

Making Good Sense

of the Bible Together

Foreword by
Paula Gooder

Bible Society
Stonehill Green
Westlea
Swindon SN5 7DG
biblesociety.org.uk

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Introduction to the course

Welcome

Welcome to *Making Good Sense of the Bible Together*. Over the next six sessions you will explore some of the key aspects to understanding and interpreting the Bible well. You will like some better than others. Some will seem more important to you than others. Some you will agree with, others you won't. At the end of these six sessions, though, we hope that your vision of the Bible will be bigger and broader. We hope that your minds will be stretched and your hearts warmed, but most importantly that you will open the Bible with even greater enthusiasm to make good sense of the word of God.

The Bible remains the bestselling book of all time – over 6 billion copies of the Bible have been printed to date! It has influenced countless works of literature, music and art. It has shaped the laws and politics of many western countries and continues to inspire a growing number of Christians around the globe. This is because through the words of the Bible, God speaks to change and transform our lives. As a result it is important for us to do everything that we can to understand the Bible and what it is saying. This course seeks to provide some of the tools that you will need for this as well as the space for you to ask questions

about how you might understand the Bible better.

You may be concerned that in-depth study of the Bible could undermine your faith, or suck the life out of your relationship with God. If this is your fear, be reassured. The intention of this course is to enhance faith by offering a deeper, richer, more vibrant insight into the Bible. The more important something is – and you don't get much more important than reading the Bible well – the more important it is to approach it as well as you can. Part of what you will gain from the course is the experience of reading the Bible as a group. Many through the ages have discovered this stretches minds and hearts and opens up new ways of thinking. As you progress through the course, however, continue reading the Bible on your own, listening to God speak to you through it about how to live your life. You will hopefully grow in confidence that you are hearing the message clearly through what you are learning.

The majority of examples used in the course come from the New Testament. This is not because the Old Testament is unimportant (far from it) but because most people know the New Testament better than the Old and, in a short course like this, will probably find it easier to reflect on passages they are more familiar with.

Making Good Sense of the Bible Together is a basic introduction to biblical interpretation, and seeks to whet your appetite for some big questions and issues. This is only the first step on a long journey. Making good sense of the Bible takes a lifetime's commitment – but it is an exciting journey and one that will take you deeper into the heart of God.



Download a free *Group Facilitators' Guide* for guidance on leading the sessions from:
biblesociety.org.uk/mgsotb

SESSION 1

Making Good Sense of the Bible: Why do we need to?

SESSION SUMMARY

This session explores some of the reasons why it is so important to make good sense of the Bible and looks at the key ways in which we go about making sense of things generally in our daily lives.



Start out

Pray

Group facilitator, you might like to open this session with the following prayer:

Teach me, LORD, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end. Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. Amen.

(Prayer adapted from Psalm 119.33,34)

Discuss

As we begin this first session, discuss the following questions:

How do you feel about reading the Bible?

How often do you read it?

Which bits do you love and which do you find difficult?

In what ways has the Bible inspired or changed you (if it has)?

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There are no wrong answers here – if you don't like it and don't read it, do say: it is important! The point of this is so that everyone in the group knows where you are coming from in the weeks that follow, so be honest. It will help.

Why do you think we need to make good sense of the Bible? What problems might be caused if we don't read the Bible well?

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Read

Take a few minutes to read and reflect on the following comments on your own.

- One of the most important questions we face at the start of a course like this is why need to even ask the question about making good sense of the Bible. Surely we just open up the Bible, start reading and allow God to speak? Isn't a course like this in danger of fiddling with something that works perfectly well so that it breaks? Doesn't it run the risk of finding problems where there weren't any to start with?
- There is always a danger that biblical interpretation will spoil rather than enhance our reading of the Bible but there are some very good reasons why we should pay attention to making good sense of the Bible.

We need to make good sense of the Bible, so that we:

1. Avoid bad interpretations

- Some interpretations of the Bible have been responsible for bringing great evil into the world (e.g. interpretations which were used to support the Nazi party in 1930s Germany or apartheid in South Africa). Can you think of any other examples?

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- Some interpretations are not wrong (in the sense of bringing evil into the world), rather they place unhelpful emphasis on themes or passages within the Bible (e.g. the view that believing in Christ will make you materially rich, sometimes called ‘the prosperity Gospel’). Can you think of other examples?

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- Some interpretations make a poor use of the Bible to support pre-established views or opinions (e.g. by just quoting verses at random from the Bible). Which opinions have you heard backed up by random verses lately? Why do you think this not a helpful or valid way of using the Bible?

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2. Can become more like the people God wants us to be

It has often been said that reading the Bible well can help form Christian character – in other words it can help us to become more like the people that God wants us to be.

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

3. So that we can hear God speaking more clearly through his word

Perhaps the most obvious reason why we need to read the make good sense of the Bible is because Christians believe that the Bible is the word of God and that when we read it thoughtfully and prayerfully God speaks. If this is the case then it makes sense to do our best to understand what it is saying as much as possible so that we can train our ears to hear God's voice more clearly.

Do you have any other thoughts about this section?

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Take a few minutes to share your thoughts and reflections on this section as a group.



Explore

Group facilitator, please read out the following section and lead the exercise below:

The feeling of being a little bemused when reading the Bible is not new; even people in the Bible appeared to struggle to make sense of it. A well-known example of someone needing help to make good sense of the

Bible comes in **Acts 8** when a court official of the Ethiopian Queen, Candace, was reading the book of Isaiah:

So Philip ran up to it [the chariot] and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

Acts 8.30-31

Believe it or not, we spend the whole of our lives interpreting the world around us. It is just that most of the time we do it so quickly we don't even notice we have done it.

The problem we face when interpreting the Bible is that it comes from a world so far away from our own that our usual techniques of interpretation break down. This is one of the reasons why thinking about the principles of interpretation can help us to work out what we need to know in order to interpret the Bible well.

Exercise

For the next exercise you will need four different envelopes that have each contained a different type of post:

1. a piece of personal post (with a handwritten address)
2. a business letter with a typewritten address but no branding
3. a business letter with either typed address or see-through window and branding (e.g. electricity bill)
4. an item of junk mail.

Look at the envelopes and decide privately in what order you would open them and why. Share together the decisions you made. Did you all decide to open the

letters in the same order or a different order? What factors on the envelope affected your decision?

Points to bear in mind:

- Could you tell where the letter came from? Did this tell you anything about who sent it?
- Did the handwriting/typewritten script affect your decision? Was there any branding on the envelope and did that affect when you thought you would open it?
- Would your own personal circumstances cause you to open the letters in a different order (e.g. if you were waiting for an important letter from the hospital)?



Notice

Group facilitator, please read out the following section:

As you will no doubt have gathered, the point of this exercise is that even when it comes to opening the post we make swift decisions based on:

- where the letter has come from
- what form the letter appears to take (i.e. what the envelope looks like)
- our own personal circumstances.

All of this affects how we relate to what we are looking at.

In biblical scholarship these three factors all play into arriving at our interpretation of a text. They are sometimes referred to as what is:

- **behind the text** – where the particular book or passage came from: who wrote it when and why
- **on or in the text** – what form the book or passage takes and what context it is in

- **in front of the text** – the issues and concerns that we bring to the text as readers.



Study

*Group facilitator, please ask someone in your group to read **Luke chapter 15**.*

As we explore the following questions, we are beginning to look at the author of Luke, the audience and context and how we might begin to make sense of this chapter for ourselves.

Discuss

As a group discuss the following questions:

Who was Jesus telling these stories to (Luke 15.1)?

How might each category of people have felt as he spoke, and who might they have related to in each parable?

How do the three stories relate to each other, and why do you think Luke chose to record them in this order?

What do you think Jesus is saying to you through these stories? How does it feel to hear about God's heart for the lost of this world?

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Engage

What are the key things you will take away from this session?

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As you come to the end of this first session, you might like to pray together.

Pray that the Holy Spirit will give you a love of the Bible, a willingness to do the work needed to read it well, and an openness to being transformed as you come to know God better through its pages.