

A Brief Introduction to The Bible: What It Is and What It Isn't

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Introduction and Table of Contents

The Bible is, by all measures, the most printed, popular, and influential book of all time. Across time, many have found in its pages a wellspring of hope and life, while others have found a source of condemnation. The Bible has the power like no other written work to unify people around common beliefs, and yet, arguments over the contents of the Bible have also led to numerous painful divisions among God's people.

In these four sessions, we invite you to take a step back and consider some basic questions about the Bible. Just what kind of book are we talking about here? What is it, and what is it not? Why is it that the Bible can be the focal point both of powerful unity as well as bitter division?

The goal here is actually quite simple – to think. We invite you to marvel with us at the great gift and treasure the Holy Scriptures are and to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit that just might have something to reveal to us that is refreshing and life-giving. Come, let us humbly approach these sacred pages, willing to be shaped by them as have so many of the saints who have gone before us.

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*** Biblical quotes in the sessions are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.*

About the Authors

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Scripture Studies from the South Carolina Synod

During the South Carolina Synod Assembly in 2023, a Resolution on *Living into the Unity of the Body of Christ* was presented and adopted. The hope of this resolution was to encourage our congregations to unite in the study of Scripture and renew their love for the sacred texts by taking a deeper look together at even the challenging passages that can be difficult to understand in our current contexts. We recognize that the Scriptures were originally written in Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic and that the collection of books was initially intended for people who lived several thousand years ago, but we also know that the Scriptures are God's living Word for us today. So, how can we best study Scripture and what can they mean for our growth in faith and life?

A group of leaders in the South Carolina Synod were gathered to serve as the Synod Bible Team to collaborate on ways we could fulfill the hope of the Resolution. Knowing that Bible Study is best done together and not alone, this Bible Team has worked together over the past year to create materials that can be used with small groups in any congregation. Our hope is that these studies will be a blessing to all who use them.

These Studies are being shared in two sections. Section One will be sent out in May 2024 to allow leaders to prepare for group studies that may be used beginning August 2024 through January 2025. Section Two will be shared in the Fall of 2024 to allow leaders to prepare for group studies that may be used beginning February through July 2025. In an effort to make this user friendly we did not date any of the courses. You may use them in whatever order you wish, and you may claim the flexibility to use the material in a timeline that suits the needs in your context. Each Study also includes questions and/or activities that can be used to supplement the study when offered to Youth.

The South Carolina Synod Bible Team includes: Josh Kestner, Josh Knutson, Shelley Allen, Steven Gallego, Kevin Ogilvie, Lisa Isenhower, Bobby Morris, Joanna Gragg, Libby Bedenbaugh, Arden Hallman, Heather Apel, Deborah Poole, Wayne Kannaday, Ginny Aebischer.

Section One Studies:

Introduction to What that Bible is and What the Bible is not

Themes in the Gospel according to Luke

What Child is This? How the Old Testament Prepares us for the Coming of God's Messiah

Jesus is born: Matthew and Luke's Birth Stories

Reading Revelation: Finding Good News in the Scariest Book of the Bible

It has been said, "Jesus didn't even mention many of the issues that divide us, but Jesus did have something important to say about unity." (see John 17)

Blessings in your Study of Scripture,

+*Bishop Ginny Aebischer*

Session 1: The Word of God

Theme:

God's word is found in the pages of the Bible, as delivered to God's people by our spiritual ancestors, but it is not constrained to just the Bible. The faithful, the great cloud of witness of which we are a part, participate and contribute to God's story to this day.

Prayer:

Lifegiving God, by your very word our world was formed and by your very word we yearn to live. Open our hearts and minds to hear new things and contemplate challenging ideas as we seek to better live as followers of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Focus Text:

Genesis 1:1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶ And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." ⁷ So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸ God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹ And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹ Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. ¹² The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴ And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. ¹⁶ God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸ to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰ And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." ²¹ So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and

every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” ²³ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴ And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” ²⁹ God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

^{2:1} Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ² And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. (Gen. 1:1-2:4a)

Word of God, Word of Life:

If we want to have a faithful discussion about the Word of God, the best place we can start is at the beginning of all things, the genesis of creation. Genesis 1:1-2:4a is probably a very familiar passage to us, especially since we read it in worship at least once a year. Over the course of a week, God carefully and meticulously speaks creation into being, breathing life into all things. Yet, despite the familiarity of the passage, there's one omission that might give us pause: If humans were not created until the sixth day (and systems of writing not created until much later), how do we have such an accurate record of what happened?

If you have ever asked yourself that question, you are not alone. Centuries of the faithful have wondered the same thing, enough so that whole academic disciplines have been

created just to unearth the secrets of the Bible. Scholars have focused on everything from studying the Hebrew and Greek the text was originally recorded in to trying to reconstruct the history of Israel with the help of modern archaeological practices. Unfortunately, this scholarly scrutiny can make us uneasy as Christians. After all, if we take seriously the promise that the Bible records God's holy word, applying academic study techniques (which often start in a place of doubt) might seem like we are doubting the promises of God or trying to explain away the things that we cannot understand.

Is Study Faithful?

As Christians, we believe that God calls us to intentional study of the Bible. We are a part of God's story, a story that did not end with the last chapter of Revelation but continues to unfold each and every day in our world. The only way for us to truly understand our place in that story is to understand what the story is through study and questions! When we approach studying the Bible as faithful people seeking understanding, we find our place and understand who God intends us to be. It also places us in a long line of prophets, kings, and regular faithful people who dared to ask God questions and actually listen for the answers.

The best part about this is that it is okay not to have all the answers. Even the Bible raises questions about the way creation occurred, with a different version of the creation narrative being told in Genesis 2. Studying God's word, even questioning God's word, does not cheapen it—it instead opens God's word to our hearts and minds in new ways, allowing us to explore our faith and relationship with God.

So, What is God's Word?

From a faithful point of view, God's word falls into a few categories. First, we find it in the pages of the Bible. Anytime God speaks, we know that we have heard the word of God, as we do in the creation narrative. Still, as much as we would like to believe that someone was following every person in the Bible around with a quill, scroll, and pot of ink, that simply is not true. Many of the stories we read in the Bible were passed on for many generations by word of mouth before they were recorded on paper. The first five books of the Bible, including the creation narrative, most likely were not recorded in the way we know them until the Babylonian exile, thousands of years after they happened. That required the scribes to gather the many traditions that had been passed down and create a cohesive narrative, which involved some give and take. The Bible as we have it provides us with the story of God that is most useful for helping us find our place in that story. Thus, the word of God is also the story of us, mediated throughout the centuries.

We also find the word of God embodied in the person of Jesus. Christ walked the earth bringing wholeness not just to creation but also to our understanding of God's love for us. In Jesus' teachings, healings, and examples, we find the word of God put into practice in a way that we can understand and live into. Studying the Bible in light of Christ's teachings helps us understand God's word that has been passed on to us by imperfect people just like us. Trusting in God's love, we can pull the Bible down from the pedestal that we often put it on, allowing for questions and debate, but assured that God's truth is revealed to us in every aspect of life.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What does God's word mean to you? Is it just what is in the Bible and revealed in Christ, or do you experience it in other ways? How does is God's word a part of your daily faith journey?
2. How does it make you feel to pull back the layers of the Bible and study how it was put together? Does it challenge or encourage you to know that the Bible was recorded by imperfect people just like you?
3. Why is studying the Bible important to you?
4. What makes you curious about God's word? What do you want to know more about?

Session 2: A Brief History of the Bible

Theme:

Besides delivering God's word, the Bible is an ancient book that has evolved many times over the centuries. By understanding why the Bible has evolved, we gain a better understanding of what we are actually studying when we read the Bible.

Prayer:

God of truth, the pages of scripture remind us that we are part of your great story, a story that continues to unfold each and every day. By your Holy Spirit, help us to see ourselves in that story as we learn how it has been woven together. Amen.

Focus Text:

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

God's Word for the People:

The writer of 2 Timothy is a good example of how things in the Bible sometimes need clarification and how study can help that. Though there are traditions that claim that Paul wrote this letter to Timothy, the overwhelming scholarly consensus is that this letter was written long after both Paul and Timothy had ascended to the Church Triumphant. The letter was most likely written by someone who imitated Paul's style (to a degree) in an effort to make sure the letter was read by the church. Yet, knowing that Paul did not write this letter does not make it less important to study than anything else in the Bible! It still contains truths that were important for the church of that day and that continue to help us understand our place in the story.

The reality of the Bible is that it is an ancient book that has been under construction for many thousands of years. What the writer of 2 Timothy considered scripture is different from what we consider our Biblical canon now, as well as different from what the Pharisees of Jesus' day accepted as scripture. Jesus was not walking around Galilee with a King James Bible in his robe, and that is a good thing, because the KJV has places where its translations miss the mark, just like any other version. When we consider the Bible and the truth revealed to us in its pages, we cannot ignore the process involved in making it.

A Very, Very Brief History of the Canon

As much as we would like to think the Bible fell out of heaven in perfect English, the reality is much more complicated. For centuries, the only parts of the Bible that were considered scripture by most people were the first five books of the Bible, which our Jewish siblings refer to as the Torah. As time moved on, groups like the Pharisees began to look to the writings of the prophets, but their view was not accepted by

everyone. The final canon of the Old Testament was not set until after Jesus' death and resurrection. Even the New Testament has undergone renovations at various points.

When deciding what books would be included in the text of the Bible, church leaders in the 3rd-5th centuries CE held many councils to debate what should be included. They sought information on when the documents were written, they questioned whether the teachings aligned with the teachings of Christ, and they weighed the acceptance of the documents among the churches. Despite the fear-mongering that the History Channel engages in, constantly trying to find a conspiracy in that canonization process, the Church took as much time as it needed to ensure the Bible we know today was an accurate representation of God's story. The books that were excluded were kept out for a reason. It might surprise you to know that Revelation was almost one of them!

Later, a troublesome monk named Martin Luther decided to do some renovation on his own. He took a section of books that he felt were not as authentic to the Bible's story and separated them out from the canon. These books can be found today in the Apocrypha, though most Bibles do not include them to save money on printing costs. That means that the Bible the Catholic Church uses differs from the Bible that Lutherans use. There are also older Christian traditions, such as Coptic, Syriac, and Ethiopian Christians that have many more books that are not found in Catholic or Protestant Bibles.

The final renovations made to the canon have become especially divisive over the years. The simple truth is that Greek and Hebrew are not languages that easily translate into English. Many of the ideas and emotions conveyed in the original languages do not come across in English, which is why Lutheran seminary students still study Greek and Hebrew. The attempts by translators to communicate these ideas are why there are so many different versions of the Bible. Whether it is NRSV, ESV, KJV, NIV, or one of the thousand other versions, each Bible translation makes an attempt to convey what we need to know in the midst of ongoing language and translation debates.

But What Does it All Mean?

It is very easy to become worried when we realize all that has gone into creating the Bible that we cherish. After all, how can we be assured that God's word has been faithfully communicated to us over the many years? The answer to that lies in the teachings of Jesus. As Christians, we are called to hold all things up to the light of Christ, testing to see if what they communicate to us is in line with the love that Christ showed us on the cross. The Biblical canon that we have now is the most complete and accurate representation of the original text that we can manage. The fact that scholars have studied the texts and discovered alterations is actually comforting, because it means we have better versions of the scriptures that convey what God wants us to know.

Questions for Discussion

1. What have you heard about the process of putting the Bible together? Does it make you more confident in God's word to know that the excluded books were excluded for a reason?
2. Does knowing the Bible was put together over a long period of time help you draw closer to the text?
3. Bible translators often put disputed sections in brackets. Does this help you to see places for deeper study?
4. What about the process of canonizing the Bible makes you curious? What do you want to know more about?

Session 3: The Diversity of the Bible

Theme:

The product of thousands of years and countless human hands – all with the abiding presence and direction of God – the Bible comes to us today as one of the most diverse collections of writings ever assembled. This reveals how true the Bible is to our human experience.

Prayer:

God of all seasons, we look to your word for guidance in every time of our lives. Help us learn and appreciate scripture as it is presented by the many authors over the centuries, finding your love in every word. Amen.

Focus Text:

*¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ⁵ a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; ⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; ⁷ a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.
(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)*

Something For All Seasons

As the above text from Ecclesiastes illustrates so well, there are many ebbs and flows, a wide variety of experiences that make up this human life of ours. We can experience the most exhilarating highs, but are also capable of coming to know the darkest and most crushing lows. One of the amazing things about the Bible is that there is hardly anything in our human experience that Scripture is unable to speak to – not necessarily in the sense of giving “answers” – but in the sense of connection, that someone else has been there and can relate.

So within the Bible, within a single book in the Bible, we can find, on the one hand:

*Shout joyfully to the Lord, all you lands; serve the Lord with gladness;
come before him with joyful song.
Know that the Lord is God, he made us, we belong to him,
we are his people, the flock he shepherds.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving, his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name; good indeed is the Lord,
His mercy endures forever, his faithfulness lasts through every generation.
— Psalm 100:1-5*

But we can also find:

O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock! — Psalm 137:8-9

Such a song of joy, but also such anguished cries for vengeance, separated by only pages in the book of Psalms. But is this not our human experience – that all too often, life takes us, without warning or apology, from one to the other? The Bible reflects this truism of our humanity.

Outright Contradictions?

OK – so the Bible has a lot of different perspectives that reflect our wide variety of human experiences. But does it go beyond that to outright contradicting itself? For example, there is:

He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. – Isaiah 2:4

But there is also:

Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare war, stir up the warriors. Let all the soldiers draw near, let them come up. Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weakling say, "I am a warrior." – Joel 3:9-10

From our modern perspective where everything has to be one way or the other, we tend to look at these two verses (and other such examples that we could cite) and say, “Well, one must be right and the other wrong – they can’t both be right! But this is the Word of God and it can’t have any errors – so what do we do, oh my!!!!”

Herein lies a major problem with treating the Bible like something that it is NOT – some kind of magic book of answers. The Bible is not Google, nor is it like one of those Amazon Alexa devices to which you can ask a question and out pops an answer. Google and Alexa can only draw from available information – data. The Bible has some of that too, but the Bible also contains an incredible wealth of real-life God-involved experience – the stuff of relationships. And so much moreso than “answers”, the Bible provides guidance, direction, examples of other somewhat similar situations to ponder along with the Holy Spirit. So we should not be surprised to find quite a wide spread of guidance. As our opening text from Ecclesiastes would suggest, while beating swords into plowshares sounds really nice, there may be a time that calls for beating plowshares into swords. We trust in the Holy Spirit to guide us into the right model at the appropriate time.

Quite the Collection

As already noted, our Bible is a collection of writings that cover a time span of several thousand years, with numerous installments of input and editing along the way. We affirm that God had a profound hand in that input and editing, of course.

Here are some of the types of writing we find in the Bible with some examples of each:
 Accounts of Beginnings – Genesis and Exodus
 History – 1 & 2 Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah
 Prophecy – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel
 Hymnody/Poetry – Psalms
 Wisdom – Proverbs
 Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
 Parables – stories told by Jesus to teach a lesson, such as that of the Good Samaritan
 Letters – Galatians, Romans (We should remember that when we read Paul’s letters, we are “snooping” on his mail which he never would have imagined being read all these years later.)
 Accounts of New Beginnings – Revelation

Just as only one Gospel would have been less than sufficient to share with us the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, so too would a single “type” of writing have been far less than sufficient to share with us the scope of the past, present, and future of the relationship between God and God’s people. The Bible is a relationship story, and such a story can only hope to be told with many colors, brushes, and portraits.

What Language Was That?

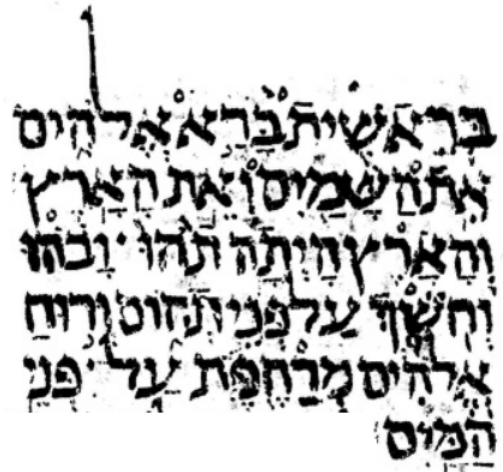
Oh yes, the diversity of the Bible even involves language – none of which was King James English, at least not originally. The vast majority of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, a language that has only consonants in its alphabet and is read from right to left (the remainder is Aramaic, a close cousin to Hebrew).

Here are three representations of the first two verses of Genesis: The modern translation from the NRSV, the modern printed version of the Hebrew text, and the handwritten Hebrew from one of the ancient manuscripts of the book of Genesis:

Genesis 1:1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

WTT Genesis 1:1
 בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ: 2 וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תְהוֹ
 וַבְּהוֹ יַחַשְׁדַּךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:

You should not be surprised to hear that there is often more than one way to translate something from one language to another – no matter what the language is. (Consider the myriad of Bible translations available today.) Translation is more of an art than a science. Part of the reason for this is that phrases and word meanings can change over time. Languages have idioms and figures of speech that might mean different things across vastly different times and places.



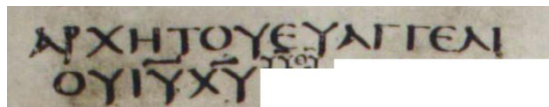
Ancient Jewish rabbis had a saying: “To translate literally is to lie, but to translate loosely is to blaspheme.”

In other words, there is hardly, if ever, a “perfect” way to render something in one language into another language.

The same could be said of the New Testament, which was written in Greek (which has both consonants and vowels in the alphabet and is read from left to right). Here are three representations of the first verse of the Gospel of Mark:

Mark 1:1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Mark 1:1 Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ [υἱοῦ θεοῦ].



(If you notice that the ancient manuscript seems to have fewer letters than the neatly printed Greek, you are right! “Jesus Christ” is abbreviated with only four Greek letters in the manuscript (versus twelve letters in the modern printing). Also, “son of God” is written in small letters, also in abbreviation, between the lines).

Do not be dismayed if you do not know ancient Hebrew or Greek. That does not mean that you cannot faithfully study the Bible! Most of the translations we have are quite good and endeavor to convey the Hebrew and Greek into English as well as possible. You probably have a favorite Bible translation. Consider adding another one to your library, such that when you read/study a text, you can read at least two translations of the original language. This just might open you up to the Holy Spirit showing you something you never noticed in the text before.

Questions for Discussion

1. How have you found the Bible able to speak to you in different times and situations in your life? Are there certain books or sections that have been particularly helpful for certain things? Can you think of a time when a text really spoke to something you were going through? Please share that experience if you are comfortable doing so.
2. Have you ever been bothered by the Bible seeming to say one thing at one place, but something somewhat, or maybe even totally different at another place? How does it help to realize that one citation doesn't have to be "wrong" and the other one "right"?
3. How do you feel about the Bible being a collection of so many different kinds of writing from such a wide period of time? Is this a strength or weakness? How so?
4. Were you aware that the Bible was originally written in three different languages, and that those languages were so different? How does that affect your view of the Bible – positively, negatively – why? Think of the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:1-13 and the Spirit's use of many languages as you consider this question.
5. How can the Bible be a single, unified book when it has so much diversity within its contents? What does that say about our own unity even when we have many and sometimes profound differences??

Session 4: The Bible- Dead or Alive?

Theme:

Books tend not to be viewed as living objects. They are ink and paper such that once they are written, they become largely frozen in time, much like a photo. The Bible, however, is quite different. Because it is the Word of God, it is very much alive.

Prayer:

Living God, your word is not confined to the dust of history, but guides our here and now, living with us as we live for you. Help us to experience your living word in our daily lives so we can more faithfully serve you. Amen.

Focus Texts:

¹⁸ Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:18-19)

²³ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. (Matthew 23:23)

¹² Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

Dead If Frozen in Time

How we read the Bible, what we get from it, and how we use it depends a great deal on whether we view it as a rigid relic from the past – largely an account of things that happened a long time ago in a land far away, or as something that itself shows evidence of change over time and remains relevant, still speaking to us in our own time and place.

First, we should recall the very nature of the Word of God. Think back to our opening focus passage in Session I – Genesis 1. How was it that God brought about creation? God did so by simply speaking. So, the Word of God is not a static utterance, but rather a dynamic creative force. It is something that changes things and brings newness and life.

A nice illustration of this power of God's word appears in the way many of the prophetic books of the Bible begin. For example, in most English Bibles, you will read in the first verse of the prophet Hosea, "The word of the Lord which came to Hosea." That's a decent translation. However, the Hebrew word that means "come" is not in the verse. Instead, a better translation of the verb would render the following: "The word of the Lord that happened to Hosea." God's word is an event. It does not show up quietly or benignly, but instead affects those who receive it.

As we have noted, the Bible contains history. And yet, it is more than history. We can learn “lessons” from any historical account – how not to repeat past mistakes, for instance. The history in the Bible, however, as the Word of God, has the power to not just teach, but to actually shape our world and lives. A good example, which also incorporates the “happening” nature of God’s word noted above is the sacrament of Holy Communion. Indeed, when we celebrate the Eucharist, we remember the events of Maundy Thursday, that on that night when Jesus was betrayed he took bread and wine and said some things and did some things with them. But Holy Communion for us is far more than a history lesson. Beyond simply calling events to mind, we actually receive the body and blood of Christ here and now, and with it, the forgiveness of our sins and newness of life in our risen Lord.

Finally, if the Bible is a static entity, frozen in time, we have some serious problems to contend with. Polygamy (having numerous wives) was not a problem, or even unusual for much of the Bible’s time period (Solomon is said to have had 700 wives and 300 concubines – see 1 Kings 11:1-3). Recall that Abraham had his first child not with his wife Sarah, but with Sarah’s servant Hagar. And this raises another issue – slavery was also not viewed as problematic for much of the Bible. How is it that God could seem to condone such things?

We need to remember that the Bible is a relationship story – a relationship between God and God’s people that journey quite a long distance together, and are still doing so. Think of how we view baptism as the beginning of the journey of a life of faith. God has a way of meeting us where we are and then bringing us to where we need to be. Just as God meets and adopts us in baptism when we are infants, that doesn’t mean we stay infants in the relationship. There is an expectation that some changes will take place! Likewise, when something appears acceptable in the Bible at one point, that does not necessarily mean that it should be viewed as such for all time. It might be an instance of God coming along side to bring to a different place. As stated of God in our focus passage from Isaiah, *“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”*

Dead If Nothing Stands Out

If something is dead, there is little if anything that can stand out about it. What is there to say when and where there is no life? If, however, something is alive, the case is quite the opposite. Consider, for example, a dry, lifeless landscape (perhaps a desert) compared with one where there is grass and trees and wild animals moving about. Quite a difference. And in the case of the life-filled scene, we can say that there are numerous distinguishable parts, and one or a few may be more dominant than others.

In a similar manner, as the living entity that it is, the Bible has certain parts that stand out. The late theologian Krister Stendahl once commented that the Bible can be compared to soup, not a soup that is a bland nearly unidentifiable puree, but rather a soup where one can detect various flavors and ingredients, such as one would find in a nice vegetable soup.

When we read the Bible, there are things that stand out. As Christians, certainly the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus would be most notable. That's not to say that nothing else matters, but it is to say that there are some things that matter more than others. In our focus text from Matthew 23, Jesus is criticizing the scribes and Pharisees for failing to focus on things that should matter more to them – justice and mercy and faith – far more important things than how much mint, dill, and cumin they tithe to the temple!

We too make such choices as to what texts are “weightier” – probably without giving much thought to the fact that we are doing so. For example, there are laws in the Bible that forbid both the eating of pork (Leviticus 11:7) and committing murder (Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17). Given the variety of pork products in supermarkets and the success of BBQ restaurants, it seems apparent that we give one of these biblical laws more weight than the other. And that's actually OK when we are dealing with a living document, as long as we own our choices and are clear as to the faith-basis of the reasoning. For example, the injunction against eating pork would seem to be more connected to time period and culturally motivated, whereas the fifth commandment involves the unjust taking of God-given human life and the doing of irreparable damage to human relationships – things that very arguably cut across time and culture.

As Christians, all of the Bible is our Scripture, the Word of God. However, the birth, life (and teachings), death, and resurrection of Jesus provides the scale by which we determine what carries the most weight. For example, did Jesus seem to be more concerned over what kind of meat people ate, or over people not having enough to eat?

Dead If Not Interpreted

Part of what makes the Bible alive is that it invites continued interpretation. That does not mean that it can willy-nilly say whatever we want it to say. But it does mean that the text needs to be interpreted. Part of this dynamic relates to language, as introduced in Session 3. As noted there, even without knowledge of ancient Hebrew and Greek, looking at more than one modern English translation can help open us to a potentially deeper understanding of a text than we may have previously had.

Sometimes interpretation can seem straightforward. Three times (Exodus 23:19, Exodus 34:26, Deuteronomy 14:21) in the Bible we find the following injunction: “You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.” This is basically to say that you shouldn't cook a young sheep or goat in milk obtained from its mother. One reaction is to say, “Well, strange concern, but that's easy, I just won't do it.” However, our Jewish siblings, noting that it occurs three times in Scripture, feel a little more effort is necessary to incorporate this part of the Word of God into daily life. The result is the practice to this day among observant Jews to not mix meat and dairy products at meals. Is this silly overkill, or might it be an amazing effort to take seriously, apply and live out the Word of God?

Incidentally, the above scenario bears some similarity to instructions given by Jesus about certain laws. The fifth commandment against murder seems straightforward

enough to obey, right? Just don't kill anyone and you're good! However, in Matthew 5:22, Jesus suggests that simply being angry with a sister or brother puts one dangerously close to breaking this commandment!

Other times, interpretation more obviously calls for consideration and thought on how to live out a text. For example, the third commandment states, "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy." (Exodus 20:8. Verses 9-11 state further "9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work-- you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.")

But what does this mean? That entails defining what work is. What one person finds to be "work" might be quite relaxing and enjoyable to someone else. And let's be careful before we get all self-righteous on how clear we think we are on what this commandment means. What about cooking – does that involve work? What about turning on a television? Does "remembering the Sabbath day and keeping it holy" mean we are to do absolutely nothing, not even get out of bed????

A good question to ask when working to interpret a text, especially a law, is to ask what the text is trying to protect? How is it trying to foster life and well-being for us and for those around us? How can it nurture the relationships we have with God and one another? As a result, we are likely to find that there is not a single "correct" way to keep this commandment. (This is one of those instances where the Bible is not Google or Amazon Alexa.)

(An additional helpful note for this example again relates to language. The Hebrew verb that is the basis for the word "Sabbath" means to "cease". Rather than meaning a cessation of everything, (doing absolutely nothing), it more likely points to ceasing that which we do most of the time, the other days of the week, perhaps what we do to make a living. By ceasing the other activities, we find ourselves gifted with time to focus on nurturing faith, relationships, and things that are restful, renewing, and life-giving.)

Questions for Discussion

1. Can you think of examples from the Bible, or even from your own life, when God has done a "new thing" – something unexpected that was surprising and life-giving? How did God meet you where you were but then journeyed with you to a different place?
2. What are some other "norms" found in the Bible that might not be acceptable, even in a faithful community, today?
3. Think back to the discussion of Holy Communion above. How is the sacrament of Holy Baptism also much more than just a remembrance of Jesus' baptism? What "happens" to us by the power of the Word of God?
4. Try to think of some other examples of Scripture passages that carry more or less "weight" than others. Discuss the reasons for the relative weight determination of each.

5. Discuss further how interpretation helps make the Bible a living entity. What are the advantages to doing interpretation in group discussions rather than alone? How can we maintain our unity in the faith even when we differ on interpretations?

Youth Options for this Course

Created by Deborah Poole

About the Contributor for the Youth Options

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A Brief Introduction to The Bible: What It Is and What It Isn't

These activities can be used with any of the lessons.

Activity #1

- Split the kids into four different groups (you can also only have one person per group down the hall, another in a different room, etc.
- Have them relay the Creation story, like the telephone game – 1st group to 2nd group, 2nd to 3rd group, 3rd to 4th group.
- The last group to hear the story then relays it back to the entire group.
- The leader then reads the original story to the whole group.
- Ask the group to comment on how the final group's rendition differed from the original.
- Reflect upon how the groups did in remembering every detail of the story, and in getting the whole gist.
- Ask group members to remember as much of the story as they can for the next gathering.

Activity #2

Separate into groups. Hand out (or share) copies of a few of Aesop's fables, one fable per group. Have them read it, and then share with the group the morals they can draw from the story. Reflect in the group: Did these stories really happen? Are they true? How are those two questions different?

Come back together as one group and generate together a list of different genres in literature. (Ask students what kind of writing units they have had in school: fiction, non-fiction, poetry, persuasive writing, etc.) Compare that to the list of genres in Scripture: law, history, wisdom and poetry, prophecy, gospel, letters, apocalyptic literature.

Activity #3

Divide into groups. Read the Creation story. Have each group come up with questions about what's actually in the Bible, things they've wondered about when they've read them, or things that haven't made much sense.

Activity #4

Divide the youth into small groups and provide each group with a scenario where believers may hold different perspectives. Examples could include topics like music choices, entertainment preferences, or social issues. Ask each group to discuss how they would respond to these situations with respect and unity.

After they have discussed within their groups, ask each group to present their scenarios and share how they would apply the principles of accepting differences and prioritizing unity in those situations. Encourage open and respectful dialogue during presentations.