

Existential Bible Reading

I use the phrase ‘existential Bible reading’ to refer to the impact that Scripture *can* and *ought* to have upon the *heart & soul* of a believer. Existential philosophy was a movement sparked by the writings of Soren Kierkegaard—a Danish Christian philosopher of the late nineteenth century. Kierkegaard was highly critical of the nominal Christian witness he had experienced in his home country of Denmark. In light of his observations, Kierkegaard emphasized the *lived-experience* of the Christian faith. Hence, his philosophy eventually became known as *existential* philosophy—existential meaning *preoccupied with human experience*. In some ways, Kierkegaard over-emphasized the importance of human experience. But Kierkegaard’s foundational point was perfectly sound: If our faith is *authentic*, then a passionate commitment to Christ will:

- a. shape the way we experience reality
- b. radically influence the way we *live our lives*.

Kierkegaard was attempting to hammer-home the implications of the greatest commandment: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Accordingly, Kierkegaard found inspiration in the stories (narratives) of the Bible—especially those of the Old Testament. His way of reading these stories was to *immerse himself* in the people and circumstances being described. Kierkegaard couldn’t stand the *moralizing tendencies* of so many preachers and commentators. These moralizers tended to stand *above* the people being described—as if they themselves would know better and do better if faced with the same circumstances. To Kierkegaard, that was a pharisaical way of reading the Bible—and I completely agree with him. *The stories of the Bible are a like a mirror reflecting the contents of the human soul*. If we find ourselves *playing the judge* as we read through the stories of the Bible, then we completely *miss the point*. Many of the stories are designed to help us *see our own depravity* and our *need for the righteousness of Jesus Christ*.

The stories of the Bible were meant to be read/heard *existentially*—and the same is true for *all* the writings of Scripture. The Scriptures are supposed to impact us *at a soul-level*—which, in turn, shapes our thoughts, our attitudes, and our actions. The author of Hebrews says, “The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joint and marrow. It judges the thoughts and attitudes *of the heart*” (Heb. 4:12). And in the book of Proverbs we read that “Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him” (Proverbs 30:5). In that very proverb, it’s important to see that the wise man connects *the word* of God with *God himself*. So then, we take refuge *in God* by taking refuge *in His word*.

If we acknowledge that every word of God is *flawless* and every word of God *judges the attitudes of our heart...* then one skill-set we ought to develop, and continuously refine, is our ability to *go from the text of Scripture to the heart & soul of the listener*. This is true for our own personal devotions, and also for the times that we share the Scriptures with others. In another resource, I outline a big-picture framework for understanding the Bible *as a whole* (see *Key People & the Story of Redemption*). But here, we are zooming-in to study individual passages. And I want to share a lens that can help to magnify the *meaning & significance* of the many individual parts of Scripture. Of course, this lens will not enable us to see *every* significant detail in *every* text of the Bible. But this lens will ensure that we don’t *miss the message of redemption* that completes-perfects-fulfills our understanding of the Bible. A trained eye will learn to *see redemption* on every page of the Bible. And training our eyes to see the redemption of Christ throughout the many parts of Scripture is immensely worthwhile!

Here are some familiar bottom-line questions: Why should I *care* about this? Why does this *matter* to me? How are these Bible passages *relevant* to my life? These are perfectly legitimate questions, and the right lens will help us to see the relevance of Scripture *for our lives*. But always remember: We don't want to approach the Bible with an *overly-pragmatic* lens (e.g. 5 biblical principles for a healthy marriage, or 10 biblical principles for financial success, and the examples go on-and-on). That is not how the Scriptures were designed to work. That way of reading the Bible tends to produce legalistic beliefs and practices.

The Scriptures reorient our lives by opening our eyes to see new depths of meaning & significance. Jesus continually says, "He who has *eyes to see* let him see." And again, "He who has *ears to hear* let him hear." This is about true *understanding*. Understanding *is* seeing. And what are we looking for? We are looking for *meaning & significance*. When we actually *see* meaning & significance in the text... this, in turn, *reorients the way we think, feel, and act* (it reorients our thoughts, our attitudes, and our actions... our head, our heart, and our hands). The New Testament refers to this process as renewal and sanctification. If we don't understand (or see) the *meaning & significance* of a passage, then it cannot impact us the way that it ought to. If we don't understand the text, then our soul can't respond to it. So then, existential Bible reading is about seeing the meaning & significance embedded in every text of the Bible. *Real* understanding (real seeing) always touches our very *being*—and it shapes *who we are*.

Now, the word "being" and the phrase "who we are" and the word "existential" are all ways of pointing to the biblical concept of the *heart & soul* of a person. There's a kind of superficial understanding (intelligence) that lacks a deeper (existential) meaning. The Apostle Paul identifies this. And he says there are people who are "always learning but never able to reach a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7). Existential philosophy (and the whole Romantic movement) were *reactions against* a dull and rationalistic worldview that marginalized or excluded the existential aspects of human existence. To use biblical language, those movements sought to recover *the heart & soul* of what it means to be human. Now, we can certainly argue with their conclusions, but their hunger to address the existential aspects of life was certainly appropriate.

And this is one of the problems with inventing new language for old concepts—it quickly obscures a simple but profound truth by burying it beneath a load of sophisticated jargon. There are many reasons why this continues to happen over-and-over-again in Western culture. One of the reasons is that the original phrases are repeatedly used *in very superficial ways*—which is a form of ignorance and/or hypocrisy. But then a thinker comes along and attempts to re-explain these very old concepts in a way that will *grab the attention* of his contemporary audience. Western society has had the concept of *heart & soul* for a very long time. But these concepts were drained of their *meaning* because the phrases were used without a *real demonstration* of their significance. Kierkegaard is prime example of someone who espoused a very sophisticated philosophy. But, in essence, Kierkegaard was simply elaborating on the greatest commandment. Those who reject Kierkegaard's Christian faith, but accept his philosophy, have placed their feet firmly in mid-air.

So then, we don't want to miss *the wellsprings of meaning & significance* found in the Bible.

To that end, let's explore a simple lens—which we'll call *the gospel lens*—that will help us to *see more clearly* the meaning & significance that has been *treasured up* in the Bible. The resources labeled *The Gospel Lens* will cover that subject.