

WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP: BEING WITH GOD



Session 6: Being with God in Scripture

How do we hear from God and understand what He wants?

How is the Bible different from other books?

How does God shape me through the Bible?

What is at the heart of the Bible?

What is in the Bible and how was it written?

How am I meant to read it?

How do I read with my mind?

How do I know I am reading it right?

How do I read with the heart?

How do I read the Bible with others?

Where do I start?

How do we hear from God and understand what He wants?



At the heart of discipleship is paying attention to God. As we have already explored, in a general way our main focus is to “keep God before our minds”. (Dallas Willard)

In a more specific way we are to be “watching, listening, learning” because “The master is going to speak”. (Archbishop Rowan Williams) “We are what we hear from God” (Emil Brunner), and, as apprentices of Christ, we are those who hear His words and put them into practice day by day.

The prophet Samuel is a good model for us – his first real prayer was perhaps, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

As we have seen, God communicates in a general way (general revelation) through His creation and through the qualities within human beings such as conscience or self-awareness which point to His existence.

But God’s covenant relationship with us is personal – He calls us to ‘be with Him’, and He has communicated, and does communicate with us in two very specific ways (specific revelation).

Firstly it is through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that we are able to see and understand God’s purposes.

And secondly it is through the gift of the Bible that we are able to both keep God before our minds and hear what He says to us personally.

Christians understand that the Bible contains the complete foundational content of what God wants His people to know, and so when God uses the Bible to speak to us today He does so not to add anything new to what it reveals, but to enable us to apply it to our lives.

St. Isidore (c. 560-636), the Archbishop of Seville in Spain, said that reading the Bible was the chief way in which God talks to us: “Prayer purifies us, reading instructs us. Both are good when both are possible. If we want to be always in God’s company, we must pray regularly and read regularly.

“

When we pray, we talk to God; when we read, God talks to us. All spiritual growth comes from reading and reflection.”

As we shall see, the practices of meditation and study help this to happen. The Bible can become a way in which God can communicate with us personally, and through which our minds can be renewed so that we increasingly see the story of our lives and the story of the world as God sees them.

God has always wanted covenant-partners who are ‘being with Him’ in specific, real, personal, and transforming ways, and still does today. The amazing claim is that through feeding on the Bible we have access to the chief way in which He can communicate with us.

As Jesus said, the question is, “Do you have eyes to see and ears to hear?”

How is the Bible different from other books?



2 Timothy 3:16 is the perhaps the verse within the Bible which best explains its significance: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness..."

The phrase "God-breathed" reveals that the Bible is different because it is divinely inspired. In other words, the many human authors of the various parts of the Bible were inspired by the Holy Spirit in their writing. The early Christians came to accept these writings as uniquely God-given, and drew them together in the form which we have today.

The theologian Calvin put it like this: "This is a principle which distinguishes our religion from all others, that we know that God has spoken to us, and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak at their own suggestion, but that, being organs of the Holy Spirit, they only uttered what they had been commissioned from heaven to declare."

In the same way that Christians believe Jesus was fully human and fully God (we shall explore this more in module 2), the Bible is a fully human book (with all the messiness that can mean) and a fully divine one. The creation of the Bible is another way in which God 'covenant-partners' with His people, cooperating with those who have been willing to serve Him through writing His story faithfully throughout many centuries.

Because it is uniquely inspired by God, the Scripture is "profitable" for teaching us – showing us how to know God better – rebuking and correcting us – showing us where and how we need to change – and training us in righteousness – helping us to live the 'Way of Discipleship'.

Even without necessarily believing the Bible was inspired by God, for Gandhi it was far more than just a book:

“

You Christians look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilisation to pieces, turn the world upside down and bring peace to a battle-torn planet. But you treat it as though it is nothing more than a piece of literature.”

Once Jesus was challenged by the Sadducees (a religious grouping) who were trying to trap Him. He replied, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." (Matthew 22:29)

For Christ, it is those who "know the Scriptures" who will know how to live. As Tom Wright says, "The Bible is the book of my life. It's the book I live with, the book I live by, the book I want to die by." In 2020, Pope Francis preached, "To follow Jesus, mere good works are not enough; we have to listen daily to his call...He, who alone knows us and who loves us fully, leads us to push out into the depth of life...That is why we need His word: So that we can hear, amid the thousands of other words in our daily lives, that one word that speaks to us not about things, but about life."



How does God shape me through the Bible?



In our life journey of discipleship the Bible can be a foundation through which we can grow in being with God, becoming like Christ, and joining in with the Spirit.

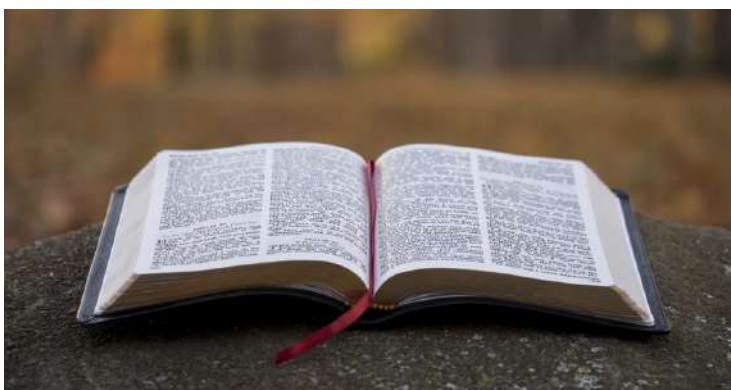
Various pictures and images are used throughout Scripture to unpack how it may shape us.

Being with God

Drawn to God: In an early version of the Bible (1611) the translators emphasised how the Scriptures “can make us wise unto salvation”. They were echoing the letter of 2 Timothy again in which Paul writes, “how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:14-15)

God offers a life of covenant love in which we are being forgiven and restored. To be saved ultimately means to be made completely whole again. For Christians this is through Christ, and particularly through the cross (as we shall unpack in module 2).

While God may speak to many people through general revelation, it is *uniquely* through the Bible people can be brought into a relationship with God through Jesus. It is through the words of Scripture that we can be first drawn to God’s loving offer. They can give us the wisdom to come to faith.



Fed and renewed by God: Jesus said, “People do not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” In other words, it is possible to be physically alive, but spiritually dead, lacking the things that give ultimate meaning.

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

Another image from Psalm 1 offers a picture of someone whose delight is in the law of the Lord, (meditating on it) day and night, as being like a tree with its roots in flowing water. They will always be bearing fruit, staying alive and flourishing.

Spoken to and guided by God: St Augustine described the Scriptures as “our letters from home.” If you have ever had a hand-written letter from someone you love you will know the experience of connecting not just with the words on the page, but having a deeper experience and reminder of their presence.

In the same way this session explores how God can speak to us personally through the Bible. A personal aspect of being with God as a disciple is in being willing to be guided by Him – in our general growth and sometimes in specific moments.

In one Psalm the writer experiences God’s word being like a “Lamp to my feet and light to my path”. (Psalm 119:105)

Becoming like Christ



Discovering who we are. An early Pope, Gregory the Great, described the Bible as “...like a mirror before our mind's eye. In it we see our inner face. From the Scriptures we can learn our spiritual deformities and beauties. And there too we discover the progress we are making and how far we are from perfection.”

This is because, as the letter to the Hebrews says, “the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12)

The point here is that anything that can divide “soul and spirit” is capable of being completely precise in how it exposes things. If the first step of becoming like Christ is to have a true understanding of ourselves, though the stories and teachings of Scripture we are offered a way of seeing in what ways and how we can change. As one writer puts it, “I don't read the Bible. The Bible reads me.”

Discovering how God works in people. As we shall see more in module 4, the Bible is full of stories of real people, with real failures, sin and brokenness. Again and again God works in and through them to bring change. As these stories shape our regular thinking we can be inspired and informed about how God can continue to shape us.

Joining in with the Spirit

Seeing what God is doing. Everyone has a way of looking at reality (a worldview) even if it is largely subconscious. Our worldview will shape the decisions we make, the things we focus on, the purpose of our lives.

It tells us who we are (what kind of creature am I?), where we are (what kind of world is this?), what is wrong and what the solution is. As disciples, the more conscious we are of having a 'biblical worldview', in other words, seeing reality as God sees it, the more likely we are to spend our lives doing the things which God desires.

Because our worldview is constantly being shaped by the voices and ideas we focus on, the more we are growing in our understanding and knowledge of God's story and reality, the more we are likely to have a worldview which is Christian.



Paul talks about us “being transformed by the renewing of our minds” – being changed because what we think about is so saturated in God's life-giving reality.

Being equipped to join in. Similarly, the more we are familiar with the Bible, the more likely it is that we will not only know what God wants in the world, but as we see how He has acted through Jesus and others how He calls us to join in.

The verse we quoted at the beginning continues like this: “All Scripture is God-breathed...so that the servant of God *may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*” (2 Tim. 3:16-17)



What is at the heart of the Bible?



The fantastic resource *The Bible Project* describes the Bible as “a unified story that leads to Jesus”.

While the Bible has many parts, and tells a long story, He is at the centre of its meaning and purpose. Any individual section will only be understood through the lens of Christ, and the purpose of any interpretation is to find Him.

As Martin Luther put it, “The Bible is the cradle wherein Christ is laid.” Or as Hugh of St. Victor expressed it, “...the whole of scripture is one book, and that one book is Christ.”

How do we know this? This was something Christ Himself claimed, saying that all the earlier books of the Bible point to Him: “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.” (John 5:46) After His resurrection, Jesus taught two of His disciples about what had happened in this way: “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” (Luke 24:27)

In what would have been shocking at the time, Jesus assumed He had authority to replace teachings of the Old Testament with his own. For instance, while the Old Testament commands people to make oaths in God’s name (Deuteronomy 6:13), Jesus forbids it (Matthew 5:33-37).

This approach is confirmed elsewhere. During what is known as the Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John see Jesus’s ‘glory’ and Moses and Elijah talking to him. They hear a voice saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” (Luke 9:33). It is clear that Christ relates to the earlier teachings of the Old Testament, but is greater than them. In the same way the writer of Hebrews says that while God spoke in a variety of ways in the past, Jesus supersedes all these past revelations (Hebrews 1:1-3).

At the end of John’s gospel it is made clear that the purpose of the Scriptures is found in Christ: “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31)

He is the ‘controlling centre’ how we understand the whole Scripture. This is important because it enables us to both understand how to read the Bible, but also to know how not to read the Bible.

The Bible in itself is not the Word of God. Jesus is the Word of God. The Bible is a book which is useful only if it helps us grow as disciples who are being with Him.

As one writer puts it, we might say that Jesus is “the Word” of the words. It is possible to become too attached to knowing the Bible and yet lose sight of knowing God. Jesus confronted religious leaders who did exactly that: “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40).

Jesus wasn’t saying there was anything wrong with their careful study of Scripture or with the correctness of their beliefs. The issue wasn’t about what these leaders believed but the way in which they believed it. He was showing them that knowing and even believing the Bible was fruitless unless it leads to Him. To miss this is to run the risk of turning Bible-knowledge into an idol.



What is in the Bible and how was it written?



As we have seen, the Bible is a “unified story” told over a long period of time.

The word Bible comes from the Greek word *biblia* meaning books - it is actually a collection of 66 books (39 books in the Old Testament, 27 in the New Testament) written over 1200 years (1100BC to 100AD) by 40 different authors.

The Bible is full of different kinds of writing, reflecting all of life. About 43% of the Bible is made up of stories, from history to parables. Approximately a third of the Bible is poetry and a quarter of the Bible is prose - laws, sermons and letters.

We have explored how the Bible uniquely claims that God uses the words of human authors to speak His message, and that through this divine mind speaking through many people in many ways a unified message and story is revealed in history.

There are of course big questions that arise from believing this: How 'error free' is the Bible? How can we trust the accounts as being accurate? Why are there different interpretations? Who decided what should be in it and why? How do we make good decisions in today's world based on what the Bible says?

We will look at these in more detail in module 4 “Knowing the Story and having Bible Confidence”, but for now it's worth noting a key idea which helps us accept the 'human side' of the Bible.

Because God loves the people He is in covenant with, He never overrides the free will or humanity of those who wrote, or who were in, the Bible.

Because of this genuine relationship and partnership one of the wonderful truths about the love of God is that it always leads Him to work with our weaknesses and mistakes, not despite them.



For example, we see this in the way that God acts through the cross, but also lets Himself be acted upon on the cross.

The sometimes challenging aspects of the Bible, in what and how it is written, are a reflection of this loving truth - God has allowed His words to come via imperfect people, and amazingly can still communicate with us.



How am I meant to read it?



Some common ideas about how we read the Bible might include seeing it as some kind of mysterious 'magic book' giving us answers to things like who we should marry, or as a moral guidebook, or a philosophical text.

While there is moral guidance and philosophy in its pages, for disciples the Bible is a way we "listen" to God. The morning and evening prayer of the people of Israel was called the *Shema* - a word which means "Hear". *Shema* is far more than hearing with the ears - it means paying attention to something with a view to obeying. For disciples, using the Bible is about this kind of listening.

It is possible to read the Bible like any other book as a piece of literature or history. Whole books have been written with this historical-critical approach. While we can gain a lot from this kind of literal knowledge (for example, by studying the archaeology of places in the Bible) as Christians who believe it is divinely inspired we will always also read it to listen for the "fuller" meaning, and to pay attention to God.

One question is should we read it through our thoughts, or our feelings, or both? Is it ever helpful to bring our feelings into the way we read Scripture?

A saint called Ignatius believed it was essential to do both. We need to understand God's story with our minds, but, in order to be able to make a true response to it, we know to also understand our feelings and desires.

In *A Spirituality Workbook* David Runcorn points out how the part of our brain which reacts when we think is actually the same part that is affected by our feelings. In other words, there is no thinking that is not emotional, and no feeling that is not thoughtful. He says it is helpful to know that we have an 'emotional mind'.

Just as the Bible invites us to love God with our "heart (feelings, desires, motives) and our mind (thoughts, ideas, worldview)", so we will listen well to God through the Scripture if we can do both in the way we read it.

The two practices that can train us to 'be with God' in Scripture are study (mind) and meditation (heart). It's good to be able to practise these on our own, but also with others.



How do I read with my mind?



Having faith is not about turning off the mind or stopping asking questions.

Teaching was at the heart of the life of Israel - God told them to “Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates...” (Deuteronomy 11: 18-20)

Jesus’ ministry was marked by teaching crowds and individuals, Paul taught and persuaded people wherever he went, writing in Philippians to guard what they focus their minds on: “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” (Philippians 4:8)

This is the reason why in most of our sessions we use the Discovery Bible Study method. One of the aims of it is to encourage us to engage with our minds and hearts. The other is to learn by doing that studying the Bible is not just for a few people.

To begin growing in the practice of studying the Bible it is good to start by doing it with other people - supporting each other and learning from the way in which others do it. While there are different techniques that can be used (see below) an effective study will always involve regular elements:

A sense of repeating the experience over time to build up knowledge and understanding.

Putting aside time and making effort to **concentrate** on the Bible.

Finding ways to **understand** what God is saying.

Always looking for the **personal significance** of what you are studying (the listening for the fuller meaning).

If you are starting out, these thoughts might help:

It’s important to remember **Bible study is not a test of how clever you are** - remember the mistake of those who had a lot of knowledge, but missed the point of coming to Jesus.

Not every part of the Bible is equally relevant for every stage of life or situation.

You don’t need to start with the more difficult parts. In 1 Corinthians 3:2 Paul wrote, “I fed you with milk, not solid food.” In other words, he knew that different people benefit from studying different things depending on their stage of discipleship.

Some techniques to get you started (most of these are better done with others):

You can use the **Discovery Bible Study** questions for any passage of Scripture (there is a handout with some suggested passages to get you started).

You can read the same passage using **two or three different translations** of the Bible to explore different emphases this reveals. Online you can use bibegateway.com to place different translations side by side.

If you are with others, you can **read larger chunks**, and then try and **summarise** what they are saying.

You can take individual verses, which might be harder to understand, and try and see whether **reading the verses before or after them help make the meaning clearer.**

Ask: what might this verse mean when I read it on its own and what might it mean if I read the verses before and after it?

You can read books called **Commentaries**, which are written to explain books of the Bible in more depth, or Bible dictionaries. The Bible Project gives amazing video introductions to each book of the Bible, as well as studies on some of the Bible’s themes.

How do I know I am reading it right?



To a certain extent it is impossible to read *anything* without interpreting it, and this is equally true of the Bible.

God doesn't remove our own individual way of reading when we come to the Bible – He meets us where we are. But this means we have to interpret Scripture, and when we do looking through two lenses will help:

How do we understand what the Bible meant **in the time and place it was written**, to the audience who received it (this is known as exegesis)?

What is God saying to us **here and now**, with the particular experience and background we have (we call this hermeneutics)?

Being able to pay attention to both these lenses will help us to read well. It enables us to see the way in which the Bible may have had a particular meaning for those who originally read it. But it may also help us to understand how its story and message is relevant for now, and indeed, for eternity.

While we may apply the Bible to situations that the original authors could not have imagined (cars! Robots! The internet!) it is always true that **a biblical text can never mean what it never could have meant to the author or her readers.**

And the fact that the Bible was written into a very different world from ours doesn't make it irrelevant. In fact, it can be a help in that it helps us to listen to what God is saying beyond our own 21st century experience, and to think about God's bigger picture through all time.

Here are five ideas which will help us interpret the Bible as well as possible:

We come with humility. Isaiah talks about people "trembling at God's word". (Isaiah 66:2) We are not the ones who create the message of Scripture – God is. And, as we have seen, because God is God, we can never know His truth completely. But we can know it enough to live faithfully.

It's always good to **read each part of the Bible through the lens of the whole story.** It is a unified story, and the more we can interpret parts by looking at how they relate to others the more balanced our interpretation will be.

It's good to be aware that **the Bible is made up of different kinds of writing** – story, poetry, fact, image, letters. When we interpret it's always good to think about what this particular piece of writing was doing. If we try and interpret a parable of Jesus as a historical fact, for example, we will miss the point because we are looking at it in the wrong way.

The **Bible is also an evolving story** (called a progressive revelation). The complete picture, which is fulfilled by Jesus, is not given all at once, but was the result of people listening to God over centuries.

Which means that anything we read in the Bible, particularly within the Old Testament, **can only be fully understood in the way that they point to Jesus.** Difficult passages earlier in this evolving story will be consistent with the direction of the whole story, but may not be the complete picture of God's character. Whenever we read something which doesn't resonate with God's love, the best way to interpret it will always be to find, in whatever way possible, how it points to Christ.



How do I read with the heart?



In the Bible the 'heart' is the place of real change and connection – it is the centre of our being, from where all our desires come. 'Heart' and 'soul' are often used as alternatives.

Psalm 119 talks about laying up God's words "in my heart." The writer Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that as we allow God's words to get into our hearts we really change: "And 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."

In our culture people can be sceptical about "God speaking to us" personally. We might struggle with the way in which, throughout the Bible, God communicates with those who have the spiritual capacity to hear and see spiritual realities. But throughout the Bible we consistently see an expectation that God will speak to each individual, through the heart.

The practice which helps us to grow in this is **meditation**. The part of us that helps us to meditate is by using our **imagination** as we read the Bible. Meditating on the Bible regularly was often seen by early Christians as the normal foundation of a spiritual life.

The aim is not so much to learn about God in the Scriptures, but to meet God through the Scriptures. Through our imaginations we can read the story as if we are present. This is not make-believe – because Jesus is not bound by time the event we are reading about on the page is a living present-tense experience for Him.

Meditating with the Bible starts with us wanting to meet with God – it is hard to meditate well if we don't have this desire.

It's very important to have enough time to do it in a relaxed way, to be comfortable in our place and in the way we are sitting, kneeling or standing.

A simple technique, which is being widely used today, is known as 'holy reading'. (Lectio divina in Latin) It's an old practice of meditation (hence the Latin title!).

Regularly learning to use lectio divina can help us read the Bible, and be with God, in our hearts. There is a handout available about practising Lectio divina.

It involves reading the text slowly and repeatedly, using our imaginations and perhaps a number of questions to help us see ourselves, and God in it.

We first **prepare to meet with God** by relaxing our breathing and centring our thoughts on Him.

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



How do I read the Bible with others?



Before the printing press most Christians could only read the Bible together, and often did so in large chunks.

While there are many ways we can read individually, coming to the Bible with other people offers three important advantages.

It helps us to **build the spiritual practices of studying and meditation**. The fact is that left to our own devices we can often find reading the Bible hard.

This is not only because it is long and sometimes hard to understand, but because there can be an element of spiritual struggle involved in even opening it – we will explore that more in module 3. Reading with others can help us build rhythms of being with God in the Bible.

We can learn from each other how to approach the Bible. The best way to learn something is by watching others do it, and then trying yourself. The more we can read the Bible with those who have more experience, and are willing to empower us, the more we will grow in confidence.

We can help each other interpret the Bible well. God always uses people in community, and by reading His word with others we can aid one another in arriving at as faithful an interpretation as possible.

Preaching and teaching are ways in which we explore the Bible in community – they are related but slightly different.

Preaching comes from the word *herux*, which was someone who would come into a town to let everyone know good news (a bit like a town crier).

Preachers announce the good news of Christ, particularly to those who might not have heard it before, aiming for a change in their lives.

Teaching is more about explaining things that people might not understand and showing people how to live in the light of it.

For example, while a preacher might announce the good news to people that they have been released from prison by the King, a teacher will explain to them how this has happened, when it will happen, where they will live now, what they do next.



Where do I start?



There are many suggestions for being with God through Scripture in the practices of study and meditation in this session and in the handouts.

The best final advice comes from Bernard of Clairvaux, who suggests we read the Bible regularly, in bits we can manage for the stage we are at, and often with others:

“Think of the word of God in the way you think of your food. When bread is kept in a bin, a thief can steal it, or a mouse can find its way in and gnaw it, and eventually, of course, it goes mouldy. Once you have eaten your bread, you have nothing to fear from thieves, or mice, or mould! In the same way, treasure the word of God...Feed on it, digest it, allow its goodness to pass into your body so that your affections and whole way of behaviour is nourished and transformed.

“

Do not forget to eat your bread and your heart will not wither. Fill your soul with God’s richness and strength.”

