

*Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About the Bible... but were afraid to ask*  
Living the Message 2020-2021  
January 2021 Study Guide for Participants and Facilitators

January's Question: ***Who Wrote the Bible?*** [Video can be watched by clicking here.](#)

### **Focus Statement and Summary**

The Bible is a human book that God uses to achieve God's divine purposes. That means the Bible was written by everyday people whom God worked through. Moreover, the Bible, especially the books of the New Testament, did not take final form for several centuries, and the early church read and re-read stories about Jesus and over time stuck with the ones that seemed most helpful. Knowing this, our task is to receive the books of the Bible as gifts of earlier believers to us and to try to hear the distinct confessions of faith the authors of the biblical books shared, especially by paying attention to the details of their works, including differences between the gospel stories.

### **Opening Prayer**

*Dear God, open our hearts and minds so that when we read Scripture and listen to the confessions of Christians who lived centuries ago, we hear you speaking to us today and are strengthened in our faith. Amen.*

### **Opening Questions to Consider *Before* Watching the Presentation**

You are invited to read once again the following two passages: [Luke 1:1-4](#) and [John 20:30-31](#), both of which testify to the fact that the authors of our Gospels made choices about what to include, about how to arrange the stories they were sharing, and about their hopes and intentions for their work. When you read these passages now, what stands out to you about their willingness to share that they were making choices. How would you describe their intentions and hopes? And how does knowing their intentions shape how you read the stories they tell?

### **Questions to Consider *After* Watching the Presentation**

Most of the books we read have a picture and brief bio of the author on the back cover. Why do you think the publishers want us to know something about the author? When you read those bios, or if you know more about the author, what does it add to your reading? When it comes to the books in the Bible, have you ever wondered about the authors? And did it ever occur to you that they likely did not know they were writing Scripture but were trying to strengthen the faith of their communities by sharing the stories of Jesus they knew? What difference does knowing this make to our reading of Scripture? Moreover, what difference does it make to know that the process of putting together the books of the New Testament took several centuries, and that it was less a "top-down" process of a Council or Pope making a decision but instead everyday congregations who, over time, kept reading the books that seemed to strengthen their faith the most? How do we receive the Bible as a human book that accomplishes divine purposes?

## Going Deeper into the Word

(There is [a second video](#) to assist with this exercise if you find that helpful. In it, Pastor Lose elaborates on the hopes of the Gospel writers referenced in the main presentation.)

Focus Passages: [John 17:17-21](#) (Jesus prays for his disciples) and [John 20:19-29](#) (Jesus and Thomas).

One of the hopes – indeed, the main hope! – of the Evangelists is that those who are reading their story of Jesus – including, first, their communities and, second, later Christians... all the way up to us! – is that believers will be strengthened in their faith and feel God’s living presence with them.

As Pastor Lose explains in the video, there are certain passages where this feels most clear, even obvious. Calling these passages “windows” and “doors,” Pastor Lose suggested that there are times when the Evangelist almost reaches out to pull you into the Gospel story and make it your own. The two passages above serve as examples.

In the first, Jesus is praying for his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. And it’s a long prayer! In fact, it takes up all of the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of John’s Gospel. Sometimes called “the high priestly prayer,” Jesus uses somewhat symbolic and complex imagery to ask God to care for his disciples after he leaves, not taking them out of the world but protecting them and strengthening them while they remain in the world. There is little doubt that Jesus’ prayer not only encouraged his immediate disciples, but also those of John’s community who read about Jesus’ prayer. Moreover, in verse 20, Jesus prays not only for his original disciples, but all those who believe because of their testimony, which includes John’s community... and us! That is, because of the faith and witness of those original disciples, more people came to believe who in time shared their faith, and they shared theirs, and so on and so on right up to those of us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In light of this, consider these questions: What difference does it make to know that on the Eve of his crucifixion, Jesus was praying for you? How might you share your faith with others to continue the long line of witnesses to God’s goodness and grace in Jesus?

The second passage is the famous scene between Jesus and Thomas, the one we sometimes call “doubting Thomas.” At the end of this story, and after Thomas has confessed his faith that Jesus is both Lord and God(!), Jesus offers these words: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Consider the following questions based on this passage: Do you hear these words as rebuke or blessing? If as rebuke, how do you think Thomas took them? If as blessing, who is being blessed? And what difference does it make to hear Jesus bless us – all of us who didn’t get to see him in the flesh – as those who still believe? How does this sense of blessing shape how we read other parts of the Bible? What does it say about faith? In particular, if Jesus is blessing those who believe, does that give us a sense that faith is not always easy? And how might Jesus’ blessing shape how we share our faith with others and regard those who struggle with faith?

## Closing

Return to our one of our opening question: *What difference does it make to know that the Evangelists were ordinary Christians, making choices and decisions to shape a story that would strengthen the faith of their congregation?* How do you hear that question, and how would you answer it, now?

**Closing Prayer:** *Dear God, we give you thanks for the witnesses who shared their stories and confession in their writings. Help us to pay attention to their confessions and, by paying attention, to hear you speak to us today. Amen.*

### **Bonus Activity (For those who just can't get enough!)**

When more than one gospel has a similar scene, it is called a "gospel parallel." Choose one or more of the gospel parallels listed below for further study. In each case, read each Gospel writer's version of the scene in question and notice the differences in their portrayal (this may include locating the scene at a different point in the larger narrative, so it will be helpful to read a little before and after each scene). What do these differences tell you about the theological concerns and confession of each Gospel writer.

Some gospel parallels to consider:

*The Triumphal Entry Into Jerusalem:* Matthew 21:1-9, Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:28-40; John 12:12-19

*The Anointing at Bethany:* Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:36-50, John 12:1-8

*Jairus' Daughter and the Woman with the Hemorrhage:* Matthew 9:18-26, Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-56

*The Cleansing of the Temple:* Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-17, Luke 19:45-56, John 2:14-22.

*The Temptation of Jesus:* Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-13

*Jesus in Gethsemane:* Matthew 26:36-46, Mark 14:32-42, Luke 22:39-46, John 18:1-12.