

Is Science More or Less True Than the Bible?



Session 1



Genesis 11:1–9; Joshua 6:20; 8:28

Session Objective

Participants will investigate what science and religion are, the sorts of things the two fields care about, and what “truth” can mean to each of them. These foundations should help the group better understand the scope and value of the relationship between science, religion, and their personal faith.

Faith Statement

We do not fully comprehend who God is or how God works.

God’s reality far exceeds all our words can say.

The Lord’s requirements are not always what we think is best.

The Lord’s care for us is not always what we want.

God comes to us on God’s own terms and is able to do far more than we ask or think.

—A Declaration of Faith, (1.2)

Session Overview

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	Option B: Falling Tissues
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 Engage	Option A: Resting with the Question
	Option B: Faith Journal
 Explore	Option A: CSI—Bible
	Option B: Tower Building
 Express	Option A: That’s Cool
	Option B: Film Clip— <i>Avatar</i>
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Enhancements

Family Connections

Archaeology

Connections

Spiritual Connections

Mission Connections



For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

It is a matter of faith to accept that God provides for us and blesses us; it is an arrogant faith that limits how God can provide for us or bless us. Consider a time that God has blessed you in surprising ways—and consider how often times like that have occurred. Maybe an ordeal proved life-changing. Maybe God answered your passionate prayer by providing something totally different, but much more important, than you asked for. However your experience speaks to the infinite creativity of God’s methods, how great it is that our God works in mysterious ways! Ask yourself:

- When you think past your personal history to consider God’s relation to all of creation, must God follow your presumptions about how God works? Why or why not?
- Do you think God acts with the occasional miracle out of the natural order or always according to the dictates of science? Or might God interact with the world with some mysterious creativity?
- How would such a creative God challenge your presumptions about “nature,” “miracles,” and “science”?



Understanding the Scripture

Many people who interpret the Bible have understood the tower of Babel story (Genesis 11:1–9) as imparting a warning about the dangers of technology, or at least a spiritual warning about humankind relying on its own cleverness instead of God’s providence. There must, however, be *some* appropriate use of science and technology, and *some* relationship between our efforts and faithfully relying on God’s grace. As you read Genesis 11:1–9, consider what the “tower” is today, what the boundaries of science are that we should not cross.

Most preachers, at least once in a while, try to offer new insight into Scripture by mentioning some interesting facts about biblical languages, cultural practices of ancient people, or archaeological records. Sometimes, this focus on information *about* the Bible can give us a breakthrough in understanding *what* the Bible actually means. At other times, the social sciences and archaeology can challenge our presumptions about God’s message, confuse our understanding of Scripture, or even confront its truth. The research about Joshua’s conquest of the Promised Land (Joshua 6–8) is just one of those challenging instances.

The sixth chapter of Joshua tells the story of Jericho’s destruction, verse 20 asserting that “the wall fell down flat,” specifically when the army trusted God. The eighth chapter of Joshua tells of his next conquest: “So Joshua burned Ai, and made it forever a heap of ruins” (v. 28). If only the historical record were so straightforward! Indisputable research over decades shows that Jericho and Ai (a Hebrew word meaning “ruins”) were destroyed well before the Hebrew

people ever entered the land. Specifically, Jericho was destroyed around 1550 B.C., and Ai hadn't been occupied since 2400 B.C. Scripture, on the other hand, implies that Hebrews did not enter the land until 1250 B.C. In other words, it is *not possible* for Joshua to have done what the Bible claims he did at the time it claims he did it. Did the author of the book of Joshua lie to us? Or is this discrepancy God's way of testing us, as though we should not question our faith, or should not give credence to anything that contradicts it? Or is there a way to reconcile the science and Scripture faithfully?



Understanding the Faith Statement

A Declaration of Faith is not included in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s *Book of Confessions*. However, the denomination has commended it to congregations for study and use in worship. Its first chapter covers our faith not simply in God, as in the beginning of the Scots Confession, but in the "living God." The first paragraph describes the solitary, unique God, "whose demands on us are absolute, whose help for us is sufficient." After this primary statement of Christian faith, the Declaration asserts our inability to "fully comprehend" God with our own imaginations. How and why God does what God does are mysteries, to which Scripture and prayer can hint, without our ever being in a position of assurance. Let God be God, and have faith that God's love is enough!



Teaching Today's Question

Different people can have vastly different experiences with and assumptions about what science and religion are, and what their relationship should be. When participants make broad claims about these issues, encourage them to describe the definitions from which they are working. If they struggle to explain those assumptions, help them to think about science at its basis as simply being inquisitive and experimental about nature, and religion at its basis as being inquisitive about life and its meaning. If members of the group disagree that science and religion are two ways of inquiring about God's ways, help them determine whether they have different definitions of science and faith, or whether a more fundamental issue is involved.



Throughout this study, participants will use a faith journal, which is available on the Web Resource download site. See page 1 of this mini-course for instructions to download Web Resources. Before the study begins, prepare a journal for each participant by stapling the pages together or putting the pages in a folder for each participant.



Enter

Option A: Apple-a-Day #1

- Apples; cutting board; knife; transparent, airtight containers such as plastic tubs or sealable bags; permanent marker; faith journals (Web Resource); pens; bleach, water, and/or sugar (optional); digital camera (optional)

Be extremely careful allowing teenagers to use knives! If you have any concerns, cut the apples yourself before participants arrive.

Before the session, invite one or more adults from your congregation to talk with your group about a meaningful baptism or Lord's Supper experience. Ask the guest(s) to bring an object that symbolizes the experience, such as a baptismal certificate, a photograph, or a memento.

Form groups of two or three. Give each group an apple and have groups cut their apple into slices. Have groups eat a few apple slices and place the rest of the slices into transparent, airtight containers that are labeled with group members' names. Explain to the group that this is the first step of an experiment in discovering how apples decompose in the period of three weeks. Give groups an opportunity to choose the conditions for their experiment, including where the container will be stored in the meeting space and the addition of other elements in the container, such as bleach, water, or sugar. Have participants complete the information and respond to the questions on p. 2 of their faith journals. Consider taking a digital picture of each container of apples in order to monitor the decomposition.

Pray the opening prayer.

Opening Prayer

God of mystery, God of truth, inspire us to know you more, and to trust you when we feel confused. Lead us to follow your will, wherever that takes us. And give us the strength to question, so that our faith might grow and deepen. Amen.

Option B: Falling Tissues

- Tissues

Form groups of two or three and give each group a tissue. Have groups try to keep their tissues in the air as long as possible by using only their breath. After congratulating and laughing at each other's attempts, explore the following questions:



- What made the tissue fall? (*gravity*)
- What kept it in the air as long as it was? (*the force of your breath*)
- Thinking scientifically, how could you have kept the tissue in the air longer? (*less weight, more force*)

Option C: Falling Apples

Faith journals (Web Resource)

Designate one side of the room as “Religious Scholar” and the opposite side of the room “Scientific Scholar.” Read each of the following quotations, having participants move to the area of the room that describes the person who they think said the quote:

“No more causes of natural things should be admitted than are both true and sufficient to explain their phenomena.”¹

“Atheism is so senseless and odious to mankind that it never had many professors.”²

“And from true lordship it follows that the true God is living, intelligent, and powerful; from the other perfections, that he is supreme, or supremely perfect.”³

Reveal to the group that all of the quotes come from Isaac Newton, a well-known scientist from the late seventeenth/early eighteenth centuries. Together read the information about Isaac Newton found on p. 3 of the faith journal.

Pray the opening prayer.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

Lead participants in a conversation that engages the question for this session, “Is science more or less true than the Bible?” Encourage them to ask and discuss their own questions, and guide the discussion with the following questions:



- What does the word *science* mean to you?
- What does the word *religion* mean to you?
- In what ways do science and religion connect? In what ways do they clash?
- What questions do you have about science and faith?

1. *The Principia*, Book 3, Rule 1 (1687).

2. *A Short Scheme of the True Religion*, 1850.

3. *The Principia: Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, 1687.

Option B: Faith Journal

- Faith journals (Web Resource), pens

Explore the following questions together:



- What does the word *science* mean to you?
- What does the word *religion* mean to you?

Read together the information about science and religion found on p. 3 of the faith journal.



- How has this information affected your understanding of science and religion?
- In what ways do science and religion connect? In what ways do they clash?

Call the participants' attention to the question, *What questions do you have about the relationship between faith and science?* on p. 4 of the faith journal. Give participants time to write a response to the question in the space provided. When all are finished, give participants an opportunity to read their responses to the group.



Explore

Option A: CSI—Bible

- Bibles, faith journals (Web Resource), historical or archaeological artifact(s) such as arrowheads or antiques or books with pictures of the same

Give participants an opportunity to examine the historical or archaeological artifact(s). Explore the following questions:



- Who do you think used this item? When did they use it? What did they use it for?
- What questions would you ask the people who used this item?
- Imagine that a book written by the people who used this item claims that they did not use the item, even though this statement contradicts all the available evidence that agrees that they did use the item. Which source would you believe? Why?
- How do you resolve discrepancies between research and literature? What questions would you ask to resolve the discrepancies?

Make sure each participant has a Bible. Read Joshua 6:20 and 8:28. Then read the information about Joshua on p. 4 of the faith journal. Have participants choose one of the statements under the information about Joshua. Explore these questions together:



- Why did you choose this statement over the other statements?
- If you agree with the first statement, how much science should you deny? Do you side with science every time it conflicts with the Bible? Why or why not?
- If you agree with the second statement, what should you believe from the Bible? Can you deny the historical accuracy of Scripture but remain faithful? How, or why not?
- If you agree with the third statement, what else could the story of Joshua mean? How do you know when to look for a deeper meaning in a Bible story?
- Whichever option you lean toward, what does the Jericho story mean to your personal faith?

Dig Deeper (optional)



Faith journals (Web Resource)

For participants who are especially interested in biblical/historical inconsistencies, have participants read the quote from John Calvin, the founder of the Reformed and Presbyterian denominations, on p. 5 of the faith journal. Explore the following questions together:



- What does Calvin mean in this quote?
- How would you put that last sentence into your own words? (*For example: We shouldn't bend our science to fit our religious beliefs.*)
- Do you agree with Calvin that science should not be manipulated to serve religion? Why or why not?
- Was Scripture ever intended to be a science textbook for us? Why or why not?
- Does knowledge of Jesus Christ come only through historically accurate information, or can our faith be inspired and grow with parables, metaphors, stories, and nonhistorical information? How do you get knowledge of Jesus?
- What makes something true? Must it always be measurable by history or science? Why or why not?
- Is truth the same for scientists and Christians? From what different contexts are they working?

Option B: Tower Building

Bibles, straws, play dough

Form groups of two or three. Give each group about twenty-five straws and some play dough. Using only the provided supplies, have groups build the tallest stand-alone tower possible. When all are finished, make sure each participant has a Bible. Read Genesis 11:1–9 and explore the following questions:



- Why were the people building a tower? (*to get to and become like God*)
- Why did they fail? (*examples: God made them fail, they can't be like God*)
- None of us believe we can literally build a tower to God, but what contemporary developments may be seen as symbolic towers in current society? (*examples: genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, subatomic research*)
- Can science ever reveal information about God or about how God works? How, or why not?
- Should there be limits to what science studies? Why or why not? What subjects might religion want to limit?
- Could science ever explain the world so well that humans no longer need faith?
- If science discovered an explanation of how prayer works, would you still pray? Why or why not?

Dig Deeper (optional)

Faith journals (Web Resource)

Invite the participants to read the faith statement for this session on p. 5 of the faith journal. Explore the following questions together:



- What does this statement mean?
- How would you put the first sentence into your own words? Do you agree with it? Why or why not?
- Do you agree that God's reality exceeds what we can say? Do you think God's reality exceeds what science can reveal?
- What makes something true? Must it always be measurable by history or science? Why or why not?
- Is information the same for scientists and Christians? From what different contexts are they working?



Express

Option A: That's Cool



Explore the following questions:



- If someone says, “That’s cool,” what do you think they mean? (*that something is good or that something is at a low temperature*)
- How do you know when to take this phrase figuratively, rather than literally?

Invite participants to close their eyes and imagine what the following biblical images would look like, understood literally. One at a time, read Isaiah 66:1, Genesis 5:27, and 1 Samuel 2:8 out loud to the group. Give members a chance to share their mental images. Then explore the following questions about reading the Bible:



- Do you think the verses are meant to be taken literally or figuratively? Explain.
- How are people’s faiths different if they take certain passages of Scripture more literally or figuratively?
- How can you know whether to take a passage literally or figuratively?
- What does this exercise help you understand about the relationship between faith and science?
- How would you respond if someone asked you, “Is science more or less true than the Bible?”

Option B: Film Clip—*Avatar*



Before the session, preview the following clip from *Avatar*: 1:48:45–1:52:48. This is just a few seconds into chapter 24, as the helicopter takes off.

Introduce the film clip by explaining that Jake is taking the scientist Dr. Grace to the Na’vi in hopes that the Tree of Souls can heal her. Dr. Grace has studied the trees on the planet and knows that there is something biologically unusual about them. However, she does not believe there is anything spiritual about them. Watch the clip together and explore the following questions:



- What does Dr. Grace mean when she says, “I’m a scientist; I don’t believe in fairy tales”?
- What is it about religion that makes some people consider it to be like a fairy tale? What aspects of Christianity might some people consider to be like a fairy tale?

- As a person of faith, how do you respond to this description of religion?
- How does Dr. Grace’s science vs. “fairy tale” dichotomy compare to or differ from the way different Christians interpret the Bible figuratively or literally?
- How can you know whether to take a passage literally or figuratively? Is there a general rule, or is it case by case?
- What does this conversation help you understand about the relationship between faith and science?
- How would you respond if someone asked you, “Is science more or less true than the Bible?”



Exit

Science and Faith

- Faith journals (Web Resource)

Read together the information about science and faith found on p. 6 of the faith journal. Explore the following questions:

- What claims does this information make between science and faith?
- What one word best describes the time we’ve spent together today?
- How has this session affected your understanding of the relationship between science and the Bible?

Pray the closing prayer.

Closing Prayer

Holy God, who honors our questions and confusion, celebrate the fact that your children are seeking your truth! We pray that your kingdom might be strengthened by study and science, but remind our hearts that kindness and mercy are your will. Forgive us when we stray from that and set us back on the path of service and peace. Amen.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for families to discuss, for each of the four sessions in this course. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Archaeology Connections

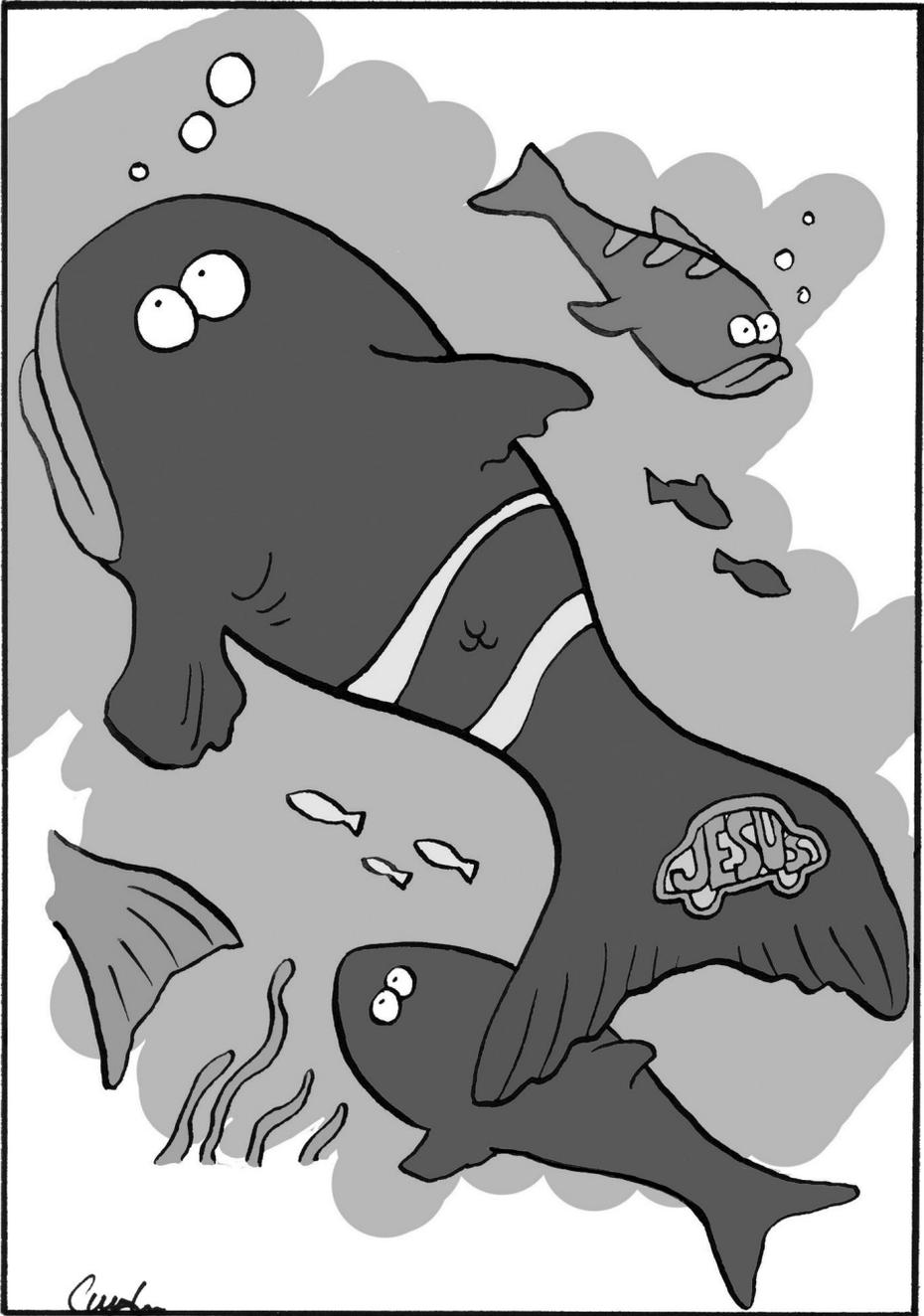
Bring and discuss a book with images and information about biblical archaeology. One good option could be the magazine *Biblical Archaeology Review*, or its corresponding website, bib-arch.org. Or invite a speaker to facilitate a discussion about how archaeology can help us understand the Bible. If possible, take the group to visit a local history museum.

Spiritual Connections

Challenge participants to conduct a month-long experiment. One option would be keeping track of how they treat people and how people treat them. One option would be praying every morning and evening, keeping track of what they prayed for and how they felt during their prayers. Have them make hypotheses about how they will feel, how God might respond to their prayers, and how their prayer life will change. If possible, have participants upload their records to a secure website and encourage conversation throughout the experiments.

Mission Connections

Many mission programs benefit from scientific research. Research some of the mission projects supported by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), to find a mission project that your congregation or youth group might appreciate, such as a program to prevent malaria, to support people with AIDS, or to teach more efficient farming techniques. Visit gamc.pcusa.org/donate for an extensive list.



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