not* have faith? Because, Jesus said, “hearing they do not hear” (Matt. 13:13). They hear the words, but they do not hear the voice of Christ. They do not discern the authenticating voice of the shepherd. “The sheep follow him, for they know his voice” (John

10:4). When Jesus said, “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:23), he meant that natural ears have their counterpart in spiritual ears. There is natural hearing and spiritual hearing.

Touching

The apostle John spoke of touching Jesus Christ who is the embodiment of eternal life: “That which was from the beginning, which we have . . . touched with our hands, . . . the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us” (1 John 1:1–2). It is as though there were spiritual eyes in the fingers of the apostles—as if touching was seeing.

Jesus spoke just that way when he said to the frightened apostles after the resurrection, “Touch me, and *see*. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39). And again he said to doubting Thomas, “Put your finger here, and *see* my hands. . . . Do not disbelieve, but believe” (John 20:27). Touch and *see*. There is a natural touching that does not “observe” who Christ is, and there is a spiritual touching that falls down and says, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28).

Smelling

There is a spiritual smelling that discerns the fragrance of Christ. Paul said, “Through us [God] spreads the *fragrance* of the knowledge of [Christ] everywhere. For we are the *aroma* of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life” (2 Cor. 2:14–16). The point is that there is true spiritual discernment (smell) of Christ as life-giving, and there is the failure of that discernment which only “smells” Christ as death.

Tasting

When we think of spiritual tasting, we might be tempted to think of the Lord's Supper and the tasting of the actual material bread and cup. That would not be wrong. But the New Testament does not make that connection. Rather Peter says, to born-again Christians, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have *tasted* that the Lord is good" (1 Pet. 2:2–3). When we are born again, it's as though our hearts are given new tastebuds that can taste the sweetness of Christ and his love for us. As with touching, it's as though there are eyes in the tastebuds of the soul: "Oh, taste and *see* that the LORD is good!" (Ps. 34:8).

No Merely Natural World

When we define *observing* as seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching what is really there, we don't confine this act of observing to natural, physical acts of the senses. In fact, we believe that all of the material world, because it is created by a self-revealing God, reveals something of God not only to our natural senses but also to our spiritual senses—if they are alive. As Jonathan Edwards wrote:

God is infinitely the greatest being . . . ; all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation is but the reflection of the diffused beams of that being who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory.¹

1 Jonathan Edwards, *Two Dissertations: The Nature of True Virtue*, ed. Paul Ramsey, vol. 8, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 550–51.

The natural beauty of creation reveals the spiritual beauty of God. Poets have tried to capture the reality of those “diffused beams” of God’s reality in what he has made. For example, Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote in his famous poem “God’s Grandeur”:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.²

Elizabeth Barrett Browning pointed to the same divine penetration of material creation in her epic poem *Aurora Leigh*, written in 1856:

Natural things
And spiritual,—who separates those two
In art, in morals, or the social drift
Tears up the bond of nature and brings death,
Paints futile pictures, writes unreal verse,
Leads vulgar days, deals ignorantly with men,
Is wrong, in short, at all points. . . .
No pebble at your foot, but proves a sphere;
No chaffinch, but implies the cherubim;
And (glancing on my own thin, veined wrist),
In such a little tremor of the blood
The whole strong clamour of a vehement soul
Doth utter itself distinct. Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;

2 Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur” Poetry Out Loud, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.poetryoutloud.org/>.

But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.³

There is no merely natural world. Everything in the world shines with the luster of divinity, and echoes the voice of eternity, and is scented with the fragrance of heaven, and seasoned with the spice of God's wisdom, and bears the texture of his character.

If we are fully alive to God's world, every act of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching will be both natural and supernatural. We will see the thing God made, and the God-like reality it reveals. Everything that God created unveils something of God, if we only have the natural and spiritual powers of observation to detect it. This is why God gave us five natural senses, and why all of them have spiritual counterparts that come alive when we are born again. Then it can be said that seeing we see, and hearing we hear.

Eternal Significance of the Material World

It would be a serious mistake, however, to conclude from what we have said so far that the importance of the natural world disappears when supernatural glimpses of God appear. The created things of this world are not like annoying curtains that need to be thrown aside to see the concealed glory. If you throw aside the sun, the radiance of God in it vanishes (Ps. 19:4–5). If you throw aside the thunder, the voice of God in it is silenced (Ps. 29:3).

3 Cited in "Earth's Crammed with Heaven," Stephen Crippen (website), June 24, 2018, <https://www.stephencrippen.com/>.

The created world is not incidental to God's self-revealing purposes, as if once we see him, we can dispense with the material world. God does not see it that way. He could have created a world without matter—without material things. He could have created only spirits with all the moral qualities that humans display. But he did not do it that way. In fact, given the exuberance of the vast diversity of created wonders, God surely delighted in creating material things—from human bodies to immeasurable galaxies. C. S. Lewis says:

There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why He uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it.⁴

Instead of preferring an immaterial spirit world, (1) God created matter. (2) He designed it to reveal (not conceal) something of himself. (3) He entered into matter as the God-man, Jesus Christ. (4) He communicated his word by means of matter (human language spoken and written). (5) He taught that, in some form, matter would exist forever. And (6) he commanded us to observe matter and learn what it teaches.

How We Know Matter Matters

Let's take those six affirmations of matter one at a time and let the Bible shed light on each one.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 63–64.

OBSERVATION

1. God created matter.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
(Gen. 1:1)

God made the world and everything in it. (Acts 17:24)

[He is the one] for whom and by whom all things exist. (Heb 2:10)

[God] created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it. (Rev. 10:6)

2. God designed every kind of matter to reveal (not conceal) something of himself.

The heavens declare the glory of God. (Ps. 19:1)

O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom have you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures. (Ps. 104:24)

He did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness. (Acts 14:17)

What can be known about God is plain to [all humans], because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly

perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. (Rom. 1:19–20)

3. God entered into matter as the God-man, Jesus Christ.

See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. (Luke 24:39)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1, 14)

When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman. (Gal. 4:4)

In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. (Col. 1:19)

In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. (Col. 2:9)

4. God communicated his word by means of matter (human language spoken and written).

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Pet. 1:20–21)

I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. (3 John 13)

5. God taught that, in some form, matter would exist forever. It is not temporary, as if it would be discarded when this age is over. The following passages point to the material reality of Jesus's resurrection body and the bodily resurrection of all Christians, and the renewal, not the annihilation, of the material world.

[In his resurrection body] Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." (Luke 24:36–39)

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Rom. 8:20–21)

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.

It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body [the same body, but much more]. (1 Cor. 15:42–44)

While we are still in this tent [earthly bodies], we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed [bodiless spirits], but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life [something not less than physical bodies, but more]. (2 Cor. 5:4)

[At his second coming, Christ] will transform our lowly [material] bodies to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Phil. 3:21)

6. Therefore, God commanded us to pay attention to matter. It is not insignificant. It is not temporary. It is given eternal dignity since the very Son of God exists as the God-man forever. The two natures of Christ, divine and human, united in one person as Creator and created, is an eternal witness to God's intention that the created world be an everlasting witness to God's nature, like a diamond with innumerable facets providing us with endless discoveries of God's infinite fullness. The command to pay attention will be valid forever.

But *ask the beasts*, and they will teach you;
 the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you;
 or the bushes of the earth, and *they will teach you*;
 and the fish of the sea will declare to you.

Who among all these does not know
 that the hand of the LORD has done this? (Job 12:7–9)

Go to the ant, O sluggard;
consider her ways, and be wise. (Prov. 6:6)

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? . . . *Consider the lilies* of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. (Matt. 6:26–29)

In fact, as we saw in the introduction, we have a call to observe the world in the very way the prophets and apostles and Jesus himself use language. They use analogies and figures and metaphors and similes and illustrations and parables. In all of these, they constantly assume that we have looked at the world and learned about vineyards, wine, weddings, lions, bears, horses, dogs, pigs, grasshoppers, constellations—you get the idea. I don't need to finish the list (see p. 11).

Obvious: Something to Be Observed

Pause here and consider the obvious implication of what we have said—namely, that there is an objective world outside our subjective consciousness to be observed. God and his creation exist outside of me, independently of me. I don't—you don't—create God or his ways or his thoughts or his world. Those are simply givens. We either see them accurately or we deceive ourselves. Even if millions say the sun is not shining, it shines. And the tiny minority who sees it, and says so, is not foolish.

Why would we pause to say something so obvious? Because many today are ambivalent about believing in objective reality. On

the one hand, when their own bank account is at stake, they insist on objectively real money and objectively real calculations. At that point, they insist that there is objective right and wrong. They will not tolerate a bank employee saying that a miscalculation doesn't exist just because he does not want it to exist. There is objective reality. Mathematical calculations are not a matter of preference.

On the other hand, many of those same people who say they believe in objective reality when their money is at stake deny that there is such objective reality in other areas of their lives, for example, whether there is such an objective, God-created reality as male and female, or whether one can make of one's sexual being whatever one likes. Carl Trueman describes the present situation like this: "We all live in a world in which it is increasingly easy to imagine that reality is something we can manipulate according to our own wills and desires, and not something that we necessarily need to conform ourselves to or passively accept."⁵

In 1947, C. S. Lewis described the same denial of objective reality. In his book *The Abolition of Man*, he cited some modern educators who claimed that observations about objective reality are really just expressions of subjective feelings. The educators said:

When the man said, *This is sublime*, he appeared to be making a remark about the waterfall. . . . Actually . . . he was not making a remark about the waterfall, but a remark about his own feelings. What he was saying was really *I have feelings associated in my mind with the word "Sublime,"* or shortly, I have sublime feelings. . . . This confusion is continually present in language

5 Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 41.

as we use it. We appear to be saying something very important about something; and actually we are only saying something about our own feelings.⁶

Over against this view, Lewis defends what he calls “the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are.” The kind of thing the universe is! Yes. There really is something there to be observed. We are not trapped in the tiny cell of our own egos with nothing but mirrors on the walls. The excitement of learning is really possible. There is a whole world of wonders to discover if we are humble enough to observe what is really there.

I hope that you can see why we devote so much emphasis to the foundational habit of lifelong learning called “observation.” We really believe that there is something there to observe. It is not a creation of our own imagination. It is rooted in the absolute reality of God, and then in his creation of a real world—a world with such God-intended design that it actually communicates something of the reality of God himself.

We hope you also see how this is absolutely foundational to all the habits of mind that follow. If there is nothing objective to *observe*, there is nothing to *understand*, nothing to *evaluate*. And all our *feelings*, therefore, have no more validity than a blowing leaf. One person’s admiration of sacrificial love and another’s disgust are equally valid. Because there is no objective reality that would make one feeling more fitting than another.

6 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 13–14.

What Shall We Observe?

Even though I can't comment on every possible reality to observe, it may be helpful to mention a few, as a way of stirring up your desire to be as attentive as possible. Let's take our cues from the Bible itself.

Observing Yourself

Here we meet several paradoxes. One is that introspection is both necessary and dangerous. You need to do serious self-observation from time to time if you are to truly know yourself. Yet we all know that there is such a thing as "morbid introspection" because one can easily lose touch with the world outside oneself where real health and transformation is found.

Another paradox is that focusing on one's happiness or sadness, for example, as a way of truly observing the nature of happiness and sadness, does not work. C. S. Lewis explains:

You cannot *study* Pleasure in the moment of the nuptial embrace, nor repentance while repenting, nor analyze the nature of humour while roaring with laughter. But when else can you really know these things? "If only my toothache would stop, I could write another chapter about Pain." But once it stops, what do I know about pain?⁷

Nevertheless, in spite of paradoxes and obstacles, we must do the best we can. Because the Bible calls us to self-observation:

7 C. S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 65–66.

OBSERVATION

Let us test and examine our ways,
and return to the LORD! (Lam. 3:40)

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. (Hag. 1:5)

Watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life. (Luke 21:34)

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. (Acts 20:28)

Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. (1 Cor. 11:28)

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! (2 Cor. 13:5)

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. (1 Tim. 4:16)

We have found that a well-balanced and honest observation of our own emotions, thoughts, motivations, and behaviors, while not losing sight of the forgiving mercies of God in Christ, is a vital key for understanding other people with true empathy and caution.

Observing Others

What an endless education there is in being a careful student of other people's behavior and how they express their emotions

and thoughts. One of the marks of psychopathy is to be utterly out of touch with other people's emotions. And one of the marks of personal health and maturity is to be able to get inside someone's skin, so to speak, and to some extent grasp what they are thinking and feeling, all the while knowing how fallible we are. This is, in fact, a key to loving others as we ourselves would like to be loved.

When Hebrews 10:24 is translated, "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works," it blunts the force of the original Greek, which says, literally, "Let us *consider each other* for the stirring up of love and good works." There's no *how* in the original; the direct object of "consider" is "each other." It is a call to study each other. Observe each other carefully enough that you can stir up each other's motivation to love.

Leaders come in for a special focus of observation. "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith" (Heb. 13:7). The apostle Paul knew the burden of being observed as a leader and did not shy away from it. "Be imitators of me" (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1). "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things" (Phil. 4:9). And when people observe Paul and live after his pattern, he tells the rest to "fix your eyes on those who walk according to the example that you have in us" (Phil. 3:17).

Observing men and women in the varied affairs of life is one of the most interesting and fruitful aspects of lifelong learning. But it does have its limits. The book of Ecclesiastes documents the futility of merely observing human life under the sun:

“I applied my heart . . . to see the business that is done on earth. . . . I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun” (Eccl. 8:16–17; cf. 3:10–11).

Which reminds us that we need the help of others to observe human behavior with true insight. This happens for us largely through books, and through *the* book, the Bible. For example, Christian counselor and teacher David Powlison (1949–2019) explained how his own observation of human nature was profoundly deepened by reading great literature, especially novels and history. He mentioned Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and Mark Helprin’s *A Soldier of the Great War*:

Of course, I love [them] in a different way than I love Scripture. But alongside Scripture, I most love novels and histories. Why? Because you learn about people. You gain a feel for human experience. You come to understand riches and nuances that you could never understand just from knowing the circle of people you happen to know. You come to understand the ways that people differ from each other, and the ways we are all alike—an exceedingly valuable component of wisdom. You become a bigger person with a wider scope of perception. All those things you come to know illustrate and amplify the relevance and wisdom of our God.⁸

8 David Powlison, “A Novel Every Christian Should Consider Reading,” Justin Taylor blog, The Gospel Coalition, August 29, 2014, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>. This quote from David Powlison is one of the reasons I love the pedagogical strategy of Bethlehem College with its motto: “Great Books in the light of the Greatest Book for the sake of the Great Commission” (<https://bcsmn.edu/college/>).

Nothing can replace Scripture as the infallible word of God about human nature. Therefore, lifelong learning will always be a combination of observing real people, reading the best stories and analyses of people, and going deep with God's witness to the deep things of human nature that we cannot know any other way. David Powlison was absolutely confident that the counsel of Christ was the decisive, indispensable, finally authoritative word of God over against the world. But he knew that the world was a treasure chest of discovery awaiting Christ as the key.

Observing the Word

The very existence of the Bible is a trumpet blast about the importance of learning to read. And learning to read means learning to observe letters that make up words, and words that make up phrases, and phrases that make up sentences, and sentences that make up paragraphs, and how all of that works to communicate reality. The most important argument for literacy all over the world is that God has revealed himself infallibly in a *book*.

The fact that the Bible is a book and the fact that it is inspired by God—those two facts are laden with implications for how to read the book. On the one hand, it is a book composed with ordinary human language that needs to be understood—it is, after all, a real human book. On the other hand, it is luminous with the supernatural light of divine glory. Which means that the Bible calls for more than your natural kind of reading. Not less. But more. Natural *and* supernatural. If either is missing, we will misread God's word.⁹

⁹ That's the main point of my book *Reading the Bible Supernaturally: Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

Jesus put a huge emphasis on reading the Bible correctly. Six times he said the astonishing and indicting words to the Jewish leaders of his day, “Have you not read?” (Matt. 12:3–5; cf. 19:4; 21:16, 42; 22:31). The implication was this: for all their reading and their knowledge of what they read, it is as though they had not read it. That is a serious warning and challenge to all of us: read God’s word well. Don’t play games with it. Don’t read your own ideas into a text. Read God’s ideas out of the text. Let Jesus’s words be a summons to lifelong growth in reading well. And that means, first, observing well.

Reading Is Observing

One might think reading is a substitute for observing. You can observe a crime being committed, or you can read about a crime being committed. True. But reading is not a substitute for observing. It is the replacement of one kind of observing for another kind. If we observe the world only through books, even *the* book, we will not be authentic people. The Bible, and all great books, send us from books back to flesh-and-blood people. But if we never observe the world through books, especially *the* book, we will be very limited in what we can know.

The reason is that daily life, even if we are world travelers (which most people aren’t), is so much more limited than the world that opens to us through books. Other worlds, other times, other ways of seeing, can be ours through what we read. And the Bible is the compass that keeps all our reading from unfruitful directions. Being saturated with the Bible enables us to test all things and hold fast the good (1 Thess. 5:21) in everything we read.¹⁰

¹⁰ Whole books have been written about the kind of observation that makes reading fruitful. We recommend Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a*

Coming to Terms

In all careful reading, there are two basic acts of observation. The first is “coming to terms.” If reading is to be fruitful, a reader must “come to terms” with an author. That means the reader and author must see the same meaning in the words that are used. To quote Mortimer Adler, “If the author uses a word in one meaning, and the reader reads it in another, words have passed between them, but they have not come to terms. . . . For the communication to be successfully completed, therefore, it is necessary for the two parties to use the same words *with the same meanings*—in short, to come to terms. When that happens, communication happens, the miracle of two minds with but a single thought.”¹¹

Relating Propositions to Each Other

Actually, that’s not quite accurate. Accurate communication does not just depend on coming to terms. It depends as well, as Adler also says, on observing propositions and their relationship to each other. This is the second basic aspect of observational reading. Words or terms by themselves do not communicate anything clearly. We need a context. That context consists not only in other words, but in the grouping of words into sentences. When those sentences assert something, we call them propositions. It is absolutely crucial in reading to observe not only the words but also how they become propositions and how those propositions relate to each other. Until that happens, communication is only partial.

Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading (New York: Touchstone, 1972); Andrew Naselli, *How to Read a Book: Advice for Christian Readers* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2024); Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally* (see esp. chap. 23).

11 Adler and Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, 96–97.

Most of us do this intuitively without thinking about it. That's good. But the treasures of the Bible, and the treasures of the best writing in general, will not reveal themselves without the mind's more consciously and carefully asking about what the propositions are and how they are related. For example, consider the propositions in Romans 1:14–17 (with the connecting words I've italicized):

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. *So* I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. *For* I am not ashamed of the gospel, *for* it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. *For* in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith.

The “So” at the beginning of verse 15 means that Paul's eagerness to preach in Rome grows out of his sense of indebtedness to all people expressed in verse 14. But the “For” at the beginning of verse 16 shows that his eagerness to preach the gospel also stems from the fact that he is not ashamed of the gospel. And the “for” in the middle of verse 16 shows why Paul is not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation. And then the “For” at the beginning of verse 17 gives the reason that the gospel is the power of God, namely, that in it the righteousness of God is revealed. So, there are five propositions, and their relationships are signaled by the connecting words “so” and “for” (three times). This kind of observation in reading sets the stage for “understanding” in the next chapter.

When words become “terms,” and when sentences become logically connected “propositions,” then the miracle of understanding can happen—“the miracle of two minds with but a single thought.”

Observing Jesus

In all our observing of the world and the word, the most important reality to see is Christ. This is why all creation exists. “All things were created through him and for him” (Col. 1:16). “For him” means that every created thing exists to put the excellencies of Christ on display. Not surprisingly, then, Jesus said that not only the world, but the whole Bible points to him as well: “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

Implicitly and explicitly the Bible tells us to *observe Jesus*. “Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, *consider* [observe carefully] *Jesus*, the apostle and high priest of our confession” (Heb. 3:1). Nothing is more important to observe in all our observing than Jesus himself, especially as he shines in “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4).

How to Observe

Implicit in all we have said about the habit of observing are pointers for how to do it. But we will close this chapter simply by making some of them explicit.

1. Observe the word and the world humbly and prayerfully.

We are not God. We are not the measure of truth or goodness or beauty. God is. He has revealed himself profoundly in his world and decisively in his word. That reality is outside of us. We do not make it what it is. It is what it is. Ours is to see and wonder. Ours is not to create meaning, but to find it. All of this implies humility.

It also implies the need for God's help. We are finite, fallible, and fallen. Without God's merciful rescue through Christ, what we observe will be distorted by our own pride and fear and greed. Therefore, we pray. We ask that God would open our eyes to see what is really there. "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law" (Ps. 119:18).

That same prayer is needed for all observation, not just biblical observation. For the sake of lifelong learning, let every day begin with, "O Lord, have mercy, for Christ's sake, and grant that I see truly today. Open my eyes at every point to see the reality that your word and your world are meant to reveal."

2. *Observe the word and the world patiently and assiduously.*

In the appendix to this book is a well-known story of Agassiz and the fish. For some of us, reading it was a pivotal moment in the discovery of the importance of patient, assiduous observation. It tells the story of Harvard professor Louis Agassiz (1807–1873) presenting an aspiring naturalist with a dead fish with the instructions to observe what he saw and report. After ten minutes, the student thought he had seen what there was to see. But when he reported to the professor, the response was, *keep looking*:

"That is good, that is good!" he repeated, "but that is not all; go on." And so for three long days, he placed that fish before my eyes, forbidding me to look at anything else, or to use any artificial aid. "Look, look, look," was his repeated injunction.¹²

¹² Horace E. Scudder, ed., *American Poems: Longfellow, Whittier, Bryant, Holmes, Lowell, Emerson; with Biographical Sketches and Notes*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton, Osgood, 1879).

After three days, he had seen more than he ever dreamed. You might not think that a fish is worth three days out of your life. But I promise you, there are passages in God’s word and glories in God’s world that are worth three hours or three days of your closest observation. Most people make the mistake of thinking that if they can’t see something worth seeing in a few minutes, then it’s time to move on—or maybe it’s time to open a commentary and let other people do the discovery for us. But many of us have learned that with patience and aggressive attentiveness, there is more to see than you ever dreamed.

The esteemed historian of American history David McCullough (1933–2022) knew the story of Agassiz and the fish, and kept the saying on his desk, “Look at your fish.” McCullough told his students, “Insight comes, more often than not, from looking at what’s been on the table all along, in front of everybody, rather than from discovering something new.”¹³

Observation is active. Many of us have been misled into thinking that observing, looking, watching (like TV or online streaming) is passive. What there is to see will just happen to us. We tend to think that the thing watched is active, but we are passive.

That may be true for entertainment. But it is not true for lifelong learning. The human mind was not meant to be a sponge. It was meant to be energetically active in aggressively looking for the clues of meaning. The Christian mind hears the voice of conscience: *Look! Listen! Attend carefully to what you are seeing. Spot clues. Be aggressively observant. Be unremitting in your attentiveness. Be unwaveringly watchful. Make connections. Notice patterns. Ask questions.*

13 Cited in Austin Kleon, “Look at Your Fish,” Austin Kleon (website), September 17, 2018, <https://austinkleon.com/>.

Yes, a Christian assumption lies behind this aggressive attentiveness. The assumption is that we are not on this planet to be passively entertained, but to be actively loving. We are actively looking at the world and the word; the aim is that we might live a wiser and more loving life. Observing the repetition of a phrase in a paragraph might point to a life-giving insight. The shape of the paw print in the snow might tell the hunter where his family's next meal is hiding. The tear in a woman's eyes might prepare you for a more fruitful counseling session. If we don't see what is really there, we won't serve as we ought.

3. Observe the word and the world accurately and thoroughly.

When Jesus said that “seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear” (Matt. 13:13), and when he asked the ever-reading religious leaders of his day, “Have you never read?” (Matt. 21:16), he was making clear that it is possible to see partially and inaccurately. From beginning to end, the Bible warns against being “deceived.” “Do not be deceived” (1 Cor. 6:9; 15:33; Gal. 6:7; James 1:16). Which means, make sure that what you see is what is really there.

When we encourage you to observe *thoroughly*, we don't mean exhaustively. No one can do that except God. For finite people, we always have more to see. What we mean is: strive to see enough of what is there so that the conclusions you draw from it are not inaccurate. Thoroughness is seeing enough to confirm accuracy. The aim is not omniscience, but rather to draw out truth from observing what is really there in the word or in the world. Thoroughness means that we have seen enough so that there is good reason to think that what we have seen is really the way it is.

4. *Give special effort to observing what will help you be fruitful in your various callings.*

There are innumerable realities to observe. No one but God can look at all of them, let alone look with aggressive attentiveness. We must be selective. We only have one life to live in this age. A third of it is spent sleeping. God urges us, “Look carefully then [observe!] how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15–16). “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time” (Col. 4:5).

Our callings determine our priorities for observation. Are you a parent? Do you have a parent? Are you a brother or sister? Mother? Father? Grandparent? Grandchild? Neighbor? Employee? Supervisor? Owner? Landlord? Scientist? Church member? Elder? Teacher? Coach? Citizen? Mayor? Each of your callings gives focus to what you spend your time observing—what parts of the *word* you observe most closely, what aspects of this *world* you study most carefully. Wherever God has placed you in your relationships is a calling on your life to work “not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man” (Eph. 6:6–7).

When Paul says to Timothy, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed” (2 Tim. 2:15), the principle applies to all of us, not just to pastors and elders who teach God’s word. The pursuit of excellence in our callings is not about impressing people. It’s about honoring our Lord. We observe his word and his world to know the truth and to be wise in our service.

Blessed Eyes

The first and most basic habit of the heart and mind in our pilgrimage of lifelong learning is *observation*. It is a delight and a duty. The word and the world are given to us for our joy and for our fruitfulness.

Clyde Kilby (1902–1986), who did more than any other person to introduce C. S. Lewis to Americans, made resolutions for his own joy and healthy usefulness. One of them was to engage in a kind of observation that simply delights:

I shall open my eyes and ears. Once every day I shall simply stare at a tree, a flower, a cloud, or a person. I shall not then be concerned at all to ask what they are but simply be glad that they are. I shall joyfully allow them the mystery of what Lewis calls their “divine, magical, terrifying, and ecstatic” existence.¹⁴

Such delight is a gift of God. In that moment of delight, we are not strategizing or planning. Self-conscious gladness is self-defeating. Nevertheless, the Christian heart knows that all God’s gifts are enjoyed most fully when the gladness overflows for the good of others. This is why observation is also a duty. When we see God for who he is, really see him, the impulse to rejoice and the impulse to love are one. Then it may be truly said, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!” (Luke 10:23).

¹⁴ John Piper, “Clyde Kilby’s Resolutions for Mental Health and for Staying Alive to God in Nature,” *Desiring God*, August 27, 1990, <https://www.desiringgod.org/>.