

Introduction

I'd like to begin by asking you a question. What is the second best book you've ever read? I wouldn't hesitate in answering that question if someone asked it of me. I've read hundreds of book and the second best of those is without doubt *The Divine Conspiracy* by Dallas Willard.

Notice something. I didn't ask the question in terms of the best book you've ever read. That's because there's no debating what that is. It's the Bible. I don't say that because I'm a pastor and I'm supposed to. I say it because I'm an objective pursuer of truth and that's where the evidence leads. It's a fact. The Bible is the best book, and our text, Psalm 119:97-104, reveals why it is. It's because it does two things.

Informs Our Minds

First, it informs our minds – more than any other book does. We see that in verses 98-100 and the claim they make. It's that the Bible makes us wiser than our enemies, more insightful than our teachers, and more knowledgeable than the aged.

The psalmist intends those three groups to be representative. They stand for people in the know, those who others consider the most insightful. In today's parlance, we call them **"life coaches."** I came across a list of America's 50 best life coaches. The top ten includes Christian Mickelson (business coach), Susan James (human potential coach), Esther Hicks (law of attraction coach), and Anthony Robbins (peak performance coach). Our current culture considers them people in the know and thus, they're the equivalent of what the psalmist calls enemies, teachers, and the aged.

Now, notice the startling claim he makes in that regard. If those life coaches don't know the Bible but we do, then we have more wisdom, insight, and knowledge than they do. They'd laugh at that of course but it's true. We're more in the know than they are.

That implies what the Bible does. It informs our minds. It does so

because it's relevant. The root of the word "**relevant**" is the word "**relate**." It connotes that something relates or connects to what is both *real* and *important*. That's exactly what the Bible does. It connects to what is *real* and *important*. God invented and created every detail of the universe and life in it. He knows, therefore, everything there is to know about it. And He revealed the most important of those things, the ones we need to know, in the Bible. It gives us, as a result, the best information about the most important matters in human life – period.

I read a post about the irrelevance of some parts of the Bible on the website of a man named Chandler. He used the *Song of Songs* in the Old Testament to illustrate his point: "***Song of Songs* seems entirely irrelevant to everything else in the Bible. I made the mistake of reading it and assuming that I would learn something about God. What I found instead was about animals, fruit, and the belly, breasts, and neck of some woman who has been dead thousands of years before I was born. I am not interested.**"

But Chandler is gravely mistaken. The *Song of Songs* reveals the most significant principles and truths about one of the important matters in human life, sex – including the foundational reality upon which human sexuality rests. Many people go to Dr. Phil for advice about sex. But if he doesn't know what the *Song of Songs* teaches about it and you do, you "**have more insight,**" to quote verse 99, than he does.

Think about the concerns in human life that matter the most to people. How can I influence others for good? How should I react when people criticize me? How should I approach aging and dying? How can I stay motivated at work? How can I have a fulfilling marriage? How should I raise my children? How can I live happily within my means? How do I handle not being good looking? And so on. The Bible gives us the best possible information about those and countless other concerns.

It's often said that experience is the best teacher. But the psalmist disagrees. Experience isn't the best teacher. The Bible is. I'd sum up what verses 98-100 claim this way. There's an old Amish aphorism that

says, **“Too soon old; too late smart.”** Happily, it doesn't have to be that way. Know the Bible. You'll be **“soon smart”** if you do. Why? It's because it informs our minds – more than any other book does.

Changes Our Tastes

The Bible is the best book because it does a second thing. It changes our tastes.

Look at verses 103-104. In verse 103, the psalmist reveals what is as sweet to his moral taste as honey (Reese Cups today) is to his physical taste. It's God's **“words,”** which are right and true. Then in verse 104, he reveals what he **“hates,”** that is, what is as offensive to his moral taste as cod liver oil is to his physical taste. It's **“every false way,”** meaning whatever is wrong or false. In verses 103-104, in other words, he reveals his tastes, what attracts and what repulses him.

Stop for a moment and think about that, the things that attract and repulse people. I talked with a woman who attended her first professional fight. It was to see Youngstown's own Kelly Pavlic. It was brutal, she said. Being there and seeing and hearing the hits sickened her – so much so that she had to get up and leave. What attracted some, those who watched and relished the fight, repulsed her. Or consider the popularity of tabloids like the National Inquirer and websites like celebrity-gossip.net. What attracts some, those who read them, repulses others like many of you and me. They disgust us.

That illustrates in general the two poles of attraction and repulsion. On the one hand, some people are attracted to the right and true and repulsed by the wrong and false. On the other hand, some are attracted to the wrong and false and repulsed by the right and true. So which is it for us? We need to ask and answer that question because what attracts and repulses us is a reliable revelation of character.

Now, notice what the psalmist teaches us about that. In verse 102, he writes, **“For You Yourself have taught me.”** In verse 104, he writes, **“From Your precepts I get understanding.”** Those two

statements, together, implicitly teach us this. When we seriously engage the Bible, the Holy Spirit who wrote it seriously engages us in return. He interacts with us and transforms us in many ways. One of those ways is that He changes our tastes. Wrong and false things that at one time appealed to us now don't. And right and true things that at one time didn't appeal to us now do.

A few years ago, a Christian shared with me how studying the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 had changed her. She mentioned several things, one of which was this. Before studying it, she was drawn to exposing people's faults and sins. But after studying it, exposing people's faults and sins turns her off. That is a profound change of taste that the Holy Spirit created in her. Verses 101-102 reveal the result. She **"restrains her feet from every evil way."** She no longer exposes people's faults and sins by gossiping or listening to gossip. She now **"turns"** to God's **"word"** and conceals them instead.

What an exciting testimony that is. It fleshes out what verses 101-104 teach. God's written word the Bible not only informs our minds; it changes our tastes as well.

Concentration

But it does so only if we seriously engage it. In conjunction with the Holy Spirit, it's powerful. But if all it does is sit on the shelf and collect dust, it'll do nothing in or for us. We have to seriously engage it and verse 97 teaches us how. We **"meditate"** on it. The Hebrew words translated **"meditate"** convey two actions.

One of those is concentration. We concentrate by doing two things. First, we think hard on the text before us. We ask and answer questions that go to its meaning. Second, we use good sense to interpret what the text means. We tie the answers to the questions we asked together and determine what they teach us.

Take *Song of Songs* 8:6 as an example of what I mean, **"For love is as strong as death, Jealousy is as severe as Sheol; It's flashes are**

the flashes of fire, The very flame of the LORD (Yahweh)."

First, we ask and answer questions that go to its meaning. To what does "**love**" refer? It's sex in marriage. What does it mean that death is strong? It's permanent. To what does "**jealousy**" refer? It's the reaction of exclusiveness. To what does "**Sheol**" refer? It was the place of departed spirits. What does it mean that Sheol is severe? It's permanent. To what do flashes of fire refer? It's the intense expressions of something. To what does the flame of Yahweh refer? It's the essence of His nature. We've now thought hard about 8:6.

Next, tie those answers together to determine what they teach us. Sex in the context of a permanent and exclusive marriage relationship is an expression of God's very nature. It's a reflex and thus a reflection of the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's the closest thing on earth to the intimacy, intensity, and love in that relationship. That is the foundational reality upon which human sexuality rests. We've now used good sense to interpret what 8:6 means.

Going back to Chandler, he thinks *Song of Songs* is irrelevant because all he did was read it, not understand it. The moral of the story is clear. We have to understand the Bible in order for it to inform our minds and change our tastes. And to understand it, we have to concentrate. We think hard on the text before us and use good sense to interpret what it means. A good Bible dictionary, Bible commentaries, Sunday school lessons, and sermons will assist us in doing just that.

Rumination

The Hebrew words translated "**meditate**" convey a second action – rumination. Farmers know what it means to ruminate. That's what a cow does when it chews its cud. We do with the Bible what the cow does with the cud. We ruminate on it "**all the day**" as verse 97 says it. We recall verses and passages and mull them over in our minds as the activities, experiences, and events of everyday life prompt and allow us to.

Doing that requires some degree of memorizing verses and passages.

“Some degree” suggests that we don’t have to remember them word for word. But we do have to remember in essence what they say.

Concentrating on texts assists us in doing that. It implants verses and passages firmly in our minds so that we’re able to recall them in their essential, if not their precise, details.

So that’s what we do. We recall and muse on them. We do that purposely. We also do it persistently as the activities, experiences, and events of everyday life prompt and allow us to.

Examples abound. As my siblings and I stood around my mother after she had just taken her last breath, I recalled and mused on John 14:28. If we love people, we’ll be glad for them when they die and go to the Father. Or when I don’t get my way in something important, I recall and muse on Psalm 131:2. I need to be as free from the nagging of self-seeking as a weaned child is free from the nagging of feeding at its mother’s breast. Or when I see all the fuss that is made over the Oscar’s or Super Bowl, I recall and muse on 1 John 2:17. The world is passing away and its lusts but those who do God’s will last forever. You get the idea. We purposely and persistently ruminate on the Bible.

Doing that is one of the most transforming of all spiritual practices. Dallas Willard explained it this way: **“The practice of memorizing Scriptures is more important than a daily quiet time, for as we fill our minds with these great passages and have them available for our meditation, quiet time takes over the entirety of our lives.”** He’s right. So, let’s do it. Ruminate **“all the day”** on the Bible.

Conclusion

I close with the words of one of America’s founding fathers, Patrick Henry. Close to death, he said to a friend of his, **“The Bible is worth more than all the other books which were written put together, yet it is my misfortune never to have found time to read it.”** Know what Henry did. The Bible is the best book. Do what He didn’t. Concentrate and ruminate on it.