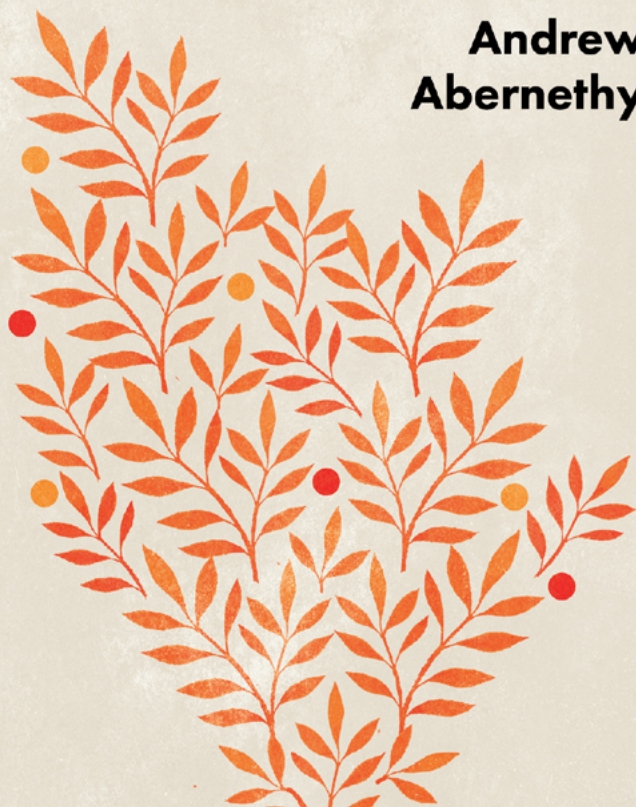


**Andrew
Abernethy**



**Savoring
Scripture**

**A Six-Step
Guide to
Studying
the Bible**



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Savoring Scripture* by Andrew Abernethy.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.

Step 1

Posture

I HAD THE CHANCE TO GO TO JERUSALEM in 2014. On the itinerary was “Hezekiah’s Tunnel.” I was excited to see it. This tunnel under Jerusalem is longer than five football fields. It may have been dug 2,800 years ago when King Hezekiah was preparing to face the Assyrians. On the itinerary, under “Hezekiah’s Tunnel,” was a caption: “Bring waterproof shoes, a flashlight, and a hat.”

It was a dark tunnel with running water, so I knew why I would need my Crocs (yes, grown men can wear Crocs) and a flashlight. But why on earth would I need a hat? Hats are for protecting my eyes or balding scalp from the sun, not for dark tunnels.

As we prepared to enter the tunnel, the leader said, “The ceiling of the tunnel can be as low as five feet in some places, so you’ll want to duck down and wear a hat to protect your head from scraping the ceiling.” Now I knew why I needed a hat.

I am 6'6". They didn't make tunnels back in ancient times for giants like me. To make it through the tunnel, I had to crouch low and wear a cap for about 500 yards. *Without adopting a lowly posture, there would be no way I'd make it through.*

Similarly, entry into the Bible demands a particular posture of mind and heart. When we read the Bible with the right posture, the odds of meeting with God and hearing his voice increases.

What posture of mind and heart will position us to hear from God as we read the Bible?

TEACHABILITY

We come to Scripture to meet with God. Don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that we approach the Bible as if it were God—that would be idolatry, *bibliolatry* (worshipping a book rather than the God of the Good Book). Bibliolatry can manifest itself in the innocent guise of wanting to know the Bible. While there is nothing wrong with seeking to study and learn the Bible, bibliolatry surfaces when the quest for knowledge becomes an end in itself.

Jesus confronts some of the most dedicated students of Scripture in ancient Israel. These Jews could have schooled any of us in their knowledge of the Bible. But Jesus was not impressed. He said to them, “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (Jn 5:39-40).

Scary stuff. It is possible to be the most diligent students of Scripture and still fail Jesus' exam. You fail if your study of Scripture does not lead you to Jesus. What can help us move beyond bibliolatry to encounter God as we read the Bible? The posture of our heart makes a difference. We need to be teachable.

The Bible gives us several vantage points for thinking about teachability. Have you ever thought about our need for God

himself to be our teacher? As discussed in the previous chapter, Mary of Bethany models for us a teachable spirit as she sits at the feet of Jesus, hungry for his every word.

This posture before God as teacher includes recognizing our need for God to help us know the things of God. We can't assume that in and of our own efforts we will automatically grasp the Bible.

The psalmist models this. He prays, "Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes" (Ps 119:33 ESV). No doubt the psalmist had studied God's statutes, but he knew that for them to sink in God would need to teach him. The prophets themselves look forward to a time when God would teach his people (Is 30:20-21; Jer 31:34). Jesus even speaks to his disciples about how the Holy Spirit would teach his disciples (Jn 14:26). As we approach the Bible, then, we need to come with hearts yearning to be taught by God, the Master Teacher himself.

CHILDLIKENESS

Another vantage point on teachability is childlikeness. We are coming to meet with God, our Father, when we approach the Scriptures. Jesus highlights childlikeness as a key to hearing God's voice. Consider this scenario in Matthew 11.

Jesus is traveling from city to city around the Sea of Galilee. Miracles are happening left and right. With just a touch, Jesus cleanses a leper, relieves the fever of Peter's mother-in-law, and opens the eyes of the blind. With just a word, Jesus heals a paralyzed servant and casts out a legion of demons. People from across the region are bringing the sick and demon possessed before him, and they are all experiencing healing and deliverance.

If you witnessed such events, how would you respond? You'd repent and turn to Jesus, right? Well, maybe not. Check out what Matthew says: "Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent" (Mt 11:20). Those who saw the mighty works of God in their midst were calloused, unchanged, and unresponsive. So Jesus curses those cities, declaring that Sodom is better off than them. This is not good news, considering the fact that God wiped Sodom off the map due to their sin in Genesis 19.

Jesus next says something that seems like it is out of left field: "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do" (Mt 11:25-26). Hold on a minute. Jesus was just calling down curses, and now he's praising God. What is going on? What is happening becomes clear when we see the contrast between Jesus condemning the "wise and learned" *who do not get it* (the cities of Galilee who remain unrepentant after seeing miracles) and those "little children" *who do get it*.

The ways of the Father are far different from what one would expect. From a human point of view, the "wise and learned" of Jesus' day—those scribes and Pharisees who went to "seminary"—are those you would expect to grasp the things of God, to repent on seeing God's miracles in Jesus. There is nothing wrong with being "wise" per se. The issue is their assumption that their status in society as those in the know gives them the inside track on knowing the ways of God. They have God in a box, so they are closed off to being pushed beyond their current thinking about God. Jesus takes great delight in how the Father

hides these things from the proud who presume a privileged place of being in the know.

Who are the “little children” that receive God’s unexpected revelation? Jesus does not have in mind *actual* infants; instead, “little children” is a metaphor for Jesus’ disciples. Jesus speaks of his disciples as “little ones” (Mt 10:42) or as “the least” (Mt 11:11) right before this.

One reason why Jesus speaks of his disciples as little children is because infants are not known for their intelligence. If you spend time around little children you know this.

My son Oliver is two as I write this book. The following conversation is typical.

“Oliver, how old are you?”

“Five,” he’ll declare.

“No, Oliver, you are two,” I respond.

“Two,” he’ll echo back.

So, I follow up by asking: “Oliver, how old are you?”

“Five,” he announces with pride.

We get lots of laughs about this. My son amazes me. I love him to bits. But he—along with all other little children—are not intellectually developed, so they are not known to be the “wise and learned” in society.

When Jesus celebrates how “infants” are recipients of divine revelation, he taps into the common knowledge that little children are not expected to be smarter about the ways of God than schooled scribes. Jesus is celebrating how the Father reveals

himself to those who might not be “wise and learned” in the world’s eyes. Jesus calls fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, and the lowly to receive insight into the ways of God in Jesus. These are the “little children.” The key seems to be that such folks would not presume to be in the know when it comes to the things of God. This creates a childlike dependence on God for him to make himself known to them. They are open, teachable. Childlikeness seems to be the key, and, as Jesus says elsewhere, we must become like children to enter the kingdom of God (Mt 18:3). The very posture that enables us to enter the kingdom is the posture that positions us to hear from God as we read the Bible.

WHERE DO YOU FIT?

Would you be among the “wise and learned”—those whom people would expect to understand the things of God due to status and training? Are you a Bible quiz champ, Sunday school teacher, Christian school kid, Bible major, pastor, or a professor? Well, here’s a warning. Having a status as “one who knows the Bible” could become a barrier between you and God if this has led to pride and presumption, for the Father takes pleasure in hiding things from folks like us.

Would you be among the “little children”? Some of you may feel like you’d be the last person to receive insight into the things of God. You don’t have formal training in how to read the Bible. You didn’t get good grades in school. You’ve made choices in life that have brought you to rock bottom. The Father takes great pleasure in making you the sort of person that will receive his revelation.

As I shared in the prologue, I began studying the Bible as one of the “little children” at the age of twenty. I had a 0.8 GPA, was untangling from substance abuse and deeply depressed, and was definitely not someone people would peg as one who’d grasp the things of God. But I’ll tell you what. It was there, amidst my desperation, where God took delight in revealing himself to me through his Word. The floodgates opened and divine wisdom and insight poured through the Scriptures into my barren heart and mind.

I now find myself among the wise and learned. I have degrees. I teach the Bible for a living. I am invited to speak on podcasts and at churches. I write about the Bible. Honestly, my teachability waxes and wanes. I can read and interpret a passage of the Bible to get an A+, but some days and some seasons it seems like the floodgates of divine revelation have been closed. I too often turn on autopilot and just let my training kick in to accomplish the task of interpretation. Thankfully, God does not leave me there. God will allow a thirst, a hunger, a yearning to swell within my unwell soul. Desperation for the things of God will overcome me, and I again become childlike, dependent on God to feed me and help me truly see. Sure, I benefit from my training, but the gates of revelation open when I reach the point of *depending* completely on God and not my status or training.

The apostle Paul gives someone like me hope. Paul was a Pharisee of Pharisees. He was wise and learned, and such learning led him to reject Christianity and persecute Christians. But then God knocked him off of his high horse. His scales of pride and presumed understanding fell from his eyes, and then he could see. There is no doubt Paul continued to benefit greatly from his prior educational training, but Paul no longer leaned on

such learning as a sure indication that he had figured out God and his Word.

Paul says this: “No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us” (1 Cor 2:11-12). Paul knew firsthand that the Spirit of God is the only way we can understand God. We desperately need the Holy Spirit. In steps five and six, we will explore further how the Holy Spirit illuminates our minds to see Christ, personalizes God’s Word to the specifics of our lives, and transforms us into people who can respond faithfully to God’s Word.

When we come to Scripture, we must come with the posture of an infant—the posture that nothing about our status or intellect is a guarantee we’ll hear from God. We don’t have God figured out. We come dependent on the Master Teacher and Father to reveal himself to us.

ADOPTION

Yes, Jesus speaks of his disciples as “little children” to highlight how unexpected it is that they are the recipients of divine revelation. There is another reason why he calls his disciples “little children.” They are not just childlike; they are actually God’s children.

Did you notice how Jesus starts these verses off by saying, “I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth” (Mt 11:25)? The very ruler of everything—heaven and earth—is addressed as Father. It is the Father who hides and reveals. Jesus views the disciples as little children because they have such a unique relationship to God as Father.

Is coming to God as Father part of your DNA? When I was a junior in college, a mentor gave me J. I. Packer's *Knowing God*. In his chapter "Adoption," one sentence jumped out at me: "If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father."¹ This was a jaw dropping moment for me. I had never let the truth of God being my Father settle in. Certainly, if someone were to judge my understanding of Christianity based on this, I would have failed.

My tendency is to create God into some sort of cosmic coach. He's given me a spot on the team, so I need to work hard, grind it out through practice, try to perform well, and hope that the coach is happy with how I've done. This god of my own creation is not the God of the Bible, and this mentality leads to a constant sense that I'm not bringing enough to the table. As we've seen, though, an "infant" mentality is one of complete dependence. It is not about what we have to offer; instead, it is about the Father's love in adopting us and about what he wishes to offer us. Thanks be to God that we can relate with him as a child to a Father, not as a player to a coach. Our Father sent Jesus so that we can be adopted as God's children.

Look at how Jesus finishes this passage in Matthew 11:26: "Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do." Let "pleased" sink in. The Father doesn't grudgingly hide things from the wise and reveal things to his children. It is the very pleasure of the Father to work in this way, to make himself known to the lowly, to children like you and me.

¹J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (1973; repr., Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 201.

This truth must infuse our outlook as we approach the Bible. Our posture should be “Father, as your child, I depend on you to help me see!” And, if Jesus is correct, then the Father is delighted to reveal himself to us, his children.

TRUST

If childlikeness should be a key posture when we come to Scripture, two features spring from it: trust and family. Let’s begin with trust. Children depend on others for just about everything, so they have to trust those around them, especially their family. This same characteristic of childlike trust is vital for our relationship with God as we read his Word.

“Do you trust me?” Aladdin asks Princess Jasmine this twice. In one scene, street boy Aladdin helps Jasmine escape from those hunting her down in the market. As the street boy and princess scramble away across rooftops, they reach a point where they will need to jump. Jasmine is scared, but Aladdin says, “Do you trust me?” After internalizing this question, she jumps.

In a later scene, Aladdin is disguised as Prince Ali. He offers the princess a ride on his magic carpet. She says, “Is it safe?” He responds, “Sure, do you trust me? . . . Do you trust me?” These words cause her to flash back to the marketplace, and then she smiles, says yes, takes his hand, and steps onto the magic carpet.

As we approach the Bible, we should hear the words: “Do you trust me?” Yet, these words do not come to us from a resourceful kid like Aladdin. These words come to us from our heavenly Father. God wants us, his children, to trust him as we come to his Word.

Fundamental to this trust is confidence that Genesis through Revelation is the inspired Word of God. Paul's letter to Timothy supports this: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). When Paul says, "All Scripture," he has the Old Testament in mind. There was no New Testament at the time of Paul. But if Paul affirms that God inspired the Scriptures throughout Israel's history, we can expect that God would also inspire a new collection of writings to speak of Jesus, the culminating act in God's plan. These Scriptures are "God-breathed," for the very life-giving breath of God that created the world also gave birth to these words. One implication of this is that we should come to the Scriptures trusting that they come from our good Father and that they will be for our good.

This posture toward the Bible is much different from what we see in society. It is often *suspicion*, not trust, that drives some approaches to the Bible. Richard Dawkins and other New Atheists have made it their aim to undermine the Bible. Many modern Bible scholars treat the Bible like any other ancient document and criticize its supernatural claims. Suspicions about the Bible circulate around society, so most who have never read the Bible are already suspicious. Today, some well-meaning Christians will also be suspicious of elements in the Bible that rub them the wrong way. Then they'll discard such passages as problematic.

If our heavenly Father has given us a book that bears his very words, we should receive it as children with trust. This does not mean, however, that we won't have questions. Our heavenly

Father is big enough for us to ask the hardest of questions. I remember some useful advice from one of my theology professors. He said, “When you find a passage in the Bible that rubs you the wrong way, mark that passage so that you can come back to it. It could be that God may want to expand your view of him through that passage.”

Esau McCaulley captures this posture of trust well. Instead of dismissing the Bible when something difficult emerges, he says, “I propose . . . that we adopt the posture of Jacob and refuse to let go of the text until it blesses us.”² What a wonderful posture of trust!

FAMILY

In addition to trust, valuing family should spring from a child-like posture. I’m not talking about valuing your biological family (though you should value them too!). I’m talking about God’s family, including God’s children from across all times, generations, and cultures.

Being part of God’s family should help us see that our own vantage point is limited. We need the insights of our sisters and brothers and spiritual fathers and mothers to understand God’s Word and see what we might be missing. Here are a few examples of this.

My expertise is in Isaiah, so I have preached, taught, and written on one of its most famous passages, Isaiah 6. This is when Isaiah has a vision of God and says, “In the year king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on the throne, high and exalted.” I had

²Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 21.

never, however, thought to ask how it is possible for Isaiah, who is human, to see God, who is spirit, until I read Thomas Aquinas's (1200s) commentary on Isaiah. Aquinas's interests expanded my horizon to ponder the wonders of how it would be possible for a human to see God.

***Reception history* explores how biblical texts have been received and interpreted in writing, art, and music in various cultures and across history.**

Another example. I had been teaching Ruth for years in the pulpit and classroom, in English and in Hebrew. I felt like I had a great grasp of its message—that was until I heard my colleague Dr. M. Daniel Carroll R. say, “I don’t know how anyone can possibly read Ruth or Esther and not think about immigration.”

Honestly, I hadn’t connected the dots before. All of a sudden, tons of aspects in Ruth came into view simply by being alert to immigration. You see, Danny is not only a brilliant scholar, but he is half Guatemalan and spent many years living in Guatemala. He could see things I could not because of his life experiences.

Another example comes from a conversation with the Rev. Dr. Charlie Dates. A simple observation from Pastor Dates helped to explode a false dichotomy. He said, “We [the Black Church] are far more conservative and orthodox theologically than the White Church. But when people see us involved in social issues they assume we are liberal theologically. Here’s the thing, Andy: we haven’t had the luxury of separating our pursuit of pure doctrine from the urgent need for social action.” All of a sudden I could see how my own context’s focus on reading the Bible for right doctrine had caused us to miss the Bible’s

corresponding interest in social action. The two aren't mutually exclusive! Hearing Pastor Dates's perspective helped to widen my understanding of Scripture. The more alert we are to the perspectives of brothers and sisters in our family the more we will be able to hear the fullness of what God's Word is communicating.

God gave us a Bible that is best read with others. If you've been in a group Bible study, you can attest to this. This is iron sharpening iron. It is like a team of doctors at Mayo Clinic coming together to see the whole picture. When we welcome and value the perspectives and voices of others, we are valuing the family of God. We become childlike and abandon any inclination of self-sufficiency. We depend on God and benefit from our family. As a result, we hear God's voice more clearly.

Family questions. What does it look like practically to benefit from the insights of others? It is unrealistic to think we will always have a diverse range of vantage points immediately available to us every time we read the Bible. A fruitful way forward is to become alert to the sorts of questions our brothers and sisters might ask when reading the Bible.

Asian and African communities teach other communities to ask, "How is honor and shame at work in this passage?" and, "Is there a focus on the community or the individual in this passage?" It is so easy for me to overlook how the prodigal son shamed his father and entire family when asking for his inheritance, but a reader from an Asian culture would easily recognize this element of bringing shame on one's family that animates the passage. Whereas Ruth is often depicted as a love story between Ruth and Boaz in White circles, African and Asian readers will be more

likely to see that the book is really about God's preservation of a family and the restoration of its honor.

African American and Hispanic communities teach other communities to ask, "How might this passage speak to the plights of the marginalized today?" Esau McCaulley calls this the "Black ecclesial instinct,"³ and he models this by pondering Scripture in conversation with topics such as policing, slavery, injustice, and Black identity. Justo L. González calls this reading with "Hispanic eyes," and he draws on the Bible to ponder God's plan for the marginalized, the poor, and immigrants.⁴

White and European communities primarily ask, "What doctrine does this teach?" or, "How might this passage have been understood in its ancient context?" These too are valuable questions.

Although these examples relate to cultural groups, we could expand the circle to pretty much anyone else. I've benefited from reading folks of different colors, genders, nationalities, age ranges, and economic statuses. In fact, pretty much anyone we read with could help us see aspects of the Bible we might overlook.

In the previous chapter, I stated, *God has given us a Bible that is for the hungry—for those desperate enough to depend on him for provision and who will exert great mental energy to taste some honey.* We can now add that the Bible God gave us is best read with *all* of our sisters and brothers.

³McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 19, 165.

⁴Justo L. González, *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, let's go back to where step one started: Jerusalem. All 6'6" of me made it through Hezekiah's Tunnel. I crouched low and wore a hat. The posture helped, but without a flashlight the journey would have been nearly impossible. It is the same when reading the Bible.

Just like my crouching and wearing the hat through the tunnel, encountering the Bible like a child is essential! Yet without the shining light of the Holy Spirit our hearts will remain dull. Jesus tells us that God will provide the Holy Spirit if we ask him (Lk 11:13).

As we enter our time of Bible reading, we need to begin by considering our posture before God. We come as children, dependent on God. The church through the ages has produced countless prayers and songs that you might want to use as you begin to study the Bible. You can also create your own. Here's is a prayer you might adopt: "Our Father, we come as your children. We long to sit at your feet and hear your voice. Send your Holy Spirit that we might savor the Son as we read your word. We are hungry for you. Speak, O Lord. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you currently identify more with the "wise and learned" or with the "little children"? Why?
2. What does it take to cultivate a spirit of childlikeness?
3. What does it reveal about the character of God that he delights in revealing himself to "little children"?
4. What causes a posture of suspicion when it comes to the Bible? What difference would having a posture of trust make when reading the Bible?

5. Who are the main teachers, pastors, theologians, or authors from whom you learn about Scripture? How many of them are ethnically or culturally different from you? What can we gain in our understanding of Scripture from listening to diverse voices from within the family of God?
6. Write your own prayer that reflects a childlike posture that you can use when beginning to study God's Word.

If you would like to benefit from the insights of the global church as you read the Bible, consider getting either the *Africa Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 2010) or the *South Asia Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 2015). You might also like Esau McCaulley's *Reading While Black* (IVP Academic, 2020) and Justo González's *Santa Biblia* (Abingdon, 1996).

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