



Season 7: Episode 8 | Rupen Das | Does God Really Speak Through Scripture Today?

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, the podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode.

Today's episode features Lorna Dueck interviewing Rev. Dr. Rupen Das, the President of the Canadian Bible Society. Rev. Dr. Rupen Das comes to CBS with considerable senior management experience, both in Canada and internationally. Most recently, he was seconded by the Canadian Baptist Ministries to Lebanon and Europe, where he was involved in theological education and managing humanitarian responses to refugees.

Prior to that, Dr. Das was professor and program coordinator for Humber College's International Project Management Postgraduate Program. He has held senior management positions with World Vision Canada and World Vision International. His consulting assignments have been with various non-governmental organizations, international agencies, the Canadian government, and the Canadian military.

Dr. Das is a missiologist who has researched and written on various aspects of contemporary Christian missions, especially issues that concern the global south. He is the author of several books, and he has been a visiting scholar at Harvard University, a 21st century fellow in the UK, and adjunct faculty at Eastern University in the United States. Dr. Das earned his Doctor of Ministry degree from the Acadia University in Nova Scotia and is a research professor at Tyndale University in Toronto.

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Rupen and his wife have two adult children who are also married now with their own families. So, I do really hope you enjoy and lean in and learn from this conversation between Lorna and Rupen.

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Lorna Dueck: Dr. Das, I'm really privileged to interview you today.

Rupen Das: It's my pleasure to be on this podcast.

Lorna Dueck: Well, after all you have seen in the world, I mean, like, listen to where you've all been, 11 countries.

Why settle down to the Canadian Bible Society as our director?

Rupen Das: Lorna, as you mentioned, so much of my career has had to do with meeting the physical and social needs of people on the margins. Throughout this time, I noticed that the spirituality of the poor was very unique. And as a matter of fact, there's research which shows that the poor, especially the desperately poor, are more spiritual than, say, the rest of us who are not poor.

This intrigued me, and it started me on a journey which ended up with me writing my book, *The God That the Poor Seek*. Now, in the midst of poverty and disaster, people ask existential questions. Where's God in all of this? Why is this happening to me? And for me, while the Bible does not give the answers to those questions, the Bible reveals the God of all comfort who is willing to walk with them in the midst of their crisis, be their strength, be their provider, be their sustainer, lead them, guide them.

And because I saw that among the poor, among those affected by crisis, I felt that this is something that I want to communicate, no matter which profession I was in. And so,

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when the opportunity came up to be part of the Bible Society, I wanted people to encounter this God who's real, that actually the poor know in very real terms those who know God and know Christ and have encountered Him. I wanted others to experience that too.

Lorna Dueck: So, in having your leadership here at Canadian Bible Society, this is a gift from the poorest of the poor. You saw their spiritual life was so vibrant, it needed to be taught.

Rupen Das: There's so much that one can say about what one would learn about the poor.

What I began to realize is that the poor don't approach God as Savior, Christ as Savior. They encounter Him as God, as Emmanuel, God who's with us. And I think we've forgotten that.

We focus on Christ as Savior and Lord. But the first name in the New Testament that's given to Him is that He's Emmanuel. And the poor want that, the poor seek that, and the poor experience that.

Those who know Christ. I don't want a generalization that it's all the poor. Yeah.

Lorna Dueck: And we have such a secular North American society. Those of us who have all the comforts of this world, who have not yet been affected by climate disaster, we're lackadaisical about our connection to the Lord, aren't we?

Rupen Das: We are.

Lorna Dueck: I referred to you as having an Indiana Jones-like background, but let's talk about who you actually do relate to in the Bible. Who do you most relate to, Rupen, in the Bible?

Rupen Das: This may be the strangest answer I'm going to give on this podcast. The person I most relate to is actually Job.

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Not because I've lost everything and not because I'm inflicted by boils or anything like that. As we've mentioned, much of my career has focused on the poor, the marginalized, those affected by disasters and conflict. And these are people whose lives have been devastated, and they've lost everything, just like Job's.

And yet, what I see in them is a resilience, that in the midst of suffering, is what I see in Job, where Job is able to say in Job 19: 25-27, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the end, He will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God. I myself will see Him with my own eyes. I am not another. How my heart yearns within me."

It's a remarkable statement that in the midst of suffering, He's got something that He holds on to.

And that's the kind of person I want to be. And that's why I relate to Him. And I hope that in the work I do, I'm able to communicate this hope to others, too.

Lorna Dueck: What is your personal practice in reading the Bible?

Rupen Das: When I first became a follower of Christ, as most of us, you read it devotionally, you devour the Bible, you want to know more. And it was God speaking to me almost every verse, every chapter, you know, I could relate to. It was something that meant a lot.

And then I wanted to know more. And it was not that it was an intentional decision. I found myself moving to reading the whole Bible.

So, I never did it in one year, but I would read the whole Bible, you know, chapter by chapter, you know, read it through. The last three, four years, I've done something very different. I'm in a different place in my life spiritually.

And one of the things we've been talking about in Canadian Bible Society is that the Bible, that we enable people to encounter Christ through the Bible. And I thought,

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okay, the Bible reveals who God is. So, as I've been reading the Bible slowly, I make a note.

So, what is it that about God that I'm seeing here? Who is He? How does He communicate? How does He operate? What does His universe look like? You know, how does He speak? How does He deal with people? And it's not just an intellectual exercise. It's I encounter this God. And it's begun to transform the way I pray, the way I live, the way I minister.

So, as I've been reading the Bible, it's basically to encounter God through the Scriptures.

Lorna Dueck: And who introduced you to the Bible? Where did this begin for you?

Rupen Das: The Bible has been part of our family history for a very long time. There's a very interesting story.

My great, great grandfather was a Hindu convert around about 1825. He was a weaver and lived in a little village. And one day he had gone down to the nearby town, and there were some missionaries from William Carey's team that were down there.

And they were preaching, and he was an educated man. And he stopped and he listened. And, you know, I'm not sure what went through his mind.

He finished whatever business he had to do, and he was walking on the way back to the village. And by the side of the road, he sees a scrap of paper, and he picks it up, and it's part of a tract. It's this torn piece of a tract, and it has the very verses on it that the missionaries had been preaching.

It was so astounding to him, and it was the Holy Spirit, that at that very moment, he abandons his idols and he follows Christ. I thought, you know, I am never going to make light of people who distribute Bibles or, you know, leave tracts, because you

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never know that even from a scrap, from a portion of a tract, that somebody gets converted, because that's in my family history. But it doesn't just stop there.

My grandfather in 1947, when India became independent, and the Indian Bible Society was formed. It broke away from the, not broke away, it separated from the British and Foreign Bible Society, and they set up an independent Bible Society. He was one of the first vice, he was the first vice president, Indian vice president of that.

The reason was he believed that the Bible transformed lives, and he wanted people to read it and encounter the God of the Bible. And I remember that so clearly about him. And then my aunt, she translated the Living Bible into one of the provincial languages.

And as she would be translating, whenever we would visit, she would talk about gems she was finding and learning and the issues she was struggling with. It was part of our conversations whenever we visited with her. And then finally, my father-in-law, my wife is from, is ethnically Nepali.

My father-in-law was part of the team that translated the Old Testament into Nepali. So, the Bible is part of our family history, and it was part of conversations, it was part of what people did in our families, it was respected. So that's where the origins of my love for the Scriptures comes from.

But it's not just, it doesn't just end there.

Lorna Dueck: What a wonderful full circle then to have you here leading Canada's distribution for the Canadian Bible Society and your interaction with the global connections. I want to take a detour now into your disaster management work, because I just think the context that we're talking about, we're recording this just after the Hawaiian crisis disaster, that tragic windswept fire.

You've been there; you've seen so many things. You lived in close proximity to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. And how has that experience impacted what's going on

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in the conflict, the current conflict in Ukraine, both in terms of, you know, could there be another nuclear power plant meltdown, the threat of nuclear weapons being used in this war? How are your views on that?

Rupen Das: I mean, the threat of another explosion and a nuclear plant or Chernobyl are real.

I mean, at one point, it came pretty close to something going wrong. And it's not a scenario that one can disregard; it can still happen. The nuclear disaster in Chernobyl in 1986 was the result of just sheer arrogance, incompetence and mismanagement by the authorities.

And the emergency response was no different, with just horrific consequences for the first responders and resulting in a traumatized population. We saw all this firsthand as we were trying to respond to some of the humanitarian needs. Once we could get access a few years later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, what we saw was human suffering because of the arrogance of those in power, who really could not care less.

So in 2014, when we were missionaries with the Baptists in Europe, during that time, when the Russians occupied eastern Ukraine, the Ukrainian Baptists asked if I would train their staff, some of their key staff, to provide humanitarian aid in what they call the grey zones, which was the occupied territories, plus those on the borders, which were heavily damaged. And so, I did the training and many of the people I trained later were the key to the church's response when Russia invaded in February 2022. The lesson that was driven home for me through all of this is that innocent civilians suffer and die because of the arrogance of people in power.

I mean, it was just blatant. It was blatant in 1986; it was blatant in 2014 and it's even more blatant today. So the question for me that has always haunted me, not just in Chernobyl, but in every disaster that I've been in, is what is my responsibility as a follower of Christ in situations like this?

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Lorna Dueck: And the Bible fits in situations like that, does it?

Rupen Das: It does, it does. We aren't called to sit on the sidelines; we're called to respond to human need.

Lorna Dueck: What scriptures have been most meaningful to you in the face of, you know, the tragedy of human arrogance causing suffering? And then these are almost Armageddon like scenarios. What scriptures are most meaningful in that for you?

Rupen Das: For me, the overall narrative of scripture is the Kingdom of God.

The Israelites in the Old Testament and the Jews in the New Testament look forward to it. Jesus announced it, Paul preached it. In sort of, in the midst of these Armageddon-like threats, for me, I know where history is headed and have faith in the God who's the God of history.

So, the scripture that is most meaningful for me in such times is actually Revelations 11:15, which reads, "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever."

That is where history is headed. So, I'm not traumatized by what's happening. I'm troubled, I'm upset, I'm anxious in these times, but I know where history is headed. And for me, that's where the end goal is.

And then add to that is Revelations 21:3-4, "God's dwelling places among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain."

So, I don't need to panic. I need resilience. I need endurance during this time, but I don't need to panic.

So, in times of turmoil, this is what actually keeps me grounded as to where history is going.

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Lorna Dueck: Okay, let's take another slice out of how the Bible applies to world trauma. You actually were in charge of creating a Christian response to the Syrian refugee crisis, and you had to lead churches and believers there in Syria to overcome their natural responses to a historic enemy.

You had to say, we have a commandment to obey, and that is that we love our enemy. But homes were destroyed. People had been slaughtered.

So, what scripture did you put around that framework as you had to face those people in their churches? There you were at the theological seminary in Beirut. What worked?

Rupen Das: There are two things that were critical in the Syrian response. One was that the response had to be through local churches.

That's what we aimed to do. The other Christian humanitarian agencies were doing excellent work, but were not necessarily connected with the local church. And my conviction and the conviction of my boss at the Lebanese Baptist Society was that look, the church is central in what needs to be done.

And there needs to be a witness of the local church in a crisis that was engulfing the country. And so, I looked at Acts 6. It's a church, the local church, that responds to the need. So, we set up a response where there would be no conditionality that if you come to my church, I will give you food or provide you medical aid, or none of that.

And there was no manipulation of any. So, we ensured that there were protocols to ensure that that didn't happen. But there would be a clear witness of The Gospel and of the love of God, both verbally and in action.

So that was the first part. The second part is what you mentioned, and that's the issue of forgiveness. And Matthew 5 talks about loving your enemy.

Matthew 5:43-48. Those are really difficult verses. Let me tell you a story about that.

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Initially, with the blessing of my Lebanese boss, when I set up the initial response, I got a lot of criticism from the Lebanese pastors. Basically, they said, Rupen, you're a foreigner. You don't understand what the Syrians have done to us.

We should not be helping them. It was ungracious at some points. But that changed because of one particular pastor.

I believe it was the Holy Spirit that was working in him. He comes to me one day. One of the pastors would criticize me, and he basically says, Rupen, we need to do something for the Syrians.

This was in the Beqaa Valley near the Syrian border, and there were a lot of refugees there. He went on, and we talked about what could be done. He said something which was absolutely profound.

He said, the Syrians, a cousin was killed, somebody else got blinded, they were driven from their home. He says, you have no idea what the Syrians have done to us. Then he said this.

He says, if I cannot forgive the Syrians as a pastor, I should not be a pastor. I'm not even sure I know that I could have said what he did. I mean, just what it took to reach that point where he's saying, I'm willing to forgive.

He was one of the early few pastors and Christian leaders who actually began to live that out, and it began to transform the churches. It was not so much what any of us said. It was these pastors who, through their lives, demonstrated that, look, what Matthew 5 says, love your enemies.

That's the only way to live, and that's the Christ's way to live. That's what was the turning point. Then, as you know the story, I don't know how much, just a profound impact among the Syrian majority religion community there, among the refugees.

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So many returned to Christ. So, so many. Nobody even kept track of the numbers, and we see the continuing impact of that. But it was that that you needed to forgive, and that's what had to be done.

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Lorna Dueck: And it turned people to salvation.

Rupen Das: Yeah.

Lorna Dueck: Remarkable.

I could go on with your international experience, but I do want to pivot it into the role we see you in at the Canadian Bible Society now. So, you know, whether I call it your Indiana Jones leadership style that you had to do overseas in crisis management, why is this style of leadership, what you just described in your Syrian challenge, why does it make sense to bring your leadership to that whole dimension into the work of the Canadian Bible Society at this time?

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Rupen Das: Actually, Lorna, when the board of CBS first approached me, I thought, I don't do Bible Society. Those were literally the words in my mind.

But again, a loving wife who is very godly and sensitive to the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit's work in my own heart, I began to realize that there were a number of reasons why God was bringing this opportunity to me and wanted me involved. One was I brought a global perspective. I understood what was happening globally with the church and how the center of Christianity had moved literally from the Western world to the global south of the majority world.

And I'd seen that firsthand. These were partners we had worked with, and I'd seen what was happening. So, I brought a global perspective on what was happening globally into my present role.

Secondly, there was a need to break from sort of the traditional ways of doing things that if you give a Bible to someone, they're going to read it. There's no guarantee they're going to read it. I remember one of the times when I asked for how many Bibles are being distributed, the staff gave me the numbers.

And then I asked, do you know if anybody's reading it? No, no. And I thought, so why are we distributing Bibles? And so, the issue was not just translating and publishing and distributing. The issue for me that I saw, which I brought into this, was that there was a need for an encounter with Christ.

And that encounter had to be through the Scriptures, because Scripture reveals the living God in Jesus Christ. It's not just reading the Bible; you encounter the Bible. I remember telling the staff very early on, I said, we need to talk about people encountering the Living Word through the written Word.

And then if we were to say later, and then as a team, we developed another statement. We said that what is it that we're trying to do? Not just distribute Bibles, but what is it that we want to see happen? And we came up with a statement where

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we say we enable people to hear God speak through the Bible. That's what we want to see.

And that's what I brought from my previous roles, that where I saw people encountering Christ through dreams and visions, of course, but also through The Word. I saw them engaging with Scriptures in different ways than we do in the Western world. They read Scripture differently; they engage with Scripture differently.

And so there was a need to rethink about all of this. And so, a major focus for us at CBS has been the whole issue of Bible engagement. And if I may just take a few more minutes, for us Bible engagement was not that you just read it, me and the Bible and God and Jesus, you know, we're going to read the Bible and Jesus is going to speak to me.

Yes, that's important. That's absolutely foundational. But we also read Scripture as a community. And that's important. We don't just read it individually. We read it as a community.

But we also engage with Scripture theologically. And we engage with Scripture through history. We engage Scripture morally.

So, these were important things that we needed to make sure was happening. And then part of that we also began to say is, where do people itch? Where are they hurting? And how do we engage them with Scripture so that they would encounter the God of all comfort, the God who brings healing, the God who heals trauma? How would we enable them to encounter that? And that's through Scripture. So, Scripture engagement has become a huge part of what we do.

Lorna Dueck: Well, and I think that's the role of Scripture Untangled, this podcast, is we visit every week with somebody and ask that, like, how are you engaging Scripture? And, you know, things just fit to different viewers or listeners we have in our audience. Things just fit. So that's very interesting that this idea of helping people

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hear God speak is what you bring into your leadership style of having been so very engaged with where real life worked, you know, from disaster settings, from crisis, into sometimes a very apathetic North American context.

But you did have, you did an amazing job on helping people hear God speak in the pandemic, because you saw a crisis unfolding in long-term care homes, and you pivoted into audio devices for elderly people. Just tell us a bit about that experiment on helping our long-term care homes get the Bible.

Rupen Das: Though we had audio Bibles in our warehouse and on stock, we never really saw audio Bibles as key to our strategy.

Bibles were either digital or in print in different languages, so on and so forth. I think what the pandemic did was that it caused us to look at things differently. When we became aware of the need of the elderly in the long-term care homes, we asked chaplains, and we asked others who were involved in ministries with them, we said, what is it that you need? And they said, audio Bibles.

But it wasn't just that. Some said, we also want large print Bibles. But they also talked about, at the beginning of the audio Bibles, could you record some of the hymns that they would remember when they used to go to church or when they were young? So, we produced these audio Bibles in different languages, where it would be scriptures, they would hear scripture being read, but also there would be some of the hymns that they would remember from the childhood.

My father struggled with Parkinson's for 22 years, and he finally died from complications from that. I remember that in the last few years, the one thing, when he could still communicate, the one thing he wanted was somebody to come in and read the Bible to him every day. It was the highlight of the day for him.

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He would just calm down. He would be still, a lot of his tremors would just, you know, be still, and he would just listen. He couldn't say, he couldn't speak properly, but he would just listen.

And there was just something that was a spark in him. And I remember that. And I just can't imagine what it must have been like for people in the long-term care homes to be able to hear God speak, that their Creator, their God, actually cared enough to speak to them.

And so, for that, that was a major change in our thinking on how we provide scripture. Where do people live? How do they engage with scripture? It's not just in writing. It's not just digitally, but it could be audio.

And it could be other ways that we aren't even aware of that we will continue to explore.

Lorna Dueck: That's a great illustration of helping people hear God speak. Prayerfully, we'll never have a pandemic like that.

But that's actually not what the experts are saying. But good on you guys to pivot into the handheld audio devices. Okay, there's another cultural issue you, you jumped right into on helping hear people speak, and that was caring for the wounded heart.

What, tell us what you're thinking there in mobilizing into that, that crisis area.

Rupen Das: When we did what we call a ministry rethink, we said, okay, what is it that we're going to do? We affirmed our commitment to translation. We affirmed our commitment to publishing and using emerging technology for publishing.

And we are committed to distribution, not just physical Bibles, but using the digital media to provide Bibles too. But the second thing we basically said is, yeah, we can look at the whole population and say, okay, we're going to provide Bibles to everyone, which is still, if it's possible, we would do that. Our commitment is that

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anybody who wants a Bible should be able to get one from Bible Society, whether they can pay for it or not.

And that's why we do our fundraising. Our business model is very different than some of the other Bible Societies, but they only sell Bibles. We raise funds so that we'd be able to provide Bibles to anyone who would want one, whether they can afford one or not.

So as part of that, we began to say, okay, while we talk about everybody, there are certain, again, this comes from my experience globally and working in disaster relief, there are some segments of the population that are more open to spiritual things than other segments of population, like I saw with the poor. And what we realized that those who are in crisis, those who are in challenging circumstances are more open to spiritual things than those who are not. And experience and research shows us that.

I mean, there's academic research that even points towards that. And so we began to look at what groups of people would they be. So, for example, there are prisoners, there are addicts, there are people who've been traumatized.

And the American Bible Society had developed this program called *Bible-Based Trauma Healing*, which we brought into Canada and adapted it to the Canadian context and revised quite a bit of it and called it *Healing of Wounded Hearts*. And what that does, it's not just therapy with some verses that are tacked on. It again goes back to encountering Christ.

It's a program that looks at the best in therapy, but at the same time leads them to the God who's the healer. And so, there's a process they go through where there is things like catharsis, they're able to share and things like that. But they also encounter the living Christ who's the Healer.

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And so that was one of the programs that were surprised by the demand for it. When our staff mentioned it to me, I thought, Canada? No, I can see among the refugees, wherever else in the world, among people trafficked and so on and so forth, Canada. We were surprised as to the demand in Canada, not among just those people who've been traumatized, but even churches were asking for it.

And actually, the demand is more than we can actually handle. And that says something about whether it was the pandemic or there was something that was hidden within society, we don't know, before the pandemic. But it's gotten a lot of demand where people are saying, OK, we want this program because we want to experience that inner healing.

And it's not just a psychological healing, but it's an encounter through Christ.

Lorna Dueck: So, it's a Bible-based inner healing program.

Rupen Das: It's a Bible-based inner healing.

Yeah. It's not just scriptures that sort of make you feel good. It's the scriptures that lead you to Christ, who's the Healer.

Lorna Dueck: We're almost out of time, but I do want to ask about your Indigenous work with Canada's First Nations. What are you encountering with our First Nations people and the Bible?

Rupen Das: We're committed to providing scriptures to all the First Nations tribes right across Canada. You may be aware that we did the first Bible Society, not because Canadian Bible Society didn't exist.

Bible Society did the first translation of the Bible into an Indigenous language in 1804, into the Gospel of John into Mohawk.

Lorna Dueck: Can I just add, we are recording this very close to where Tyendinaga went. He lived here. He lived on my Brant Street, which is very familiar with that 1804.

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And I've been to the little chapel. And this is through and through Canadian, where he went in Wilberforce, encouraged him when he was arguing with the Queen for the crown settlements that were getting trampled on here.

Yeah, that's a great story. Okay, I digress. But what's happening today?

Rupen Das: So, we continue to work with tribes and languages that want the Bible.

Not all the tribes have the complete Bible. So, most of them have portions of the Bible or the New Testament. We're working towards making sure that every tribe has the complete scriptures.

Lorna Dueck: In Canada, our Canadian tribes.

Rupen Das: In Canada.

Lorna Dueck: Wow.

Rupen Das: When I first joined, I thought, okay, we need to raise money to do translation overseas.

And then I realized there's a lot of translation work that needs to happen here, too. And the Indigenous is only part of that. But part of that, I remember talking to a senator in Ottawa, and I was telling her what we do.

And she made a comment, which took me by surprise. She said, do you realize that by translating the Bible into Indigenous languages, you're giving them back their language and their culture? And I thought, that's what we're doing. We're affirming their language, their identity, their culture by giving it back, by giving them the Scriptures in their language.

Lorna Dueck: There are so many items on your to-do list and on your day timer that we could keep discussing, but we are just about out of time. Rupen, what's your hope for this podcast that we've finally been able to get you to be a guest on? And we've

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got such a great lineup of stellar guests on Scripture Untangled. But what's your hope for the audience that listens to this podcast?

Rupen Das: The objective right from the beginning, and it's still my desire, is that people would hear the podcast and realize that while there is one way to interpret the Bible, but there are different ways of reading it.

And each person reads the Bible in a way that makes sense to them, and they encounter the God of the Bible. Each person we've interviewed, I love the stories they tell about how they've encountered God through Scripture, and what Scripture means to them, and how God speaks to them. So, I just hope that that would be an encouragement to anybody who hears that they'd want to get into Scripture and hear God speak to them too.

Lorna Dueck: Dr. Rupen Das, thank you very much for sharing with us your global background, your Indiana Jones adventures, and most of all, your great heart for the work of the Canadian Bible Society, where you serve as president. Thank you.

Rupen Das: Thank you.