

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

April's Question: What About the Really Hard – Or Even Weird – Parts? [Video can be watched here.](#)

Focus Statement and Summary

This may be one of the more challenging questions we encounter, because deeply ingrained in most of us is a reverence for the importance of Scripture that can make it difficult to voice our discomfort with some passages. Yet each of us has often read passages that raise serious questions for us about the validity, or even morality, of what we're reading. Whether it's the credibility of the creation accounts or the story of Jonah and the whale, or whether it's the number of offenses that biblical authors describe as meriting stoning, or justifications of slavery, or portrayals of God that seem violent or vengeful, there are passages littered across the pages of Scripture that seem hard, downright weird, and at times don't seem to reflect the God we know in Jesus.

One of the keys to addressing such passages will be recalling that across our course, we have regularly emphasized that the Bible is not simply a single book but rather is a collection – a collection of books, a collection of testimony, a collection of beliefs representing different cultures that span more than a millennium. Which means we probably shouldn't be surprised when we encounter things that seem different, or are challenging, or strike us as a little weird or even as morally suspect. The question becomes what we do when we hit those parts. In the presentation for this month, we suggest three interrelated levels (approaches) at which we might address these kinds of passages.

Approach 1) Paying attention to context and culture. The first step we identified was realizing that it's vital to keep in mind a) the context of a passage and b) the culture from which it comes. Knowing the context and genre of a passage helps set our expectations. Poetry is different than history which is different from apocalyptic literature which is different from a parable. Learning more about these elements by using a commentary or study Bible can make a big difference in helping us understand a passage better. Similarly, putting passages in their historical context and recognizing the insights and limitations of a particular culture help put passages in perspective. It was probably not the intention of the authors of the creation accounts, for instance, to offer a historical or geological or biological account of the formation of the earth but rather to tell a huge, mythic story that addressed some of life's largest questions.

Approach 2) Noting the temporal chasm between the biblical writers and us. The second level invites us to adopt a "that was then, this is now" sensibility to our reading of Scripture. Sometimes the gap between a particular view – of the role of women or children or assumptions about human sexuality or stances on human slavery, for instance – can be explained by the historical context and circumstances of the biblical authors. The values that guided a nomadic tribe regularly at risk of extinction in the 5th or 7th centuries BC are, not surprisingly, very different than those of an industrialized and democratic society of the twenty-first. Sometimes that's easier, recognizing that we simply know far more about evolution than the biblical authors did (even while admitting they may have at times a more realistic grasp on human nature!). There may be other times when, even though we may understand historically and contextually why biblical authors assumed certain societal realities, we may still disagree with them. No one in this course would advocate for purchase, sale, or ownership of another human, yet for most of history – including the time periods in which the Bible was written – slavery was assumed and justified.

Approach 3) Receiving the biblical authors as faithful but imperfect witnesses. As we've said before, the common element of all the biblical writings is that they were all authored by people who had an experience of the living God and wanted to share it. Their witness, in this regard, is faithful. But, because they are human and because they are writing within the limitations of their time and culture, their witness can be imperfect. There are times when we may question whether one passage of Scripture reflects God's character and will clearly, or even well. We may wonder, with some passages, whether the author/witness was faithful, but still wrong. That may feel like an uncomfortable assessment to make, but we actually make it all the time, based on how often we read a particular scripture, or use it to help us make sense of other passages, or (as a pastor) preach on it, etc. By naming our questions and reservations, we can examine them, share them with others for input, and invite Scripture itself to better challenge and question our assumptions as we more openly question and challenge some passages.

This third approach to addressing challenging passages introduces **the question of biblical authority**. What authority do we ascribe to the Bible as a whole and on what basis do we then make distinctions about which passages are more central? Pastor Lose introduced two views of the authority of Scripture. One, where every passage of Scripture – from the laws of Leviticus to Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" – is equally important and authoritative as any other. He described this as the "link chain" view of Scripture because of the maxim, "a chain is only as strong as its weakest link." He illustrated the second view of Scripture with a series of concentric circles, where those passages that witness most clearly to God's character and will help us assess the value of other passages which may fall further from the center and hold, on a day to day basis, less authority.

Opening Prayer

Dear God, invite us to trust that the Holy Spirit will guide our reading, discussing, and questioning of Scripture that we might have better insight into your will, and help us to read all of the Bible in light of the grace and mercy we experience most fully in the story of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Opening Questions to Consider Before Watching the Presentation

- What are the hard or difficult passages you've encountered when reading Scripture? (Suggestion to make a list of three passages, as we'll come back to these.)
- How do you make sense of them? Do you ignore them, seek help from a study Bible or commentary or pastor to understand them?

Questions to Consider After Watching the Presentation

- How comfortable are you with entertaining the possibility that some passages of Scripture may witness to God's character and will more clearly than others? Why do you think that is?
- Which passages seem most central and important to you?

Scripture Reading Exercise

There are two parts to this exercise in reading Scripture. The first is exploring John 3:16, perhaps the world's most beloved and most famous Bible verse and one that serves as a central passage about God's character for many of us. But as beloved as this verse is, we often don't read it in its larger context. So, first, let's do just that by reading the [third chapter of John's Gospel](#) aloud. Then discuss the following questions:

- How do you hear John 3:16 in light of the earlier part of the chapter and its discussion of Nicodemus?
- How do you hear John 3:16 in light of the verses that follow?
- How does this passage speak to you and your life?
- How does it help you understand John's Gospel and, indeed, the whole Bible?
- What does it tell you about God?
- What questions remain for you about this passage?
- Evaluate the claim that John 3:16 is "the gospel in miniature"?

- Does it seem like this is one verse or passage where we find the “center” of Scripture?
- Are there other passages that might also play this role?
- Can you state in a sentence the chief value or import of this passage when reading other parts of Scripture?

The second part of this exercise is to look at one or more of the passages you (and/or your group) named and listed as difficult earlier in light of the three approaches we identified above and, particularly, with regard to the third approach, using John 3:16 as a central passage of Scripture that helps us interpret and assess other passages.

- First, name again what makes it a difficult passage: is it hard to understand, offer a complicated or uncomfortable picture of God, or seem to offer dubious ethical counsel?
- How does reading that passage alongside John 3:16 shed additional light on the passage in question?
- Where would that more difficult passage fall on your set of concentric circles?
- What else would you need to help you understand the difficult passage better?

Bonus Video and Activity

[\(There is a second video to assist with this exercise.\)](#)

In the “bonus video,” Pastor Lose invites you (and members of your group) into two brief exercises that help identify your sense of the “center of Scripture.” In the first, you and each member of your group are invited to choose the **five books of the Bible** that are most important to you. After doing so, talk about which books you chose and why. For instance, you probably didn’t choose Matthew, Mark, and Luke because they are so similar. So which one did you take and what informed that decision? Did you choose Exodus, for the giving of the Ten Commandments, or Genesis, where God makes the covenant with Abraham? Do you choose the Psalms for devotional reading? How many and which of Paul’s letters did you choose? Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. The second exercise is similar, inviting you to choose **five stories or passages** that are most central to your understanding of God. Again, after naming and sharing your choices, talk about what made you choose these particular passages and stories.

Then, after either (or both) of the exercises, ask three more questions:

- 1) What did you learn about your sense of the center of Scripture from naming your choices? What does this tell you about your sense of who God is?
- 2) What did you learn from listening to the choices others made? How might their convictions shape your own? If you could, would you reconsider any of your choices in light of your discussion?
- 3) How does all of this inform your sense of how you read and interpret Scripture? How did clarifying some of your values about Scripture make it easier to examine and adjust those values? How do you think it will shape the way you read the Bible going forward?

Closing

We started this unit by admitting that we sometimes find reading Scripture challenging because some passages are just plain hard. Can you name one insight from this month’s discussion that may help you the next time you encounter a difficult passage? And how has this month’s presentation, Bible study, and exercises informed how you think about the Bible as a whole and your approach to reading and interpreting it? What more would you like to learn about Scripture at this point in your journey?

Prayer: *Dear God, you have given us minds to use when reading and studying your Word, and you have blessed us with the Holy Spirit to remind us of your grace and mercy in Christ. 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.*