

Encountering God in Scripture

Participants' Guide

S E S S I O N S

TEN BIG QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

- How did we get our Bible?
- What is the authority of the Bible?
- How do we use the Bible?
- What are the barriers to reading the Bible?
- Why read the Bible?
- How should we not read the Bible?
- What questions should we ask?
- Should we interpret the Bible literally?
- Who decides what the Bible really says?
- How do we get meaning from the Bible?

FIVE BIBLE STUDIES

- Jesus Forgives the Sinful Woman with Dr. James Boyce
- The Sabbath Principle with Dr. Rolf Jacobson
- The Story of Jonah with Dr. Diane Jacobson
- Jesus Raises the Widow's Son at Nain with Dr. Matthew Skinner
- The Story of Cornelius with Dr. Sarah Henrich

F E A T U R I N G

13 TEACHERS FROM LUTHER SEMINARY

- James Boyce- professor of New Testament
- Diane Jacobson- professor of Old Testament
- Rolf Jacobson- professor of Old Testament
- Matthew Skinner- professor of New Testament
- Sarah Henrich- professor of New Testament
- Craig Koester- professor of New Testament
- Fred Gaiser- professor of Old Testament
- Arland Hultgren- professor of New Testament
- Mark Hillmer- professor of Old Testament
- Mark Throntveit- professor of Old Testament
- David Tiede – former president of Luther Seminary, professor of New Testament
- Terry Fretheim- professor of Old Testament
- Mary Hinkle Shore- professor of New Testament

To learn more about these presenters visit luthersem.edu

Disc 1: Ten Big Questions

SESSION: HOW DID WE GET OUR BIBLE?

Suggestions from video: The Bible is...Oral tradition, varied tradition, emerging authority, other books emerge, gathered material, begins in experience, life was first, became cohesive, long process, collection of stories and letters, need to preserve, discerning process, Holy Spirit active, criterion of use, rule of faith.

A Beginner's Guide to Reading the Bible:

Chapter 3 (pg 29) How Was the Old Testament Formed?

Chapter 4 (pg 41) How Was the New Testament Formed?

Chapter 5 (pg. 55) Who Decide Which Books Belong in the Bible?

Questions for discussion:

1. How did this sit with you?
2. It can be troubling that the Bible was collected over time from a variety of people.
3. How does your understanding of the way God works in history, in and through humans, square with the way the Bible was brought together?
4. In biblical times stories and sayings were passed on orally. It was the most trusted means of transmission. The whole community owned the story and knew the story.
5. The benefit of a written tradition is that the stories and sayings could be shared with those far away. They recognized the need for a written record because the original witnesses were dying. In the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, he makes mentions that others had written down the story and sayings of Jesus.
6. How do you respond to the idea that the transmission of these texts didn't come down from heaven?
7. The claims about the Koran and the Book of Mormon are that they are the God's words set down word-for-word directly to humans. Some Christians make this claim about the Bible, but the Christian Scriptures show a variety of written styles and languages, translation challenges and historical conditions.
8. How human can the Scripture be and still be divinely inspired? Does divine inspiration require word-for-word transmission?

Disc 1: Ten Big Questions

SESSION: WHAT IS THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE?

Suggestions from the video: Experience as truth, authority between the word and the reader, others witness to its authority, time tested, convicting power, God uses the ordinary, God's Word is vulnerable, God comes in human form, God works through earthly means, God was active in human process, inspiration continues, demonstrates authority by invoking faith, openness to authority, acknowledging the authority, God speaks through Scripture, God's love story, the word has power.

A Beginner's Guide to Reading the Bible:

Chapter 1, page 12 there is a section on The Bible As an Authoritative Book.

Questions for discussion:

1. Why is the Bible authoritative for you?
2. How has it become an authority for you? Have you seen the bumper sticker that says, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it. What do think about that statement?
3. Some Christians insist on the words "infallible" and "inherent" or "literally true" as a way to describe or assert the authority of the Bible. What words would you use to describe the Bible's authority? What do you think about it?
4. Is it possible to make an idol out of the Bible? Martin Luther describes the Scripture as the manger that holds and presents Christ to the world. Does the Bible need to be perfect by scientific standards to communicate the truth about Christ?

SESSION: HOW DO WE USE THE BIBLE?

Suggestions from the video: The Bible in worship, connects us to God's people, shapes our language, shaped our culture, gets us places, shapes our world view, makes sense of our own story, we're in the story, it shapes us, it tells me who I am, it forms your life, what God is up to, it's not a weapon, it's not an instruction book, not an answer book, Bible builds community, live in the Bible, doing business with those texts, it seeps into you.

Questions for discussion:

1. How have you used the Bible or experienced the Bible being used?
2. Some have used it to understand who Jesus is, some have used it as a rule book, some have used it to judge others some have used it to pray, some have used it bless others. Monastic orders (like one that Martin Luther belongs to) used memorized Scripture to sing, worship, study etc.

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3. Most of us have heard that you can use the Bible to prove just about any point of view that is known as “proof-texting.”
4. The Bible can be experienced differently at different times in your life or in different experiences. Verses or stories that didn’t really speak to you before may really become important at a different time. How has that been true for you?
5. Two speakers suggested that the Bible wouldn’t provide ready answers to modern societal answers. But they also suggested that if you live in the world of the Bible, such living will shape your response to modern challenges. How do you see the Bible as a simple answer book?
6. What are some of your favorite hymns? Are there any direct scriptural citations in the verses? How has the liturgy or hymns helped been informed by Scripture?

SESSION: WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO READING THE BIBLE?

Suggestions from the video: Attention span, fear, too big, placement of the books, patriarchal, alien world, scary texts, disturbing images of God, expecting to find a moral to every story, no instructions, adult literature, like a river, not simple, not a search engine, lack of knowledge, freelance reading, needing experts, two worlds meet.

The Beginner’s Guide to the Bible:

Chapter 6 (pg. 67) How Have People Viewed the Bible?

Questions for discussion:

1. What keeps you from reading the Bible? The speakers listed lots of reasons that people cite for not reading the Bible, what is your experience?
2. Martin Luther said that the Bible’s main function is to reveal Christ to the reader. He understood that some passages revealed Christ better than others. Luther, however, saw Christ all over the Old Testament material as well. Would you agree with him? What do you think about his take on the main function of the Bible?
3. What are the benefits of reading the Bible with others over-against reading it by yourself?

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SESSION: WHY READ THE BIBLE?

Suggestions from the video; God communicates, grounded in the promises, the last word, God is not abstract, shared humanity, access to biblical characters, common experience, universal human experience, same God, God is near, Who is this God? It does God, creates our identity, God's presence.

A Beginner's Guide to Reading the Bible:

Chapter 1 (pg. 9) Why Read the Bible?

Chapter 8 (pg. 91) How Should I Read the Bible?

Questions for discussion:

1. Why read the Bible? Why read the Bible over-against another book? (for instance: Purpose Driven Life, Chicken Soup for the Soul, etc.)
2. This is a rare time in history when most people can read for themselves, including the Bible. On the other hand, it is said, "I don't need to know what is under the hood in order to drive the car" or "I don't need to know about the Bible because the pastor tells me all I need to know." What is your experience with this? Is this true? Why might it be important to have an experience of the Bible first hand?
3. We live in a country where lots of people read the Bible and have a lot of Bible knowledge. Do some friends and relatives seem to know the Bible better than you? Do you get intimidated by Bible quoting? (Remember: just because one has read the Bible well does not mean that one interprets or understands it well.)
4. How has your reading of the Bible informed or changed your view of God? View of humanity? View of yourself?

SESSION: HOW SHOULD WE NOT READ THE BIBLE?

Suggestions from the video: Not a book on reality, not an instruction book, what does it mean for me? What was at stake? Proving my point, not a data bank, see the larger context, don't assume you know the answer, more like a marriage, read the parts you don't agree with, be self-aware, we are not the only readers, not a text book, not a private matter, never heard in isolation, don't read it on the flat.

Questions for discussion:

1. After hearing the speakers, did any of them say anything new, surprising, disturbing regarding how not to read the Bible?

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2. Disagreements about what the Bible said have torn many Christian communities apart. How do you experience the Bible being used as a weapon or a source of division?
3. The Bible is used as a guide for life, but it is not primarily that or only that. How can it be guide for life? How is that different than an answer book or moral instruction book?
4. To what extent is reading the Bible a process of telling the difference between what is command and what is promise? What is the difference for you in reading commands and promise?

SESSION: WHAT QUESTIONS COULD WE ASK?

Suggestions from the video: Bible invites asking questions, where does it come from? When to whom, and by whom and why? Do you understand it? Go to the part you don't understand, use study Bible, Bible is full of questions, who, what, where, how, why and when? What bothers me? Ask the questions, who are the characters? How would this have been heard? Bring best questions to the text, details matter.

Questions for discussion:

1. What passages and portions of Scripture have you found confusing? What has helped you make sense of it?
2. Have you found yourself in situations, where is hard to ask questions?
3. Think of the average worship service, where an old testament, psalm and gospel passages are read publicly, but there is no opportunity for discussion during the service. What is the disadvantage of reading Scripture this way? How could your congregation help provide a place to ask questions who, what, where, when, why?
4. Is there someone you know who has an admirable understanding of Scripture? What are the benefits to asking the hard questions and spending the time answering the questions about the Bible?
5. Which of these resources provide the most help for further understanding: study Bible, taking a class, informal Bible study, websites, articles, books, meeting with the pastor, Bible tutors, what else?

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SESSION: SHOULD WE INTERPRET THE BIBLE LITERALLY?

Suggestions from the video: Scientific interpretation, where is the gospel, who is faithful? Enjoy the humor, many levels, recognize form, trust the promise, expand imagination, use imagination, read on several levels, different kinds of material, read literally, read it for what it is, many kinds of literature.

Questions for discussion:

1. What does “literal truth” mean?
2. The Bible is similar to a newspaper in that it contains a variety of forms of literature: historical accounts, wisdom literature or lists of sayings, music, poetry, correspondence, apocalyptic visions, and stories of origins, Would any of these types of literature contain less truth than others?
3. Is it necessary for the story of Jonah to be an actual historical event to contain truth about the way God works with humans? If this question raises more issues about historical truth, watch the Bible study session on Jonah, which demonstrates other ways of reading texts.
4. Do modern ideas about scientific truth cloud the way in which we receive truth and meaning from the Scriptures?

SESSION: WHO DECIDES WHAT THE BIBLE REALLY SAYS?

Suggestions from the video: Individual and church, councils decided, Bible and deliberation, interpretation that serves the gospel, scholarship is important, pastoral authority, authority of tradition, The Gospel is the final word.

Questions for discussion:

1. In the Protestant tradition, no one single person is set apart to have the final say in what a text means. What are the pros and cons of that tradition in your opinion?
2. In terms of scriptural authority, how would you rank these authorities? Individual experience, consensus of a Bible study group, pastor of a church, television preacher, bishop, seminary faculty, the pope?
3. Is it possible to live and worship with other Christians who don't share your interpretation of the Bible?
4. In the Lutheran tradition, scriptural authority lies in the ability of a text to point to Christ. Is that helpful to you? How does that compare to other principals of authority?

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SESSION: HOW DO WE GET MEANING FROM THE BIBLE?

Suggestions from the video: It's what connects with you, God becomes real, it's an open book, read and wait, meaning doesn't always come, can't force meaning, find meaning with others, learn from others, be open to fresh insight, new meaning emerges, the Bible interprets you.

Questions for discussion:

1. One speaker indicated that when you go looking for God in Scripture it just might happen that God finds you. What has been your experience with the way in which meaning comes to you from the pages of the Bible?
2. Aside from the Bible, what other books or literature have given you insights about God or about human life? Why does the Scripture carry a higher level of authority and sacredness than such books?
3. In the past have you found Bible study in a group study to offer greater insight and meaning than when reading the Bible on your own?
4. If you approach a Biblical text expecting, or even demanding, a certain meaning, is it possible to shut yourself off from what God wants to reveal to you through a text? Note that several speakers continued to gain fresh insights even after studying texts for many years.

BONUS MATERIAL: DR. CRAIG KOESTER DESCRIBES HOW THE BIBLE WAS PUT TOGETHER.

Disc 2: Bible Studies

DR. ROLF JACOBSON: THE SABBATH PRINCIPLE

Various passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy

Questions for discussion:

1. In your experience, what does Sabbath mean? What did that look like in your family and community?
2. Exodus 20:8 says to keep Sabbath holy because of God's creation. Deuteronomy 5:12 reminds us to keep the Sabbath because of what God did for us in Egypt when we were slaves. What is the difference to you in these two commands?
3. Exodus 31:12 The sign of the relationship or covenant of God and his people is the keeping of the Sabbath. How do you see this? How has this shaped you?
4. Exodus 23:14 Sabbath is a daily time with God, a weekly time with God, an annual time with God. How do you see these regular rhythms of faith? What times are holy or separate to you or your family?
5. Exodus 23:10-11 How does God build in care for the poor and animals into the lives of his people then, and now? This is described as God's gracious intrusion into the economic realities of his people.
6. The Sabbath principal: Deuteronomy 15:1. In the seventh year there is to be a remission of debt. What did this do for the people, both the debtors and the lenders? How radical is this principal or commandment? How have you seen God at work to intrude or break bondage?
7. Sabbath means:
 - A. A regular time being in relationship with God
 - B. God's gracious intrusion at regular place where bondage occurs
 - C. God provides for usWhich ones of these are new to you? What do they tell you about God?
8. Exodus 16:13 Some of us fear that there won't be enough and so it is hard to take a break from work. What does that do to us (physically, in relationships, emotionally, in our relationship to God)? Does it affect you at all to hear the promise that God will provide? In what ways? What is the modern dilemma?
9. How have we built our modern American lives to break this commandment? What would you see change if we kept the commandment?
10. How do you see the connection of fasting in Isaiah 58:6 to Sabbath living? How can the loosening the chains of injustice and setting the oppressed free be Sabbath living? Look back at the three meanings of Sabbath in question seven. What surprised you about this study? What did you learn? What did you already know? Is there anything that will change (attitude, behavior) from your new understanding of Sabbath?

DR. MATTHEW SKINNER: JESUS RAISES THE WIDOW'S SON AND NAIN

Luke 7:11-17

- Read the text together.
- Summarize the story and include any details that stand out.

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Questions for discussion:

1. What parts of this story seem important to you? Why?
2. How does Jesus reveal who he is? Who is he?
3. How does Jesus relate to the vulnerable widow? Why is this significant?
4. Why did Jesus raise the young man (boy)? Why this particular boy? To show his power? Compassion?
5. What happens by putting this story between the healing of the centurion (Luke 7:1-10) and the encounter with John the Baptist (Luke 7:18-35)? How is the gospel writer revealing the identity of the Messiah?
6. I Kings 17:24 and II Kings 4:8-37 How does this story help us understand Jesus' healing the boy in Luke?
7. What does this story mean for us? Compassion, help for the vulnerable, sharing the good news of the Savior, confession of faith?
8. How is God still making people whole today?
9. What other stories of the Bible speak to you? Which ones are difficult?
10. What did you learn about Jesus?

DR. JAMES BOYCE: JESUS FORGIVES THE SINFUL WOMAN

Luke 7:36-50

- Texts to keep in mind Luke 5:27-32 (the call of Levi) and Luke 7:18-35 (John the Baptist).
- Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me. (Luke 7:23)

Questions for discussion:

1. With whom do you identify in the story? Why?
2. What makes you uncomfortable in this story? Is there anything that gives you comfort?
3. What surprises you? What expectations do you have around this story? Images, inspirations?
4. Why did Jesus accept the invitation to eat at the Pharisee's house? Was Jesus up to something?
5. What is your response to the sinful woman's actions?
6. How did you expect the Pharisee to respond to the woman's actions?
7. What is the significance of the act of anointing Jesus?
8. What is the significance of the fact that it was a "sinful woman" doing the anointing and doing it in the house of a Pharisee?
9. Why did the Pharisee (and many of the people of that time) not know what to make of Jesus? What about people today?
10. What does it mean that Jesus is a prophet? John the Baptist sends followers to ask if Jesus is the one they

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were waiting for.

11. It is suggested that the woman performs a worshipful act out of love and seems to get who Jesus is. Who seems to have a greater understanding and why is that important?
12. Why is it hard to think in terms of Jesus forgiving quantity of debt or sin (our own or someone else's)? Does it matter? Does our culture measure sin? How?
13. Where does God's love and forgiveness find this woman? Is that the Pharisee's view?
14. Do you think that the level or intensity of her actions was a clue as to the level of her pain or discomfort? How has your own circumstances influenced your image and relationship with God?
15. Does the boundary crossing behavior make you uncomfortable? Does Jesus forgiving her make you uncomfortable?
16. If her sins were already forgiven, then is her reply of thankfulness? Or because she shows love, than she is forgiven? Does this make you uncomfortable?
17. Faith and salvation have the last word in this story. Is this what gets portrayed primarily in American Christian messages? Why is this last sentence important to you?

DR. DIANE JACOBSON: THE BOOK OF JONAH

The Book of Jonah

Questions for discussion:

1. Why is it significant that Jonah is the official prophet for the temple in Israel?
2. How are the sailors characterized? What are they like? How is Jonah portrayed?
3. Sheol is Hebrew for Place of the Dead. Jonah describes his time in the fish as Sheol. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for 3 days and 3 nights. Some point out the parallel with Jesus' descent into hell for 3 days only to rise again.
4. Jonah's proclamation to Nineveh, how effective was he? What was God up to in Nineveh?
5. How does the absolute repentance of the people of Nineveh look like against Jonah's resentful and angry demeanor? What does that tell us about Jonah? About God? About what this story is telling us?
6. God uses outsiders (sailors and Ninevites) to further his kingdom. Who are the sailors and Ninevites to you? (other nationalities, religions, social groups, etc.) Are you surprised?
7. Jonah 4:2b "for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." This is the central creedal statement about God. What is your experience with the gracious God? How has God been slow to anger or relenting with you or your world?
8. What is the most important thing or message of Jonah?
9. What do you find humorous in the book of Jonah?
10. What is distracting about this story? Who is/are your favorite character(s) and why?
11. What do you think about Jonah? What does he represent? Then? Now? At whom was this message

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aimed? Then and now?

12. Does it matter if this story is or isn't historically true?

DR. SARAH HENRICH: THE STORY OF CORNELIUS

Acts 10:1-48

Questions for discussion:

1. This is the point at which the Gospel is opened beyond Israel to Gentiles. A non-Israelite who is described as a devout man who feared God, is given a command to have his men go to Joppa and bring back Simon Peter. God uses a non-Jew to further his kingdom in a new way. Cornelius is a Roman soldier, do you think he was praying to the God of Israel?
2. The vision of Cornelius came at three in the afternoon. Peter's vision happened three times. Why is that significant? Sometimes three is a significant number coming out of the Old Testament, helping God's people understand that God is at work.
3. Peter is confronted with the irrelevance of the laws in Leviticus, by God's claim, "what God has made clean, you must not call profane." There was a change in laws here. Have you ever been confronted with a new reality that challenged you? How was that?
4. How is the temptation of Peter like the temptation of Jesus by Satan?
5. How do we know when God is talking to us? What counts as communication from God? What gives it authority or how can we trust it? For Cornelius? For Peter? For you?
6. In verse 17, it describes that Peter was greatly puzzled. Does that make you feel better to know that Peter struggled to make sense of things?
7. Peter welcomes in the Gentiles and hears their request and goes with them. He brings witnesses with him. Why?
8. Peter is asked to do something uncomfortable by gathering with unclean people. Does God ever ask you to do things distasteful or odd?
9. Peter and his Jewish friends gather in Cornelius' house with the assembled gentiles. This is a mixing of clean and unclean and forbidden by Jewish law. How does Peter do this? Notice in verse 28, it moves from anything to anyone, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." It is a move away from the Jewish understanding of the centrality of the laws in scripture to a center in the ministry of Jesus (even if it means outside of Israel). Radical discipleship! How are we called to live this way in our own lives and congregations?
10. This story is a blurring of the lines between clean and unclean for the early followers of Jesus. They had long clung to rules of the Jewish people and now the landscape is beginning to shift. What does that say about the radical message of Jesus? How is the idea of mixing clean and unclean, saint and sinner found its way into our worship and liturgy? What is important about that shift for the Christian believer?
11. How does this story encourage us to break the Gospel out of our own communities to others?
12. How does God continue to use outsiders to further his kingdom?