

THE

BIBLE IS

FOR REAL!

A family devotional by  
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# SESSION ONE

## **What Is the Bible and Why Might I Want to Read It?**

*HINT: The Goal Is More Than Just Knowing Stuff*

In this first session,<sup>1</sup> we are going to explore three big issues about the Bible:

1. What is the Bible?
2. How did we get it?/How did it come to be?
3. Why might I want to read it?

### **Opening Prayer**

Dear God, thank you that You are real. You have made Yourself known to us throughout history—through stories, events, miracles, teachings—and ultimately, through Jesus Christ. Help us now become more aware of You in our lives as we talk about the Bible. Amen.

Before we get going into the main discussion, let's start with an icebreaker for everyone in the group.

### **ICEBREAKER: Story Time!**

In this fun and crazy icebreaker, your mission as a family is to create a single story by beginning with one word and adding on to it as the story progresses. You will select one person to begin and then take turns around the table, having each person add to the word given by the person before them. Then continue a handful of rounds until you and your family have created a fun story together.

*Debrief by reflecting on the following questions:*

1. Why might I want to read it? What was your favorite part of the story?
2. If it was fun and crazy, what made it so?

*Then read this:*

What makes this kind of story so fun is the lack of cohesiveness to the story. There is usually no common thread that runs throughout. The fact that there is no beginning or end adds to the ridiculousness of it.

## Section 1: What Is the Bible?

Well, the truth is that the Bible is not like the story in the icebreaker. The Bible truly has a definitive beginning and end. When we think about the Bible—or simply when people refer to the Bible—it is acknowledged as a book. And while that is true in so many ways, it is actually not just a book. It's better understood as being a library of books. The Bible contains several books, 66 in fact, and many different genres (styles) of writing comprise it. Genres that make up the Bible include history, poetry, apocalyptic (metaphorical writing of the future/the end), prophetic, eyewitness writing, and letters.

In addition, the Bible has cohesion to it. BibleProject describes the Bible as “a unified story that leads to Jesus.”<sup>ii</sup> There is something profoundly true in that statement, yet something that so many Christians (friends of Jesus) forget or remain unaware of. It's this: The Bible is not merely a library of books written so that we can gain knowledge or more information from them. Given that the Bible is a unified story that leads to Jesus, the ultimate goal of reading Scripture is not just to know more stuff. It is to know, to encounter, to somehow experience the love, the truth, the beauty, and the power of Jesus in and through reading the massive story that leads to Him, a story found within the pages of the Bible.

Let's stop now for a moment to ask a question and discuss it as a group:

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GROUP QUESTION: Has there ever been a moment in your life when you would say you thought or felt God to be real? If so, what was that moment and when did it happen?

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There are so many ways in which we can experience God. We might sense His greatness on a hike or in singing a song or maybe in the quiet before we go to sleep. Maybe we sense it when we wake up, or while in a conversation with friends or at church. There really are so many ways in which we can experience God personally as real.

The Bible, writes one of its authors, is “living and active” (Hebrews 4:12). One of the reasons the Bible is *living* is that in it are truths pointing to the saving and life-giving power of Jesus Christ. The Bible is living because it contains stories about a living God who wants us to know Him, to hear Him speak to us, and to be changed by Him.

This means that among the many ways in which we can experience God's love, power, truth, and help in our lives (experiencing God as real), reading the Bible has been, and remains today, one of the primary ways in which we can encounter God. We will come back to this point near the end of our time in this study together.

## Section 2: How Did We Get It?/How Did It Come to Be?

The question of how we got the Bible is such a big question. In a way, how we answer for the Old Testament is slightly different from how we answer for the New Testament, but only because the Old Testament ranges back so much farther in time.

There are a couple of very helpful observations to keep in mind when we are wondering how the Bible came to be:

First, both testaments were universally accepted by God's people: the Old Testament by Israel and the New Testament by the early church. This universal acceptance was a major "box needing to be checked" in order for the books to be seen as Scripture rather than merely important sacred texts or religious texts that were not part of Scripture.

Second, Jews and Christians viewed what's been termed the "internal witness of the Holy Spirit" to be crucial to deciphering which books would be included in the Bible. This simply meant that "the Spirit of God bore witness to the early readers of Scripture that these books and no others were the inspired Word of God."<sup>iii</sup>

But how do we know that the right books are in the Bible? The short but important answer to that is the fact that Jesus Himself quoted from the Scriptures. He saw the Old Testament (also known as the Hebrew Scriptures) as God's Word. So, as has often been said by Bible scholars about Jesus, "to accept his authority is to accept the authority of the Old Testament."<sup>iv</sup>

And how do we answer the same question about the New Testament and its books? It's what's called "the confirmation of the apostles." Translation: the fact that the men who directly received instruction from Jesus Himself during His time on earth also accepted and confirmed the New Testament books punctuates the Bible's authority. There are so many things that can be said here. Yet one important point to observe from this detail is that how the Bible was shaped and formed, specifically the New Testament, was not something that came together decades, and most certainly not centuries, after the events it referred to. What is now universally acknowledged as the Bible was decided very early after those events occurred.

## Section 3: Why Might I Want to Read It?

### FAMILY FUN TIME: “I Didn’t Know That”

In this final activity, you will take turns around the table and share one thing about yourself that no one knows about you. After sharing, if someone did in fact know this fact about you, then you have to come up with a new thing until you share something no one knows about you. Begin when you are ready.

*Once you are done, debrief by reflecting on the following question:*

What was the most surprising thing you learned about someone else?

*Then read this:*

The truth is that we can be sitting right next to the ones we love the most and be surprised we can still learn something new about them.

Why might we want to read the Bible? Because God loves us and wants to have a relationship with us. So when we read the Bible, we have the opportunity to learn more about Him.

### Closing Discussion

We will close by reading two passages of Scripture. The first is from Exodus, telling how the people of Israel are saved from Pharaoh.

*Have one person in the group read Exodus 14:19-31.*

The second is from Luke, in which Jesus tells the story of the lost son.

*Have another person in the group read Luke 15:11-32.*

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GROUP QUESTION: What do these two passages from the Bible tell us about what God is like?

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In both of these stories, we read about God’s power to save, His mercy, and His relentless love for His people and for us. In the story of the sea being parted, God’s power is on full display. The story of the father running after his son is actually a picture describing God’s love for His people. In reality, God is the one who comes after us even when we have made bad choices and messed up.

In summary, the Bible is a gift from God. This gift is a story that has a cohesive storyline with a beginning and an end. When we read this story, we learn about this God, who wants to have a relationship with us.

## Closing Prayer

Dear God, thank you for giving us the Bible. Help us become more aware of Your presence when we read it. As we come to know more information through reading the stories in the Bible's pages, help us to encounter You in all of it. Amen.

## Digging Deeper

For more information about how the Bible came to be, see William D. Mounce's book *Why I Trust the Bible*, specifically chapters 5, 6, and 13 (chapters 5 and 6 under "The Canon" section, and chapter 13 titled "The Historicity of the Old Testament"). All chapters are helpful when it comes to the content discussed in this session.

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<sup>i</sup> Content in Sessions 2, 3, and 5 is taken from Nathan Betts' book *Short Answers to Life's Biggest Questions*.

<sup>ii</sup> BibleProject, <https://bibleproject.com/about/>, accessed 6/1/2023.

<sup>iii</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *How We Got the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), p. 11.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

# SESSION TWO

## The Bible Is History!

### *Exploring the Different Ways in Which the Bible Is Rooted in History*

In this second session,<sup>i</sup> we are going to look at different ways in which the Bible, particularly the Gospels, is grounded in history. All throughout this series, we are going to be looking at how the Bible is true—how it is *for real*. Today we are going to zoom in on some of the exciting ways in which we can know through the lens of history that the Bible is true:

1. We are going to explore how we can know that the Gospel stories (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are true.
2. We'll look at how this tells us more about the trustworthiness of Jesus Christ.
3. Then we'll look at how those first two details—the trustworthiness of the Gospels and the trustworthiness of Jesus—give us confidence in the credibility of the Old Testament.

### Opening Prayer

Dear God, thank you that You are real. Thank you for giving us the Bible. And thank you for revealing to us what You are like through Jesus Christ and through the Bible. Today, help us to discover more about the truth found in the Bible and in Jesus. Please encourage our hearts and minds by what we discuss together. Amen.

To start this session, let's begin with a group question. The group leader can start by asking the question and offering one idea. Then move on to the next person until all have responded.

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GROUP QUESTION: What would you say if a friend came to you and said, "That stuff in the Bible isn't even true. How do you know the information about Jesus in the Bible is true?"

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We are going to be looking at that question in different ways throughout this series. This might be a good time to mention that although there are many statements which people bring against the Bible and Christianity, there is a commonly held assumption among Bible scholars, including both those of faith and those who do not believe. This assumption is that Jesus Christ was a real person who lived in first century Palestine.



## Section 1: Was Jesus a Real Person?

Let's take a look at some of the information we have on the life of Jesus Christ (and there is a lot!).

First, it should be noted that the Gospel writers provide the most extensive data for the life of Jesus. New Testament (and skeptical) scholar Bart Ehrman writes:

If historians want to know what Jesus said and did, they are more or less constrained to use the New Testament Gospels as their principle sources. Let me emphasize that this is not for religious or theological reasons.... It is for historical reasons, pure and simple ... The only real sources available to the historian interested in the life of Jesus are therefore the New Testament Gospels.<sup>ii</sup>

With great detail, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell of the life of Jesus Christ. And they are considered reliable accounts by both skeptical and conservative scholars. Although Ehrman rightly points out how valuable this material is for the historical witness of Christ, it should be said that the Gospel writers were not setting out to prove merely that Jesus was a real person. That part was assumed! They were writing biographical accounts of Jesus. By giving eyewitness information concerning His life, teachings, interactions, miracles, death, and resurrection, the Gospel writers provided a detailed picture of who Jesus Christ was.

Second, in addition to what we find in the Bible itself, first century writers—such as Josephus, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny the Younger—whose works are well respected by historians of all stripes, give accounts of the person known as Jesus Christ. Why is this important? It reminds us that Christianity is a faith rooted in history. Throughout the Bible and supremely in the life of Jesus, we see that faith in God is belief based on evidence. Christianity is an eyes-wide-open faith.

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GROUP QUESTION: Christianity is often seen as space where people are good, kind, and ... also a bit *crazy* in the sense that Christians are people who believe in things that aren't physically there. When you hear of the Gospels being rooted in history, how does that change or help define what faith in God means?

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Any person will be hard pressed to find a professor of ancient history who does not believe that Jesus ever lived. Historian John Dickson puts the matter plainly:

The claim that Jesus of Nazareth did not even exist has virtually no currency in contemporary scholarship. All the standard (secular) compendiums of ancient history judge the core of the story—that a popular Galilean teacher and reputed healer named Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem by order of Pontius Pilate—to be beyond reasonable doubt.<sup>iii</sup>

There is simply too much evidence defending the claim that there was in fact a person named Jesus of Nazareth who lived in first century Palestine.

It's worth pausing here for a moment to remind ourselves why all of this is important. In short, the reason why it's important to make the connection of Jesus and the Bible to history is because the whole of Christian faith orbits and centers around Jesus Christ Himself. So if we become wobbly about whether Jesus Christ actually lived, we most certainly have a problem.

But instead of looking into scholarship—specifically, the group of people who spend their lives studying and writing on ancient history—and finding doubtful literature about whether Christ existed, we discover reams upon reams of work showing overwhelming evidence that Jesus was in fact a real person in first century Palestine.

Let's pause briefly for a fun **Pop Quiz**.

*Ask the following question:*

Although we have not gone into great detail here, how would you answer a friend if they asked you whether Jesus actually existed?

## Section 2: The Bible—A Unified Story Pointing Us to Jesus

In our first session, we talked about the Bible being “a unified story that leads to Jesus.”<sup>iv</sup> Let's go a bit deeper into what that looked like, specifically through the eyes of Jesus.

In a story found in Luke's Gospel, after Jesus was raised from the dead, Jesus said this to His disciples, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44, NIV).

New Testament scholar William Mounce helps explain what Jesus was saying here:

Jesus' Bible included three parts:

- “The Law of Moses,” which is Genesis–Deuteronomy, also called the Pentateuch or the Torah.
- “The Prophets,” which includes both the former prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) and the latter prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve [Hosea–Malachi]).
- “The Psalms” is the first and largest book in the third collection of books generally called “the Writings.” In Hebrew canonical order, this includes Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles.<sup>v</sup>

And check out how William Mounce describes what Jesus was saying in Luke 24: “Jesus [is saying] that all these books ultimately point to him and are about him.”<sup>vi</sup> If Jesus had a microphone, it would have dropped right there. Or if the conversation had taken place on YouTube, the video would have gone viral! He was instructing His friends that all Scriptures have been pointing to Him.

In addition to this showing us a bold claim from Jesus, it also tells us something of how He viewed the Old Testament. As we read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we notice that Jesus often quotes from the Old Testament. That detail in itself reveals Jesus' high view of

the Old Testament. But perhaps more than that, when He makes the claim in Luke 24 that all the Scriptures have been pointing to Him, He is implicitly making two claims. The first is that what they had read of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) is true. The second is that those truths pointing to the future are fulfilled and realized in Him.

In a significant way then, Christians view the Old Testament as true because Jesus viewed it that way. We have a high view of the Old Testament because we have a high view of Jesus.

## Closing Discussion

It is easy to get lost in the details of this conversation. But as we end our session for today, it's important to remember that the same Jesus who uttered those profound words to His friends is the same Jesus who invites us to engage with Him, to talk to Him personally today. If the Bible is a unified story leading to Jesus, then it truly is a means by which we can know Him more.

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GROUP QUESTION: Through our reading of the Bible, what are ways in which we can get to know God better?

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## Closing Prayer

Dear God, thank you that You have provided evidence throughout history for us to believe in You. Thank you for sending us Your Son, Jesus. Please use the conversations we've had today to build in us a deeper knowledge and understanding of who You are and what You are like. And in all of it, help that knowledge and understanding to be a means by which we can come closer to You. Amen.

## Digging Deeper

For more details on how the Bible is a unified story pointing to Jesus, check out William D. Mounce's book *Why I Trust the Bible*, specifically chapter 13.

If you are interested in learning more about what we know about Jesus in history, John Dickson's small book *Is Jesus History?* is a great starting point.

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<sup>i</sup> Content in Sessions 2, 3, and 5 is taken from Nathan Betts' book *Short Answers to Life's Biggest Questions*.

<sup>ii</sup> Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and translations*, p. 229 (cited in Greg Monette, *The Wrong Jesus*, p. 39). See John Dickson's excellent short book *Is Jesus History?* for more on this.

<sup>iii</sup> John Dickson, *Is Jesus History?* (Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2019), p. 39.

<sup>iv</sup> BibleProject, <https://bibleproject.com/about/>, accessed 6/1/2023.

<sup>v</sup> William D. Mounce, *Why I Trust the Bible: Answers to real questions and doubts people have about the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), p. 250.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid*, p. 251.

# SESSION THREE

## Reporting Live:

### *How Eyewitness Information Points to the Trustworthiness of the Gospels*

In this third session,<sup>i</sup> we are going to explore the power that eyewitnesses have when it comes to establishing the truth of an event. There are many questions or objections raised regarding the Bible. But one basic question, and it's one that we've been dealing with throughout our sessions, could be phrased in a couple ways: *But how do you even know the stories about Jesus are true?* or *But how can you know this stuff in the Gospels is real?*

We are going to face these questions head-on in our time together today:

1. We'll briefly discuss the question just mentioned.
2. Then we'll look at one particular strand of data used by historians (i.e., people who spend their lives looking to verify fact from fiction) to decipher whether a work of antiquity, such as the Gospels, is true. In short, we are going to look at the power of eyewitnesses in the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), which are also known as the biographies of Jesus Christ.
3. Then we'll bring it all back to how this important and encouraging piece of evidence can change us personally today.

## Opening Prayer

Dear God, thank you that You are real. Help us now as we discuss another common question raised regarding the Bible. Please use the answers we find here to encourage our minds and hearts so that we not only gain more knowledge about You, but by Your Spirit, can become closer to You as a friend in this time. Amen.

To start this session, let's begin with a group question. The group leader can start by asking the question and offering one idea. Then move on to the next person until all have responded.

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GROUP QUESTION: Have you ever been in a situation or conversation in which a person says, "Prove it!" And have you ever had to prove something that was actually very hard to prove? If so, what did you do to persuade the person wanting proof?

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## Section 1: Author's Story

During college, I worked on the ground crew for a major league baseball team. It was my college dream job. I loved taking the subway down to the stadium, knowing that I would be working on a major league baseball field and getting to watch the game.

I was one of the guys whose job title was “ground crew,” but we could have just been called “guys who work with dirt and clay.” Most of our time was spent on field repairs—filling in the cleat holes that players dug around base paths, the pitcher’s mound, or home plate. We worked to ensure everything was repaired and aesthetically groomed for game conditions.

One season, my main job was to work on field repairs at home plate. On a typical day, we would place clay in the holes by hand, pound it down by foot, and then use a power machine for good measure and the smoothing touch. When the machine was off during this time, there was always lively conversation. No topic was off-limits.

I will never forget one conversation at home plate when one of the guys looked at me and said, “Nathan, I respect you. I respect what you believe and the way you live. But there is one thing I will never be able to believe. It’s this idea that Jesus Christ actually lived.” He glanced up from his bucket of clay, looked straight at me, and continued, “I mean, is it true that you believe Jesus Christ lived 2,000 years ago?” I nodded. “Well,” he continued, “we don’t even know what happened in history 50 years ago. How can we ever know what happened 2,000 years ago? How do you explain that?”

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GROUP QUESTION: How would you have answered that question? If someone were to say to you, “We have a hard time knowing what happened even 25 years ago! How can we possibly know what happened 2,000 years ago?”

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Well, I was stumped. I told my friend I needed a few minutes to think about it. I continued filling in holes with clay. I looked up and around the stadium and saw the World Series championship banners from years past. Thoughts began rolling through my mind. I started processing out loud.

“Think about it like this,” I started. “What if our team won the World Series this year? Then, say 20 years from now, you and I come down to the ballpark to watch a game with our sons. And when we sit down, you and I reminisce about this year when our team won the World Series. But as soon as we share in that moment, our sons break into laughter.

“ ‘There’s no way that could have happened!’ they argue. ‘This team is so bad, there is no way they could have ever won a World Series championship.’

“You and I then point to the World Series banners to prove our story. But our sons are still doubtful and opine that anybody could have paid money to have those banners put up. We then look at our sons and tell them that we were there. We were as close to the action as you can be without being in the action. We saw our team win the World Series in person. We were there!”

I was processing all of this out loud on the field with my colleague. I then suggested to him that this kind of “we were there” testing is something that historians use in establishing whether a historical event actually happened. And in the case of Jesus Christ, I suggested, there were plenty of people there. This is strikingly similar to how we view good journalism. Interviewing or observing different witnesses to get the full story is what honest journalists have always done.

Whether it be ancient or modern history, one of the most compelling ways by which we can verify history is through eyewitness accounts. Now, eyewitness testimony is not always trustworthy, but as soon as someone tells you they witnessed an event firsthand, their testimony of the event gains credibility. It is one key box that historians want checked in distinguishing history from falsification, truth from fiction.

## Section 2: The Power of Eyewitness Testimony

There is a passage in the New Testament that seems unremarkable until you start asking certain questions. The verse is found in one of the biographies of Jesus Christ, Mark’s Gospel:

And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross.<sup>ii</sup>

*Boring. Insignificant. A collective yawn.* If these words come to mind after reading that excerpt, maybe it will help to know I once shared your feelings. For years, I viewed these details as merely anecdotal to the bigger drama surrounding Jesus: His dying on the cross and His resurrection. This particular verse takes place while Jesus is journeying to the cross. After having been cruelly beaten, verbally assaulted, and tried by different rulers, He is now on the way to being killed on a Roman cross. Needless to say, it’s almost as if this mention of some guy named Simon of Cyrene gets in the way of the story.

That was how I viewed this verse ... until I came across the work of a New Testament scholar named Richard Bauckham. He suggests that this verse is actually significant: It provides us with a unique quality of storytelling that is distinctive among all four Gospels. And what is that? It is the fact that all four Gospel writers give us eyewitness reports of Jesus Christ’s life.

Bauckham points out that the way Mark records this seemingly anecdotal detail of Simon of Cyrene is a “living memory”<sup>iii</sup> report, a report that “was written well within the lifetime of many of the eyewitnesses.”<sup>iv</sup>

But how do we know that’s what Mark is doing here? It’s the name-dropping.

Bauckham basically asks, Why does Mark cite the names of Alexander and Rufus? Then Bauckham goes on to show that this is one way in which Mark validates the day’s events. It’s as if Mark is instructing his original readers by saying something like, You know Alexander and Rufus. If you don’t believe me, go and find them. They will verify this for you.<sup>v</sup>

Saying this would have had a lot of persuasive power.

One other well-known example of a living memory report is found in the first letter that the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, Greece:



***Have one person in the group read the following passage from 1 Corinthians 15:1-6.***

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.<sup>vi</sup>

If you thought Mark's dropping of a couple of names was intriguing, Paul pegs it to a number: *500 people have seen the risen Jesus!* Yes, some have died ("fallen asleep"), but Paul's citing of the number 500 is so bold that it has to be true.

"Why would this have been bold?" some might ask. Well, for one major reason: He put it in a public document that would have been read out loud to many listeners. If Paul were lying or simply off the mark, his audience would have taken him to task. Why? Because he was writing a living memory report on the resurrection of Christ.

It's worth noting that there were times when people disagreed with Paul; but we don't see any evidence of that in this instance, and that is telling. In this case, it was the living memory report that brought a lot of credibility to the resurrection of Christ.

There are many reasons we can trust the Bible. But one of the strongest is that its stories are grounded in eyewitness testimony. This, in and of itself, does not prove that the Bible is true. But it most certainly makes up a central part of how historians and scholars of ancient history verify events. This key characteristic of the Gospels, at the very least, points in the direction of truth. When historians search for eyewitness data, the Gospels provide an embarrassment of riches.

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GROUP QUESTION: Think back to the question we discussed earlier. If someone were to ask you how we can know anything about what happened 2,000 years ago, specifically about Jesus Christ, what would you say to that? Now that we've discussed the importance of eyewitnesses, is this something you would mention?  
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### **Section 3: Jesus Lives Today**

All these observations and conversations about looking back 2,000 years can be really helpful for anyone interested in the Bible's trustworthiness—its "truthiness"—and in Jesus Christ. But what's also important to remember is that although it is true that Jesus Christ lived 2,000 years ago in Palestine, it is also true that Jesus Christ lives today. Think about that for a moment and let the strangeness of that truth sink in.

How is it that Jesus Christ lived about 2,000 years ago but still lives today?

***Have a person in the group read Matthew 28:16–20 and then Luke 24:45–49.***

In Matthew, Jesus says that He will be with them until the end of the age. And in Luke, Jesus tells His friends that He is going to send them what His Father has promised.

The disciples might not have understood exactly what Jesus was referring to when He spoke those words. But for us as Christians, we now understand that Jesus was speaking of the Holy Spirit, the very presence of Jesus living inside us. Again, just stop for a moment and think about how strange that sounds. God’s. Presence. Living. In. Us!

If we are friends of Jesus, this means that we look back on Jesus not only as a historical figure but as the presence of God now living inside us (Romans 8:11).

On a personal level, this means that we can indeed know about God from history. Through the fact that Jesus Christ lived, died, and rose again, we are reminded that not only does He live full stop, but He lives inside us. We can know that God is with us because of His presence inside us.

## **Closing Discussion**

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GROUP QUESTION: We’ve discussed a lot of information during this time. Has any of this information changed how you view the Bible and God? If so, share one or two ways your view has changed.

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## **Closing Prayer**

Dear God, thank you for giving Your Son to us. Thank you for entering into our world. Thank you for Jesus. Help all the encouraging things we’ve discussed today settle into my heart and mind. As You gave Your presence (the Holy Spirit) to Your disciples, I now ask You to fill my own life with Your presence. Help me to know You not only as the God in history but as the God who lives inside me. Please fill me with Your presence. Amen.

## **Digging Deeper**

Among the many books mentioned throughout this series, another one worth exploring (or simply having as a good resource) is a small book by Peter J. Williams, titled *Can We Trust the Gospels?*

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<sup>i</sup> Content in Sessions 2, 3, and 5 is taken from Nathan Betts’ book *Short Answers to Life’s Biggest Questions*.

<sup>ii</sup> Mark 15:21, ESV.

<sup>iii</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as eyewitness testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006). See Chapter 1, titled “From the Historical Jesus to the Jesus of Testimony.”

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>v</sup> Check out how Bauckham explains this in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 52.

<sup>vi</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:1–6, NIV.



# SESSION FOUR

## **Well, That's Embarrassing!**

### *How Certain Stories and Events in the New Testament Reflect Its Credibility*

In this fourth session, we are going to explore a surprising feature in the New Testament that points to its trustworthiness:

1. We'll briefly discuss a common objection raised regarding the Bible.
2. And we'll discuss one observation that historians make in response to that objection.
3. Then we'll bring it all back to why this is important for us today.

### **Opening Prayer**

Dear God, thank you that You are real. As we discuss a common question raised against Christians or the Bible, please help us understand the truth of Scripture. But even more than that, remind us of how You can be trusted. Amen.

To start this session, let's begin with a group question. The group leader can start by asking the question and offering one idea. Then move on to the next person until all have responded.

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GROUP QUESTION: What is the most embarrassing thing that has ever happened to you? Has there ever been a moment in your life when you have seen or experienced something so embarrassing that if you told others, they might think you are making the story up?

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### **Section 1: Objection!**

There can be many reasons as to why people do not come to follow Jesus Christ. One reason is that they do not believe the Bible—the primary book by which we can read or hear about the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus—to be true. And although there are many reasons a person may disbelieve the Bible's credibility, one popular reason is the belief that the Bible, specifically the New Testament, was made up.

And why might this be the case? Well, for many people today, their working theory is that the New Testament was written by a group of people wanting to start a movement. So, says this theory, this group of people made up stories to support their religion in the hope that many would follow them. Therefore, in short, the New Testament is simply a legend, a series of fables put together by a group of men in early antiquity who were working very hard to start a movement.

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GROUP QUESTION: If you were telling a friend a story that was made up or not true, what would be the dead giveaway to your friend that your story was not true?  
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## Section 2: Embarrassing!

We have been looking at different ways in which we trust the Bible. In this session, we are going to look at one surprising feature that points to the truth of the New Testament.

Technically speaking, we are going to look at something called “the criterion of embarrassment,”<sup>i</sup> a principle that historians use to distinguish what actually came from Jesus versus what are fabricated statements, stories, or events around His life. And here’s where it gets interesting: The method “focuses on actions or sayings of Jesus that would have embarrassed or created difficulty for the early church.”<sup>ii</sup>

Perhaps the best way to understand how this method works is by looking at what would have been seen as embarrassing stories in the Gospels and other books of the New Testament.

First, think of one of Jesus’ close friends, Peter. Here’s a guy who spent a lot of time with Jesus, shared meals with Him, witnessed many of Jesus’ miracles in-person, and saw His teaching up close. At several points, Peter told Jesus of his unwavering love and commitment to Him. And in one of the most dramatic moments in the Gospels, Jesus instructs His disciples that they “will all fall away” (Mark 14:27, NIV). Peter is clearly not okay with this. He responds: “Even if all fall away, I will not” (v. 29). Then we read these words in Mark 14:30–31:

“Truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.”

But Peter insisted emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the others said the same.

We later see that Jesus was exactly right. In Mark 14:66–72, we read that Peter disowned Jesus three times.

In addition to the sadness and drama of that story, when we think of it in terms of the embarrassment factor, it is not just important; this story turns out to be hugely important. Why? Well, because this is not the last we see of Peter in the Bible. Peter, in fact, goes on to become one of the leading voices and bastions of the early church.

So, here’s where we come back to the embarrassing part: If there were really a group of people attempting to start a movement around Jesus Christ, you would most certainly not have a guy near the center of it who had clearly disowned Jesus when Jesus probably needed him most. And yet, this story was never erased or taken out of the New Testament. The early church, in wanting to attract more people, would have been extremely embarrassed by this story ... so embarrassed, some Bible scholars believe, that this kind of story would have been omitted from the Bible. But since it was left in, they conclude that the story must be true.

Let's look at a couple of other stories directly involving Jesus. After healing many people and then appointing His twelve disciples, we read these words in Mark 3:20-21:

Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."

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GROUP QUESTION: Just think about this for a moment: If you were part of a group trying to start a movement at which Jesus Christ was the center, how would you like people to see Him? What kind of attributes or character traits would you want to have Jesus associated with?

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There are so many historical details that can help here. But one important detail to know is that the world in which Jesus lived was one where power was looked upon favorably. In Rome, "might was right." So, if we were wanting to attract people to Jesus, we would probably want to make Him look smart, winsome, and most certainly powerful. And above all, we would do whatever it took to ensure that He did not look crazy.

Yet, this is exactly what He looks like in this story with His family. And to be clear, it's not just that a group of random people come and see Him and conclude that He is out of His mind. The sting in this story is that it's His very own family who think He has lost His marbles! Talk about bad press! Talk about embarrassing.

Historians look at this story and conclude that if indeed people were trying to start a movement and making stories up to help their cause, they would not have included this story in their book because it would have caused them too much embarrassment. Therefore, since the story was included, the story must be true.

## **Closing Discussion**

Before we end this session, think about the stories that led up to Jesus' death on the cross.

***Have a person in the group read Mark 14:32-36 and then Mark 15:16-20.***

These stories are so rich in meaning. Both stories describe something of the pain and suffering Jesus endured in the time leading up to His death—not only physical pain, but the enormity of sin that He was about to defeat. In Jesus' day, the Jewish Messiah was seen as and expected to be a person who would defeat the power of Rome. This Messiah would be powerful. Yet, shockingly, when Jesus comes, He is quite clear in His teaching of nonviolence. And then in these stories just read, it looks as though He is actually losing to Rome. Rome is beating up on the person many deemed to be their Messiah.

Now, we today have the advantage of hindsight. We know that Jesus rose from the dead and thoroughly defeated the power of sin and death. But the fact that He was tortured and tormented at the hands of

Rome and then died a physical death would have signified weakness, not power and authority, in the ancient world. To say this would have been embarrassing for the early followers of Jesus would be an understatement. Yet, these are the stories we find in the New Testament, stories that are incredibly awkward if you were wanting to make a case for a strong, powerful, and polished movement. This is most definitely not that!

There are many stories that fit the criterion of embarrassment. We've just explored a few in this session. These embarrassing stories do not necessarily prove that the Bible is true in and of themselves. But they certainly add to the other layers of compelling information we've discussed to this point for seeing the Bible as a reliable source of truth. It is for real!

**For Us Today.** One of the hidden truths within the stories we discussed here is the stories' unfinished nature. Peter did deny Christ. But that was not the end for Peter. Jesus was seen as crazy. But that was not the long-term view of how His family viewed Him. Jesus would have been seen as weak in His suffering. But that is not how He is viewed now within history.

Maybe there have been hard things that have happened in our lives, events or stories that we wish had never happened or would rather just have them be changed. The story of Christ's coming to earth reminds us that we live in a broken, damaged, and fractured world. This was the world in which Jesus lived, taught, died, and rose again. Christ's death and resurrection tell us that no matter how bad or dark stories/events in our lives might be, God has the power to somehow change how the story ends. For some of us, we will see that before Christ returns. For some of us, this might mean experiencing some of that truth now and then later in heaven.

## Closing Prayer

Dear God, thank you for giving us the stories we read in the Bible, and today especially, the embarrassing ones too. Thank you for giving Jesus to us. Please help us experience Your life-giving and restoring power, specifically into the parts of our lives in which bad stuff has happened. Please bring Your light, life, and love into every part of our lives. Amen.

## Digging Deeper

If you are interested in exploring other embarrassing stories that point to the New Testament's credibility, check out Peter J. Williams' book *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, specifically chapter 8, "Who Would Make All This Up?"

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<sup>i</sup> The phrase *the criterion of embarrassment* is taken from the book *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. I, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), written by Bible scholar John P. Meier.

<sup>ii</sup> John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. I, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 168.

# SESSION FIVE

## **Timing Is Everything ... Well, at Least Something:**

### *How the Dating of the Gospels Points to the New Testament's Credibility*

In this fifth session,<sup>i</sup> we are going to look at how the particular dating of the Gospels points to their credibility. It might sound a bit strange, but this idea will become clear as we go along.

But before we head into the details, now is probably as good a time as any to clarify that the timing of the Gospels (when the books Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written) does not prove that the stories of Jesus are true. But just like the other observations we've discussed in our conversations that point to the trustworthiness of Scripture (that the Bible is for real!), it's the *cumulative impact* of all the strands of data—including the eyewitness data, embarrassment criterion, and now the dating of the Gospels—that provides very compelling evidence that the Gospels are true.

Let's do a quick review of key things we've discussed to this point.

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GROUP QUESTION: In a sentence or two, why is it significant that the Gospels were stories that came from eyewitness accounts? Secondly, in a sentence or two, how does the embarrassment factor found in the New Testament writings give the stories credibility/point to their trustworthy nature?

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In today's session,

1. We'll briefly discuss a common objection raised regarding the Bible.
2. We'll look at how the timing of the Gospels' writing addresses that question.
3. Then we'll look at not only what this says about the Bible, but how this reveals something about the unique character of God.

## **Opening Prayer**

Dear God, thank you that You are real. Thank you for giving us the Bible. Help us now as we discuss a common question raised regarding the Bible. God, there are so many questions that people, us included, have about the Bible and about You. Please use this time to help our minds know more about You—how loving, great, and amazing You are—and help our hearts come closer to You. Amen.

In our last session, we discussed the many stories in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament that would have been so embarrassing for the early followers of Christ. They simply could not have made it all up! Before we get going into the main discussion, let's start with a group question:

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GROUP QUESTION: Can you remember some of the embarrassing stories or events that happened in the Gospels that we discussed? If so, can you remember why those things would have been embarrassing?

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Beneath the surface of all the embarrassing events is the fact that if the early followers of Christ were wanting to compel people to believe in Jesus and follow Him, they most certainly would not have told those stories of Jesus. And the more we think about all of it, the simplest explanation for why those stories of Jesus are in the Bible is the belief that those stories are indeed true. They were left in the Bible because the stories are true.

The embarrassment factor speaks directly to the common question of whether the Gospels were a bunch of stories made up. The more a person looks at the stories in the New Testament, the harder it is to believe why many of the stories would have been fabricated.

## **Section 1: The Importance of Dates**

Another reason we can confidently reject the idea that the Gospels are legends is the timing of the documents written with respect to the events recorded. For literary scholars, in order for the Gospels to be legend, the documents would need to have been written long after the life and death of Christ. This would mean that the people who saw Christ, heard Him teach, or perhaps shared a meal with Him would not have been around to verify or dispute the accounts of His life. The longer the time span between the events and their recordings, the easier it is for stories to be fabricated or for details to grow fuzzy and inaccurate.

But a smaller gap of time between an event and its recording makes it less likely that the event was made up. The shorter gap between when the events occurred and when they were recorded in the Gospels implies that the people who would have been around to see Jesus also would have been around for the recording of the stories. The major question then becomes, When did the events of the Gospels take place, and when were the Gospels written?

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GROUP QUESTION: Let's do a fun pop quiz here. Do you know (approximately) when Jesus was crucified? If so, mark that date in your mind and store it there for a moment. Next question: How much time do you think elapsed between Christ's crucifixion and the first written Gospel account of His life and teachings?

The following is an outline of the proposed late dating of the Gospels, given by New Testament scholar Craig Evans:

Christ is crucified	AD 30-33
The Gospel of Mark is written	AD 65-70
The Gospel of Matthew is written	AD 75-80
The Gospel of Luke is written	AD 75-80
The Gospel of John is written	AD 90-95 <sup>ii</sup>

Christ's crucifixion is widely believed to have happened in the year AD 30 or 33. The dating for Mark's Gospel is somewhere between AD 65–70. That gap tells us that many of the people who were around to see Jesus also would have been around to hear Mark's Gospel. It would have been extremely difficult for the message in Mark's Gospel to get traction if Mark had been misrepresenting stories of Jesus' life. There would have been too many people to call him out on it.

To this, some might argue, there were still decades between the life of Jesus and the Gospel recordings. But it's worth thinking about how much time can occur between an event and the recording of it for there to still be reliable memory of that event.

## Section 2: The Importance of Eyewitness Accounts

### **ICEBREAKER: Grandparent Story Time!**

Select a grandparent (or an aunt or uncle) who lives within the same time zone as you. Then give that person a phone call and ask about an event that happened to them when they were growing up. Ask them to share about that time period. Ask them questions like, Tell us the details of that event, How did that event affect you? Where were you when that event happened? As they share, pay attention to the details.

***Once they are done, debrief by reflecting on the following questions:***

1. What was something you learned from their time of sharing?
2. As they shared, did you pick up on how easily they were able to remember the details and talk about it or parts of it as if they were living it right now?

The reason it feels so fresh to them is that they lived firsthand in that experience.

Let's keep that conversation going. Think of the Vietnam War, a fairly recent major historical event.<sup>iii</sup> There is a similar time gap between the crucifixion of Christ in the Gospel of Mark (between 32 and 35 years) as there is between the Vietnam War and today (46 years). If we wanted to talk to a veteran of the Vietnam War, we could do that today. As a matter of fact, at an event a few years ago, I was seated next to a soldier of the Vietnam War. After finding out what he did, I asked questions and then just sat back and listened.



Yes, decades have fallen between the Vietnam War and today, yet many war veterans are around to attest to what happened. Decades make up the time between the crucifixion of Christ and the Gospels. But this does not take away the reality that the dating of the books makes it highly likely that the people who were around to see Jesus firsthand were also around to hear the reading of Mark's Gospel.

So what does all this tell us? For people wanting to know if they can trust the Gospels, the three aspects of eyewitness testimony, criterion of embarrassment, and dates should bring a lot of encouragement. Far from material being fabricated, we see many signposts pointing us toward truth.

So true, it is almost embarrassing.

## **Closing Discussion**

One of the more poignant and moving moments in the Gospels is when a close friend of Jesus named Thomas sees Him for the first time after He's been raised from the dead.

*Have a member of the group read John 20:24–29.*

There is so much meaning packed into this story. But one idea we cannot miss is that Jesus invites Thomas to see Jesus' hands and to put his hand into Jesus' side. This reminds us that Christianity (believing and following Jesus) is not a "close your eyes" kind of faith. Jesus asks us to trust Him with our eyes wide open, asking questions, seeking after Him, and looking for evidence.

Interestingly, the passage ends with the words "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29, NIV). We are in that latter group of whom Jesus spoke ("those who have not seen and yet have believed"). Jesus is saying that those who have never seen Him and yet have chosen to believe in Him are blessed. To be clear, He is not saying, "Those who have no evidence and yet choose to believe are blessed." Seeing Jesus is just one form of evidence. There are many strands of evidence in addition to seeing Jesus in person for why we can believe in and follow Jesus.

What we've been discussing over these sessions are the many ways in which we can know that the Bible is for real—that we really can trust it—and that God Himself can be trusted. After all, behind the story of the Bible is the towering message that there is a God and He can be trusted. He is a God who invites us to ask questions, to seek after Him, and to search the evidence and believe in Him.

## **Closing Prayer**

Dear God, thank you for the many ways in which You have revealed Yourself in history. Thank you for Jesus. Thank you for the Bible. As I have questions about You in life, please help me seek You. Help me to have courage like Thomas, who really wanted answers to his questions. In Your grace, mercy, and love, help me experience You and all that You are inviting me into.



## Digging Deeper

We have looked at so much information regarding the trustworthiness of the Bible to this point. If you are interested in watching a great documentary on the Bible's credibility, particularly the role of biblical manuscripts, check out this documentary hosted by Bible scholar Dr. Craig Evans: [“Fragments of Truth,” documentary film featuring Dr. Craig Evans—YouTube.](#)

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<sup>i</sup> Content in Sessions 2, 3, and 5 is taken from Nathan Betts' book *Short Answers to Life's Biggest Questions*.

<sup>ii</sup> See Dr. Craig Evans' excellent book on this: *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 202.

<sup>iii</sup> My friend Greg Monette explores this example in his helpful book *The Wrong Jesus: Fact, Belief, Legend, Truth ... Making Sense of What You've Heard* (Carol Stream, IL: NavPress, 2014).

# SESSION SIX

## Encounter:

### *Reading the Word of God in Order to Meet with “The Word of God”*

We’ve now come to our final session. Congratulations for entering into some challenging conversations about how we know the Bible is *for real!*

When you think back on the different discussions we’ve had, what are some of the topics, observations, or thoughts that stand out? Just think, we’ve actually covered a lot of material in a small amount of time. We’ve looked at how the Bible is rooted in history, why eyewitness information is important, what some embarrassing aspects of the Gospels are, and why it is significant to know when the Gospels were written.

To start this session, let’s begin with a group question. The group leader can start by asking the question and offering one idea. Then move on to the next person until all have responded.

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GROUP QUESTION: Discovering the fact that the Bible is true (*for real*) is actually a big deal. It is significant for many reasons, not the least of which many in our world do not believe it to be true. If you were now asked, How do you know that the Bible is for real?—or stated another way, How do you know that the Bible is true?—how would you answer that question?

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In today’s session, we are going to explore how reading the Bible can be a way in which we meet with and encounter God.

## Opening Prayer

Dear God, thank you that You are real. Thank you for giving us the Bible. As we share this time together now, please come and meet with us. As we talk about the Bible, help us know that You are the God whom we can meet with through the reading of Scripture. Amen.

Before we get going into the main discussion, let’s start with a question for everyone in the group.

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GROUP QUESTION: Are there one or two ideas/points/answers/observations/stories that you’ve learned in our discussions about the Bible that you were not aware of before? And if so, how has that encouraged you in your faith and in your friendship with Jesus?

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## Section 1: Not Just Knowing More but Becoming More

After looking at the many ways in which the Bible is *for real*, it might be easy for us to simply see the Bible as a library of books full of information and nothing more. But this is where it is important to remember that the information in the Bible falls very short in our reading if the goal becomes simply to gain more information. The Bible's information was intended to shape us and push us closer to Jesus. In short, the Bible is not merely informational, but also formational.<sup>i</sup> If we allow it to, and are open to it, the Bible has the power to shape us and form us to be more like Jesus.

### How do we read it?

In life, there's a sense in which we can make things more complicated than they need to be. Unfortunately, reading the Bible can become a much more complicated thing than it was intended to be. With that being said, when we talk about encountering God and being shaped by Him through the reading of Scripture, one question we might be asking is, How should I read the Bible?

We are going to focus our discussion around two practical ways in which we can experience God through the reading of Scripture. The first way is by meditating on the Bible, and the second is by hearing the Bible read out loud.

## Section 2: Meditating

So let's look first at the idea and practice of meditating on Scripture.

Pastor and author Eugene Peterson tells the story of his dog's love for finding and chewing on bones. In the forested foothills of Montana, Peterson's dog would be able to find many good options of bones to chew on. He'd often come across a carcass of a white-tailed deer. The very happy dog would eventually make his way back to Peterson's lakeside patio dragging this "trophy." The dog would be wagging his tail with excitement as he showed off his new prize. This is how Peterson describes what would happen next:

But after awhile, sated with our applause, he would drag the bone off twenty yards or so to a more private place, usually the shade of a large moss-covered boulder, and go to work on the bone. The social aspects of the bone were behind him; now the pleasure became solitary. He gnawed the bone, turned it over and around, licked it, worried it. Sometimes we could hear a low rumble or growl, what in a cat would be a purr. He was obviously enjoying himself and in no hurry. After a leisurely couple of hours he would bury it and return the next day to take it up again. An average bone lasted about a week.<sup>ii</sup>

Peterson, like so many of us, loved watching his dog take delight in smothering his new bone, chewing on it, parading around with it, then burying it, retrieving it, and enjoying the whole process over and over again. Peterson experienced a surge of delight when he read the words in Isaiah 31:4, which include, "As a lion or a young lion growls over his prey..."<sup>iii</sup>

He noticed that Isaiah's lion was doing the same thing that his dog did to his treasurable bone. What made this especially moving for Peterson, a man who spent so much of his life teaching and also translating the Bible, was when he noticed the Hebrew words used in that verse from Isaiah. The word *hagah* that is often translated as "growl" is usually translated as "meditate." 27

This same word is used in Psalm 1:1-2: “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who *meditates* on his law day and night” (NIV, emphasis mine).

The point being made is that Isaiah uses this word to refer to a lion growling over his prey the way a dog might savor, chew, and enjoy his bone.<sup>iv</sup>

More than that, although there are instructions throughout the Bible reminding us that it is good to meditate on the Bible, that word *meditate* has become very tame, and in some cases boring, to us.

Eugene Peterson urges us to reconsider what the word *meditate* means when we are reading the Bible: “But when Isaiah’s lion and my dog meditated they chewed and swallowed, using teeth and tongue, stomach and intestines: Isaiah’s lion meditating his goat (if that’s what it was); my dog meditating his bone.”<sup>v</sup>

Peterson is making a connection between Isaiah’s lion meditating on its prey and his dog chewing on his bone to the way in which we are to meditate, savor, and enjoy Scripture.

All of this might sound extremely strange to us at first. Enjoying the Bible as a dog enjoys a bone? Well, that’s a bit odd.

The truth is, it does sound funny. But if we think carefully about it, the words of Scripture were intended to be savored, enjoyed, and taken seriously. Psalm 34:8 tells us: “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him” (NIV).

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GROUP QUESTION: Before going any further, what might be some ways in which you/we can read the Bible in a way that enables us to truly savor, enjoy, and meditate over its message (as opposed to reading Scripture for the sake of reading Scripture or merely because we feel we should)?

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Just taking our time and slowly reading the Bible, as opposed to rushing through it, can allow us to appreciate, enjoy, and chew on what God might be saying to us through the reading of Scripture. And like that dog, sometimes our enjoyment of the Bible can be enhanced by sharing with others our excitement of what we recently read in the Bible. Just sharing our excitement of the Bible with others can remind us of how amazing the Bible is and how God speaks to us through it.

### Section 3: Hearing

For us today, when we think of the Bible, we tend to think of reading through its pages. But for the early followers of Jesus, they would think in terms of listening and hearing the Bible read. The culture in which Jesus lived was an oral culture. People knew the Hebrew Scriptures (what we now consider the Old Testament) by their hearing of those passages. This is one of the reasons why we see throughout the Bible the emphasis on hearing or listening.

Eugene Peterson is helpful here again. To illustrate the Bible’s emphasis on hearing, he looks at Psalm 40:6, which says: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire—but my ears you have opened—burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require” (NIV). For our discussion here, we’ll focus on the phrase *but my ears you have opened*. Given his background in biblical languages, Peterson mentions that those words in Hebrew actually translate into English the words *ears thou hast dug for me*. And although different Bible translations of that verse use various terms denoting God’s opening our ears, Peterson reminds us how imaginative and powerful the psalmist views God: “The psalms poet was bold to imagine God swinging a pickax, digging ears in our granite blockheads so that we can hear, really hear, what he speaks to us.”<sup>vi</sup>

The Bible is at its best when it is heard or read aloud. The act of hearing the Bible read reminds us that there is a personal voice speaking to us through the words of Scripture. It reminds us that although we might be alone reading the Bible in our bedroom, in our living room, on a hike, on the water, or in a large gathering at a church service, God is speaking to us through the Bible. In other words, there is a relationship with God waiting to be built through our reading of Scripture, and hearing the Bible’s words out loud remind us of that invitation.

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GROUP QUESTION: What is one way you can practice or experience hearing or reading the Bible out loud?

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## **Closing Prayer**

Dear God, thank you for the Bible. Thank you for all the truth You reveal through its pages. As I live a life that involves reading and engaging with the Bible, remind me that You can speak to me through its pages. Please help me take the time to enjoy and chew on the words that I read. And as I read the Bible out loud, help me hear Your voice. Amen.

## **Digging Deeper**

If you are looking for Bible reading plans, *BibleProject* has several that are outlined on their website: [Free Bible Reading Plans | Over 30 Options | Animated Videos \(bibleproject.com\)](#).

A Christian ministry out of the United Kingdom called 24-7 Prayer has created an app [Lectio for Families - 24-7 Prayer International](#). It is a wonderful resource that helps families engage in Scripture and prayer together.

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<sup>i</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), p. 24.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid, p. 92.