

# **BIBLE 101**

**Woodbury UMC**  
**Winter, 2021**

## **Session One**

### **I. YOU AND YOUR BIBLE**

- A. What are your earliest memories of reading the Bible or hearing it read? How did you view the Bible at that time?**
- B. How are you currently engaged with the Bible (private reading, group study, corporate worship)?**
- C. What benefits do you receive from reading the Bible today?**
- D. What challenges does your reading of the Bible present for you today?**
- E. What do you hope to learn from “Bible 101”?**

### **II. INTRODUCTION: CHRISTIANS ARE A “PEOPLE OF THE BOOK”**

- A. Our beliefs and practices are grounded in sacred writings.**
- B. Hebrew and Christian traditions (stories, laws, letters, etc.) were transmitted orally for decades or centuries.**
- C. These traditions were eventually put into writing and organized into books and sections.**
  - 1. The word “Bible” comes from the Greek word *biblos*, which means “books.”**
  - 2. The Christian Bible is a library of 66 books in two “testaments” – Old (39 books) and New (27) books.**

**D. *Discussion question:* What is the purpose or advantage of putting religious traditions into writing?**

**E. Many sacred writings have significance for Christians, but the Bible has unique authority.**

**III. WHY THE BIBLE IS SO IMPORTANT AND INDISPENSABLE TO INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIANS AND THE CHURCH**

**A. Human beings desire to know God.**

**B. The Jewish-Christian tradition confronts us with a paradox:**

- 1. God is an unknowable mystery.**
- 2. God desires to be known and can be known.**

**C. God can be known in two ways:**

**1. Reason**

- a. Humans take the initiative to seek and know God.**
- b. Example: by observing nature, inferring from creation to a Creator**
- c. Human reason is limited and fallible.**

**2. Revelation**

- a. God takes the initiative to disclose God's self.**
- b. In the Jewish-Christian tradition, God is revealed primarily through God's actions and words.**
  - (1) Actions must be interpreted by words.**
  - (2) God's words are themselves actions.**

**D. God wants to have a word with us!**

- 1. God speaks to create the world (Genesis 1, John 1:1-3) and reveal God's will (through prophets).**
- 2. The Word becomes flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1:14, Hebrews 1:1-2).**
- 3. God cannot be seen but can only be heard through God's words and ultimately through God's Word (John 1:18).**
- 4. God's word is not only spoken, but also takes the form of written words: Scripture.**

**E. The Bible is our primary source for revelation, for hearing the word of God.**

- 1. The Bible contains God's spoken words ("Thus saith the Lord").**
- 2. The Bible also contains human words. Divine revelation is mediated through human writers (over against the "verbal" theory of inspiration).**
- 3. The Bible is both a divine and human book. This balanced view avoids two extremes:**
  - a. Regarding the Bible as merely human religious literature.**
  - b. Worshiping the Bible instead of the God to whom the Bible points (bibliolatry, the 4<sup>th</sup> Person of the Trinity, a "paper pope")**
- 4. God continues to speak to human beings after the Bible is written – the Wesleyan quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience.**

**5. What makes the Bible our primary authority for belief and practice?**

**a. The Bible tells the story of God's relationship with humanity – how that relationship became broken and repaired.**

**b. The Bible records the unique events of salvation history that become the foundation for our faith.**

**(1) The Old Testament: God's covenant with Israel (Abraham, Moses, the prophets)**

**(2) The New Testament: God's covenant with the Church in Jesus Christ (the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; the birth and expansion of the Church; God's ultimate triumph in human history)**

**c. The Bible is a living document through which God continues to speak in ever-changing circumstances (through reading, teaching, and preaching).**

**IV. *EXERCISE:* Share instances in which God has spoken to you through Scripture.**

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## **Session Two**

- I. LOOKING BACK: WHY CHRISTIANS ARE A “PEOPLE OF THE BOOK”**
  - A. God is revealed through God’s activity and speech, mediated through the words of Scripture.**
  - B. The Bible is the record of the formative events and teachings of our faith, which makes it our primary authority for belief and practice.**
  - C. Christians are not all “people of the Book” in the same way. Different groups place differing amounts of emphasis on the Bible.**
    - 1. Roman Catholics**
      - a. Have honored and utilized Scripture, but have given proportionately more weight to Church Tradition in determining belief and practice.**
      - b. Tradition = councils, creeds, papal pronouncements.**
      - c. The Church’s *magisterium* (“teaching authority”) resides in priests, bishops, and the apostolic succession of popes.**
    - 2. The Protestant Reformers**
      - a. Reaffirmed the Bible as the primary authority (source/norm) for Christians.**

- b. Empowered laypersons to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, as individuals and especially in community (a universal priesthood).**

### **3. Methodism**

- a. John Wesley: the Bible contains “everything sufficient for salvation.”**
- b. The UMC affirms the primacy of Scripture, but also acknowledges other sources of authority (Tradition, Reason, and Experience).**

#### **D. How varied understandings of the Bible’s importance have played out in Christian worship:**

- 1. Roman Catholics place greater emphasis on the Sacraments as the place in which God meets us.**
- 2. Liturgical Protestants (e.g., Episcopalians and Lutherans) maintain a balance between Word and Table in worship.**
- 3. Evangelical Protestants emphasize the preaching of the Word, almost to the exclusion of the Table.**
- 4. Methodists affirm in theory a balance between Word and Table, but place greater weight in practice on the preaching of the Word.**

## **II. LOOKING AHEAD**

- A. What is the Bible and how was it written and compiled?  
(February 2)**
- B. How can we read and study the Bible in meaningful ways?  
(February 9)**

C. What Bible verses and passages have the greatest meaning for us? (February 16)

### III. UNDERSTANDING WHAT THE BIBLE IS

#### A. What's in a name?

1. *Biblos* = “books” – a library of 66 books (Roman Catholics include the *Apocrypha*)
2. *Holy Bible* = set apart from the ordinary; associated with the divine
3. Old and New *Testament* = covenant
4. *Scriptures* = “writings”
5. *God's Word* = written revelation of the divine

B. A collection of diverse literary forms: history, law, poetry, hymnody, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, letter, apocalypse

### IV. UNDERSTANDING HOW THE BIBLE WAS WRITTEN

#### A. A divine-human partnership

1. The Bible as divinely “inspired” = “God-breathed”
2. The plenary verbal theory of inspiration (dictation)
3. The dynamic view of inspiration: God spoke through human authors who reflected their own cultural backgrounds and points of view.
4. The Bible is both a divine and human book.
  - a. The Bible is not intended to be a strictly historical or scientific account of the events it describes.
  - b. The Bible reflects the testimony of eyewitnesses who see events through the eyes of faith.

- c. This eyewitness testimony is re-interpreted and modified by authors in succeeding decades or generations. Examples:**
  - (1) Multiple accounts of Israel's history**
  - (2) Multiple accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus – the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and the Fourth Gospel (John)**
- d. Inclusion in the canon of Scripture is a human (and sometimes political!) decision.**
- e. Faith communities affirm that the entire development of the Scriptures is guided by God's Spirit. Inspiration is a process, not a point in time.**

## **B. Six stages in the formation of Scripture**

- 1. Event and interpretation**
- 2. Oral transmission**
- 3. Written transmission**
  - a. Case study: compiling and editing traditions in the Old Testament (Yawhist, Elohist, Priestly, Deuteronomic)**
  - b. Case study: the writings of the New Testament**
    - (1) The letters of Paul (50-60 A.D.) – focused on the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection.**
    - (2) The Gospels (68–100 A.D.) – recorded events and teachings in the life of Jesus.**
- 4. Circulation**
- 5. Collection**

6. Canonization – *canon* = “measuring rod”

**C. Development of the Old Testament canon**

1. The Torah (Law) – consisted of first five books, the “Pentateuch” (5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.)
2. The Prophets (1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D.)
3. The Writings included in official canon (90 A.D.)
4. Translation into Greek: the Septuagint (3<sup>rd</sup> Century)

**D. Development of the New Testament canon**

1. The Church began to regard specifically Christian writings as equal to the Hebrew Scriptures; read in public worship (2<sup>nd</sup> Century).
2. A canon prepared by Athanasius of Alexandria was the first to include the 27 books of the New Testament canon (367 A.D.)
3. Criteria for inclusion in the New Testament *canon*
  - a. Orthodoxy
  - b. Apostolicity
  - c. General usage

**E. The *Apocrypha* – writings from the intertestamental period**

1. Included in the Christian version of the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate, but not in the Hebrew Bible.
2. Martin Luther excluded the *Apocrypha* from his canon, which became the Protestant Bible.

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## **Session Three**

### **I. PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**Eternal God, in the reading of the Scripture may your Word be heard; in the meditations of our hearts, may your Word be known; and in the faithfulness of our lives, may your Word be shown. Amen.**

### **II. TONIGHT'S FOCUS: HOW TO ENGAGE THE BIBLE IN MEANINGFUL WAYS**

#### **A. Possible starting points:**

**1. Choose a book of the Bible.**

**2. Adopt another plan for regular Bible reading (e.g., *Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions, 2021*, by The Upper Room).**

**B. Example: the lectionary (4 passages for each Sunday and for special days: Old Testament, Psalm, Epistle, Gospel)**

**C. Exercise: overview of the lessons for Transfiguration Sunday**

**D. Question: for what purpose am I reading these passages?**

### **III. TWO DIFFERENT WAYS OF READING THE BIBLE**

#### **A. For information**

**1. Goal: discover the author's message for the original readers (historical background, the text in its wider context, audience, purpose, main themes, key words, etc.).**

**2. Method: study, analysis**

**3. Tools: an annotated Bible, commentaries**

**4. Uses: personal edification, teaching**

**5. Pitfalls:**

**a. To view the Bible merely as religious literature to be analyzed.**

**b. To ignore the purpose for which the Bible was written (revelation).**

**c. To assume that the Bible's message is for other people in other times and places, not for us.**

**d. To use the Bible for merely utilitarian purposes (teaching and preaching).**

**B. For spiritual formation**

**1. Goal: discover what God is saying to you through the Scripture passage**

**2. Method: meditation, personal reflection**

**3. Tools: the steps of "spiritual reading"**

**a. An initial reading: What words or phrases stand out to you?**

**b. A second reading: What questions or concerns do you have about the passage?**

**c. The option of analyzing the passage (using study tools)**

d. A third reading: What is God doing or saying in this passage? How is God asking me to respond?

e. Journaling, prayer

4. Uses: spiritual growth, personal change

5. Pitfalls: a naïve or misinformed reading of Scripture

#### **IV. EXERCISE: EXPLORE THE LESSONS FOR TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY**

##### **PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

Loving God, who speaks to us through your Scriptures and in the collective wisdom of your people throughout the ages: help us to hear anew what you would speak to us this day. For your word is always fresh, a message of life and hope in the world that needs to know and heed your will. Through Christ the living Word and your Spirit of illumination, who with You is the truth that sets us free. Amen.

##### **OLD TESTAMENT LESSON: 2 KINGS 2:1-12**

**1**Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. **2**Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. **3**The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he said, “Yes, I know; keep silent.”

**4**Elijah said to him, “Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho.” But he said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they came to Jericho. **5**The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he answered, “Yes, I know; be silent.”

**6**Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.” But he said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them went on. **7**Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. **8**Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

**9**When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha said, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” **10**He responded, “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.” **11**As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. **12**Elisha kept watching and crying out, “Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

#### **RESPONSORIAL PSALM: PSALM 50:1-6**

**1**The mighty one, God the LORD,  
speaks and summons the earth  
from the rising of the sun to its setting.  
**2**Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,  
God shines forth.  
**3**Our God comes and does not keep silence,  
before him is a devouring fire,  
and a mighty tempest all around him.  
**4**He calls to the heavens above  
and to the earth, that he may judge his people:  
**5**“Gather to me my faithful ones,  
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!”  
**6**The heavens declare his righteousness,  
for God himself is judge.

#### **EPISTLE LESSON: 2 CORINTHIANS 4:3-6**

**3**And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. **4**In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of

the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. 6For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

### GOSPEL LESSON: MARK 9:2-9

2Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. 4And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 6He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" 8Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

9As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

## V. MORE ABOUT TOOLS FOR BIBLE READING/STUDY

- A. Understand the difference between a translation and a paraphrase (e.g., *The Living Bible*, *The Message*).
- B. The best modern translations: *New Revised Standard Version*, *New International Version*
- C. An annotated Bible (*The Interpreter's Study Bible*, *Oxford Bible*)
- D. Commentaries (one-volume or by individual books)
- E. Other resources: a Bible dictionary, concordance