

Introduction

How do you move a mountain?
One spoonful of dirt at a time.

Chinese proverb

This is a book about moving a mountain. The mountain is my own, though I admit that I overlooked its existence until I was in my twenties. I suspect it may be your mountain as well, but you'll have to decide that for yourself. Unlike Pikes Peak or Kilimanjaro, this mountain does not immediately announce itself to our vision—it takes time to see. Thankfully, unlike a real mountain, this one can be moved. That's a good thing, because there is something unspeakably beautiful to behold on the other side.

If there were such a thing as a church pedigree, mine would read "mixed breed." I spent my childhood searching for a church to call home, following one or the other of my parents (who divorced when I was nine) to their current places of worship. I logged significant time in seven different denominations, during which I went to Sunday schools, vacation Bible schools, youth groups, and retreats. I was sprinkled as an infant and immersed as a teen. I sang

hymns from hymnals set to organ music, and I sang praise songs from projection screens set to guitar music. I learned to raise my hands in worship, and I learned to keep them at my sides. I heard sermons read in monotones and sermons shouted with vigor. I learned the cadence of creeds and liturgies as well as the cadence of tambourines and dancing. I learned to have a “quiet time” and memorized numerous Bible verses to earn a free trip to summer camp. I learned how to share the gospel with my lost friends. I was a church kid—albeit a kid of many churches—and I could give answers to Sunday school questions that made my teachers beam with pride.

In college I continued my denominational travels, reading devotional books and attending Bible studies to fan the flames of my faith. By my senior year I had been asked to lead a study. But I carried a secret not uncommon to people with my background: I didn’t know my Bible. Sure, I knew parts of it—I remembered stories from vacation Bible school and I could quote verses from all over the New Testament and Psalms—but I didn’t know how the parts that I knew fit with each other, much less how they fit with the parts I didn’t know yet. Looming in my peripheral vision was a mountain of biblical ignorance that was just beginning to cause me concern. Though I treasured what I knew, I was growing troubled by what I did not know.

Spending time in all those different churches had taught me the worrying truth that all pastors had much to say, but not all pastors were saying the same things. Who was right? Was there a rapture or not? Did God have to answer

our prayers if we prayed a certain way? Did I need to be baptized again? How old is the earth? Were Old Testament believers saved differently than New Testament believers? For the most part, my teachers sounded equally convincing. How could I know who was properly interpreting the Bible and who was teaching error? Learning firsthand the painful fallout of wrong teaching sparked in me a desire to know for myself what the Bible taught.

Marriage and motherhood increased my sense of urgency to learn, revealing how ill-equipped I was to fill those roles in God-honoring ways. But I didn’t know where to begin to fix the problem. It seemed beyond obvious that if God had given us his revealed will in the Bible, I should be spending more time trying to know and understand it. But the task seemed overwhelming. Where was I supposed to start? And why weren’t the things I was already doing making the problem discernibly better? How was I supposed to move the mountain of my biblical ignorance?

The answer, of course, was gloriously simple. The answer was “one spoonful at a time.” Thankfully, someone gave me a spoon.

I admit that I went to my first women’s Bible study looking for adult conversation and coffee cake, not necessarily in that order. The siren-call of free childcare was more than this young mother with a three-month-old could resist, so I went to get out of the house and get back into the land of the living. What I found was a thing of sweetness: a group of like-minded women to connect with in community, prayer, and study. What I found, though I didn’t know it at the

time, was the beginning of a process that would transform me from student to teacher, leaving me lying awake in my bed at night plotting how to get more spoons into the hands of more women, praying that many mountains might be thrown into the sea.

This book intends to equip you with the best spoon I can offer. It intends to teach you not merely a doctrine, concept, or story line, but a study method that will allow you to open up the Bible on your own. It intends to challenge you to think and to grow, using tools accessible to all of us, whether we hold a high school diploma or a seminary degree, whether we have minutes or hours to give to it each day. This book intends to change the way you think about Bible study.

Perhaps your story is not like mine at all—perhaps you have spent your entire life in the same church or in no church at all. My guess is that you know the dim discomfort of living in the shadow of a mountain.

It has been said that we become what we behold. I believe there is nothing more transformative to our lives than beholding God in his Word. After all, how can we conform to the image of a God we have not beheld? On the other side of the mountain of my biblical ignorance was a vision of God high and lifted up, a vision stretching from Genesis to Revelation that I desperately needed to see. I have by no means removed that whole mountain from my line of sight, but I intend to go to my grave with dirt beneath my nails and a spoon clutched in my fist. I am determined that no mountain of biblical ignorance will keep me from seeing

him as clearly as my seventy or eighty years on this earth will allow.

So this is a book for those who are ready to start digging. This is a book for those who are ready to face squarely the mountain of their fragmented understanding of Scripture, and brandishing a spoon, command it to move.

Turning Things Around

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

2 Tim. 3:16-17

This is a book about equipping women through Bible study. Outside of my family, it's the thing I care most about. But this hasn't always been the case. Long before I had a passion for teaching the Bible, I had a deep and abiding passion for something else. Four-year-old-me had a passion for rhumba tights.

You remember rhumba tights—those tights for little girls made extra fancy by four rows of ruffled lace sewn across the seat? I absolutely loved them. I wore dresses to preschool every day so I could wear my special tights. When I ran out of dresses, undeterred, I crammed those tights

under my jeans. Bulky? Yes. Uncomfortable? Absolutely. Beautiful? You know it.

I loved everything about them, except for one thing—the ruffles were in the back where the wearer could not enjoy seeing them. All that beautiful lace out of eyesight? Unacceptable. But a simple solution presented itself: I began wearing them backwards.

Problem solved. Until my mother caught on.

I don't know if it was the heel section of the foot flopping out the top of my Mary Janes or the way my stomach bulged suspiciously beneath my skirt. Maybe it was the funny way I had to walk to keep them from falling down, or my frequent habit of twirling in front of mirrors. Let's just say that wearing my rhumba tights backwards presented some coverage issues that wearing them correctly did not. My mother informed me that improper usage was not an option. Rhumba tights were made to be worn a particular way for a particular purpose, and I either needed to turn them around or give up the privilege of those four glorious rows of lace.

I wish I could say this was the only time in my life I got something backwards. It wasn't. In fact, my passion for teaching women the Bible is actually the result of getting other things backwards as well. I want to tell you about two approaches I took to being equipped by Scripture that seemed right at the outset but were completely backwards.

It might seem that studying the Bible would be something we should know how to do intuitively. After all, if God discloses his will and character there, wouldn't the Holy Spirit just open up its message to our hearts? But this is not

the case. Yes, the Holy Spirit opens the Word to us, but not without some effort on our part.

Do you know that the word *disciple* means "learner"? As a disciple of Christ, you and I are called to learn, and learning requires effort. It also requires good study methods. We know this to be true of our schooling, but do we know it to be true of following Christ? Though I was a good student in school, I was not always a good student of the Word, and left to my own devices I probably would not have become one. But through the faithful teaching of others, my tendency to get a good thing backwards came to light. Turning around my two backwards approaches to Bible study started me toward a lifelong love of learning, applying, and teaching.

Turnaround 1: Let the Bible Speak of God

The first thing I got backwards seems so obviously backwards that it's embarrassing to admit: I failed to understand that the Bible is a book about God. The Bible is a book that boldly and clearly reveals who God is on every page. In Genesis, it does this by placing God as the subject of the creation narrative. In Exodus, it places him in comparison to Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. In the Psalms, David extols the Lord's power and majesty. The prophets proclaim his wrath and justice. The Gospels and Epistles unfold his character in the person and work of Christ. The book of Revelation displays his dominion over all things. From beginning to end, the Bible is a book about God.

Perhaps I really did know that the Bible was a book about God, but I didn't realize that I wasn't reading it as if it were.

This is where I got things backwards: I approached my study time asking the wrong questions. I read the Bible asking, "Who am I?" and "What should I do?" And the Bible did answer these questions in places. Ephesians 2:10 told me that I was God's workmanship. The Sermon on the Mount told me to ask for daily bread and to store up treasure in heaven. The story of King David told me to seek after the heart of God. But the questions I was asking revealed that I held a subtle misunderstanding about the very nature of the Bible: I believed that the Bible was a book about me.

I believed that I should read the Bible to teach me how to live and to assure me that I was loved and forgiven. I believed it was a roadmap for life, and that in any given circumstance, someone who truly knew how to read and interpret it could find a passage to give comfort or guidance. I believed the purpose of the Bible was to help me.

In this belief, I was not so different from Moses standing before the burning bush on Mount Sinai. Immediately within his view was a revelation of the character of God: a bush in flames, speaking audibly to him, miraculously not consumed. When charged by this vision of God to go to Pharaoh and demand release of the captives, Moses self-consciously replies, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Ex. 3:11).

God responds by patiently making himself the subject of the narrative: "But I will be with you" (Ex. 3:12). Rather than be reassured by this answer, Moses next asks, "What should I do?". Then Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me

to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?" (v. 13).

Notice that rather than telling Moses what he should do, God instead tells him what *he* has done, is doing, and will do:

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt. . . ." And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.' But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty." (Ex. 3:14-22)

The dialogue continues in this manner. For an entire chapter and a half of Exodus, Moses asks the wrong ques-

tions: Who am I? What should I do? Rather than answer him, "Moses, you are my chosen servant. You are my precious creation, a gifted and wise leader," God responds by completely removing Moses from the subject of the discussion and inserting himself. He answers Moses's self-focused question of "Who am I?" with the only answer that matters: "I AM."

We are like Moses. The Bible is our burning bush—a faithful declaration of the presence and holiness of God. We ask it to tell us about ourselves, and all the while it is telling us about "I AM." We think that if it would just tell us who we are and what we should do, then our insecurities, fears, and doubts would vanish. But our insecurities, fears, and doubts can never be banished by the knowledge of who we are. They can only be banished by the knowledge of "I AM." We must read and study the Bible with our ears trained on hearing God's declaration of himself.

Does this mean that the Bible has nothing to say to us about who we are? Not at all. We just go about trying to answer that question in a backwards way. The Bible does tell us who we are and what we should do, but it does so through the lens of who God is. The knowledge of God and the knowledge of self always go hand in hand. In fact, there can be no true knowledge of self apart from the knowledge of God. He is the only reference point that is reliable. So, when I read that God is longsuffering, I realize that I am not longsuffering. When I read that God is slow to anger, I realize that I am quick to anger. When I read that God is just, I realize that I am unjust. Seeing who he is shows me who I

am in a true light. A vision of God high and lifted up reveals to me my sin and increases my love for him. Grief and love lead to genuine repentance, and I begin to be conformed to the image of the One I behold.

If I read the Bible looking for myself in the text before I look for God there, I may indeed learn that I should not be selfish. I may even try harder not to be selfish. But until I see my selfishness through the lens of the utter unselfishness of God, I have not properly understood its sinfulness. The Bible is a book about God. As Moses would learn during the Exodus, *who he was* bore no impact on the outcome of his situation. *Who God was* made all the difference.

In the New Testament we find Jesus addressing the same problem with the Jewish leaders: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that *bear witness about me*, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39–40). The Jewish leaders searched the Scriptures asking the wrong question, looking for the wrong image to be revealed.

If eternal life is found in the Scriptures, it is found through the lens of who God is. If our reading of the Bible focuses our eyes on anyone other than God, we have gotten backwards the transformation process. Any study of the Bible that seeks to establish our identity without first proclaiming God's identity will render partial and limited help. We must turn around our habit of asking "Who am I?" We must first ask, "What does this passage teach me about God?" before we ask it to teach us anything about ourselves. We must acknowledge that the Bible is a book about God.

Turnaround 2: Let the Mind Transform the Heart

The second thing I got backwards in my approach to the Bible was the belief that my heart should guide my study. The heart, as it is spoken of in Scripture, is the seat of the will and emotions. It is our "feeler" and our "decision-maker." Letting my heart guide my study meant that I looked for the Bible to make me feel a certain way when I read it. I wanted it to give me peace, comfort, or hope. I wanted it to make me feel closer to God. I wanted it to give me assurance about tough choices. Because I wanted the Bible to engage my emotions, I spent little time in books like Leviticus or Numbers and much time in books like the Psalms and the Gospels.

The Bible commands us to love God with all of our hearts (Mark 12:30). When we say that we love God with all of our hearts, we mean that we love him completely with our emotions and with our wills. Attaching our emotions to our faith comes fairly naturally for women—generally speaking, we know how to be emotive without much guidance. If we think of the heart as the seat of our emotions and our will, it makes sense that we so often approach God's Word asking, "Who am I?" and "What should I do?" Those two questions uniquely address the heart. And we speak often in the church about how Christianity is a religion of the heart—of how Christ comes into our hearts, of how we need heart-change. It is right to speak of Christianity in this way, but not exclusively in this way.

Interestingly, the same verse that commands us to love God with all of our hearts also commands us to love him

with all of our minds. Our minds are the seat of our intellects. Attaching our intellect to our faith does not come naturally to most of us. We live in a time when faith and reason are spoken of as polar opposites. At times, the church has even embraced this kind of language. For some of us, the strength of our faith is gauged by how close we feel to God at any given moment—by how a sermon made us feel, by how a worship chorus made us feel, by how our quiet time made us feel. Hidden in this thinking is an honest desire to share a deep relationship with a personal God, but sustaining our emotions can be exhausting and defeating. Changing circumstances can topple our emotional stability in an instant. Our "walk with the Lord" can feel more like a roller-coaster ride of peaks and valleys than a straight path in which valleys and mountains have been made level.

Could this be because we've gotten things backwards? By asking our hearts to lead our minds, have we willingly purchased a ticket to the roller-coaster ride? Unless we turn things around, placing the mind in charge of the heart, we could be in for a long, wild ride.

Asking us to put our minds before our hearts sounds almost unspiritual, doesn't it? But notice the way that Scripture talks about the role of the mind:

In repentance: "If they repent with all their mind and with all their heart in the land of their enemies . . . then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea. . . ." (1 Kings 8:48–49)

In seeking God: "Now set your mind and heart to seek the Lord your God." (1 Chron. 22:19)

In finding peace: "You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you." (Isa. 26:3)

In right worship: "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also." (1 Cor. 14:14-15)

In understanding the Scriptures: "Then [Jesus] said to [the disciples], 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures." (Luke 24:44-45)

In transforming us: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Rom. 12:2-3)

Don't rush past that pivotal truth you just read in Romans 12:2-3. What Christian doesn't desperately want life transformation and knowledge of the will of God? In these verses, Paul states unequivocally how we can have them: by the renewing of our minds—not our hearts.

For years I tried to love God with my heart to the neglect of my mind, not recognizing my need to grow in the knowledge of the "I AM." Any systematic study of the Bible felt mechanical, even a little like an act of faithlessness or an admission that the Holy Spirit's insight during a quiet time wasn't enough for me. But I was missing the important truth

that *the heart cannot love what the mind does not know*. This is the message of Romans 12:2-3—not that the mind alone affects transformation, but that the path to transformation runs from the mind to the heart, and not the other way around.

The scientific community has noted this mind-before-heart connection. Paul Bloom, a Yale professor with a PhD in cognitive psychology, specializes in pleasure research—the study of how we as humans develop the ability to derive pleasure from people, experiences, and things. He has discovered through his research that pleasure does not simply occur; it develops. And how it develops is a point worth noting: "People ask me, 'How do you get more pleasure out of life?' And my answer is extremely pedantic: Study more. . . . The key to enjoying wine isn't just to guzzle a lot of expensive wine, it's to learn about wine."¹

Bloom has found that pleasure results from gaining knowledge about the object of our pleasure, not, as we might assume, from merely experiencing it over and over. Specifically, our pleasure increases in something when we learn its history, origin, and deeper nature.² This is particularly relevant to Christians. We are called to be a people who delight ourselves in the Lord, who can say with conviction that "at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11). Many of us identify readily with the call to Christian hedonism. Yet we fight daily to live as those whose greatest pleasure is found in God. If Bloom is right, finding greater pleasure in God will not result from pursuing more experiences of him, but from knowing him better. It will result from making a study of the Godhead.

Think about the relationship, possession, or interest you derive the most pleasure from. How did you develop that delight? Whether you are passionate about modern art, your car, conservation, your spouse, nutrition, education, or baseball, my guess is that you became that way by learning about the object of your passion—and that your pleasure in it grew as your knowledge grew.

Marriage may be the most obvious example of this process. Most people get married on very little information. Have you noticed this? We stake our future on a relatively short acquaintance, in large part due to a rush of emotion that hits us during the courtship phase. We marry, awash with feelings of love for our spouse, but knowing rather little about him in the grand scheme of things. Those initial feelings of love either dwindle or deepen, depending on how we nurture them. Looking back on twenty years of marriage, I can honestly say that I love my husband exponentially more than I did on our wedding day. Why? Because I have made a study of him, and he of me. Knowing him has grown my love for him. On our wedding day I suspected he would be a good father, a hard worker, and a faithful sounding board, but twenty years later I know him to be these things. My love for him has grown as my knowledge of him has increased.

Now think about your relationship to God in the same light. Most people come to faith in God on very little information. We understand that we need forgiveness and grace, and we're ushered into the kingdom on a wave of deep emotion. But we hold only a small sense of the One

who has brought us to himself. We suspect that he is all good things, but we have not yet made a study of him. Like a new bride, we reach the end of the honeymoon phase and begin to wonder how we are to sustain and nurture this relationship.

The answer lies in knowing God, in loving him with our minds. Never has the phrase "to know him is to love him" been more true. As we grow in the knowledge of God's character through the study of his Word, we cannot help but grow into an exponentially deeper love for him. This explains why Romans 12:2 says we are transformed by the renewing of our minds. We come to understand who God is, and we are changed—our affections detach from lesser things and attach to him. If we want to feel a deeper love for God, we must learn to see him more clearly for who he is. If we want to feel deeply about God, we must learn to think deeply about God.

Consider another illustration: If I told you that I loved the piano and took great enjoyment in playing it, how could you discover whether my feelings about the piano were real or not? Simple. Just ask me to play for you. A person who truly loves to play the piano disciplines herself to make a study of it. Through much application of mental discipline, her proficiency at playing—and consequently, her love for playing—grow and flourish.

The heart cannot love what the mind does not know. Yes, it is sinful to acquire knowledge for knowledge's sake, but acquiring knowledge about One we love, for the sake of loving him more deeply, will always be for our transformation.

We must love God with our minds, allowing our intellect to inform our emotions, rather than the other way around.

God before Me, Mind before Heart

Seeing ourselves in the Bible and engaging our emotions in loving God are beautiful things. They are the metaphorical ruffles on the rhumba tights of Bible study. But they belong in the back, a secondary reward for obediently seeking that which is primary. Bible study that equips does not neglect self-knowledge, but it puts self-knowledge in the right place: informed by the knowledge of God. Bible study that equips does not divorce the heart from study, but it puts the heart in the right place: informed by the mind.

Perhaps you have gotten things backwards like me. Perhaps you've realized the ill-fitting discomfort of Bible study that focuses on who you are and what you should do more than on who God is, or of Bible study that targets your emotions more than your intellect. It's not too late to turn things around. Let's move forward, asking the Lord to show us a "ruffles in back" approach to learning the Bible.

The Case for Bible Literacy

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Rom. 15:4

A little heads-up: this is the chapter you don't want to read. This is the chapter where you get uncomfortable and want to tell me to mind my own business. This is the chapter where we talk about Bible literacy: what it is, whether we are acquiring it, and why it matters that we do so.

Let me put you at ease: most of us don't have it, myself included. Bible literacy is something most of us will never feel comfortable claiming we have achieved during our lifetime. So this is a chapter that makes me uncomfortable, too.

We all carry around the dim discomfort of our not-knowing, feeling it surge to the surface when we enter into