

BIBLE STUDY

Session 2

Historical

This is the second session on Bible Study that will focus on one of the informational ways to approach scripture: the historical method. Historical methods are the most common form of Bible Study, getting at the “who, what, why, when” questions. Knowing the culture, history and contextual world out of which scripture was written is an important part of understanding scripture. Knowing who the intended audience was and what situation may have been the catalyst for why that particular part of scripture was written gives us a deeper and broader understanding. For instance, knowing that at Caesarea Philippi there is a pagan shrine to the Greek god Pan at the mouth of the Jordan River where both Pan and the Canaanite god Baal were believed to emerge from every spring helps us better understand what “rock” Jesus was perhaps referring to when he says, “Upon this rock I will build my church.” Knowing that fortresses and gates were typically meant to keep invaders out, using the image of “the gates of Hades will not prevail” helps us envision the Church knocking down the gates of Hades. Also knowing what significance Hades had in the Greek world as the “realm of the dead,” speaks to Jesus’ own foreshadowing of his resurrection.

Leader Prep Before You Meet:

Some advance research will need to be done by this week’s leader to help facilitate this Bible Study. Read through the questions and do some advance research on the questions related to the historical elements. You do not need to be an expert - your role is simply to make room for the questions and encourage discussion and invite others to share their knowledge and experience.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God’s presence among us.



Job 8:8-10

For inquire, please, of bygone ages, and consider what the fathers have searched out. For we are but of yesterday and know nothing, for our days on earth are a shadow. Will they not teach you and tell you and utter words out of their understanding?



Scripture was written by humans “out of their understanding.” What are some ways our “understandings” of the world around us has changed and shaped our interpretations?



Opening Prayer:

Gracious Lord, you have spoken to us throughout all times and places. While we know our understanding of your word can be obscured by time, we know that same word is capable of speaking anew to us today in our time and place. Help us to hear your word with fresh ears and open hearts. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks’ exercises or session.



Watch: Bible Study - Historical



Group Bible Study - Historical

Exodus 3:1-15 (Study by Dr. Diane Jacobson, “Opening the Book of Faith”)

The Book of Exodus tells the story of God saving Israel, the people God has personally claimed and promised to be with. In Exodus, God frees the people from slavery in Egypt through the leadership of Moses (aided by his brother Aaron and sister Miriam) God leads the people across the sea to Mount Sinai where God makes a covenant with Israel and gives them the Ten Commandments and other laws. In this covenant, Israel is asked to respond to God’s gift of saving them by becoming a nation dedicated to God, obeying God’s voice and serving their neighbor.

Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush comes toward the beginning of the book of Exodus. Through this encounter, God calls forth the leader who was needed for the task of delivering the Hebrew people out of slavery. This story is one of the first stories from the Bible many of us learn. We picture Moses in the desert, minding his own business, when suddenly faced with this dramatic sight, God calls to him and shakes up his world.

It may be helpful to set the stage for this story just a bit by looking at the historical context of the story. Start by noticing many of the names and places mentioned in the text.

- Who are the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites?
- Who are the Egyptians and Israelites?
- What were the connections between the Egyptians and these other tribes?

- Why is Moses living in Midian? Who are the Midianites? Is that at all significant?
- To which Pharaoh does this story likely refer?
- Why are the Israelites living as slaves in Egypt?
- Where is Mt. Horeb and what is its significance?
- Why did Moses remove his sandals?
- What was it about the land of Canaan that God possibly found important and would have wanted the Israelites to live there instead of somewhere else?
- The Bible itself does not give us much of this information. For instance, we have no idea aside from speculation which Pharaohs that are mentioned were ruling during this time exactly. The reality is there is no Egyptian record of the Israelites being slaves in Egypt - so the story of the Exodus exists outside other historical sources.
- What other questions about the setting or context of the story do you have?



Closing Prayer

Choose a prayer style that you have learned about to close.



Exercises To Do At Home

Possible resources: Bible dictionaries; Bible Atlas (“The Historical Atlas of the Bible” by Dr. Ian Barnes), Historical Perspectives: “Palestine in the Time of Jesus” by K.C. Hanson & Douglas E. Oakman, “The World that Shaped the New Testament,” by Calvin J. Roetzel; Bible commentaries; Bible Concordances; Google.

Some recommended Bible commentaries: the “Interpretation” series, New Interpreter’s Bible series, “The Prophets” by Abraham Heschel, “The Prophetic Imagination,” Walter Brueggeman. Online commentaries: workingpreacher.org/bible-index

Jeremiah 1:4-19 (Commentary by Paul Lutz), “Opening the Book of Faith”

In these verses, we hear three visions placed before Jeremiah during a time of vast historical changes, not just in Judah but realignment of power among the empires adjacent to Jeremiah’s small kingdom of Judah.

The first vision is of an almond branch from the first of the trees that flower in the spring. This was a sign the lord was watching to ensure that as spring comes forth, so will God’s word come forth.

The vision of the boiling pot tilted away from the north declares the impending destruction on Jerusalem and summarized the divine message that would dominate Jeremiah’s preaching: the coming judgment of God against the wickedness of the people of Judah who were forsaking God by sacrificing “to strange gods.” (1:16)

The last vision concerned Jeremiah’s own person: God would make him “a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land” (v. 18), even if the people of Judah should fight him, for the Lord solemnly promised that “they shall not prevail against you, for I am with, says the Lord, to deliver you.” (v. 19)

- Describe the historical situation.
- When did Jeremiah live? Under which Kings did he serve?
- What was going on in Israel at this time? What other countries are involved?
- How difficult would it have been to be a prophet during this time period?
- Who is speaking? Who is the audience?
- What is the intention of the passage?

- Who are the tribes of the kingdoms of the north?
- How does knowing something of the historical situation influence our understanding of these verses from Jeremiah?

John 8:31-36 (Commentary by Kathryn Kleinhans, “Opening the Book of Faith”; additional possible resource: “John” by Karoline Lewis)

John’s Gospel is the last of the four canonical Gospels to be written. It was most likely written in the 90’s AD since it reflects growing tensions (and eventual separation) between Jewish Christians and the rest of the Jewish community following the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in 70 CE.

New testament scholars think that the Gospel of John, the three letters of John, and Revelation were not written by the beloved disciple himself but by members of the “Johannine community” of Christians, perhaps founded by the beloved disciple, located in Asia Minor near Ephesus. The Gospel’s witness to Jesus is shaped by the context of this particular late first-century Christian community. In addition to the tensions with the Jewish community, the Gospel reflects internal concerns about the authority and leadership within the Johannine community as the generation of those who knew Jesus and his disciples firsthand dies out.

Being attentive to the differences between the historical context of the Gospel writer and our historical context will help us both understand the text in its own right and apply it to our lives today.

In this text, the Jews say that they “have never been slaves to anyone,” and yet their own founding is rooted in their enslavement to the Egyptians before the Exodus. Later, in the sixth century BCE many of the Jewish people were captured and deported to Babylon. In Jesus’ own time, Palestine had been under Roman rule for a century.

Why do you think they say that they have never been in bondage? Have they forgotten their history? Are they in a state of denial? Are they implying that they have maintained their spiritual freedom despite physical and political bondage?

What difference does it make, if any, in how you understand their conversation with Jesus?

The Gospel of John reflects first-century tensions between Jewish Christians (Jews who accepted Jesus as God’s Messiah) and the Jewish community as a whole. There are many passages that express the concern that Jewish Christians will be expelled from the synagogues. This is one example of how the situation of the later Johannine community is projected into the Gospel narrative of Jesus’ earthly ministry.

John 7-8 shows Jesus teaching in the Jerusalem temple. In this passage, Jesus raises the question of whether or not the Jews had come to believe in him would “continue” in his word.

- What factors might have kept them from continuing in Jesus’ word?
- What are today’s challenges for us to continue in the word?
- There is a long history of Christian anti-Semitism, in which Christians blamed--and persecuted--Jewish people as “Christ killers.” Some Christian groups, including the ELCA, have apologized for this history.
- How might our sensitivity to this injustice shape the way we read this text today?
- While those of us who live in North America enjoy political freedoms that come with democracy, what captivities might Jesus challenge us to recognize in ourselves? What freedom struggles are more recent and ongoing in the world?

Romans 7:15-25a (Commentary by R. Guy Erwin, “Opening the Book of Faith”)

If we go back to the previous chapter (6), we would find that Paul began with a general discussion of what it means to “live in Christ” through God’s grace. Then at the end of the chapter 6 and into chapter 7, Paul turns to the question most on his mind: if salvation comes to us by grace through faith, how should we now regard God’s law? What does it mean to be a believer? This was a particularly important question for those whose whole understanding of religious faithfulness and meaning came from obedience to divine laws. How were they now suddenly reinterpreting what it meant to be a believer, when the principal way of being one was to be a follower of the law?

But the question is even broader than that, and still relevant to us about two millennia later: How does our salvation by

God's mercy and grace relate to our struggle to live good and moral lives? How are these things connected? This is the framework within which our text selection fits.

In 7:1-14, Paul explains that the law that regulates the lives of humans pertains only to their bodies, so that to live in Christ (which Paul calls having "died to the law" through Christ) is to live in freedom from the law. But what does Paul mean by "law" here? He makes a distinction between our living "in the flesh"--by which he means in a way ruled by our feelings and desires--and living the "new life of the Spirit." The purpose the law serves is to awaken in a person the sense of sinfulness. As Paul sees it, humans will always resist the law, and so the law will provoke rebellion in them. The result is that where there is knowledge of the law there is knowledge of sin, which Paul understands as the beginning of a person's understanding of the need for God's grace and mercy. The law is good because it "lays bare human rebelliousness." And it is good because knowing one's sin then leads to depending on God. So far, so good (or not good, as the case may be).

Now in verse 15, Paul changes gears a bit, and talks about himself as a living example of this complicated and paradoxical truth about humankind. Again and again in this section, Paul uses the pronoun "I," something he has not done before in regard to sin and grace--earlier it was always "we" and "us" -- but now it's getting personal, both for Paul and for his audience. He wants his readers and listeners to know that he understands this truth about sin and law not as something theoretical or abstract, but right there in his own heart and mind and life. But what does it have to do with us and our experience?

Paul is writing to a far away group of believers to help them understand what it means to believe in Jesus, and what implications that believing has for their religious life. Whether Jews or Gentiles, much of what they have understood up to now about God's expectations for them has revolved around two things: correct worship and moral behavior. How might this text challenge them?

- What is Paul writing about?
- What kind of message is Paul sending in this text?
- Is it teaching, preaching, correcting, or consoling? Or something else?
- Who is Paul's audience? What do we know about the Christian church in Rome during this time period?
- What does he want them to think?
- Do the words sound the same to you as you think they would have sounded to first century Romans?
- How might these words have sounded to Christians who had been brought up in the Jewish faith and its observance of law as a faithful response to God?