# Improving the Mind and Enriching the Soul

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The Bible is a divine gift given to us in order for us to intimately know the Lord better, but it also can have the opposite effect of stirring up pride. It's possible to know a lot about God yet not know God. Therefore, our motives for studying the Bible will determine whether we grow in knowing Him or simply knowing about Him.

## Knowing The Bible and Knowing God

In Matthew 4, Satan clearly knew the Scriptures, quoting Holy Spirit-inspired verses to Jesus in order to tempt Him in the desert. The word of God had no effect on the devil.

In John 5, we read about Christ debating with the Jewish leaders. They had an encyclopaedic knowledge of Scripture and all-encompassing zeal for the Scriptures, and yet He accuses them, saying, 'His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you' (John 5:37b-38a). These are the men who 'searched the Scriptures' (John 5:39), who memorised and studied at great length the words of God, yet Jesus pointedly says they don't know God! God-in-the-flesh is standing before them, yet Jesus says they have never seen His form nor heard His voice. They didn't recognise the author of their Scriptures in front of them. As the saying goes, they missed the wood for the trees.

> May all we learn about God lead us to prayer and praise and obedience and, ultimately, intimacy with God.

Now the problem is not with the Scriptures. They are 'breathed out by God' (2 Timothy 3:16) and without error. It is also an indispensable tool given by the Lord to shape us. (see 2 Timothy 3:15-17)

So how is it possible to read and study the Bible in a way that can cause us to know and love God more deeply, rather than ending up like the devil or the Jews in John 5?

## Two Motives for Studying the Bible

Here are two postures that I will discuss. The first deals with what to avoid, and the second with the attitude we should embrace.

1. Desiring Knowledge for the Sake of Knowledge In the Bible we learn about weighty themes, such as the nature of God, creation, election, sin, and redemption. The knowledge of such topics could easily cause one to become conceited and proud. In learning these truths, the temptation is to feel spiritual and clever, but in God's eyes we are proud and deceived if we haven't allowed His word to convict and transform us. Paul tells the opinionated Corinthians, 'knowledge puffs up... If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.' (1 Corinthians 8:1-2) But these Corinthians used their knowledge to prove others wrong and elevate themselves with a sense of self-importance. So is Paul saying that having theological knowledge is a bad thing? Not at all. But these Corinthians used their knowledge to prove others wrong and elevate themselves with a sense of self-importance. So to have theological knowledge as a goal in itself is dangerous. J.I. Packer explains that, '...to approach bible study with no higher a motive than a desire to know all the answers, is a direct route to a state of self-satisfied self-deception.'
2. Desiring to Know and Obey The Author We will never grow in friendship with God if we merely aim to read our Bibles to gain knowledge or answers. Our aim is to learn about God so we can obey and worship Him. I can learn about the size, frequency and patterns of ocean swells, but until I actually swim in the ocean, it will always be theoretical, detached knowledge. The Lord doesn't want to us to be merely informed about him. He wants us to delight in, enjoy and obey Him. It seems the Jews in John 5 were so focused on their learning, that they refused to actually draw near to the living God (see John 5:40). They put their trust in their heritage and their interpretation of the Scriptures instead of the Lord Himself. We can end up in the same trap if we don't approach God prayerfully and worshipfully when reading His word. Our aim is to learn about God so we can obey and worship Him. We need to trust that

when we learn about God, we can have the same heart as the writer of Psalm 119. He wanted the know the Scriptures so that he could delight in God as a lover and have his life shaped by God. He responds to truth by storing it up in his heart to stay pure (v9-11) and to simply delight in God in it (v14,16,72,77). Through the Scriptures, he is able to experience the goodness (v68), the discipline (v75) and the peace of God (v165). This man wasn't aiming to be clever. He was aiming to know God!

Let's trust the Spirit to help us posture ourselves rightly before the God who desires us to grow in friendship with Him. May all we learn about God lead us to prayer and praise and obedience and, ultimately, intimacy with God.