



SMALL GROUP INTRODUCTION

To the Leader

Today, we begin to *Explore God's Story* by reading key passages of scripture every day for the next three months. Here are our goals for the study:

- Improve our knowledge and understanding by regular, systematic engagement with scripture
- Develop an understanding of the overall “story” of God’s engagement with the world
- Develop a habit of regular Bible reading

On the first day of the study, your objective is to give an orientation to the Bible and its history and get people talking about their own experiences with scripture. We want people to reflect on how they approach scripture, and get them excited about learning and understanding more.

Overview

The following information is provided as a basic orientation to reading the Bible. Feel free to add to it and use it in any way that is helpful for your group. Also, feel free to make copies of these pages for members of your group!

We say that the Bible is vital to our faith and life, but what exactly is the Bible? Here are four ways to view it:

1) A Library | The Bible is a collection of 66 books, 39 in the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) and 27 in the New Testament. These books were written over a 1,000-year period in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic (the language Jesus spoke), and Greek.

The books are of different lengths and different literary styles. In the Hebrew Bible we find legends, histories, liturgies for community worship, songs, proverbs, sermons, even a poetic drama (Job). In the New Testament are Gospels, a history, many letters, and an apocalypse (Revelation). Yet through it all the Bible is the story of the one God, who stands in a covenant relationship with the people of God.

2) Sacred Scripture | In early times and over many generations, the 66 books were thoughtfully used by faithful people. In the process their merits were weighed, and the community of believers finally gave them special authority. Tested by faith, proven by experience, these books have become sacred; they’ve become our rule for faith and practice.

In Israel, the Book of Deuteronomy was adopted about 621 B.C. The Torah, or Law (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible), assumed authority around 400 B.C.; the Prophets about 200 B.C.; and the Writings about 100 B.C. After a struggle the Christians determined that the Hebrew Bible was Scripture for them as well. The New Testament as we know it was formed and adopted by church councils between A.D. 200 and A.D. 400.

3) God's Word | We say that God speaks to us through the Bible, that it's God's Word. This authority derives from three sources:

- We hold that the writers of the Bible were inspired, that they were filled with God's Spirit as they wrote the truth to the best of their knowledge.
- We hold that God was at work in the process of canonization, during which only the most faithful and useful books were adopted as Scripture.
- We hold that the Holy Spirit works today in our thoughtful study of the Scriptures, especially as we study them together, seeking to relate the old words to life's present realities.

The Bible's authority is, therefore, nothing magical. For example, we do not open the text at random to discover God's will. The authority of Scripture derives from the movement of God's Spirit in times past and in our reading of it today.

4) A guide to faith and life | We United Methodists put the Bible to work. In congregational worship we read from the Bible. Through preaching, we interpret its message for our lives. It forms the background of most of our hymns and liturgy. It's the foundation of our church school curriculum. Many of us use it in our individual devotional lives, praying through its implications day by day. However, we admit that there's still vast "biblical illiteracy" in our denomination. We need to help one another open the Bible and use it.

Perhaps the Bible is best put to use when we seriously answer these four questions about a given text:

- 1) What did this passage mean to its original hearers?
- 2) What part does it play in the Bible's total witness?
- 3) What does God seem to be saying to my life, my community, my world, through this passage?
- 4) What changes should I consider making as a result of my study?

— From *United Methodist Member's Handbook*, Revised by George Koehler (Discipleship Resources, 2006), pp. 80-81. Used by permission

Discussion Questions

Use any or all of the following questions, depending how much time you have:

- What are your earliest memories of the Bible?
- How was the Bible used in your family and/or your church when you were growing up?
- What are some unhelpful ways that scripture is used? (*Examples: "prooftexting," or using a couple of Bible verses to make a point, or using scripture to keep certain people out of the church*)
- What are some helpful ways to engage with scripture? (*Examples: writing a Bible verse on a note card and taping it to the bathroom mirror or your car dashboard*)
- What are the metaphors you have heard to describe the Bible? (*Examples: A roadmap for living, A love letter from God, Life's instruction manual, The Greatest Story Ever Told*)
How helpful are these metaphors for you?
- What, if anything, holds you back from reading the Bible on a regular basis? During this study, how can you overcome those barriers?

Goal-Setting

As a church, we have set out three goals for *Explore God's Story*, but we want you to set your own goals! Take some time during your first group session to individually write down a goal or two for this study. Here are some examples:

- To complete the daily readings
- To attend worship each week in order to understand the readings better
- To attend Sunday School/Small group each week so that I stay engaged with my reading
- To keep a journal of my thoughts and questions while I read
- To understand what the Old Testament is about, or how the Old Testament and New Testament are related.
- To be able to state in a few sentences what the Bible is about.
- To develop a sustainable habit of reading the Bible every day (or five days per week, etc.)

Encourage your group members to write their goals down and keep them in a place where they will see it—in their Bible, at their desk or bedside, etc.

Closing Prayer

God of Scripture, we thank you for revealing yourself to us through the words of the Bible. As we begin this season of study, let your spirit work through our reading of these passages. Give us grace to be faithful in our reading, to ask honest questions, to persevere through our failures, and to support one another. By your Word, show us who you are and what you are doing in our lives and in the world, and call us again to bring your Good news to the world. We pray all of this in the name of Jesus, Your Word who became flesh. Amen.

Additional Resource

De-Mystifying the Bible (at Least a Little Bit)

by Diana L. Hynson

The Bible—the Holy Scriptures—is a book of books about God, what we have experienced of God over many centuries, what we have recorded about God’s activities and interactions with Israel and the ancient world.

To those who are unacquainted with the Scriptures, there may be a certain mystique about what the Bible is, what it says, and what it means. Even those of us with a seminary education and/or who have been thoroughly immersed in the Scriptures can’t agree on everything! So, whether you are a novice or expert at the Bible, if it seems mysterious to you, there is good reason. At the same time, God longs to be known, and the Bible is one of the means by which God is revealed to us.

Here are a few pointers to help take the plunge into the Bible.

First, and most important—don’t be afraid to read it and try to figure it out on your own. If scholars haven’t come to consensus for hundreds of years, there’s no fault to you if something seems strange or unclear. Remember that we are 2000 years away from the historical Jesus and much, much farther from the Old Testament events. Someone from the 40th century picking up a 2008 whodunit might need some help understanding the idioms, 21st century stuff (what’s a gun?), and history, at the least. So, use a good study Bible with notes and cross-references to help understand customs, terms, history, and context. Since the Bible is one of God’s many ways to speak directly to you, also try to leave your mind and heart open to what that word might be. Then check it out with others you trust.

The Bible is a book of books, written over time. There are many understandings of who wrote the Bible, and there are numerous contributors. Suffice to say here that much of the Old Testament, at least, was shared as oral history before being written and collected. When it was collected in writing, it was copied and tweaked (with and without copyist mistakes) over and over again. The texts of what we know as the Old Testament were centuries old before they became "official," over time, around the end of the first century A.D. (though that is also by no means certain).

The events in the Old Testament span several millennia; the New Testament, about two centuries. Keep in mind that the biblical text tends to compress time, as if events happened more quickly or contemporaneously than they did. Remember the sweep of time as you read. If we read one of the Gospels straight through, it could seem as if everything happened over the course of a few days or weeks, rather than years.

The Bible books are not in chronological or historical order (which is sometimes highly inconvenient!). Everything in the Old Testament happened before the New Testament, and the first five books of the Old Testament are roughly in some chronological order, but not the prophets, for example. All of the Gospels were written after the letters of Paul, and Paul’s letters are in order of length, not date. What this means is that you need to do a bit of historical homework by reading the introduction to the biblical book in a good study Bible to help get oriented to the time, cultural location, and so on.

The chapter and line verses were not original to the texts, but added to aid in our reading and organization. Scripture references note the book, then the chapter, then the verse or verses, such as John 3:16—the Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 16. Bibles include a table of contents, and it’s there to be used. Some books, such as Philemon, are only one chapter, so that reference would be to book and verse, as in Philemon 10.

Some books have the same name. That I, II, or III before the name of a book means something. There are two letters to the Corinthians, for example, and they are not the same. Another example -- there are three short letters ascribed to John that are each different from the Gospel of John.

There is a multitude of translations and paraphrases of the Bible, and they are not all equally good. You might want to have more than one "flavor" to help with understanding. The New Revised Standard Version and the New International Version are the two biblical translations used in the highly acclaimed The New Interpreters Bible commentary series. Those Bibles were translated from the original texts of the ancient Scriptures from (mainly) Hebrew and Greek. The Message, for example, is a paraphrase that started with the English translation and reworded it into colorful and colloquial, English-based phraseology and idioms. This does not carry the same weight or accuracy of an actual translation, though the different twist of phrase can bring some insight.

Any Bible in English (or Spanish or French or something other than the original languages) **is at least one step away from the original biblical text.** It is subject to the nuances of the language into which it is translated, and that language itself changes over time. Compare, for example, the King James Bible (ca 1611), which was actually a revision of earlier Bibles and the New Revised Standard Version (1989).

The Bible means what it means, but not necessarily just exactly what it says. Virtually any specific text is interpreted somehow. While this statement can open a huge debate on the doctrine of Scripture and the interpretation of Scripture, we can probably agree that Scripture should be studied. When it says something happened in 40 days or 40 years, for example, that may really mean a generation or a general passage of time.

There are some teachings, laws, practices, and portrayals of God that seem troubling and difficult to believe. Some are more benign, like the law against eating pork (Leviticus 11:3-8) or shellfish (11:9-12) and against wearing a garment made of different kinds of fabric (19:19), and Christians typically ignore them. Others are much more difficult. Some seem excessively bloodthirsty (1 Samuel 15:1-3 or Psalm 137:7-9, for example) or contradictory (see for example Matthew 10:34 and John 16:32-33). How do we reconcile all this?

First, we return to the issues of culture and history. We are thousands of years and miles removed from the events, culture, history, land, and way of life. We have a different set of civil laws that govern life like it is now, though they are certainly based on biblical ethics. (It's still not nice to steal or kill!) Biblical laws and precepts, especially those very specific laws in the Old Testament, relate to life like it was then. When we sort through those that we might take with a grain of salt and those that are still universal, we take the entire Bible into account. As a whole, the Bible portrays a God and Savior of love and grace, of justice and accountability. Any specific text is viewed and interpreted according to the best that scholarship (and God's speaking) can tell us about it as well as its place in the whole. What is the message "underneath" the text?

Second, depend on the wisdom of the community. First John 4:1-6 speaks of "testing the spirits" in order to discern the true from the false. Christian faith is nothing if not communal. The Bible is a book for the community first, not just for any individual. It tells us how to live together as well as what our roles and responsibilities are as members of the community of God.

Third, weigh the text against your best biblical/theological understanding of love, grace, accountability, and justice. This may be another way to ask, "What would Jesus do or understand?" As United Methodists, we consider another set of filters, which we refer to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. We consider Scripture to be primary and also recognize that we understand and filter our doctrine of Scripture (as a whole) and certain texts (in particular) through our traditions, experiences, and reasoning. Scriptural interpretation is formed and informed by those three filters and those three filters are informed and formed by Scripture. To understand the pieces, we must also look at the whole.

So, in short form, keep these questions in mind:

- What do I think this Scripture passage means?
- What do I know of the history, culture, and context of this passage and time period?
- How is God/ Jesus / the Holy Spirit presented in this passage and is it consistent with the broad range of what we know and have experienced?
- How does it square with a biblical/theological understanding of love, grace, accountability, and justice?
- What might God be saying to the community and also to me through the Bible?
- How does the community confirm (or not) what I think is true about it?