

JEN WILKIN

foreword by Matt Chandler

Women of the Word

*How to STUDY the BIBLE with
Both OUR HEARTS and OUR MINDS*



"I have a passion for people to see and savor the God of the Bible, and a corresponding frustration when I see the hurt, loss, and lack of confidence that accompanies a lack of biblical literacy. That's why I'm glad you are holding this book. Jen Wilkin takes knowing the God of the Bible seriously. She is one of the better Bible teachers I've had the opportunity to hear. Her approach in teaching people how to grow in their knowledge of the Scriptures is accessible and helpful regardless of whether you have been a Christian for decades and feel like it's too late for you or you are a young believer who is hungry to know and understand the God of the Bible."

Matt Chandler, Lead Pastor, The Village Church, Dallas, Texas; President, Acts 29 Church Planting Network

"I found *Women of the Word* to be so practical in the way it demystifies serious Bible study. Too many people—men and women—opt for just reading a few verses and hoping for some inspiration, rather than discovering the meaning of the text in the sweep of God's redemptive plan. *Women of the Word* will help all who read it to find their way deeper into the Word of God without having to be seminary educated, a genius, or even an especially good student. My only caveat is that I wish the title didn't make it hard for men to read . . . they need it, too."

Kathy Keller, Assistant Director of Communications, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City, New York

"I've seen eyes misty with tears as women come to understand for the first time that the Bible is actually, literally God's Word. What great mercy we have been shown—that the Creator who spoke everything that ever was into existence would give us his Word. Jen Wilkin knows this mercy in the core of her being. She has tasted and seen God's goodness in his Word, and she doesn't want a single woman to miss it. Read *Women of the Word* with your Bible open and your friends alongside you. Think of this book as a maître d' of a Bible study banquet—have a seat, here are your utensils, dig in, and enjoy."

Gloria Furman, author, *Glimpses of Grace* and *Treasuring Christ When Your Hands Are Full*

“Jen lives what she teaches. Her servant heart in unpacking the Scriptures as well as her affection for the women she is teaching is evident the moment you meet her. I’m so glad she was obedient to the Lord’s call to write this book! It has served to clear the fog in my heart and mind when it comes to studying God’s Word, and I absolutely cannot wait to purchase many more copies for the women in my life who I know will love it too!”

Bethany Barnard, singer/songwriter

“This book responds to the feelings-driven, me-centered approach that has too often dominated our study of the Scriptures. Jen encourages women to grow in knowledge of the Word in order to know our Lord. She speaks out of her own joyful and growing experience of learning to dig in. May her voice be joined by many others!

Kathleen Nielson, author; speaker; Senior Adviser,
The Gospel Coalition

“Reading the Bible can sometimes seem daunting. There are difficult passages, many interpretations, and often so little time to read thoroughly. Jen Wilkin recognizes this and provides tools to help us navigate it all. *Women of the Word* gives us a blueprint for Bible literacy. If we want to know the God we love, we must engage our minds and know his Word where he reveals himself. Wilkin’s tools may be new for some, but the effort will be worth the reward. Ultimately, it’s about seeing and savoring our Savior.”

Trillia Newbell, author, *If God Is for Us; Fear and Faith;*
and *United*

“Jen Wilkin’s book is written with a winsomeness and warmth, which makes it easy to read. But she also writes with clarity of purpose that rightly pushes the reader to want to read God’s Word well. The bottom line: this book encourages women to know God better by developing good habits of reading his Word. Amen, sister!”

Jenny Salt, Dean of Students, Sydney Missionary and Bible College

“How can we go deeper than a little dabbling in the Bible for inspiration? Jen Wilkin shows us how in this must-read for every woman interested in teaching and leading Bible discussion groups in your church.”

Nancy Guthrie, author, *Even Better Than Eden: Nine Ways the Bible’s Story Changes Everything about Your Story*

JEN WILKIN

foreword by Matt Chandler

Women
of the
Word

How to STUDY the BIBLE with
Both OUR HEARTS and OUR MINDS

Second Edition

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Women of the Word: How to Study the Bible with Both Our Hearts and Our Minds

Copyright © 2014 by Jennifer Wilkin

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover image: Beth Rufener

First printing 2014

First printing of second edition 2019

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are from *The New American Standard Bible*®. Copyright © The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977. Used by permission.

Scripture references marked NIV are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-6714-8

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-6717-9

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-6715-5

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-6716-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wilkin, Jen, 1969– author.

Title: Women of the word : how to study the Bible with both our hearts and our minds / Jen Wilkin.

Description: Second Edition. | Wheaton : Crossway, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019010899 (print) | LCCN 2019022068 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433567155 (pdf) |

ISBN 9781433567162 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433567179 (epub) | ISBN 9781433567148 (tp)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible—Study and teaching. | Christian women—Religious life.

Classification: LCC BS600.3 (ebook) | LCC BS600.3 .W555 2019 (print) | DDC 220.071—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019010899>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB	29	28	27	26	25	24	23	22	21	20	19	
13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

To Jeff, who knows me best.
You give me courage. Psalm 34:3

Contents

Foreword <i>by Matt Chandler</i>	11
Acknowledgments	13
Introduction	15
1 Turning Things Around	21
2 The Case for Bible Literacy	37
3 Study with Purpose	51
4 Study with Perspective	63
5 Study with Patience	79
6 Study with Process	93
7 Study with Prayer	111
8 Pulling It All Together	119
9 Help for Teachers	137
Conclusion: Seek His Face	157
Recommended Resources	165
Notes	167
Scripture Index	169

Foreword

When the Holy Spirit opened my eyes to believe, it was like being run over by a train. I fell in love with Jesus that night and have yet to get over it. But although my heart was aflame, my mind was empty. I asked hundreds of questions that night and in the following days.

In God's gracious providence, he put a man in my life who was willing to teach me early on what the Bible was. This quote from Ed Clowney encapsulates what I learned in those early days:

There are great stories in the Bible . . . but it is possible to know Bible stories, yet miss the Bible story. . . . The Bible has a story line. It traces an unfolding drama. The story follows the history of Israel, but it does not begin there, nor does it contain what you would expect in a national history. . . . If we forget the story line, we cut the heart out of the Bible. Sunday school stories are then told as tamer stories of the Sunday comics, where Samson substitutes for Superman; David becomes a Hebrew version of Jack the Giant Killer. No, David is not a brave little boy who isn't afraid of the big bad giant. He is the Lord's anointed. . . . God chose David as a king after his own heart in order to prepare for David's great Son, our Deliverer and Champion."¹

Over the last twenty years, the Holy Spirit has used the Scriptures to encourage me; rebuke me; shape my marriage, my parenting, my approach to money, and my outlook in the midst of tragedy; and to repeatedly draw my eyes to the One whom the Bible is about. I find in my heart a passion for people to see and savor the God of the Bible, and a corresponding frustration when I see the hurt, loss, and lack of confidence that accompanies a lack of biblical literacy.

Jen Wilkin takes knowing the God of the Bible seriously. She is one of the better Bible teachers I've had the opportunity to hear. Her approach in teaching men and women how to grow in their knowledge of the Scriptures is accessible and helpful regardless of whether you have been a Christian for decades and feel like it's too late for you or you are a young believer who is hungry to know and understand the God of the Bible. The church as a whole must become people of the Word, and (don't let the title fool you) this book provides the guidance we all need. So, that's why I'm glad you are holding this book.

The five *p*'s of purpose, perspective, patience, process, and prayer covered in this book will serve you well in the days, weeks, and months ahead. I am confident that as you learn and practice Jen's Bible study methods, you will be enthralled by both the Bible's stories and its story, and you will be forever changed as you come to know the Hero of that story.

Christ is All,
Matt Chandler
Lead Pastor, The Village Church
President, Acts 29 Church Planting Network

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Collin Hansen and Dave DeWit for believing I had something to say, and for giving me a means to say it. You both knew I was a writer before I did.

To my faithful “freditors”—Lindsey Brittain, Kindra Grider, Lori Kuykendall, and Kristen Rabalais—thank you for reading all the clumsiest versions of my thoughts and gently helping me to be a better communicator. I value your edits, but I value your friendship more.

Emily Spalding and Sally Sturm, “free therapy” is a bit of an understatement. I love you both.

Tara Davis, thank you for giving me back the Oxford comma, and for untangling my sentences with patience and grace. Gloria Furman, you generously read my manuscript in the weeks after your fourth child’s arrival. I know first-hand you had other things to do, and your encouragement was a priceless gift.

Matt Chandler, you extended friendship and unqualified support of my ministry and message. Thank you for being my pastor. Kent Rabalais and Sara Lamb, your willingness to help me balance my role at The Village Church with my writing commitments kept me sane.

Matt, Mary Kate, Claire, and Calvin, you are my favorite children in the world. By giving me space to write and

Acknowledgments

helping me keep our house standing you have partnered with me in ministry. Let's not eat frozen lasagna for a while.

And to the women of Flower Mound Women's Bible Study, whose hunger and thirst for righteousness has been an ongoing inspiration to keep my hand on the plow, thank you for sticking with me and for loving God with your minds. You are a precious weekly reminder that this work matters.

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.

Questions for Reflection

1. What is your church “pedigree”? How has your exposure to different churches (or lack thereof) shaped the way you view Bible study?
2. How aware are you of your own need for greater Bible literacy? What events or experiences have raised your awareness of your need to know the Bible better?
3. What experience have you had with false or poor teaching? How much of a role did ignorance of what the Bible says play into the teacher’s ability to spread error?

4. How equipped do you feel to study the Bible on your own? What tools do you currently use when you study?
5. What has been the greatest obstacle to your study efforts in the past? In your current life stage? What do you think could be an obstacle in the future?

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

Women of the Word

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.

Women of the Word

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

Women of the Word

questions: 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)

Women of the Word

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.

Women of the Word

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.

Women of the Word

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.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are some ways you have used the Bible as if it were a book about you? How does seeing the Bible as a book primarily about God, not you, change things?

2. How prone are you to measuring the strength of your faith by the strength of your feelings? What is the danger of measuring your faith in this way?

3. Restate this idea in your own words: "The heart cannot love what the mind does not know." Why is it spiritually dangerous to claim to love God without making an effort to know him through his revealed Word?

4. Chapter 1 makes a connection between pleasure and the learning process. Describe a time when your pleasure in a relationship grew as you got to know the person better. To what extent have you seen the same connection in your relationship with God?

5. What do you think is the connection between the two backward approaches to Bible study (self before God, heart before mind)?

“*Women of the Word* will help all who read it to find their way deeper into the Word of God without having to be seminary educated, a genius, or even an especially good student.”

KATHY KELLER

Assistant Director of Communications,
Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City, New York

We all know it's important to study God's Word. But sometimes it's hard to know where to start. What's more, a lack of time, emotionally driven approaches, and past frustrations can erode our resolve to keep growing in our knowledge of Scripture. How can we, as Christian women, keep our focus and sustain our passion when reading the Bible?

With over 250,000 copies sold, *Women of the Word* has helped countless women with a clear and concise plan they can use every time they open their Bible. Featuring the same content as the first edition, and now with added study questions at the end of each chapter, this book equips you to engage God's Word in a way that trains your mind and transforms your heart.

“I'm glad you're holding this book. Jen Wilkin's approach in teaching people how to grow in their knowledge of the Scriptures is accessible and helpful.”

Matt Chandler, Lead Pastor, The Village Church, Dallas, Texas; President, Acts 29 Church Planting Network; author, *The Explicit Gospel*

“A must-read for every woman interested in teaching and leading Bible discussion groups in your church.”

Nancy Guthrie, author, *Even Better than Eden: Nine Ways the Bible's Story Changes Everything about Your Story*

“This book has served to clear the fog in my heart and mind when it comes to studying God's Word, and I absolutely cannot wait to purchase many more copies for the women in my life who I know will love it too!”

Bethany Barnard, singer/songwriter

JEN WILKIN is a speaker, writer, and teacher of women's Bible studies. She has a background in women's ministry, and has organized and led studies for women in home, church, and parachurch contexts. She is the author of *In His Image* and *None Like Him*.

BIBLE STUDY / WOMEN

