Why Bible Study Matters

Tom Davis builds a case for why we should study the Bible, drawing on both the Old Testament and New Testament scriptures.

Does it matter if we study the Bible?

I recently encountered an article claiming it doesn't. The author claimed that Christians are not feeding the poor, helping the downtrodden, seeking justice for the persecuted, or evangelizing people, because we are too busy studying our Bibles. (Interestingly, the article has since been removed, but the question remains.)

Is his concern valid? Approximately 16% of people in the United States read their Bible most days during the week.{1} A 2014 article in *Christianity Today* states, "The average length of time spent studying the Bible was between 10 and 20 minutes per session."{2} According to Probe's 2020 religion survey, "Only one out of five Born Again Christians ages 18 through 29 pray daily, attend church at least monthly, and read the Bible at least weekly."{3} The statistics indicate that the average amount of time Christians spend reading their Bible cannot be what is keeping Christians from sharing their faith, helping those in need, or helping the homeless.

Another issue that the author raised is that the early church did not have an authoritative list of New Testament books for more than three hundred years after Jesus' resurrection. I am unsure how these historical facts show that anyone today is spending too much time reading their Bible. Are we better off when we have all the books of the Bible? Would these early Christians have preferred having all the books of the Bible? Would they want to stick with having parts of the Old Testament, a Gospel or two, and a few of the epistles? I think they would be confused why this pastor thinks that Christians

are spending too much time studying their Bible.

What the Old Testament Says About Reading the Bible

One way we can figure out the role that studying the Bible should play in the life of the Christian is to look at what the Bible says about reading the Scriptures. We should start with the Old Testament. The first passage to examine is:

> These words I am commanding you today must be kept in mind, and you must teach them to your children and speak of them as you sit in your house, as you walk along the road, as you lie down, and as you get up. You should tie them as a reminder on your forearm and fasten them as symbols on your forehead. Inscribe them on the doorframes of your houses and gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9 NET)

God is preparing to lead the Hebrews into the promised land. He tells the people that they are to remember the covenant, teach the covenant to their children, and place inscriptions from the covenant in prominent places in their homes. Knowing and teaching the commands of God is so important that this charge is repeated in Deuteronomy 11:18-23.

Peter Cousins states, "Not only is it to be upon the heart . . . it must take first place in training children, in conversation (at home and outside) from the beginning to the end of the day; it should govern the senses, control behavior, and direct life in the home and community."{4} The words of the covenant between God and the Hebrew people are so important that the words have to be known and understood. That requires study. Knowing the covenant is so important that the Hebrew people are commanded to decorate their walls, doorframes, and gates. The people are even commanded to have the words of the covenant on their clothes. All of this indicates that God intends for His people to know and follow His commands, and that this is done by studying them. Even the

people who could not read would memorize the law. (Ancient cultures operated from an oral tradition; people were used to hearing, memorizing, and repeating stories and passages from verbal input alone.) To be fair, few Jews would have been able to recite the first five books of the Bible from memory, but they would have been able to recite long passages of Scripture.

The most common passage that was most often recited was the Shema, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You must love the LORD your God with your whole mind, your whole being, and all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Jesus said this is God's greatest commandment (Matthew 22:36-40). Jews would pray the Shema several times a day. This is the passage most often found on doorposts and in houses in archaeological digs.

As the people prepare to enter the land promised to them, God makes provisions for a future King. The responsibilities and conduct of the king are:

> When he sits on his royal throne he must make a copy of this law on a scroll given to him by the Levitical priests. It must be with him constantly, and he must read it as long as he lives, so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and observe all the words of this law
> and these statutes and carry them out. (Deuteronomy 17:18-19 NET)

Here we can see that the king does not make the law. God gave the law to Moses. The Levitical priests were to copy the law and teach it to the people. The priests were also tasked with giving the king a copy of the law so that the king could carry out God's law. The King is under the authority of the priests and of God. The king is not allowed to make his own law, he must be obedient to God.{5}

As Joshua leads the people into the promised land God tells

him, “This law scroll must not leave your lips. You must memorize it day and night so you can carefully obey all in it. Then you will prosper and be successful” (Joshua 1:8 NET). Even before a king was installed over the people, the leaders of Israel were to lead God’s people according to the law so they could be successful in following God.

As Israel moved into the land God had promised them, they became corrupt. The priests did not teach the kings or the people. God sent prophets to the people to call them back to living faithfully to the covenant. The people would not keep the covenant they made with God, and the priests would not teach the law to the people. God, in the book of Hosea, tells the priests:

> My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.
> Because you have rejected knowledge,
> I will reject you from serving as my priest.
> Since you have forgotten the law of your God,
> I will also forget your sons. (Hosea 4:6 CSB)

Despite all of these warnings, Israel was not faithful in following God. David Allan Hubbard summarizes the situation, “The collapse of the priests and prophet, key ministers of law and word, leads inevitably to the disastrous destruction.”{6} The priests were not teaching the people or the kings. This led to God sending the people into exile and the destruction of the Temple in Israel. As a result of a lack of faithfulness and a lack of knowledge of God’s law, Israel was separated from God.

What the New Testament Says About Reading the Bible

The Gospels tell us that after his baptism Jesus has a 40-day fast followed by a confrontation with Satan. This involved Satan tempting Jesus by quoting scripture, and Jesus rebukes him by quoting Scripture (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). New

Testament Scholar Craig Keener gives the following description: “This text also shows that Jesus does not just use Scripture to accommodate contemporary views of its authority; he uses it as his authority and the final word on ethics even when dealing with a supracultural adversary.”{7} While the Bible was written by people living in cultures that existed in real places and real times in the past, the morality taught within scripture is not restricted by those historical and cultural settings. As Jesus’ followers, we need to understand what is expected of us morally. In order to know Christian morality, we must study the Bible.

The Gospels also show that Jesus had debates concerning what was taught in the Scriptures. These debates often included not just morality, but the identity of the Messiah, and the power of God. In one debate Jesus tells the Sadducees, “You are deceived because you don’t know the scriptures or the power of God” (Matthew 22:29 NET). The Sadducees did not know the scriptures because they only studied the first five books of the Bible. They didn’t know the power of God because they rejected the resurrection. Stanley Horton writes, “Those who do not really know what the scriptures teach, nor God’s omnipotent power cannot avoid going astray.”{8}

In another debate with the Pharisees Jesus said, “You study the scriptures thoroughly because you think in them you possess eternal life, and it is these same scriptures that testify about me, but you are not willing to come to me so that you may have life” (John 5:39, 40 NET). The Pharisees rejected Jesus because they saw him as a threat. Jesus had undermined their authority and threatened their position in the culture, so they were obstinate. Keener states, “They believed that one had eternal life through the scriptures; but Jesus says that the Scriptures witness to him, hence to reject him is to disobey the Scriptures.”{9} By rejecting Jesus, the Pharisees unintentionally rejected the Scriptures. By rejecting Jesus, they could not possess eternal life.

In the book of Acts, we see Jesus' disciples proclaiming to everyone who will listen that Jesus is the Messiah and was raised from the dead. This led to debates and conflicts with the Jewish authorities. In Acts chapter seven Stephen accuses the Jewish council that they failed to follow the scriptures. In chapter eight Philip leads an Ethiopian eunuch to faith by starting with a passage in Isaiah and telling him about the gospel of Jesus. Later in Acts Paul met repeatedly with a group of Jews. Acts
describes the Bereans as "more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they eagerly received the message, examining the scriptures carefully every day to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11 NET). The reaction of the Bereans is not emotional. They investigated the scriptures intellectually to see what was true.{10}

In his letters Paul addresses why God gave us the scriptures. In Romans Paul writes, "For everything that was written in former times was written for our instruction, so that through endurance and through encouragement of the scriptures we may have hope" (Romans 15:4). John Murray comments, "In Paul's esteem Scripture in all its parts is for our instruction, that the Old Testament was designed to furnish us in these last days with the instruction necessary for the fulfillment of our vocation to the end, and that it is as written it promotes this purpose."{11} Part of being on fire for Christ is fulfilling our vocation. The primary way we know what our vocation is and how we can fulfill it is through studying our Bible.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul doubles down on the benefits of studying scripture. Paul reminds Timothy that he was taught the scriptures while he was a child. Then Paul writes, "Every scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person dedicated to God may be capable and equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Paul is

reminding Timothy that scripture has authority because it comes from God. Scripture is good for learning about God and ethics. The Jews have this benefit, but the Christians have a better understanding because Jesus taught the Apostles, which gave them a better understanding of the scriptures that that of the Jews.{12}

The last passage that I would like to examine is in Revelation. “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy aloud, and blessed are those who hear and obey the things written in it, because the time is near!” (Revelation 1:3). While this verse is speaking specifically about people who read Revelation, by logical extension we are blessed any time we read any part of the scripture. All scripture is given by God, therefore when you read any part of scripture you will be blessed. What does it mean to be blessed by reading scripture? Earl F. Palmer answers, “It does not express superficial sentiment but instead the rugged and tested assurance that it is a good thing to be walking in the pathway of God’s will.”{13} Our obedience to scripture brings blessing. We cannot be obedient to scripture without studying the Bible.

Conclusion

In one sense the author of the article I mentioned was correct. If we spend so much time studying the Bible that Christians never feed the hungry, help the poor, make disciples for Christ, or work to bring justice to the downtrodden then we are neglecting part of what we were commanded to do. But how can we even know that Christ commands us to do those things if we do not study the Bible?

In the examination of what the Bible says about Bible study, we can see that Bible study is an indispensable part of the Christian life. We can see in Deuteronomy that God commanded the Hebrews to memorize and obey the Law. When they failed to do this, they were ultimately exiled by God. Jesus reprimanded

the Sadducees and the Pharisees for not knowing and believing the scriptures. Paul and John taught that Christians would be blessed by studying the scriptures.

The reason we are blessed when we study the Bible is that when we study, we develop and form a Christian worldview. The story shapes our values, our morals, and the way we live. The way we think about the people and the world around us is changed by studying scripture. One other aspect is that when we study the Bible, we enter into the glory of God. When we study the Bible, we are in God's presence in the same way as when we are praying. Studying the Bible is an act of worship.{14}

Finally, studying the Bible is how we obey the command in Ephesians 5:10 to "find out what pleases the Lord." Since the greatest commandment is to love God (Matthew 22:37) as noted above, how can we love Him without knowing what pleases Him? And since we find that God's love language is obedience (John 14:15), how can we discern what to obey without studying His word? How can we avoid sin if we have never studied the Bible to find out what sin is?

How can Christians implement Bible study into a busy 40-hour work week and taking care of kids and spending time with their spouse? You do not have to spend hours a day studying. Spend ten or fifteen minutes in the morning or at night to read the Bible. Take five minutes of your lunch break to read a chapter. If you are so busy that you cannot study during the work week, find fifteen minutes to study on your day off. Whatever amount of time you spend studying the Bible, God will honor and bless you for
that time.

Notes

1. State of the Bible 2021: Five Key Findings – Barna Group
2. Evangelicals admit struggling to find time for daily Bible reading and prayer (christiantoday.com)

3. Probe 2020 Survey Report 3: Religious Practices & Purpose for Living
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8. Horton, Stanley M. 1986. *The Complete Biblical Library: The New Testament Study Bible Vol. 2 Matthew*, 481. Springfield, World Library Press.
9. Keener, op cit, 265.
10. Marshall, I. Howard, 1980. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Acts*, 280. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing.
11. Murray, John, 1968. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans Vol 2*, 199. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing.
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13. Palmer, Earl F. 1982. *The Communicator's Commentary: 1, 2, 3, John, Revelation*, 114, Word Inc.
14. Wright, N. T. 1992. *The New Testament and the People of God*, 235-237, Minneapolis, Fortress Press.

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