

2 Timothy 3:16-17 NKJV

Read the Bible – Why?

This morning I'm gonna tell y'all a story. (pause) This morning I am going to tell y'all a story about a Bible. (pause) It is the story of this Bible, and its importance to me. Because I have an October birthday I turned 17 during my junior year of high school. That year something very very important happened. My family won the lottery. It wasn't the PowerBall, or the MegaMillions lottery. It was the lottery for slots to go backpacking at Philmont Scout ranch in Cimarron, New Mexico. This was a HUGE deal. My Dad, my little brother and I were going to join five others on this trip and it was the trip of a life time. We were to back pack 72 miles across under some of the prettiest sky God ever made. However, to make that trip we had to get in shape. The three of us started working out, and jogging around the neighborhood. One night while I was out for a run I saw this strange guy in the neighborhood going door to door. When I got home he was talking to my mother. He was selling Bibles. My mother bought 2 – one for me and one for my brother Ryan. The Bibles came in the mail while we were gone on our trip. They had our names in gold foil on the front cover. This is that Bible.

Many years later, after I had graduated from college and had moved to North Carolina I was miserable. I had that good job everyone wants with the health insurance, the 401K and the two weeks paid vacation and I was miserable. I had been asking myself, "Why am I so miserable?" Finally, one night I flipped the question and asked, "When was I happy?" I was happiest when I was living for something greater than myself as a Boy Scout. I was in my mid-twenties. I was too old to be a Boy Scout. It had to be something else. The only thing I could think of that was big enough was God. So I prayed to God, "God if you will allow me to sit on the stairs leading up to the gates of heaven with a stack of legal pads and a box of ball point pens I will serve you for all of the rest of my days." (pause) Yea. I know now that's not how salvation works, but that was the best way I knew how to put it then. And that was the moment everything changed for me. Before this moment I had a hard time reading the Bible. My eyes would slip off the page like eggs in one of those commercials for a non-stick pan. However, after that moment there was this kind of ravenous hunger for all things to do with the Bible. Within a year I found myself in a Disciple I Bible study and this is the Bible I read.

This New King James Bible is pretty beat up now. The cover is worn. The pages are creased and written on – some of the pages are stained. I lived with this Bible through Disciple I and Disciple II. I facilitated Disciple I and Disciple III with this Bible. I wrote and taught Bible studies out of this Bible. You could even say I have a relationship with this Bible. It is almost as if this Bible knows me as well as I know it.

How did one book hold my attention for so long and through so many studies? This book, the Bible, is not just a book of rules. This Bible is not just a handbook for life like the Boy Scout handbook. This book, the Bible, is a love letter from God to God's people and bears the response of God's people to God's love. The Bible is filled with different kinds of literature. There is history, and poetry, and prophecy, and law, and letters, and wisdom, and apocalyptic literature. There are stories about people who have struggled to be faithful to God and have failed. There are stories about those who have not cared at all if they were faithful to God who then suffered. There are stories of those who knew the joys of walking with God all the days of their lives.

The Old Testament is broken into three sections, the Torah, or law, makes up the first five books of the Bible. Can y'all name the first five books of the Bible? (pause) Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Ketuvim, or Writings are made up of Joshua; 1 & 2 Kings; 1 & 2 Chronicles; Ruth; Esther; Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Psalms and Proverbs. Then there is the Naviim; the Prophets. You may have heard there are major prophets, and minor prophets, but the only difference between the two is some are more long winded than others. The importance of their message is the same – repent! Return to God! God loves us, and will hold us accountable.

In the New Testament there are the Gospel narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Each was written to a different audience with a different purpose in mind, and all of them are important for helping us to understand who Jesus Christ is, and what God wants for our lives. The book of Acts tells the history of how the Gospel spread out of Jerusalem and across the Roman world. Much of the rest of the New Testament is made up of letters. These letters are written from the Apostles to the various churches across Asia Minor, and to Rome. These letters were written to address theological, spiritual and practical challenges in the early church. And then there is apocalyptic literature in the Revelation of John which is meant to give hope to those facing persecution, injustice and death.

If y'all were to ask me why I read the Bible it is because there is so much there. There is so much to explore. The Bible is like a deep well of riches just waiting to be mined. We will never know how deep the mine goes if we are too afraid, too lazy, and too distracted to open the Bible for ourselves. For me it is like being fed. Let's try this. How many of y'all had breakfast this morning? **(pause, and raise my hand)** How many of y'all are gonna have lunch today? **(pause, and raise my hand)** How many of y'all will probably have a snack this afternoon? How many of y'all are gonna have dinner this evening? **(pause, and raise my hand)** Anybody gonna have a snack before bed? **(pause, and raise my hand)** If we eat at all of those times we're eating something like four or five times a day. When it comes to Scripture, most people only hear it when the preacher reads it on Sunday morning or when they are scared, or in a time of need. My sisters and brothers, how many of y'all are starving for God's Word? **(pause)** Do y'all even know when you're hungry? I read the Bible because I am still hungry for more of God's Word.

I read the Bible to be reminded of God's call on my life. **(pause)** To enter again into God's presence. To listen to God speaking through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Here's the thing about reading the Bible. The Bible is not a book of information for the sake of making us smarter. The Bible is not just a text book for learning stuff about God, Jesus Christ, or God's people. The Bible is not science the way we think of science today. Modern science is focused on identifying "What something is," and the processes of, "how does that thing work and how did it come to be?" The Bible is God's story for God's people. The Bible tells us, "Who made everything, and Why."

God is still speaking through Scripture. God still speaks to me through Scripture. If prayer is our talking to God, the reading of God's Word is God speaking back to us. It's amazing how I can read something in Scripture I read 5 or 10 years ago – sometimes two or three days ago, and I understand it differently. That is the power of God speaking through Scripture. We shouldn't read Scripture to gain knowledge about an ancient time. We should always read Scripture to listen to God, and to hear what God has to say to us today.

Brothers and sisters, I should warn you. When we pick up God's word and begin reading it with a curious mind and an open heart God will challenge us. God will break our hearts for our neighbors, for the physically and emotionally wounded. God will cause us to challenge our opinions about what we think is most important in our lives. God will challenge who we call our neighbor, how we look at money, and question in ourselves what it means to be a good person. The muscle that is our conscience will begin to grow as the Holy Spirit works through and with God's Word to bring about change in us so we might be a force for change in our homes, in our schools and work places, in our town and all across the world.

This journey through and with Scripture can be scary and daunting. It's a lot to read. It's a lot to understand. I know I have questioned if I can do it. Hear this good news. John Wesley once said, "The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion." My sisters and brothers we were never meant to do this alone. If you feel God moving you to read Scripture, or if you are just a little more curious than usual let me encourage you to pick up your Bible today. If you don't have one Walmart sells them. If you don't know which one to get, pick up the one you will read. Go into Walmart. Pull three different versions off the shelf. Turn them all to the same passage. Read them one after another. Whichever one is easiest for you to read, or makes the most sense to you is the one you should go with. Don't worry about translation. God will work that stuff out in time. What is most important is that you read the Bible for yourself. It is important that you read the Bible with a friend. It is important that you be willing to share what you are learning. No one expects you to have it all figured out. Do not be afraid. Be excited to share what you are learning and what God is doing in your life. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen.