

First Hand Interviews

Conversations with People about Bible Study

a discussion with **Lauren Dahl Zapater**

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First Hand Truth

Equipping people to study God's Word
Rick McNally / founder, presenter



What is your motivation for taking time to study the Word of God?

I have a few motivations for studying God's Word. I do it because it helps me to see my story inside of God's Story, which gives me purpose, strength, hope, and a deeper love for God. I also do it so that I can help others also discover the truth and beauty of God's Word. For me, one of the most life-giving things is to share and explore the goodness of God together as his people.

What is "life-giving" in studying with others, for you, and in your experience?

When I discover something I enjoy, it feels like the experience isn't complete until I share it with others. For example, if I find a delicious recipe or hear a new song or read a great book, I always want others to taste, listen to, or read it too. Somehow shared experience enhances the enjoyment. I find it to be similar with regard to studying with others. As we share and build on each other's insights, one person's excitement ignites someone else and so on. It can also challenge us to see the text in a new way or articulate vague ideas that we've never really explored. This does not always

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happen with group study, but when it does there is nothing quite like that profound sense that "we have met God today."

For me personally, it is also "life-giving" because my calling and gifting is to teach the Bible. So studying it with others is one of the things that God has created me to do and it resonates with who I am. I have heard that Eric Liddell said that when he ran, he felt God's pleasure. Similarly, when I get to teach and study with others, I feel God's pleasure.

What is your greatest barrier to study?

My greatest barrier to study is the habit of instant gratification. When there are so many easy entertainment options vying for my time, it is difficult to want to do the harder work of sitting down and focusing intently on Scripture until God speaks to me. Even though I know it's worth it, I often take the easier path.

Have you found any ways out of the instant gratification trap?

It is definitely an ongoing process! But a few things have been helpful. The first is to have a non-negotiable appointment with God every day. I find that first thing in the morning is what works best for me because it reduces the chance of getting caught up in other things and either forgetting about it or running out of time. The second is to be part of a group Bible study because the need to prepare for it adds extra accountability, which helps me overcome laziness. Third (though I guess in some ways this summarizes the other two), having a

clear and definitive plan is helpful. If I vaguely hope that I'll feel like studying something this evening, it won't happen. If I decide that I want to study this particular text at a specific time for at least X amount of time, I am much more likely to do it.

Can you describe a bit of your technique for Bible Study?

I tend to use a variety of approaches depending on the passage, my goals and my mood. The main commonality is that I try to maintain an ongoing conversation with God about what I'm reading. The simplest is to read the Bible daily and broadly (I've been using the M'Cheyne plan), paying attention to anything that stands out to me. This builds a solid foundation of general biblical knowledge that is extremely helpful for more serious study. When I want to focus on a passage, I will read it through several times in English and usually once in the original language. I'll write down observations (like repetition, interesting things about the structure, connections to other passages) and questions. One of my favorite questions to ask is "why?" Why include this detail? Why did he do that? etc. Even when I can't arrive at a definite answer, trying to understand the reason behind something often results in better engagement with the text. After I have observed and questioned, I'll usually go to the online notes for the NET Bible and see if they provide any useful background information or answer questions. If possible I'll also read a commentary too. After this, I'll try to pull everything together into a summary of the main point of the passage. As a side note, I think the best study happens when people are working through the text together, not only on their own.

I love hearing your strategy. We all study a bit differently and yet in many ways the same. Is that a little bit like a child asking a parent why?

Sometimes! When I'm asking about what is happening in the text, that's often the case. But when I'm thinking about how something is written, it's more like an editor or literary critique analysing a text. Not in a fault-finding

way, of course, but more like trying to understand an author's intentions. Details are given or left out and accounts are arranged in a certain way for a reason. These editorial choices are especially clear when we have parallel texts, like Kings and Chronicles or the Gospels, but they're always there to some extent. When I ask why, it is often aimed at trying to understand the reason something is written the way it is.

If you were talking to a newer believer, what in scripture do you encourage them to study? Do you give any advice on the technique?

I really struggle with the question of where to begin because it depends so much on the individual. In general, I would advise them to begin with the overarching story of the Old Testament (Gen 1-3, Abraham, the exodus, entering the land, overview of the judges cycle, David, overview of kings, exile, return) with a special focus on the covenants and how they point to Christ; then slow down and spend a good amount of time in one of the Gospels before finishing their introduction with Romans. I think this would give them a good foundation and context for studying the Bible going forward. But if they really want a more focused study, then I would encourage them to begin with Ephesians. This short book provides a wonderfully comprehensive summary of the gospel and the Christian life.

For a new believer, I don't focus much on technique. My main advice for them is simply to read the Bible the way they would a normal book (i.e. from the beginning of a section to the end and looking for the plain meaning) rather than flipping it open to random passages looking for a "word of the day" like a sort of divine horoscope.

What is a passage you remember studying that popped out through study?

It is not a specific passage, but I gained a much greater appreciation for the book of Revelation after a group Bible study helped me understand how it all works together to encourage God's people to

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faithfully persevere. It stopped feeling like a distant, scary, confusing book when I saw its purpose.

Can you expound on that?

Sure. So, as I said, I believe that main purpose of Revelation is to encourage God's people to hold fast to our faith in the midst of a turbulent and often hostile world (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26-29; 3:5-6, 12-13, 21-22; 13:10; 14:12; 18:4; 22:10-11; etc.). There are many challenges to our faith including persecution, the lure of worldly comforts, and various disasters. Revelation addresses persecution by showing that it is an expected piece of living in a world in active rebellion against God, but that He remains in control and will punish his enemies and vindicate his people (2:10; 3:10; 6:9-11; 11:7-13; 12:17ff; etc). It shows that even though there may be temporary benefits to cooperation with the corrupt systems of the world, they will be overthrown so God's kingdom is a far better investment (13:16-17 and 14:9-12; ch. 18; etc). Finally, the many cycles of disastrous judgments are shown to be both just and under God's sovereign control. The book reminds readers that there is a spiritual reality behind the events we see unfolding in the day's newspaper. The world is at war with God, but he will win in the end. We can either hold onto hope and faith, even if we have to suffer for a little while, in order to enter into a greater future that we can possibly imagine; or we can sacrifice it all to be on the losing side.

There are still things about Revelation that I don't understand (and more that I didn't have time to say), but I find that the visions it records make a lot more sense to me when I look at how they call me to faithful living compared to trying to use them to

construct a timeline or map them to current events. Once an older Christian lady was talking to me about Revelation and expressed so much fear regarding the idea that we could be living in those times. I thought that was such a shame because I believe it's supposed to have the opposite effect. Yes, it does speak of fearful events, but in this fallen world most of these terrible things are sadly commonplace: wars, famine, earthquakes, disease, drought, corruption, persecution, etc. I don't say this to minimize the seriousness of God's judgments, but to acknowledge that Revelation speaks to the reality faced by Christians throughout history. In the midst of all the upheaval, the power and plan of God shines through and we receive assurance that our hope is still secure. Christ is coming again. All things will be set right. Our God will reign forever and ever. ■



Lauren grew up on the European mission field and, after completing her studies in theology, she returned to Europe with a passion for teaching the Bible. Together with her husband, she serves in a small international church in Stockholm, Sweden. If you would like to contact her, you are welcome to write to her at lauren.d.dahl@gmail.com

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