

E	L	H	T	W	O	R	D	S	E	S	S	Z	L	F
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C	L	X	P	Y	E	A	N	N	L	I	F	E	R	S
X	A	B	U	N	D	A	Z	C	E	E	E	C	K	V

Growth Groups Material

(6 studies on the Bible)

July-August 2023

LEADERS GUIDE

WORDS FOR LIFE

Teaching Schedule

Date (Thu-Sun)	Sermon Theme
20-23 Jul	Words for Life
27-30 Jul	How does God speak today?
3-6 Aug	Why trust the Bible?
10-13 Aug	What is the Bible like?
17-20 Aug	What is the Bible for?
23-27 Aug	What do we do with the Bible?

Booklet Contents

	Introduction	p.3
	Theme	
Study 1	Trusting the Bible	p.5
Study 2	Loving the Bible	p.12
Study 3	Understanding the Bible (and its history)	p.16
	- live event: Tuesday 1 August	
Study 4	Handling the Bible	p.18
Study 5	Meditating the Bible	p.28
Study 6	Sharing the Bible	p.33

Additional Resources

We've put together some additional resources that might help you as you make your way through this series:

<https://jannalianglican.org.au/wordsforlife>



Introduction

Every year at Jannali Anglican Church we work our way through what we call a 'Doctrine for Life' series. The aim is to take an important theological topic, teach what the Bible says about it and then explore its implications in a practical and meaningful way for our lives. But did you notice the assumption I just made? In fact, it's the same assumption underlying all our ministry and approach to the Christian life. That is, we go to the Bible to learn God's truth! You might be thinking, of course we do! That's great if you think like that! Nevertheless, it's important to examine why and how the Bible speaks to us as God's Word! Why do we believe that? And what exactly do we believe about the Bible when we say it's God's Word?

Outside the church (and sadly, now, inside the church in some places) the notion that the Bible is authoritative, reliable, and relevant is under attack. To be honest, most of our non-Christian peers would find it strange that we consider a 2,000 old book to be God's powerful and living communication to the world! Perhaps in our own lives, too, we're beginning to exhibit that same lack of interest in the Bible? We might come to church and listen to sermons, but do we love God's word? Do we read it for ourselves? Some of us will. Others might have been struggling in this area for a while.

So, as you contemplate all the above, you'll begin to see why our focus this term is on the Bible itself: **Words for Life**. As is usually the case with our Doctrine for Life series' these studies aren't perfectly aligned with the sermon series. They tackle the same issue from different angles, are a bit more practical, and hopefully will complement the preaching well!

Our aim and prayer are that as you listen in church, and use this material, you will grow in understanding about the Bible, grow in your confidence to trust it as God's Word to us, deepen in your love for it, and become more enthused to read and share the bible yourself!

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Note for leaders:

- Leaders' notes look like this (dot point, grey shading)

You will notice that these studies have a different feel from our usual material. It's less about reading one passage and unpacking it, and more about covering several passages. Most weeks there is 1 or 2 excerpts from books or articles that do well in raising or explaining the issue in focus.

I've taken on some feedback considering last years Doctrine for Life series and more recent study material. The text is larger. This is intended to be especially helpful for those of you who print the studies into A5 booklets (note if you would like A5 printed booklets please approach me – this can be easily arranged at the church office). The material is also shorter than last years Doctrine for Life studies. If you are finding yourself with extra time, you may want to work in a time of group reflection on the previous weekend's sermon.

One difference this year is that there are no podcasts or videos built into the study material. There will, however, be some of that type of material on the series webpage (see QR code and URL on page 2).

Another important factor to consider is the stand-alone, combined event scheduled for **Tuesday 1 August**. This presentation serves as the content for the third study: **Understanding the Bible (and its history)**. James will be presenting a seminar on historical questions surrounding the biblical text including how the books of the Bible were chosen, and how the original texts have been preserved throughout history. There are several options for your group to engage with this particular study:

1. Attend in person on the evening of Tuesday 1 August
2. Watch the presentation (which will be recorded) together in your group time. It will not matter if you shuffle the order of the studies.
3. Negotiate with James about visiting your group to deliver the presentation in person (which may be possible depending on dates and times etc.).
4. Skip this study altogether and spend the week doing something else in your group.

As usual, don't feel compelled to do every question. You're free to tailor the material to your group needs.

Study 1 | Trusting the Bible

What is this study about? The aim for this study is to be reminded that the Bible holds *itself* out as God's divine word to us, and therefore has authority! We'll see that Jesus believes in the authority of the Old Testament Scriptures, and establishes his apostles as the authoritative authors of the New Testament. The article excerpt will help us consider the practicalities of the authority of the Bible – particularly when it clashes with other sources of guidance that we might be inclined to follow

Introduction

1. The divine authority of the Bible as God's word seems to be an 'outdated' idea to many people these days. Think of your friends, work colleagues or others you know that aren't believers. What do you think their objections to the authority of the bible might be?
2. What other things do people tend to rely on for guidance when it comes to deciding what's right and wrong, or in making choices?

- The questions above are open and introductory in nature. Try to encourage people to reflect on how their unbelieving friends or family members think about the bible's claims of divine authority. The purpose of this introductory discussion is to raise the question of biblical authority. This is a notion which Christians believe, but they may not have scrutinized.
- Answers to question 2 will come up again as the article excerpt is read and considered.

What the Bible says about itself...

3. Read 2 Timothy 3:14-17 and 2 Peter 1:19-21. What does the Bible itself say about its own origins?
- Each of these passages assert that Scripture comes from God. That is, the Bible is God's word.

What Jesus thinks about the Bible...

- The attitude of Jesus towards the Scriptures is an essential element in a Christian doctrine of Scripture. Jesus Himself knew, trusted, and used the Old Testament Scriptures. He also contemplated and authorized the writing of the New Testament.

4. Read the following verses. How would you describe Jesus' attitude to the Old Testament?

- a. Matt 4:1-10
- b. Matt 5:17-19
- c. Matt 19:4-5

- In Matt 4:1-10 we see Jesus whole attitude to his temptation being shaped by God's word. His obedience to the Scriptures is more important to him than the comfort offered by Satan's temptations.
- In Matt 5 Jesus demonstrates his loyalty to the OT law and prophets
- In Matt 19, Jesus quotes from Genesis in his interactions with some Pharisees
- The effect of verses like this is that we see Jesus own reverence for the Old Testament. If we were to adopt the same attitude as Jesus has to the Old Testament (which is a compelling proposition, if Jesus really is God incarnate), then we too would recognize the divine authority of the Old Testament.

5. Read the following verses. How would you describe Jesus' relationship to the New Testament?

- a. John 14:25-27
- b. John 16:12-15

- Jesus' relationship with the New Testament is obviously different to his relationship with the Old Testament. He cannot quote or refer to specific NT scriptures as they had not been written until after his earthly ministry. However, in these two passages from John we see Jesus commission and authorize the apostles to continue sharing God's truth with the world, as the Holy Spirit reveals the truth to them.

Trusting the authority of the Bible today

6. Read the account of Paul's mission to the Bereans (in the Macedonian town of Berea) in Acts 17:10-12.

- a. How do the Bereans demonstrate their trust in the Scriptures
- b. In what ways could we practice the 'Berean' approach in our own lives?

- The Bereans demonstrate their trust in the Scriptures by examining them (v11) to discern whether Paul's preaching was legitimate.
- Modern analogies (e.g., the Berean approach) might be having our Bibles open in church when listening to sermons, or in Growth Groups, so that any suggestions or teaching that is put forward, is tested against the words of Scripture. The principle we are concerned with here, is that teachings are measured against the written word of God, rather than the other way around. This practice demonstrates that one's ultimate trust is in the Bible.

7. Read the following article excerpt and consider the following questions:

- I concede that this is a long article excerpt, but the lesson it conveys is exceptionally important to this study.

a. What are the 4 'competing authorities' that people tend to rely on in seeking religious truth?

- Bible, experience, tradition, reason

b. Can you think of examples from your own life, where you, or others, have put your trust in an authority other than the Bible?

- This is a chance for people to share from their own life if the ideas in the article ring true with their own experience.
- Some examples that may emerge include people from catholic backgrounds where church traditions are considered essential, even if never mentioned in the Bible. Another example might concern modern sexual ethics. The bible is quite clear on what is prescribed as godly sexual practice, but in employing our human reasoning many deem biblical sexual ethics unreasonable because it is contrary to the prevailing views of our current culture.

c. Is the author against the use of 'non-biblical' sources of guidance? How are they to be used?

- Absolutely not! In fact, it's impossible for us not to be shaped in some way or another by our experiences. It's also impossible for us to avoid traditions, and institutional authority entirely. These things are all helpful. Likewise, we're not expected to switch off our brains and suspend reasonable thinking when it comes to biblical interpretation. These things all have a role in helping us understand and apply the Bible.
- The crucial test, however, for whether or not we submit to the authority of the Bible comes when we consider the question: "What will we do when another source of authority (e.g., our experience, tradition, reason) clashes with what the Bible clearly says on a particular issue?"

**Phillip Jensen & Tony Payne, 'Four ways to live?', article excerpt from
*The Briefing***

Most of the issues facing evangelicals today resolve into a debate about authority, and in particular the authority of the Bible. In each area of controversy, the issue is 'Where do we go for the answer on this question? What is the truth by which we must live?' We all believe in the authority of the Bible, or say we do...why then do we disagree?

While nearly all Christians uphold the authority of the Scriptures, in reality there are other authorities that compete with the Bible for supremacy, other sources of truth about God and our world. Most commonly, there are four claimants to religious authority: Bible, Experience, Institution, Reason

Put simply, these four competing authorities represent four Christianities.

There are those who seek to understand their life in terms of the Bible, and treat the Bible as the final and comprehensive authority in all matters of faith and life.

Others wish to be led more by their experience of God. They see their Christian lives in terms of following the movings and promptings of the Spirit.

A third group regard the teachings of the institution or tradition to which they belong as authoritative for their life. If their church or priest or bishop or pastor offers direction for their behaviour or understanding, they will adopt it readily and fall into line.

The fourth group base their understanding of God and what he requires of us on human reason. They will accept and practise whatever can be demonstrated as sensible, rational, and intelligent and discard the primitive or irrational.

Four views of God

Each of these views springs from an understanding of what God is like. The first view is based on a God who speaks. God reveals himself to mankind through speech, through his word, and can only be known through his word. The second view assumes that God moves and acts in our lives and can be experienced directly today. The third is built on a God of order, who has called out a people to be his own—a people who are to live in unity. The fourth group has as its God one is reasonable, rational, and true.

We should find ourselves giving some assent to each of these understandings of God. Our God is all of these things. Nobody adopts any of these views to the extreme. Everybody's theological position has a measure of Bible, Experience, Institution and Reason mixed in.

Drawing the line

Should there be lines drawn between these different viewpoints? Some say no. They argue that the Church (the institution) has given us the Bible; or that the Spirit we experience today is the same Spirit who wrote the Bible; or that the Bible will always be rational (being the product of a rational God). However, we must not be fooled. The end result of these arguments is that the Bible's sphere of influence is radically diminished. When it is subordinated to or diluted among the other areas, the Bible ceases to speak with its own voice. It becomes a rubber stamp for our own views and prejudices.

There comes a point where one has to choose between these four competing authorities. What will we do when our experience doesn't tally with the Scriptures? Or when our reason disagrees with our church's teaching? Or when the Bible seems irrational or unreasonable? It is at this point that we reveal our true colours. We draw a line and take our stand.

Sola Scriptura

The authority of the Bible will never be maintained unless it is maintained alone. While recognising the subsidiary roles of experience, institution and reason in our understanding and application of the Scriptures, it is still crucial that we establish again the supreme authority of the Bible for our lives. There can be no alternative or additional authority. It is the only reliable source of truth, the only reliable guide to knowing God. The other claimants are better regarded as lampposts—helpful for illumination, but not for leaning on.

The Bible is sufficient for making God's mind known to us, for telling us all that we need to know to live in godly obedience to him—in all ages, in all cultures, until the Lord returns. God has not left anything out that is of any significance for us as Christians. We don't have to search elsewhere for the answer to our dilemmas. If the Bible doesn't give an answer, then there is no dilemma—we can do as we see fit, for the issue is unimportant. If we are taught things by spiritual experiences, church traditions or rational reflections (beyond the realm of Scripture) they are unimportant for Christian living. These things must not be laid on the consciences of other Christians. If the Bible doesn't teach it, it is not normative or significant for the Christian.

We must be on our guard against groups and individuals who follow additional authorities to the Bible. It is an oft-repeated pattern. Some additional authority teaches them some 'truth'. They then find this truth in the Bible, reading their new idea back into the text. Before long, this 'new truth' has become an 'old truth' that Christians need to rediscover if they are to live a life pleasing to God.

Subtly, but inexorably, the Bible's emphasis on godly living and ministry is placed to one side. The area of the Bible's authority has been left far behind. The Bible is not simply authoritative. The Bible alone is authoritative.

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Study 2 | Loving the Bible

What is this study about? The aim for this study is to target our heart! We may understand, agree with, and even live under the authority of the Bible. However, a fully mature recipient of God's Word comes to treasure and love it! We'll see some Psalmists that model this heartfelt delight in God's Word. Then we'll try to grow our own love for God's word by remembering all that it offers us!

Introduction

1. What's a good way of identifying what you love?

- For discussion. What do you and your group think? Usually, the things we love arouse our passions and emotions and consume our time and energy.

Reading exercise

2. Read the following book excerpt and consider the following questions:

- a. Do you see any of yourself, and your own personal relationship with the bible in this passage?
- b. Do you agree with the authors assessment at the end, namely, that *unless we love the Bible and find delight in it, our view of the Bible is too low?*

- This excerpt comes from a book which is entirely taken up in examining the text of Psalm 119. The passage below comes from the book introduction and raises the issue of *bible delight*. This reading exercise will complement the introductory question in raising the issue of how we feel about God's Word.

Christopher Ash, *Bible Delight: Heartbeat of the Word of God*

If someone asks you or me, 'Do you love the Bible?' we might reply - if we are Christians - 'Well, I know that I ought to love it. But to be honest I am not sure that I do. My Bible reading is more a matter of duty than delight. I wish it were a delight, but all too often it is a chore.' [...] If you are not a Christian believer, that may sound a stupid question. 'Of course not,' you may respond. Perhaps you love the Bible as literature. But I am not talking about loving the Bible as literature. I am talking

about loving the Bible for its substance. If you want to know why Christians love the Bible, you cannot do better than to start with Psalm 119.

It is especially for you if, like me, you have a high view of the Bible. We are persuaded that the Bible is trustworthy. We believe it is the word of God himself. Perhaps we are happy to speak of it as 'inspired', even 'infallible' or 'inerrant'. And yet even for us, until and unless we love the Bible and find it a delight, our view of the Bible is too low.

Bible Delight in the Psalms

3. Read Psalm 19:7-11 and then Psalm 119:89-96.

4. How would you describe the attitude of these two Psalmists towards God's Word?

- Begin by reading these two Psalms and simply observing what is said.
- Tip – the Psalmists use a range of words in referring to the scripture, including *instruction, testimony, precept, command, ordinance*, and so on. Remember that for the Psalmist, the main scripture they had access to would have been the Torah (the first 5 books of the Old Testament).
- Clearly, the attitude conveyed by these two Psalmists (they may be the same author – King David), is one of delight. You get a sense that they hold the Bible in the highest regard. They love it!

Application

5. As a result of what we've read so far, we might long to love and delight in the Bible, like the Psalmist. Along with praying for this development in our hearts, how can we grow in love for the Bible? What do you think?

- This question invites reflection and brainstorming. There is no short answer on how to grow in love for God's word.
- Some thoughts: in most spheres of life we tend to grow in love for the things we invest in and spend time doing. Think of hobbies, for example. The more someone develops depth of knowledge or skill in a particular area, the more they fall in love with the particular pursuit. I'd consider this to be the case with bible study.

6. One way we can begin to grow in love for God's word is to be reminded again of all that it can do for us, and in us. Look up the following verses and identify what God's word can do for/in us.

- This is clearly not a shortcut to loving the Bible. But we can tend to forget all that God's word can do in and for us. It's helpful to be reminded. This is not an exhaustive list either!

Verse	Benefit
Deuteronomy 32:46-47	'they are your life'
Psalm 19:7-11	Renewing one's life Making the inexperienced wise Making the heart glad Making the eyes light up Reward in keeping them
Psalm 119:50	Comfort in affliction
John 8:32	freedom
John 20:31	Belief in Christ leading to eternal life
Romans 10:17	Faith comes through hearing the word about Christ
Romans 15:4	Instruction, hope, endurance
Eph 6:11, 17	Sword of the Spirit which helps us resist Satan's schemes
1 Thessalonians 2:13	The word works in us to change us
2 Tim 3:14-17	Make us wise for salvation, useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, training in righteousness, equipping us for good works
James 1:21	The word saves us
1 Peter 1:23	new birth
1 John 5:13	Assurance of eternal life

7. Pray that we would develop a deep love for, and delight in, the Bible!

Space for notes:

Study 3 | Understanding the Bible (and its history)

Combined Event: Tuesday 1 August, 7.30pm

James Sneddon will present on the topic of Understanding the Bible and its history. Questions about the handing down of the biblical texts through history, how the Bible books were chosen, and more, will be addressed. There will also be an opportunity for questions. This event is open to all growth groups, and anyone else in our church community.

Other groups not meeting on Tuesday nights will be able to watch a recording of the presentation in their group time, after 1 August, if they wish. Alternatively, if scheduling allows, James will be happy to visit groups during the week to deliver the presentation.

Note: the link to access the recorded presentation will be published on the series webpage (see QR code and URL on page 2)

Space for notes:

Study 3 | Understanding the Bible (and its history)

Space for notes

Study 4 | Handling the Bible

What is this study about? If we're to love and trust the Bible, we want to be able to handle it well. Mishandling the Bible can lead to all kinds of problems! We don't want to be guilty of twisting the words of the Bible to say things that God doesn't intend to communicate.

It's right, then, for us to grow in our Bible reading skills so that we don't err in our interpretation. This study is different to others insofar as it invites you to develop bible reading skills. For many of you, the bible reading 'tools' will appear obvious (something that you utilise in your reading already). For others, they may be completely new.

Introduction

1. Think about your current view on interpreting the Bible. Mark on the spectrum below what your current view is.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
←					→				
Different people will read the same thing completely differently and that's ok!							There is only one true meaning of every sentence in the Bible		

- This introductory exercise is intended to stimulate discussion on the theme of bible interpretation.
- Clearly, there are parts of the Bible where it's very easy to follow what is being said. Other parts are trickier. For the most part, this difference comes with different genres (e.g., gospel narratives vs prophetic vision). However, we don't want to make the mistake that when parts of the bible are tricky to understand, that we're free to decide for ourselves what's being communicated! Our task is to work hard at understanding what the biblical author, and ultimately, God is intending to convey.
- In the exercise above, the two ends of the spectrums may represent extremes. However, mainstream Reformed theology would push us towards the right end rather than the left. Having said that, proceed with gentleness and care, if someone in your group indicates that their view is at the left end.

- For those interested in further theological investigation, we are dealing here with the idea of the 'Clarity (or perspicuity) of Scripture'. Kevin De Young in his book *Taking God at His Word* describes this doctrine, very helpfully, this way:
- *[The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is not a wild assertion that the meaning of every verse in the Bible will be patently obvious to everyone. Rather, the perspicuity of Scripture upholds the notion that ordinary people using ordinary means can accurately understand enough of what must be known, believed, and observed for them to be faithful Christians.]*

2. Read the following passages? How do they convey to us the importance of interpreting the bible carefully?

a. 2 Tim 2:15

- Timothy's job as a teacher was to 'correctly handle the word of truth'. This idea assumes that the Bible can't be handled in a correct way, and an incorrect way.

b. Acts 20:29-31

- This reference comes from Paul's farewell speech to the Ephesian elders. He warns of leaders who will rise up within the Ephesian church and 'distort the truth', leading people astray.

c. 2 Peter 3:16

- Here, Peter is speaking about some of the complex arguments in Paul's letters (which, incidentally and notably, he likens to other Scripture). Peter reminds his readers that some people may twist these teachings into error, leading to destruction.

Reading exercise

3. Read the following book excerpt. What point is the author trying to make? Do you agree?

- The thrust of this authors message is that we must take care in Bible interpretation, lest we find ourselves in error. They are against the idea that everything in the Bible is open to interpretation. On the contrary, the truth is that the Bible does reliably convey a clear message, in the main, and especially in matters pertaining to salvation.

Nigel Beynon & Andrew Sach, *Dig Deeper: Tools to Unearth the Bible's Treasure*

'It's all a matter of interpretation'

Most conversations I've had with non-Christians about the Bible end up there sooner or later. It's all a matter of interpretation. Sure, you say it means that Jesus is God and that sex outside marriage is wrong and that heaven is only for Christians, but maybe for me it means that Jesus was just a good teacher and sex with anyone is OK as long as you both want it and heaven is for everybody. It's all just a matter of interpretation.

Actually, we've all been conditioned to think like that. It's part of the whole philosophical movement called 'post-modernism', and over the last few decades it has infiltrated the TV shows that we watch and the classrooms that we sit in. Postmodernism teaches that when I come to a piece of literature such as the Bible, what matters is not what it means, but what it means for me. And that might be different from what it means for you. And that's OK.

[...]

Many of the world's leading cults - Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Science - claim to place the Bible at the centre of their religion. They just interpret it 'differently'. But even mainstream Christians can end up in a real mess because they think that the Bible is saying or promising something that it isn't. I (Andrew) think of a Christian I knew at university who was young but dying of cancer. Some well-meaning Christians told her mum that she would be healed if only they had 'enough faith'. It was a desperately cruel error; they added the agonizing guilt of 'maybe I haven't believed enough' to the grief of losing a daughter. But they had verses in the Bible - tragically misunderstood verses- to back it up. The truth is that without some care in your interpretation, you can make the Bible say almost anything.

Skills for interpreting the Bible well: the bible toolkit

4. As competent Bible readers it's important for us to develop a 'toolkit' of methods to employ when we are trying to understand what the bible is saying. As a group, work through the following tools and look up some of the examples.

- There are no further leaders' notes pertaining to each of the tools provided below. The intention, after having got to this point of the study, is to work together as a group to 'upskill' in our bible reading.
- A helpful approach might be to split into smaller pairs or triplets and assign a tool to each pair or triplet. You could ask them to read about the tool, look up a few of the examples/exercises, and then explain the tool in their own words to the rest of the group.
- If you get stuck, you may care to watch some of [these videos](#), explaining some of the tools

The authors purpose tool

Biblical authors all wrote with particular purposes in mind. Discerning these purposes helps us understand the 'why' of their content and, therefore how their message applies to us.

Sometimes there are explicit purpose statements in the passage or book itself (e.g., Luke 1:1-4, John 20:30-31, 1 John 5:13). If there is no specific purpose statement, we must play detective: look for the identity of author and readers, their situations, problems being addressed, or repeated themes.

Exercise – employing the authors purpose tool

- Look up Gal 1:6-9, 4:21 & 5:2. How do these verses help us understand the situation Paul is addressing? How would this help us discern what Paul's purpose is in writing his letter to the Galatians?
- Read John 20:30-31. How does John want us to use the knowledge we've gleaned from the rest of his gospel account?

The context tool

All communication is connected to what comes before and after it. When reading the Bible, we want to consider the broader context of

what we read, including (moving from immediate context to large context): the rest of the sentence, the paragraph, book section, book, whole biblical storyline.

Exercise – employing the context tool

- Look up Exodus 20:1-19. How would verse 2 shape your understanding of verses 3-19. How would the events of Exodus chapters 1-19 shape your understanding of the laws given in verses 3-19
- Read James 2:24. Out of context, this verse seems at odds with things we read elsewhere in the Bible about how we are saved. Now read the entire unit from verse 14. How would the context help us understand the point James is getting at?

The structure tool

How has the author broken down his material into sections? How do these sections fit together? This doesn't simply mean looking at chapter or paragraph divisions, or headings in the Bible (although they may be helpful). In narrative, look for changes in scenes through transitions of place, time, or repeated patterns. Other genres may have changes in dialogue or speaker. Letters may have different parts to an argument signified by questions or linking words.

We ought to ask why has the author structured their passage in such a way? Maybe it is to repeat the same theme multiple times or to contrast opposing ideas. At the very least, identifying the structure can help us towards identifying the main point being made

Exercise – employing the structure tool

- Consider Genesis 1. What structural patterns do you notice? How does this help us see what's important in this chapter?
- Read Mark 2:18-3:6. What is common to the three scenes Mark has clumped together? How would this help us understand the point Mark intends to convey?

The repetition tool

Does the author repeat words or ideas to make their point? Repeated words or ideas often convey the main stuff the author wants to get across, but care is still needed. Repetition might occur across a few verses in close succession, or across a larger passage/book.

Exercise – employing the repetition tool

- Read John 6:47-51. What word or idea is repeated? How does this help us understand what is important here?
- Consider Daniel 3. What string of words get repeated several times. Why might the author be doing this?

The linking words tool

What important words convey the logic of the author's argument? Significant linking words appear most frequently in New Testament letters and character speeches, but they might be found anywhere. Below are some types to look out for.

- *Therefore* (looking back). What comes before gives the reason. *Consequently, for this reason, thus.*
- *For* (looking forward). What comes after gives the reason. *Because, since, so.*
- *So that* (looking forward). Gives the purpose of what came before.
- *If* (one idea is conditional on the other being true)
- Some words contrast ideas. *However, instead, rather.*

Exercise – employing the linking words tool

- Consider Phil 2:5-11. What linking words or phrases do you notice?
- Consider Romans 5:12-21. What linking words or phrases do you notice?

The copycat tool

The Bible acknowledges that sometimes it describes people and events, intending that they serve as an example to us, either positive or

negative – see 1 Cor 10:6 and Heb 11. Is the author holding up one of the characters as someone we should imitate, or whose likeness we should avoid? Care is needed here.

How can we tell if an example is intended? Ask ourselves, "Does the example align with other biblical teaching?" Another approach to using this tool is to ask, 'Who am I meant to identify with in this passage?'

Exercise – employing the copycat tool

- Consider Genesis 37:1-11 and the rest of the Joseph story (hopefully fresh in your mind after Term 2). Based on the example of Joseph – should we be inferring that the dreams we have will come true?
- Consider the response of the crowds to Peter's sermon in Acts 2:36-42. How are they a good example for us to follow?

The genre tool

There are many genres in the Bible - e.g., song, historical narrative, genealogy, law, speeches, letters. Identifying the genre is important to how we interpret a passage.

Some genres aren't meant to be taken too literally. They can use unusual imagery or numbers to convey a broader point. But they are still communicating reality in some way. Other genres clearly convey real events, even if they are miraculous.

Exercise – employing the genre tool

- Consider Mark 4:35-41. Do these words have the character of imagery or prophetic vision, or are they intended to convey real events.
- Consider Revelation 7:1-8. What makes it hard to take these verses (esp. verses 4-8) literally?

The quotations/allusions tool

When the author quotes (explicit) or alludes (not explicit) to another part of the Bible, we should turn there to see what ideas he is picking upon.

How do you identify allusions? The more specific the item/event, the more likely it is that two references in the Bible to the same thing, are related. E.g. "sheep" are everywhere. But a "lamb of God who takes away sin" (John 1:29) is quite specific. It takes wide biblical knowledge to identify all allusions, so it comes with time and experience.

Exercise – employing the quotations/allusions tool

- Consider Matthew 2:3-6. How do we know this is a quotation? What does Matthew intend for us to learn from this quotation?
- Consider Matthew 4:2 (c.f. Deut 8:2). What allusion might Matthew be intending here?

Reflection

5. As you may sense, use of the bible 'toolkit' is a simply a matter of reading carefully. Share amongst your group any other tips you have for reading the bible carefully.

- This is an open question, inviting group contribution.
- Some group members may encourage others to make use of commentaries. Commentaries are helpful and need not be discouraged. However, take care to refocus the discussion back into methods of carefully reading the biblical text itself. We don't want to unwittingly convey to people that we rely on commentaries or teachers in order to get meaning out of biblical text.

Applying the Bible well

- The following section rounds out this session. The intention is to convey the principle that handling the Bible well, will always involve application. It is never a purely intellectual exercise. Some suggestions are about how to think about biblical application are set out. But there are no questions or exercises *per se*.
6. Biblical interpretation counts for little if we don't seek to apply what we've learnt to our own lives. As our situation is often very different to the original audience, what we do with what we've read is often different too!

Some people find questions like those below, helpful in applying the Bible:

- Is there a command to obey?
- Is there a reason for thanksgiving, worship, or praise?

- Is there a promise to claim?
- Is there an example to follow?
- Is there a sin to avoid or confess?
- Do I need to change my mind about something (e.g., the way I understand God, Jesus, myself, others)

Others are helped as they consider how they might respond to what they've learnt in different spheres of their life:

- At home
- At church
- At work
- In particular relationships (e.g., with family members, friends, or work colleagues)
- Use of money
- Recreational pursuits

Conclude

7. Which of the bible reading 'tools' did you find most interesting or helpful?
8. Pray that God would equip us to be competent Bible learners, and that he would guard us from misinterpretation!

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Study 5 | Meditating the Bible

What is this study about? The aim of this study is to be reminded, rediscover, or perhaps for some, realise for the first time, that personal, heartfelt intake of the Bible lies at the heart of our relationship with God. Our method for doing this is to consider the biblical theme of *meditation*.

Introduction

1. Read the book excerpt below, describing a lesson learnt by the author. What point do you think they are getting at? Do you have a similar experience? Are there any questions you have emerging from this reading?

- For discussion. The excerpt below ought to stimulate discussion on the nature of the 'quiet time' or personal Bible reading.

Allan Chapple, *True Devotion: In Search of Authentic Spirituality*

When I was converted, I was given quite a good grounding in the basics of the Christian life. This included a strong emphasis on the importance of the daily 'Quiet Time', which had two ingredients: Bible-reading and prayer. I was given material that helped me to start reading the Bible systematically and thoughtfully. I was also given a clear framework that taught me how to pray. But I had the impression that the two activities were not closely connected. So, I often found that after I had read and analysed the Bible passage for that day, I closed the Bible and then started working out what to pray about.

It was only many years later that I found out that somewhere along the way a third component of the Quiet Time had been lost [...] This missing link is the practice of meditation.

2. What do you think of when you hear the word ‘meditate’ or ‘meditation’?

- Upon hearing this word, many may think of ‘Eastern’ style meditation involving breathing exercises or chanting. It is important to recognize that a biblical understanding of meditation has very little in common with the widespread modern view. Influenced by mysticism, this regards meditation as the process of emptying the mind. In the Bible, however, it is a way of focusing the mind.

Psalm 1

3. Read Psalm 1. This Psalm contrasts two ‘lifestyles’ or ‘types of people’ who draw influence from different sources. What are the two alternatives presented?

4. What is the essential activity for the ‘happy’ or ‘blessed’ life in this Psalm.

- The ‘two ways to live’ presented in this Psalm are, on the one hand, the ‘happy’ or ‘blessed’ person of God who isn’t influenced by the wicked but rather immerses themselves in God’s word. The result for this person is spiritual fruitfulness and prosperity. This doesn’t necessarily mean material prosperity, but rather good standing with God.
- On the other hand, there are the wicked, who, contrary to the healthy and fruitful tree are like dry chaff that is blown away by the wind. This image signifies the fragile position of the wicked before the judgment seat of God.
- The essential activity of the ‘happy’ or ‘blessed’ one is that they delight in the word of the Lord (*instruction*) and meditate on it day and night.
- This is the kind of life we aspire to – spiritual prosperity and fruit-bearing, righteous character. This life comes as we meditate daily on God’s word.

What is meditation?

5. In the Hebrew poetry, we often see the same idea repeated twice in a row (this is called parallelism). Read the following verses and try to ascertain what word is intended to be synonymous with meditate:

a. Psalm 63:6, 77:3, 77:11-12, 119:15, 143:5

- Think; think; remember/reflect; think; remember/reflect.

b. How does this exercise help us understand the practice of ‘meditation’?

- Verses such as these confirm to us that in the bible, meditation is not a mystical, strange practice, but is more a matter of mental engagement with God’s word. It’s not intended to be purely intellectual, leaving us unchanged. However, God’s

truth which is applied to our hearts and changes us, comes to us through our mental engagement with the words of Scripture.

- Having said this, the practice of repeatedly reciting (or silently saying to oneself) a verse of scripture or working to memorize these verses could be very helpful.

6. Read the following book excerpt. What stands out to you?

J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*

We have some idea, perhaps, what prayer is, but what is meditation? Well may we ask; for meditation is a lost art today, and Christian people suffer grievously from their ignorance of the practice.

Meditation is the activity of calling to mind, and thinking over, and dwelling on, and applying to oneself, the various things that one knows about the works and ways and purposes and promises of God. It is an activity of holy thought, consciously performed in the presence of God, under the eye of God, by the help of God, as a means of communion with God. Its purpose is to clear one's mental and spiritual vision of God, and to let his truth make its full and proper impact on one's mind and heart. It is a matter of talking to oneself about God and oneself; it is, indeed, often a matter of arguing with oneself, reasoning oneself out of moods of doubt and unbelief into a clear apprehension of God's power and grace.

- For discussion. Here, Packer is trying to define meditation. In short, it is the process of taking what we read in the Bible and speaking it to our own souls, that we might digest it and be changed by it.

Application

7. Have a go at defining biblical 'meditation' in your own words.

- Invite group members to have a go. This will be a helpful exercise to consolidate what has been learnt in this study.

8. Can you describe what it would look like for someone to read the Bible but not meditate upon it?

- The aim here is to clarify our understanding by way of contrast. In this case, reading the bible without meditation might be when someone reads a passage, then closes the book and moves immediately onto another task. That is, without

working through that unseen, work of mentally contemplating what has been said.

9. Sometimes meditation is likened to 'preaching to ourselves'. How would personal meditation be like preaching a sermon? Who is the audience, who is the speaker, what is the aim?

- Preaching and meditation are similar insofar as they have the same aim – to apply the truth of the Bible to hearts, that faith might be nourished, affections refocused on God, hearts changed, and behaviour modified. In meditation the audience and speaker are the same person: ourselves. Perhaps, without pressing too hard on the make up of the human person, you might say that in meditation the audience is one's own heart, whereas the speaker is our mind.

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Study 6 | Sharing the Bible

What is this study about? The aim of this study is to be encouraged that we all have a role to play in speaking God's words to one another! After all that we've learnt in this series, it would be a shame if we didn't have a desire, and confidence to open God's word with one another. This study highlights several passages which contemplate the practice of Christians speaking God's word amongst one another, their assorted contexts, and the relationships in which this might happen.

Introduction

1. "Reading and discussing the Bible with people is the job of the pastor". What do you think about this statement. Do you agree/disagree? Why?

- This is an open question, inviting discussion. The statement is deliberately provocative. Don't be surprised if most people declare their disagreement and move on quickly.
- You might like to probe further and identify why people disagree with the statement and whether their practice backs up their attitude.

2. Read Ephesians 4:11-16. According to this passage what is the job of the minister/leader? What is the job of the church member?

- Ephesians 4 is one of the 'go-to' passages when it comes to understanding ministry. The role of the leader (verse 11-12) is to equip the rest of the church for the work of ministry (also translated as works of service). In other words, we are all 'ministers' and we all have ministry to do.
- In verse 15, all of us are to speak the truth to one another, in love.

The Bible on sharing the God's words with others

3. The Bible itself anticipates that God's people will speak God's words to one another. Read the following verses and complete the table.

	Location/context of sharing God's word OR the people involved	Purpose in sharing God's word
Deut 6:1-9	See verses 7-9. Parents speak with their children in their homes and during their daily life	See verse 3, especially. In the Old Covenant, obeying God's word led to long life and prosperity.
Ps 78:1-8	See verse 4. One generation is telling the next generation. Maybe parents to children, or elders to youth?	See verse 7-8 So that they would put their confidence in God, remember God and not be unfaithful like their ancestors (probably the wilderness generation)
Col 3:12-17	See verse 16. The context here is the relationships amongst the Christians of Colossae. Note also that they sing God's words to one another.	The purpose is not states. Col 3:1-4 is still in view. Speaking God's words to one another helps us to set our minds things above (v1-2), put off the old self (v5,9) and put on the new self (v10, 12)
1 Cor 14:26	The context here is the church gathering	The section is about order in church gatherings, but the word shared ought to build one another up in faith.
Heb 3:12-13	The context here is the relationships amongst the Christians written to in the letter. Their encouragement should be happening daily!	The purpose of encouragement is so that we'd all be wary of sins deceitfulness, and never turns away from God.
Heb 10:24-25	The context here is the relationships amongst the Christians written to in the letter. The regular gathering is contemplated, but the encouragement would extend beyond the formal gathering	The purpose of the 'provoking' is that we might grow in love and good works. The purpose of the encouraging is in light of Jesus second coming, but presumably connects to verses 19-23 – namely holding fast to our confession.

Reflection

4. Consider what you've discovered in the exercise above. Which of the examples, if any, do you consider yourself to be currently doing? Could you tell the group what you are involved in.

- This question provides an opportunity for people to share which of the examples fit with their life, and to describe to the group how they are already doing it. Something like a Growth Group would cover several of these examples. Other activities to encourage or celebrate might be reading the bible with our children in our homes, catching up regularly with someone 1-1, and engaging in edifying conversation in and around church.
- The key principle that is being promoted by these verses, and in this study, is that we can all be active participants in speaking God's word to one another. If our only regular engagement with God's word is when we sit in church and listen to it read and preached (which is a wonderful thing), we are missing out on lots of opportunities to be used by God!

5. Are there other examples that you are not involved in? Could you be?

Reading exercise

6. Read the following book excerpt

a. What excites the author?

- Clearly the author is excited about Christians reading the Bible with other Christians in all contexts of life.

b. What beliefs are challenged by their vision of church ministry?

- The main belief challenged by this vision is the vision of ministry that says ministry is the job of the pastors and leaders – not the 'regular' Christian.

7. In the first paragraph the author lays out a hypothetical Christian who is reading the bible with a range of other people in their life. They seem like a very busy person! Do you think a Christian reading the bible with multiple people in their life is an achievable goal? Why or why not? What is achievable for you?

- This is more a question for reflection, that will invite people to wrestle with the vision presented and whether we truly endorse it.
- The individual described in the excerpt *does* seem busy. But on the other hand, when you read closely, most of their bible reading relationships are happening in the course of ordinary life. And some of the engagements are only monthly or fortnightly! We ought not conclude too quickly that this mode of life is beyond

us. Life can be busy for many, but people always find time for the things they prioritize.

- Perhaps you could lead a discussion about how we could “piggyback” of parts of our regular schedule to read the bible with others.

8. Do you think the vision of this author is being realized in our church? What should/could we change?

- Open question for reflection. I'd love to hear your feedback about this!

Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*

If you want yet another way of expressing the same point, what we are really talking about is a Bible-reading movement-in families, in churches, in neighbourhoods, in workplaces, everywhere. Imagine if all Christians, as a normal part of their discipleship, were caught up in a web of regular Bible reading not only digging into the word privately, but reading it with their children before bed, with their spouse over breakfast, with a non-Christian colleague at work once a week over lunch, with a new Christian for follow-up once a fortnight for mutual encouragement, and with a mature Christian friend once a month for mutual encouragement. It would be a chaotic web of personal relationships, prayer and Bible reading more of a movement than a program-but at another level it would be profoundly simple and within reach of all. It's an exciting thought! And it is hardly a controversial or outrageous idea. Most pastors would love their congregation to be involved in this kind of everyday Bible ministry. Who could argue against it?

However, if we pause to reflect on the implications of this vision of vine work by every Christian, many of our most cherished assumptions about church, ministry, evangelism, and congregational life are called into question. For a start, it radically dissolves many of the traditional distinctions between 'clergy and 'laity'. Many of us minister in contexts where the unspoken (or even spoken!) assumption is that it is the pastor's job to build the church, and the members' job to receive that ministry and to support it through involvement in a range of jobs and roles-counting

the money, organizing morning tea, ushering, serving on committees, and so on. The pastor (or pastoral staff team) is really the one who does the vine work and the rest of us do what we can to maintain the trellis, not least by giving money.

9. Finish by praying for a growing desire to practice bible sharing with others in our lives.

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