

Participant Reading – Week Two

SCRIPTURE

Do you have a favorite bible story? Have you ever been a part of a bible study group? Do you enjoy reading scripture on your own? Do you feel like it is sometimes difficult to interpret or understand the bible?

As Christians, we know that scripture is important. But sometimes it is difficult to understand. Bible culture seems so peculiar. There are ideas and concepts we struggle to comprehend. That's why studying scripture, together with other Christians, is so beneficial.

I will never forget the message preached at my grandmother's funeral service. The pastor chose to preach on the 23rd Psalm. It is a passage familiar to nearly everyone; but even a familiar passage benefits from some study. At one point in his message, he spoke of the shepherd's rod and the verse that reads, "thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." I listened with concern as he proclaimed that the shepherd's rod "comforts" us by correcting us. "Sometimes the shepherd has to use his rod to discipline the sheep as God disciplines us," he said. I found nothing comforting in his interpretation. In fact, sheep are meek animals. Ancient Palestinian shepherds used their rods to threaten predatory animals that could potentially harm the sheep. Shepherds did not discipline their sheep with the rod. Sheep are too easily frightened. My grandmother had faced many challenges in her life. She had grown up very poor, had experienced many health difficulties and lived as a widow for many years before she passed. I wondered; was the implication of the pastor's interpretation that my faithful grandmother's struggles represented "God's rod" disciplining her life?

When we read the bible as God's Word for us, it is helpful to consider a few things:

- The bible is not "a book" so much as it is a collection of many different kinds of books or literature – history, wisdom writings, laws or instruction, letters, sermons, hymns, poetry, prophecy, parables, etc. Just as we do not approach poetry, a Stephen King novel, or an issue of the *Wall Street Journal* in the same way and with the same expectations, we approach different portions of scripture differently and with different expectations.
- The bible springs from a different culture and world view. Elements of some stories are heavily influenced by cultural assumptions (e.g. the inferior and submissive role of women; the acceptance of slavery; and thinking of oneself as a member of a group rather than as an individual).
- In various books or sections of the bible, knowing something about the author, the audience, the historical context, and the reason or purpose for the writing will help us better understand what it meant in bible times in order to consider what it means to us here and now.

As Christians, we take the study of scripture seriously because, as 2 Timothy tells us, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3.16-17). Yet, our goal is more than *learning* the Word of God. We learn the Word of God in order to *know* or discover the God of that Word; in other words, to be in a closer relationship with God. We learn scripture not only to inform our minds, but to transform our hearts and lives.

If you have a favorite bible story or verse, be ready to share it with your group, as well as the reason behind why it is important and meaningful to you. If you do not have much familiarity with scripture, you may want to read some of the stories below and consider what they might teach us about God, humanity, and the relationship God wants to have with us. They are short passages so you may want to read them all in one sitting, or you may read one each day.

- Psalm 23: this psalm employs a metaphor (sheep and shepherding) that would have

been very familiar to people in the ancient Middle East. What emotions does this metaphor, this image, evoke in you?

- Micah 6:6-8: in the ancient Middle East, sacrifice was a key component of worship for Jews and people of other cultures and religions. Jews offered God sacrifices of certain grains and animals. But what do these words from Micah teach us about what God wants most from us and what will please God the most?
- Luke 6:43-45: These words of Jesus employ a metaphor. How are trees and their fruit like people's hearts and outward actions? How do we struggle in our own lives to demonstrate consistency between our beliefs and our behaviors?
- Matthew 7:12: This verse is a "wisdom saying" spoken by Jesus that is often referred to as "the golden rule." When is following the golden rule difficult or most challenging? In what kinds of circumstances or contexts?
- Romans 8:28: Sometimes people have interpreted this verse as meaning that "God never gives us anything we can't handle." Is that what this verse is saying? How do you interpret its meaning?

If you would like to engage in the study of scripture on your own, a good study bible is helpful. My personal favorite is the *New Interpreter's Study Bible* (New Revised Standard Version), published by Abingdon Press.

Session Two – Facilitator Discussion Outline

(Items needed – candles, a bible)

Note: Although this is not designed to be an in-depth bible study, as the leader, you may wish to have a *Harper's Bible Dictionary* with you for quick reference for questions that may come up.)

- Remind the group of the format for your time together. Begin by lighting candles; hear a word of scripture; take a few moments to breathe deeply and relax; and, have a prayer time that will conclude with the Lord's Prayer.
- Light a candle and explain that it is a reminder to us of Jesus' presence with us since Jesus is the light of the world. Invite members to come forward at their own pace and light a candle.
- Begin with this scripture verse from the Psalms:
Your word, O Lord, is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. [Psalm 119.105]
- Invite members to take a few moments to close their eyes and breathe deeply and slowly using these few moments to begin to relax and let go of the day's tensions.
- Invite group members to name anyone or any situation for which they desire prayer. All they need to do is speak the name of the one in need since God already knows every need. Let them know that the prayer time will conclude with the Lord's Prayer.
- Next, invite group members to share what they may have learned or questions that they have about the bible as a result of this week's reading. Did it surprise them to know that the bible is comprised of so many different literary types – wisdom sayings, gospels, parables, history, law, etc.?
- Let group members know that, together, we are going to look at the parable Jesus tells in the gospel of Luke that we often call "The Parable of the Prodigal Son."
Let them know that you will read the parable through once. [Luke 15.11-32]
After reading, allow for a few moments of silence, then ask group members how this story makes them feel. Who do they identify with most? What are their feelings toward the younger son, the older son and the father? [At this point in the discussion, try to prevent them from "theologizing" or interpreting. The question right now is about how the story *causes them to feel* and where the points of identification occur.]
Now let them know that there would have been cultural elements related to this story's interpretation that would have been common knowledge to the people who heard Jesus tell this parable. Here are just a few:
 - Property would not have been divided up until the time of the father's death. For the younger son to request his inheritance while his father is still living is akin to him telling his father he wishes he were dead.
 - This young man was Jewish. For him to be reduced to the job of feeding pigs (unclean animals) would have been as low as he could go.
 - For the father to run to greet his returning son and to welcome him as he did would have been scandalous. In that culture, adult men never ran. Running was behavior fit only for children. It was humiliating. No respectable adult male ever ran.

- Furthermore, the father fully restores the son to his previous honorable position by having sandals placed on his feet (slaves or servants did not wear shoes) and even placing on his finger a ring that was probably a signet ring. The dishonorable behavior that the young son has previously displayed is exceeded by the father's *self*-humbling. The father loves and treasures his son far more than his own personal honor or reputation.
- When the elder son refuses to enter the home and celebrate, he too dishonors his father. It is a celebration with many guests and his disrespectful behavior would not have gone unnoticed by those guests. Even so, the father leaves the party to go out and plead with this ungrateful and disrespectful son.
- Ask participants: How do these details impact your understanding of this parable? Has it changed how you feel about this parable? Has it helped you better comprehend the enormity of God's (our heavenly Father's) love for you?
- In our weekly reading, participants were invited to share with the group if they have a favorite bible story or verse and what it is about the story/verse that is meaningful or significant for them. When did they learn the story? Did they first read it on their own, or did someone else read or teach the story to them? If there is hesitancy in getting started, begin by sharing *your* favorite story/verse and its significance to you. Allow people plenty of time to share their favorite stories and experiences with one another.
- Invite participants to come forward, as they are ready, to blow out their individual candles.
- End with a prayer of blessing from Numbers: *The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.* Amen.