

“Follow Me”

How many here have a library card? There is a library for which you do not have to have a card—that is the Bible. The Bible is not a single book but a collection of books. There are sixty-six books in the Protestant version of the Bible. The Anglican version adds another twelve or so books in what we call the Apocrypha or the Deuterocanonical books. These are the books that are inserted between the Old Testament and the New Testament. If you were raised Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox, you would be accustomed to seeing these books distributed throughout the Old Testament. In the Protestant Reformation, these books were removed because they were not part of the Hebrew Bible.¹

Regardless of how we count the books of the Bible, and which ones are in or out, the Bible remains a library. Like a library, it is a collection of books in many different literary styles—poetry, song, fable, narrative, history, letters, genealogy, apocalypse, visions, prophecy, aphorisms, theology, and more. When we read these different books, we read them differently according to their style. We do not read history in the same way we read poetry. We do not read aphorisms like we read letters. We do not read a song like we read genealogy, and so forth.

To make it concrete and modern, we do not read Emily Dickinson’s poetry the same way we read a biography of Lincoln by historian Jon Meacham. We do not read Bartlett’s Quotations like we read the letters of Thomas Jefferson. We do not read Taylor Swift’s lyrics the way we read the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Different genres require us to read them differently, so we understand them.

Apply that understanding to the Bible and realize there are many ways to read it. One way is to read the Bible as a faith book, the way we read it most of the time in church. Then we are reading it for what it tells us about God and our relationship to God.

Another way to read the Bible is like a self-help book. Then you might look for phrases that help you live your life. Others read the Bible as a guide to life and mores in the ancient world. They combine that reading with other written sources and archaeology to understand the Ancient Near East. Some read the Bible as an interesting piece of literature, just as they might read a novel or book of poems. These are just some examples.

I think that the epilogue to the Gospel of John, which is what chapter 21 is, invites us to read it in many ways. Scholars are quite certain that another author added this chapter of John, because the grammar and writing style are different. Also, the end of chapter 20 sounds like the natural ending. There is no need to continue, but someone felt it necessary to add a chapter that includes another post-resurrection sighting of Jesus. It also tidies up some of the loose ends in the Gospel. For example, what the disciples did after they left Jerusalem and what Jesus directed them to do. All of that is interesting, but if that is all there is, then so what? This brings me to

¹ There are several reasons they were left out of the Jewish canon. A lot of it boils down to age. They had not stood the test of time as the other books had. Jews still read them and discussed them but not as part of the canon. Protestant dropped them altogether. When I quoted from one of those books in seminary, a professor who was a Presbyterian said that the words were nice, but they were not in the Bible.

another way of reading scripture. That is, reading the scripture for, “What it means for us today?”

When we read scripture solely for historical value, literary value, or other intellectual reasons, the scripture becomes ossified. It is like an archaeological dig, which teaches us something about the past, but without any flesh on it. Reading scripture in this manner insulates us from experiencing its transformative power. It keeps us safe in our comfortable cocoon and prevents us from the metamorphosis that changes us from caterpillars to butterflies.

If we look at the passage with the eyes of a reader seeking transformation, we might see invitations and intimations to something powerful. For example, when the disciples see Jesus on the shore of the lake, they do not recognize him. They, like Mary Magdalene in the garden, did not have eyes to see Jesus. We may have the same challenge. We do not expect to see Jesus in our world, and therefore, we do not recognize him. The invitation here is to look with fresh eyes for Jesus. Since Jesus dwells in the hearts of all of us, if we are looking for him, we might see him in the kindness of one person or the pain of another. We might see Jesus in the one calling out to us for friendship. We might see Jesus in the one whom we believe is our enemy, but is really groaning in pain. She is not a threat, she is in need.

Another invitation is to sit and be fed. Without this chapter, we might think that the Last Supper is the only way we meet Christ in a meal. Yet here we have the disciples eating with him informally, on the seashore, and part of the meal is fish that they caught. It is nothing fancy. It is not part of a Holy Day. It is the simple act of feeding and being fed. We can meet Jesus at a table at home as well as at the one in the church.

One of the powerful parts of this chapter is, to me, one of the most emotionally powerful parts of the Bible. When Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. He is not to challenge Peter. He is giving Peter the opportunity to repent for his three denials of Jesus on the night before his crucifixion.

The poignancy of Jesus’ care for Peter and the gentleness with which he gives Peter the opportunity to atone breaks my heart each time I read it. Jesus gives us that opportunity to repent as well. He also sets the example for how we are to forgive. We do not need to humiliate someone to gain true repentance. We just need to ask, even in an oblique way, for them to offer their apology.

As we near the end of this passage, Jesus, with only two words, offers us the words of life. They are the only words we need to heal our hurts, strengthen our souls, reform our spirits, and remake our lives for the rest of our days. Those words are—“Follow me.” That is all the instruction we need to live a life worthy of our creator. Follow the teachings of Jesus.

While we might find great intellectual reward from doing serious exegetical, historical, literary, sociological, and contextual study on a passage such as this one, we also need to do what Martin Luther called plain reading. This is not taking the text at face value, but reading the text for what it teaches us about life. This is how we get out of our heads and into our hearts, something Jesus was trying to do with every parable, teaching, sermon, and miracle, because “It is only with the heart that one can

see rightly.”² It is only with the heart that we can give ourselves over to the Good Shepherd.

There are many ways to read scripture, but when we read with our heart, we get closest to the heart of the one who makes his home in our hearts, asking that we do only one thing, “Follow me.”

² Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*