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# WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

## Teacher Helps

### Bible Background

The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material. This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.



### Teaching Outline

provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

## Teacher Options

The next three sections provide a beginning, middle, and end for the session, with focus paragraphs in between.

### Focus Paragraphs

printed in italics at the top of the page because they are the most important part of the Teaching Guide. These paragraphs will help you move your class from “what the text meant” to “what the text means.”

## You Can Choose!

There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

### Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.

## 1

SCRIBES  
AND SCRIPTURES*Jeremiah 36:4-8, 20-26, 32; Luke 1:1-4***Bible Background****The Scroll is Produced in Partnership (Jer 26:4-8)**

Jeremiah lived and preached in Judah during the late seventh and early sixth centuries BC, a very tumultuous period due to both internal problems and the rising power of Babylon. The events of Jeremiah 36 are set in “the fourth year of Judah’s King Jehoiakim” (v. 1), which was 605–604 BC. In 605 the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians at the Battle of Carchemish, a victory that established Babylon as the dominant force in the region. It could be that those international events prompted Jeremiah to put these words into writing. The historical context of the passage reminds us that Scripture was inspired, produced, developed, and preserved under specific circumstances.

The opening words of Jeremiah 36 also remind us that God stands behind the production of Scripture. “This word came to Jeremiah from the Lord,” the Scripture says, “Take a scroll and write in it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, Judah, and all the nations from the time of Josiah until today” (vv. 1-2). Somehow—we are not told how—God inspired Jeremiah to commit to writing the content of his many years of preaching, which previously existed only in oral form. We see then how God, the prophet, and historical

circumstances partnered to produce the written tradition that eventually grew into the book of Jeremiah.

There was another partner in the scroll’s production: a scribe named Baruch (v. 4). Given the risks Baruch took to help deliver Jeremiah’s message, he was obviously a close partner in the prophet’s ministry. Baruch wrote what Jeremiah dictated on a scroll that would have been made of papyrus, a paper-like material made of the fibers of the papyrus reed, or parchment made from animal skin.

The scroll had a purpose beyond the preservation of the prophet’s words, however. Echoing the words God told him in verse 3, Jeremiah hoped that the people would turn from their sins and avoid God’s judgment (v. 7). The goal of writing down Jeremiah’s words was to bring about changed lives in response to God’s message. The production of the scroll, like the production of the entire Bible, was a gift of God’s grace.

Jeremiah had been banned from the temple (see chs. 7 and 26), so he told Baruch to read the contents of the scroll to the people. After he did so (vv. 9-10), some court officials had the scroll read to King Jehoiakim. As the scroll was read to the king, he methodically cut it into pieces and burned it in the wintertime fire that blazed before him. The king’s actions symbolized his utter rejection of the word of the Lord.

## The Scroll is Reproduced and Expanded (Jer 36:20-26)

In response to the destruction of the scroll by the king and in obedience to the instruction of the Lord (36:27-28), Jeremiah dictated another scroll that contained all the words of the first scroll—and even more: “many similar words were added to them” (v. 32). Here, our Bible tells us that Scripture came to us through a process of addition and revision.

Baruch was likely not the first and was certainly not the last scribe to work on the production and preservation of Scripture. In later history, two important groups of scribes emerged in Jewish life. The first group is known as the Sopherim. Their name is derived from the Hebrew word meaning “book,” so they were “people of the book.” Between the fourth century BC and the first century AD, they copied and preserved the Hebrew text to ensure its accurate transmission. The second group of scribes is the Masoretes. Their name comes from the Hebrew word *masorah*, which means “hedge,” because they understood their task to be building a protective hedge around the text. The Hebrew text of the Old Testament that the Masoretes produced between the fifth and tenth centuries AD (drawing on older manuscripts) is the basis of the text we use today.

The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Old Testament produced by Jews living in Egypt during the last two centuries before Christ. The Septuagint text of Jeremiah is about one-eighth shorter than the Masoretic text. Scholars long believed that the Septuagint translators must have abbreviated the Masoretic text during the process of translation because no shorter Hebrew text was known to exist. That all changed when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947 and a shorter Hebrew text of Jeremiah was found. This discovery indicated that the Septuagint was translated from a shorter Hebrew version of Jeremiah (Thompson, 117–20). The history of the book of Jeremiah offers us

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

- I. The book of Jeremiah says that “the LORD’s word” combined with the “words of Jeremiah” to make up the content of prophet’s message (Jer 1:1-2).
- II. The first scroll of Jeremiah was produced in response to specific historical circumstances. The “fourth year of Judah’s King Jehoiakim” (Jer 36:1) was 605–604 BC, when Babylonia defeated Egypt at the Battle of Carchemish.
- III. The first scroll of Jeremiah was produced as an effort to bridge the divide between God and God’s people.
  - A. It was intended to create an opportunity for repentance.
  - B. The first edition of Jeremiah was intended to turn people to God and teach them how to be the people of God, which is the purpose of Scripture (see 2 Tim 3:16-17).
- IV. The second scroll of Jeremiah was produced in response to the rejection of the previously delivered word.
- V. The purpose of Luke’s Gospel was to provide a trustworthy account of what God had done in Christ so that people could have confidence in what they learned. God used Luke’s handling of previously written sources and his intensive scholarly work to tell the story of Jesus.

an example of the ways in which biblical texts could be in flux for centuries before becoming standardized.

### Luke Writes His Gospel (Luke 1:1-4)

Luke is unique among the Gospel writers in that he actually says he used sources in the production of his book. That does not mean, though, that he is the only writer who did. Old Testament scholars have

long observed that the Pentateuch appears to be the result of a long period of composition and editing with one part of that process being the combination of various written sources. Similarly, Luke based his work on earlier written documents (“Many people have already applied themselves to the task of compiling an account of the events that have been fulfilled among us,” v. 1) that were based on oral tradition (“They used what the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed down to us,” v. 2).

The scholarly consensus is that Luke’s main written sources were the Gospel of Mark (about fifty percent of the content of Mark is also found in Luke), a “sayings source”—often referred to as Q (from the German word *Quelle*, meaning “source”), which helps explain why there is much material that is held in common with Luke and Matthew but is absent from Mark—and material that is found only in Luke (usually referred to as L).

Luke evidently felt that he had the privilege and responsibility of improving on the material from which he drew. He told Theophilus that he had “decided to write a carefully ordered account” for him because he wanted Theophilus “to have confidence in the soundness of the instruction” he had received (vv. 3-4). This implies Luke thought he could produce a more helpfully accurate account (Vinson, 25). While the other Gospel writers do not state such a motive, why else would they have written their Gospels when other traditions and accounts were available?

## A Way to Begin

*The Bible did not drop down out of heaven fully formed. Instead, the Bible developed over many centuries, and the books that make it up took many years and the efforts of many preachers, writers, editors, and copyists to produce.*

*Understanding the dynamic divine-human partnership that produced the Bible adds to our appreciation of it. Our Bibles are rooted in God’s efforts to love and to save us—real people living real lives in real history.*

### ○ Let’s Read Carefully

Divide the class into two groups. Assign one group Jeremiah 36:4-8, 20-26 and the other group Luke 1:1-4. Ask each group to read their assigned text carefully and answer the following questions.

#### Questions

- What does the text teach us about the roles of God and of human beings in the production of Scripture?
- What does the text say about the purpose of the production of Scripture?
- What surprised you about what the text teaches about the production of Scripture?

Bring the class together to discuss each group’s insights.

### ○ “Aha! Moments

Arrange to read the blog post by Peter Enns cited in the Resources section. This post recounts how the lesson writer first realized that the Bible was more complex and fascinating than he had previously thought.

#### Questions

- Have you ever experienced such an “Aha!” moment?
- If so, what was it? How did it affect you?
- If not, what would it mean for your approach to the Bible if you had one?

# **B** A Way to Explore Scripture

*We live 2,700 years after Jeremiah and Baruch and 2,000 years after Luke.*

*We are therefore far removed from the events about which their books tell us.*

*Still, as Christians, we affirm the role of the Bible in pointing us to Christ and in helping us to be formed in his image. **How do we respond to what Scripture is and to what Scripture says?***

## ○ **The Writing of Scripture**

Read Jeremiah 36:4-8, 20-26 and then Luke 1:1-4. For each passage, ask the following questions.

### **Questions**

- What does this passage describe as God's role in how Scripture came to be?
- What does this passage describe as the role of humans in how Scripture came to be?
- What other factors does this passage suggest may have played a role in how Scripture came to be?

Ask the following questions.

### **Questions**

- What have you been taught about how Scripture came to be? How is this the same as or different from what we have read in Jeremiah and Luke?
- How does understanding the process by which Scripture was written help us appreciate its message?

## ○ **Primary and Secondary Sources**

One of the characteristics of good research is the use of primary sources; that is, documents or accounts that come from the time being studied and/or provide the reports of eyewitnesses to an event.

Have participants read Jeremiah 36:1-4, 20-26 and Luke 1:1-4. Ask the following questions.

### **Questions**

- What constituted primary sources for Baruch and Luke?
- How would you evaluate Baruch and Luke on their use of primary sources?
- When it comes to studying the Bible, what are our primary sources?
- How effectively do we consult our primary sources?
- How is the Bible, as we have it today, a primary source? In what sense is it a secondary source? (For example, if Luke consulted primary sources to compose his Gospel, then by definition his Gospel must be a secondary source.)
- In what sense is the whole Bible a primary source even if the authors or editors are far removed from the events they describe?

# C A Way to End

It is important to accept our Bible as it is rather than insisting that it must be something different. It is even more important, however, to understand that knowing about the formation of and even the content of the Bible is not enough. Raw biblical knowledge is not the goal. **The purpose of the Bible is not information but formation.** It is God's gift to form us into the people God means for us to be and that Christ died that we might become.

## ○ Giving Thanks



Distribute copies of the resource page "Giving Thanks." Summarize the information provided about the Masoretes and their diligent work. Note that we are the recipients of all that work, without which we would not have Bibles to read.

Lead the class in a prayer of thanks for people through whom God worked to give our Bibles to us.

## ○ Being Formed

Share about a time when the words of Scripture became alive for you in a special way. Perhaps you were challenged about questionable lifestyle choices. Perhaps you heard words of comfort when you had been conditioned to hear only condemnation. Invite participants to share their stories of being spiritually formed by the words of Scripture.

Discuss the relative importance of understanding where the Bible comes from as opposed to allowing the Bible to transform us on the inside. The two are not mutually exclusive, however. Sometimes knowing something about where the Bible came from forces us to think about God and God's work in history (and thus in our lives) differently.

## ○ The B-I-B-L-E

Though it can be wonderfully challenging to understand how the Bible came to us, as people of faith we gladly affirm that God has guided the process. We can count on the Bible to teach us what is vital to grow in our relationship with God.

Close by singing together the children's song "The B-I-B-L-E":

The B-I-B-L-E  
Yes, that's the book for me  
I stand alone on the Word of God  
The B-I-B-L-E!

## Resources

Peter Enns, "Aha' Moments: Biblical Scholars (and Pastors) Tell Their Stories (8): Michael Ruffin," [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com), 14 July 2014 <<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/peterenns/2014/07/aha-moments-biblical-scholars-and-pastors-tell-their-stories-8-michael-ruffin/>>.

J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1980).

Richard B. Vinson, *Luke*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008).

## 2

SCHOLARS  
AND TRANSLATORS*Nehemiah 8:1, 5-8; Acts 8:26-31***Bible Background****Ezra and the Levites Explain God's Word**

Nehemiah 8 recounts an important and fascinating action undertaken by a priest named Ezra nearly a century after the Jews had returned from exile in Babylonia. In a public gathering at the Water Gate, probably a part of the wall located on the east side of the city, the people “asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Instruction scroll from Moses, according to which the LORD had instructed Israel” (v. 1). The word translated “Instruction” in the CEB is “Torah,” so the scroll was at least some portion of what now constitutes our Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible. It is likely that Ezra brought the scroll back with him from Babylonia since the Pentateuch was put into its final form during that period.

As Ezra read the scroll, the Levites helped the people understand what they heard (vv. 7-8). They translated and interpreted the Torah for the people. Translation was necessary because, during the Babylonian period, the Jews had adopted Aramaic, the language of Babylonia, as their own. This language is related to Hebrew but different enough to be unintelligible (somewhat like English is to German). The Levites apparently also offered commentary on the meaning of what was read.

Thus began a long tradition of translating the biblical text from its original languages into other languages, a process that finally led to our English Bibles. Many ancient versions existed long before the first English Bibles were translated, though, and it is helpful to know something about them.

Nehemiah 8 may offer some insight into the development of those translations that came to be known as the Targums (Wurthwein, 79). The word *targum* means “translation.” The practice pictured in Nehemiah 8 became standard in synagogue worship. After the sacred texts were read in Hebrew, someone would then orally translate the text into Aramaic and also offer some commentary on it. Eventually these on-the-spot translations were written down and thus developed the Targums. There were many different Targums due to their being based on oral traditions. Eventually, though, an official Targum tradition developed so that a standardized Aramaic text for the Pentateuch and the Prophets resulted. They are known as the Targum Onkelos and the Targum Jonathan, respectively (Wurthwein, 79–83).

**Philip Explains God's Word**

Though interpretation alongside translation may strike us as unusual, it is good for us to remember a couple of things. First, even though we obviously need a text in our own language if we are going

ancient translations of the Old Testament. A document known as the Letter of Aristeas claims that this Greek translation was produced by seventy-two Jewish scholars working in Alexandria, Egypt. This tradition, which was later embellished to make claims, such as that the translators worked separately yet produced seventy-two identical translations, provides some accurate information, namely that the Septuagint was produced in Alexandria by and for Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt. The story also provides a helpful abbreviation for the Septuagint (which means “seventy”); it is called the LXX because of the tradition of seventy (rounded down from seventy-two) translators.

The Septuagint was the Bible of the early church. Since the New Testament was written in Greek, it was only natural that quotations from the Old Testament would be from the Greek version. We may reasonably assume that the scroll from which the Ethiopian eunuch was reading in Acts 8 was the Septuagint. Because of the Christian use of the Septuagint in supporting some of their key teachings—perhaps the best example being the LXX translation of Isaiah 7:14, where the Hebrew word that means “a young woman of marriageable age” is translated by a Greek word that can mean “virgin”—later more literal Greek translations were produced for use by Jews, the most important being those of Aquila and Theodotian, both produced in the second century AD (Metzger, 13ff.).

The Targums and the Septuagint were Jewish works originating before the time of Christ. Therefore, they contain only the books of the Old Testament (although the Septuagint did also contain additional books considered canonical by Catholics and the Orthodox). The Latin translation known as the Vulgate was produced by a Christian scholar working in the late fourth and early fifth centuries AD. This translation contains both the Old and New Testaments. That scholar was

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

- I. Philip (Acts 8) was a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian evangelist while the Ethiopian was a God-fearing government official returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.
  - A. The scroll from which the Ethiopian was reading was most likely part of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament.
  - B. Philip offered a Christ-centered reading of the Bible, moving from his own experience of the risen Christ to a reading of the Old Testament that helped explain the kind of Messiah that Jesus was.
- II. The Jews in the mid-fifth century BC (Nehemiah 8) needed their Scripture both translated and interpreted.
  - A. While Ezra read the Torah scroll in Hebrew, the Levites translated it into Aramaic and interpreted it for the people.
  - B. That practice continued in the synagogues, and out of it developed the written Aramaic paraphrases known as the Targums.
  - C. Other important ancient translations include the Septuagint (Greek) and the Vulgate (Latin).
- III. The first translation of the entire Bible into English was that done by followers of John Wycliffe in the fourteenth century.
  - A. The first English translation from the original languages was that of William Tyndale in the early sixteenth century.
  - B. Many other significant translations are ultimately revisions of Tyndale’s work, all the way down to the New Revised Standard Version of 1990.

Jerome, who was commissioned in 382 by Pope Damasus to produce a standard

Latin translation to replace the many Latin versions that had developed and that were of questionable quality. Jerome’s work was a revision of an Old Latin version already in use in Rome, but he revised it on the basis of the Septuagint and the original Hebrew and Greek. (Jerome was one of just a handful of Christian scholars of that time who could read Hebrew.) The Vulgate was the “official” Bible of the church for a thousand years and was the basis for some of the earliest English translations (Metzger, 29–35).

## A Way to Begin

*According to the American Bible Society, there have been approximately nine hundred translations into English of either the entire Bible or portions of the Bible. Factors like the discovery of new biblical manuscripts and changes to the English language mean the work of Bible translation is never really over. The work of translation has a long and distinguished history and will no doubt continue as long as people want to read the Bible.*

### ○ Greek to Me

Invite someone who speaks a foreign language to visit your class and bring his or her foreign-language Bible. Have your guest read aloud one of the texts from today’s lesson. Alternatively, find a foreign-language Bible you can display to the class. (Your pastor likely has a Hebrew Old Testament or a Greek New Testament in his or her study.) Ask the following questions.

#### Questions

- How would you feel if the only way you could hear the Bible was through the medium of a foreign language?
- What would it take for you to get the most out of a Bible you could not read for yourself?
- Even in English, has the Bible ever seemed to you like it was written in a foreign language? Explain.

### ○ No, Really—That’s English!



Distribute copies of the resource page “No, Really—That’s English!” Invite a participant to read the first section aloud (you may not have any volunteers!). Have participants observe how the text has changed over the centuries. Ask the following questions.

#### Questions

- How well could you understand any of these versions?
- How much biblical understanding would we have if no further work had been done on English translations of the Bible after John Wycliffe?

Today’s lesson is about how the Bible has been translated and interpreted.

# **B** A Way to Explore Scripture

*What an experience it must have been for the Jews gathered in Jerusalem to hear the law read, translated, and interpreted for them! What an experience it must have been for the Ethiopian eunuch to have Scripture interpreted for him in light of the life and death of Jesus, and how thrilling it must have been for Philip to share the good news with him! We are still blessed to have the Scripture opened up for us by translators and interpreters. We even have the opportunity to interpret Scripture for ourselves and perhaps for others.*

## ○ **Compare and Contrast**

Divide the class into two groups. Assign Nehemiah 8:1, 5-8 to one group and Acts 8:26-31 to the other. Ask each group to answer the following questions about their passage.

### **Questions**

- What kind of interpretative work is pictured?
- Who does the work of interpretation?
- What is the purpose of the interpretation?
- What does the passage teach us about the importance of translation and interpretation?

## ○ **Fifth-Century BC Selfies**

Imagine that smartphones had been available in the fifth century BC. The crowd listening to Ezra read the scroll, took selfies, and posted them on social media. What captions might they put on these pictures? If they made an album of these pictures, what title might they give it? Discuss what this experience would have been like for those who were there.

## ○ **A Christ-Centered Reading**

When Philip interpreted Isaiah 53:7-8 for the Ethiopian eunuch, he started with that passage and “proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him” (Acts 8:35). Though we aren’t told what Philip told the Ethiopian, it is obvious that he saw the life and death of Jesus as giving meaning to the text from Isaiah. Ask the following questions.

### **Questions**

- What might Philip have said about Jesus in light of Isaiah 53:7-8? What might he have said about Isaiah 53:7-8 in light of Jesus?
- How does Philip’s approach help us evaluate modern interpreters of the Bible?
- How does Philip’s approach help us formulate our own approach to interpreting the Bible?

## ○ **English Bibles**

If time permits, summarize the history of the English Bible as presented in the *Learner’s Study Guide*.

# C A Way to End

*We want Scripture to point us to Christ and we want Christ to open up Scripture to us. The translation and interpretation of Scripture isn't a purely academic exercise. Its purpose is to bring us and others into an ever-deepening relationship with God. That relationship can grow as Scripture leads us to Christ and as we read Scripture in light of Christ. Lead participants to commit to being more open to the ways Jesus leads them in light of Scripture.*

## ○ **The Best Interpreter**

Jesus is the best Bible interpreter. Following him makes us the best informed Bible readers.

Reflecting on the Levites' efforts to help the people understand the Scripture, Matthew Levering says, "Like no other, the risen Christ is fully able to give the sense." Referring to Jesus' encounter with the disciples on the Emmaus road (Luke 24), where he interpreted Scripture to them in terms of his own mission, Levering says,

Only Christ is able to give sense to the entirety of human history. Before his coming, human history and its purposes remained an inscrutable mystery, because the aspirations of human knowing and loving are mocked by the onslaught of sin and death.... But Christ's victory over death through supreme love provides the missing interpretive key to the story of human history. (176-77)

Lead the class in a prayer that the resurrected Christ will open up the meaning of Scripture for us and that we will be open to his interpretive work.

## ○ **What Now?**

The Levites translated and interpreted the Torah so that the people could understand it. They responded by weeping, but Ezra told them to rejoice instead (Neh 8:9-12). When the Ethiopian heard Philip's interpretation of the Isaiah passage, he asked to be baptized. After Philip baptized him, he "went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39).

Provide paper and pens or pencils for each participant. Ask them to write one change or commitment that God might be leading them to make through today's lesson. Let those who want share what they wrote.

Close with prayer for grace to follow through with these resolutions.

## Resources

American Bible Society, "Number of English Translations of the Bible," <http://news.americanbible.org/article/number-of-english-translations-of-the-bible>.

F. Charles Fensham, "The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah," *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1982).

Matthew Levering, "Ezra & Nehemiah," *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos, 2007).

Bruce Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2001).

Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed., trans. Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

## 3

MISAPPLYING  
SCRIPTURE

*2 Timothy 2:14-18, 22-26; 2 Peter 3:15-16*

## Bible Background



### The Heart of the Gospel

Second Timothy presents the Apostle Paul offering advice to his protégé Timothy. In this week's passage, Paul instructs Timothy on how properly to handle Scripture in the context of his ministry in the church. Some of us are pastors, but most of us are not. We all, however, have the privilege of reading and studying the Scriptures and we all share the responsibility to approach it—as we are to approach everything in life—with grace and with the humility that accompanies that grace.

Paul tells Timothy to “remind them of these things” (2 Tim 2:14). The pronoun “them” refers generally to the people of God (v. 10) and specifically to those Christians whom Timothy is training to carry on the ministry of the word (v. 1). “These things” refers generally to all that Paul has said in the letter to this point and specifically to the content of 2:8-13. Most specifically, it refers to the words of 2:11-13a, which may have been quoted from an early hymn. A review of those words reveals that Paul was telling Timothy to remind the people of the basics, of the most important teachings of the faith. It would be wise to take special note of verse 8: “Remember Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead and descended from David. This is my good news.” Jesus the Messiah, crucified and

resurrected, is the heart of Paul's gospel. But not just Paul's gospel; it is the heart of *the* gospel.

### Crucial Contrasts

After the positive instruction to remind the people of the basics, Paul offers a negative word: “Warn them in the sight of God not to engage in battles over words that aren't helpful and only destroy those who hear them” (v. 14). That is the first of several contrasts that the passage offers between the right way and the wrong way to handle Scripture. The command to remind them of the basics of the gospel that will build people up contrasts with the command not to get involved in debates over peripheral things that will tear people down. One way to handle Scripture correctly, then, is to focus on the heart of the gospel—on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—and to deal with everything else in light of that central truth. To do otherwise is to risk great misunderstanding and possibly to inflict great harm.

The next contrast is between “Make an effort to present yourself to God as a tried-and-true worker, who doesn't need to be ashamed but is one who interprets the message of truth correctly” (v. 15) on the one hand and “Avoid their godless discussions, because they will lead many people into ungodly behavior” (v. 16) on the other. The positive image is of a master craftsman who works with disci-

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

pline and thoroughness. The phrase in verse 15 translated in the CEB as “one who interprets the message of truth correctly” is rendered “rightly dividing the word of truth” in the KJV. The Greek word translated “interprets... correctly” or “rightly dividing” is the participle *orthotomounta*, which “literally refers to the act of cutting something in a straight way and carries the connotation of ‘exactness and precision, without error or flaw’” (Gloer, 258). So Paul encourages Timothy and us to take great care in the way that we deal with the good news of Jesus Christ, to which the phrase “the message of truth” refers.

If we give careful, disciplined attention to the study of Scripture, we won’t have time to engage in the kind of “godless discussions” that lead to “ungodly behavior” (2 Tim 2:16). Such behavior could take many forms, but the one Paul names is spreading false ideas that have the potential to go viral among the members of the church.

### Missing the Point

Paul offers an example—and names names!—of people who were engaging in such behavior by claiming that the resurrection was a past event (vv. 17-18). Their great error was in denying a central truth of the faith. It would not be surprising that Hymenaeus and Philetus had misunderstood things Paul himself had said. After all, the writer of 2 Peter affirmed that Paul’s writings could be hard to understand. But it is probably the case, given Paul’s harsh judgment of them, that these men fell into the category of those who, in 2 Peter’s words, “are ignorant and whose faith is weak” since they seem to have been among those who twisted Paul’s words “to their own destruction” (2 Pet 3:15-16).

Paul talks about the resurrected life as a present spiritual reality in both Romans 6:1-11 and Colossians 2:20-3:4 (Gloer, 259). But Paul also affirms the reality and necessity of the future bodily resurrection (1 Cor 15). Here, then, is an instance of

- I. Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Tim 2:17) may have derived their misunderstanding of the resurrection from an incomplete understanding of Paul’s words.
  - A. Second Peter admits that Paul’s writings can be hard to understand (3:15-16).
  - B. Hymenaeus and Philetus committed the common error of emphasizing one part of the truth to the exclusion of other parts.
- II. Appealing to the “plain sense” of the text is not helpful.
  - A. People making such an appeal may mean that they take the text literally.
  - B. There is no such thing as reading without interpretation.
- III. Paul encourages Timothy and us toward ethical biblical interpretation, which means an interpretation that is guided by our ever-increasing Christian maturity.
  - A. Ethical biblical interpretation emphasizes the saving act of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.
  - B. It involves disciplined and committed effort.
  - C. It seeks to do good and not harm.
  - D. It is other-focused rather than self-centered.
  - E. It leaves the outcomes in God’s hands.

something that happens all too often: fostering error by emphasizing part of the truth while downplaying or ignoring another part. It is vital to remain open to more complete understanding while at the same time remaining grounded in the core elements of our faith. The last thing we want to do is to undermine other people’s faith (v. 18).

## Unnecessary Conflicts

We also don't want to get wrapped up in unnecessary conflicts over foolish issues. We all likely remember the natural arrogance that characterized our youth. There's nothing wrong with it in its proper time—it's pretty much unavoidable—but there is something wrong with retaining it into our adult years. So the third contrast Paul offers is between immature impulses and mature motivations. If our study of Scripture is motivated by such adolescent values as coming out on top and saving face, we will become embroiled in conflicts and constant arguments (vv. 23-24). But if we are motivated by the pursuit of the values that are to characterize our life with God and each other—"righteousness, faith, love, and peace" (v. 22)—then we will practice kindness, patience, and gentleness (vv. 24-25) toward other people.

We must be disciplined in our pursuit of God's truth so that we can be reasonably confident that we are moving toward it, humble in that pursuit so that we are always open to new understandings, and loving in it so that we deal kindly with people who may have less understanding than we do or who may just see things differently.

After all, our goal is not to win an argument. It is for God to change our minds and our lives (v. 28). In the end, this is the Bible's purpose and God's work.

## A Way to Begin

*Some things in the Bible are difficult to understand. Other things seem easy to understand but are still misunderstood. The only way to avoid misunderstanding Scripture is not to even try to study it, talk about it, or have anything to do with it. But we want to study it. It is God's revelation to us. We need to be aware of the risks and of the rewards of engaging with Scripture.*

### ○ Are You Intellectually Humble?



Distribute copies of the resource page "Are You Intellectually Humble?" Have participants silently consider the questions provided. Ask the following questions.

#### Questions

- Why is intellectual humility important?
- What makes intellectual humility difficult?
- When have you seen someone exhibit this quality with respect to how they approach the Bible?

### ○ The Speed of Lies

Winston Churchill once said, "A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on." That's true, isn't it? Paul told Timothy that the ideas coming from "godless discussions" would "spread like an infection" (2 Tim 2:16-17). Ask the following questions.

#### Questions

- Why are people seemingly more willing to believe a falsehood or a half-truth than they are to believe the truth?
- How can and does the willingness of people to accept less than the full truth about God's ways harm the church's fellowship? How does it hurt the church's witness?
- Admittedly, there are things in the Bible that are hard to understand. How can Christians keep from settling for less than the truth in our study and discipleship?

# B A Way to Explore Scripture

*It is sometimes said that how we see things depends largely on where we stand. That is certainly true with regard to Bible study. We all have certain presuppositions. The crucial question is, are those presuppositions self-centered or Christ-centered? The answer to that question will affect our approach to studying the Bible.*

## ○ **Vision Test**

Read 2 Timothy 2:14-18, 22-26.

Ask participants for one-word descriptions of the approach to Scripture taken by Hymenaeus and Philetus. Then do the same for the approach Paul commends to Timothy. List these on the board in two columns.

Recall what it is like to have an eye examination: sitting in the chair while the optometrist clicks lenses of various strengths into place and asks, “Can you see better here? Or here? Is this one better? Or this one?” Then conduct a “vision test” with the class. Ask, “Through which of these two lenses do you see the Bible better?” Discuss what a good spiritual eyeglass prescription for reading the Bible might look like.

## ○ **Just Hold on to That**

A college ministerial student told his father, “Dad, you’re helping pay for my education so I think I need to tell you that I may be becoming a liberal.”

His father asked, “What do you mean by that?”

“I don’t know,” the son said. “It’s just that I’m questioning things I’ve never questioned before.”

His father asked, “Do you still believe in Jesus as your Lord and Savior?”

“Yes, sir,” the young man replied.

“Just hold on to that,” his father said, “Everything else will probably work itself out.”

Read 2 Timothy 2:8-18. Discuss what Paul encouraged Timothy to hold on to.

## ○ **Lucy’s Lunchbox**

There is a classic “Peanuts” cartoon in which Lucy tells Charlie Brown she thinks she would make a good evangelist. Asked why, she says that she convinced a kid in her class that her religion was better than his. “How did you do that?” Charlie Brown asks.

“I hit him over the head with my lunchbox,” Lucy explains.

## **Questions**

- What wrong ways of handling Scripture does Paul warn Timothy about?
- How can an inappropriate use of Scripture negatively affect others?
- What might it say about us if our main motivation in studying the Bible is to prove that we are right?
- Is there more than one good way to study the Bible? Is there a best way? Explain.
- How can we move toward biblical interpretations that rightly reflect Jesus Christ and our growing relationship with him?
- How does our level of concern for and treatment of people reflect our commitment to reading the Bible rightly?

# C A Way to End

*As Christians, we want to read the Bible. Furthermore, we want our Bible study to have Christian presuppositions, Christian approaches, and Christian outcomes. This is only possible by grace, of course. We need God's help to grow into an ever-maturing Christian reading of the Bible.*

## ○ A Long Way to Go

Frederick Buechner tells the story of spending the weekend at a monastery when he was a young man. The monk to whom he wished to talk was under some special vows and could not be seen. All of the other monks save one practiced silence. The only monk who could talk to visitors was an older man called the Guest Master, but he had suffered a stroke that affected his speech. At the end of the weekend, the Guest Master listened to Buechner's confession and then spoke this blessing over him: "You have a long way to go" (102-104).

Ask the class members to reflect upon the long way they have to go in treating the Bible with humility rather than arrogance, with Christ-centeredness rather than self-centeredness.

Close with a prayer for God's help in developing the best presuppositions and approaches to Bible study.

## ○ Bumper-Sticker Bible Study

You may have seen the bumper sticker that says "God said it, I believe it, that settles it!" But is it really that simple? Ask the following questions.

### Questions

- In light of this lesson, how would you evaluate that bumper-sticker statement?
- That statement may sound humble (it affirms dependence on the word of God, after all), but is it really? Explain.
- How would you rewrite the statement to add a dose of humility to it?
- What other slogans might describe inappropriate or appropriate approaches to the Bible?

Close with prayer for humble confidence when it comes to studying the Bible.

### Resources

Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey: A Memoir of Early Days* (San Francisco: Harper, 1982).

W. Hulitt Gloer, *1 & 2 Timothy-Titus*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2010).

## 4

READING  
WITH UNDERSTANDING*Matthew 22:34-40; Acts 17:10-12***Bible Background****Put in the Effort**

In Acts 17, Paul and Silas had just been in Thessalonica where, through Paul's "interpretation of the scriptures, he demonstrated that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead" (Acts 17:3). Although some believed (Acts 17:4), others responded with violence that led the believers in Thessalonica to send Paul and Silas on to Berea (Acts 17:5-10).

There they found greater openness among the Jews (v. 11) because they were more "honorable" (CEB) or "noble" (NIV) than the Thessalonian Jews. This Greek word describes anyone bearing the characteristics of a noble-born person. In this case, the trait of "open-mindedness" or "receptiveness" is in view (Newman and Nida, 332-33). F. F. Bruce says the Berean Jews had "an admirable freedom from prejudice" when it came to Paul's teachings (327). Their receptiveness made them willing to listen and eager to study. They examined the Scriptures each day (v. 11). Our openness to the good news of Jesus Christ should motivate us to such regular study as well.

This kind of study requires a commitment and discipline based on strong motivation. The possibility that Paul's preaching about Jesus *might* be true motivated the Bereans to study. How much more should we be motivated by our

conviction that the good news of Jesus Christ *is* true?

How do we study our Bible in pursuit of the truth? The most necessary step is to read the Bible for ourselves. The Bereans listened to what Paul said but they did their own research to discover the truth for themselves. It is good to have preachers and teachers who can point us in the right direction, but each of us is responsible for our own relationship with the Lord and our own pursuit of the truth.

We should read not only the Bible, however. We also should read ourselves. That is, we need to work at developing an awareness of who we are. Who we are affects how we read and interpret anything—including the Bible. Why were the Berean Jews more open to Paul's preaching than the Thessalonian Jews? We can't know, but we can be sure that the life experiences, social backgrounds, and spiritual pilgrimages of each group had something to do with it. A black, middle-class, college-educated man living in Massachusetts is going to come to the Bible with different assumptions and questions than a young, white, impoverished female high school dropout living in rural Georgia. Every individual comes with her or his unique experiences and perspectives. How one sees things depends in large part on where one stands. So, as we study our Bibles, we need to take an honest look at who we are and why we are who we are. If we are to

appropriate the Bible's message into our lives, we also need to be willing to let the Spirit of God change us where change is needed.

Furthermore, we should also read the Bible with others. One gets the impression that the Bereans studied the Scriptures together. In fact, group study would have been necessary because, unlike now, the average person did not own a Bible. The only scrolls were likely found in the synagogue. Like the Bereans, we need to study the Bible with our local faith community. We also need to study it with the larger Christian community through such resources as books, journals, and the Internet. Like the Bereans, we need to be open-minded to whatever new aspect of the truth this might uncover for us. Such insights will most likely come to us through people with a different perspective than ours.

In addition, we should read the Bible in context. When we study a particular passage, we need to look at its immediate context by considering the verses leading up to it and following it. This passage also has a context in the biblical book in which it is found as well as in the entire Bible. Finally, we must look at the context of its interpretation throughout Christian history. That sounds like a lot of work—and it is—but the writers of good commentaries have already done a lot of work from which we can draw. Clearly, though, such an approach requires a life-long commitment to careful study of the Scriptures.

### **Remember the Goal**

Why would we undertake such an effort to study the Bible? While gaining a lot of information about what the Bible says is a worthy endeavor, that's not the final goal. As a result of their studies, many of the Bereans came to believe (v. 12). We want to come to believe, too, whether that means beginning to follow Jesus or growing in our relationship with him. Such growth should never stop.

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

- I. The Berean Jews, upon hearing Paul preach about Christ, studied the Scriptures to see if what he said was true.
  - A. It is vital that we read and study our Bible.
  - B. The Bible has no meaning for us unless we read it.
- II. We need to read the whole Bible.
  - A. The entire Bible is a gift.
  - B. Different people had different canons.
    1. from canon of the legal expert (Matt 22) was “the Law and the Prophets.”
    2. The canon of the Bereans (Acts 17) was the Septuagint.
    3. The Christian canon includes the Jewish Bible (the Old Testament) as well as the New Testament. Furthermore, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians have additional books in their Old Testament (which would have also been in the Bereans' Bible).
- III. We should use the best tools available to study our Bible.
  - A. We need to be discerning about the resources we use.
  - B. Do they point us to Christ? Do they point us toward love?
- IV. The legal expert and his fellow Pharisees sought the heart of the Torah in order that they might better understand and live it.
  - A. Love that is total commitment—that thinks more of God and others than it does of self—is the goal of our Bible study.
  - B. The best way to put love at the heart of our Bible study is to have Jesus at the center of our lives.

The real reason for studying the Bible is to be formed rather than informed. That is, reading the Bible is one of the

ways the Spirit of God conforms us to the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18). We want our study of the Bible to move us toward what is most important, which is to become all that God intends us to be.

The legal expert who asked Jesus about the greatest commandment (Matt 22:35) did so out of a common interest of scholars in that time. Since there were 613 commandments in the law, it seemed wise to try to find the one that would summarize or stand as the organizing principle of the rest. In answer to the legal expert's question, Jesus quoted part of the basic Jewish confession known as the Shema, which commanded the love of God with every aspect of one's being (Deut 6:5). Jesus paired this command with Leviticus 19:18, which commands the love of one's neighbor with the kind of love one has for one's self. "All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands," Jesus says (Matt 22:40).

For the legal expert—and everyone who heard Jesus' words—the phrase "all the Law and the Prophets" meant "all of the Bible." We can safely conclude, then, that our reading, interpretation, and application of all of the Bible—the Old and New Testaments, in our case—depend on growing in our understanding and application of love for God and for others.

Growing in Christ results in growing in love. That is the goal of our Bible study, and it is a most worthy goal!

## A Way to Begin

*When the Bereans were confronted with Paul's preaching about Jesus being the Messiah, they went to the Scriptures to see if what he said was true. They took the Bible seriously. When the Pharisee legal expert asked Jesus what the most important commandment was, he was reflecting the seriousness with which he and his fellows took the Bible. **How seriously do we take the Bible? How seriously do we take the Jesus to whom the Bible points and who shows us how best to read the Bible?***

### ○ **Sidetracked by Little Things**

Share about something in the Bible that has confused or perplexed you. (Maybe it still does!) Don't think in terms of big controversial issues but rather the little things you've always wondered about. For example, where did Cain get his wife, what was Jesus doing between age twelve and the start of his public ministry, and so forth. Invite participants to share similar questions.

### **Questions**

- In the vast scheme of things, how important are the answers to questions like this?
- When have you observed people becoming sidetracked by these issues? Has it ever happened to you?

- What is the point of Bible study?  
How do we know if we've done it right?

Today's lesson will help us evaluate our goals and methods of Bible study.

### ○ **Looking for Love in All the Right Places**

Provide participants with concordances, Bible dictionaries, or other research tools. Point out that Jesus said that love is the key to understanding and applying the Scriptures. Have participants search for occurrences of the word "love" in the Bible. Ask each participant to share a verse he or she found.

As a group, list tangible, practical ways the Bible says we are to love God and to love each other. If we follow Jesus' teaching to see love as the greatest commandment, how will that influence how we read and interpret Scripture?

# B A Way to Explore Scripture

*Jesus is the center of our lives as Christians. He is therefore the key to and the focus of all of our living. Everything we think, feel, say, and do is measured and evaluated by its degree of Christlikeness. If Jesus is the key to everything, then it stands to reason that he is the key to our reading and interpretation of Scripture.*

## ○ **That's a Good Question**

Divide the class into two groups. Assign one group to read Matthew 22:34-40 and the other to read Acts 17:10-12. Have each group read their passage and make a list of questions their passage raises in their minds.

Bring the class back together. Have each group share their questions. Using information from the Bible Background and the *Learner's Study Guide*, seek to answer these questions, at least tentatively.

## ○ **Reading as Grown-Ups**

Share the following quote from C. S. Lewis:

There is no need to be worried by facetious people who try to make the Christian hope of "Heaven" ridiculous by saying that they do not want "to spend eternity playing harps." The answer to such people is that if they cannot understand books written for grown-ups, they should not talk about them.... People who take these symbols literally might as well think that when Christ told us to be like doves, He meant that we were to lay eggs. (121-22)

Lewis is talking about the immaturity that lies behind taking symbolic language literally. But in this week's texts, both the Bereans and Jesus point us toward other important aspects of reading the Bible like adults.

## **Questions**

- Read Acts 17:10-12. How do the Bereans model a "grown-up" reading of the Bible?
- Read Matthew 22:34-40. What do Jesus' words to the legal expert tell us about the relationship between living as mature people and reading the Bible as mature people?
- How can we tell if we are reading the Bible like adults?

## ○ **What's My Canon?**

Summarize the information in the *Learner's Study Guide* about the biblical canon.

## **Questions**

- The biblical canon is closed. That is, no other books can be added to it. How is this fact significant for our reading and study of Scripture?
- How much effort do we make to read and understand the entire Bible?
- Do we have an organizing principle to guide our study of the entire Bible?
- We sometimes talk about a "canon within the canon": those parts of Scripture we naturally turn to, possibly to the exclusion of other parts. What makes up your personal "canon within the canon"? Why?

# C A Way to End

**Taking the Bible seriously means taking our relationship with God in Jesus Christ our Lord seriously. It means taking the presence of the Holy Spirit seriously. It means taking our lives as the people of God and as followers of Jesus seriously. Since the Bible is human in its production, we need to use the best tools available to help us study it. Since the Bible is divine in its purpose, we need the help of God in understanding and applying it.**

## ○ Praying the Scripture



Distribute copies of the resource page “Praying the Scripture.” Briefly explain the concept of *lectio divina*.

(This discipline was also described in the September 6 lesson.)

Invite participants to engage in a group exercise such as the one described in the handout based on Matthew 22:34-40. If time is limited, simply invite participants to read the text slowly and prayerfully. Encourage them to ask God to open the text up to them and to open them up to the text.

## ○ One Key Insight

Invite participants to share one key insight they have gained about the Bible from this unit. How does this insight challenge them to read the Bible differently than they have?

## ○ Closing Hymn

Provide hymnals for each participant. Close by singing together a hymn about Scripture such as “Wonderful Words of Life” or “Break Thou the Bread of Life.”

## Resources

F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1988).

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972).

Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).