

Experiencing God's Story of Life and Hope

*A Workbook for
Spiritual Formation*

J. Scott Duvall

*Experiencing God's Story of Life and Hope: A Workbook for
Spiritual Formation*

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■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Read Me First

Whether you were raised in the church and accepted Christ as your personal savior at age five, or whether you have only recently given your life to Christ, spiritual growth is not optional. God expects his children to *grow up!*

We define *spiritual formation* as the process of allowing God to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ. The Bible clearly teaches that God wants his children to grow to maturity. As you read the sampling of verses below, especially notice the italicized words.

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be *conformed to the likeness of his Son*, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Rom. 8:29)

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but *be transformed* by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Rom. 12:1–2)

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are *being transformed into his likeness* with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:18)

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly *we are being renewed* day by day. (2 Cor. 4:16)

My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth *until Christ is formed in you* . . . (Gal. 4:19)

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to *be made new* in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, *created to be like God* in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph. 4:22–24)

. . . being confident of this, that *he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion* until the day of Christ Jesus. (Phil. 1:6)

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to *work out your salvation* with fear and trembling, *for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose*. (Phil. 2:12–13)

Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, *train yourself to be godly*. (1 Tim. 4:7)

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it *you may grow up in your salvation*, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. (1 Peter 2:2–3)

Each aspect of our definition of *spiritual formation* is significant. Spiritual formation is a *process*. We don't experience growth as a neat, clean, upward slope toward heaven. In reality it looks and feels more like a roller-coaster ride, twisting and turning and looping and climbing and dropping. Only as you stand back and see the big picture can you tell that the "exit" to the ride is higher than the "entrance." Spiritual formation is a messy process. Because we don't always cooperate with the Lord, it takes time for him to accomplish his purpose in our lives. Philippians 1:6 offers a great deal of encouragement here (see above). God never stops working.

Spiritual formation is the process of *allowing* God to work in our lives. God is sovereign but he has also created us to make important decisions and to bear the responsibility for those decisions. We have no power in and of ourselves to cause our own growth, nor will God force us to obey him. We must allow God to work in our lives and to bring about change. God deeply desires to work, but we must give him the necessary time and space. We don't cause our own growth, but we do cooperate with God as he works. Check out Philippians 2:12–13 above.

Spiritual formation is a process of allowing *God* to work in our lives. We are told that the Holy Spirit continues the earthly ministry that Jesus began (Acts 1:1–2). God's Spirit lives within each genuine believer (1 Cor. 6:19). Our growth is not the result of special circumstances or good luck. We don't grow by our own willpower or by striving to obey the Law. We grow when we follow the Holy Spirit, who alone can produce spiritual fruit in our lives (see Gal. 5:16–23). For us to be loving, joyful, peaceful, and so on, the Holy Spirit must be allowed to do his work.

Spiritual formation is the process of allowing God *to conform* us to the image of Jesus. As much as I hate to admit it, growth means change. Like clay in the potter's hand, we are shaped and molded and conformed to a particular pattern. Change at the hand of God is sometimes painful, but it is always good. We don't always like it, but deep down we always desire it

because we know it is necessary. James tells us to “consider it pure joy . . . whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance” and “perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2–4). God loves us too much to let us stay as we are.

Finally, spiritual formation is the process of allowing God to conform us *to the image of Jesus Christ*. In Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18; and Galatians 4:19 (see page 9), we are told that God is making us more and more like his Son. Jesus is the perfect pattern or model. He represents the goal of spiritual formation. We are not being shaped into merely religious people or ethical people or church-going people. We are being conformed to the very character of Christ himself.

Everyone, without exception, experiences some kind of “spiritual formation.” Dallas Willard puts it this way:

All people undergo a process of spiritual formation. Their spirit is formed, and with it their whole being. . . . Spiritual formation is not something just for especially religious people. No one escapes. The most hardened criminal as well as the most devout of human beings have had a spiritual formation. They have become a certain kind of person. You have had a spiritual formation and I have had one, and it is still ongoing. It is like education: everyone gets one—a good one or a bad one. (*Renovation of the Heart*, 45)

Everyone is being formed by certain powers after a particular pattern or model. We are blessed beyond words to be able to participate in God’s design for spiritual formation.

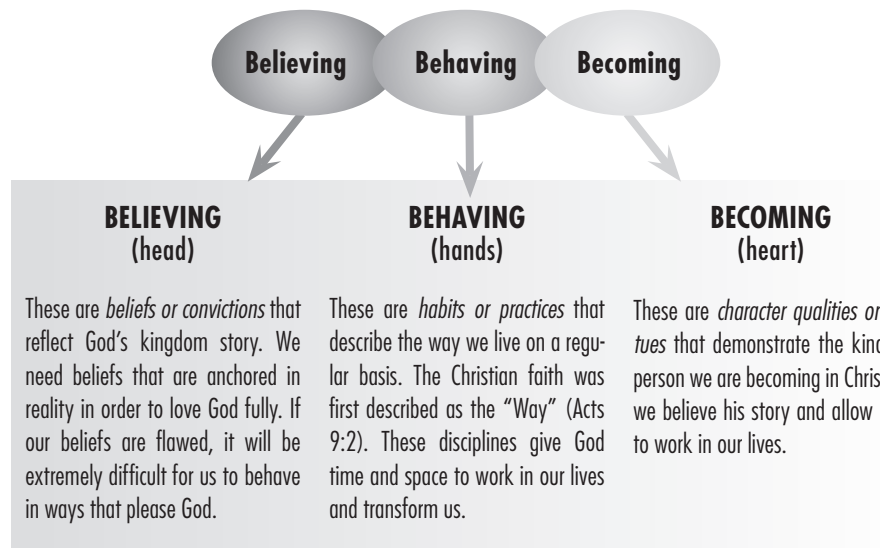
God often uses resources to shape or mold us into conformity with Christ’s character. Of course, the primary resource is God’s Word, the Bible. But there are also many good and helpful supplementary resources. We certainly know that no ministry resource of any kind can ever substitute for a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, but God does seem to use spiritual-growth resources to help our love for him grow deeper and stronger. *Experiencing God’s Story of Life and Hope* is one particularly effective resource that God can use to help us understand and participate consistently in true, godly spiritual formation.

Believing-Behaving-Becoming

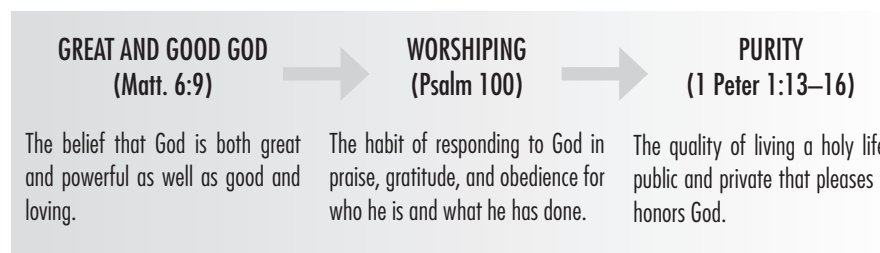
Most resources focus on just one aspect of the spiritual formation process. Some tools emphasize our *beliefs* by explaining the core teachings of the Christian faith. Knowing what to believe is crucial, but there is more. Many spiritual formation resources highlight how we should *behave*. They stress the importance of spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, solitude, worship, and so on. Without a doubt God uses such disciplines to transform our lives, but the disciplines are means to an end, not the end themselves.

The disciplines are like workout routines pointing toward the game itself. The game is our life with God. Finally, there are a handful of resources that pay attention to what people are *becoming* in the entire process of spiritual formation (i.e., godly character). Most of these center on the fruit of the Spirit as the true test of spirituality, and rightly so.

Experiencing God’s Story of Life and Hope connects all three aspects of spiritual formation: what we believe, how we behave, and who we are becoming. All three are essential to our growth:



As a teaching tool, this workbook connects a “Believing” area with a “Behaving” area and a “Becoming” area. Look at the overview on pages 16–17 to see the whole plan. For example, in the third row of the overview you will notice a belief in a great and good God. That belief is connected to the habit of worship and to the quality of purity or holiness. In other words, each row of the overview is connected and integrated; each belief is tied to a behavior or habit and then to a character quality.



This Believing-Behaving-Becoming arrangement is merely a teaching tool and is not intended as a rigid religious system. Sometimes beliefs lead to behavior, while at other times behavior influences beliefs. I’m not suggesting a 1-2-3, neat, clean, foolproof, linear progression that will solve all of life’s problems. We all know that life is messy, dynamic, unpredictable, confusing, spontaneous, mystical, and so on. But I still think there are

important connections to be made using this teaching arrangement. For instance, what we believe about Satan and sin will affect how we fight spiritual battles and how we understand and experience true freedom. While recognizing this somewhat artificial organization, I hope the Believing-Behaving-Becoming setup encourages you to allow the Lord to work in your entire life rather than just one area of your life.

The overview includes a total of thirty-six boxes of beliefs, behaviors, and character qualities.

Why these particular topics? Were they chosen simply because they are the most popular topics when it comes to spiritual growth? Are we looking at a random bunch of beliefs and habits and virtues all loosely connected? Actually, the topics were not chosen at random or through some popularity contest. These topics reflect God's story and in our context today we definitely need to stay anchored to God's story.

Experiencing God's Story of Life and Hope

Since the late 1960s we have been experiencing a cultural shift from modernism to postmodernism. (See Jimmy Long's excellent book *Emerging Hope* for more on this cultural change and how Christians can respond.) The modern era emphasized the individual, objective truth, words, and some kind of grand story to explain the meaning of life. By contrast, the postmodern era emphasizes community, subjective "truth," images, and the absence of any grand story to explain life. Christians can embrace some aspects of postmodernism and probably need to resist others. For instance, we can certainly celebrate the greater emphasis on community. But if we give up on a big story that explains reality, then we might as well give up on our faith.

The Christian faith is founded upon God's grand story revealed in the Bible. Postmodernism does away with all big stories that claim to explain reality, opting instead for local or small-group stories. What is true for me and my friends is what is true—period! But Christians can't abandon God's grand story or there is nothing left to believe and all hope is lost. Instead, we need to understand God's story even more and see how it connects to life and how it does us good. We would say that what is real and true is not just what my local group prefers, but what God has revealed. God's story explains life.

Spiritual formation needs to be connected to God's story or it can be manipulated to mean almost anything. In other words, we need a biblical story approach to spiritual formation. But we obviously need to do more than just "believe" the story. We need to act upon the story and allow God's story to shape our whole being. Perhaps now the title makes more sense. We need to experience (beliefs, habits, character qualities) God's story (as revealed in the Bible) of life and hope (a story that does what is best for us).

How is this story approach built into this workbook? It's simple. If you look again at the overview you will notice that the "Believing" column is actually God's grand story.

BELIEVING	(meaning in the story)
Authority of the Bible	A trustworthy script for the story
Triune God who is Great and Good	Begins with God who is community
Humanity	God wants to share his community
Satan and Sin	Evil powers try to ruin the plan
Jesus Christ	The hero of the story
Salvation	The rescue begins
Holy Spirit	God with us until the end
The Church	The community being rescued
Transformation	God works among his children
Mission	God works through his children
The End	The end—we are with God in the new creation

The very first item in the column is the *Bible* or the script of the story. The story proper begins with *God*—who he is and what he has done. God creates *human beings* to relate to him in perfect community, but *Satan and sin* spoil God's good creation and interfere with his story. God must now attempt a rescue to save his creation. Because of his great love for us, God sent his Son *Jesus Christ* to rescue us from Satan and sin and restore us to a relationship with him. *Salvation* means that God has come to rescue us from the dark side. Through Christ, God offers us a way home. As we respond to his gracious offer by trusting him, we are adopted by God into his family. He puts his very own *Spirit* within us and incorporates us into his community. God desires to use this *new community* (called *church*) to provide us with identity, stability, and wholeness. As we eat, pray, worship, and listen to God's Word together, we begin to feel safe. We open up, revealing our joys and struggles. We discover that we can really be known and loved at the same time, rather than just one or the other. Perhaps for the first time we experience life and hope through Christ and his community. We are *transformed* into the kind of person we were created to be. Naturally, we want other people to experience this life and hope. We have a *mission*—to live out God's story in biblical community so that others can join God's community. Since it is a story of hope, God's story *ends* happily (read Rev. 21:1–4).

To summarize, the “Believing” column is God’s grand story. Spiritual formation is anchored in God’s story. As we move through the story (from top to bottom), each Belief area extends out (from left to right) to a Behaving and a Becoming area. In this way our whole life is being shaped by the Lord and the entire process is firmly secured to God’s story.

Workbook Format

Most of the studies in the workbook consist of the following elements:

- An introduction that explores the biblical context
- “A Closer Look,” to dig deeper into a particular text
- “Crossing the Bridge,” to move from the ancient world to our world
- “So What?” to apply what we have discovered in the context of biblical community
- “The Power of Words,” to help you understand the meaning of words in the text
- Insightful quotes that inspire reflection and action
- Application questions for your small group
- Cross-references for more Bible exploration
- A “For Deeper Study” recommended reading list

In terms of assumptions, characteristics, and benefits, *Experiencing God’s Story of Life and Hope* is:

- theologically grounded in the evangelical Christian tradition
- spiritually integrated by connecting believing, behaving, and becoming
- academically reliable through the use of solid biblical scholarship
- pedagogically interactive without being insulting (i.e., you won’t find rhetorical fill-in-the-blank questions)
- creatively designed to be used by individuals within the context of biblical community
- practically and realistically arranged into 12 three-part chapters

Another subtle characteristic worth mentioning is that the workbook teaches by example how to do responsible Bible study. The move from context to observation to theological principle to application follows the journey model detailed in *Grasping God’s Word* by Scott Duvall and Daniel Hays. Thirty-six weeks of handling the Scriptures responsibly will have a positive impact on students of the Bible.

May the Lord bless you richly as you allow him to conform you to the image of Jesus Christ. I pray that *Experiencing God’s Story of Life and Hope* will serve you well on your journey.

Overview

BELIEVING	BEHAVING	BECOMING
<p>Authority of the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16–17)</p> <p>The belief that the Bible is God’s inspired Word given to us to help us mature in our faith.</p>	<p>Studying the Bible (2 Tim. 2:15)</p> <p>The habit of reading, interpreting, and applying the Bible as the primary means of listening to God.</p>	<p>Truth (Eph. 4:20–25)</p> <p>The quality of living and speaking truthfully in a world of lies and deception.</p>
<p>Triune God (Gal. 4:4–6)</p> <p>The belief that the Bible teaches the triune (three-in-one) nature of God.</p>	<p>Fellowshipping (Acts 2:42–47)</p> <p>The habit of living in authentic relationship with and dependence upon other followers of Jesus.</p>	<p>Love (1 John 4:7–8)</p> <p>The quality of choosing to do what God says is best for another person.</p>
<p>Great and Good God (Matt. 6:9)</p> <p>The belief that God is both great and powerful as well as good and loving.</p>	<p>Worshipping (Psalm 100)</p> <p>The habit of responding to God in praise, gratitude, and obedience for who he is and what he has done.</p>	<p>Purity (1 Peter 1:13–16)</p> <p>The quality of living a holy life in public and private that pleases and honors God.</p>
<p>Humanity (Gen. 1:26–28)</p> <p>The belief that human beings are uniquely created in the image of God.</p>	<p>Seeking the Kingdom (Matt. 6:33)</p> <p>The habit of acknowledging that God is our Creator and that we are creatures intended to seek him and his purposes.</p>	<p>Rest (Matt. 11:28–30)</p> <p>The quality of living with a deep awareness of and contentment with God’s purpose for our lives.</p>
<p>Satan and Sin (Gen. 3:1–7)</p> <p>The belief that Satan is the leader of the opposition against God and his people, and that all human beings have a willful opposition to God’s claim on their lives (sin).</p>	<p>Waging Spiritual War (Matt. 4:1–11)</p> <p>The habit of knowing and using appropriate strategies for fighting against the Devil, the flesh, and the world.</p>	<p>Freedom (Rom. 8:1–4)</p> <p>The quality of experiencing freedom from Satan’s power and sin’s domination and freedom for new life with God.</p>
<p>Jesus Christ (John 1:1–3, 14, 18)</p> <p>The belief that Jesus Christ is God the Son, fully divine and fully human.</p>	<p>Following (Mark 8:34–38)</p> <p>The habit of daily choosing to follow Jesus Christ as Lord in every area of life.</p>	<p>New Identity in Christ (John 21:15–23)</p> <p>The quality of single-minded allegiance to Jesus Christ above every other competing loyalty.</p>

BELIEVING	BEHAVING	BECOMING
<p>Salvation (Eph. 2:8–10)</p> <p>The belief that salvation is by grace (source), through faith (means), for good works (result).</p>	<p>Trusting and Acting (Phil. 2:12–13)</p> <p>The habit of allowing God to work in our lives so that our faith results in action (not salvation by works, but true faith that works).</p>	<p>Assurance (Rom. 8:15–16)</p> <p>The quality of knowing (with a healthy confidence) that we belong to God.</p>
<p>Holy Spirit (John 14:16–17)</p> <p>The belief that God the Spirit continues Jesus’ earthly ministry, especially that of transforming believers and empowering them to fulfill their mission.</p>	<p>Walking by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 25)</p> <p>The habit of living in dependence upon the Holy Spirit as the source of strength to resist temptation and imitate Jesus Christ.</p>	<p>Fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–24)</p> <p>The quality of bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Christlike character qualities) in one’s life.</p>
<p>The Church (1 Peter 2:4–10)</p> <p>The belief that God’s people are joined together in Christ into a new community, the church.</p>	<p>Serving (Mark 10:35–45)</p> <p>The habit of being a servant to other members of this new community.</p>	<p>Humility (Luke 18:9–14)</p> <p>The quality of a servant’s attitude grounded in the recognition of our status before God and our relationship to others.</p>
<p>Transformation (Rom. 12:1–2)</p> <p>The belief that we are not to be conformed to this world, but we are to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ.</p>	<p>Praying (Matt. 6:9–13)</p> <p>The habit of continual communion with God that fosters our relationship and allows for genuine transformation in our lives.</p>	<p>Peace (Phil. 4:6–7)</p> <p>The quality of calmness and well being (vs. worry and inner turmoil) that comes as a result of our communion with God.</p>
<p>Mission (Matt. 28:18–20)</p> <p>The belief that Jesus commissioned his church to make disciples of all nations.</p>	<p>Engaging the World (Acts 1:7–8)</p> <p>The habit of engaging the world for the purpose of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.</p>	<p>Compassion (Luke 10:30–37)</p> <p>The quality of extending love and compassion to people in need.</p>
<p>The End (1 Thess. 4:13–18)</p> <p>The belief that Jesus Christ will return to judge evil, restore his creation, and live forever in intimate fellowship with his people.</p>	<p>Persevering (Heb. 12:1–2)</p> <p>The habit of enduring and persisting in spite of the trials and difficulties we face in life.</p>	<p>Hope (Rom. 8:22–25)</p> <p>The quality of a confident expectation that in the end God will be true to his word and keep his promises.</p>

God Talk

Authority of the Bible

I've never been scuba diving, but I'm told that it's a blast. Strapping on those life tanks and exploring the water world below sounds like fun. Of course it's not all fun and games. A former Navy diver once told me that he had been in waters so deep and dark that it was almost impossible to keep from becoming disoriented and confused. What a terrifying feeling it must be—being under water, unable to see your hands in front of your face, not knowing which way is up, panic engulfing you. I immediately interrupted my friend. "So what did you do?" I knew he had survived the ordeal since he was standing there talking to me. "Feel the bubbles," he said. "When it's pitch black and you have no idea which way to go, you reach up with your hand and feel the bubbles. The bubbles always drift to the surface. When you can't trust your feelings or judgment, you can always trust the bubbles to get you back to the top."

I have no intention of ever diving that deep and getting myself into that situation, but it's nice to know that I could always "feel the bubbles" as a reality check. Life is like scuba diving in that we need a way to determine what is real and true. Sometimes in life we get disoriented and desperate. At other times, we find ourselves drifting aimlessly. God knew that we would need instructions and examples about how to live. In the sixty-six books of the Bible, we have a reality library—stories, letters, guidelines, and examples from God that tell us what is true and real. In a world that is changing faster than we can imagine, we have something stable, true, and real. The Bible is our reality book, an amazing gift from God, who loves us deeply and desires a relationship with us.

A Closer Look—2 Timothy 3:16–17

God is the divine author of the Bible, choosing to work through many human authors over a period of time to give us his message. We use the word *inspiration* to describe God's work as the divine source of the Bible. The

36 Life Essentials

BELIEVING

► Authority of the Bible

- Triune God
- Great and Good God
- Humanity
- Satan and Sin
- Jesus Christ
- Salvation
- Holy Spirit
- The Church
- Transformation
- Mission
- The End

BEHAVING

- Studying the Bible
- Fellowshipping
- Worshipping
- Seeking the Kingdom
- Waging Spiritual War
- Following
- Trusting and Acting
- Walking by the Spirit
- Serving
- Praying
- Engaging the World
- Persevering

BECOMING

- Truth
- Love
- Purity
- Rest
- Freedom
- New Identity in Christ
- Assurance
- Fruit of the Spirit
- Humility
- Peace
- Compassion
- Hope

apostle Paul speaks of the divine inspiration of Scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16–17:

SCRIPTURE NOTES

¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed [inspired] and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

What Was Jesus' View of Scripture?

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

—Matthew 5:17–18

In 2 Timothy 3:16–17 the term “Scripture” refers specifically to the Old Testament. What does it refer to in 1 Timothy 5:18? How about 2 Peter 3:16?



Let’s take a closer look at this text to get a better idea of what the Bible is and why God gave it to us.

Looking closely at a passage of Scripture is a lot like listening to another person—it takes time, concentration, and effort. The first step in listening to God’s Word is understanding the passage’s context, that is, the surrounding words, sentences, and paragraphs. Look up 2 Timothy in your Bible, and read the paragraph before and the paragraph after 3:16–17.

1. Who is writing this book, and to whom is he writing? (See 2 Tim. 1:1–2.)
2. In 3:10–13 Paul contrasts his way of life with the lifestyle of what group (see 3:1–9)?
3. What is Paul’s specific command to Timothy in 3:14? What are the two reasons why Timothy should be motivated to continue in what he has learned (see 3:14–15)?
4. In 3:16 what are the two things that “Scripture is”?

Inspired by God

Paul says that Scripture is “God-breathed.” What does this expression mean? Some versions translate the Greek word as “inspired,” but the NIV has chosen “God-breathed”—a good translation. This is much more than saying that the Bible is inspiring, like a good movie or a romantic sunset. To say that the Bible is God-breathed, or inspired, is to say that it is God’s Word. All Scripture, not just some of it, comes from the mouth of God. To read the Bible is to hear God speak, and what God speaks is completely true and reliable. What Scripture says, God says.

We are told that Scripture is both “God-breathed,” or inspired, and useful or helpful. The order is important. Scripture is profitable and beneficial to us in life and ministry *because* it comes from God.

Profitable for Us

In the last part of verse 16 we are told that Scripture is useful or profitable for four things. What are those four things, and how do they relate to each other?

So Scripture comes from God and therefore proves helpful to us. But helpful in what sense? In 3:17 we find that the purpose of Scripture is accomplished in our lives when we read it and take it to heart. What is that purpose?

Summary

Let’s say that you want to be a person of God who is “thoroughly equipped for every good work” (v. 17b). Summarize the advice given in 3:16–17 about how to become so equipped.

Jesus Believed the Bible

The first and foremost reason why Christians believe in the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture is . . . because of what Jesus Christ himself said. Since he endorsed the authority of Scripture, we are bound to conclude that his authority and Scripture’s authority either stand or fall together. . . . All the available evidence confirms that Jesus Christ assented in his mind and submitted in his life to the authority of Old Testament Scripture. Is it not inconceivable that his followers should have a lower view of it than he?

—John Stott,
Authentic Christianity, 96

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“teaching”—This word, frequently translated “doctrine,” shows up often in Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus (1 Tim. 1:10; 4:1, 6, 13, 16; 5:17; 6:1, 3; 2 Tim. 3:16; 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1, 7, 10) and refers to reliable instruction in Christian belief and conduct. Scripture plays a primary role in equipping Christians in belief and behavior.

“rebuking”—This word refers to pointing out as well as refuting erroneous beliefs and practices.

“correcting”—This is the positive side to rebuking and deals with how to set everything right once the error has been identified. Scripture helps us restore or change our beliefs and practices.

“training in righteousness”—This phrase speaks of Scripture’s role in helping us stay on the proper path through teaching and instruction in God’s ways.

In 2 Timothy 3:14–4:2 Paul refers to the Scriptures in four ways. What are they?



The Primacy of Scripture

A writer and teacher who chose and ordered his words carefully, Mr. Lewis put “Scripture, the Church, Christian friends, books, etc.” in this order by design. To him these avenues of revelation were not equal. Scripture, to Lewis, is the place where we hear God most clearly and definitively. Scripture is the litmus test of the validity of all other sources of Divine guidance. When the church, a book, or a Christian friend instructs in a way contradictory to the plenary meaning of the Bible, C. S. Lewis firmly dismissed the other voices.

—Lyle Dorsett,
Seeking the Secret Place, 52

Cross-References

Ps. 119; John 17:17; Rom. 15:4; Heb. 4:12;
2 Peter 1:20–21

For Deeper Study

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So What?

1. Some people don't respect the Bible and deny its authority altogether. What other authority or authorities do they put in place of the Scriptures?
2. Sometimes those of us who hold to the authority of the Bible struggle to live out that belief in a consistent way. Would your friends and family say that your life demonstrates your belief in the authority of Scripture? What causes us to struggle to allow God's Word to have its rightful place of authority in our lives?
3. What is the best advice you have ever received about how to connect more consistently with God's Word?
4. What can you do this week to be more faithful to listening to God through his Word?

Handle with Care

Studying the Bible

If we really believe in the authority of the Bible, we will want to read it and study it on a regular basis. Some Christians, however, don't study the Word because they don't know how. They think the Bible is just for professionals or they feel intimidated or embarrassed by what they don't know. What you will learn in Behaving 1 will help you gain confidence in your ability to understand what God is saying to you through his Word. The experience of learning how to study the Scriptures will cultivate in you a firsthand faith, resulting in greater joy and excitement about following Jesus.

Studying the Bible is like taking a journey. Every time you open your Bible and read a passage, you are reading about people who lived and events that happened a long time ago. Yet because neither God's character nor human nature change, God's Word remains timeless and forever relevant. Don't worry, we don't bear the burden of having to make the Bible relevant; it is already relevant. We do, however, need to discover and explore how it relates to our lives. We need a reliable way to understand God's Word as it was intended. That's where the image of a journey proves helpful. (The journey image is taken from Scott Duvall and Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word*.) The "journey of the Bible" includes four steps:

1. *The meaning for the Biblical audience.* What did the passage mean to the biblical audience, to the people who first heard the words that we are now reading?
2. *The river of differences.* What are the differences and similarities between the biblical audience and us?

36 Life Essentials

BELIEVING

Authority of the Bible
Triune God
Great and Good God
Humanity
Satan and Sin
Jesus Christ
Salvation
Holy Spirit
The Church
Transformation
Mission
The End

BEHAVING

► Studying the Bible

Fellowshipping
Worshipping
Seeking the Kingdom
Waging Spiritual War
Following
Trusting and Acting
Walking by the Spirit
Serving
Praying
Engaging the World
Persevering

BECOMING

Truth
Love
Purity
Rest
Freedom
New Identity in Christ
Assurance
Fruit of the Spirit
Humility
Peace
Compassion
Hope

In your opinion, what are the top five reasons why people do not study the Bible?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Knowing Firsthand

The ultimate benefit of firsthand Bible study is that you will fall in love with the Author. You see, it's hard to fall in love by proxy. Sermons, books, commentaries, and so on—those can be wonderful resources to spiritual growth. But they are all secondhand. If you want to know God directly, you need to encounter His Word directly.

—Howard Hendricks and
William Hendricks,
Living By the Book, 33

3. *The bridge of theological principles.* What are the timeless theological principles in the text that connect with both the biblical audience and with us?
4. *Contemporary application.* How can we apply that meaning to our lives today?

We begin our journey in the ancient world because that is where God first spoke his Word. If we ignore the ancient meaning, we will be tempted to make the Bible say what we want it to say, rather than discovering what it really says and means. We don't stay in the ancient world, since that wouldn't do us any good. Instead we cross into our world using a bridge built upon timeless, theological principles. Only then can we apply the meaning of the text to our lives. Let's look at each phase of the journey using 2 Timothy 2:15 as our example text. Open your Bible to 2 Timothy 2, and begin your journey.

1. The Meaning for the Biblical Audience

To grasp what the text meant to the biblical audience, you first need to understand the context. Read the verses before your passage as well as the verses that follow. What do you see in the surrounding context that helps you understand what Paul meant in verse 15?

We also need to find out about the historical situation that caused Paul to write to Timothy in the first place. A good study Bible (e.g., *The NIV Study Bible*) will tell you about the historical context of a book. Look in your study Bible at the beginning of both 1 and 2 Timothy and read about the author, setting, purpose, reasons for writing, and things like these. Is there anything in this information that helps you understand what Paul meant in 2:15?

After you get a feel for the context, look carefully at the passage itself. Circle important words, underline commands, bracket figures of speech, identify contrasts and comparisons, notice how significant nouns are described, be aware of the tone of the passage, and so on. Mark up the passage below with your observations. Don't worry about what it all means at this point, just look carefully at what it says.

Do your best to present yourself to God
 as one approved, a workman
 who does not need to be ashamed
 and who correctly handles the word of truth.

Can you summarize what Paul meant when he wrote 2 Timothy 2:15?

2. The River of Differences

Sometimes the river separating us from the biblical audience is narrow and shallow (e.g., James 1:19: “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry”). At other times, however, the river is wide and deep (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:4: “Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head”). How does our situation differ from the circumstances Paul and Timothy faced?

How is our situation similar to theirs?

3. The Bridge of Theological Principles

We cross the bridge from the ancient world to our world by identifying theological truths that God intended to communicate through Paul to Timothy and the Ephesian church, and ultimately to us. This is the most challenging part of Bible study but also the most crucial for “handling the Word correctly.” Write out a present-tense statement or principle that captures the heart of 2:15 by completing the following statement:

What are the main traits of the false teaching that Timothy is fighting in Ephesus (see 2 Tim. 2:16–3:9)?



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“correctly handles”—A metaphor that literally means “to cut straight.” The background of the metaphor is unclear. It could refer to a stone mason making a straight cut, or to a farmer cutting a straight furrow, or to a person walking in a straight line. In any case, Paul is telling Timothy to handle the Christian message accurately, unlike the false teachers.

Had Jesus Been Listening to Moses' Sermons?

When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he answered every temptation with Scripture—"it is written" (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). All three times he quotes from Deuteronomy 6–8. This section of Deuteronomy contains Moses' sermons to Israel just before they crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Jesus had just been baptized in the same river and was about to begin his public ministry. Jesus, the obedient Son, came to do what the disobedient children of Israel failed to do. He was probably reflecting on Moses' sermons during the time when the Devil attacked him. How do we know? We don't know for sure, but you can tell a lot about people by their response under pressure. Jesus' response was to quote God's Word in context and win the battle over evil. His belief in the authority of God's Word sustained his godly behavior.

Grasping God's Word

We cannot apply the Bible without knowing what it means, but we can know the Bible without applying it. We can investigate context, analyze words, and even memorize chapters, but unless we act on what we know, we do not truly *grasp* that Word. . . . God certainly wants us to know biblical principles and valid applications, but his ultimate goal in communicating with us is to transform our thinking and acting so that we conform to the image of his Son, Jesus Christ. When we come to the point of truly grasping God's Word, we will find God's Word grasping us.

—Scott Duvall and Daniel Hays,
Grasping God's Word, 213–14

All Christians, but especially those church leaders responsible for the ministry of the Word, are supposed to . . .

This is your *theological principle*. Ask yourself the following questions to test the validity of the principle you have identified.

- Does your statement reflect what the Bible actually says and means?
- Is your statement relevant to both the ancient situation and the contemporary situation? A theological principle will be timeless and apply equally to both audiences.
- Is your statement consistent with the teaching of the rest of the Bible?

4. Contemporary Application

When you cross the bridge of theological principles, you are identifying the meaning of the text. We do not determine the meaning; we discover the meaning and then respond to that meaning. We refer to this response as "application." While the meaning of a passage never changes and is the same for all Christians, the application of that meaning may be different for every Christian. As you think about the context and meaning of 2 Timothy 2:15, what specific application is the Holy Spirit leading you to make part of your life? In other words, what particular changes does God want to make in your life related to how you handle the Bible?

So What?

1. Do you see a difference between reading the Bible and studying the Bible? Explain.

36 Life Essentials

BELIEVING

- Authority of the Bible
- Triune God
- Great and Good God
- Humanity
- Satan and Sin
- Jesus Christ
- Salvation
- Holy Spirit
- The Church
- Transformation
- Mission
- The End

BEHAVING

- Studying the Bible
- Fellowshipping
- Worshipping
- Seeking the Kingdom
- Waging Spiritual War
- Following
- Trusting and Acting
- Walking by the Spirit
- Serving
- Praying
- Engaging the World
- Persevering

BECOMING

► Truth

- Love
- Purity
- Rest
- Freedom
- New Identity in Christ
- Assurance
- Fruit of the Spirit
- Humility
- Peace
- Compassion
- Hope

The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth

Truth

As what we believe and how we behave come together, they shape who we become. One quality that results from believing and studying the Bible is the quality of a truthful life. In our world truth is often considered an inconvenient liability rather than a godly asset, yet we know that God himself is the author of truth. If we want a meaningful relationship with the Lord, commitment to truth is not an option but a life essential. In fact, Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). God is truth, and the closer we walk with him, the more truthful our lives will be. In *Becoming 1* we will explore how we can live and speak truthfully in an age of exaggeration, spin, lies, and deceit.

We do indeed live in an age of spin. Bill Press, former host of CNN’s *Crossfire*, attempts a definition:

There is no good definition of spin. It’s easier to say what it’s not than what it is: It’s not the truth. Neither is it a lie. Spin lies somewhere in between: almost telling the truth, but not quite; bending the truth to make things look as good—or as bad—as possible; painting things in the best possible—or worst possible—light. (*Spin This*, xiv)

The first-century Roman world also had its share of spin doctors. The apostle Paul and other Christian teachers and missionaries had to distinguish themselves from popular preachers called Sophists who traveled around using their slick image and polished speaking ability to impress the crowds and pad their bank accounts. These swindlers would gladly twist the truth for personal profit. Paul does not hesitate to tell the churches that he

and his coworkers would have nothing to do with such underhanded methods of spreading the gospel.

Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God. . . . Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. (2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2)

For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. . . . You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. (1 Thess. 2:3, 5–6)

Clearly, truth twisting has always been a temptation for people living in a world where sin abounds. How, then, are Christians to live truthfully in a culture where falsehood is the norm?

A Closer Look—Ephesians 4:20–25

We see in Ephesians 4:20–25 a summary of Paul's advice on speaking and living truthfully.

²⁰You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. ²¹Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. ²²You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. ²⁵Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

Wearing a Mask?

When people fail to live the truth they speak, we call them hypocrites. A hypocrite says one thing and does another. Our word *hypocrite* comes from the ancient Greek word *hypokritēs*. Classically, it denoted the actor in a drama who played a role on stage, often wearing a mask as part of a costume. In time *hypokritēs* came to have the negative connotation we associate with the English word *hypocrite*.

—Mark Roberts,
Dare to Be True, 143

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The Old Testament has a lot to say about truth, often connecting it closely with faithfulness—a quality that fosters trust and makes relationships thrive. What do the following texts from Psalms teach us about truth?

• 15:1–2

• 40:11

• 43:3

• 51:6

• 86:11, 15

• 119:160

• 138:2

• 145:18

THE POWER OF WORDS

“falsehood”—The Greek word *pseudos* refers to a false statement or a lie, spoken with the intent to mislead or deceive. While God is the author of truth, Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44). Those who follow Jesus Christ are committed to truth (Rev. 14:5; 21:27), whereas those who are opposed to Christ prefer lies and deception (Rom. 1:25; 1 Tim. 4:1–2; Rev. 22:15).



1. To understand a text and apply its meaning to our lives, we always start with context. Read Ephesians 4:14–32 and note anything that helps you understand what Paul meant by the commands to “put off falsehood and speak truthfully” found in verse 25.
2. The word *however* in 4:20 indicates a contrast. What stands in contrast to the way the Ephesians came to know Christ? (What you win them with, you win them to!)
3. What is the basis or foundation of the command in 4:25 (see 4:21–24)? How does our identity in Christ relate to our experience of living truthfully?
4. Identify the negative command, the positive command, and the reason for the commands that Paul presents in 4:25. How do the two commands relate? Can you obey one without obeying the other?

Crossing the Bridge

Write a present-tense statement that captures the theological heart of Ephesians 4:25. Often in New Testament letters, the “river” separating us from the biblical audience is neither wide nor deep, so your statement may sound a lot like the verse.

As a way of validating the theological principle that you have just written, you can ask the following questions:

- Does your statement reflect what the text actually says and means?
- Is your statement relevant to both the ancient situation and the contemporary situation? A theological principle will be timeless and apply equally to both audiences.
- Is your statement consistent with the teaching of the rest of the Bible?

So What?

1. Have you ever been hurt by a lie (yours or someone else's)? Explain.
2. Why is lying a relationship killer?
3. Think about a recent situation where you were not completely honest. What pressured or motivated you to lie or spin the truth?
4. What helps you to recognize and to reject falsehood and deception?

Jesus said, "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matt. 5:37). What did he mean?



Growing Up

Then [as the church moves toward maturity] we will no longer be 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 men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

—Ephesians 4:14–15

With reference to Eph. 4:15, which is the greater temptation for you, speaking (in love) something besides the truth or speaking the truth without love?



Cross-References

John 8:32; 14:6; 15:26; 16:13; 17:17; 2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2; Eph. 4:14–15; 6:14; Col. 3:9–10; 1 Thess. 2:3, 5–6; 1 John 2:21; 3:19–20; 5:20; 3 John 4

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5. Is there a person in your life who exemplifies truthful living? What would it take for you to be more like that person?

6. What specific steps can you take now to live more truthfully (e.g., Scripture memory, accountability partner, examining your motives)?

7. How can your Christian community promote truthfulness?