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Scripture as a Gateway to Eternal Living

*We cannot have a relationship with the
Bible, but the God of the Bible.*

DALLAS WILLARD, *HEARING GOD*

I SHOULD HAVE TAKEN my high school typing class far more seriously.

I thought this about a hundred times as I furiously tried to capture everything Dallas Willard said throughout the weeklong class I took with him in 2010 through Denver Seminary.¹ The course was held at The Hideaway Inn and Conference Center in Colorado Springs, in the shadow of what has been called America's Mountain, Pikes Peak. It was a fitting setting to meet and study under the person who has become the most towering spiritual influence in my life.

In the conference room at The Hideaway, I learned the essential *message* of Dallas Willard through his profound lectures. While he is often and generally associated with the spiritual disciplines, the scope of his teaching extended greatly beyond this. During our time together, through the use of an old-school

transparency projector—a Willard staple—he helped us discover a picture of the gospel Jesus preached. He enabled us to understand what the kingdom of God is really about and its availability here and now. Eventually, he made his way toward the spiritual disciplines and concluded the course by casting a vision for the local church to become a “school for eternal living”—whatever that meant.

He finished his formal teaching with the most freeing words I ever heard as a young pastor: “What God gets out of your life is the person you become.” What God gets out of my life is not my success as a pastor or the size of my ministry. The person I become matters most. That *is* good news.

Never before or since have I come across a person whose teaching carried so much weight. Every sentence he uttered spoke volumes. Every idea he introduced possessed authority. Every pause pulsed with spiritual power.

Like most students of Dallas Willard, I wasn’t able to come close to understanding all the revolutionary things he said in real time, so I resolved to capture as much as I possibly could for later reflection. Fifteen years later, these are some of the takeaways from Dallas’s teachings that I’ve come to treasure most from my notes:

Joy is “a pervasive sense of well-being.”² It’s possible for you to be okay even if everything around you isn’t.

Beauty is goodness made sensibly present.³

Does the gospel I preach have a natural tendency to produce disciples or only consumers of religious goods and services?

If you want to do everything Jesus said, don’t *try* to do everything he said. Instead, *train* yourself to become the

kind of person who would “easily and routinely” do everything he said.⁴

While I learned the *message* of Dallas Willard in the conference room, what left an even greater impression on my life was interacting with the *man* in all the other spaces of The Hideaway. For a person who was once described as “a man from another ‘time zone,’” Dallas was surprisingly down-to-earth.⁵

He was funny. When talking to my wife, Erin, and me over a meal, he described how he met his wife, Jane, at his college’s library. “I checked her out, but I never checked her back in.”

He was normal. One evening, Dallas watched the college football national championship game with us—even though USC wasn’t playing. Other retreat leaders I had interacted with over the years were almost impossible to connect with outside of the formal sessions. It was a relief and a joy to discover that this philosopher seemed more at home hanging out as our friend than alone as a monk.

He was helpful. Dallas slowly and patiently guided me through some of the confusion I had around spiritual practices and theology. For instance, I posed a “hypothetical” situation to him.

“Dallas, if you’re fasting and your wife cooks you dinner, what do you do? After all, Jesus tells us to fast ‘in secret.’”

“Dave, if you’re fasting and your wife cooks you dinner, you eat. The point of the spiritual disciplines is not to get good at them, as much as they are designed to help you love God and love others more fully. The more loving thing to do is to eat what your wife has prepared.” It wasn’t the answer I was looking for in the presence of my wife, but I’m confident it was the right answer!

And yet Dallas was devout. As the only married couple in the class, my wife and I ended up staying in a suite that shared a wall with the room Dallas was in. Every morning we awoke to the sound of Dallas's baritone voice singing hymns as part of his morning time with the Lord. Our class followed Dallas's spiritual practice of fasting on Wednesdays along with him. Somehow being with the man—experiencing his personal presence and his personal spiritual practices—seemed to confirm his message, adding even more gravity to his groundbreaking thought.

Since that course, I spent years first trying to learn *what* Dallas said about the topics he addressed—especially his unique interpretations of many passages of Scripture. In more recent years, though, as part of my doctoral studies, I have sought to discover *how* Dallas reached the conclusions he did.

I have been grateful to learn that others have pursued similar ends. In his outstanding academic work *The Kingdom Among Us: The Gospel According to Dallas Willard*, Michael Stewart Robb shares his email correspondence with Willard, regarding how he arrived at many of the biblical and theological conclusions he came to hold—viewpoints that do not seem to fit squarely in any one Christian tradition. In response to Robb, Willard writes:

Nearly all of my “influences” are from people long dead. I have arrived at my views by studying the Bible philosophically, if you wish, and by reading widely through the ages, and trying to put it all into practice. It is presumptuous to say, but I believe that God has guided my thinking. Certainly nothing I have is really new or “my own.”⁶

In the next chapter, I will attempt to explain the basics of the philosophical terms and approaches that characterized

Willard's work, like *robust metaphysical realism*, *epistemic realism*, and *phenomenology*. Before then, though, I'd like to use more accessible language to explore how Willard read the Bible philosophically. To do so, we must first build a foundational theological understanding of Willard's view about the nature of God and what the gospel is. To rightly perceive what the Bible is, we must know the God who lovingly gave it to us. Second, I'll present a case study of the text Willard arguably quoted the most through his teaching and writing, John 17:3. By building this foundation, we will be prepared to craft the core framework for how Willard read Scripture like a Southern Baptist, a philosopher, and mystic.

WHAT COMES TO MIND WHEN DALLAS THINKS ABOUT GOD

In *The Divine Conspiracy*, Willard writes that when we think about God, we should conclude that he leads a very interesting life, and that he is pervaded with joy. In fact, he believes God is the “most joyous being in the universe.”⁷ Because he is abundantly loving and abundantly generous, God is infinitely joyous. What an astonishing way to think about God!

To illustrate this enthralling vision of the nature of God, Willard describes an overwhelming experience of beauty he had off the coast of South Africa. It occurred to him that God sees brilliant scenes of wonder like this all the time. Willard reflects, “It is perhaps strange to say, but suddenly I was extremely happy for God.”⁸ To deepen his reflections even more, Willard posits, “But he [God] is simply one great inexhaustible and eternal experience of all that is good and true and beautiful and right.”⁹ This is what we should think of when we think of God's perfect

being—God’s very life. And this life—his life—is the life God desires to share with each one of us.

God desires to share his joyous life with us because, as 1 John states, God is love (4:8, 16). Woven throughout the tapestry of Willard’s works is his belief that the essential nature of God is love.¹⁰ Later in *The Divine Conspiracy*, Willard concludes, “The acid test for any theology is this: Is the God presented one that can be loved, heart, soul, mind, and strength? If the thoughtful, honest answer is ‘Not really,’ then we need to look elsewhere or deeper.”¹¹ Given God’s loving nature, his people are invited to live what Willard described as the *with-God life*, which is central to his understanding of the gospel.

THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

To grasp Willard’s understanding of what the Bible is and how it is to be read and applied, we must examine Willard’s subversive perspective on what the gospel is. In *The Divine Conspiracy*, Willard claims that the Christian message proclaimed today is focused only on how to deal with sin, or what he calls “gospels of sin management.” When surveying the broad spectrum of Christian belief and practice, he observes that the right side of the theological spectrum focuses almost exclusively on the forgiveness of an individual’s sins. On the left end of the spectrum, the gospel is viewed as a removal of social or structural evils.¹²

Given these shortsighted understandings of the gospel, Willard believes Christians devolve into being people who are merely ready to face the judgment of God at death, or those who are committed to pursuing love and justice in society.¹³ In our politically and religiously polarized world today, it is

apparent that these distinctions Dallas Willard wrote about in 1997 are just as true today—perhaps even more so.

While Willard contrasts the differences between right and left gospel perspectives, he also draws comparisons to what they have in common. Neither group, he believes, provides a “coherent framework of knowledge and practical direction adequate to personal transformation toward the abundance and obedience emphasized in the New Testament, with a corresponding redemption of ordinary life.”¹⁴ The gospels of sin management simply do not offer a clear path to a life of apprenticeship to Jesus.¹⁵

My background and tradition were largely bent toward the right side of this gospel continuum. Presentations of the gospel I heard were almost exclusively about death, and not life. Related to this, the Reformational theology I was taught in college bordered on making “the atonement the whole story,” as Willard warns against doing. To shed light on this common perspective in evangelical circles, Willard asserts, “justification has taken the place of regeneration, or new life. Being let off the divine hook replaces possessing a divine life ‘from above.’”¹⁶ In contrast to atonement as the whole gospel, Willard offers a gospel for living—life to the full here and now (Jn 10:10).

According to Willard, the gospel is “the good news of the presence and availability of life in the kingdom, now and forever, through reliance on Jesus the Anointed.” Crucial to this definition is the reliance on the *person* of Jesus and not simply the *work* of Jesus. We are called to trust Jesus—the real person—to experience the good news of the gospel, rather than merely “trusting some arrangement for sin-remission set up through him—trusting him only as a guilt remover.” Trusting Jesus as a

person means we have confidence in him for every aspect of our lives. Trusting Jesus means we believe that he is right about everything and sufficient for all that we need.¹⁷ Trusting Jesus is what enables people to experience and enter into an eternal kind of life now. Building off his understanding of the gospel, Willard clarifies what he believes the Bible teaches about eternal life.

JOHN 17:3 CASE STUDY

According to Willard, the only definition we have of eternal life in the Scriptures comes from John 17:3, in which Jesus says, “This is eternal life, that they [his disciples] may know you, the only real God, and Jesus the anointed, whom you have sent.”¹⁸ While it can be tempting for people—especially those with gospel leanings toward the right end of the spectrum—to interpret knowing Jesus as mere “head knowledge” or mental assent, Willard argues that *to know* in the Bible “always refers to an intimate, personal, interactive relationship.”¹⁹ Thus he concludes, “The eternal life of which Jesus speaks is not knowledge about God but an intimately interactive relationship with him.”²⁰ Do you see what this means? We do not have to wait until we die to experience eternal life. Rather, as we *know* God, we can experience *eternal living* today.

This understanding of the gospel and knowing Jesus is paramount for reading Scripture like Dallas Willard. We are not to approach the Scriptures to merely know what is true, but to know the one who says, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6). We are to read Scripture in a way that invites communion with the trinitarian God of love, the one who is the most joyous being in the universe.

While Willard's interpretation of John 17:3 and its implications are inspiring and resonate, he does not explicitly show his readers each of the steps he took to reach this interpretation. To better understand how Willard drew this interpretive conclusion, let's consider the different ways one can know something, which Dallas would have had in mind. These are best summarized through the words of one of his PhD students, philosopher J. P. Moreland, in Moreland's tribute to his professor and friend.

According to Moreland, there are three essential forms of knowledge: propositional knowledge (true belief based on adequate grounds); know-how (wisdom, skill); and knowledge by acquaintance (direct experience).²¹ To expound on these ideas, propositional knowledge "is knowledge that an entire proposition is true"; in other words, it is justified true belief.²² *Know-how* is the ability or capacity to do certain things. It is characteristic of the knowledge of a skilled practitioner. Moreover, it is the "ability to engage in the correct behavioral movements, say by following the steps in a manual, with little or no knowledge of why one is performing these movements."²³ *Knowledge by acquaintance* is when we are directly aware of something. According to Moreland, it is sometimes called simple seeing or direct experience of something or someone.²⁴ Perhaps an illustration will help clarify and distinguish these three forms of knowing.

At a church where I previously served, I have a good friend named Ted. Ted has brewed coffee for many different ministries and events at the church for the past two decades. He possesses an incredible, almost encyclopedic knowledge of all things coffee: its composition, consistency, and origins. Ted is well educated in

the physical impact coffee has on the different types of people who drink it. He has a robust understanding of the economics of the entire coffee business. This understanding of coffee that Ted possesses is what we have described as propositional knowledge.

Not only does Ted know a lot about coffee; he knows how to roast it and brew it in a variety of styles—from drip to cold brew to French pressed. His capacity to roast and brew coffee is know-how. But while Ted's know-how and propositional knowledge of coffee are seemingly as bottomless as a refillable mug at a diner, Ted does not actually drink coffee. In fact, he will often ask others how it tastes. Ted possesses propositional knowledge of coffee and know-how for roasting and brewing coffee, but he does not have what we have described as knowledge by acquaintance. To really know coffee, you have to actually drink it. The tasting of coffee is the direct, firsthand, experiential way of knowing coffee.

I believe this understanding of knowledge by acquaintance is what guided Willard to interpret John 17:3 the way he did. And it's a driving factor in how Willard read all of the Bible. The good news of the gospel according to Dallas Willard is that, through the words of Scripture, you can possess more than just propositional knowledge of who God is and what he's done. Hearers of the Word can gain more than just simple know-how for living life well and wisely. The Bible invites us to experience knowledge by acquaintance—relational knowledge—with the relationship that is at the center of the universe: our triune, loving God. You can know Jesus by acquaintance—directly, personally, interactively. You can experience a transforming friendship with Jesus that begins now and lasts forever as you apprentice your life to his. Jesus' invitation to everyone is to

taste and see and experience life in the kingdom. Scripture is a gateway to eternal living.

Before moving on, it is important to highlight an additional principle Moreland raises about knowledge, which coheres with Willard's views. Moreland adamantly believes knowledge does not require certainty. He contends, "If knowledge is just a sort of certainty, then knowledge 'with certainty' would be redundant."²⁵ What this means for spiritual knowledge is that when we seek to know God or understand certain biblical texts, we should not assume that our search requires reaching a state of total certainty, free of all doubt. While Moreland is not stating that certainty is a bad thing, he is noting it is not required to have genuine knowledge. In the spiritual life, we are pursuing confidence, not certainty. In our cultural moment of deconstruction, maintaining the distinction between certainty and confidence is vital for readers and teachers of Scripture. Much of the confidence we discover through knowledge by acquaintance with God and the Scriptures could be described by Willard as being *self-authenticating*.²⁶ In other words, we gain confidence in our knowledge of God and his ways as we obey his teachings and experience God and his Word as real.

KNOWING DALLAS BY ACQUAINTANCE

Prior to the 2010 class I took with Dallas, I had acquired propositional knowledge about his thought through the books and articles of his I read. I also possessed know-how for teaching and quoting Dallas to add depth and authority to my preaching and teaching. But after gaining personal, interactive, experiential knowledge of Dallas, I knew him by acquaintance.

Prior to having this experiential knowledge of Dallas the *man*, I only possessed knowledge of Dallas's *message*. Knowledge of his message convinced me that he absolutely had something to say—a message I must take seriously and pay attention to. But after getting to know Dallas personally, I became convinced his message was right. My experience of Dallas living what he taught proved the veracity of what he said. My experiential knowledge of Dallas fueled my commitment to not just knowing what he said or understanding why he said what he did. Meeting Dallas convinced me that I could live more fully into the kingdom of God than I was. I could experience a deeper, eternal kind of life here and now.

I share this not to sing the praises of Willard, but to illustrate the fuller, richer, more intimate way we may know God through the Scriptures. We do not need to settle for mere propositional knowledge of God or the core doctrines of the faith—as essential as these are. Neither do we need to be content in simply knowing how to apply certain truths from Scripture to our lives. We can know God with a knowledge by acquaintance, which lies at the heart of the gospel for today. As we open the pages of the Bible, we are invited to experience eternal living now as Jesus' apprentices. The good news of the Bible is that we can know its author.

EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES

1. John 17:3 was one of the biblical passages Willard referenced most. Spend time memorizing and meditating on this verse.
2. Based on John 17:3, this chapter stated that “Scripture is a gateway to eternal living.” Have you ever had experiences

of reading Scripture when you encountered the presence of God in a personal way? If so, reflect on what that experience was like. Can you recall what parts of Scripture you read when you were able to know God more directly, personally, or intimately?

3. Read passages of Scripture where the word *know* is used in a prominent way. Examples include: Psalm 46:10; Psalm 139:1; Philippians 3:10-11. As you read the word *know* in these passages, read in light of what was described as *knowledge by acquaintance*. How does this shape your understanding and experience of these texts?
4. Pray the words of Ephesians 1:17-19. Ask God that you might know him in an ever-deepening experiential way.

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may perceive what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

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