



from the East Mercia Methodist Circuit

Session 2.5: READING THE BIBLE

INTRODUCTION: A BOOK OF MANY BOOKS

The Bible is the world's best-selling and most influential book. For centuries it has formed the basis of Christian faith and worship.

The word 'Bible' literally means '*the books*'.

The Bible in the protestant tradition contains 66 separate books under one cover (other Christian traditions may have extra books known as an *apocrypha*). The Bible is typically referred to as 'the Word of God', expressing the unity and continuity of the books within it. The books are related to each other by their telling of the God of Israel, the God of Jesus, and by the belief that through this ancient collection of stories, history, poems, letters and commands, God speaks.

But what does it mean that God speaks to us through these words? And how reliable is it? Or, how do people of Christian faith read and understand the Bible, both in worship and in their personal lives?

To start to address these questions, we might say that there are things of *fact* we can know about the Bible and its history, and things of *faith* about how we interpret and understand it in our different Christian traditions – which can bring a deeper truth, impacting our lives.

You can read **A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BIBLE** which comes with this issue. (See Appendix.)

You might have many questions or doubts about the Bible, or you might feel uncomfortable discussing it in a way that even calls it into question. If you do, you're not alone. It is a huge topic, it takes a lifetime of study to master, and it's safe to say that no one person has ever fully understood it. The beauty of it, though, is that thanks to God's Holy Spirit, every believer can have something to offer and can receive something from God as we read it together.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION (before you arrive)

Group leaders:

We have prepared some **Bible bookmarks**, which can be given out at the session. Participants might like to take theirs home, and colour them in while thinking about on the words on them. Colouring pencils can be provided if needed.

You might also like to have ready two or three different Bibles for people to look at in this session.

For all participants - preparing ourselves at home:

What is your favourite passage of the Bible? And why? You might like to think of one to take with you to share with the group.

What questions do you have about the Bible?

How often do you read the Bible at home? Have you ever studied it or asked questions about it?

Do you trust the Bible? To what extent do you think it is 'true'? And why? What do you think is the 'point' of the Bible?

STARTING THE SESSION: FINDING OUR ROOTS!

It might be best, in your group, to split into twos and threes for this opening part of in the group:

If you have brought a favourite Bible-passage with you, or know the reference, share these together in the group.

How would you sum-up what the Bible means to you?

What questions have you brought with you about the reading the Bible?

A PRAYER

Loving God,

You speak to us in many ways:
Through the mystery of scripture,
through the wonder of creation,
through our fellowship with one another,
and by the power of your Spirit;
All these things pointing us to Jesus your Son.

May you bless us and speak to us in this time together.
Uplift us and encourage us,
Deepen our understanding,
Strengthen our faith,
and may be enriched by learning from one another.

In the name of Christ, who is the Word made flesh.
Amen.

READING THE SCRIPTURES

When Paul was writing his letters, the Bible didn't exist as we know it! But still, there were sacred or holy scriptures, in the form of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) – especially the books of the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms – which Jesus often referred to.

But how do the Scriptures work? How do they speak to us? Why are some writings considered holy and others not?

The Bible was formed over a long process of many years: It contains beloved writings, with special meaning to a community of faith. It is that community which gives the scriptures their authority. As Paul was writing his letters, he didn't know they would very soon be accepted within the accepted Christian collection (known as the 'canon') of the New Testament.

So what is the point of the Bible? What is it there for?

In his second letter to Timothy, his friend and apprentice, Paul wrote some words that many consider to be 'the Bible talking about itself'. What does this passage say to us today?

2 Timothy 3: 10-17 (New International Version - UK)

*¹⁰ You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹ persecutions, sufferings – what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹² In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³ while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known **the Holy Scriptures**, which are able to make*

*you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ **All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.***

DIGGING DEEPER

In this passage of scripture, what does the Bible say about itself?

(And, we might add, what does it NOT say about itself?)

What does it mean for something to be God-breathed? Some translations use the word 'inspired'. Both imply the Holy Spirit (the breath of God) is involved.

*The Bible does not exist for itself but to be a help to God's people – 'to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ' (verse 15). *How does the Bible help and equip you in your life, or as you follow Jesus?**

Who do we turn to or rely upon for help in understanding the Bible and how we apply it to our lives?

How important is the careful study of scripture?

Who do our preachers and teachers follow in their understanding of scripture?

Do we ever stop to think about the different perspectives we are not hearing? What voices are perhaps absent from ancient scripture and need to be heard today?

*We often call the Bible '**the Word of God**' – and in certain passages actual words from God are referred to as such. But in the Gospel of John, we read of another 'Word of God' – 'the Word made flesh':*

John, chapter 1: 1-14 (New International Version - UK)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.² He was with God in the beginning.³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

For John, the true Word of God is Jesus Christ. For Paul too, Christ is 'the image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1:15) – Jesus is God's ultimate self-revelation.

One way of thinking of the role of the Bible is like that of John the Baptist mentioned in this passage: it exists as a witness to tell us about the light and love of God, revealed most fully in Jesus Christ.

The Bible might be '*a lamp to our feet and a light on our path*' (Psalm 119: verse 105) but it is not the full light of God; for that we have to look to Jesus. If we think of it in this way, the Bible is more a signpost than the destination. But it is surely the best signpost we have.

When has the Bible felt like 'the Word of God' speaking directly to you? And when has it been pointing you to something more?

How does the Bible help us to know Jesus and deepen our relationship with God?

What help do you need to make the Bible more relatable to you?

Can anyone in the group give any advice on a useful pattern of Bible reading – where to start, how often, and how to best deepen your understanding in an accessible way?

Holy Scripture has always been read most wisely and best in community – not as isolated individuals. *Would you feel confident bringing your questions to this group, or sharing how God is speaking to you?*

PRAYING TOGETHER

- Thank God for the session you've shared together;
- Pray for any who are in need of healing or comfort at the moment;
- Pray for a greater enthusiasm to read and digest God's word in the Bible, and for a growing understanding;
- Pray for our growing relationships with God, and for our church;
- Pray for those who are suffering in our world or community;
- Pray that we will be good witnesses, pointing others to Jesus;

- *Say the Lord's Prayer together:*

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.**

SUGGESTED SONGS TO LISTEN TO (or your own choice)

(Please note: you don't have to like them all! But we offer them for reflection and a time of prayer.)

Available on YouTube using the links below:



Speak, O Lord, sung by Stuart Townend (written by S. Townend & Keith Getty)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XQD8JV_7ho

Psalm 91 Song, by Esther Mui

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67wC6-kWWS0>

The Gospel, by Ryan Stephenson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTdFEZjhjiko>

NEXT TIME: Session 2.6: HOLY COMMUNION

Good Soil: Material written and produced by Andrew Murphy & Melissa Wheeler
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Session 2.5 Appendix:

**A VERY BRIEF HISTORY
OF THE BIBLE**

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BIBLE

What we call ***the Old Testament*** – the Hebrew Scriptures – began to be collected together and used in Jewish worship hundreds of years before Christ. By the time of Jesus, they had also been translated from Hebrew to Greek – for a wider audience – and were grouped together as ‘the Law’, ‘the Prophets’, ‘Wisdom Literature’ and other categories, but with no ‘official’ list at that stage. It takes many years for writings to be considered as holy scripture by religious authorities. Many of the Old Testament scriptures were only written down after the people of Israel went into exile (600 years BC), but they had been passed down orally from generation to generation for many centuries before. The actual authors are largely unknown, but the books often bear the names of certain individuals – often recording their teachings or prophecies (e.g. *Samuel, Isaiah*). At the centre of the Bible, the *Psalms* form the basis of Jewish worship, from the Temple of Solomon to the synagogues of today.

The Hebrew Scriptures start at the very beginning (*Genesis* – the word means ‘beginning’ or ‘origin’) and move quickly through the history of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) until the people of Israel end up in Egypt. 400 years later, the books of *Exodus* to *Deuteronomy* tell of the pivotal events of the rescue of the Hebrew people from slavery, and their journey towards the Promised Land.

The writings that follow, from *Joshua* to *2 Kings*, tell of many hundreds of years of history from the violent entry into the Promised Land, through the regional governments of the Judges, to the introduction of the kings of Israel, from Saul to David to Solomon and his descendants, with the ministry of a few prophets like Samuel, Elijah and Elisha. *1 and 2 Chronicles* retell the history of Israel from a different perspective, and many lists of names!

The reign of the kings ends badly, with many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem being taken into exile, and the Temple destroyed. *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* deal with the return from exile and the starting of the rebuilding project. There are also four major prophets, *Isaiah* to

Daniel, and 12 minor prophets, from *Hosea* to *Malachi*. These deal mainly with the periods immediately before, during and after the exile.

There are books which tell stories of important women, which don't really fit into the usual categories: they are *Ruth* and *Esther*. Then there are a few books collectively known as the Wisdom literature *Psalms*, *Proverbs*, *Job*, *Song of Songs*, etc.

The Old Testament is not one whole chronological story, but a collection of holy and precious books about God's relationship with the people of Israel.

The 27 books of ***the New Testament*** were written and collected together in a shorter space of time – as Christianity was expanding around the Roman world. They were written in Greek, by 8 or 9 different authors. The earliest were some of the letters of Paul – because these were actual letters sent in 'real time' to actual churches in different parts of the empire (e.g. *Romans*, *Galatians*). They were then copied and sent on to other churches, because they were considered useful for Christian teaching and instruction – believed to contain some timeless truths and important information about following Jesus and life in the church. Other letters were written by (or named after) other apostles of Jesus, (such as *James*, *Peter*, *John*) but none were as prolific as Paul. Paul's letters are grouped together according to their size, not in chronological order.

The four Gospels were written some years after the events of Jesus they portray. They were carefully put together by four authors (whom we know as *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke* and *John*) who – either through knowing Jesus or some of the people in the stories – each wrote a unique account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus based on the oral accounts. It is widely agreed that *Mark* was the earliest gospel written, and *John* was the latest, but all of them were written within about 40-60 years of the actual events. This might be similar to someone today writing a book about something that happened in the 1970s, by researching and interviewing the people involved. (If we think of it like that, there's good reason to suppose such a book would be accurate. Although if four different people wrote about the

same period, there would also be considerable differences, but not necessarily wrong!).

Luke also wrote a sequel: *The Acts of the Apostles*, telling of some of the key events in the life of the early Church and the ministry of Paul, leading to Paul's arrest in Rome.

Revelation ends the New Testament, and it has always been a controversial and hard-to-understand book. Don't worry if you struggle with it!

These scriptures were copied and copied and copied and sent to the emerging churches in different parts of the known world. What is astounding, when we look at the oldest known manuscripts, is just how closely the manuscripts correspond to each other (with only the occasional tiny differences) giving good evidence that the copies we have are as close as possible to the original writings.

Christians consider the New Testament to be a continuation of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) because Jesus expressed faith in them, and knew the scriptures off-by-heart. The God and Father of Jesus is the God of the Old Testament, although Christians believe Jesus reveals God in a new and profound way. The term 'new testament' reflects the New Covenant (new relationship, new agreement) with God that Jesus brought about on the cross and opens up to the whole world.

Something close to the list of books of the Bible as we know it was agreed by church leaders in the 4th and 5th Centuries AD. For many of the centuries that followed, most European Christians only read the Bible in Latin. People like John Wycliffe (who died in Lutterworth in 1384) were instrumental in translating it into English. Later centuries have seen an explosion of translations into every language of the world. There are currently over 60 different English translations, each offering a unique interpretation or style.

Understanding the Bible can be the work of a lifetime, but Christians believe God can use it to speak to us in a moment. It has never grown old, and never stopped being the most influential book in the world.