



# Holding the Word

Five Ways to

Encounter God

through the Scriptures

**Bill Mowry**

Bill brings new eyes for old scenery to those who are just encountering the Bible for the first time or to those who want a fresh start to develop new habits. A seasoned Bible reader, he here introduces wise, often countercultural choices maximizing our reading and comprehension—the next best thing to having Bill in the room with you. His invitation to become an artist in lost arts informs with the aid of poets and philosophers, butchers and professionals; aiming for simplicity, Bill casts a wide net with his own personal experiences, metaphors, and examples.

**SAM MEIER**, professor emeritus in Near Eastern studies and cultures at the Ohio State University

This is a book about love. It is a love story about loving God so much that you want to hold his Word. Bill takes an old Navigator illustration, the Word Hand, and presents it in a fresh way with personal stories and helpful tools. This is the kind of book you can use with your church life group or your ministry leadership team or for your own personal development. May God use it to set you and others on this journey of love. I always wanted to help people have this kind of heart for the Word, but I didn't have the words to express it until I read Bill's book.

**MIKE WHITNEY**, Northeast division director for Disciplemakers for Life, The Navigators

Bill takes the simplest directives of Scripture and makes them seem like the wisest and healthiest practices a person could pursue. Bill draws on science, popular culture, psychology, theology, Greek, and personal experience to show that the directives of Scripture are not cold commands to be dutifully followed but life-giving invitations to community and joy. Bill reminds me of the scribe who “brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matthew 13:52, ESV). His words are equally at home in my college psychology classes and in my adult Sunday school class.

**CHARLES DOLPH, PhD**, senior professor of psychology at Cedarville University

As a respected authority on discipling, Bill has already led us wisely regarding the relational aspects of making disciples. His studies and books have coaxed us away from a simply intellectual approach to discipling and toward an emphasis on relationship in ministry. Now, in *Holding the Word*, Bill advocates for a relational approach to the Scriptures, uniting The Navigators' hand illustration with the ideas of attachment, connection, and love for the author of the Scriptures. Bill is intuitive, uncovering something that has been missing as many people study God's Word: attachment to its author. Bill gathers meaningful questions, tells stories, and evokes the imagination as the reader responds to God. I highly recommend this book to readers who would like to be challenged in a more personal dimension as they study the Scriptures.

**VICKI GATCHELL**, member of the Navigators Church Ministries National Leadership Team

Bill Mowry discipled me one-on-one for years and taught me how to read, study, and memorize Scripture. He mentored me for years as I built a discipling pathway in my church. What I learned from Bill over years you can now learn from reading this book. Bill's biblical insights, practical wisdom, and actionable steps will help you get a handle on Scripture so that the Bible can get a hold on you.

**REV. DR. ERIC WATERS**, St. John Lutheran Church

Bill Mowry's book *Holding the Word* brings new life to the Word Hand illustration, created over sixty years ago by Dawson Trotman to instruct new believers on how to handle the Word of God. The book has helpful analogies that appeal to all five senses and show how hearing, reading, studying, memorizing, and meditating on God's Word help us have a closer relationship with the Lord. While this easy-to-read book can be inspiring for all believers, I recommend it especially for new believers, those with little experience reading the Bible on their own, and those desiring to disciple and encourage new believers.

**LEILA GARDNER, MA**, assistant director of mission support at International Friendships, Inc.

# **Holding the Word**

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**Bill Mowry**



A NavPress resource published in alliance  
with Tyndale House Publishers

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# Introduction

A Book about Holding

*I hold fast to your statutes, LORD.*

PSALM 119:31

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT HOLDING—about holding the things we love.

We all hold things. Right now you're likely holding this book or some type of ebook reader in your hands. Holding on to things is a natural part of life.

We hold in a variety of ways, and with a variety of people. Holding can be an intellectual activity: "I finally got ahold of geometry." Holding is a physical activity: "I'm holding on to the rope for dear life!" Holding is a relational activity: "Will you let me hold your hand?"

In this book I'm inviting you to "hold" the Bible—but not in an intellectual or physical way. I'm inviting you into a relational holding that bonds us in love with the book's author. Relational holding often happens in three ways.

We hold on to memories we love. One of my favorites is a Mowry family Christmas. My memory relishes the laughter



(often at my expense), the food cooked by my son (the amateur chef), and the unbridled excitement of our grandchildren opening presents. Holding this memory is a multisensory experience that I enter into again and again because I love it so.

We also hold on to possessions we love. One of my prized possessions is a signed lithograph of the Beatles performing at the Cavern Club in 1962. When I look at this framed picture on my office wall, I go back in time to my first hearing of the Beatles. It brings back the sounds of “I Want to Hold Your Hand”—a time when life was simpler.

We hold on to people we love. When my twin grandchildren were young, I loved holding them and reading books to them. I can still feel them squirming in my arms. And after fifty years of marriage, I’m still thrilled by holding Peggy’s hand. Holding is an act of care and intimacy. We hold what we love.

### **The Bible is a book about holding.**

Keep hold of instruction; do not let go.

PROVERBS 4:13, ESV

The Bible is a book about holding and a book to be held. One of the New Testament words for “holding” means “cleaving to something.”<sup>1</sup> A cross-check of words tells me that *cleaving* means “becoming strongly involved with or emotionally attached” to someone or something.<sup>2</sup> This describes our holding of the

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Bible—we don't let go; we're glued to or stuck together with the book's author.

Here are some examples of different kinds of holding from Scripture (emphasis mine):

- “**Hold fast** to him” (Deuteronomy 10:20).
- “Therefore choose life, . . . loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and **holding fast** to him” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20, ESV).
- “I **hold fast** to your statutes, LORD” (Psalm 119:31).
- “Your right hand will **hold me fast**” (Psalm 139:10).
- “Let your heart **hold fast** my words” (Proverbs 4:4, ESV).
- “Keep **hold** of instruction; do not let go” (Proverbs 4:13, ESV).
- “I praise you for . . . **holding** to the traditions just as I passed them on to you” (1 Corinthians 11:2).
- “He must **hold firm** to the trustworthy word” (Titus 1:9, ESV).
- “**Hold** to the testimony of Jesus” (Revelation 12:17, ESV).

We hold the things we love. Unfortunately, holding isn't always positive. We can also hold on to the negative. We hold memories that are hurtful or traumatic. We let possessions get ahold of us. We retreat from the intimacy of touch. These acts of holding must be dealt with to truly hold or cleave to our Lord and to one another. Life is full of holding the good and the bad.

## HOLDING THE WORD

If you've ever been on a plane stuck in a holding pattern, you know how frustrating it can be to live in a state of no progress. Readers of the Bible—like you and me—can sometimes fall into a similar kind of holding pattern. We circle the Scriptures without touching down. We get stuck doing the same thing while waiting for something to happen. Perhaps you've experienced some of the following holding-pattern tendencies:

- *I feel guilty about what I think I'm supposed to do.* These could include *I'm supposed to read the Bible*, *I'm supposed to love the Bible*, or *I'm supposed to feel something when I read the Bible*. These *supposed tos* make us feel guilty when they're not what we're experiencing. These feelings put us in a holding pattern, and we delay landing in the Scriptures.
- *I'm bored with the familiar.* Some of us have grown up in churches or families where the Bible has been emphasized since infancy. We've heard it and read it so often that it now seems boring.
- *I don't understand what I'm reading and am afraid of making a mistake.* This can be a holding pattern for those new to the Bible. It might seem like a complex and contradictory book. We're afraid of making a mistake in interpreting and applying it, so we don't read it at all. We circle around and around the text, fearful of diving in.

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- *I'm satisfied reading what others have to say.* Some of us fill our lives with devotional books, study guides, and the latest Bible blog postings. Reading what others have to say about the Bible feels safer and easier than reading it ourselves. We have few firsthand encounters with God in his Word.

**II Press Pause.** Which of these holding patterns are true of you? Would you add other holding patterns that keep you from God's Word?

Do you feel stuck in a holding pattern with the Bible? Do you long to break out of that cycle and touch down to encounter the author of this book? *Holding the Word* will help you get there.

In the pages ahead, you will discover five ways to “hold” the Bible—relational practices that will bond you with God. These five practices are not solitary actions but ways of being that are better when they're done with a community of friends.

Before we move on, let me describe my backstory about the Bible. My holding pattern was one of arrogance and boredom until a change happened in my life.

### Holding was not natural for me.

From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings.

2 TIMOTHY 3:15, ESV

It's true-confession time. The Bible has not always been important to me; desiring to read it hasn't always been a top priority. In fact, I once lived a Bible-absent life. The book had zero hold on my life.

It's not that I didn't know about the Bible. As a Boy Scout, I earned my God and Country merit badge, which required memorizing portions of the Scriptures. And I regularly won attendance awards at Sunday school. Despite all this input, no one ever showed me how the Bible could connect with my world. It was simply an important book that sat on a shelf, forgotten until Sunday came around.

Somewhere in high school, I told God to "shove off," and this included the Bible. He and his book were neither needed nor wanted in my life. This all changed when I met Ed in college.

Ed lived across the hall from me in my freshman dorm. We soon became friends. He was a regular guy with whom I shared several interests—girls, music, politics, and girls—but he had one interest I lacked. Ed was a Christ follower, and he loved the Bible.

Through our friendship, Ed's life whetted my appetite for Jesus and his words. After finishing my freshman year, I resolved to read the Bible during my break. Beginning with the Gospel of Matthew, I read all four Gospels that summer. I approached my reading with genuine curiosity, not with a preconceived agenda. The Bible had been read at me, to me, and for me, but I had never read it myself.

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I came away enamored with Jesus. His teachings were challenging, the message was relevant, and I admired the consistency and truthfulness of the Gospel accounts. Bible translator J. B. Phillips's words expressed my conclusions: "No man could ever have invented such a character as Jesus."<sup>3</sup> My thirst to know Jesus led me deeper into his book—the Bible. My sophomore year in college, I surrendered my life to Christ and took hold of the Bible. What changed? My life became like the apostle Peter's description: This spiritual infant "long[ed] for the pure milk of the word" (1 Peter 2:2, NASB). God planted a desire in my life to know him through knowing his Word. I fell in love with his words; they had a hold on me!

Ed capitalized on this life change and showed me how to read the Bible. He invited me to a Bible study, we memorized the Bible together, and we attended church to hear the Bible taught. My Bible-absent life became a Bible-filled life . . . and it began with a hand.

**II Press Pause.** What were some of your first impressions of the Bible?

### Holding needs a hand.

"And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace."

ACTS 20:32, ESV

When Ed found out that I had placed my faith in Christ, he invited me to join the campus ministry of The Navigators. I soon became acquainted with the story of Dawson Trotman, founder of The Navigators. Dawson's conversion in the 1930s was like a lightning bolt. Over several decades, the Lord used him to birth a disciple-making movement through The Navigators that began with sailors and spread to campuses, the marketplace, churches, and military bases around the world.<sup>4</sup>

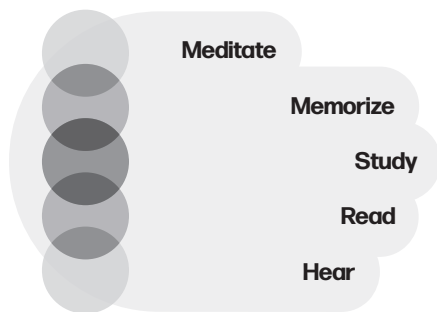
Dawson restored the importance of disciple making to the church's agenda. He called it "follow-up": helping new believers become established in Christ. Not only did he codify the concept—he birthed a vision; these disciples could disciple others who could disciple others.

Sustaining this vision were creative, practical, and portable tools that Dawson developed. His most popular tool was the *Topical Memory System*, a means to memorize the Scriptures that is still the bestselling Bible-memory system on the market.<sup>5</sup> I think his most revolutionary disciple-making resource, however, was the Word Hand. Using something that nearly everyone possesses—a hand—he created a multisensory tool that engages people firsthand with the God of the Bible. Practicing the disciplines reflected in each finger helps people get a "grip" on the Bible, as Dawson expressed it.

Take a look at your hand. You have five fingers. Each finger represents a way to take in the Bible. The smallest finger is hearing the Bible. The next finger represents reading the Bible. The middle finger represents studying the Bible, and the index

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finger is memorizing the Bible. The thumb represents meditating on the Bible; it is the finger that can touch all the other fingers. This combination of practices is how we hold the Word: gripping it with our hand.



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Dawson exhorted his audiences “not to study commentaries, expositions, lexicons, or concordances first, but to start with a firsthand study of the Scriptures themselves.”<sup>6</sup> He challenged people to be in the book and the book to be in them.<sup>7</sup> For him, understanding the Bible did not require a theological education, but it did require work. This work of reading, hearing, studying, memorizing, and meditating turns the Bible into a sensory feast and a learning tool that transforms lives, enabling us to encounter the living Christ in a firsthand approach to the Scriptures.

I want to add a new lens through which you view the Bible. It may be an obvious lens, but it’s one that’s easily missed in our efforts to be disciplined and practical. In this book I will explore how each of the practices of the hand is an act of love. Holding



the Bible becomes an act of love, not a scholarly pursuit. Loving is what the hand is all about.

**Hearing:** We pay attention to and listen to what we love.

**Reading:** We take time to read what we love.

**Studying:** We choose to study what we love.

**Memorizing:** We memorize what we love.

**Meditating:** We think about what we love.

This is a very practical book. Along the way, I will bring in some contemporary learning and brain theory. We will discover what the Bible teaches about each discipline and learn some practical exercises that turn the hand into a mesmerizing approach to live out and love God's Word.

**II Press Pause.** Which finger of the hand is a current practice for you?

### How This Book Will Get Ahold of You

Who is this book for? This book is for anyone interested in meeting the God of the Bible. Some of you may be new to the Bible, others of you are accomplished Bible students, and others need to refresh their motivations. Welcome to all of you!

This is not a book about the doctrine of the Bible, nor is it a book about the Bible's background. I'm not writing about the Bible's authorship or culture, or the idea of the canon. Others

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have done this better than I ever will.<sup>8</sup> This is a book about holding to what we love, about bonding to the Bible's author. It will break you out of your current holding pattern with the Bible and engage you firsthand in an encounter with God. This encounter will be enhanced when done in the company of friends.

How can you profit from this book? In an ideal world, we would have a steady diet of each of these five practices. The reality is that our application of the practices is often seasonal or preferential. The goal is not to perfectly practice each principle but rather to encounter God in his Word. Here are some suggestions for reading and applying this book:

1. Read *Holding the Word* to recharge your motivation with the end goal of applying one or two practices. Choose according to what nourishes your life in Christ at this moment.
2. Read the entire book and consider how to improve your current application of these practices. This book will help you go deeper in what you are already doing.
3. Read *Holding the Word* selectively, choosing the practices that arouse your curiosity or meet a current need. Some practices may be more relevant or doable than other ones in this season of your life.

**II Press Pause.** What motivated you to purchase this book?





## CHAPTER 1

# A New Way of Holding

*“Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love.”*

JEREMIAH 9:23-24, ESV

IMAGINE KISSING SOMEONE through a pane of glass. What a funny image! Who would do that? We might mouth a kiss through a window as someone leaves. We might jokingly imitate a kiss to another through a glass window. But no two people would exchange a purposeful kiss through glass, especially when the real thing is available.

Kissing someone through a pane of glass creates an illusion of intimacy. Our lips appear to touch, but no real contact is actually made. The passion is not felt; the touch is not enjoyed. Sometimes we experience this illusion of intimacy when we approach the Bible. Without realizing it, we can end up going through the motions of Scripture engagement without making contact with our Lord.

The statistics are in, and Bible reading is declining. Research has shown that Bible engagement has fallen 21 percent among American adult Bible users over the last few years. Almost one in five churchgoers say they never read the Bible. And while 65 percent of Protestant churchgoers spend time alone with God daily, only 39 percent read the Bible during that time.<sup>1</sup>

For those who do read the Bible, there's an increasing reliance upon devotional books by popular authors.<sup>2</sup> Many Christians are content to read another's thoughts about the Scriptures rather than experiencing the personal joy of discovery through Bible study or meditation. We make celebrities of Bible teachers but seldom take the time to read the Bible for ourselves.

Without this personal discovery and encounter with God in the Bible, our experience is like kissing through a pane of glass. We have an illusion of intimacy with God but not a firsthand touch.

The Bible is a living, breathing, life-changing book through which the Spirit of God wants to personally touch our lives. It's not enough to know the Bible intellectually; we must know the Bible in relational ways. A new way of knowing the Bible is required.

**II Press Pause.** Consider your church or ministry. Is Bible reading increasing or declining?

## Holding is knowing.

Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face,  
as a man speaks to his friend.

EXODUS 33:11, ESV

You can begin to catch some knowledge about me through my books. For example, you might discover that I live in Columbus, Ohio; I have a dog named Ginger; my wife is Peggy; I have sons who are artists; and we love gardening. At this point you know some facts about me, but you don't really *know* me.

It's not until we meet and have a conversation, not until we look one another in the eyes, that we begin the dance of knowing one another. We could easily exchange information through texting or email. However, something special happens when we meet face to face—when we sit down together in a shared space to talk. What happens when we do this?

We make all kinds of associations when we see one another. In many of these encounters, we create a safe shared space where revelations happen. Through conversation, our hopes and dreams, sorrows and disappointments, are revealed to one another. Over time, we might bond together in a friendship.

We soon begin to truly know one another—to hear what the other is saying and feel emotions with them in their words. This tuning in to the rhythms and routines of another's life is required to build relationships. This is the type of knowing that the Bible speaks to—a **relational** knowing—and it's this type of knowing that God invites us into (see Exodus 6:7 and Psalm 36:10).

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Using various word pictures and relational experiences, the Bible paints a vivid description of this knowable God:

- We dwell with God (Psalm 23:6).
- Our souls cling to God (Psalm 63:8).
- We trust God (Proverbs 3:9-10).
- We're upheld by God (Isaiah 41:10).
- We know God (Jeremiah 9:23-24).
- We walk with God (Micah 6:8).
- We're close to God (Matthew 28:20).
- We are friends of Jesus (John 15:7, 14).

Let's explore what this word *know* means. The Hebrew word for "know" (*yada*) is "more than intellectual, emotional knowledge. . . . [It means] to enter into deep commitment so profound that Yahweh enters our experience with us."<sup>3</sup>

Think of one of your best friends—a friend who has entered into your life experience. He or she has stood by you in your triumphs and failures, your joys and disappointments. This is analogous to our relationship with God. In the Christian way, "[knowing] is firsthand relationship, personal knowledge," not the amassing of information.<sup>4</sup>

Author David Brooks describes knowing in this way:

In the biblical world . . . "knowing" is . . . a whole-body experience. In the Bible, "knowing" can involve studying, having sex with, showing concern for,

entering into a covenant with, being familiar with, understanding the reputation of.<sup>5</sup>

This relational knowledge shows up in places like Exodus 33:11 and Deuteronomy 34:10, where God is described as interacting with Moses “face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (ESV). To know someone face to face means “to have a personal and confidential relationship with another person.”<sup>6</sup> It’s like moving from my online bio of facts to a personal conversation in my home over dinner.

In Genesis 3:8, God is portrayed as “walking” in the garden. Walking is a frequent biblical metaphor. Instead of walking in a straight line to a particular place, the word used here suggests a casual walking around—the type of walk one has with a friend. Eugene Peterson describes it as follows: “This is the form the verb takes in Genesis that shows God out for an evening stroll in Eden, anticipating a conversation with Adam and Eve. He wasn’t headed for a destination. He was entering into a place and time for relaxed conversation.”<sup>7</sup> Puritan writers also spoke of a “comfortable walk with God.”<sup>8</sup>

In the New Testament, we find a similar form of knowing. The Gospel of John provides two great examples (emphasis mine):

- “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will **know** the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32, ESV).



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- ““This is eternal life, that they **know** you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3, ESV).

This is a knowing not “by mere intellectual activity, but by operation of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>9</sup> It is also not a complete or full knowledge but knowledge that is progressive. In other words, we continue to grow in knowing God. We never fully know him or another person in their entirety. This is what makes friendships special. We keep coming back to people (and God) because there’s usually something new to discover about them.

Do you see how this biblical concept of knowing is different from the classroom-based, logical, rational approach we’ve inherited from Greek philosophers? While the Greeks were concerned with detached knowledge and had a speculative interest in philosophy, the Bible “regards knowledge as something which continually arises from personal encounter.”<sup>10</sup>

But sometimes we settle for kissing through a pane of glass. We become information accumulators rather than friends of God; we know the Bible but don’t know the Bible’s author. We attend countless Bible studies, explore the prophecies, and dig into biblical culture while missing the person behind the pages—a person who is revealing himself and his ways, loving us and inviting us into a relationship with him.

Author and pastor A. W. Tozer writes that “we have almost forgotten that God is a person and, as such, can be cultivated as any person can.”<sup>11</sup> This is relational knowledge—a loving holding to the Father that happens as we encounter him in his Word.

Let me add one word of caution. Jesus is not our celestial buddy. While he calls us to be his friends (John 15:14), this is more than a casual “buddy” relationship. While God is our Father—the personal term *Abba* (Mark 14:36)—he is also in heaven (Matthew 6:9), making him different from us. This inequality is never meant to make the Father unapproachable or reduce our relationship to a set of formal rules, however. We can be open, spontaneous, and honest in our relationship with God, but it should be marked by a sense of respect and honor. Sacred awe does not eliminate intimacy.

Holding the Bible demands a new way of knowing. This new knowing is an invitation to a conversation, a relationship, a bonding with God that happens when we hold his Word through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He longs for a relationship that’s made of more than information and activities—a love that draws him into our lives as a companion and a heavenly Father. *Knowing* in the Kingdom world means loving; we hold on to what we love.

Holding the Bible demands a new way of knowing. This new knowing is an invitation to a conversation, a relationship, a bonding with God that happens when we hold his Word through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

### Three Markers of Knowing

Oh how I love thy law!  
It is my meditation all the day.

PSALM 119:97, ASV

If you're like me, the phrase *knowing God* has a certain ambiguity about it. How can we know someone we can't see? For some of us, we need some descriptors that make knowing something more tangible; descriptors that make sense to our twenty-first-century world.

Three markers have helped me love and hold to God through his Word—even amid the everyday routine of work, caring for children, and mowing the lawn. I hope they can make this new way of knowing more real to you:

- His words meet our deepest needs, providing hope and healing.
- His words fill us with wonder and delight, creating in us a state of awe and worship.
- His words teach us how to live life well, guiding us on the path of obedience.

*His words meet our deepest needs, providing hope and healing.*

When my anxious thoughts multiply within me,  
Your consolations delight my soul.

PSALM 94:19, NASB

Our grandchildren (twin boys) were born prematurely and spent months in the neonatal unit of a children's hospital. My wife and I faced one of the most anxious and fearful moments of our lives. Not only did we grieve for our grandchildren, but we were also concerned about the stress to our son and daughter-in-law. We needed a word from God, some hope to meet our hurts and fears.

God's word of help came through Romans 12:12 (ESV): "Rejoice in hope[, Bill and Peggy], be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." What a comfort this verse was. Our hope was in God; we needed to be patient and prayerful. God comforted us through his Word; he met some of our deepest needs. A sentence written to a church in Rome hundreds of years ago became a lifeline to us.

Peggy and I aren't the only ones who need hope. Even our media-saturated world recognizes how helpful the Scriptures can be in times of trouble. Oftentimes when people in a movie or television show face a crisis, they turn to God's words. Some repeat the Lord's Prayer; others recall Psalm 23. At a deep heart level, these biblical passages comfort and care for us. You and I are drawn to them over and over again.

Not only are we drawn to God's Word for care and comfort, but we also experience his challenge to us. How many times have you encountered God through a challenge from the Scriptures?

I'm learning that character development never stops, no matter how much I age. I recently dealt with jealousy over

another leader's success. I found myself wishing for the esteem and respect he was receiving. I thought aging eliminated these issues!

Being the faithful God that he is, the Holy Spirit challenged my attitude through a story Jesus tells in Matthew 20:1-16. In the parable, a landowner hires day laborers at different points in the day. When they all receive their pay in the evening, some of the workers are upset because the landowner pays everyone the same amount, no matter how long they worked. What is the landowner's reply to this perceived injustice? "Surely I am free to do what I like with my own money. Why be jealous because I am kind?" (Matthew 20:15, NEB).

I needed this gentle rebuke and reminder. God is free to bless whomever he desires. Why should I be jealous because he chooses to be kind to another? He used his Word to meet me with what I needed most: correction for an envious heart.

**II Press Pause.** Think of a time when God's Word met one of your heart's deepest needs. Was it a specific verse, chapter, or story? Was it during a time of stress or anxiety, fear or uncertainty about the future?

*His words fill us with wonder and delight, creating in us a state of awe and worship.*

Your testimonies are wonderful;  
therefore my soul keeps them.

PSALM 119:129, ESV

The event of April 8, 2024, only happens every few decades. It was the day of a total solar eclipse.

The path of the eclipse included northern Ohio, so several of our family members secured an Airbnb for the weekend and positioned ourselves to watch. What an amazing show! The moon slowly covered the face of the sun until we were left with some blazing fringes around an enclosed circle. The skies went dark, the birds changed their tune, and the temperature dropped. We all verbally or mentally said, “Wow!”

Wonder is the wow factor. When we look up at the Sistine Chapel ceiling, savor a meal at a five-star restaurant, or sit enraptured at a Mozart symphony, our mouths form a wordless *Wow!* We stand in wonder at that which is beautiful and magnificent.

Poets and songwriters are people who write and sing about wonder. No wonder the Psalms are full of God’s wonder! Here are a few examples (emphasis mine):

- “Show me the **wonders** of your great love” (Psalm 17:7).
- “You have multiplied . . . / your **wondrous** deeds and your thoughts toward us” (Psalm 40:5, ESV).
- “Let the heavens praise your **wonders**, O LORD” (Psalm 89:5, ESV).
- “Open my eyes, that I may behold / **wondrous** things out of your law” (Psalm 119:18, ESV).
- “I will meditate on your **wondrous** works” (Psalm 119:27, ESV).

## HOLDING THE WORD

- “Your testimonies are **wonderful**; / therefore my soul keeps them” (Psalm 119:129, ESV).

Wonder calls us to stop, to take it all in, to absorb beauty and majesty and otherworldliness—something bigger than ourselves. Wonder is the cause of astonishment and incites rapt attention. In his book *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*, Dacher Keltner defines *awe* as “the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world.”<sup>12</sup> Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel describes the Bible as “*the perpetual motion of the spirit*, an ocean of meaning.”<sup>13</sup> This “ocean of meaning” fits Keltner’s definition of *awe*.

We’re in short supply of the wow factor these days. Heschel writes, “We teach the children how to measure, how to weigh. We fail to teach them how to revere, how to sense wonder and awe.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, according to Keltner and fellow psychologist Paul Piff, “research finds that even brief experiences of awe, such as being amid beautiful tall trees, lead people to feel less narcissistic and entitled and more attuned to the common humanity people share with one another.”<sup>15</sup> “Unfortunately,” writes Christine Aroney-Sine, “the research also suggests that we are awe-deprived.”<sup>16</sup> We are healthier people when our lives are wonder filled.

How is the Bible wonder full? Here are some examples:

- Wonder is when, after years of life in the Bible, you still find new things when you read, hear, study, memorize, or

## A NEW WAY OF HOLDING

meditate on it. This wonder of discovery keeps drawing you back.

- Wonder is when you reflect on how you have changed over the years and how the Bible has been the impetus for this change.
- Wonder is when you see new believers “hold” the Bible and change long-held values and behaviors as they read it. What a miracle!
- Wonder is when you discover something new about God’s character or works that refreshes your soul in new ways.

**II Press Pause.** When has the Bible produced a sense of wonder or awe in your life?

We also hold on to what delights us, what brings us pleasure. Wonder and pleasure are tied together. The psalmist understood the nature of delight when he wrote, “Blessed is the man” whose “delight is in the law of the LORD” (Psalm 1:1-2, ESV). In Psalm 119, the author again and again refers to God’s Word as a delight (emphasis mine):

- “In the way of your testimonies I **delight** / as much as in all riches” (verse 14, ESV).
- “I will **delight** in your statutes; / I will not forget your word” (verse 16, ESV).



- “Your testimonies are my **delight**; / they are my counselors” (verse 24, ESV).
- “For I find my **delight** in your commandments, / which I love” (verse 47, ESV).

Delighting is a cultivated affection. “Delight,” writes Jean Fleming, “presupposes focused attention, a process to enjoy, to relish God.”<sup>17</sup> The analogies we choose can create a sense of delight in God’s Word. Unfortunately, we too easily turn the delightful into the pragmatic.

Let’s consider this common analogy: The Bible is like an owner’s manual for life. What a pragmatic picture. What a joy-killing image. The owner’s manual for my car is hidden in the glove compartment along with napkins, the car registration, and ketchup packets. The only time I pull out the owner’s manual is when I have a problem or question—like when to check the oil, how to use the cruise control, or how much to inflate my tires. I don’t wake up in the morning thinking, *I can’t wait to read my owner’s manual today!* I like it when I need help, but I don’t love it enough to read it regularly. If the Bible is like an owner’s manual for life, no wonder it’s the book that’s most owned but least read.

What happens if we change the analogy? Suppose we think of the Bible like a seven-course meal at a five-star restaurant. We immediately begin to salivate about the experience. The delight of a seven-course meal is found both in the food we enjoy and in the company we share. During the time it takes to

serve seven courses, we can have extended conversations with the other guests around the table. The food is sumptuous and the relationships are rich.

Isn't this a better experience than sitting in your car reading an owner's manual? When I experience God's delight, I step back in awe and worship. Delight is a joy magnet, drawing us back again and again to enjoy the pleasure found in God's words—a pleasure that is beautiful. The psalmist spoke to this beauty when he wrote these words: "One thing have I asked of the LORD, / that will I seek after: / . . . to gaze upon the *beauty* of the LORD / and to inquire in his temple" (Psalm 27:4, ESV, emphasis mine).

"Beauty," writes Elaine Scarry, "quickens. It adrenalizes. It makes the heart beat faster. It makes life more vivid, animated, living, worth living."<sup>18</sup> St. Augustine says, "It is desire for the beautiful that draws us to God."<sup>19</sup> Author Joan Chittister writes, "Beauty transports us. It refuses to be dull. It . . . changes the spiritual life from an experience of rules to an expression of awe."<sup>20</sup> Beauty is an unspoken partner in holding the Word.

I've spent most of my life absorbing and marveling at God's beauty displayed in the Bible. Here's my simple definition of *beauty*: beauty is something so attractive to the five senses that I'm drawn back again and again to savor it by looking, feeling, hearing, smelling, or touching. We love returning to that which is beautiful and delightful, whether it's a favorite song, a majestic landscape, or a rich friendship. Beauty delights our souls and pulls us in to enjoy it longer. Beauty leaves us in a state of wonder. Here are a few ways the Bible is beautiful to me:

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- I marvel at the beauty of God's character that's disclosed in his Word. His character is so attractive and yet different from mine that I'm drawn to it again and again to discover more about his nature and to stand in awe of these discoveries.
- I stand in wonder at God's created order. Who could create such diversity as the scent of a fragrant lily, the beauty of a rose in bloom, and the grandeur of a rich green forest? His Word speaks to his creative genius.
- I find myself amazed at the wisdom of God's Word. The Bible provides perspective and insight that speak to the realities of my life. I'm a better and different person because of the Scriptures. There's beauty in his wisdom.

**II Press Pause.** Can you think of a moment when reading the Bible was a delightful experience for you? What is one beautiful thing that draws you back to the Scriptures?

*His words teach us how to live life well, guiding us on the path of obedience.*

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17, ESV

When my mother entered the hospital, the family knew that death was imminent. I saw her faith grow in her few remaining hours of consciousness. It was hard to explain, but there was a special presence of the Holy Spirit in that hospital room. She handled her upcoming death with hope and purpose. I thought to myself, *Not only did my mother teach me how to live, but she's also teaching me how to die.*

Teaching is something that parents naturally do with their children. Good parenting wraps instruction in the loving embrace of a relationship. Our heavenly Father exemplifies this principle; instruction is relational, even when it's called "the law."

Psalm 1 describes the blessed man as the one who meditates on and delights "in the law of the LORD" (verse 2, ESV). This "law" is not limited to the five books of Moses or even to the Old Testament as a whole. Scholar Willem A. VanGemeren explains, "The Hebrew word *torah* ('law') signifies primarily instructions that come from God."<sup>21</sup> *Torah's* original meaning is "direction" or "guidance."<sup>22</sup>

- Standing behind the "law" is a teacher who instructs, gives direction, and guides. This law is more than a static, cold moral code; it's instructions from a loving teacher—a father—who wants to equip his children to live life well with him. Teaching is wrapped in relationship. We can see this in the guidance offered in Proverbs: "My son, do not forget my teaching, / but let your heart keep my

commandments, / for length of days and years of life / and peace they will add to you” (Proverbs 3:1-2, ESV).

- “Hear, O sons, a father’s instruction, / and be attentive, that you may gain insight, / for I give you good precepts; / do not forsake my teaching” (Proverbs 4:1-2, ESV).

I’ve always had problems with authority. Peggy points out that “Why?” is one of my most common questions. When we say that the Bible teaches us how to live life well, we’re talking about authority. What makes the Bible’s authority greater than any other authority in teaching us about life?

The word *authority* has the root word *author*. *Author*, from Latin, literally means “one who causes to grow.”<sup>23</sup> Authority, then, is both a position—held by one with the right to give orders—and a relationship with an “author” who encourages growth.

God’s authority rests on him being the Creator and on his commanding perspective of what gives life. He is the highest peak in the mountain range of competing authorities, and this makes him wise. God’s position calls attention to his authority.

But like with any good father, this perspective and wisdom is wrapped up in a relationship. If I know that the person instructing me cares for me, has insight into my soul that I don’t have, and wants the best for me, I will choose to listen to him. This is the intention of my heavenly Father’s instruction. I will submit to the authority of his teaching.

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The Bible is God's personalized instructions to us—his guidance to help us live life well. It is a book of wisdom that's wrapped in a relationship. *The Message* translation of Psalm 5 paints a vivid picture of the person who is surrendered to God's loving instruction:

Every morning  
I lay out the pieces of my life  
on your altar  
and watch for fire to descend. . . .

I enter your house; here I am,  
prostrate in your inner sanctum,  
Waiting for directions  
to get me safely through enemy lines.

PSALM 5:3, 7-8

When I come into God's presence through his Word, I "lay out the pieces of my life." I need his help "to get me safely through enemy lines" today. I need his guidance, his instruction, his teaching to live life well. This breaks me out of my holding pattern with his Word.

**II Press Pause.** What is one way that the Bible has been your teacher?

The Lord invites us to know him. This knowing is not a mastering of information, the maintaining of a moral code, or a sentimental worship experience. Knowing him happens when his Word meets us in our places of deepest need. Knowing him happens when we're filled with wonder and delight in his presence. Knowing him happens when he instructs us on how to live life well, guiding us on the path of obedience. When these things happen, it's no wonder that I want to hold on to the Bible; I hold what I love.

### **A Story of Holding**

My friends Dave and Lori decided on a special gift for their granddaughter's twenty-first birthday. They would give her a Bible. But this would not be an ordinary Bible.

Dave and Lori decided to highlight verses in the Bible that meant a lot to them. Using two different colors, they marked up verses from Genesis to Revelation. These verses were not necessarily the ones they loved most, however, like John 3:16 or Psalm 23. And they did not just underline key verses of Bible doctrine. They highlighted verses where they had encountered God in the Scriptures. They colored verses that had been promises in times of crisis or need. They underlined commands that had changed the direction of their lives. They marked verses that had comforted them in sorrow. They colored verses that had given special wisdom to a challenge or question. Dozens and dozens of verses jumped out.

Dave and Lori created a book of memories of how they had walked with God in the Scriptures. Behind each underlined verse was a story they could tell their granddaughter about how the Lord had met them in everyday life. This Bible portrayed a sixty-year journey of two people walking with God, people whose life stories intersected with God's redemptive story.

If you were to do the same assignment, what would your Bible look like? Would you have a few meager favorite verses underlined, or would the text explode with color? An underlined Bible portrays a life lived with God in his Word, with memories and stories present on every page. Dave and Lori are people who have held the Bible, and the Bible has held them.

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