

Learn Your Bible

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in a six-part series

April 29, 2018

©2018 Scott L. Engle

Psalms 119:97–103 (CEB)

⁹⁷ I love your Instruction!

I think about it constantly.

⁹⁸ Your commandment makes me wiser
than my enemies
because it is always with me.

⁹⁹ I have greater insight
than all my teachers
because I contemplate your laws.

¹⁰⁰ I have more understanding
than the elders
because I guard your precepts.

¹⁰¹ I haven't set my feet on any evil path
so I can make sure to keep your word.

¹⁰² I haven't deviated
from any of your rules
because you are the one
who has taught me.

¹⁰³ Your word is so pleasing
to my taste buds—
it's sweeter than honey in my mouth!

¹⁰⁵ Your word is a lamp before my feet
and a light for my journey.

Proverbs 30:5 (NIV)

Every word of God is flawless;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.

2 Timothy 3:14–17 (NIV)

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Holy Scripture: God-breathed and God-given.

Here's an obvious question for us. *Why* should we learn the Bible? The answer lies in what the apostle Paul taught his younger associate Timothy. You'll recall from a few weeks ago that Paul once wrote, "I have no one like him . . . like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel" (Philippians 2:20-22).

In his letter known as 2 Timothy, Paul urges Timothy to remember what he has learned and who he has learned it from. Like most Jewish boys, Timothy had been steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures from a very early age.¹ Paul reminds him that those sacred writings are able to instruct Timothy and make him wise for salvation in the faith that is in Jesus Christ. We need to remember that the writings Paul refers to in these verses is not the entire Bible, but only the Old Testament. Though some of the New Testament writings existed and were circulating among the churches, they had not been collected and canonized. Nonetheless, the message of salvation begun in the Old Testament had been fulfilled in the gospel, and that is what Timothy is to preach (2 Tim 4:2). Moreover, just as the Jews had a tradition of sacred and inspired writings, so would the Christians, who came to understand that the writings of the Old Testament and the New Testament were inspired by God in a way unlike any other literature. Paul puts this quite bluntly when, in v. 16, he refers to the sacred writings as *theopneustos*, literally "God-breathed." Though the process of inspiration is a mystery,² God is the source of these writings.

The Usefulness of Scripture

Because the scriptures are "God-breathed," Paul reminds Timothy that they are "useful" – teaching us, rebuking us, correcting us, and training us. In his paraphrase of

¹ Timothy had a Jewish mother and a Gentile father. He was not circumcised at birth, so he wouldn't have been considered Jewish. Yet, it is not surprising that his mother would have taught him the Jewish Scriptures. I suppose all this makes him especially well-suited for his work with Paul.

² Christians do not hold that God dictated the Bible in the same way that Muslims believe God dictated the Quran in Arabic. We believe the Bible is God's word for his people, yet preserves the genuineness of its human authors.

the Bible, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson renders Paul's words this way, "Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live in God's way." This is pretty much how we learn anything important. We have to be shown the path forward, we have to be shown when we have fallen off the path, we have to be shown how to get back on the path, and then we have to be trained so we can stay on the path.

The UMC and the Bible

(all quotations taken from the umc.org website, April 2018)

Despite the scriptural roots of the Methodist church, the UMC has sometimes undervalued the Bible, failing in many congregations to teach even the basics. But this is changing. The General Conference, the governing body of the UMC, has reaffirmed the place of Scripture in Methodism.

In the United Methodist Church, we affirm that, "The Bible bears authentic testimony to God's self-disclosure in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as in God's work of creation, in the pilgrimage of Israel, and in the Holy Spirit's ongoing activity in human history."

Further, "The Bible is sacred canon for Christian people, formally acknowledged as such by historic ecumenical councils of the church. Our doctrinal standards identify as canonical thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. Our standards affirm the Bible as the source of all that is "necessary" and "sufficient" unto salvation (Articles of Religion) and "is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice" (Confession of Faith). We properly read Scripture within the believing community, informed by the tradition of that community."

But this is no intellectual exercise. We do not study the Bible so we can become biblical scholars. Instead, we read and study the Bible because, like Timothy, in its pages we learn of the salvation that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible also equips us for good works that serve God and neighbor, build up the body of Christ, and are a good witness to others.

Regrettably, sometimes we try to turn the Bible into the sort of book that we think God ought to have given us rather than the one he did. Sometimes, we try to turn it into some sort of rule book, as if it is no more than a list of do's and don'ts. Or, we try rearranging the Bible into a systematic book of right beliefs. But instead, in his wisdom, God has given us a book of stories about God's relationship with his people. Even in the writings that don't seem to be stories, like Paul's letters to Timothy, we can probably hear God more truly when we listen for the underlying narrative. It is from these stories that we learn what it means to be God's people.

I can imagine someone saying, "I don't have time for the Bible, all I really need is Jesus." But how do any of us come to know Jesus? Certainly, we can come to know something of Jesus through our fellowship with other Christians, through prayer, through service and worship. But the only check on our imaginations and wayward hearts is the Bible. Everything we think we know about Jesus has to be tested against Scripture. It is true that even then, the questions and answers often elude us. But still, it is the Bible that keeps us grounded in God's revelation of himself.

Learning to read the Bible well

You might think you'd have to be some sort of Bible scholar to learn to read the Bible well.

But that isn't the case; it is a matter of how you go about reading and studying. If your reading is always a search for some truism or answer to the latest question, you will be disappointed and you will ignore much of the Bible. I've never found a better approach than that suggested by Richard Hays, which I will paraphrase. There are four steps:

1. *Read the passage carefully*, paying close attention to the immediate context and to its historical and geographic setting. You are trying to grasp what it meant to those for whom it was first written.

2. *Put the passage in its canonical context.* In other words, let the rest of the Bible help you to read the passage well. For example, if you are going to read about the role of women in the church, you'd best read everything on the question, not just the passage in front of you.
3. *Relate the passage to your own situation.* We all tend to grasp Bible passages and immediately try to figure out they mean for us, bypassing the first two steps. The problem is that the first two steps are the only checks on us finding anything we want in the passage. The goal is to read outward from the Bible, not read into it whatever suits us. The Bible ought to reshape us as opposed to our reshaping it.
4. *Now for the toughest task: Live it.* This is where we strive to "live into" Scripture, as I've heard it put. We want to consciously work with the Holy Spirit to better reflect the image of God that we have seen in Scripture, to be every truer disciples of Jesus as we walk the path set out in the Bible for God's people.

You will sometimes hear people warn about the dangers of studying the Bible for "head knowledge." That sentiment simply speaks of a Christian who is all about steps 1 and 2, yet never goes on steps 3 and 4. Not much point in that. Conversely, we could also be warned about "heart knowledge," speaking of a Christian who skips steps 1 and 2, going right on to steps 3 and 4, making of Scripture whatever suits them. Both approaches fail to appreciate what God has given us in the pages of Holy Scripture.

We can't be divided into "head" and "heart," we are whole persons. The only question is whether we will read Scripture as well as we can, so we live our life before God as well as we can.

Finally, enjoy the stories

I teach two outright Bible studies. One on Monday evenings and the other at Tuesday lunchtime (more info on the last page of this study). We take a book of the Bible, and make our way through it, paragraph by paragraph. You'd be surprised at how much fun we can have doing so. This is because so much of the Bible is comprised of stories, short ones, long ones . . . dramatic ones, funny ones.

As I said, sometimes we want to pretend that the Bible is a big rule book, giving us straightforward lists of do's and don'ts. At other times, we go to it seeking a well-organized presentation of what we ought to believe. In truth, the Bible is neither. It is largely a book of stories. And we are blessed by this.

The longer I teach the Bible, the more I appreciate God's wisdom in giving us these stories. We can identify with the people whose stories are told; we can see ourselves in them and participate in their journey with God. Stories preserve all the ambiguities and mysteries of life. Life is never so simple as a list or a creed. Stories are easy to remember and to tell. Stories can engage our imaginations and instruct us in ways that lists of rules or systematic theologies never could.

Finally, biblical stories nest within one another. The small stories about Abraham and Sarah nest within the larger epic of God's choosing a people. These larger stories nest within the over-arching biblical story of redemption and restoration. Stories help us to find unity within the rich diversity of Scripture. . . . so read it and live it!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The discussion questions for this study are drawn from the curriculum for our Connection Groups, which will be meeting throughout the series. The questions were written by Rev. Allison Jean.

1. What is your favorite way to read scripture and why? What is your favorite setting for reading scripture, and why (coffee shop, vacation, while eating breakfast, etc.)?
2. Share about a time in your life when scripture has been a refuge for you. What passages have given you comfort in difficult times of your life? How did you find those passages (friends or family, daily devotionals, sermons)?
3. Describe how scripture impacts your life and faith on a daily basis. If you don't read scripture regularly, why is that? If you do read scripture regularly, share what it means to you and why.
4. Who in your life has taught you about scripture in a way that has impacted you (Sunday school teachers, pastors, authors)? Why have they been so meaningful to you? How has what you learned changed how you read scripture now?
5. Share about a time in your life when scripture has offered you correction. What did you do in response to reading this passage? Was receiving this instruction difficult for you? Why or why not? How did your relationship with God change because of this experience?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: More on the Bible

Monday, Deuteronomy 6 God's teachings are to be on our hearts.

Tuesday, Deuteronomy 17:18-20 Learning to revere God and his ways.

Wednesday, Psalm 119:73-80 We love God's instruction because it comes from he who made us.

Thursday, Psalm 119:105-112 We never stand beyond the need for help.

Friday, Ezekiel 2:8-3:3 & Revelation 10:9-10 Eating the Bible??!!

Saturday, Luke 4:14-21 Jesus reads from Isaiah to launch his public ministry.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the gospel of John.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Samuel.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *Jewish History*, a six-week series with faculty from UTD's Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies.