



BROADCAST TALKS

Enjoying the Bible

by Matthew Mullins

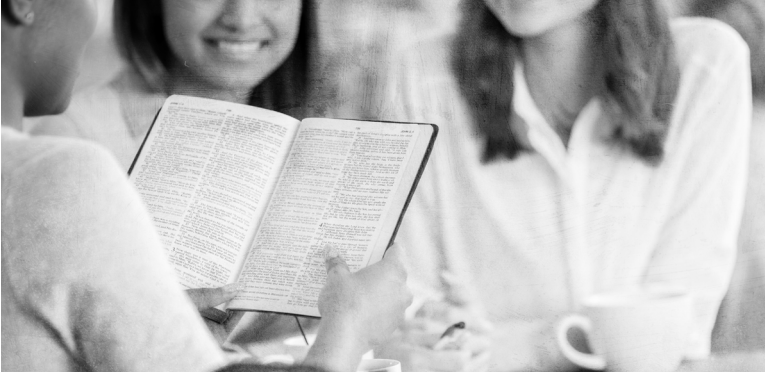


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Matthew Mullins is Associate Professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University. He joined the Department of Language and Literature at OBU in 2024, having taught at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary from 2012 to 2024. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He teaches courses in American literature, English Composition, and the Western Civilization sequence. His research focuses on contemporary literature, and his academic articles have appeared in journals such as *African American Review*, *Arizona Quarterly*, and *Christianity and Literature*. Beyond academia, his essays and reviews frequently appear in popular outlets such as *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Christianity Today*, and *American Book Review*. Mullins's book, *Enjoying the Bible: Literary Approaches to Loving the Scriptures*, was published in 2021 by Baker Academic and won an Award of Merit in *Christianity Today's* 2022 Book Awards.

The following is adapted from a May 2024 livestream interview with Matthew Mullins, conducted by Brian Rall, City Director, CSLI—Seattle, titled *Enjoying the Bible: Literary Approaches to Loving the Scriptures*.

BROADCAST TALKS presents ideas to cultivate Christ-like thinking and living. Each issue features a transcription of a talk presented at an event of the C.S. Lewis Institute.



I'm always curious to ask authors what motivated them to write a book. When I think about writing a book, it just seems like an elaborate self-punishment, right? What went into your decision to write this book [*Enjoying the Bible: Literary Approaches to Loving the Scriptures*]?

There was a little bit of suffering, I will confess. But this book came about after some ten years of teaching literature in a unique context here in a seminary and Christian college. I kept noticing that my students didn't really have any troubles or didn't express any discontent when it came to reading Psalms or Ecclesiastes or Proverbs or much of the prophets, and even throughout the New Testament. But whenever we would come to units on poetry in my literature classes, they would bemoan the difficulty of reading poetry and say things like, "Why doesn't the writer just come out and say what she means?" That's been historically for many of us a common complaint. So I started sensing this weird dissonance: "Why are they never complaining about the difficulty of the poetry they find in the Scriptures?" I started to think, "Well, either they're not reading it like it's poetry or those poems are really easy to understand, and all these poems from much more relatable contexts are just super difficult." So I tried to diagnose and then address that disconnect and hopefully help people enjoy reading poetry in general and as an avenue for enjoying the Bible more deeply.

When preparing for this event, I thought I might say there could be no better person in the world to discuss poetry with than Matthew Mullins. Then I thought, “Wait a minute. I know only two people in the world who read poetry,” right? I love the titles of your chapters. The introduction of your book is called, “Why We Hate Poetry and Why It Matters.” I imagine there’s a big audience for that. But besides making us laugh at that truism, why do we have such a contentious relationship with poetry? And what does that have to do with reading the Bible well?

I have two answers to the why question: Ben Lerner, who is a poet—I’m borrowing one of his answers. He says poems exist to help us attempt to express or to take in things that we can’t quite put into words—feelings or thoughts that we can’t quite articulate in language, and so, by definition, poems ultimately fail, because they’re trying to reach for something that is a bit beyond reachable. That’s one reason why poetry frustrates people. Another answer that I have and that I pursue in the book: so much of the communication—not only written, but especially written—that we regularly encounter is designed primarily to communicate information that we can assimilate; we know we understand what’s being said when we can rearticulate it in our own words. We’re like, “Okay. Now I understand what’s being said. I’m done with that.” But poems aren’t like that. They’re often much denser, and the connotations are really rich. Every word is doing a lot of work, so they’re frequently irreducible to just a singular bit of information. I think it frustrates us, and we’re like, “Okay. Well just get to the point.”

And then the second part of the question: Why is this relevant to reading the Bible? A huge chunk of the Bible is poems, but then also, from a devotional perspective, frequently the biblical text is not only trying to tell us a bit of information; often it is trying to perplex us. I don’t think confuse us, but perplex us, to make things a little more complicated and a little less simple, given that God’s ways are so much greater than our own. It’s an invitation to struggle with the text a little, to sit with paradox

and even contradiction sometimes, not as a means of saying, “Well, I can’t know what’s going on,” but as a means of just sitting there to commune with God, through trying to grapple with God’s Word. So that’s why this question about the difficulty or the hatred of poetry is really relevant to reading the Bible. Because we miss out on opportunities to commune with our Maker through the Scriptures when we just say, “Let’s get to the point.”

I think one of the key arguments in your book is that, when we want to understand every text and look at it as a main idea and its application, we have allowed the hermeneutics of information to become a one-size-fits-all approach that shapes the way we read everything, even texts whose purpose is not only to inform our heads, but also to move our hearts. So many people operate on the assumption that if I can get just a little more information about the Bible, then I might be able to live a fuller and more joyful Christian life. But this goes directly to that whole issue of heart and mind, doesn’t it? More specifically, what is it that actually changes people? Is it what they believe intellectually? Or is it what they worship and what they desire?

I’m pretty heavily influenced by the Christian philosopher James K.A. Smith. A good introduction to his work, and a text that was certainly influential on my book, is called *You Are What You Love*. It’s a condensed and very accessible version of a much more academic trilogy of books he published over many years. Throughout his work, specifically in the realm of Christian higher education, but also, I think, for the Protestant church more broadly, Smith is trying to reintroduce an emphasis on the body and the heart and on habits and embodiedness as being important to the Christian faith. It’s not that belief or ideas are unimportant; it’s trying to expand our understanding of what it means to believe a thing. We can be like the demons and believe that Christ is the Son of God, and yet the belief doesn’t transform us into Christ followers. And that’s where, for my own work, Smith has been very helpful for me when it comes to

reading the Bible. If we think about it exclusively as, “I need to figure out what God is telling me to do,” or, “What is the appropriate information here that I need to grasp to move forward?” we are possibly overlooking how the text is *not only* trying to tell us information. It is also trying to do that in ways sometimes that form us.

A concrete example of this would be Psalm 119:105. That’s an example I discuss in the book, because it’s a poem first and foremost. It also is a verse that is clearly trying to convey information to us. If you’re not familiar with this verse, it’s a meditation on the Word of God: “Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” The quick version of the “head” information is, “When would we need lamps or lights?” “We would need those things if it was dark”; and then, “The psalmist is comparing God’s Word to a lamp or a light in a dark place.” It’s not very difficult to figure out the idea: if you can’t see or you need direction or guidance of some kind, then God’s Word is a very helpful source of direction and guidance. Even though it’s a poem, most of us can get that idea.

But the way many of us have been trained to read primarily for information, we stop once we figure out what claim is being made—that God’s Word is a source of guidance for us—and then there’s an exhortation—that we should turn to God’s Word, as we would turn to a light in a dark place. Then, “Okay. Now I know the meaning of this verse. I know that information. I can move on.”

Two things are sad about that: (1) So now that you know it, do you never need to read it again? Can you just set it aside? (2) If that’s really what’s important about that verse—that you should turn to God’s Word when you need direction—then the big question should be for those of us who have a high view of Scripture and think every word is important: “Well, why doesn’t the text actually say that?” The text says that God’s Word is a lamp and a light, which in a literal sense is untrue. It’s not a lamp or a light. Those are poetic figures. Those are metaphors that are being used to help us understand something.

So when we pay attention to the poetic form of the text, yes, an idea is definitely being conveyed. But it's being conveyed in a way that tries to form and shape us by tugging at our hearts. If you can imagine yourself being in a pitch black space unexpectedly, so you can't even see your hand in front of your face, how badly would you want the light? You would be desperate for it. You would be feeling walls, and everything would be clumsy, right? That's the kind of metaphor the psalmist uses in Psalm 119:105. He's trying to cultivate in us that kind of longing for the Scripture. It's not just, "You should turn to God's Word." The next question is: "Well, do you do that? And if not, why? If so, how did you cultivate that kind of longing for God's Word?" Giving that idea to us in this beautiful form is like having a heartbreak or a romantic feeling of love come alive in you from listening to a really good song, a tearjerker. That's what we have throughout the Scriptures. All kinds of beautiful works of art that are intended to light us up, not only intellectually, but emotionally. We are whole embodied creatures.

And that's what's going on when we start to move beyond information only. Not get rid of information. But move beyond information only and start to think about the artistry of the Scriptures.

That's a super explanation. It's interesting that the New Testament writers so often describe human beings as having both hearts and minds. They clearly are different, and you argue that it would follow that they require different kinds of instruction. The Bible is clearly designed to instruct. But the appeal to the heart and the mind are different, aren't they?

Yes. That's really well put. What I'm trying to get across in the book is that we shouldn't approach the Scriptures as an instruction manual, in the sense that we normally think of that as a genre. It's not like your car owner's manual. It's not like the instruction manual that comes with the present that has you on the floor Christmas morning sweating and angry, trying to put this thing together. Nobody curls up with that kind

of instruction manual with a cup of coffee, thinking, “Oh, I just want to revisit how to fit this piece into this and put that thing together.”

I’m trying to expand or enrich our idea of what instruction is. It’s not only the Ten Commandments and God telling us, do or don’t do this. It’s not only Paul writing to a church and saying, “Stop it!” That is definitely the most common form of instruction that we might normally think of. It’s all throughout the Scripture, and it’s very important. But the Scriptures are also trying to instruct our hearts, and that’s why they give us stories and poems. Ecclesiastes is almost like a play. Almost like a drama, with characters stepping on and off the stage and speaking. It’s trying to appeal to more than just that informational dimension of our brains.

It is an instruction manual. And it is telling us what to do. But not in the sense that we normally think of instruction, as just, “Okay. Do this. Don’t do this. Check mark. Got it. Now I can move on.” If it were that easy, we could just memorize the ideas, and we wouldn’t need the text at all.

So many challenges in life are not directly addressed in Scripture. Things like, “Where should I go to college?” or, “What career path should I choose?” “Whom should I marry?” “What books should I read?” “How can I be a better parent?” You argue that the literature of the Bible has a role in shaping our thoughts regarding these things. So how do literary texts shape us in a way that non-literary texts don’t?

You cannot open the Bible and figure out whether you’re supposed to go to this college or that college, right? You’re not going to open it up and find your future spouse in there: “Marry this person.” That’s right. Rather, you have this wildly diverse and eclectic and beautiful collection of God-breathed, human-written texts that can mold and shape you into the kind of person who won’t always necessarily choose the exact right thing, but who will do so from a desire to serve God and to love God and to love neighbor;



the Lord tends to bless those kinds of endeavors. It doesn't mean that they always work out. So rather than thinking about the Bible . . . "Okay, so I've got to read this text to find out: Should I go to college? Should I not go to college?" Whatever. No, you're reading this text to be formed and shaped into a Christ follower, someone who belongs to a very long tradition of Christ followers, someone who wants to love God and to love others well. As you do that, and as you're transformed by the Scriptures, those decisions—it's not like they simply take care of themselves, but you're making them from a place of trying to love God. When that really is number 1, God will bless. Even if we sometimes do things that don't work out for the best, God can bless those things.

The reason it's so important to have a bit of a literary sensibility when it comes to reading these texts is because the more you read the literary elements of the Bible as being literature—I don't mean here that they're somehow fictional or made up or something like that. If you see that they're artistically designed, put together with very conscious and intentional and God-inspired, Spirit-inspired, artfulness, you will kind of move away from, "Okay, this brother did this to this other brother, so that translates into, 'You shouldn't do these kinds of things to brothers.'" Yes, probably that, but there's likely so much more there when you stop trying to distill or reduce every story or every verse into this one idea; rather, we can embrace the multidimensionality, the complexity of the text. That is entering into relationship with God. And if you start moving away from that just information only and more toward an artfully or artistically minded reading of the text, nuances and complexities of the text just open themselves up to you. You end up spending more time with it and striving and seeking after God in the text in ways you hadn't before.

Your chapter 3 is called "Meaning Is More than Message." I saw a profound thought there: if you go looking for but can't find a main idea or a central point in a text, you're going to be very frustrated. And so my question is, why do we need a larger and more robust concept of meaning, over and above simply finding the main idea of a text?

It's not only that we'll get frustrated with the text, which definitely happens. You're like, "Well, I've just got to figure it out, what does this one verse mean?" When we constantly come back to that as our rubric or our lens for reading the text, we'll get frustrated when the text itself doesn't offer us one singular meaning. Sometimes there is one singular meaning, but often there are many things that God is trying to communicate to us, even through a single verse. Besides frustration, the second piece—and maybe a little scarier—. . . the history of the Christian church is filled with stories of us, as Christians, really just subjecting the Scriptures to what we want them to mean, or to our own ends and uses. And that's another kind of really scary outcome of insisting that every text be reducible to one central idea or one claim. When we don't find it, we'll get frustrated, or we're likely to default to whatever is most familiar or comfortable to us, thus imposing our own agenda on the text itself.

You bring up a question that I had—right in line with that: “If it’s possible that the literature of the Bible could swing to the point where it can mean anything, then the literature of the Bible probably means nothing.” I think you did a great job in the book, explaining some elements of literary writing that act as constraints on the meaning. You call it a spectrum of meaning. Can you unpack that a bit.

Sure. That's something I learned from one of my own teachers, Michael Travers. I can't remember the class, but it was an undergraduate class, and we were struggling with these kinds of questions about interpretation. He said, "Just because there might be a richness to language, whether that be Shakespeare or the Scriptures or whatever, just because words inevitably have connotations and denotations, and they can mean in many different ways . . . but you go to look up a word in the dictionary and what do you find? More words you have to go look up. And so on and so forth, forever and ever and ever." He said, "But just because a text might not be reducible to one singular meaning, it doesn't mean it can mean anything." He used the word *spectrum*. That's right. He said

it's a range, and he held his hands up. He said, "It might be a range like this. Not like this."

So yeah, when we talk about this from a Christian perspective, you will often hear people say, "When we're interpreting the Scripture, a good place to start is with the Scripture itself," meaning that Scripture interprets Scripture. So the Scripture does give us limitations. This is where literary artistry becomes so important, because we have to tune in to the exact word, the exact language, the way something is being repeated. Or sometimes, even though it's hard for us as modern-day English speakers . . . I'm an English-only speaker. Sometimes sound is really important, the sense of the words, their arrangement on the page, visually. Psalm 119 is an example of that. It's an acrostic.

So there can be a range, for sure, because language is complex. It's a complicated human instrument. But the text often contains within itself its own parameters. An example of this is a text like Psalm 23, a well-known poem where the metaphorical language of shepherd is used to help us relate to God. "The Lord is my shepherd"—probably a phrase that, even if you've never read the Bible, you've heard before. There in that very specific poetic figure of speech comparing God to being a shepherd is both an irreducible metaphor (so there are lots of different connotations that can come with it) and also a self-imposed limitation by that same figure. If you think about the shepherd, the one who guides or watches or looks over the sheep . . . the shepherd is also used as a name for a pastor or minister or counselor later in the Scriptures. I've sometimes asked students to think about someone who has been a good shepherd to them. Maybe a parent or grandparent, a teacher, pastor . . . someone who has taken care of them, guarded them, come alongside them, gotten them back on track, someone who they know will do whatever it takes. I say, "Picture that person in your mind. And now think. That is the image that's being used to help us try to imagine and relate to God. Someone who loves you and would get you and do whatever they need to protect you. No matter what. Even if it means

sometimes using a rod to bring you back into line, ultimately giving you peace and comfort and protection. Wow!” So at the end of the day, it’s just not a poem about how aliens are going to come down and rescue us all from the dictatorship of . . . It’s just not about that. The language itself, the artistry of the text, is giving us a way to think about God and also excluding other possible ways, right there in that moment.

That’s great. I want to shift gears just a minute. One observation I have about people who begin to read and take all the Scriptures seriously—they’re almost always shocked at how unsettled they become. They begin to question the certainty of what they value. Their equilibrium is affected. It’s almost like they take a step back and reevaluate everything in life. And for me, when I began to read the Bible systematically, about eight years ago, I was surprised, even shocked, at what an emotional impact it had on me. I’m curious: What are some of the reasons that good literature has this effect on people?

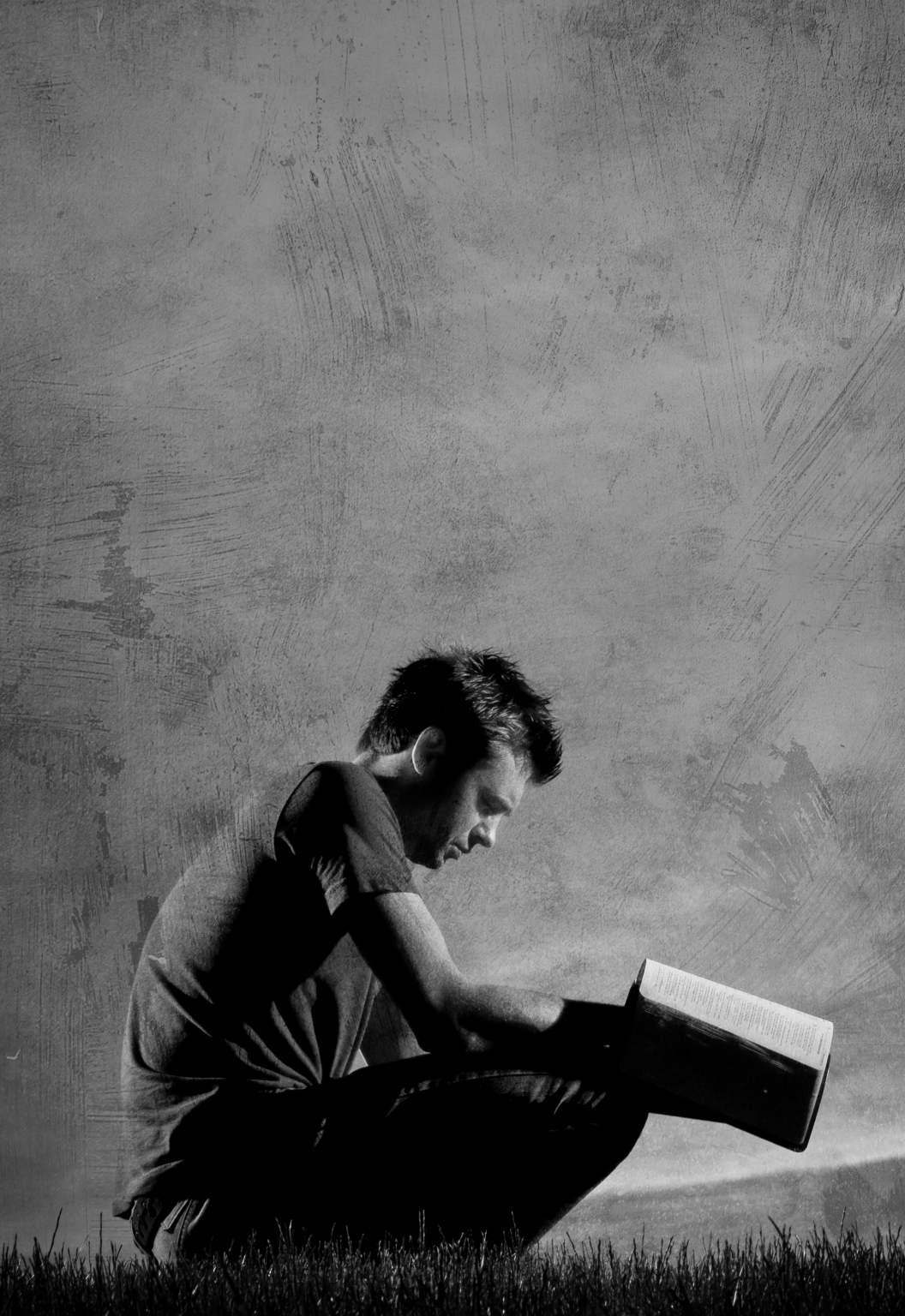
One thing that has struck me since publishing this book and talking with folks about what it means to read the Bible and take it seriously today, is just how overly familiar the Scriptures [seem to those of us who grew up going to church.] Sometimes I think the Scriptures aren’t weird enough to us. They don’t shock us or unsettle us. And then when we really start to read them, it’s like, “This is super weird. This is a really strange, foreign, alien-to-me text.” And when you start having that experience, from what I’ve seen, I would say, “Good. You’re doing it right.” If it was super, super familiar to you and it didn’t seem weird, I’m thinking you’re probably mapping your own perspectives onto it. And so I want to really emphasize here that I am not a biblical scholar. I don’t read Hebrew or Greek or Aramaic. I talk all the time, and I work at a place with people who do that. I can frequently text or walk across the hall and say, “Can I say this sentence?” But I am not a Bible scholar.

As a literary critic, I’m interested in the literary approaches that we modern people bring to the text. And when the Scripture is not weird to you, that

immediately tells me you're bringing modern ideas and then imposing them on the Scriptures, assuming, for instance, that the Scriptures are being composed with the same idea of authorship or audience or sound or meter or whatever that we have. But when you really start reading the text and trying to engage with the way it's put together on an artistic level, it will start to get super weird. I mean there are tent pegs being driven through people's skulls. There's just all kinds of wild stuff going on throughout the Scriptures and shipwrecks and snake bites . . . Then you're reading along, and you're supposed to get some wisdom from a book like Proverbs, and it'll be diametrically contradictory sometimes. It'll say, "Answer a fool according to his folly," and in the next sentence, "Don't answer a fool according to his folly." And it's like, "Well, which one is it? They can't both be true!"

When we start to pay attention to that and it gets weird, that is an invitation from our God to sit with the text, to meditate on the text, and try to start to think, "Well, why would it be like this? What could the purpose be in this artful design?" That's an opportunity for communion. Some people see that as a strike against the text or an undermining of its integrity. No, no, no, no, no. It's artful, and it's intentional. It's purposeful. It's been stitched together in a certain way to elicit a certain reaction. And when we stop imposing our own view, we're much better able to start to see those things.

Chapter 5 in your book is called "Reading with Our Guts." Probably my favorite chapter. You argue persuasively that we've been taught that what we are and who we are as human beings is determined by what we think. But the Bible teaches—and you argue effectively—that what defines us most as humans is what we love. Our loves are oriented by a picture of what we think it looks like to live well, and these pictures are most powerfully communicated in stories, in legends, in myths, in plays, in novels and films. So how are the Scriptures designed? If they were designed that way, how are they



designed to furnish us these pictures? And how can we begin to read them with our guts?

That's another place where I'm drawing pretty heavily on James K.A. Smith—that idea of your love for something being as powerful or maybe even more so than your intellectual understanding. And the picture piece is so important, and this was part of the premise of the book. I started asking myself and my students, “Do you enjoy, do you love reading the Scriptures in the same way that you love or enjoy your favorite album or your favorite film series . . . They're dropping a new season of your favorite show on Netflix or whatever, do you love it like that?” Most people, if they take the Scripture seriously, have some kind of love for it. But hardly anyone seems to just want to curl up on the couch and binge watch the Scriptures like they would binge watch their favorite show. But this is why it's so important to understand that the picture you have of reality is cultivating and fashioning a certain vision of what's good for you, because you've got to ask the question—“Well, where's that picture coming from?” So much of what I'm taking in and seeing is coming from—whether it be television or the kids with the TikTok or social media . . . What's actually shaping your picture? If most of us are honest, including myself, I would say my picture of what's desirable or good is being shaped more by the world, if you will, than by the Word of God. So I thought, “Oh, man! Here I am teaching classes about the beauty and the artistry of literature, and yet I'm myself not reading the Scriptures that way. I'm more reading to find information.” That's another piece of that question of what started me down this road.

Throughout the Scriptures, even in the books that you think of as being more overtly informational, the epistles of Paul, for instance, or even historical pieces like the Gospel of Luke. They are put together in very intentional ways. Think about shifting from prose narrative to Mary's song of praise, the Magnificat, at the beginning of Luke's gospel. That stitching together of prose and poetry right there is intended to effect a

shift in us as readers, many, many, years later, where we can experience with Mary this overwhelming overflow of emotion. If we ignore that, we're just missing so much!

You've had a huge benefit to be in the laboratory of the classroom, teaching literature and poetry. Can you share a couple of practical things that you suggest to your students? The way they would look at a piece of literary art? What practical things can help people as they think more broadly about their own reading of the Scriptures?

Sure. A couple that I talk about in the book: One I borrowed—and not from a book specifically about reading the Scriptures, but from the fantastic Christian scholar—and fans of Lewis should know his work, Alan Jacobs, who teaches at Baylor University. He's written extensively on Lewis, so if you're a Lewis fan and you haven't read Jacobs's work, you should look him up. He has a great book called *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*, in which he talks about reading at whim. Often when we're studying the Scriptures, we'll be following some type of plan or following a devotional book of some kind. That's great—I do that as well—but if you're trying to break out of merely study or information and think more about the pleasure of the text . . . Jacobs suggests reading at whim, in life in general and I apply it to reading the Scriptures. Just thinking, “You know, today I'd like to read a story. I don't really feel like reading a poem—or the appointed passage.” Then flip around and find a narrative, a story, maybe even one that you've read before, and read that.

Another practical strategy is to read aloud, just to slow down a little bit. And then one that I don't really talk about in the book, though it has recently become near and dear to me, is reading the same passage every morning, for a while. If I'm bored with it, I'll flip and read something else. But I try to internalize a small chunk. For me, most of last year, I reread a stretch in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus tells us not to worry and then turns around and tells us to strive. I'm like, “So don't worry, but strive.” I spent most of last summer and fall of 2023 reading that every morning—dwelling on it, meditating and thinking on it. So

read at whim, read out loud, and then try reading the same thing for a good long chunk of time.

At the very end of the book, you made a really powerful and practical point. You talked about the power of habit, which you term habituation. So I want to end on this point, not necessarily because it's so original, but because it's so powerful. It relates to Aristotle's argument that our state of being or our character results from the repetition of similar activities. Could you explain habituation. Why is our habit of consistency and regular reading of the Bible linked to whether we'd be transformed by it?

Sure. I teach Aristotle's ethics to college students. This is something they really get into. The basic idea here, for Aristotle, is that humans are composed of both *states* and *actions*. Whatever state you're in, you can't control it. You can't snap your fingers and change your state of being. Having said that, you got into that state voluntarily, because you form your states by the repetition of certain actions. Let's say, as an example, that you're not someone who reads the Scriptures daily. You cannot just decide, "You know what? I now am that person who reads Scripture daily," and make it so. You are not that person because you have not chosen to read the Scriptures daily; you formed yourself into that kind of person. You have no control over who you are right now, but you do have control over whether you read the Scriptures tomorrow. Then the day after that, you can have some control over that as well. And through time, Aristotle argues—and Augustine picks up on this and again Smith as well in a Christian context, noting that cultivating good habits is how we are ultimately shaped into lovers of God and of one another and Christ followers.

So when it comes to being shaped to love God and others, here we have God's actual words that we can physically touch in our hands. Many people have multiple copies of the Scriptures, whereas some around the world have no access to it in their language. We have this great privilege.

I think it's so important for Christians to read daily, which is why I want us to enjoy the reading of the Bible. It's kind of the ultimate purpose of the book. Maybe we'll actually read it more if we enjoy reading it, and if we read it more, we'll love God more, and then ultimately, perhaps, as humans, if we love God more, maybe, just maybe, we'll be able to love each other more, but that's not going to happen unless we make a choice tomorrow to act and read the Scriptures and then try to do it again the day after and try to do it again the day after, and eventually we become the kind of people who do it.

For me personally, when I feel far from God, the struggle has always been thinking, "No, I'm not in a good place. I can't pray today," or, "I can't read today because my heart's not right." And over time, especially in recent years, the Lord has, through my cultivation of the discipline of reading His Word, changed me; now, even when I feel very far from God or disconnected or separated, most of the time I pick up the Scriptures; even if it's just a verse, I will still read Scripture that day, and through that He has drawn me to Himself.

[Video of the complete version of this talk, including additional content, is available at: www.cslewisinstitute.org/enjoying-the-bible/. Additional information about the topic of this talk is include in Matthew Mullins's book, *Enjoying the Bible: Literary Approaches to Loving the Scriptures* (Baker Academic, 2021).]

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