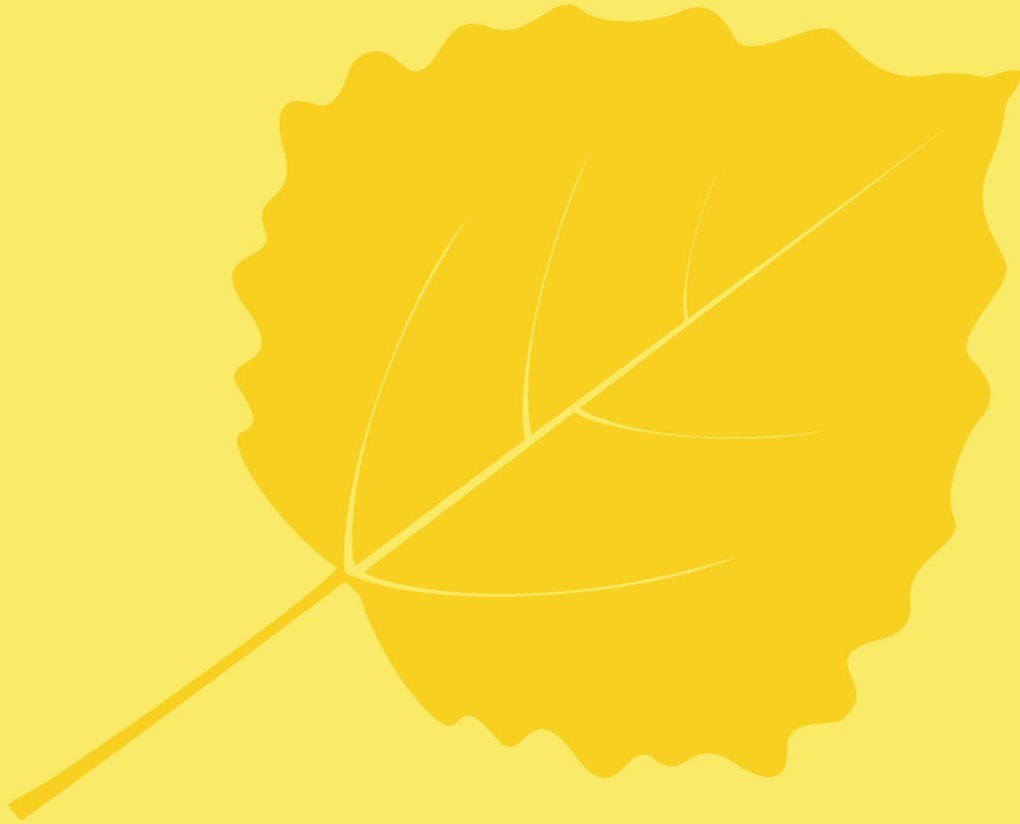


# 1stTHINGS1st



**W**hat's really in first place in our lives? We say God is first, but our schedules, commitments and finances tell another story. Setting God in the highest place is not just right, it's good! When God is first, everything else falls into place. It's time to let God be God. Let's study our priorities until God is at the head of our lives and order everything around Him through worship, obedience, service, prayer and generosity. God in first place—let's put **First Things First**.

## First Things First - First Authority • 2 Timothy 3:12-17 • John Goodale • September 10, 2017

One Saturday night in 1899, reporters from four Denver newspapers converged on Union Station in Denver. Each had been assigned an article by their respective newspapers for the Sunday edition the next day. Each came to Union Station hoping to see a celebrity they could write about. And each departed disappointed, with no person of news on the train.

The reporters retired to a nearby saloon to discuss what to do. Eventually, they decided to make up a story. It had to be outrageous enough, and far enough away that it couldn't be questioned. So the next day, each newspaper published the story that engineers had been seen traveling through Denver on their way to China--and that they were planning to bid on a job to dismantle the Great Wall! It was a lie—but it carried enough authority that other newspapers around the country eventually picked it up, as did other papers around the world!

That's not the end of the larger story, though. Forty years later, a magazine article claimed that this newspaper story was responsible for the Boxer rebellion in China in 1900. This rebellion had led to the deaths of thousands of Christians and missionaries; the magazine article asserted that the false story had enraged Chinese activists, and led to their actions.

There's no mention in Chinese history that the Chinese were ever aware of this fake story, and the rebellion seems to have been triggered by a German invasion of the country. Yet linkage between this story and the Boxer rebellion was repeated for decades by authors and even pastors as an example of the dangerous consequences of careless words! Both the newspaper story and magazine article sounded authoritative—but there was no substance to either.

In contrast, Jesus said that those who hear His words and do them are like a wise person who built their house upon rock. His words and the rest of the Bible provide a solid bedrock of authority that we can base our lives upon. It's a trustworthy source that guides us in how to live, and that shapes what we believe. As we talk this fall about putting first things first, we want to look today at making the Bible the first authority in our lives.

Unfortunately, this isn't always the case from Monday through Saturday, when we're not in worship. A recent survey found that more than half who regularly attend church read the Bible once a week or less—more than half! The number one reason given for not reading the Bible is that people didn't prioritize it. In other words, they didn't put first things first.

There are reasons why this may be the case. The Bible contains so much, we can be unsure where to read, so we don't. Or the wording and customs, written centuries

ago, are unfamiliar to us today and can be daunting to read. Presbyterian pastor and author Frederick Buechner described our challenge with the following words:

*"The Bible not only looks awfully dull, but some of it is. The prophets are wildly repetitious and almost never know when to stop. There are all the begats. There are passages that even Moses must have nodded over. There are the lists of kings, dietary laws, tribes, and tribal territories. There is the Book of Leviticus and most of the Book of Numbers.*

*"In short, one way to describe the Bible, written by many different men over a period of three thousand years and more, would be to say that it is a disorderly collection of sixty-odd books which are often tedious, barbaric, obscure, and teem with contradictions and inconsistencies. Let him who tries to start out at Genesis and work his way conscientiously to Revelation beware."*

Yes, this book can be hard to read. But we have to ask the question: If the Bible isn't our primary voice each week that guides our actions and what we believe . . . what is? Is it the opinions of friends we respect? Is it the norms of society we're expected to blend into? Is it the authoritative sounding voices we hear on TV, or read online? Or do we tend to rely most upon our own personal instincts of what's right and wrong, or true and false?

If we were to rank the voices of authority we listen to most each week, what would be the top two or three? That's not a rhetorical question; it's important that we understand what influences us the most, as well as assess where the Bible ranks among other sources of authority in our lives. Kent Hughes observes, *"You can never have a Christian mind without reading the Scriptures regularly because you cannot be profoundly influenced by that which you do not know."*

If the Bible isn't currently a regular source of authority throughout our week, would we consider this morning giving it a larger voice? To make it our first authority? Today's passage reminds us of two important ways the Bible provides meaning and direction for our lives.

First, **the Bible is our greatest authority for understanding our identity.** Paul tells us, *"the holy Scriptures are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ"* (2 Tim. 3:15). Our story is shaped by so much more than the work we do, the family we're part of, or how we're viewed by others. At the very core of our story is that we are so loved by our Creator, who so deeply desires to be in relationship with us, that He went to extraordinary and costly lengths, even death on the cross, to maintain this relationship. In this book, we find the ultimate story of whose we are, who we are, and how we've been saved by Christ.

Too often it seems like we approach the Bible as if it's a textbook of information we need to master—and who can get excited about that?! In reality, this book is a love letter from God. Paul tells us it's "God breathed", from Him to us. In this book God reveals to us His character, and His faithfulness to His people even when we are unfaithful. When my wife Deborah and I were dating, I still remember how I treasured her notes and letters, because they were a reminder of how I was loved. God longs for us to treasure His words to us in the same way; to make them the first authority in our lives, and for our story.

Theologian C.S. Lewis wrote that there are two kinds of reading: reading in which we use a book for our own purposes, and reading in which we receive the author's purpose. When our purpose with the Bible is getting answers to questions, we'll often find ourselves stuck in the weeds of details. But when we approach it from God's purpose, we'll find ourselves asking, "What do I learn about God?" or "What do I learn about myself?"

Earlier I offered a quote from Frederick Buechner. It was actually the first part of a larger statement; let's listen to his conclusion:

*"And yet just because it is a book about both the sublime and the unspeakable, it is a book also about life the way it really is. It is a book about people who at one and the same time can be both believing and unbelieving, innocent and guilty, crusaders and crooks, full of hope and full of despair. In other words it is a book about us."*

The Bible is the story of our salvation. More than any other authority, it shapes our understanding of who we are.

Second, **the Bible is our greatest authority for understanding how to live well.** Listen again to Paul's words, in the Bible's strongest statement about itself: *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work"* (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

The teaching and rebuking Paul refers to has to do with our mind, and what we believe. Biblical teaching informs and shapes our understanding of God, and what it means to be in relationship with Him. Rebuking exposes wrong beliefs by holding them up against the truths of scripture, revealing what is lacking. These wrong beliefs were a significant problem in Paul's day—and they still are today. Many people today believe what they do about God simply because they want to; it helps them feel good about following Him. The Bible is our first authority for all matters of faith. It's God's direct revelation of Himself, that forms our understanding of Him.

Paul's reference to correction and training has to do with the practical life. The Bible is like a mirror we hold up, helping us recognize and turn from sin in our lives that hurts us and others, and creates distance with God. It shapes our understanding of what it means to live like Jesus, and in alignment with our Creator. In the same way water gradually wears away at rock, drop by drop, God's word can soften our heart and change our life when we return to it again and again and again.

If we're honest, few of us get excited about Paul's words about being rebuked or corrected. But think about football players we may watch today on TV. They're playing at the highest level only because they were willing to be corrected by coaches along the way to be the best players they could be. If football players took that posture because playing football was so important to them, can we not do the same when it comes to our Christian walk?

We just had to buy a new car after ours broke down, and we're still trying to figure out the manufacturer's instructions! The Bible is our manufacturer's operating instructions on how to live wisely and well. Paul tells us it will thoroughly equip us for every good work. No other voice in our lives provides the same dependable authority as the Bible.

Let's look at one last statement by Paul: *"As for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of..."* (2 Tim. 3:14). Paul's encouragement to continue is far more than just "keep on doing what you're already doing." The Greek tense calls for a constant and continual habit in life. We're to immerse ourselves in this book—to become so familiar with the Bible that it shapes our convictions, which in turn will guide our steps. This will only happen when we decide to make the Bible our first authority, regularly listening to and being influenced by it.

How do we do this, when it's not always an easy book to read? When it competes with other voices that are less demanding? Let me offer three brief suggestions.

First, we need a time. Here's where we put first things first, for if reading the Bible isn't on our calendar, it won't be a priority. The most important things in our lives are scheduled and prioritized to ensure we'll do them. If we're going to be influenced by the Bible, we'll need to value it enough to set aside time; we won't get to it, otherwise. Identify a period of time that revolves around the Bible, rather than the Bible revolving around everything else.

Second, we need partners; others who will walk with us thru the inevitable challenges and questions that arise when we read the Bible. Each Sunday morning an average of 500 adults meet in classes in addition to worship, where they learn more about the Bible; others come Wednesday evening for Growing Together Wednesday.

We don't offer classes on Sunday and Wednesday, or bible studies during the week simply because that's what a church does. We do so because we all need partners on the journey of learning from the Bible. If you'd like this book to have a larger voice in your life, where can you find a place of community, or a partner or two with whom you can read the Bible?

Finally, we need a tool; something that will guide us in where to read. Trying to read the Bible from beginning to end ensures that we'll encounter speed bumps along the way, usually in the Old Testament. Selecting certain passages to read here and there can lead us in circles if we only turn to the same few passages. My own reading became consistent 25 years ago only when I found a tool that tells me each day where to read.

If you want to make the Bible more an authority in your life, consider googling "Bible reading plan" online to see if something might work for you. Or get a One Year Bible that enables you to read it in a year without doing so from cover to cover. Perhaps it would be helpful to listen to a CD of the Bible while driving. Or to read Daily Bread or other devotionals that take us to a different passage each day. Find a tool that will lead you into the Bible on a regular basis, so we can make it our first source of authority.

A missionary once gave a Bible to an African man. The man was so grateful, and so profuse in his thanks, the missionary was puzzled when they crossed paths again some months later. For the Bible looked torn and battered, and even had a number of pages missing. The missionary said to the man, "I thought you would take better care of this Bible. I assumed that you wanted it, and would treasure it."

The African man replied, "It is the finest gift I have ever received. It is such a wonderful book, I gave a page to my father, a page to my mother, and then I gave a page to everyone in my village."

May we each value the Bible so much that we, too, wear it out. As we consider where to put first things first, may it be the first and most treasured authority for our lives.

## STUDY GUIDE

### FIRST THINGS FIRST

#### First Authority

#### 2 Timothy 3:12-17

#### Start It

- Think for a moment about the different voices that speak into your life in any given week (media, friends, church community, cultural messages, etc.). If you were to identify the 2-3 voices that most authoritatively have influenced your life, what would they be? Where would you rank the Bible among the voices that you most listen to during the course of a week?

#### Study It

- Read 2 Timothy 3:14. The Greek tense for "continue" refers to a constant and continual habit in life. What has helped you maintain a constant habit of reading the Bible during your life? What factors have made this hard to do at times?
- Read 2 Timothy 3:15. When Paul points to the ability of the Bible "to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus", what does that look like practically in our lives today?
- Read 2 Timothy 3:16-17. In what ways has Scripture served as a helpful correction or rebuke for you during your lifetime—or how do you think it has potential to serve in this way moving forward?
- Similarly, share a time in your life when the Bible has been a helpful teacher for you in some way that was life-giving and/or helped you follow Christ more faithfully.

#### Pray It

*Almighty God, You've revealed Yourself to me through the Bible, and offer it as a guide to learn more about You, myself, and what it means to follow You. Give me wisdom to understand, in the midst of all other competing voices and choices for my time, how to make Your words my first authority throughout my week for how I live and what I believe. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

#### Live It

Schedule a time this week when you'll read the Bible. If you're not sure where to begin, look online for options with the words "Bible reading plan." Identify one other person with whom you can share one thing you learned, or ask a question about something you don't understand.