
Presented below is a transcript from a talk I gave to a women's group Bible study in May 2019 focused on answering the question: Why do we study the Bible? It has been edited for readability in a text-based context instead of a verbal talk.

Why Do We Study the Bible?

-Brandy M. Eldridge

If you have your Bible, know that I am going to bounce around a little bit tonight, but we will return frequently to Paul's two letters to Timothy, about maybe two-thirds of the way through the New Testament. So you might want to mark those so you can flip there quickly.

Every human being will develop a worldview. By this I mean an understanding of how the world operates, the meaning of life, and one's individual role and purpose in the world. Even atheists develop such a worldview—one that disavows the existence of God in any form and His influence in the world. Not everyone will develop their worldview systematically or deliberately, but it will be developed. Developing a worldview isn't optional. If you are not an active participant in its development, you will be a passive and unquestioning recipient of what the others instill in you. Commercials on television, peer groups, self-help books, advertising campaigns, political commentary, mass media representations, cultural authority figures—these things and more will endeavor to instill a sense of what is important, what the meaning of life is, and what your role in the world is. Ephesians 4:14 warns us that those not strongly rooted in mature Christian faith are like “infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.”¹ Scripture warns us, therefore, to be careful and deliberate, to attend to the task of developing our worldview in a systematic way, so that we can develop into mature people, rooted in the Truth.

A word you hear in church circles sometimes to describe a Christian worldview is theology—it comes from two Greek roots: *theos* meaning “God”, and *-logia* meaning “study of.” So theology, then, is the study of God. As Christians, our worldview, our understanding of the world and our place in it, is based on the study of God. And our theology is critically important. Gotquestions.org, a resource for Christians seeking better understanding of Biblical issues, puts it this way: “Reject theology and you doom yourself to life with no sense of direction. Without theology, we waste our lives and lose our souls.”

Let me give you a picture of what theology is and what it means for your life. Specifically, I am going to suggest to you that your theology is like a rope.²

Historically, rope was made by individually twisting at least three strands in one direction, and then twisting them around one another in the opposite direction. This produces a strong rope that is unlikely to break. However, traditional rope has some problems. Without a very specific type of carefully maintained twist, it easily becomes waterlogged and quickly is too heavy to lift. It also tends to untwist slightly when in use, which is why you sometimes see large loads spinning when suspended by this type of rope. Also, every fiber is exposed at multiple points long the rope, and thus it is susceptible to breakage at various points, after which it decreases in strength and longevity. Many modern ropes use a different construction, one that avoids the pitfalls associated with traditional rope. To start, modern rope has a strong core, which can be constructed in various ways and with specialized purposes. The core offers the rope additional strength, and the woven tubular covering offers protection for the core.

¹ All scripture quotations herein are from the 2011 NIV translation.

² The analogy of a theology as a rope was introduced to me by Caroline Smiley, in a presentation entitled “The How & Why of Theology,” which she gave at the Proclaim Truth conference in January, 2019.

In the rope of your theology, the core is made up of the things you hold as central, those around which you build your life and understanding of the point of existence.

- These are the beliefs that are core to the Christian faith (e.g., triune nature of God, deity of Christ, salvation and the redemptive work of His death on the cross, the meaning of the resurrection), sometimes referred to as orthodoxy.
- Many Christian denominations make a routine practice of reciting creeds, such as the Nicene creed, as a reminder of what their core beliefs are.
- As these are the central truths of God’s plan for the redemption of humanity, it is absolutely the strongest core you can provide for your theology rope.

Around the core of your theology rope, you weave doctrine.

- Doctrine is just a fancy word for teachings that you apply to your life and weave together for greater understanding of who God is and what your response to Him should rightfully be.
- If we are not deliberate about basing our worldview on sound doctrine, the world can and will lead us astray. 2 Timothy 4:3 says, “For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.” In this passage, we are cautioned that there will be teachings in the world around us that are attractive, that are pleasant to hear and make us feel warm and fuzzy inside. Our ears will itch to hear more. But rope doesn’t get stronger with a haphazard weave. It is the carefully planned weave that makes it strong. Thus, we must be careful what doctrines we listen to and which we follow.
- Even well-respected leaders in Christianity will sometimes miss the mark on doctrine—not because they are poor teachers or because they are being deliberately misleading, but because we as humans are all fallible.
- Always check new teaching, no matter who is comes from, against the Truth of the Word, as Paul instructs in Acts 17:10-12. These verses come out of a passage in which Paul is traveling to different churches to preach the gospel. He has just come from Thessalonica, where as we see in verse 2, he “reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead.” In response, some became believers, while some of the Jews stirred up discontent and basically sent a mob after Paul, who the believers hid from the authorities. Which is where we pick up the story. Acts 17:10-12 reads, “As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.” One of the key differences Luke highlights in this passage is that the Jews in Berea first heard Paul’s message, were excited by it, and then—and this is key—checked it against the Scriptures. They didn’t accept what he said just because he was passionate about what he spoke, because he was charismatic or easy to listen to, or even because they wanted what he said to be true. They first checked the Scriptures for themselves, and when it all checked out, they believed.

Now that you have a sense of the idea of your theology as a rope, what is the practical application? I have this theology here, what am I supposed to do with it? In reviewing what Scripture records about the value of studying the Bible, I found three main purposes of your rope:

1. It secures you tightly to the Lord and His Truth—Like a rock climber, you want to attach your rope to strong, unyielding anchors that will hold you when your strength runs out and when the world tries to shake you off.
 - a. Psalm 119:10-11 says, “I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” The Psalm continues in verses 105-106 with, “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path. I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws.” The Lord’s Word communicates His heart, what He wants us to reflect in our lives, His intentions for how the world is supposed to work. When we study and understand it, we are better able to adhere more and more closely to God’s intentions for our lives.

- b. 2 Timothy 1:13-14 says, “What you have heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Jesus Christ. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.” We are to guard the deposit of sound teaching in our lives, through the help of the Spirit. It is through this teaching that we grow in faith and love for Jesus.
 - c. One of my favorite songs when I was in high school was “Breakfast,” by the Newsboys. It’s a bittersweet song in which the death of a young man is mourned and his life celebrated. One of the lines in the song states, “Those here without the Lord, how do you cope? For this morning we don’t mourn like those who have no hope.” (This is a reference to 1 Thessalonians 4:13.) We need to understand our source of hope—Romans 15:4 says, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.” The Scriptures are a source of hope and encouragement, which is mainly because...
 - d. ...the Scriptures tell a unified story that points to Jesus, who is the hope and salvation of humanity. Jesus Himself spells out the importance of knowing His teachings, as found in Scripture. In comparing Himself to a shepherd, Jesus says, in John 10:27, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.”
2. It helps you remain secured to other believers, so that you may encourage one another and guard one another from following false doctrine—Like climbers seeking to summit Mount Everest, we lash ourselves together with our shared theology, protecting one another from falls or wandering from the true path. We also draw strength, hope and encouragement from the knowledge that we tread that path together.
- a. Paul instructs us multiple times to encourage one another. 1 Thessalonians 4:18 says, “Therefore, encourage one another with these words.” Here Paul has just finished talking about the hope we have in the assurance of the return of Christ, and he encourages the church as Thessalonica to encourage one another with that hope. Scripture records the very source for our hope, and we can use it to encourage one another.
 - b. There is a specific passage that records one of the most direct instructions of the purpose and uses of Scripture, and some of you may have been listening to me this whole time wondering when I was going to talk about it. Don’t worry, I didn’t forget. Let’s turn to 2 Timothy 3:16-17, which says, “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Here we see that Scripture serves a purpose in training those who follow it toward righteousness, with the intention of making each of us thoroughly equipped to pursue the good works of the Lord. Now, here is where we run into, I think, one of the downsides of the sectioning we’ve done in the Biblical text. Those are the words that end the third chapter of Timothy, and when a chapter ends we are sort of culturally trained to view it as the completion of an idea, that something new is going to be introduced next. It’s a stopping point for us. But we see in 2 Timothy 4 that he goes right on talking about the Word of God, and he provides an additional instruction to us. 2 Timothy 4:1-2 says, “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.” As we see in 2 Timothy 4:2, we are instructed to use Scripture to “correct, rebuke, and encourage”—how?—“with great patience and careful instruction.” Love never departs from the good works and instructions the Lord provides. We sharpen each other, call each other out when we are heading down the wrong path, but we do it in love, we are patient with each other, and we are careful in the words we choose and the encouragement we provide. This includes children. 2 Timothy 1:5—“I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.”—praises Lois and Eunice for raising Timothy from a young age to form and maintain a sincere and active faith.

- c. We are charged with being on guard in our churches against false teachings. Paul's letters to Timothy are full of admonishment for those who spread false teachings. When these letters were written, the early church already had prominent members who were beginning to spread false teachings, especially regarding topics such as the resurrection. We are talking things that alter the core of the theology rope, so this was a big deal! Paul wanted to encourage Timothy, who at this time was a young man beginning his own personal journey of independent ministry. However, he also wants to warn Timothy about the critical importance of rooting out false teaching when it crops up.
- i. 1 Timothy 1: 3-7 says, "As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith. The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm." Here Paul points out that the church in Ephesus had become caught up in false teaching and squabbles over some mythical stories that had been constructed based on the genealogies in Genesis. This created controversy and division in the church that took away from time dedicated to the study and living out of Truth.
 - ii. 2 Timothy 2:16-18 says, "Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have departed from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some." This is an important passage, because it further elucidates the consequences for a church when false teachings are allowed to fester. At the time of this letter, there were false teachings that are being spread through the church in Ephesus, and some of the more influential people in the church had been embracing them, leading others who respected those people likewise astray. This passage can get a little confusing, in part because Paul and Timothy had maintained close relationship with one another and with the churches they were guiding, and so we are not told explicitly what the false doctrine being spread was. Paul wouldn't have needed to offer specifics to Timothy, who would already have been familiar with what is going on in the church at Ephesus. What we know is that it involved a false teaching about resurrection, with many scholars believing it had to do with undermining Christian faith for resurrection and life to come, the hope we have in the return of Christ, the setting to rights of the world, including our bodies. Regardless of what the false doctrine in this case was, I want to call your attention to how Paul characterizes it. In verse 17, he likens it to gangrene. Interestingly, this word has been noted as originating from a similar Greek word, *gangra*, which refers to a goat, an animal that consumes everything within its path indiscriminately. Within the human body, gangrene likewise spreads from its origin rapidly and with devastating effect, consuming everything it encounters, with the solution likely to involve amputation to save the remaining healthy tissue. What Paul is saying here is that false teaching will corrupt indiscriminately, eating away at the strength, vitality, and effectiveness of the church body. It isn't just a matter of "agree to disagree," it's the very lifeblood of the church that is at stake. This is a key reason to regularly study the Scriptures—the consequences of being led astray by false teaching, especially those that eat away at the core of our theological rope, are too great to risk.
3. It provides a life line to the lost—If you really believe in the theology you have woven together from the Word of God, it is inescapable that you must throw that same theology rope to others, to offer them a clear path toward hope. You can think of this as cooperating with the Spirit to conduct rescue missions, like the coast guard who lowers a diver on a rope to save a person in peril.

- a. Matthew 28:19-20 says, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Here are the last words of Jesus recorded in Matthew. Jesus gives clear instruction that we are to spread the gospel message far and wide, ensuring that all of humanity has a chance to hear and respond to the message of salvation. We are also to teach about how to be obedient to what Christ has commanded us—and believe me, teaching is much easier when you have a good working knowledge of the material you are presenting. I teach preschool, and believe me, it only takes a 3-year-old asking “why?” once for you to figure out whether you really know what you are talking about! You can only help someone grow as far as you yourself have grown. It is regular study of the Word and application of it to our lives that keeps us growing well.
- b. 2 Timothy 2:24-26 says, “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their sense and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.” Here Paul spells out what it means to be the Lord’s servant with regard to spreading the hope of the Gospel. We are to gently instruct and approach others with kindness. We shouldn’t interpret this as meaning to approach with timidity, however. Paul clearly indicates here that the intention is to provide information about Jesus so that others may be led by the Spirit to knowledge of His Truth. The consequences of not coming to this knowledge is failure to escape the devil. Verse 26 lays it out plainly, that these are literally rescue missions we are undertaking. So though we are to operate from kindness and love, make no mistake—the stakes are high and our mission is critical.

And so we return to our initial question--Why is studying the Bible so important? And the questions I know I myself have asked in the past: I know it’s the “good Christian thing” to do, but do I really need to read the Bible for myself, when there are so many good Christian leaders who can teach me what is in it? Shouldn’t I learn my theology from someone with more experience and knowledge than me? Bible teachers and commentators have been given the gift of teaching for a reason, and we are wise to listen to the insights God reveals to them. At the same time, one of the biggest indicators to me that we are supposed to study the Bible for ourselves is how hard the enemy works to get us to avoid it. If us engaging with the Scriptures wasn’t that important, the enemy wouldn’t waste his effort. But he will fight you on this one, I promise you. If he can’t stop us from reading the Word, he will instead try to twist and distort our understanding of it, and if he cannot do that he will try to thwart its effectiveness in our lives. I believe the enemy works hard at convincing us we *need* a Bible teacher to tell us what the Word means, that we will never know enough to understand it on our own. He goes one step further, then, wanting us to become loyal to certain Bible teachers, rather than to the Word itself, so that we elevate the teacher above the one who gifted them with the insight. When we’re honest, sometimes we avoid participation when the study isn’t by an author we like. I believe that, if he can’t stop us from reading it, the enemy wants to see us stockpile Scripture references merely as ammunition, just waiting to absolutely unleash on anyone who dares question God, so thereby we undermine the love that identifies us with Christ. The enemy will settle for us collecting Bible studies like merit badges, for us to prominently display a bookshelf of completed studies, gathering dust, never to be opened again to return to the Scripture they taught. He delights when love for studying the Word overtakes love for the God who breathed that Word, when we read without praying and learn without loving. What we have in the Bible is the beautiful communication of a loving God to us, His most prized creation. We don’t study it because we have to, or because we feel guilty if we don’t—we study it out of the overflow of our love for God, our immense gratitude for the grace He has lavished upon us, and our genuine desire to align our lives with His Truth, His intents and His purposes.

Now when I say “we” here, I very much intend it literally—I absolutely am included in the guilt of being led astray in these ways. I have also fallen into the temptation at the end of a Bible study to “take a breather.” This is especially true when the study homework required a large daily time commitment.

- There is wisdom in taking a little time after God has shown you new insights, to sit with it and let it settle deeply into your soul—How does what you learned weave into your theology rope to make it stronger? How can you use it to draw closer to God, to encourage other believers, or to reach out to those who do not walk with Jesus?
- However, I caution you not to lose momentum. Reading Scripture is not like taking a college course. You don't reach the end of a given book or study, take note of everything you learned, and then move on to the next thing, perhaps never to revisit it again. Reading the Bible is more like physical exercise—even when you reach a fitness goal, you are not finished. If you want to maintain your weight, or strength, or stamina, you must continuously train. There is benefit to rest days in which your body can rejuvenate, but too long a rest interval results in lost progress and decreased motivation for picking up your physical discipline again.
 - Scripture is meant to be read regularly, a part of your daily routine. Deuteronomy 6:4-7 says, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” Joshua 1:8 says, “Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.”

My sincere and fervent prayer is that you will leave this Bible study experience with a renewed commitment to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. I pray that you will be guarded from the snares and traps that the enemy will use to try to derail you. I pray that your heartfelt desire to know Him will constantly increase and that you will seek out His Word as your daily bread.