

Sixty-Six Books. How Can I Read the Bible to Better Understand God's Word to Me?



Session 1



Isaiah 43:1-7; Matthew 5:3; Luke 24:13-35; 2 Corinthians 5:13-19

Session Objective






Participants will learn that the Bible tells how God has sought his people in the past and seeks us still today.

Faith Statement

The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written . . . God's word is spoken to his church today where the Scriptures are faithfully preached and attentively read in dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit and with readiness to receive their truth and direction.

—Confession of 1967 (9.27, 9.30)

Session Overview

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	Option B: Nametag Biblical Names
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	Option B: Opening the Scriptures: A Dramatic Reading
 Explore	Option A: Asking Questions of the Text
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	Option C: Look for the Bible in Other Places
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 Exit	The Bible Tells Me So



Enhancements

Family Connections
Tell About the Bibles You Read and Study
Read the Bible on Your Computer, Tablet, and iPad



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

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

The psalmist declares, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105). Think about the times in your life when God’s word has shined light in the darkness and illuminated the way ahead. Meditate upon how God spoke to you through the Scriptures and continues to speak to you.

Think about the scope of the biblical testimony—sixty-six books written in various styles over a long span of time, speaking to different settings. Where have you felt at home in the Scriptures? Where do you find yourself returning again and again? What would you most like to share with the youth? Where would you like to lead them? In what ways can you help them embrace God’s word as a lamp to their feet and a light to their path? Treating these sixty-six books merely as ancient historical documents would be really dull. But looking for the light that shines through them can be breathtaking!



Understanding the Scripture

In a recent book, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, the theologian N. T. Wright asserts that understanding the Scriptures ultimately leads us to cooperate with God in all that God is doing:

“The Bible isn’t there simply to be an accurate reference point for people who want to look things up and be sure they’ve got them right. It is there to equip God’s people to carry forward his purposes of new covenant and new creation. It is there to enable people to work for justice, to sustain their spirituality as they do so, to create and enhance relationships at every level, and to produce that new creation which will have about it something of the beauty of God himself.”¹

Just imagine! Helping youth understand the Scriptures equips them to cooperate with God in bringing about a new covenant and new creation.

The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and the presence of Jesus in their midst (Luke 24:13–35), proclaims Luke’s understanding of how the resurrected Christ will be known and experienced by those who did not know him in the flesh. The new believers will encounter Christ whenever the Scriptures are opened and whenever the bread is broken and the cup shared. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” is a graphic way of expressing the action of the Holy Spirit in the reading and hearing of God’s word.

Isaiah 43:1–7 and 2 Corinthians 5:13–19 provide ways to expand upon the provocative image of seeing ourselves as participants in God’s ongoing drama. They also offer grace-filled messages to the youth—“Do not fear, for I am with you,” and “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.”

1. N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperCollins: 2006), pp. 182–183.

Promoting the value of a user-friendly Bible translation leads to a simple exercise in translating Matthew 5:3, the first of the Beatitudes. Even though it is a short verse, youth will discover the challenges of translation choices.

The other key Scripture passage for this session is the one that your congregation will be hearing in worship on a future Sunday. Check with your pastor and select one of the passages to be preached in the coming weeks.



Understanding the Faith Statement

The Confession of 1967, a theological response to the shaking of the foundations in society and in the church, begins with its primary theme, "God's Work of Reconciliation." The statement on the Bible is found within the section, "The Communion of the Holy Spirit." Notice that Jesus is affirmed as "the Word of God incarnate" and the Bible is expressed as "the word of God written."

The faith statement beautifully expresses the work of the Holy Spirit in witnessing to Jesus Christ through the Scriptures and also illuminating the reading and preaching of the Scriptures. Even when we read the Bible by ourselves we are not reading it alone. We are reminded that we "read in dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit." Our desire to read the Bible and better understand God's word to us does not depend solely upon us. We have an active partner.



Teaching Today's Question

Those who regularly read and study the Bible testify to various ways their awareness and understanding have grown: prayer, meditation, familiarity, and development of new skills. Seven basic affirmations guide the selection of Bible study skills in this session:

1. God seeks and encounters us today through the Bible.
2. The scope and format of the entire Bible informs any smaller part of it.
3. Asking questions of the biblical text is how we learn the Bible.
4. Reading a translation we can understand helps our understanding of the Bible.
5. Keeping our eyes and ears open to the Bible's message in other settings helps our understanding of the Bible.
6. Engaging in worship practice increases our understanding of the Scriptures.
7. Relying upon the powerful presence and illumination of the Holy Spirit increases our understanding of the Scriptures.



Enter

Option A: Nametag Bible Books

- Nametags, pens, Bibles

As youth arrive, ask them to write the name of a book in the Bible on a nametag. Instruct the youth to line up according to the biblical order of the books on their nametags, without talking or looking in the Bible. When they have finished, have the youth check their positions against the table of contents in a Bible. If there is a mistake in the order, invite youth to move to the proper place. When everyone is lined up in the order of the books, have students say the names of the books like a roll call.

Option: For small groups, assign specific books or use larger designations, such as Hebrew history, poetry, prophets, Gospels, or letters, for example.

Option B: Nametag Biblical Names

- Nametags, pens, newsprint, Bibles

As youth arrive, ask them to write the name of a biblical person on a nametag. If anyone needs help thinking of a name, share the list in the sidebar. Invite the youth to place their nametags on another person's back. The youth are not to see the nametag on their backs, and others are not to tell what it says. When each person has a nametag, each student is to ask questions of others to solve the mystery of the name on their tag. The questions can be answered only with a "yes" or "no."

Abraham, Barnabas,
Bartimaeus, Herod, Isaiah,
John the Baptist, Joseph,
Lazarus, Lydia, Mary
Magdalene, Moses, Paul,
Peter, Pilate, Ruth, Sarah,
Thomas, Timothy, Zacchaeus

The goal is for the group to see how many can be identified. Once a name is identified, remove the nametag and post it on newsprint. Have the youth who wore it sign the nametag. That student can still be asked questions to help others identify the names that remain.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

- Bibles, newsprint, marker

Write the following quote on newsprint and post it:

"The Bible not only tells how God has sought his people in the past; it is also a means by which he seeks us out today."²

2. Robert MacAfee Brown, *The Bible Speaks to You* (Louisville: The Westminster Press, 1959), pp. 16, 21.

Read and discuss the Brown quote. Explore the following questions:



- What is the difference between knowing about God and knowing God?
- What is the difference between knowing about the Bible and knowing the Bible?
- What skills would help us read the Bible to better understand God's Word to us?

Pray the opening prayer.

Option B: Opening the Scriptures: A Dramatic Reading



Bibles, copies of "Opening the Scriptures" (Web Resource 1a)

Invite the youth to imagine how God speaks to them through Scripture.

Luke 24:13–35 invites the reader to join the story and engage in the drama.

Distribute copies of "Opening the Scriptures" (Web Resource 1a) and select readers for the dramatic reading. Encourage the readers to express the actions and emotions in the text.

Reflect upon the dramatic reading with the following questions, along with those the youth may raise:



- What role do the Scriptures play in this encounter?
- What were "the scriptures" at that time? (Old Testament)
- According to the passage, how will Jesus come to be known by future disciples? When will their hearts be on fire and when will their eyes be opened to know Jesus?
- In what ways do you hear the story differently if you read the passage and insert your name in place of the unnamed disciple?

Pray the opening prayer.

Opening Prayer

Loving God, we give you thanks for your gift of the Bible, and for your inspiration of writers, translators, hearers, and readers. Inspire us with your Spirit, so that we may meet you and know you in the words of Scripture. Guide us in our reading, studying, speaking, and listening. Set our hearts on fire. Through Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.



Explore

Option A: Asking Questions of the Text

- Bibles, copies of "Asking Questions of the Text" (Web Resource 1b)

Explain that the question before the group is learning to read the Bible to hear God's Word to us. One of the best ways to read the Bible is by asking questions of it. Distribute copies of "Asking Questions of the Text" (Web Resource 1b).

Invite youth to work in pairs or small groups on one of the Scripture passages. When the pairs or groups are complete, ask:



- Which questions were the easiest to answer? The most difficult? Why?
- What may have surprised you?
- What other questions do you have about the texts?
- What difference did it make to enter into the drama?

Option B: Read a User-Friendly Translation

- Bibles, copies of "Review Translations" (Web Resource 1c)

To give participants an opportunity to understand some of the challenges faced by translators, review and discuss the translations of Matthew 5:3 using Web Resource 1c.

Option C: Look for the Bible in Other Places

- Bibles, two books: *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*; *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* (2011, PG-13), DVD, TV, and DVD player

Explain to the youth that one of the ways to hear the Bible as God's Word to us is by hearing it in other contexts. Offer an exercise in keeping our eyes and ears open to the Bible's message in other settings.

First, invite the youth to read Leviticus 25:10. Ask: *Do you know where we can see these words quoted in large letters? (The Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, U.S.A.)* Consider what those words in Leviticus meant to those who designed a bell for the United States of America! Ask:



- What do these words mean to you in your life today?

Second, read 1 Corinthians 1:25. Ask: *Do you know in which award-winning book these words are quoted? A book you may have read in the fifth grade? (A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle)* Read a selection from the chapter "The Foolish and the Weak." Begin with "The momentary vision and faith. . ." and conclude four paragraphs later with ". . . Mrs. Whatsit was no longer there." Ask:



- What do you think 1 Corinthians 1:25, about the incredible power in love through weakness, must have meant to the author?
- What does the verse mean to you today?

Third, read 1 Corinthians 15:26. Ask: *Do you know where these words are quoted in a recent epic story?* (Written on the grave of Harry Potter's parents in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows by J. K. Rowling) Read a selection from the book, beginning on page 323 with "The snow here had become impacted . . ." and continuing through "Living after death" on page 328. Ask:



- What do you think 1 Corinthians 15:26 must have meant to the author?
- What does the verse mean to you today?

Next, view the scene with Harry and Hermione at the graveyard as interpreted in the film, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 1*:

- Start: 1 hour 24 minutes
- End: 1 hour 27 minutes

Ask such questions as:



- In the book, what role did 1 Corinthians 15:26 play in the story?
- In the movie, why do you think 1 Corinthians 15:26 was pretty much ignored?
 - How did the way 1 Corinthians 15:26 was treated in the movie change the story told in the book?
 - Can you name other movies, books, or popular songs that quote Scripture? What do you think or feel when you recognize Scripture in places other than in the Bible?



Express

Option A: Worship Practice



Bibles, art supplies

Introduce the idea of "worship practice." Basketball practice is intended to improve the players' skills. Musicians practice in order to learn their instruments. Play practice is crucial in helping actors learn their roles. In the same way, worship practice heightens awareness and deepens understanding for Christ's disciples. Worship practice involves such activities as:

Reading the Scripture passages in advance and thinking about what God is saying to you in the readings.

Imagining yourself as the day's preacher. What might you be preaching from this Scripture reading? What is God's word for the community of faith?

Praying for all those involved in leading worship that they may be faithful to the gospel and use their gifts to the fullest.

Previewing those who will be gathering in the worshipping community and the prayers you offer on their behalf.

Choose a Scripture reading that will be read and preached in worship in the coming weeks. Ask:



What worship practice will help you to better hear and understand the Scripture reading when it is read in worship?

Invite the youth to express a chosen worship practice through: designing a bulletin cover; drawing a poster for the church entryway; crafting a banner for the worship service; writing new verses to a hymn tune; or creating a children's sermon. Form pairs or small groups, provide supplies, and let them loose in worship practice.

Gather and enjoy each of the approaches.

Option B: Offer Prayers for Illumination

Dark construction paper, gel pens, light chalk or oil pastels

Indicate that prayers for illumination are offered for the worshipping community before the public reading of Scripture. An example of a prayer for illumination:

Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace; through Christ our Lord, Amen.

In addition, an individual often offers a prayer for illumination during the reading of Scripture. Form groups of two to four participants. Direct each group to create a prayer for illumination to be prayed by this learning community or by an individual. Invite them to write their prayers upon dark sheets of construction paper using gel pens, light chalk, oil pastels, or all three. Gather and share the prayers.



The Bible Tells Me So

Share this story: An interviewer asked a prominent theologian, Karl Barth, what he considered the most profound theological concept. Without missing a beat, Dr. Barth responded, "Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so." The interviewer continued, "But how can you be so certain?" And Barth said, "Because my mother told me and she doesn't lie." Ask:



- What is one thing that the Bible has told you?
- How did you come to hear and learn it?
- Who shared it with you?

Give the youth some time to think about their responses. Do not rush things. The Spirit is at work.

After each of the youth (only those who wish to) contributes, direct the group to respond, "The Bible told me so." Conclude by praying the closing prayer.

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, we desire to know your presence and to live in your loving care. Speak to us not only through the living stories in these ancient books but also through the unfolding stories of our lives. Help us be alert to the many ways you are present and active in the world. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the four sessions in this course that families can talk about after class. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Tell About the Bibles You Read and Study

Take some time to talk about your personal Bible and any of the personal Bibles the youth have with them in the session. Do you write in your Bible? What will cause you to underline or make marks on the text?

Consider focusing attention also on the pulpit Bible, the one used every Sunday to read the Word of God. Who gave the Bible? When was it given? Consider the pew Bibles: Is there a story about their addition to the sanctuary? What is the translation? How is the congregation encouraged to read from them?

Read the Bible on Your Computer, Tablet, and iPad

Wow! The entire Bible can now be downloaded on your computer, giving you the opportunity to look up words, underline, highlight, and so much more. In addition, many Bible translations are available so that passages may be easily compared and alternative translations discovered. Instead of using a hefty book called a Bible concordance, the computer allows for a word search throughout the document and provides a count of the number of occurrences. Encourage those who read the Bible on their computers, tablets, or iPads to share their value with the rest of the group.