

# BIBLE STUDY

Session 3

Literary

*This is the third session on Bible Study that will focus in on the literary perspective in Bible Study. What are the significant forms or styles of the Biblical texts? Knowing what we're reading regarding genre, form, and style impact our understanding and interpretation of the Biblical texts in a variety of ways. Hearing HOW a story is told is just as important as the story itself. Is it a letter? A prophecy? A narrative? History? Poetry? A parable? Is it employing the use of similes, metaphors, merisms, puns, or idioms? How does an English translation affect our understanding when it perhaps only made sense in the original Hebrew or Greek? Names as well had specific meaning in the original languages that would many times result in a play on words that gets lost in English. Since very few of us are fluent in the original Greek and/or Hebrew used in the Bible, these issues can easily be missed. This is one of the many ways in which are constantly humbled when it comes to our understanding of scripture.*

## Opening Activities



### Centering Moment

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



### Psalm 18:1-3

*I love you, O Lord, my strength.*

*The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,  
my God, my rock in whom I take refuge,*

*my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*

*I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised,  
so I shall be saved from my enemies.*



### Reflect

What "literary" style are the psalms written in? What does the imagery utilized in these passages reveal about God? Why use these images when we know God is not a literal "rock" or "fortress"?



### Opening Prayer:

Gracious Lord, your servants have always been individuals with their own unique personalities and talents. Help us to remember that how the authors of scripture chose to reveal their experiences of you matters and that we may be come to know you more deeply as a result. Amen.



## Music (optional)

Sing or listen to “I Will Call Upon the Lord”



## Share

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



## Watch: Bible Study - Literary



## Discuss

- A literary reading of scripture can be a new concept for many. How do you react when told that stories like Jonah might not have been written as historical fact, but were likely more of a parable or folk tale never intended to be taken literally? Does this change anything for you regarding how you understand God? Does its historical accuracy (or lack thereof) ultimately matter?
- Read John 3:3. Take note of the footnote regarding the two different ways to translate this text as either “born again” or “born from above.” How do the different translations change the meaning for you?
- A “merism” is a rhetorical device (or figure of speech) in which a combination of two contrasting parts of the whole refer to the whole. For example, in order to say that someone “searched everywhere,” one could use the merism “searched high and low.” The implied meaning is that one searched high, low, and everywhere in between.

Now read the creation account in Genesis 1. How might understanding this passage as utilizing “merisms” alter our understanding? (ie: light and dark - and everything in between. Male and female - and everything in between.)



## Group Bible Study - Literary

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

In the stories leading up to chapter 3, we find out many things about Moses--how he was born to a Hebrew family and put in a basket in the Nile River, where he was discovered and adopted by an Egyptian princess. Even though he grew up as part of the Egyptian royal family, Moses still identified with his enslaved people. He burdened a cruel Egyptian overseer and became an exile, marrying the daughter of a Midianite priest.

- Moses’ job is to lead his father-in-law’s flock into the wilderness to the mountain of God. How is this similar to what God will call him to do later in the story? What is the significance of the symbolism of Moses being a shepherd here?
- Notice how Mount Horeb described. It is called “the mountain of God.” So something about the place Moses is leading the flock is holy or sacred. How does this story seem to foreshadow what God is calling him to do for the Israelites?
- When looking at the original Hebrew of this text, the word of Horeb (which also gets called Sinai elsewhere), we discover that the word for “bush” is “sineh” which sounds a lot like “Sinai.” Moses’ encounter with God at the flaming bush invites us to think about Israel’s

## Things To Consider...

These things are helpful to keep in mind when you approach scripture from a literary perspective:

- Choose a text with a logical beginning and ending--for example a parable, a psalm, a set of instructions, a scene, or a whole story.
- Identifying the type of literature your chosen text is: Is it a parable, a psalm, prophetic, a letter, an “apocalypse”?
- Read different versions of the text to help discover the important choices translators make. How do different translations express details in different ways? How do they alter or bring a different perspective to a word or phrase?
- Know the general theme and purpose of the book. If you have a Bible that has an introduction, that can usually help with this step.

When reading a narrative, things to look for:

- **What is the literary context?** What is the overall plot of the story and how does this text fit into that plot? Does it have a structure like other stories? Are there details that remind us of other details either elsewhere in the same book or in another book? (For example, when reading the plagues of Revelation, what other Biblical story might come to mind? Where else were plagues used? How does knowing this help shape our understanding then of what Revelation might be doing?)
- **Who are the characters?** Who are the major and minor characters? Who is named, who isn't? What do we know about these characters? Do they appear elsewhere in scripture? Do we learn something about them from the narrator, from another character, or do we just have to intuit something from a detail in the text?
- **What is the setting?** Settings can be spacial, temporal, or social. Spacially: inside, outside, a doorway, a temple, a palace, a city, a desert, a river? Temporally: time of day, seasons, festivals, etc. Socially: banquet, city gates, wells.
- **What is the theme?** What themes are highlighted? Does this deal with violence, power, election, or morality? What is being commanded? What is being promised? What is it trying to tell you about God and our relationship with God?
- **Whose Point of View** is the story told from? What's the narrator's POV? The Character's? God's?
- **Rhetorical considerations:** how does this text persuade? Who is it meant to persuade? Who is the speaker or audience? How does this text work on us? (This is obviously interrelated with the historical method discussed in the last session, and related to the theological method - which will be discussed in the next session)

upcoming encounter with God at the fiery mountain. “Horeb” also means “glowing heat.” The call of the leader is closely tied to the call of the people.

- This is frequently seen as a “prophetic call” narrative. Compare it to the call of Samuel (1 Samuel 3), Isaiah (Isaiah 6), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1) or even Ananias (Acts 9). (Just for fun, compare it with Jonah and note the distinct differences between these “prophetic call” stories.) Note how they all express their feelings of inadequacy. Moses brings all his faults to the encounter with God. God's sign to Moses will be in the future, not the present. Moses must take on his task by depending entirely on the promise of God.
- How does hearing about or reading about how God has called others help you recognize your own call narrative/story?

- Notice the relationship of seeing vs. hearing. Moses sees the burning bush so he might “hear” the call of God. Seeing serves hearing. God hears the cry of the people so that God might act. Hearing serves action. What other seeing and hearing is going on in this text? What do you make of these observations?
- Note how God’s sacred name is revealed. Names are extremely important in the Bible as they almost always have some kind of symbolic meaning attached to them. YHWH (Yahweh) is frequently translated as “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” The meaning is not necessarily as important as the reality.
- Why does Moses want to know God’s name? How is this revelation of God’s name related to what God intends to do for the people of Israel? What does God’s name mean for us in the here and now?



## Closing Prayer

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



## Exercises To Do At Home

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

- Identify the type of writing
- What is the literary form of this story?
- Is this story to be taken literally or figuratively? Why do you think so?
- If you were to use a phrase to explain what is happening in this text, what would it be?
- Compare what is happening in this text to Jeremiah to what happened to Moses. How are these stories similar or different?
- Search the original meaning. Study the words, symbols and images to understand what the writer may have intended.
- How do you think the first hearers understood the story? How might they have understood the two symbolic visions?
- What would they have made of the fact that in Hebrew the words for watching and almond sound similar?

## John 8:31-36

(Study selections from Kathryn Kleinhans, “Opening the Book of Faith.” For further reading on the literary motifs of John’s Gospel, see “Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel” by Craig R. Koester)

John’s Gospel differs dramatically from the other three “synoptic” Gospels. John’s Gospel is highly symbolic and many scholars argue it shares striking similarities stylistically to a Greek drama/tragedy. Symbolic imagery such as light/dark, water, lambs, bread, and symbolic actions and figures are strewn throughout the entire text. The symbols of John’s Gospel are conveyed in language that was an integral part of a cultural context, and understanding the symbolism means entering into that context. It was written in Greek for a Greek speaking audience, and the symbols used evoke a cluster of connotations and associations depending on life experiences, ethnic or religious heritage, as well as other Biblical associations with the imagery. “Word” and “truth” are two particular literary motifs. If you have time, sit down and read the entire Gospel of John and take note of some of the other repeated words and images.

- Read John 1:1-18 & John 14:1-17. Rather than a birth narrative like in Luke or Matthew, John's Gospel begins with a far more sweeping and cosmic poetic-style narrative that brings to mind Genesis 1, describing how this cosmic and creative "Word of God" became "flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." In John 14:6, Jesus identified himself as "the way, the truth and the life."
- Consider for a moment the word "dwelt" or another translation, "tabernacled." What connotations and associations does this evoke for you?
- How might these two passages deepen your understanding of Jesus' words in John 8:31-32?
- Read John 14:15-21; 15:26-27; 16:12-15. John 14:1-16:33 is called "Jesus' Farewell discourse, spoken at his last meal with his disciples. In the selected verses, Jesus describes the role of the "Spirit of truth" whom he will send to them. What is the relationship between Jesus who is the truth (John 14:6) and "the Spirit of truth"? Does thinking about the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth" add new insight to your understanding of John 8:31-36?
- In a courtroom, witnesses take an oath to tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Read John 18:37-38. How does your understanding of "truth" in John's Gospel shape your own self-understanding as one called to witness to Jesus Christ? How would you respond to the people you encounter today who ask, "What is truth?" Passages such as John 19:35; 20:30-31; and 21:24-25 highlight the evangelist as a trustworthy witness to Jesus, so that others may come to believe in him. What would your congregation need to do to be recognized by non-members as a trustworthy witness to Jesus?
- Usually we think of truth as an object, grammatically speaking. We find out the truth. We tell the truth. But in John 8:32, truth also functions as the subject of the verb: "the truth will make you free." How can the truth make us free? Is there a difference between verse 32 (the truth will make you free) and verse 36 (the Son makes you free)?

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

- What type of literature is Romans?
- How does that affect the way we read Romans compared to other scripture passages we have studied thus far?
- Is there something significant about the particular form or style of this piece of text? Look at how Paul has changed so dramatically to the first person singular "I." Is this just his vivid description of his personal experience? Probably not. He may well think that the "I" of the writer will speak directly to the heart of the "I" of the reader--who is in fact, you.
- When Paul writes "I" can you also identify with what he is saying? Is it possible that you could even say the same thing about your own experiences?
- Paul's admission of confusion may be reassuring for some. If even Paul can be confused, maybe it's OK if I'm confused sometimes, too. That seems to be what Paul wants us to think--that the experience he describes is one that we will understand and be able to empathize with because, in fact, we probably share it.
- How do you feel about the gap between what you want and what you think you ought to want?
- Do you sort your "wants" into categories of "good" and "bad"? Do you feel a tension here? How does this tension affect the way you feel about God?
- Is it not so much a case of wanting things you think you shouldn't want as it is a gap between what you want and what you can have? Do your desires always greatly outstrip your abilities or opportunities? There is tension in that as well--the gap between what "is" and what you "wish there was." How does this tension feel? How does it make you feel about God?

Both of these are situations of frustration and longing and guilt, whether you desire what you think or know is wrong, or simply want more than you reasonably have or need. Such desire, as Paul understands it, draws the heart away from God and makes it rebellious and defiant. And the case he knows best is his very own.

Paul describes a situation that is not as it should be: "i do this, but I should do that." "But" is the key word here--things are not as they should be. What Paul does is contrary to his desires on one level, but he does it anyway. There is tension in this:

something is that shouldn't be. How can this tension be resolved? Clearly, Paul is uncomfortable with it.

- What is the “shape” of this passage?
- Is it complete in itself, or does it seem fragmentary?
- What is the form of address? Who is speaking and who is spoken to?
- What words recur again and again?
- What patterns are visible in Paul's choice of language?
- Does the text lead up to a specific ending? If so, what is the conclusion or climax of this section of Paul's letter?