

HOW DO WE “DO THEOLOGY”? Do not read this as an academic question for people who have been to seminary—how *should* we do theology? Read it as an observational question about everyday people—how *do* we form our opinions and attitudes about God?

One portrayal of how we do theology is provided by breathing: inhale, process, and exhale. We inhale information, experiences, relationships, hopes, dreams, opportunities, tragedies, successes, failures, and an incredible number of mundane moments. These pieces are then processed by personal evaluations as good, bad, pleasant, unpleasant, painful, pleasurable, significant, noticed, or unnoticed. Finally, we exhale beliefs, correlations of cause and effect, life principles, optimistic or pessimistic expectations, and ideas about God (i.e., whoever or whatever we believe to be “in charge” of it all).

Consider a few examples. A kid wears stinky socks to his Little League baseball game because his mom was too busy to get the laundry done, and he hits a home run (events inhaled). Junior deems this experience to be good, pleasurable, and potentially leading to a life of fame and fortune (evaluations processed). At every game afterward, Junior wants to wear unwashed, stinky socks, lest “the baseball gods” curse him with being an ordinary little kid again (theology exhaled). Unfortunately, self-fulfilling prophecy—also known as confidence—has enough influence to frequently confirm Junior’s theology.

As Junior grows up and gets a job, he leaves superstition behind and exchanges it for purpose. Realizing that not everything he wants to do can get done, he makes a list of everything

that is being asked of him (events inhaled). Simple math tells him that all of this will not fit in a 168-hour week, so he deems these expectations unreasonable, bad, and stressful (evaluations processed). Crunching the numbers and the impact of giving attention to work, family, rest, and self, Junior creates a system that will please an abstract concept called “success” (exhale theology). For some period of time, Junior’s obedience to, and deepening understanding of, the doctrine of success results in a blessed life.

Later Junior’s life takes several turns for the worse that are no fault of his own: an illness, an economic downturn, a parent’s death, his house robbed, an unfaithful spouse, or betrayal by a friend (events inhaled). With increasing fervor, Junior searches for some way to explain why these things happened, but can find no satisfying explanation (evaluations processed). Ultimately, he abandons the cause-and-effect beliefs of stinky socks and successful priorities, surrendering to the “reality” that life is random and meaningless (exhale theology). From that point onward, Junior’s life begins to unravel as words like *good*, *worthwhile*, and *hope* lose their meaning.

As we can see, theology often goes by many names: superstition, purpose statements, priorities, meaning, hope, and explanations. And we have not even mentioned the Bible yet. The point so far is that we don’t have to be intimidated by the word *theology*, because we all do it every day. Every day we assign meaning to life on the basis of some perception of ultimate reality. The goal from this point forward is to begin “breathing theology well.”

As you prepare to get started, use the chart below to see better how you have been doing theology. A summary of Junior’s examples is included in the chart to help you get the hang of it. Start with some of the formative events of your life. These major memories usually have the largest and most identifiable impact on our core beliefs (theology).

Inhale (Events)	Process (Evaluations)	Exhale (Theology)
Stinky socks and home run	Good and profitable	Cause and effect (lucky)
Too busy	Stressful and bad	Priorities earn success
Life tragedy	No answers	Life is meaningless

FROM LIFE TO GOD

So far, our discussion has hinted at direct beliefs about the person and character of God, focusing on how to live effectively and make sense of life. This is because most of us do not think we are defining God as we live. But we do.

In this study, which will become much more devotional, we will begin to look at sixteen attributes of God and see how our functional beliefs about life impact how we live. If you did not take time to reflect on the beliefs you gleaned from formative life

events (chart above), it is worth the time to go back and do it. Until you clarify how you have thought, your ability to maintain the peace and joy of new beliefs will be significantly limited. It's as hard to fend off and alter the implications of beliefs you do not know you have as it is to punch a ghost.

As you reflect on these formative life events, the hard or negative ones will fit into one of two categories: sin or suffering. Sin encompasses those actions, beliefs, and emotions that are contrary to God's Word or character. Suffering includes the tragic and deteriorative effects of living in a fallen world, as well as the consequences of other's sin against you.

The guiding principle of this entire study is simply:

Our battle *from* and *against* sin and suffering is first and foremost a battle *toward* and *for* God.

With this said, our concept of God, resulting from the theological breathing discussed above, greatly influences how we read the Bible. If we believe that God is a cosmic cop, we read the Bible fearfully wanting to know the things for which God will "pull us over" and for which he will "let us go"—the equivalent of the "how far over the speed limit can you drive and get away with it" debate. If we believe that God is a heavenly grandfather, then we read the Bible to find out what good ideas he has and how to stay on his good side to get the extra treats of his approval.

One of these images we do not trust. The other one we do not really need. According to research into what makes counseling effective, these are two of the most important variables: Does the individual believe that he or she needs help? Does the individual trust that the counselor can and will help him or her?

With this said, if we are going to read our Bibles effectively, we must know God accurately. Each time we breathe Scripture,

just as when we breathe life, we must ask, “Is our interpretation accurate?” Chances are, we bring the same interpretive distortions to God and Scripture that we bring to life. We are continually going through the process described in Hebrews 5:14, “But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.” Good is simply a right view of God impacting life choices. Bad is the result of acting on a wrong view of God.

This is what it means to have our discernment trained to distinguish good from evil—that all of our actions, emotions, struggles, and failures should deepen our understanding of, trust in, reliance upon, and imitation of God’s character. This study is designed to assist you in identifying the connections between your current life struggles and sins and the attributes of God you need to learn, clarify, trust, enjoy, or emulate more.

The premise of the exercise is:

If, in our struggle to conquer sin and alleviate suffering, we fail to learn and treasure God more, we have missed the most important thing God is doing in the midst of these experiences.

Often people ask, “What is God trying to tell me in the midst of this?” Our particular answers to this question are usually rather speculative (depending on the accuracy of our general understanding of God’s character and life). But we can know one thing that God is doing in every circumstance: revealing more of himself. Over ninety times in Scripture, God says of his actions something like “that they may know that I am the Lord.”

When we miss this key interpretive principle of life and Scripture, we are bound to start or perpetuate some error. We may become rule-following, comfort-seeking Pharisees. We may become fearful children of an abusive, all-powerful parent. We

may become haphazard pleasure seekers looking for good ideas in a random universe.

We need to be continually alert to these questions: Who is God? What is God like? How is God relevant and active in this moment? When we are alert to them, we can, by God's grace and self-revelation, become heart-focused, God-treasuring disciples of Christ.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This study is designed to last at least four weeks. At first, it would be good to continue reading this booklet from start to finish, just as you would read an article, to get the big picture for the daily studies. On this first reading, you will not look up the Scripture references or try to answer the reflective questions.

Once you begin the devotional study, you will study one group of God's attributes per week. As you study an attribute, you will find a brief definition of it, several passages of Scripture that refer to it, and two sets of questions for self-assessment:

1. How well do I *rest* in this attribute of God? Do I take the appropriate degree of comfort and joy in this aspect of God's character?
2. How well do I *emulate* this attribute of God? As an image-bearer and ambassador of Christ, do I represent this attribute of God accurately to the world around me?

The order of these two sets of questions is intentional. First we demonstrate our belief that God is good by trusting him (the questions about rest). Then we exhibit this trust through the worship of imitation (questions about emulation). The four pieces of each day's study should create a cycle of purification for our beliefs about God and life: