

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

March Question: ***“How Can I Enjoy Reading the Bible (Part 2)”*** [Video can be watched by clicking here.](#)

Focus Statement and Summary

As we talked about last month, most of us struggle at times in our reading of Scripture. Recognizing that the Bible is a complex book – or, really, library of books – that reflect many different traditions, cultures, and points of view, we focused on two ways to help us understand and enjoy Scripture more. Looking “behind” the biblical passage we’re reading to consider its historical dimensions and looking “in” the biblical passage carefully to consider its literary elements. This month we add two more “places to look.” The first is “around,” by which we mean the ways we read the passage as Christians, especially our theological convictions and the way we use the passage in our worship. We’ll also look “in front of” the passage to remember that how we read a particular passage is very much shaped by what is going on in the world and in our lives. Taken together, there are a variety of ways to approach Scripture carefully, listening for God’s voice in and through the witness of the faithful believers who first shared their experiences. And, as we love to remind each other: 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. So let’s dig in!

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 Questions to Consider Before Watching the Presentation

In our reading of Scripture, we’re often very concerned with “meaning,” as in “what does this passage mean?” We tend to think of meaning as something that is just out there, waiting for us to discover it or figure it out. But... and this will take a little getting used to... meaning is far more relational than we might imagine. That is, meaning arises between the interaction of the reader (or readers) and a passage. To put it another way, does a passage mean anything if no one reads it? Let’s illustrate that with a brief exercise that invites a few questions.

Exercise: Most of us have a favorite passage of Scripture. Let’s start by naming ours. Then, after sharing your favorite passage, talk a little bit about why. Why that passage? What was going on in your life that made it particularly meaningful? Was it read during a church service? Where do you first remember hearing it? Have you ever heard a sermon on it? Did that affect how you heard it? Have you shared it with others? Under what circumstances?

These kinds of questions remind us that “meaning” comes from a relationship between the passage being considered and us as we read it together and listen for God’s voice.

Questions to Consider After Watching the Presentation

In the presentation, Pastor Ruud talks about looking “around” a passage to understand it better in its theological and liturgical (worship) contexts, and “in front of” the passage to remind us that how we read and understand Scripture is very much shaped by what is going on in the world and in our lives.

Has it ever occurred to you that you have a particular theological lens that you bring to bear when you read Scripture? That is, that when you read one passage, your interpretation and understanding of it is very much shaped by all the other passages you've read and interpretations you offered or heard over the years. We are also very much shaped by how we imagine God. Similarly, what is going on "around" a passage when we're hearing it read – whether it's in a Bible study, Sunday service, or during a funeral, for instance – also shaped how we understand it.

Similarly, what is going on in your life and in the world very much shaped what we hear. Consider St. Paul's affirmation in his Letter to the Romans that "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God" (8:28a). If things are going relatively well in our life, we might nod our heads in assent. If things are challenging – having recently lost a job or struggling with illness, for instance – we might hear Paul's words as encouragement. If you are living through tragedy – the unexpected death of a loved one or a house that caught fire, for instance – you might struggle to agree with Paul's affirmation and even want to challenge him. None of these interpretations are wrong, and it's actually the very fact that Scripture speaks to us differently at different times and circumstances that makes us keep reading!

So go back to the exercise we did earlier about a favorite passage, and talk a little more about when it first became important, when and where you've heard it (in a service or a sermon, for instance) that were helpful, and in what circumstances you find it most important to you. All of this will help us focus on the variety of things "around" and "in front" of the passages we read that help us understand and appreciate them.

Going Deeper into the Word

We're going to try out two exercises this week that invite a deeper listening of Scripture.

The first is a practice of reading Scripture that is called "Lectio Divina" that invites a more personal reading of Scripture. It suggests choosing a passage and reading it three times aloud, each time asking slightly different questions. Let's try it out by reading [Psalm 23](#), one of the best known passages of Scripture.

Step 1: Read it aloud. After reading it, stay quiet for 30-60 seconds to notice what you heard. Then share (or, if you're doing this on your own, you can write it down) what words or phrases jumped out at you.

Step 2: Read it aloud again. (If you are in a group, have a different person read.) After again staying quiet for 30-60 seconds, ask what God is saying to you (as a person, as a group) in this passage. Where do you hear God encouraging, comforting, or teaching you?

Step 3: Read it aloud once again. This time, after staying quiet for 30-60 seconds, share what you think God is inviting you to do. What in the passage nudges you to live or act differently? Who needs your help? Who might benefit from hearing this passage or knowing more deeply the God it describes?

Step 4: Read it aloud a final time. After 30-60 seconds of quiet, close in prayer.

The second exercise is to imagine different circumstances that may shape how we read, understand, and appreciate Scripture. We'll continue working with Psalm 23. Read it aloud once more, and then consider these scenarios. (If you're in a group, you can assign a scenario to a different person.)

Sunday worship: We often hear Psalm 23 on the 4th Sunday of Easter, often called "Good Shepherd Sunday" because the Gospel reading is from John 10 where Jesus names himself the good shepherd. Read that passage

too – [John 10:1-21](#) – and ask how that shapes how you hear and understand Psalm 23. You can certainly talk about the passage from John, but the focus is still on the Psalm. :)

Funeral: Psalm 23 is a very popular choice at funerals. How would you hear and understand it in that context if you are a family member of the deceased? A spouse, child, parent? What might it mean?

Struggle: Consider various situations of struggle – the loss of a job, the end of an important relationship, a betrayal or disappointment, a sense of a loss of hope – how do these words speak to you in these situations. (Tip: be as concrete as you can in naming the challenging circumstances and then also as concrete in how the Psalm speaks to them.)

Bonus Activity

(There is [a second video](#) to assist with this exercise. In it, Pastor Lose explores the rest of the parable of the prodigal son from [Luke 15:11-32](#).)

As we talked about last 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). Last month we focused on the first and main part of the parable ([Luke 15:11:24](#)), asking ourselves what details stood out what we thought Jesus was trying to say both to the “sinners and tax collectors” and the “Pharisees and scribes” named in verses 1-2. This month, we’re going to go deeper with one of the suggestions we entertained last month, and that is to “bring the passage alive” by placing ourselves in the roles of one or more of the characters. A few questions will help:

- With which character do you identify most easily?
- Which one is harder to sympathize with? And why?
- Assign different characters to different members of the group – father, younger son, elder son – and ask each to “offer a defense” of his actions.
- Luke leaves the story open-ended. We don’t know if the younger brother really reforms and we don’t know if the elder brother enters the party. If you were to write the rest of the story, how would it go?
- How do you imagine these characters continuing their lives together?
- What would be the same and what would be different for each character?

Closing

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 do you think about your own “theology” and how do our worship practices shape how you hear a passage? Going forward, 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.

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.