

THE  
DISCIPLESHIP  
PLACE

How to Study the Bible



**SESSION 2**  
The Challenges

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# The Challenges: An Overview

## SESSION OVERVIEW

**The History Challenge**

**The Language Challenge**

**The Literature Challenge**

**The Presupposition Challenge**

**Letting the Bible Speak**

**Conclusion**

**Application**

**Exam – Session 2**

**Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant**

## LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should be able to:

- describe some of the major challenges to effective Bible study
- listen more carefully to what the Bible is saying

# The Challenges: An Overview

## INTRODUCTION



Several challenges present themselves when we study the Bible. Knowing these challenges will help us navigate the journey better. Like a hiker on a wilderness trail, the more we know about the challenges we face, the better prepared we can be. We do not want to be surprised along the way.

The challenges we face in Bible study are much like those encountered in everyday communication. Suppose you receive the following email or text: “Don’t worry. I sent a couple of bills your way today.” What does this message mean? What kind of “bills” is it talking about? Will you receive some money, or will you receive another “bill” to pay? Or maybe Uncle Bill and Cousin Bill are coming to visit! Is the mood of the message serious or mocking? In order to interpret this message, you must know the circumstances behind it and the meaning of its words. Knowing the mood of the message also helps. In addition, we will likely interpret the meaning of the message based on what we expected it to say.

The same is true when we try to interpret a passage in the Bible. In this session we will look at the challenges presented by the history, language, and literature when we do Bible study. Also, we will consider the challenges our presuppositions pose for us.

## THE HISTORY CHALLENGE



### NOTES

The first challenge to good Bible study is to know the history surrounding the text. The Bible often assumes its original readers knew such background, as they surely did. But today's readers are not so well informed. For example, the Book of Daniel begins, "In the third year of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it" (Daniel 1:1). As the story continues, it tells us very little about who Jehoiakim and Nebuchadnezzar are other than kings in their respective countries. We do discover that Nebuchadnezzar takes control of Jerusalem and carries off treasures from its temple. But why is this important to know? Who is Nebuchadnezzar anyway?

Knowing the answers to these questions and others related to the historical setting matters a great deal to understanding the message of the Book of Daniel. For an ancient Jewish audience, hearing Nebuchadnezzar's name might be compared to evoking the name of Adolf Hitler today. Nebuchadnezzar eventually crushed Jerusalem, utterly destroying its temple, the Davidic kingship, and the nation of Judah. He then placed what remained of its population into forced labor for his empire. In the story of Jesus' birth, the mention of "King Herod" has a similar effect upon its original audience of Jewish Christians (Matthew 2:1). These were ruthless men hated for their brutal treatment of Jews.

The Bible is filled with historical references because the revelation of God takes place within the context of human history. A particular people lived during particular times in particular places. So those who would study the Bible in depth need to know something of the historical background related to the events, people, and places mentioned in the story. This is our first major challenge.

## THE LANGUAGE CHALLENGE

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**NOTES**

Another challenge that immediately confronts those who study the Bible is the meaning of its words. The Bible was originally written in languages that most people do not know: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Fortunately, the Bible has been translated into many of today's languages; yet a problem remains.

Translating from one language to another is tricky business, especially when one of those languages is very ancient and the other modern. Word-for-word correspondence does not always work well. One word in a modern language does not always express all the meaning contained in an ancient word. On the other hand, sometimes the modern word carries connotations the ancient word didn't convey.

For example, the word shalom in Hebrew is normally translated "peace" in English. In ancient Hebrew, it conveyed the idea of harmony and wholeness, like when all the pieces of a puzzle fit together. It was about much more than the absence of conflict, which is what we often think about in our modern world.

Further, in today's world we can think about peace between nations without any reference to God. In the Bible, peace comes about only in the context of relationship to God. Thus our modern word "peace" does not carry all the connotations included in the ancient word shalom, and it contains some ideas that may have never been associated with the ancient word. So discovering the particular meaning of biblical words can be challenging.

## THE LITERATURE CHALLENGE

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### NOTES

A third challenge for students of the Bible is determining the kind of literature we are reading. This is important because we read different forms of literature differently. In libraries and bookstores, we can find books arranged in various categories such as poetry, fiction, economics, politics, history, and more. We know that books from these different sections will provide very different reading experiences. For example, we would not interpret images in a poem literally, and we would not read fictional stories as if they were history.

As we study the Bible, we become aware that it contains many different types of literature. There is both poetry and prose, each of which contains a variety of subgenres. Poetry comes in the form of psalms, proverbs, and prophetic speeches, for example. Prose sections of the Bible include state records, family sagas, and hero stories. Determining how to read these many different kinds of literature is not always easy because we do not know the standards of ancient writers. Perhaps the most difficult genre for modern readers is the apocalyptic style literature found in Daniel and Revelation. The surreal images portrayed in these books are very different from anything we know today. So knowing the type of literature we are reading in the Bible and how to best interpret it remains a major challenge for serious Bible study.

## THE PRESUPPOSITION CHALLENGE

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**NOTES**

A fourth challenge to Bible study is our presuppositions. Sometimes we can miss the message of the Bible because it does not fit with our understanding of things. We try to make the Bible's message fit into our world rather than into its world.

Experiences of life have shaped every one of us in particular ways. We know certain things, feel certain ways, and view reality a certain way because of what parents, schools, and culture have taught us. We have been culturally conditioned to think, feel, and act as we do. In a sense, we have been given a set of glasses with lens through which we view the world. And of course we tend to read the Bible with these glasses.

As an example of what we are talking about, most of us come to the Bible feeling like we know something about God. Some of us may view God as a kindly grandfather, while others may view Him as a heavy-handed policeman. What if the God of the Bible is not like either one of these? Will we be able to see that? If we understand God to be a kindly grandfather, we will struggle with the God who allows Job to suffering or pronounces judgment on His people through His prophets. If, on the other hand, we experienced a disengaged father while growing up, we may struggle emotionally with calling God our Father, as Jesus taught His disciples to do.

The challenge of our presuppositions requires us to first become aware of them. Then we must try to set them aside while we read the Bible within its world rather than ours.



## LETTING THE BIBLE SPEAK



### NOTES

The problem with all of these challenges is that they might keep us from hearing the message of the Bible. Without some understanding of the historical setting, the meaning of the words, and its literary forms, we can miss what God intended to communicate to us. Unless we can learn something more about those things as well as set aside our preconceptions about what it means, we will make the Bible say what we want it to say rather than hear what it is actually saying.

Another way of thinking about this is to imagine ourselves at a committee meeting with God as we study Scripture. In such meetings a leader usually brings the agenda of discussion items. This typically includes approving minutes of previous meetings, discussing old business, and addressing new business. If a committee member brings their own agenda to the group, things can get off track, and the purpose of the meeting will be sabotaged.

As we come to our Bible study time, we might imagine God leading that time with His agenda in Scripture. We can expect that whatever topic our Bible passage brings up is the topic God has in mind to discuss. Rather than bring our agenda to Scripture, we can simply let God do that. We will likely be surprised at how God's agenda will address the deepest issues and concerns of our lives. We will find God's discussion items very relevant to life when we let the Bible set the agenda.

When I was growing up, our family ran a gasoline station. One day my grandfather drove in and asked me to put in five gallons. I assumed he wanted his car filled up so I heard him say five dollars. In those days five dollars worth of gas was about 20 gallons, which was a problem for a car that only held 15 gallons. Soon gas was overflowing on the ground, since there was no automatic shutoff. My grandfather was not too happy about the wasted gas and paying more than he planned. My lack of knowledge about cars and my predetermined assumptions caused me to miss what my grandfather actually said.

## CONCLUSION

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### NOTES

While each of the above reasons for studying the Bible has value, focusing upon the goal of knowing God better through our study is undoubtedly the most important. This, after all, is the first purpose of the Bible. Above all else, the Bible intends to tell us about the most remarkable Being in the universe and invites its readers to know Him personally. As we will discover, this goal carries eternal rewards. Our relationship to God shapes how we live today as well as where we will live forever.

With our focus upon knowing God through our study of the Bible, we will also undoubtedly satisfy our curiosity about the history of an ancient people and find joy in the beauty of its literature. In addition, during that process we will discover biblical support for our beliefs and become better people. As we come to know Our Creator by studying His words, we will grow into the people God created us to be.

## APPLICATION

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1. Look at the learner objectives for this session. Can you:
  - describe some of the major challenges to successful Bible study?
  - listen more carefully to what the Bible is saying?
2. Read through the story of the visit of the Magi in Matthew 2:1-12, and list some things about the history and the meaning of some words that might keep you from understanding all that is being said in this passage.
3. What are some presuppositions we might have about the story of the Magi that need to be set aside in order to hear its message more clearly?

## EXAM - SESSION 2



### NOTES

1. The historical background of a Bible passage presents a challenge for us because \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. Bible writers did not think history was important
  - B. Bible writers wanted to keep readers from understanding what they wrote
  - C. Bible writers wrote to readers who knew things that we do not
  - D. all of these
  
2. Understanding all that an original Bible word meant is challenging because \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. Bible translators have not done a very good job
  - B. the meaning of a word in one language is not exactly the same in another
  - C. we lack information about ancient words and can only guess their meaning
  - D. all of these
  
3. Knowing how to read the various forms of literature in the Bible is challenging because \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. Bible writers did not know very many different kinds of literature
  - B. forms of literature in the ancient world may differ from forms we use today
  - C. all forms of literature should be read the same anyway
  - D. all of these
  
4. Our presuppositions about life and God can obscure the message of the Bible because \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. we may feel we already know what the Bible is supposed to say
  - B. the message of the Bible may be different than what we think
  - C. our understanding of the world may not be correct
  - D. all of these
  
5. According to the writer of this session, our biggest challenge in Bible study is: \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. to let the Bible say whatever it wants to say
  - B. to make the Bible say whatever we want it to say
  - C. to listen to what other people think the Bible says
  - D. all of these
  
6. The writer of this session suggests that one way to think about our Bible study time is to imagine being at a meeting in which God sets the agenda with Scripture.
  - A. True
  - B. False

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

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**NOTES**

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor:

1. What are some of the major challenges to effective Bible study?
2. Why is the history of the Bible such a challenge to us?
3. Why do Bible translations not always give us complete understanding of the meaning of words?
4. Why is reading poetry often different than reading prose?
5. What kind of presuppositions might we have about the Bible?
6. How can we listen more carefully to what the Bible is saying?