

Experiencing God Through Scripture

Theme

The theme for this gathering is "Experiencing God through Scripture." Much of what we know about who God is, we know from hearing or reading the Bible! Chances are good that some of us are relatively new to the Bible, while others are more familiar or experienced. You don't need any Bible experience to take part in this session! The purpose of this session is to explore how we can all more fully experience God through God's word in scripture.

Life Issue
How does
reading the Bible
enhance my life?

Community Building & Opening Question

- What is one of your favorite books? What about it makes it a favorite?
- What types of books, magazines, or newspapers are you mostly likely to read?

Opening Prayer

Lord, you called your followers together in Christian community when you walked the earth. Gather us together today, so that we may grow closer to each other and closer to you. Be present with us, as we are present to one another. Guide us and renew us with your love and grace. Amen.

What does the Bible say?

Psalm 33:4-9

For the word of the LORD is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.
He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;
he put the deeps in storehouses.

Let all the earth fear the LORD;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.

John 5:24

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.

What do others say?

One of my most vivid impressions, from many long days of waiting in the family lounge of a hospital, during a family member's serious illness, is of a Bible that my friend brought when she came to sit with me. As we read from the Psalms, Paul's letter to the Romans, and John's gospel, my eyes continually strayed to her Bible. It was falling apart! The cover was torn and coffee-stained. The pages were worn and covered with writing. At that point I wished that I had a Bible like that, a Bible that had obviously been well used. For me, that tattered Bible spoke volumes about my friend's relationship with God.

God reveals God's self to us through the Bible, yet many of us think of it as primarily a book of moralistic stories that tell us how we "should" live or, in the case of the Old Testament, tell us stories about God's actions throughout the history of the Hebrew people. We know the stories about Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection so well that we may fail to see anything new in them from reading to reading. As we get lost in the plot or moralistic teachings, do we miss the personality and characteristics of the main character – the community of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

How can we discover more about the Living God through reading and experiencing the scriptures? It all starts with the desire to know God. When we love someone, we want to know everything about them, including the important events in their lives, how they think and feel, and the interests and activities about which they are most passionate. Reading the Bible is a chance to do that with God. However, it's hard to really get to know someone if you are speaking different languages! So, the first step in becoming a regular scripture reader is to find a Bible that uses language you can understand! *The Learning Bible* or *The Message* are just two examples of contemporary English translations.

There are people in our lives whom we know well enough to greet when we see them on the street, but we don't really know much about their personalities, their families, their hopes and dreams. They are acquaintances, not friends. For many of us, our relationship with God is on the "acquaintance" level. When we read the Bible in an active manner, we're able to dig in and get to know God on a deeper level. Even setting aside 10 minutes each day can make a difference in the depth to which you recognize the activity of God in your life. There are a variety of active-reading techniques that can make our understanding of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit so much richer.

- **Read with a focus.** Set a goal to read a specific book of the Bible, such as Genesis, to learn about the beginnings of faith in one God. Maybe you'd like to learn more about a specific period in the life of Jesus, such as Holy Week (Matthew 26-28, Mark 14-15, Luke 22-24, and John 13-21). Opening the Bible and beginning to read whatever is on that page will be confusing, because information can so easily be taken out of context. Having a focus will allow you to take in more information on a deeper level.
- **Take notes or write in a journal.** Some Bibles may even have study helps, including more white space on each page for this very reason. Some things you might want to note are actions that God has taken in a particular passage or how people have been changed by encountering the Holy Spirit. Ask yourself, "What did I learn about God's personality from reading this?" "Which characteristics of Christ's personality appear in the passage?" "How might I put this to use during my day?"

- **Put yourself into the passage.** With which of the people in the passage do you most identify? How might you have acted if you had been present as one of the actors in the story? How does putting yourself in the story allow you to see events or understand the story in a different way?
- **Think about what impact this story might have on your life.** How does what you read apply to your life today? Are you motivated to do something as a result of reading this story? How might God be speaking to you in this passage? If you like to journal, keep a scripture journal where you write your thoughts and discoveries as you read God's word. Think about how interesting it would be to read that journal in a few years!

Something that my friend with the well-used Bible had obviously learned, and something that I continue to learn every day I spend time in God's word, is that the time set aside to experience God through scripture is never enough. It's always interesting to me, how reading scripture leads the reader deeper into the meaning of a text and raises so many more questions than it answers. It's a stimulating experience! Your group is a great place to encourage one another to read the Bible and to share what you're learning about God with each other.

Think About...

- In Psalm 33, the psalmist recognizes that the word of God is powerful. God "spoke" the world into being by saying what should happen and it happened! What are some other things that we know about God from reading God's word?
- What might be some motivations for reading the Bible? How could a regular practice of reading the Bible make a difference in someone's faith development and/or daily life?
- The writer offers some ideas for how to engage in reading the Bible. Which one of these ideas sounds interesting to you? What are some other ways that you've found helpful or heard about from other people?
- What portions of the Bible intrigue you most?
- Which Bible character would you like to learn more about? With what Bible character do you most closely identify?
- Why do you think that Jesus is referred to as God's "Word?" How might this be transforming for us if we really believed it?
- At what times in your life has the Bible been especially important for you? Could you imagine a time or circumstance when the Bible could be especially valuable or meaningful in life?

What's my response? *Select one or more ideas...*

- Select one of the ideas for reading the Bible offered in the reflection and give it a try.
- Read the Bible texts selected for the upcoming Sunday. Think about the texts as you go through the week and consider what God might be saying through the text. You can find the texts for each Sunday on the Incarnation website.
- Pick one of the books of the Bible to read this month. If you feel that you need more focus, choose a study guide to challenge yourself to go deeper into God's word.

- Pick a topic and read several passages in scripture to find out what Jesus had to say about that topic. For example: forgiveness (Mark 2:7-11, Matthew 6:12-15, or Luke 6:37) or money (Luke 16:3, Matthew 6:19-21). If you have a Bible with a concordance, you can look up a topic and read the verses listed for that topic. As you read, note your thoughts and applications to your life.
- Ask a friend to read a portion of the Bible with you, and then talk about what you've read. What new insight did you receive from the passage? What was the most surprising thing that you read in the passage?

Closing Prayer

Lord, thank you for revealing yourself to us through your word. Thanks, especially, for your words of hope, love, and forgiveness. Help us to appreciate and live out the Good News that you have for us. Let your word work in our lives to enlighten us with your promises and to transform us to be the Good News for others. Amen.

Reflection written by Lynda Thompson

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