

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

February's Question: "**How Can I Enjoy Reading the Bible (Part 1)**" [Video can be watched by clicking here.](#)

Focus Statement and Summary

Most of us struggle at times in our reading of Scripture... and feel guilty admitting that. But... the Bible is a complex book, written over a thousand years, with all kinds of literary genres, and reflecting cultural assumptions often quite different than our own. So... it's understandable that it can be hard sledding at times! Yet while the Bible is complex, there are a variety of ways to help us understand it better and enjoy our reading more. This month and next, we'll look at four "lenses" to use as we read the Bible, each referenced by a preposition describing a particular location along the history of the passage's composition and transmission:

- "Behind" names what happened in history that made someone want to write a story down.
- "In" refers to the finished product and invites us to consider the literary elements of a passage.
- "Around" reminds us that the Bible is the church's book and we have a whole tradition of reading it theologically and using it in worship that informs our reading.
- "In front of" describes all the things going on in our life and world that may influence how we read and understand a particular passage of Scripture.

We will look at the first two ways to read Scripture – "behind" (historical) and "in" (literary) this month, and the next two in March. Finally, and a major theme throughout this class, is that while it's great to read the Bible, it's even better to read it with others, as our different perspectives and experiences enrich our reading and draw us closer together as members of the church.

Opening Prayer

Dear God, invite us to explore different ways of reading Scripture with curious hearts and open minds, and make us both attentive to and appreciative of the insights of others, so that together we may hear you speaking to us and be strengthened in our faith. Amen.

Opening Thoughts to Consider *Before* Watching the Presentation

Our "theme passages" for much of this course have been the beginning of Luke's Gospel, [Luke 1:1-4](#), and the close of John's, [John 20:30-31](#). You are invited to read them each again, noticing that both draw upon historical events. Luke talks about "eyewitnesses" and John refers to Jesus doing "many other things that aren't written in this book." Both also indicate that the authors made literary and artistic decisions: Luke's desire to write "an orderly account" and John's decision to include some stories but not others. Pastor Lose will discuss more about these "Before" and "In" lenses we can use to enhance our enjoyment of reading the Bible.

Questions to Consider After Watching the Presentation

Pastor Lose first talks about looking “behind” a passage to understand it better historically. Sometimes it’s hard to know what we don’t know. :) This is particularly true of historical matters regarding the Bible. But... we can train ourselves to ask questions and seek more information.

- 1) Does thinking about scripture passages and stories through the lens of “Before” (historical context) enhance the reading for you? How does it help you enjoy reading the Bible?
- 2) How did the historical details that Pastor Ruud shared about the Good Samaritan parable affect your understanding of this well-known story? Any new insight? Affirmation of previous thoughts?
- 3) What is one of your favorite biblical stories where the historical details stand out to you? Or that perhaps stand out more now as you reread it with a “Before” lens?
- 4) What is one of your favorite fiction or nonfiction books where what’s *behind* the book – the author’s life or the circumstances of the book’s writing, for instance, shaped the final product for you?
- 5) How comfortable are you in using a Bible study reference for historical information? Will you/have you checked out any of the study bibles or websites that Pastor Lose recommended?

Suggested Study Bibles: Augsburg Fortress, Harper Collins, Oxford Press

Suggested Online Resources: enterthebible.org workingpreacher.org

Pastor Lose then discusses paying attention to the “In” lens: the literary elements of a passage. Remembering that the writers of Scripture are writing with the hope that you will understand and enjoy their work helps us pay attention to their actual literary choices and decisions and allow those to guide our interpretation. We can train ourselves to slow down, pay attention to the details, and share with others what we notice!

- 1) Does thinking about scripture passages and stories through the “In” lens (literary elements) enhance the reading for you? How does it help you enjoy reading the Bible?
- 2) How often do you pay attention to the dialogue in a passage, or to the character development across a Gospel (for instance), or to the “stage directions” (for instance in John’s story of Jesus’ trial before Pilate)? What other literary elements of the story might guide you in how you read and understand it?
- 3) What is one of your favorite biblical stories where the literary details stand out to you?
- 4) What is one of your favorite biblical styles: parables, prophets, Psalms? Or ?
- 5) What is one of your favorite fiction or nonfiction books where the skill with which the author presents the information or crafts the story influenced your enjoyment of it? And/or what is your favorite literary form to read? Fiction? Poetry? Short story? Autobiography?

Going Deeper into the Word

(There is [a second video](#) to assist with this exercise. In it, Pastor Lose explores the parable of the prodigal son. We will work with the first part of the parable this month – which is found in [Luke 15:11:24](#) – and continue with the rest of the story next month.)

The fifteenth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel holds three stories, sometimes called "the lost parables," because each revolves around something that is lost and then found – a sheep (vv. 3-7), a lost coin (vv. 8-10), and a lost son (vv. 11-32). The first two verses of the chapter set the context of the story; that is, describes the situation that Jesus tells his parables to address. A few historical notes may help you understand that introduction better:

- The "tax collectors" Luke describes have nothing in common with people working for the IRS today. Rather, they were Jewish citizens collecting the "Imperial Tax" that Rome used to fund their army's occupation of Israel. That means that this was a tax that Jews paid so the Romans could occupy their own country, so the tax collectors were seen as "collaborators with the enemy." Similarly, "sinners" is not so much a theological category as it is a social one; people that everyone thinks are pretty bad and should not be welcome in decent company.
- "Pharisees" are volunteer leaders of the local synagogue and "scribes" are those responsible for teaching the Bible. So a very free translation of these verses might be, "Now all of the very worst sorts of people were coming near to listen to him, and the church council members and Sunday school teachers were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow hangs out with despicable people.'"

With that in mind, now read the introduction and first two parables ([15:1-10](#)) before reading the parable of the prodigal son. Then consider these questions:

- 1) Why do you think the tax collectors and sinners came to listen to Jesus?
- 2) Why were the Pharisees and scribes upset by this?
- 3) How do those first two verses shape the way you hear the parables to come?
- 4) What details in the two short parables (lost sheep and lost coin) stand out to you?
- 5) What do you think Jesus is trying to say to these two groups – sinners and religious authorities – through these parables? How do you think they responded?

Now read the first part of the parable of the prodigal son ([Luke 15:11:24](#)), and ask yourself these questions:

- 1) What details stood out to you?
- 2) What do you think Jesus is trying to say to these two groups – sinners and religious authorities – through these parables, and how do you think they responded?

Pastor Lose points out how our experiences and context shape how we hear the story and give weight to particular details that may shape our understanding of the parable. After watching the video, read the parable of the prodigal son again and ask:

- 1) Are there other details that make an impression on you?
- 2) Which of the three answers to the question he raised – "what goes wrong, what sets the story in motion?" – seems plausible to you? If several seem plausible, what does that say about our reading of Scripture?
- 3) What role does your own life experience play in how you read the story Jesus tells, and how is your understanding enriched by listening to the interpretations of others?

Bonus Activity

To practice paying attention to the details, we might read a familiar parable or story in the Gospel and then make a list of what we remember. After making the list, then read it again and see if a) everything we remember was actually there and b) if there are details we forgot about or omitted. One fun way to try this would be to retell the parable of the Prodigal Son as a newspaper article – what details would you retain or omit – or as an autobiography, perhaps from the younger son’s point of view, but also the father’s or the elder brother’s (we’ll hear more about him next month!). We might even invent a “Mrs. Prodigal” – the landowners’ wife and mothers of the two sons – and tell it from her point of view. Again, what details matter that most? What do we capture in our retelling, and what do we miss?

Closing Thoughts

We started this unit by admitting that we sometimes find reading Scripture challenging. What is most challenging to us? What about this month’s lesson has made it easier? What can we try that is new? And... perhaps most importantly... How willing are we to have Scripture call some of our preconceptions into question, and how comfortable are we in living with questions rather than only finding answers? Thinking through all these matters can also increase our enjoyment of Scripture.

Closing Prayer: *Dear God, you have given us minds to use when reading and studying your Word. Bless our study, encourage us in our efforts to understand Scripture, and deepen our conversations with others about your Word so that we may come to a richer understanding of your mercy for us and all the world. Amen.*