

WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP: BIBLE CONFIDENCE AND KNOWING THE STORY



Session 5: Jesus and the Gospels

Understanding key themes: Why is Jesus the centre of God's story?

Understanding key themes: What is the Story of the Kingdom and its King?

Understanding key themes: How does Jesus show what the Kingdom of God on earth looks like?

Understanding key themes: In what ways is Jesus an unexpected kind of Messiah?

Reading it well: Why and how does Jesus communicate the Kingdom in parables?

Understanding key themes: How does Jesus establish God's Kingdom through His death and resurrection?

Understanding key themes: How does Jesus ensure that God's Kingdom will spread?

Reading it well: How can different perspectives help us understand the Bible?

Practical starting points: Why and how might I meditate on the Bible?

Understanding key themes: Why is Jesus the centre of God's story?



For many people Jesus is just a good teacher or moral example. Others find it difficult, or even offensive, to believe that He is divine.

Others might wonder if the New Testament, and particularly the gospels, are beginning a completely different story.

This section aims to address these questions by focussing on two things:

How the gospels fulfil the Bible story: Jesus is the climax of God's plan to rescue His fallen world through being the divine King who in Himself brings God's healing kingdom to the world.

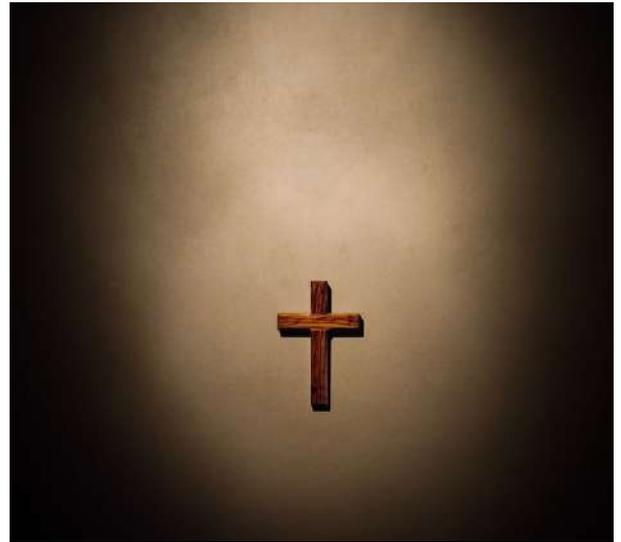
How the gospels help us to see who He is and to "follow Him" by shaping us to live under His rule today, seeking His kingdom above everything else.

Jesus is the one in whom all the main themes of the Bible come into focus. He reveals fully our identity and purpose as human beings - who we are called to be and what we are called to live for. The gospels show how:

Jesus is the one who fully restores our covenant relationship with God - showing us who we are.

Jesus is the one who brings God's kingdom fully into the world and invites us to join Him as God's covenant-partners - showing us what our lives are for.

(The module 'Becoming like Christ' offers a more detailed way to help us grow in understanding who Jesus is and at how our characters and lives can be shaped to be like His.



Among other things it covers:

The main ways we understand who He is - as Saviour and Lord.

The titles Jesus used for Himself.

The four gospels and the different perspectives they offer.

The significance of Jesus being fully God and fully human.

The nature of salvation.

How God is involved in the work of the cross.

The defeat of evil and death.

How Jesus' death and resurrection establishes Him as Lord.

How discipleship involves obedience.

How Jesus reveals the distinctive nature of God's love.

The significance of, and evidence for, Jesus' resurrection.

Having a balanced view of suffering.

The nature of Christian hope and the difference it makes to my everyday life.)

Understanding key themes: What is the Story of the Kingdom and its King?



In a universe that is fourteen billion years old, could a period of just thirty years two thousand years ago be the centre of the story of everything?

Only if those thirty years were the pivot for God's plan to rescue all things, and God became a human being.

The four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John outline those thirty years, choosing eyewitness stories and shaping them in different ways, but all with a common message.

Through Jesus God was completing the task of restoring His fallen world, including His people.

That plan had started with a small tribe, Israel, but the prophets had repeatedly promised it would extend to everyone and everything when God's anointed King arrived.

When this happened God would reign fully over everything again. Isaiah had prophesied that God would create a "new heavens and new earth" (65:17) and Habakkuk looked forward to the time when "... the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." (2:14)

A "gospel" means an announcement of good news – and usually news that a new King had arrived, or a victory had been won.

The four "gospels" are the stories of how in Jesus the King had arrived, and that in Him the "kingdom of God" – the effective rule of God which brings wholeness and restoration is being established.

(There are over a hundred uses of the term in the gospels – particularly Matthew, Mark and Luke). The world will never be the same.

Jesus does this in three short years. After growing up in Nazareth He begins His ministry in Galilee, teaching about God's kingdom and demonstrating its healing reality. He gathers a group of disciples around Him, twelve people who form a new Israel – God's covenant people to be a blessing. As His ministry grows, He comes to the attention of hostile religious leaders.

From Galilee, He journeys to Jerusalem – the centre of the nation and the focus of opposition. He is arrested, crucified and then is raised from the dead.

His death and resurrection bring His whole ministry to a climax. Sin, death and the powers of evil exhaust themselves in Him on the cross, but His resurrection demonstrates how their power has been broken forever.

With all opposition defeated, this ultimate victory and sacrifice opens the way for God's covenant people to receive forgiveness and for the kingdom of God to be released into the world.

In Jesus' resurrection body heaven and earth are once again reunited, and Christians are given the promise that His resurrection is the foretaste of the time when God will make all things new.





The gospels invite those who read them to receive this promise for themselves and be restored in their covenant relationship with God through Christ.

They ask us, "Who do you say Jesus is?", and invite us to live with Him as King, living our lives as those who "learn as we follow" to join in with the establishing of His kingdom.

Jesus is the Messiah who fulfils the story and is the Good News of God's Kingdom.

The gospel writers all want to show how Jesus fulfils the entire story of the Bible. To do this they are constantly referring to the Hebrew Scriptures – sometimes explicitly, and sometimes in the way in which they tell the story – offering us different emphases which help a fuller picture to emerge.

The gospel writers name Jesus directly as the one who fulfils God's plan as the Messiah in many ways.

Matthew begins: "This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham..." (1:1) He is rooting Jesus in the story of Israel. He quotes regularly from the prophets – Jesus is the "Immanuel" (God with us) prophesied by Isaiah (1:23). The Magi call Him "king of the Jews" (2:2) and He is the fulfilment of Micah's prophecy that a "ruler" will come from Bethlehem. (2:6)

Mark begins, "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God..." (1:1) In Luke the shepherds are told to find the baby who is "born in the city of David. He is Christ the Lord." (2:11) Simeon and Anna recognise Him as the "Lord's Messiah." (2:26)

Matthew and Mark record Peter stating, "You are the Christ". (Matthew 16:16; Mark 8:16) Matthew adds "the Son of the living God."

While all of God's people were His sons, the Jews of Jesus' time believed the Messiah would be a son of God like the Old Testament kings. This is the sense in which Jesus in John is God's "only Son". (John 3:16)

John locates Jesus before creation – He is the "Word of God" (1:1) and named as "God's Chosen One" by John the Baptist. (1:34)

In other ways Jesus is described or acts as the fulfilment of God's story.

Matthew shapes his gospel into five blocks of teaching, mirroring the first five books of the Bible – Jesus is the new and greater Moses – the new teacher.



In Mark with the arrival of Jesus God's promised future erupts into the present. Jesus' first words and actions are to go "into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'" (1:14-15)

John the Baptist calls people to prepare for the Messiah by being baptised in the Jordan – the river which reminds Israel of God's original calling on them. When Jesus is baptised, He does not need to be cleansed from sin, but He is identifying Himself with this original mission.

The words spoken to Jesus by God at that moment recall that He is both the anointed King spoken about in the Psalms "You are my beloved Son" (Psalm 2:7) and the servant who will suffer but will be "God's delight" (Isaiah 42:1) in whom He is well pleased.

In Luke and Mark Jesus is revealed as the one who is greater than Moses and Elijah, and who fulfils the law and the prophets at His transfiguration. (Mark 9: 2-8; Luke 9: 28-36)



As Jesus approaches His death, we have seen how he reinterprets the Passover meal to demonstrate how in Him God's plans will be fulfilled. The gospels reveal Him as the Messiah in two other key ways in Jerusalem.

All four gospels record how Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, laying claim to David's throne, fulfilling a prophecy from Zechariah which predicted the Messiah coming to Israel's throne in victory, and bringing God's kingdom. He will be "...righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey...He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend... to the ends of the earth." (Zechariah 9: 9-10)

The crowds understand and use a Messianic Psalm 118 to greet Him, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord."

Having entered the city in Mark Jesus does what a victorious king would always do by going to the Temple. The Jews expected that when the Messiah came He would re-establish God's throne at the centre of Israel and cleanse the Temple of pagan influences.

But Jesus, acting as the Messiah, cleanses the Temple by judging God's people.

Israel was called to be a light to all nations. But they have lost this calling and instead turned the Temple into a way of separating people. Jesus acts as the Messiah, but in a way that turns the Jewish authorities against Him.

In the gospels Jesus' entire mission, and the purpose for which God sent Him, is to establish the Kingdom of God. He talks about God's kingdom more than anything else and claims that all the Old Testament Scriptures testify about Him (John 5:39)



Understanding key themes: How does Jesus show what the Kingdom of God on earth looks like?



The beginning of the Bible story describes a world which has fallen. As a result:

People are cut off from God and His image in us is distorted.

Creation is under a 'curse' leading to sickness and death.

Opposing powers blight God's creation and oppose His goodness.

Jesus' ministry demonstrates God's kingdom rule by reversing these in every way - bringing wholeness (or "salvation") in all these areas. Through Jesus

The kingdom means people are restored to God and one another. Jesus brings "salvation" to Zacchaeus (Luke 19), a Jew who has fallen away from God's calling by cheating people and collaborating with Romans.

Responding to Jesus' compassion, Zacchaeus recognises Him as "Lord" (19:8) and begins to pay back what has been broken. Jesus declares him a "son of Abraham" - in other words, restored to covenant relationship with God.

The kingdom means sickness and death is reversed. When John the Baptist questions whether Jesus is the Messiah, Luke records the evidence of God's kingdom like this: "At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard:

The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." (Luke 7: 21-22).

Through Him, God's healing power is breaking into human history to end the grip of sickness and pain. In His ministry Jesus demonstrates the reversal of death - raising Lazarus, the widow's son and Jairus's daughter.

The kingdom means opposing evil forces are defeated. In Mark Jesus' first public action is to confront an evil spirit who recognises His true identity.

The coming of the Messiah intensifies this spiritual reckoning. "Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" (Mark 1: 23-24).

Both Matthew and Luke show that for Jesus this confrontation is evidence of God's kingdom. "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." (Matthew 12:28)

The kingdom means creation is in harmony. The Old Testament prophets had foreseen the coming of God's Messiah as bringing peace to all of creation. (Isaiah 11)

Matthew, Mark and Luke show how in being the one whom the wind and waves obey, by stilling the storm and reversing the waves of chaos, Jesus demonstrates to His disciples how in Him God's kingdom brings peace to the whole created world.

Understanding key themes: In what ways is Jesus an unexpected kind of Messiah?



Despite the impact of these signs of God's kingdom, Jesus was not the Messiah many Jews were expecting.

Instead of the kingdom being about re-establishing Israel with a display of power against the Romans Jesus reveals it has:

A different focus: Restoring the rejected, the unclean and the outsider.

Luke in particular draws us to Jesus as one who has come "...to seek and save what was lost." (Luke 19:10) Jesus is focussed on restoring those rejected by society - sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, and the poor and sick - a wonderful reversal at a time when poverty and sickness were often interpreted as signs of God's judgement against sin.

While religious authorities in particular are scandalised by the way Jesus "eats with tax collectors and sinners", equally challenging is His demonstration of God's kingdom restoring those who are "unclean" or non-Jewish Gentiles.

In Mark 5 Jesus heals a demon-possessed man, a woman who has been bleeding internally for twelve years and raises a dead girl. Whereas previously people would have avoided being contaminated by the "uncleanness" of all three, Jesus reverses the situation as God's kingdom comes.

Their uncleanness does not affect Him. Rather, in approaching, touching and healing them, God's kingdom through Christ makes those who are unclean clean again.



Similarly, whereas Gentiles (non-Jews) were seen as excluded from God's purposes, Jesus has an (at first evolving) sense that He has come for all people.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is shocking in placing someone seen as an enemy by the Jews as the example of being a true neighbour. (Luke 10)

Yet as we have seen, Jesus is not introducing anything new into God's purposes. God's people had always been called to care for the foreigner, and to seek justice for those who are oppressed.

At the beginning of His ministry in Nazareth, Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61 and claims to be the anointed one sent to "proclaim good news to the poor...to proclaim freedom for the prisoner...to set the oppressed free..." He also pointedly reminds the crowd of how often in the Old Testament the Gentiles had responded to God (Luke 4: 16-30) - setting the Nazarenes against Him.

In prioritising the outsider Jesus is calling His people back to the original calling to be a blessing to the nations.



A different character: Being shaped by upside-down ways of living.

In every way Jesus describes those who seek God's Kingdom first as being shaped by self-giving love, rather than power over others – even their enemies.

Having embraced His calling in the Jordan river, Jesus immediately faces three temptations as to how He will carry it out. In the temptations (Matthew 4: 1-11) He wrestles with turning stones into bread – using power for His own needs – throwing Himself off the Temple – making Himself the centre of people's attention – and gaining the kingdoms of the world – acquiring earthly power for Himself.

To all three of these temptations Jesus replies with Old Testament Scriptures placing obedience to God at the heart of the Kingdom.

In the Beatitudes, a series of teachings which show the character of those who seek God's kingdom, (Matthew 5 and Luke 6) Jesus emphasises that it is those who are humble, who know their dependence on God, who are often rejected by the world and who hunger for His kingdom who are His disciples.

In His teaching and practice Jesus emphasises that the more the Kingdom comes the more the social order is turned upside down with the last being first (Matthew 20:16), "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" being invited in (Luke 14:21) and the "tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God" ahead of those seen as religiously righteous. (Matthew 21:31)

It is John who describes how at the Last Supper Jesus demonstrates the servant-heartedness of the Kingdom, shockingly taking the role of a slave in washing His disciples' feet and setting out a living example of a disciple's character.

"Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." (John 13: 14-15)



Reading it well: Why and how does Jesus communicate the Kingdom in parables?



John the Baptist's confusion shows that neither the things Jesus does to demonstrate the Kingdom nor the character with which He goes about it fit with people's expectations.

It is clear as well, particularly in Mark, that Jesus goes out of His way not to be misinterpreted as a political Messiah by the people. (This is known as the Messianic secret).

He avoids declaring Himself to be the Messiah, He withdraws from the crowds when they want to make Him King (John 6:15) and He tells people not to spread news of healings (Mark 5:43).

In the light of how difficult it is for many to understand His mission, how might Jesus help people grasp this very different Kingdom, giving them the imagination to see it? He knows not everyone is ready to accept the Kingdom, and that the nature of God's love with His covenant people means He will not force people to receive it - they must be willing to do so.

His method is to teach the nature of God's kingdom through over forty parables. Often parables begin with the words, "The kingdom of God is like..." (or in Matthew the kingdom of heaven, meaning 'where God rules fully').

Parables are not just moral tales, or stories to make a point, but bring the hearer face-to-face with God's kingdom in a way that will deepen their response to it. The parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-9) demonstrates how people respond in different ways to the coming of God's kingdom.

But it also shows how the story itself opens up different reactions. "The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them." (Matthew 13: 9-10)

Jesus was building on a tradition from Old Testament prophets, for example, Isaiah, who used parables in ways which would either open the hearers up to God or harden their hearts against Him.

In some ways Jesus used parables to buy more time - to allow the true meaning of His Kingdom ministry, and His journey to the cross, to unfold, without people being able to impose other ideas or agendas onto Him.

Rather than simply making a point, parables are "used to get God's people to stop, reconsider their way of viewing reality, and to change their behaviour." (Kyle Snodgrass).

They put the **ball in people's court**. The parables describe how **surprising** God's Kingdom is.

They reinforce the **upside-down values** of the Kingdom.

They **challenge people to make decisions** about placing the Kingdom at the centre of their lives.

They describe the way that the Kingdom **influences the world**, rather than controls it, like yeast in dough.

They talk about the presence of God's kingdom now but are **mostly about its future fulfilment** and the need to be ready.

In our time the Kingdom of God continues to turn the values of the world upside down. Jesus' parables remain a source of alternative imagination for disciples - shaping us to see the world as God sees it.

Understanding key themes: How does Jesus establish God's Kingdom through His death and resurrection?



Jesus demonstrates God's healing kingdom through His life – bringing restoration and making things new.

But all four gospels write extensively about Jesus' death – seeing it as the centre of His mission as God's Messiah.

It is through His dying that Jesus decisively confronts the powers of sin and evil, absorbing them into Himself and defeating them.

The gospels all emphasise His death as Jesus' ultimate enthronement as King - with a crown, a robe, His "lifting up" – not on a throne, but on the cross and a sign that declares Him to be "King of the Jews" written in the main languages spoken by all people (Luke 23:38).

Matthew emphasises how, although Jesus is rejected as Messiah by His own people, On the cross His true royal nature is disclosed.

While many found (and find) the idea of God being crucified obscene, Christians view the crucifixion through the resurrection. Jesus' resurrection is the proof that He is God's truly victorious Messiah whom death cannot hold.

The nature of Jesus' resurrection was unexpected. Throughout the Old Testament and the inter-testamental period God's people had come to believe that one day God would renew all things and that as part of this "Last Day" Israel would be restored and human bodies resurrected. (Martha tells Jesus that she knows Lazarus "will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." (John 11:24))

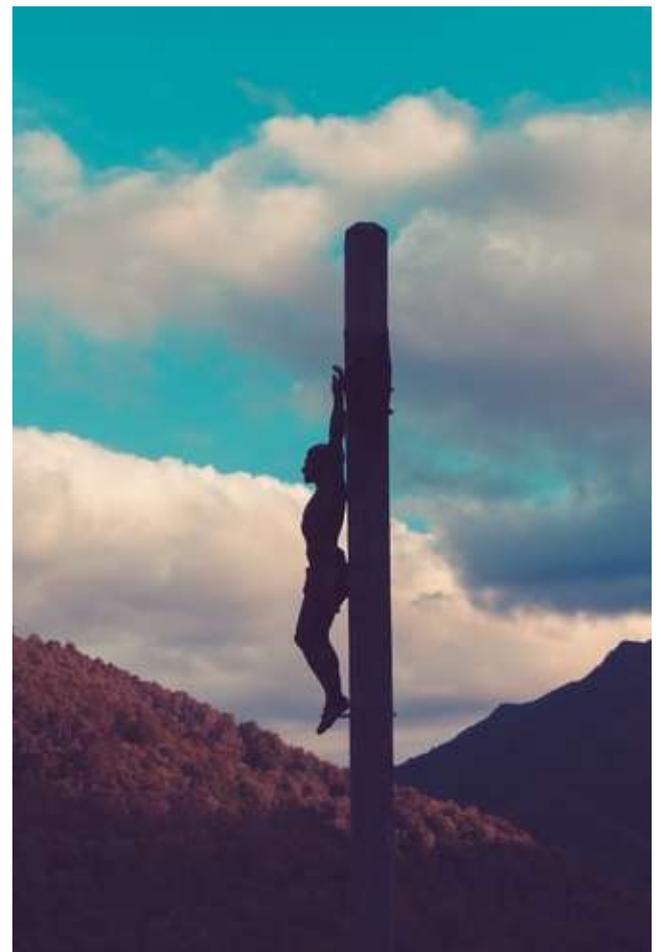
Yet rather than waiting for the end of history, Jesus' resurrection erupts into the present as a representative of God's future.

He is its "firstfruits" and confirmation of the ultimate "gospel – announcement of good news" - that God's enemies have been defeated, and people and creation have been bought back.

As individual Christians we are set free through the cross and resurrection. But our restoration is within the larger story of Scripture - God's plan to rescue all things. Jesus dies for the world.

Through the victory of the Messiah the kingdom of God has come, and a renewed creation is unfolding.

Jesus invites disciples to live in this new reality and anticipate its fulfilment in our daily lives.



Understanding key themes: How does Jesus ensure that God's Kingdom will spread?



Jesus renews God's plan to call a people to be a "kingdom of priests", imaging Him in the world and being a blessing to the nations.

But rather than this being achieved through a nation, centred around a Temple, it will now be through a community with Him at the centre, which will draw all nations to God.

Jesus calls twelve disciples to be a different kind of Israel. They will fulfil the calling of the Old Testament, not by establishing a geographical kingdom, but by accepting God's rule, making Him their Lord and having changed hearts so that they can truly love God and love their neighbour, including their enemy.

He calls them to be with Him, become like Him, and to join in with His mission, sending them out "... to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick." (Luke 9:2)

In Matthew He tells His disciples, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." (5: 14-16)

They are a covenant people, and, as a result, put God's Kingdom on display.

For some this means seeking the Kingdom by staying in their homes and villages. For others it means leaving everything behind. For all, it involves cost.

Jesus' journey to His death in Jerusalem is presented as Jesus preparing His disciples for life after His departure - just as their physical journey is challenging so the way of discipleship is sacrificial.

In Luke Jesus teaches the disciples that they need total allegiance to Him - not looking back. "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." (9:62)

In Mark it is the cross is the new reality which shapes the community of Jesus' followers and calls us to live self-sacrificially. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34)

Finally, before His ascension Jesus explicitly commissions His disciples to carry on His work. Crucially, He gives them His own authority and promises the power of His presence with them.

Matthew describes the priority - Jesus' Great Commission to go and make disciples. John offers the reassurance - the disciples are sent and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit as Jesus breathes on them. Luke emphasises the task - to be witnesses.

To read the gospels is not just to know about God's kingdom, it is to be invited into being part of Jesus' mission, taking part in the new creation He has started. In the next session we look at what this began to look like in the Early Church, as the first Christians began to seek God's kingdom.

Reading it well: How can different perspectives help us understand the Bible?



We have seen how Christians have different understandings of some parts of the Bible because it is impossible for us to read anything without *interpreting* it.

We have looked at the importance of reading the Bible well by doing two things: firstly, by getting as close to the original meaning as we can and using different tools to give us the background knowledge we need.

The other part of interpreting well is about knowing that each of us has a certain perspective – no one is likely to have the full view of what is going on. This is true in any area of life.

When looking at the same object, one person might see a triangle, and another a circle. Neither are wrong in what they see, but they are actually looking at a cone, and it is not until their perspectives come together that they see the clearer 3D picture.

Sometimes people get worried by talk of there being lots of different interpretations of the Bible. They might ask, “Surely there is one truth from God which we all need to find when reading it?”

Acknowledging that there are different perspectives is not necessarily saying that they are all as valid as each other or denying that there is truth.

But because it is impossible for any human being to have a complete view, we need to read with humility and openness to keep on learning. Rather than being threatened by this reality, our reading of the Bible can be enriched and challenged by those whose perspectives are very different from us, and who might open up new ways of seeing things.

This requires a trust that the Bible has been given by God as something that is best read in relationship with others. Ancient writers used to say that every Scripture has seventy facets, and so one of the reasons we commonly gather to hear or study Scripture is because it was written to be understood best as we learn together.

(The technical word to describe the way we interpret things is hermeneutics, and when talking about the Bible we talk about 'biblical hermeneutics'.)

There have been, and continue to be, many debates what it means to interpret well, and about which perspectives to emphasise when we interpret Scripture. Some (like Luther and Calvin) have asked, “How do we discover the most **literal** way of reading the Bible, according to its original meaning and intention?”

Others (like Origen) have agreed with this, but asked, “Can we interpret the Bible in any **allegorical** ways, with a second level of meaning?” For example, they point to the way that Paul uses the story of a “rock in the wilderness” in the Old Testament as a picture of Jesus.

In our own reading this might make us ask, “Can we read the account of Jesus calming the storm as only about God’s control over the weather, or more allegorically as a way of seeing His activity in our own ‘storms of life’?”

Others have emphasised a **moral** perspective, asking, “What might this story show us about how to live now?”



But in the last few decades another important question about interpreting well has come by people asking.

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How can we make sure we are understanding the Bible better from the perspectives of those who have previously been left out or sidelined by history?”

For example, in 1949 Howard Thurman, an African-American professor, wrote a book called “Jesus and the Disinherited”. He argued that for centuries the Bible had for the most part been interpreted by those who were powerful in society – and even in order to justify slavery.

As a result he wrote this: “The significance of the religion of Jesus to people who stand with their backs against the wall...is one emphasis which has been lacking...”

He said that to understand Jesus better we need to read the Bible from the perspective that Jesus was poor and a member of a minority group. When we do this, we see that “Christianity as born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed.”

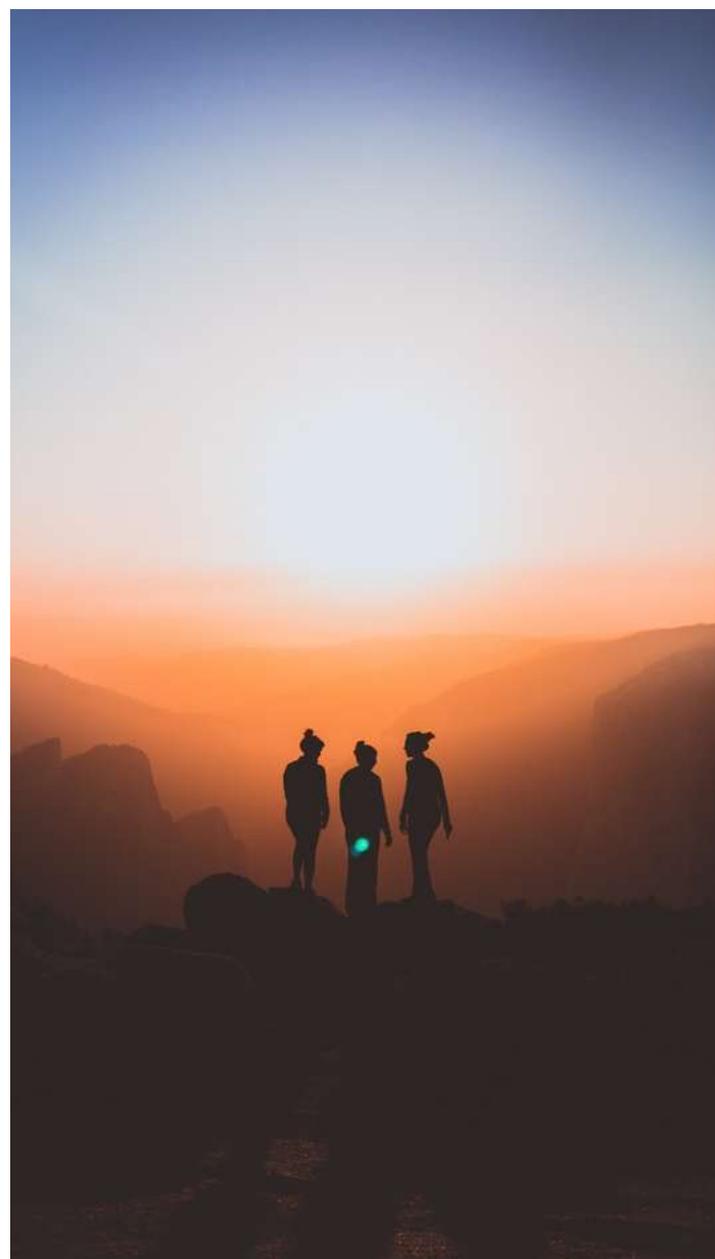
His words reflect a desire to read the Bible from a perspective of **liberation** – particularly for those who suffer from injustice. ‘Liberation theologians’ look for ways in which the Bible can be understood as a resource for overturning unjust structures in the world.

They offer the view that however we understand the Bible, we interpret it well when it is “good news for the poor”.

More recently this kind of perspective has been highlighted by people reflecting on the experience of Black Christians in the West – people who feel their experience has been missing from the way the Bible has been interpreted.

The writer Chine McDonald says that emphasising the way the Bible tells “a story of redemption, the overturning of power structures and a future kingdom where justice reigns” helps shape ‘Black Theology’ in which “Black people can see themselves reflected as made in the image of God and redress the imbalances that have left us feeling and being treated as ‘less than’.”

Others give better attention to the **perspective of women** when it comes to interpreting Scripture well. For example, while the Bible was not written *for* men, they notice how religion has traditionally been dominated *by* men and how most of the Bible has been written by men. They ask questions about what difference it makes that Jesus was a man.



Most of church history has excluded women from mainstream church leadership or ministry. Feminist theologians will ask how much this is to do with the fact that, when interpreting the Bible, women's voices have been missing.



For example, what difference does the traditional way of talking about God using male-orientated language make? How could being more aware of the female imagery for God in the Bible will help lead to a higher view of women's places in the church and society?

How much should these other perspectives influence our reading of the Bible? Some would say that these voices have been so ignored in the past that they need to be centre stage. (Some liberation theologians would argue that liberation is the main theme of the Bible.)

At the very least, they can jolt us into thinking in fresh ways about what God might be saying through the Bible.

Taking these perspectives seriously will help us when we are thinking about which themes are important throughout the Bible, but they might also help us to read particular parts of it with fresh eyes. We might ask, "How would a refugee/rich person/poor person/differently abled person/male/female/black/white/child/adult see this passage and what could I learn?"

Good questions to ask when interpreting the Bible well are:

How can I read this with others?

Are there other ways of interpreting this which are still faithful to the original meaning?

Whose voices are missing in the way that this has been traditionally understood?



Practical starting points: Why and how might I meditate on the Bible?



Disciples read the gospels to *understand* the story of God through Jesus, and how that shapes the story of our lives. But (as we have already seen in 'Being with God' Session 6), the Bible is a “living word” through which we can also *meet with God* in Jesus.

What does this mean? St Ignatius believed that we need to both understand God’s story with our minds, but in order to be able to make a true response to it, we need to also understand the feelings and desires we have when we read it.

The words of God can feed us spiritually, emotionally and mentally, bringing us into a life-giving sense of God’s presence and purpose.

Psalm 1 says that as we meditate on God’s word we become like a tree with its roots in flowing water - always be bearing fruit, staying alive and flourishing.

When we meditate, or read contemplatively, we open ourselves up to God speaking to us personally through the *rhema* (living word) of the Scriptures. In Psalm 119 the writer experiences God’s word being like a “Lamp to my feet and light to my path”. (119:105)

As we have seen, the writer Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that we read God’s word from the heart: “... just as you do not analyse the words of someone you love, but accept them as they are said to you, accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart, as Mary did. That is all...Do not ask, ‘How shall I pass this one?’ but ‘What does it say to me?’ Then ponder this word long in your heart until it has gone right into you and taken possession of you.”

Meditation is being aware of God and using our imagination as we read the Bible and was seen by early Christians as the normal foundation of a spiritual life. Through our imaginations we can read the story as if we are present.

C.S. Lewis says it is like the difference between looking at a beam of sunlight in a dark shed in which he “was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it. Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam.

“Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun.

“Looking along the beam and looking at the beam are very different experiences.”





Meditating on the Bible is not looking at it, in order to study it, but looking at everything through it – and being changed by the view.

There are different ways of meditating. As we have seen, the practice of 'holy reading' (Lectio divina in Latin – see handout) starts by being relaxed and becoming aware of God's presence – perhaps relaxing our breathing and centring our thoughts on Him.

We then read the text slowly and repeatedly, using our imaginations and perhaps a number of ways to help us see ourselves, and God in it.

This might give us a good opportunity to 'see the story from the perspective of a 'missing voice'. How might I see this if I am another gender? Or an oppressed person?

Then we read, reflect with questions, respond to what God is saying to us, and finally rest in His presence.

These suggestions may help us to read the Bible in this way:

Reading a sentence, but with a different word emphasised each time. For example:

"Christ in you the hope of glory", Colossians 1:27.
Read: CHRIST in you the hope of glory – then unpack what CHRIST means.
Read: Christ IN you the hope of glory – then unpack what IN means.
Read: Christ in YOU the hope of glory – then unpack what YOU means.

Using guided meditations which lead us into the passage.

Personalising the passage by including my name as one of the characters.

Using pictures to visualise the passage.

