

LESSONS IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR

THE EXALTED WORD

PSALMS 138:2

I will worship toward Your holy temple, and praise Your name for Your lovingkindness and Your truth; for You have magnified Your word above all Your name.

Moses needed a name! When God met Moses on the holy mountain He gave the former Prince of Egypt a tall order. He told Moses he'd been chosen to deliver the Hebrews from their enslavement in Egypt... *but two issues immediately drew Moses' concern...*

First, was his reception by the Egyptians. Moses asked God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" Egypt was the most powerful nation on earth – Pharaoh, the most powerful man on earth - it could be hazardous to his health for Moses to enter Pharaoh's court and demand his cooperation. A little apprehension was only natural.

But Moses' *second* concern is a surprise. He was equally concerned about the reception he would receive from the Hebrews. Moses spoke to God again, "When I come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" It was almost as dangerous for Moses to approach the Hebrews on behalf of God as it was for him to approach the Pharaoh on behalf of the Hebrews. Why would the Hebrews accept a former Egyptian as their deliverer? Why would their God pick one of their enemies as the answer to their prayer? Moses needed some corroboration – some authorization - so he asked God for His name!

Understand the false gods of the ancient world were visible, tangible entities. The land of Egypt was a land of idols. Thus, the name of a graven image was not that important since you could see the carved image. The Egyptians saw their gods because they built them. They associated their gods with a visual image. But the real God, the God of the Hebrews, was the unseen God. In 1 Timothy 1:17, Paul says of the true God, "Now to the King eternal, immortal, *invisible...*" The book of Hebrews says of Moses, "By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible." Moses couldn't see God, but he endured because he knew His name. The Hebrews would also follow God not because they could see Him – but His name inspired faith.

Thus, at the outset of Moses' ministry God revealed His name, "I AM WHO I AM... Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" What an awesome name... The phrase, "I AM", is the present tense of the verb *to be*. The name speaks of existence, reality, self-sufficiency. In taking this name, God claims to be the ultimate reality - the only self-existent One in all the universe. God has need of nada! In contrast, we are such needy people. Our lives are so fragile. We depend on God for the air we breathe, and our next breath. God alone is the great "I am". If you or I had sent Moses to Egypt we would've told him to say, "the great I AIN'T has sent you," or "the great I WISH..." or "the great WHO'S THAT...". Only God can say, "I AM THAT I AM has sent you."

And the name God gave to Moses became the foundation of Hebrew faith. The name “*Yahweh*”, or its Anglicized form, “*Jehovah*” is from the verb “*to be*.” And it harkens back to Moses’ initial encounter with God... It’s difficult to trust in an invisible God - *but not when you know His name*... “*Jehovah*” became the solid ground on which God’s people over the centuries stepped out in faith. This is why the name “*Jehovah*” became so revered among the Hebrews. It was the most sacred of all God’s names. In the third commandment God told His people, “*you shall not take the name of the LORD (or Jehovah) your God in vain.*” In Leviticus 24 a man was given the death penalty for blaspheming the name of God. To trivialize or disrespect God’s name carried stiff and swift penalties.

Later in Hebrew history the name of God became so revered they were afraid to even speak it. When they read the Scriptures and came to the word “*Jehovah*” - instead of speaking it, they would bow their heads and read simply “*the Name*.” Eventually the Hebrews became afraid to write the name so they wrote only the consonants, and left out the vowels. It’s amazing the reverence they gave to the name of God. Certainly, they placed extreme importance on God’s name. Today, visitors to Jerusalem’s Wailing Wall write prayers on slips of paper and place them in the crevasses of the rock wall. Since the papers contain prayers, the rabbis are concerned God’s name might be on them. At the end of the day when they go to clean the area, and dispose of the papers, they don’t want to be guilty of just throwing away the name of God, so they give the papers a religious burial. They go to great lengths to keep from taking the name of God in vain.

And so, with that bit of background we can really feel the force of our text... In Psalm 138:2, David says of the “*I AM THAT I AM*” - the one, true God in all the universe... “*You have magnified Your word above all Your name.*” *God’s name was the bedrock of their belief... Men died in deference to His name... To the Hebrew nothing was more significant than God’s name...* Yet, David makes an astonishing statement. There’s one item more important than God’s name... The great “*I AM*” has exalted *His Word* even above *His name*!

There are two items every man possesses... *his word and his name*. If you’re a man of your word it will earn for you a good name. When your name is spoken, it’ll be respected. But if your word can’t be trusted your name is mud. This is why God exalts His word above His name. We respect His name and the nature it reflects, chiefly because His word is so sure, and certain, and reliable. And if God exalts His Word above His name it should be a clue to us... Of all our pursuits none is more vital than the study and application of God’s Word.

On occasion someone will come up, and suggest, “*Pastor Sandy, we need to worship more at this church - extend the music time... Or you need to talk about social concerns. Why spend all our time on the Bible. Keep us more informed about current events... Or let’s spend more of our service in prayer and fellowship...*” Understand, I’m all for worship, and proper social involvement, and opportunities to minister to each other - but make no mistake about it – when we gather there is one overarching, pressing priority we cannot neglect... the study of God’s Word. Hear the psalmist... **God magnifies His Word even above His name!**

I don’t care what your activities consist of during a normal week... Maybe you broker multi-billion dollar deals, or turn over valuable real estate... You might consult with physicians over life and death decisions... Perhaps you lobby Congress, and represent vital national concerns... Maybe you’re the closer for the Atlanta Braves, and you’re needed each night to get the final out... I don’t care how significant and critical your activities seem to be – if God elevates His Word even above His name - then there’s nothing more important for you and I to do than to dig into our Bible, and discover what it says. It’s the one activity above all others that should not be neglected. God prioritizes His Word!

Yet today, the study of God's Word is not the main concern of many churches. All kinds of activities clutter the church calendar to the neglect of God's Word... *support groups*, and *aerobic classes*, and *concerts*, and *pot luck dinners*, and *softball games*, and *political rallies*... all can crowd out systematic Bible study.

As I look back in the rearview mirror of my life, I grew up in southern churches that majored on morality and legalism. I was taught *dos and don'ts*, but not always *whys and hows*... *I was raised in the Bible belt – but I got a lot more belt, than Bible*. The churches I attended taught *from the Bible*, but they didn't teach the Bible. And there's a not-so-subtle difference. In most churches the pastor sets the agenda and uses verses to support his thesis. That's a far cry from teaching the Bible and letting the Book speak for itself. God needs to set the agenda, not us. Christians need to know *the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!*

A poll recently revealed that 93% of all Americans own a Bible – in fact, 75% of American households own two or more copies - yet 50% said they never read it. Of those who claimed to be born-again Christians only 18% read their Bibles daily. After a similar survey George Gallup concluded, *"It's time to sound the alarm. There exists today a shocking lack of Bible knowledge."* It's tragic, but churches today - even in the Bible belt - are turning out biblically-illiterate Christians.

In fact, I've known churches, and denominations, and pastors who will defend the infallibility of the Scriptures to their death - *they just never bother to teach it!* The prophecy in Amos 8:11 is coming true before our very eyes, *"Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord GOD, "That I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD."*

Did you hear about the pastor who was testing the effectiveness of his Sunday School... He asked one of the students, *"Who broke down the walls of Jericho?"* The little boy answered, *"It wasn't me, sir!"* The frustrated pastor turned to the teacher and asked, *"Is this typical of your students?"* The teacher replied, *"Pastor, this is an honest child. If he said he didn't do it, I really don't think he did it."* The pastor couldn't believe what he'd heard come out of the mouth of one of his Sunday School teachers, so he immediately went to the director of the Sunday School. When the pastor told the director what had been said, the director replied, *"Pastor, I've known the boy's family, and this teacher, for a number of years, and I really don't think either of them would be capable of breaking the walls of Jericho."* This time the pastor was furious. In disbelief, he took his problem to one of the elders in the church. After listening to the pastor, the elder - just wanting to smooth things out - suggested, *"Pastor, let's not make a big fuss out of this. We can just pay for the damages out of the maintenance fund, and rebuild the walls."*

That kind of ignorance of the Scriptures, reminds me of a young Cajun named *Claude*. He was a zealous new Christian who lived way down on the bayou. One day, Claude approached his pastor, and asked if he could serve in the church. The pastor asked him, *"Claude, can you read and write?"* Claude admitted that going to school hadn't really been his top priority. He'd been too busy hunting gators, and eating gumbo, and working on the shrimp boats. The pastor asked him again, *"Well, do you know your Bible?"* Claude replied, *"Sir, I's pretty good in de Scriptures; I knows my Bible from limb to limb."* The pastor then asked him to name his favorite Bible story. Claude answered, *"I like de parable o' de Good Samaritan."* He said, *"Great, tell me the story?"*

And here's how Claude told it...

"Onced dere was dis man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho. And he felled among thorns and de thorns sprung up and choked him. And as he went on his way, he didn't have no maney and he medst the queen of Sheba, and she gives him a thousand talents of gold, and a

hunder'd changes o' raiment. And he gots into a chariot and he drove furiously. And as he was a drivin' under a big juniper tree, his hair caught in de limb of dat tree, and he hung dere many days. And de ravens brought him food to eat and water to drink, and he ate five thousand loaves and two fishes. One night when he was a hangin' dere asleep, his wife Delilah comes along and cuts his hair, and he drops and he fells to de stony ground. But he gots up and he went on. And it began a rainin' forty days and forty nights, and he hides himself in caves, and he lives on locusts an wilds honey. And while he was dere, he met a servant who says, '*Come, take suppa at my house*'. And he says, '*No, I won't; I married a wife and I can't go*'. Well, de servant went out into de highways and de hedges and compelled him to come. And after suppa, he went on down to Jericho. Well, when he got dere, he saw dat old queen Jezebel sittin' way up high in da window, and she laughed at him. And he say, '*Throw her down outta dere*'; and they throw'd her down seventy times seven. And of the fragments, dey picked up twelve baskets fulls – '*sides womens and childrens*. And den da say, '*Blessed are da piecemakers*.' Now, who's wife you s'pose she be in de judgment day?"

Biblical ignorance is funny when it comes from a new believer named *Claude*, but it's distressing when it's found in a person who's been a Christian for a while. Someone once commented on the ministry of a particular church, "*It's a mile wide, and a foot deep*." In other words, large numbers of people are brought in with fluff, and entertainment, and *a few Bible bits* – but there's no substance.

For people to grow spiritually they need to be fed a steady diet of not just milk – but the meat of God's Word. They need more than snacks and fast food. Folks need spiritual protein. They need to be challenged with a biblical outlook – *to see today in light of eternity*. It's been said, "*To measure the success of a church's ministry its members should not only be counted, but weighed*." There's a quote in Halley's Bible Handbook I agree with heartedly, "*A church that does not enthrone the Bible in the lives of its people is false to its mission*." If God has exalted His Word even above His name, can we esteem it too highly?

Once, my son Zach and I were given passes to the Masters Golf Tournament – *the toughest ticket in sports*. We sat down next to a fellow on the 18th green. It turns out he owned a bar in Missouri, and bartered keg parties for Master's badges. It was obvious this guy had no idea what Christianity was all about. But after talking about himself for awhile he asked me, "*What do you do for a living?*" When I told him I was a pastor he got excited. He had all kinds of questions. But I'll never forget his first question. He asked me, "*I once had a friend who wanted to be a pastor, and he went to seminary for 3 or 4 years. And I've never figured out why you need that much schooling? All you guys got is one book!*"

Hey, that Missouri bartender was more insightful than a lot of pastors and church members. When will we realize that God has made it so simple? He's compiled the whole course in a single book. God isn't asking us to pour over thousands of volumes, or memorize libraries... *He's only given us one book!* When we get to heaven, our excuses for being ignorant of God's Word will look pretty flimsy... "*God, I was too busy with work, and friends, and carting the kids to Little League... I didn't have much time leftover... God, after working in the yard I was too tired to concentrate*." I can hear God's response, "*Wait a minute, you had 24 hours a day, 7 days a week - and all you had to learn was one book!*"

It reminds me of the son who went off to a liberal seminary. His father worried the seminary would strip his son of his confidence in the reliability of the Bible. Figuring the book of Jonah might be a target for the skeptics he warned, "*Son, don't let them take Jonah from you!*" Two years later, the son returned home, and as soon as he saw the boy, his dad asked, "*Do you still have Jonah in your Bible?*" The boy laughed, "*No I don't, and neither do you*." The father got upset, "*Of course I do*." "*No, you don't. Go look...*" The father got his Bible, and tried to find the

Book of Jonah, but the three pages that made up Jonah had been clipped out of his Bible. The son explained, "I did it two years ago, before I went to school." Then he told his dad why, "What's the difference whether I lose the Book of Jonah through studying under non-believers, or you lose it through neglect?" I know you believe in the Bible – but do you *know it thoroughly, and study it vigorously?*

And we're going to be held responsible for knowing the whole book! 2 Timothy 3:16 says, "*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God.*" All the Bible is inspired, not just portions... Leviticus is as much God's Word as Luke - Ruth as inspired as Romans. We need the whole counsel of God, not just part and parcel. AW Tozer said, "*Nothing less than a whole Bible can make a whole Christian.*"

Listen to a poem... "I supposed I knew my Bible, reading piecemeal hit or miss - now a bit of John or Matthew, now a snatch of Genesis. Certain chapters of Isaiah, certain Psalms, the 23rd, 12th of Romans, 1st of Proverbs; Yes! I thought I knew the Word. But I found a thorough reading was a different thing to do, and the way was unfamiliar when I read the Bible through. You who treat the crown of writings as you treat no other book – just a paragraph disjointed, just a crude, impatient look – try a worthier procedure, try a broad and steadier view. You will kneel in very rapture when you read the Bible through." I agree wholeheartedly!

Did you hear about the lonely elderly lady who bought a parrot to keep her company? She figured if she had a pet parrot she would always have someone to talk to - but after bringing the bird home from the store, she couldn't get it to speak. So she went back to the pet store, and complained to the owner. He said, "*Does the parrot have a mirror in his cage? Parrots love mirrors.*" So she bought a mirror, took it home, put it in his cage, but he still wouldn't talk. She returned to the pet store, and complained again. The owner said, "*Does your parrot have a ladder? Parrots love ladders. And a happy parrot is a talkative parrot.*" She tried a ladder, but not a peep from the parrot. So the lady went back again. The third time she was told, "*Try a swing. Parrots love swings. Get him swinging, and he'll talk up a storm.*" So she bought a swing. Two days later she returned to the pet store. When the owner asked about the parrot, the woman said he was dead. The man was shocked. He asked, "*Did your parrot ever say a word?*" The woman replied, "*Yes, just before he died, in a very soft, faint, weak whisper, he asked, 'Don't they sell any food at that pet store?'*"

As I look back in my rearview mirror, I've seen churches, that rather than feed God's people God's Word, they resorted to *mirrors... and ladders... and swings... Folks are invited to look into the mirror. Self-help has replaced Scripture. Ladders and rung-by-rung formulas have replaced faith. Swinging entertainment has replaced spiritual substance.* People are like the parrot. They're being told to explore their inner self – or they're climbing the rungs of some man-made system – or they're swinging on an emotional roller coaster – all the while they're dying for lack of food... *the Bible.*

Churches are either like McDonalds or your mother. Either they try to feed you Happy Meals and McFlurries – junk food – or they give you meat and vegetables. I want to feed you like your mother! I don't mind going into the kitchen and cooking up a nutritious meal. But you've got to come to dinner when you're called. If you're in the yard playing around, and don't bother to come you'll miss out. And today, I want to call you all to dinner!...

With the time I have left, I want to stress to you the benefits of the Bible... If you're like most folks you have vastly underestimated the impact of this book. We tend to forget that God has exalted His Word, even above His name.

Turn to Hebrews 4:12... This verse unveils the Bible's enormous influence... "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." According to Hebrews 4:12, the Bible has three characteristics - it's **active**, it's **effective**, and it's **incisive**...

First, that which God exalts above His name is "living!" It's **active**. Earlier I quoted 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God..." The Greek word translated "inspiration" is "*theopneustos*," which is a compound word. "*Theo*" or "God," and "*pneustos*" or "breathed." Literally the word "inspiration" means "*God breathed*." Don't think the Bible is the word of mere men – the Bible is divine. It's God's Word. "Holy men wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

The Bible is unlike any other book. It has a power all its own. Remember, in Genesis 1:3 we're told, "God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light." All creation was spoken into existence by God. Nature's wonders and beauties are the result of the force and power of His Word. Never forget the Word of God is supernatural, and it works miracles in the hearts of those who believe.

I love Isaiah 55:11. The Lord says, "So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it." God's Word works! *The Word of God* goes out empowered by *the Spirit of God*. It never fails to accomplish its mission. The great reformer, Martin Luther, once wrote, "The Bible is alive, it speaks to me - it has feet, it runs after me - it has hands, it lays hold of me." The Bible is like a lion. If someone taunts or harasses a man-eating lion you don't have to defend the king of beasts - *just turn him loose!* The same is true with the Bible. Don't worry about defending it, just preach it, and it'll eat up its enemies.

Once, a young man walked into a country barber shop. The walls were all decorated with trophies of wild animals. There was a deer's head with a full rack, a wild fox, a wild turkey, several stuffed birds – but the young man was unimpressed. He was studying taxidermy, and was critical of what he said was shabby work. He singled out the owl sitting on the shelf, "Look at the drooping wings, and the crooked leg – it looks so unnatural." He went on and on criticizing the bird, when suddenly the owl turned its head! *He'd been criticizing the life-likeness of a live bird.* And this is also true of the Bible's critics. They critique a life bird. Berate it – deny it – say what you want about the Bible – but when it's ready, it'll fly off the shelf to do exactly as it pleases. *The Bible is the one book that's self-propelled.* When you hear it, the author Himself works in your heart to help you grasp its message.

Second, that which God exalts above His name is "powerful." It's **effective**. There is a verse that illustrates the power and usefulness of God's Word. Psalm 119:9 asks a vital question, "How can a young man cleanse his way?" And I love the logic behind this verse... The psalmist doesn't ask "*how can a young child cleanse his way - or a middle age woman - or an old man?*" Kids, grandmas, geezers aren't really known as rebel-rousers... So you clean up the way of a grandma - *no biggie* – how dirty could it have been any way? *But young men!* Oh, adolescent men are cocky, passionate, reckless, stubborn, hotheaded, hormonal, impulsive, obstinate, and independent. I know! I once was one. But here is the point... *if you can cleanse a young man's way you can affect anyone!*

So how can a young man cleanse his way? The psalmist tells us, "By taking heed according to (God's) word." This is why the Bible is so important... This Bible alone has the ability to renew a mind, transform a character, create a new outlook, break old habits, produce sensitivity, spawn self-discipline, develop faith! Paul tells us, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." What can tame a young man's

lusts, passions, hormones, and impulses? There are a 1000 shortcuts... *pray over him - cast out a demon – slay him in the Spirit – get him into Christian rap - enroll him in an accountability group – hire some cool youth leader* - the list goes on and on. But make no mistake about it - the only hope a young man has of living a pure and godly life is a steady diet of God's Word!

And finally, that which God exalts above His name is **"sharp"** or **incisive**. The Bible cuts to the heart. It reveals our motives. It keeps us honest. Hebrews 4:12 tells us the Bible is sharper than a two-edged sword. The Bible has an edge. The Bible is like a surgeon's scalpel. It pierces our pride. It dissects our delusions. It lays bare our motives. Go through the Bible and the Bible will go through you. It's God's Word that keeps us on the *"cutting edge"* of God's will. Your Bible is a two-edged sword - *the kind of sword a Roman soldier would use in hand-to-hand combat*. This is why the Bible is useful in our encounters with the devil. With God's Word, you can slice through the villains of doubt and fear. In 1 John 2:14 the apostle writes, **"I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one."** They overcame Satan because the Word of God abided in them. In Matthew 4 when Satan comes to tempt Jesus, the Lord counters all three temptations with the phrase, **"It is written..."** - and then He quotes the appropriate passage of Scripture. But each time He overcomes Satan through God's Word. The Bible is living and powerful, and sharper than a two-edged sword!

2 Samuel 23:10 describes the exploits of Eleazar – one of David's mighty men. We're told, **"He arose and attacked the Philistines until his hand was weary, and his hand stuck to the sword. The LORD brought about a great victory that day..."** Notice, He held onto his sword so tightly, his hand froze to its handle. He couldn't let go... And this is how we need to clutch onto God's Word – a vice-grip is needed for victory. If we drop our sword, or never pick it up, we're left defenseless.

John Wesley wrote, **"I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. A few months hence I am no more seen; I drop into unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing – the way to heaven... And God Himself has written it down in a book. O give me that Book! At any price, give me the Book!"** Never forget, if God has magnified His Word even above His name, how then can we neglect the Book of books, and not give it the priority that it deserves?