

SESSION ONE:
WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

pilgrum

In this session we are looking at a 'way in' to reading the Bible, thinking particularly about how to recognize what kind of writing the Bible is.

Opening Prayers

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

The word of the Lord endures for ever.

All flesh is like grass and all its glory is like the flower of grass.

The word of the Lord endures for ever.

The grass withers, and the flower falls.

The word of the Lord endures for ever.

That word is the good news that was announced to you.

The word of the Lord endures for ever.

ISAIAH 40.1, 6–8 AND 1 PETER 1.24–25

Almighty God,

in Christ you make all things new:

transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace,

and in the renewal of our lives

make known your heavenly glory;

through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,

who is alive and reigns with you,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Conversation

How do you feel about the Bible? Is it something that excites you?

Fills you with dread? Inspires you? Makes you feel guilty?

Do you think it is relevant or irrelevant in our modern world? Talk about this in your group.

Reflecting on Scripture

Reading

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’

LUKE 4.14–22

Explanatory note

In Synagogues it was the custom to read one reading from the Torah and one from the Prophets. They would then discuss the readings together. What Jesus did in the Synagogue at Nazareth seems to have been a natural part of what would have taken place in the synagogue.

Jesus read from what we would now call Isaiah 61.1–2, though not from the whole passage – you might like to look and see what is missing from what he read out.

- Read the passage through once
- Keep a few moments’ silence
- Read the passage a second time with different voices

- Invite everyone to say aloud a word or phrase that strikes them
- Read the passage a third time
- Share together what this word or phrase might mean and what questions it raises

Reflection

PAULA GOODER

The Bible as library

The encouragement to read your Bible appears simple and straightforward. In the English-speaking world we are blessed with many different English translations. So, surely, all that is necessary is that you pick the one you like and off you go?

Anyone who has tried this will tell you that it won't be long before you hit problems. The further into the Bible you get from Genesis the harder the going gets. Some people succeed and reach the end, but many give up and from then on struggle to read it at all. Part of the problem is that many people treat the Bible as though it is a novel: easy to read, chronological and sequential or, failing that, as though it is an encyclopedia (annoyingly organized out of alphabetical order) into which you can dip to find answers to a range of questions. It is neither of these.

The Bible is a collection of 66 books.

Contrary to its title 'The Bible', which implies that it is a single volume, the Bible is in fact a collection of 66 books, 39 in the Old Testament, 27 in the New Testament, many written by different authors, at

different times and in different places. This is reflected much more accurately by its Greek title 'Ta Biblia', which means 'the books'. Just as you would no more enter a library or bookshop and read the first book you come across followed by the ones next to it on the shelf, so there is no reason why you should read the books in the order in which you find them in the Bible. It is a mix of different types of writing (law, history, poetry, wisdom, letters, biography and so on) and it can help to know what type of book you are about to read before you begin.

In short

The name 'The Bible' can be misleading as it implies that it is a single book that can be read easily from beginning to end. It is rather 66 books written at different times and in different styles.

For discussion

- Do you read it? If yes, share with the group how you read it. All the way through? In small chunks? Do you listen to an audio version or have you watched films based on it? What has worked best for you?
- Does thinking about the Bible as a collection of books or as a library help in any way?

The Story of Salvation

Once we realize that the Bible is not a single book designed to be read from beginning to end, it is, intriguingly, easier to see it as a whole. The books were not written chronologically, nor are they now arranged chronologically. Indeed, especially in the prophetic books, you can jump time periods by as much as a couple of hundred years from book to book. But if you step back and look at the Bible as a whole, it tells the story of the relationship between God and the world from the dawn of time (in Genesis) until its ending (in the book of Revelation).

Over the years there have been huge arguments about what the Bible is. Most recently the Bible's scientific credibility and historical reliability in particular have been challenged. It is important to recognize, however, what the Bible is and what it is not. It is neither a scientific textbook nor even a newspaper article, and so cannot be evaluated as though it is. As we've already observed, it contains many different types of material, from law to poetry, biography to visions, which are all discussing and reflecting on God and his relationship with humanity.

The story of God's love for the human race.

As we trace this story through, it becomes clear that the major story that returns again and again in all the different types of writing is the story of God's love for the human race: a love that continues despite humanity's arrogance and evil; a love that eventually led God to send his own Son to die. This is not a story that begins on page 1 and ends on its final page but is a golden thread that runs through the whole Bible and is expressed in poetry, law, story and song.

Some people describe the Bible as a five-act play in which the final act and a half are not written. The first act is the story of creation, the second the story of Israel and God's first covenants with his people. The third act is the story of Jesus and his death and resurrection. The fourth act tells the story of Christians and the Christian Church and the fifth act tells the story of the world to come. So on this model we have a complete first three acts, we have a little bit of the fourth act (the book of the Acts of the Apostles) and a little bit of the fifth (the book of Revelation).

God's grand play of love is not yet complete and we are called to take our parts in that play. The Bible, giving as it does the first three, and a bit, acts of the play, sets our course. We read the Bible so that we learn more about how the play began, and we listen for the director's instructions as we play our part. The Bible is not just a book to read. It is a book to live.

In short

The Bible tells the story of the expression of God's love in the world, a love that caused him to send his Son to die for us. As we live our lives, we continue that story of God's love in the world.

For discussion

- How have you experienced the story of God's love in your own life?
- What role, if any, should the Bible have in modern discussions about science?
- What would it mean for how we live our lives to take seriously a call to continue living the fourth act of God's five-act play of love?

Journeying On

We would encourage you to reflect on one of these six verses from the bible each day between the sessions. Read it, pray about it, listen to what God might be saying to you in it and allow it to change you.

For the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. (Psalm 33.4)

In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I am not afraid. Psalm 56.10–11)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3.16)

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. (Psalm 36.7)

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8.38–39)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. (2 Corinthians 13.13)

Concluding Prayers

God of love,
the Bible recounts the story
of your great love poured out on us.
Help us to live out that story of love
every day of our lives
in everything that we say and do.

Amen.

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray,
Our Father (see p. XX)

Wisdom for the Journey

Lord, who can comprehend even one of your words? We lose more of it than we grasp, like those who drink from a living spring. For God's word offers different facets according to the capacity of the listener, and the Lord has portrayed his message in many colours, so that whoever gazes upon it can see in it what suits. Within it God has buried a variety of treasures, so that each of us might grow rich in seeking them out.

EPHREM OF SYRIA (C.306–73)

If you wish to secure a true knowledge of scripture you must first nurture within yourself humility of heart which is unshakable. Only this will ensure that your knowledge does not puff you up, but instead illuminates your heart through love.

JOHN CASSIAN (C.360–435)

If we want to be always in God's company, we must pray regularly and read the scriptures regularly. When we pray, we talk to God; when we read, God talks to us.

ISIDORE OF SEVILLE (C.560–636)

It is important to spend time in the systematic reading of Scripture. For if you read now here, now there, the various things that chance and circumstance cause you to stumble across, it will not consolidate your learning. For it is easy to take such reading in, and easier still to forget it. You should also pause over certain authors and allow yourself to become accustomed to their style. For it is important to read the Scriptures in the same spirit in which they were written because only in that spirit are they to be understood.

GUIGO V (1083–1136)

The Bible is a vast web of interwoven conversations, encounters of faith and struggle and disclosure between God and men and women. As we become familiar with them we find ourselves drawn into more and more of them. In prayer I put myself into one of those conversations and God uses the historic faith encounter to draw me into my own today.

MARTIN L. SMITH (1947–)