

Way of Discipleship Small Groups

What helps us to discover the original intended meaning of Bible passages?



Touching base (5 minutes)

Open in prayer as is helpful for your group.

If this is your first session take time to introduce yourselves and set any ground rules you want to for your time together.

If you met previously take the opportunity either as a group or in pairs to check in with each other about how your response from last time has gone.



Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

Why does understanding the original meaning of Bible passages matter?



Understanding the information (20 minutes)

Share these thoughts in your own words or read them together:

Why did the religious groups of Jesus' time – Pharisees, Sadducees or Essenes – disagree about some aspects of what the Torah means, even though they had the same text? Why do Christians have different understandings of what the Bible means?

It is impossible for us to read anything without interpreting it. Two things stand in our way when we seek to have a perfect understanding of any text:



- We all have incomplete knowledge of the background and intention behind the original words or story.
- We all wear the “glasses” of own perspectives, shaped by our experiences, which no one else shares. (Sometimes these perspectives may help us discover new insights, but sometimes they may get in the way).

A book that was written over 1500 years by multiple authors can be doubly hard to interpret.

To read the Bible well it is therefore important that we seek to understand the original meaning as best we can (and also become aware of how other perspectives – including our own - can influence that interpretation. There is another session on this).

Particularly when we are teaching others, being sure we are trying to draw out the original meaning as much as possible (known as exegesis) as opposed to having our own ideas and trying to use the Bible to justify them (eisegesis) is vital in reading it well.

Some of these questions may help us to understand the original purpose and meaning:

How can I read this prayerfully, asking the Holy Spirit to guide me?

Who wrote it and to whom? (Was it intended for all people in all times e.g. the record of Jesus written by eyewitnesses, or for a particular situation e.g. food laws in Leviticus?)

Why did they write it and what did they intend it to do? (What kind of writing is it?)

How does the particular passage relate to what is written before and after it? (e.g. sometimes paying attention to how a parable is introduced can help us focus on its main meaning: “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.” (Luke 18:1))

How does this passage work alongside other passages? (e.g. How might we harmonize Luke 14:26, which tells us we must hate our parents, spouses, children and even ourselves if we are to be Christ’s disciple and Ephesians 6:2, which tells us to honour our parents?)

How does the whole Bible story help us to understand this passage? (e.g. how does our understanding of Abraham help us to interpret the writing about covenant in the New Testament?)

How might we see the meaning of this passage through Jesus? (e.g. how do we make sure we read the accounts of warfare in the Old Testament in the light of His self-sacrificial love?)

What was going on at the time that is relevant? (What historical events or cultural background might help us understand it better? What does archaeology reveal about the place involved?)

Are there meanings of particular words we need to pay attention to?

There are many resources available seeking to help us find answers to the questions we might want to ask when trying to find the intended meaning of a text.

<https://bibleproject.com/> provides excellent overviews of key themes and each of the books of the Bible.

Study Bibles have useful maps and introductory material for each biblical book, as well as comments on individual verses.

Bible Commentaries are written to provide detailed background, summarize the key points, and help us to apply passages well.

A Bible Dictionary gives short articles on biblical themes arranged in alphabetical order. Nave’s Topical Reference offers a similar resource.

A Concordance cross-references individual words, showing where else the author used particular word, and the meaning of the original Hebrew or Greek.

Many of the tools listed above can be found on the Internet. www.biblegateway.com is a reliable resource.

Discuss: How might researching the original meanings of texts grow our faith?

Reading the Bible (15 minutes)

Read Mark 7: 6-13 in which Jesus exposes the way that the Pharisees ignored the original meaning of Scripture.

Discuss the Discovery Bible Study questions:
What does this passage teach me about God?
What does this passage teach me about people?
How does this passage call me to obey God?
What might I do in response to this this week?



Seeing how it looks in real lives (10 minutes)

There is no video, but you are invited to discuss your experience of how background research has helped you understand something better - in the Bible or elsewhere. How do you do it? What do you find helpful?



Optional further material and questions

Share these thoughts or read them together:

An example: looking for the original meaning of Genesis 1

What was going on at the time that is relevant?

Knowing that other cultures had their own creation stories, that the biblical authors who wrote Genesis would have known about, can open up some exciting possibilities in appreciating the meaning of Genesis.

Indeed, the writers used aspects of these stories, but in a way that contrasts with these other myths.

At the time Genesis 1 was written, while the Israelites were in Babylon, people worshipped many gods, including the sun and moon. Genesis emphasises that there is one God and calls the sun and moon “lesser lights” (1:16), in other words, not to be worshipped. During this period a Babylonian myth called the Enuma Elish portrayed creation as the fallout of a battle between two gods, and human beings, who are created from the blood of a slain god, as the slaves of the gods.

We can understand Genesis 1 better when we see it in contrast to this – rather than the world being created from a battle, it is created as “good”. Rather than humans being slaves, they are “under-kings”, made in God’s image.

The people who originally read this would have been slaves in Babylon – to read that God has ordered the world, and made them to be free and in His image would have inspired hope in the face of despair. Genesis 1 is a liberating story.

Are there meanings of particular words we need to pay attention to?

This question can be illustrated by looking at the meaning of how we understand human “dominion” in Genesis, and how important a good understanding of individual words can be.

In 1967, a professor named Lynn White wrote an article in Science magazine called The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis.

In a nutshell he said that the real problem...the real danger to the environment...actually comes from the Christian faith. He went back to Genesis 1:28 and human dominion to rule over the earth.

White said Christianity created this idea that nature is not sacred it is just disposable, and that in the Bible human beings are not really a part of nature, they are above it, so nature exists just kind of as a thing for people to use and exploit. He called this selfish anthropocentrism and that this is what characterizes Christianity. Even today a lot of environmental activists are highly suspicious of Christianity.

So understanding the intended meaning of the word dominion (or “rule over”) is crucial in reading the passage well.

The writers of The Drama of Scripture put it this way: “...it is incorrect to read dominion as legitimising a ruthless mastery over nature and exploitation of it. In God's own creative work, He acts for the good of what he has made and not for his own selfish pleasure....Over this good creation, God calls the human “ruler” to serve as steward under-sovereign, to embody God's own care for, and protection of, His good creation in his own sovereign rule over the earth.

It is impossible to read this as suggesting that humans are free to do what they like with God's workmanship. ...A better way of expressing the concept of “dominion” over creation may be to say that we are God's royal stewards, put here to develop the hidden potentials in God's creation so that the whole of it may celebrate His glory.”

Discuss: How much of an issue is it that the way we understand one word can make a world of difference?

Responding to God's leading (5 minutes)

Give people an opportunity to think about, “What might God be showing me and how might I respond?” They may like to write this down and/or share it with the group and/or share it with one other person. A friendly question is to ask each other, “Is there anything that would be helpful to ask you next time?”



Group prayer (5 minutes)

Almighty God, We thank you for the gift of your Holy Word. May it be a lantern to our feet, A light to our paths, and a strength to our lives. Take us and use us to love and serve all people in the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the name of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen



What helps us understand the original meaning of Bible texts?

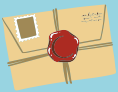
Why do Christians have different understandings of what the Bible means?

It is impossible for us to read anything without interpreting it. Two things stand in our way when we seek to have a perfect understanding of any text: We all have **incomplete knowledge** of the background and intention behind the original words or story.

We all wear the “glasses” of **own perspectives**, shaped by our experiences, which no one else shares. (Sometimes these perspectives may help us discover new insights, but sometimes they may get in the way) To read the Bible well it is therefore important that we seek to understand the **original meaning** as best we can. We want to be sure we are trying to draw out the original meaning as much as possible (known as exegesis) as opposed to having our own ideas and trying to use the Bible to justify them (eisegesis). Some of these questions may help us to understand the original purpose and meaning:

01 *How can I read this prayerfully, asking the Holy Spirit to guide me?*

02 *Who wrote it and to whom?*



(Was it intended for all people in all times i.e. the record of Jesus written by eyewitnesses or for a particular situation i.e. food laws in Leviticus?)

03 *Why did they write it and what did they intend it to do?*



(What kind of writing is it? i.e. does the fact that Genesis 1 is structured like a poem for worship help us understand its purpose better?)

04 *How does the particular passage relate to what is written before and after it?*



(i.e. sometimes paying attention to how a parable is introduced can help us focus on its main meaning: “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.” (Luke 18:1))

05 *How does this passage work alongside other passages?*



(i.e. How might we harmonize Luke 14:26, which tells us we must hate our parents, spouses, children and even ourselves if we are to be Christ’s disciple and Ephesians 6:2, which tells us to honour our parents?)

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How does the whole Bible story help us to understand this passage?

(i.e. how does our understanding of Abraham help us to interpret the writing about covenant in the New Testament?)



07

How might we see the meaning of this passage through Jesus?



(i.e. how do we make sure we read the accounts of warfare in the Old Testament in the light of His self-sacrificial love?)

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What was going on at the time that is relevant?



(What historical events or cultural background might help us understand it better? What does archaeology reveal about the place involved?)

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Are there meanings of particular words we need to pay attention to?



What will help me discover the original intended meaning of a text?

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Bible Commentaries are written to provide detailed background, summarize the key points, and help us to apply passages well. There are commentaries for each book or one volume books on the whole Bible.

The Lion Handbook to the Bible has proved popular and immensely helpful over several decades and the **short commentaries** on each book by Tom Wright, published by SPCK have proved very helpful.

A **Bible Dictionary** gives short articles on biblical themes arranged in alphabetical order. **Nave's Topical Reference** offers a similar resource.

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Additional notes:

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