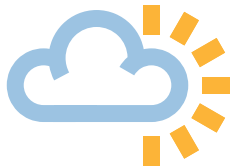




Sunshine  
and  
showers

**The Bible's  
beautiful  
strangeness**



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# Welcome to Sunshine and showers: The Bible's beautiful strangeness

Reading the Bible is one of the core things that we do as followers of Jesus. Noticing God in Scripture is one of the twelve commitments of **A Methodist Way of Life**: a way we respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and live out our discipleship in worship and mission.

The Bible is beautiful: it contains wisdom, humour, great stories and deep comfort. But it is a strange book, and not necessarily easy to use. This is the reality of dealing with such a set of ancient texts, but sometimes it feels like we must be doing something wrong.

Part of the challenge is that the Bible is full of paradoxes. It doesn't always make sense in a simple way. Different aspects of it can seem contradictory, and yet true. For example, we believe that the Bible is true, but in different places it makes different claims about who God is and how God acts and what it looks like to be part of God's family.

This sort of paradox can give us what psychologists call cognitive dissonance: that unpleasant feeling when we believe seemingly mutually incompatible things. People naturally want to reduce this discomfort. One way is to oversimplify and ignore one side and push into the other: 'the Bible never contradicts itself' or, 'the Bible can't be true'. Another strategy is to avoid it altogether. Either way, our understanding and appreciation of God can suffer.

This course aims to explore six of these paradoxes. It aims to encourage us to keep reading the Bible, and to resist the temptation to jump to one pole of the paradox or the other. Good news can appear when we embrace the mystery and give it space to breathe.

## **By the end of the six sessions we hope you will have gained:**

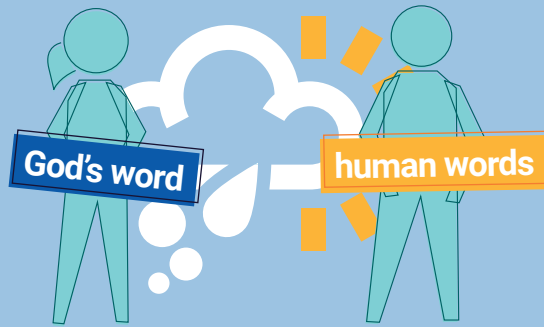
- a fresh appreciation for what the Bible is
- ideas for approaching the Bible with greater confidence and expectation
- reassurance that while the Bible is complex, we can learn from it for ourselves
- a desire to journey alongside others in study, and an openness to learning from one another.

Some guidance on facilitating this course is available on page 52, and all additional resources needed to run this course, including all the videos, are available at [methodist.org.uk/Sunshine](https://methodist.org.uk/Sunshine)

It is important to note that the Methodist Church recognises that God is beyond gender and persons of all genders are made in God's image. The Bible contains many traditionally male images of God, and fewer but nevertheless significant examples of traditionally female images as well as others that don't have a specific gender. The small selection of passages of Scripture used in this course cannot fully express the full richness of God's nature, which is beyond words and our comprehension.

Go deeper: Explore more about all the themes in this course and related resources and books at [methodist.org.uk/Sunshine](https://methodist.org.uk/Sunshine)





## Session 1: Whose word is it?

God's word ◀

▶ Human words

*This is the introductory session. It sets the scene for the course and introduces some of the beauty and strangeness we encounter when we read the Bible. Each week we'll look at a particular pair of apparently paradoxical ideas, both of which are part of the Bible's nature. In this first session we look at the Bible and consider where it has come from – who wrote it?*

### Watch animation 'Animation 1: Whose word is it?'

#### The paradox

To what degree do each of these statements, which seem to contradict each other, describe your experience of reading the Bible?

#### The Bible is God's Word

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

#### The Bible is made of human words

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

## The good news

The Bible is God's gift of self-revelation to us. It is full of stories, songs, prayers, letters and wise words from and about God that have been handed down through many generations of faithful believers, so that we can better know God and become more faithful members of God's family today.

## Preparation

Think back over your own experiences of the Bible up until now.

What have been the highlights and difficulties you have experienced when reading it?

What have been some of the bits you've celebrated or questioned?

## Introductory reflection

*How can young people keep their way pure?*

*By guarding it according to your word.*

*With my whole heart I seek you;*

*do not let me stray from your commandments.*

*I treasure your word in my heart,*

*so that I may not sin against you.*

*Blessed are you, O LORD;*

*teach me your statutes.*

*With my lips I declare*

*all the ordinances of your mouth.*

*I delight in the way of your decrees*

*as much as in all riches.*

*I will meditate on your precepts,*

*and fix my eyes on your ways.*

*I will delight in your statutes;*

*I will not forget your word.*

Psalm 119:9-16

## Conversation starter

### How do you respond to the animation?

- Briefly introduce yourselves and share your main response to the video.
- What do you think about the idea of the Bible being paradoxical?
- In what ways do you agree or disagree with the description of the Bible as 'beautifully strange'?
- What do you love about the Bible?
- What do you find most challenging about the Bible?

*Use this space to make notes from the discussion and questions throughout the session.*





## Watch 'Conversation 1: Whose word is it?'

### Response

#### Discussion

#### **Bible tool #1: See it as a partnership between Creator and creator.**

"Inspiration, both in the English language and in its ancestral languages, is rooted in the imagery of divine breath, the eternal rhythm of inhale and exhale, gather and release... Inspiration is not about some disembodied ethereal voice dictating words or notes to a catatonic host. It's a collaborative process, a holy give-and-take, a partnership between Creator and creator."

Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired*

- Rachel Held Evans saw Scripture as a holy give and take between God the Creator, and humans, who are also creators in their own way. If the Bible is the word of God, what might we expect it to contain or offer us? If it is human words (also or instead of), what might we expect to find in its pages?
- In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul describes Scripture (by which he is referring specifically to the Old Testament) as 'God breathed'. How do you understand this phrase?
- In his *Notes on the New Testament*, John Wesley makes the following comments: "*God speaks, not as man but as God. His thoughts are very deep, and thence His words are of inexhaustible virtue. And the language of His messengers, also, is exact in the highest degree; for the words which were given them accurately answered the impressions made upon their minds.*" What do you think this reveals about how Wesley understood the Bible?

## Activity

Read these four Bible passages.

Next to each one write what you think the author meant by the word(s) of God.

Draw weather symbols to express your feelings about each one.

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

Genesis 1:1-3

For God said, 'Honour your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' But you say that whoever tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not honour the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you nullify the word of God.

Matthew 15:4-6





I am enlightened



I'm confused



Can I get out of this please?



This is a dramatic moment



This leaves me cold

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.

Deuteronomy 18:18

Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and wages war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God.

Revelation 19:11-13

## Prayer

Let us pray to God using some words of Scripture:

*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.*

Numbers 6:24–26

## Follow up

### Reflect

What do the following passages reveal about what God's people have felt and thought about Scripture historically? How does this relate to how you think and feel about Scripture?

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 | Psalm 119:33-40 | Romans 15:4 | 2 Peter 1:21 | Hebrews 4:12.

### Act

If you struggle to believe that God can speak to you through the Bible, try noting down the questions and frustrations that come to you as you're reading. Then ask yourself whether these questions themselves might be guided by the Holy Spirit working in you, revealing God's heart to you as you read.

## Prepare

In the next session we will think about the Bible's reliability; the paradox that it is trustworthy and yet full of contradictions and inconsistencies. Which do you tend towards yourself – trusting the Bible or feeling suspicious of these discrepancies?

## Go deeper

*General introductions to, and information about the Bible*

- **BibleProject.com**
- *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path: The nature of authority and the place of the Bible in the Methodist Church*, The Methodist Church, 1998
- *Worship Leading and Preaching: Module 2.1 – Encountering God in the Bible*
- Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*, Nelson Books, 2018
- NT Wright, *Surprised by Scripture*, SPCK, 2013
- Mitzi J Smith, and Michael Willett Newheart, *We are all witnesses: toward disruptive and creative biblical interpretation*, Cascade, 2023



## Session 2: Is the Bible trustworthy?

The Bible is flawless ◀ ————— ▶ The Bible is inconsistent

*The Bible was written by lots of different writers, who say different things in different ways, at different times and for different reasons. Sometimes in their differences, they even seem to contradict one another. In this session we consider whether the Bible has inconsistencies and if so, does that make it untrue or unreliable?*

### Watch animation 'Animation 2: Is the Bible trustworthy?'

#### The paradox

To what degree do each of these statements, which seem to contradict each other, describe your experience of reading the Bible?

#### The Bible is flawless

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

#### The Bible is inconsistent

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

## The good news

We're invited to dialogue with the Bible and its various authors, grappling with them and their words, exploring the hows and whys of what they say. As we engage in this dialogue, life-giving and trustworthy wisdom and truth emerges.

### Introductory prayer

*Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous.*

*Praise befits the upright.*

*Praise the LORD with the lyre;*

*make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.*

*Sing to him a new song;*

*play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.*

*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.*

Psalm 33:1-9



## Conversation starter

### How do you respond to the animation?

- Is the Bible reliable?
- How would you characterise the discrepancies highlighted in the video? As errors? As inconsistencies? As differences of opinion? As developments? Something else?

*Use this space to make notes from the discussion and questions throughout the session.*





## Watch 'Conversation 2: Is the Bible trustworthy?'

### Response

#### Discussion

#### **Bible tool #2: Look for God in the messiness**

"Inspiration does not extract or eliminate the messiness of what it means to be human. For me, the miracle is that we can find God in the midst of human fallibility and our mess."

Mitzi J Smith, *Toward Decentering the New Testament*

- Mitzi J Smith writes that we can find God in the messiness of human fallibility. Do you agree with her?
- Which 'voices' in the Bible do you tend to listen to more or less? What have you based these preferences on?
- What is 'truth'? What makes something more or less true?
- How do you resolve the tension that different authors can say different things about God at different times?

## Activity

Spot the difference: highlight the alleged inconsistencies in these pairs of texts.

Write next to each one how you feel about it. Does it bother you?

Draw weather symbols to express your feelings about each one.

*Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, 'Go, count the people of Israel and Judah.' So the king said to Joab and the commanders of the army, who were with him, 'Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beer-sheba, and take a census of the people, so that I may know how many there are.'*

2 Samuel 24:1-2

*Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel. So David said to Joab and the commanders of the army, "Go, number Israel, from Beer-sheba to Dan, and bring me a report, so that I may know their number."*

1 Chronicles 21:1-2

*(This is a later retelling of the same event. Note who tells David to count the people in each account.)*



I am enlightened



I'm confused



Can I get out of this please?



This is a dramatic moment



This leaves me cold

*...Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus, who is called the Messiah.*

Matthew 1:15b-16

Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of *Joseph son of Heli, son of Matthat...*

Luke 3:23-24a

If you would like more examples, look at Genesis 1:12, 26,31 together with Genesis 2:5-7, and Galatians 2:16 together with James 2:14 and 2:24

## Prayer

Let us pray to God using the words of Mary:

*“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
for he has looked with favour on the lowly state of his servant.  
Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name;  
indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty.  
He has come to the aid of his child Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”*

Luke 1:46-55

## Follow up

### Reflect

Joshua 1:8 describes Scripture as something to “meditate on day and night”. How might the suggestion that it needs to be meditated on impact your engagement with the Bible? Does this build up or chip away at your trust in the Bible? What might this meditation look like for you?

### Act

In your encounters with people this week, try to see God revealed in your relationship with them, despite their (and your) messiness.

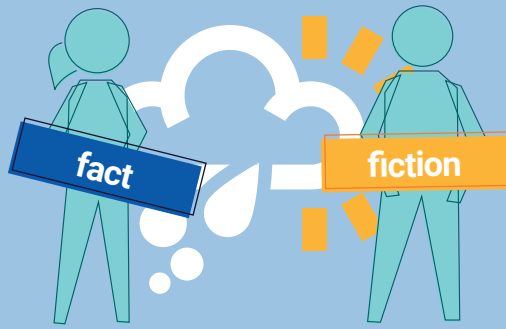
### Prepare

Next week we will consider the historical authenticity of the Bible – is it fact or fiction? Over this week, think about some of your favourite or the more famous Bible stories and reflect on what you believe about them. Did the events described really happen as described? How might they make a positive contribution to our understanding of God and our lives today?

### Go Deeper

- [BibleProject.com](https://www.bibleproject.com)
- Mitzi J Smith, Yung Suk Kim, *Toward Decentering the New Testament: A Reintroduction*, Cascade, 2018
- Matthew J Schlimm, *This Strange and Sacred Scripture*, Baker Academic, 2015





## Session 3: Did it really happen?

The Bible is fact ◀

▶ The Bible is fiction

*The Bible is full of wonderful stories about cosmic events, miracles and life in ancient times. It describes lots of people, places and events in factual terms. But these accounts don't always match up with our modern understandings about science or history. In this session we explore this tension and ask, 'is the Bible fact or fiction?'*

### Watch animation 'Animation 3: Did it really happen?'

#### The paradox

To what degree do each of these statements, which seem to contradict each other, describe your experience of reading the Bible?

#### The Bible is fact

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

#### The Bible is fiction

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

## The good news

The stories in the Bible are there to shape and inspire our imaginations. They offer us insights about how God's people have understood and reflected upon reality in light of their relationship with God. They can help us reflect on our own lives and circumstances today and build a deeper awareness of God's activity in and will for the world.

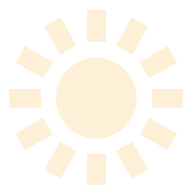
## Introductory reflection

For I know that the LORD is great;  
our LORD is above all gods.

Whatever the LORD pleases he does,  
in heaven and on earth,  
in the seas and all deeps.

He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth;  
he makes lightnings for the rain  
and brings out the wind from his storehouses.

Psalms 135:5-7



## Conversation starter

### How do you respond to the animation?

- Which bits of the Bible don't you question, and which bits are you not sure really happened as described?
- How important do you think it is, for the Bible's recounting of events to be historically and scientifically accurate?
- How much creative license do you think someone can exercise before what they're saying becomes 'untrue'?
- Why do you think the Biblical author's wrote things the way that they did? What do you think they were hoping to achieve?

*Use this space to make notes from the discussion and questions throughout the session.*



## Watch 'Conversation 3: Did it really happen?'

### Response

#### Discussion

#### **Bible tool #3: See it as a collection of stories**

"Stories are transformational. Stories make us feel and think. Stories empower us. When we think about the Bible as story, that has implications for our part in reading and listening to it... We have to let the Bible be what it is – story, poem, letter, prophecy, whatever... put aside the question of whether it really happened and, as you read the Bible, ask yourself, 'Is this true? What is the story about? What counsel has this storyteller got for me?'"

Nick Page, *The Badly Behaved Bible*

- The writer Nick Page suggests how and why it is helpful to approach the Bible as story. How do you respond to this?
- What is the relationship between 'truth' and 'fact'? In what ways do they overlap? In what ways are they different?
- Ask someone to read 2 Samuel 12:1-13. What do you notice about Nathan's use of story? What was the benefit of him approaching David with a story?
- Some stories contain real facts. But what can be learned from stories which we know are fictional, eg *The Tortoise and the Hare*?
- The Bible isn't only stories, it's also poems, songs, letters, prophetic speeches, words of wisdom etc. Do you approach these differently to the narratives? Why/why not?



## Activity

Fairy tales and fables often begin with the phrase 'Once upon a time...'

Read these Bible passages, which have had this phrase added to them. How much would this change the way you receive the message?

Draw weather symbols to express your feelings about each one.

**Once upon a time** the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the sailors were afraid, and each cried to his god...

Then they cried out to the LORD, "Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you." So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Jonah 1:1-5, 14-17



I am enlightened



I'm confused



Can I get out of this please?



This is a dramatic moment



This leaves me cold

**Once upon a time** the land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

Luke 12:16-20

**Once upon a time**, when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

"A voice was heard in Ramah,  
wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

Matthew 2:16-18

*(Apart from this passage there is no historical evidence that this slaughter happened; a contemporary secular account of Herod's acts of cruelty does not mention this. It has strong parallels with the story of Moses' birth.)*

## Prayer

Let us pray to God using the words of the Psalmist:

*Make me to know your ways, O LORD;*

*teach me your paths.*

*Lead me in your truth and teach me,*

*for you are the God of my salvation;*

*for you I wait all day long.*

Psalm 25:4-5

## Follow up

### Reflect

Read Genesis 1:1-2:4a. What kind of questions do you find yourself asking as you read? What 'truths' do you think the writer is trying to point you towards? How is your imagination being shaped by what you read?

### Act

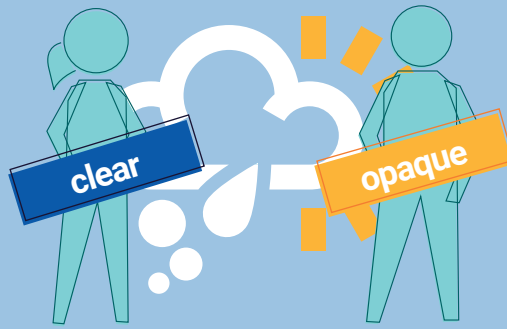
Take Time meditations are based on the Ignatian practice of Bible reading in which you imagine yourself to be present in a Biblical story, and let that shape your experience and interpretation of it. Why not visit [taketime.org.uk](http://taketime.org.uk) and listen to one of the guided meditations. Note down your experience of engaging with the Bible that way.

## Prepare

In the next session, we are discussing the paradox of the Bible designed to help us know God better, and yet also written in a way which we often find confusing or unclear. Over this week, think about the bits of the Bible you find straight forward and easy to understand, and the bits that leave you confused or uncertain what to think or feel.

## Go deeper

- Nick Page, *The Badly Behaved Bible*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2021
- Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Basic Books, 2011
- Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, Basic Books, 2011
- Chine McDonald, *God Is Not a White Man*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2022
- [taketime.org.uk](https://www.taketime.org.uk)
- [BibleProject.com](https://www.bibleproject.com)



## Session 4: Is the Bible clear?

The Bible is clear and easy to understand



The Bible is opaque and hard to understand

*We've already explored in this course how the Bible is God's self-revelation to us. But if it's supposed to be revelatory, why does it often seem so confusing and peculiar? Why is it so long? Why is it more of a story than an encyclopaedia? Why doesn't it offer us easy answers? In this session we'll explore the tension and ask, 'how clear is the Bible?'*

### Watch 'Animation 4: Is the Bible clear?'

#### The paradox

To what degree do each of these statements, which seem to contradict each other, describe your experience of reading the Bible?

#### The Bible is clear and easy to understand

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

#### The Bible is opaque and hard to understand

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

## The good news

The Bible isn't a simple fact file or encyclopaedia that we're simply required to agree with. It's an unfolding story that is inviting us into a certain kind of relationship with God and the world around us. We're encouraged to invest time, to sit with the Bible and nurture the relationship, reflecting and responding to what we're discovering.

## Introductory reflection

*Blessed is the one*

*who does not walk in step with the wicked*

*or stand in the way that sinners take*

*or sit in the company of mockers,*

*but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,*

*and who meditates on his law day and night.*

*That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,*

*which yields its fruit in season*

*and whose leaf does not wither—*

*whatever they do prospers.*

Psalm 1:1-3 (NIV)



## Conversation starter

### How do you respond to the animation?

- What are some of your favourite 'T-shirt or poster verses' from the Bible?
- What bits of the Bible do you find more baffling?
- What are some of the questions you have that you wish the Bible was clearer about?

*Use this space to make notes from the discussion and questions throughout the session.*





## Watch 'Conversation 4: Is it clear?'

### Response

#### Discussion

#### **Bible tool #4: Celebrate the diversity**

"One single authoritative interpretation is impossible because the Bible contains divergent voices in different writings, written in different times. Instead, we must celebrate the diversity of biblical interpretation. Meaning should not be controlled by one person or one special group of Christians or scholars."

Yung Suk Kim, *Toward Decentering the New Testament*

- Yung Suk Kim suggests we resist the idea of one, single authoritative interpretation. What reasons does he give?
- What do we need to be mindful of when reading some of the apparently more clear and straightforward parts of the Bible?
- What are the potential benefits of the Bible being more of a collection of artistic texts (stories, poems, wise words, prophecies, etc) rather than an encyclopaedia?

## Activity

For each of these case studies, which of these proverbs would be wisest to follow? What are your reasons?

You are the moderator of a special interest Facebook group. A member regularly contributes posts that are aggressive, insulting and ignorant. Do you try to correct them?

Proverb A or B?

Someone writes an article for the church newsletter, and it is full of spelling and grammatical mistakes. Do you edit it?

## A

### Proverb 26:4

Do not answer fools according to their folly, lest you be a fool yourself.

## B

### Proverb 26:5

Answer fools according to their folly, lest they be wise in their own eyes.

You are a church steward. A member of the church wants to have an upfront role in leading services, but you know from past experience that they are likely to say offensive things. Do you let them volunteer?

You are a pastoral visitor for a teenager who has started smoking. Do you say anything to them?

## Prayer

Let us pray to God using some words of Scripture:

*Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever.*

*Amen.*

Jude 24-25

## Follow up

### Reflect

What helps you understand the Bible? Are there particular people or resources or tools that you tend to turn to? How much time do you set aside for exploring the Bible? What might it look like for you to sit with the Bible and let it nurture your relationship with God and engagement with the world?

### Act

Discovery Bible Study is a tool you can use to help you reflect on any given passage, however clear or opaque it might seem to you. The idea is to read a passage and ask:

- What does this passage say about God?
- What does this passage say about humans?
- What does this passage say about being one of God's people?

The aim of a DBS study is to focus on what a particular passage says to you, rather than getting bogged down in what it doesn't say, or what other passages might say. This doesn't mean you should always ignore any broader understanding you might have; but it can help to take each passage on its own terms and figure out what it may or may not contribute to your developing theology. You can download a DBS Study Guide and see some of their recommended passages for reflection at [dbsguide.org](http://dbsguide.org)

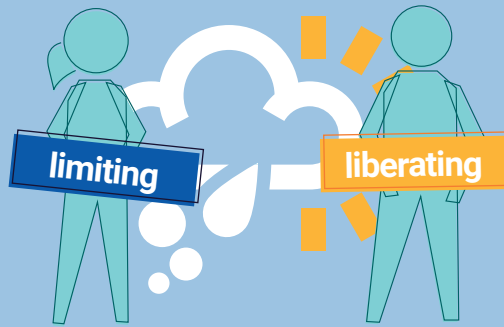
## Prepare

Next week we will be looking at how the Bible is both a book that is full of rules, and yet also a book that is all about liberating its readers to experience fullness of life. Take time this week to think about any rules from the Bible that you've practice and any that you haven't. How have you determined which rules to live out and which ones to ignore? What has been your experience of obeying or rejecting these rules? Have you felt free or restricted?

## Go Deeper

- Mitzi J Smith, Yung Suk Kim, *Toward Decentering the New Testament: A Reintroduction*, Cascade, 2018
- Ellen Davis and Richard Hayes, *The Art of Reading Scripture*, Eerdmans, 2003
- [BibleProject.com](https://www.bibleproject.com)





## Session 5: Is it a rule book?

The Bible is limiting ◀ ————— ▶ The Bible is liberating

*The Bible contains many instructions. In fact, there are over 600 'laws' in the Old Testament alone and this list isn't even exhaustive of all those kept to by the Jews of Jesus' day. Sometimes we view teachings as important for life. Other times we experience them as arbitrary or restrictive. In this session we'll consider ways of engaging with the instructions in the Bible and ask whether the Bible is limiting or liberating.*

### Watch 'Animation 5: Is it a rule book?'

#### The paradox

To what degree do each of these statements, which seem to contradict each other, describe your experience of reading the Bible?

#### The Bible is limiting

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

#### The Bible is liberating

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

## The good news

God has designed humanity to enjoy and experience abundant life. So that this abundant life can be shared by everyone rather than monopolised by a few, the Bible encourages us to think about the impact of our actions, exercise restraint and to let our hearts and minds be shaped by God's vision for life, rather than simply our own desires or compulsions. The 'rules' of the Bible are always geared towards building a better, more just, equitable and inclusive world.

## Introductory reflection

*Praise the LORD!*

*I will give thanks to the LORD with  
my whole heart,  
in the company of the upright,  
in the congregation.*

*Great are the works of the LORD,  
studied by all who delight in them.*

*Full of honour and majesty is his work,  
and his righteousness endures  
forever.*

*He has gained renown by his  
wonderful deeds;  
the LORD is gracious and merciful.*

*He provides food for those who fear  
him;  
he is ever mindful of his covenant.*

*He has shown his people the power  
of his works,  
in giving them the heritage of the  
nations.*

*The works of his hands are faithful  
and just;  
all his precepts are trustworthy.*

*They are established forever and ever,  
to be performed with faithfulness  
and uprightness.*

*He sent redemption to his people;  
he has commanded his covenant  
forever.*

*Holy and awesome is his name.*

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning  
of wisdom;  
all those who practice it have a good  
understanding.  
His praise endures forever.*

Psalm 111:1-10

## Conversation starter

### How do you respond to the animation?

- How do you tend to react or respond to rules? Are you more of a conformist or a rebel?
- What would you say are your core values or the guiding principles of your life?
- What are the most important rules in the Bible?

*Use this space to make notes from the discussion and questions throughout the session.*





## Watch 'Conversation 5: Is it a rule book?'

### Response

#### Discussion

#### **Bible tool #5: Use it to gain wisdom, not answers**

"Wisdom is the lifelong process of being shaped into mature disciples, who wander well along the unscripted pilgrimage of faith, in tune to the all-surrounding thick presence of the Spirit of God in us and in the creation around us... Rulebook answers are distant and passive, but wisdom is intimate and learned through experience... Rulebook answers keep us small, but wisdom gives us the space to grow."

Peter Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works*

- For Peter Enns, the Bible is meant to help us gain wisdom. What do you think of this understanding?
- In what ways can limitations be liberating? In what ways can liberation sometimes be limiting?
- Can you think of examples of rules in the Bible that are generally obeyed today? What about ones that are rarely or almost never followed?
- Are there things for which the Bible doesn't have any explicit rules about that you wish it did?

## Activity

The book of Matthew contains a block of Jesus' teachings called the Sermon on the Mount. It contains several commands that begin with 'Do not...'

They may seem at first glance to be **limiting**, but can you think of ways in which they are also **liberating**, with the potential to set us free?

Do not store up for yourselves  
treasures on earth.

Matthew 6:19

Do not worry about tomorrow.

Matthew 6:34

Do not worry about your life,  
what you will eat or what you will  
drink, or about your body, what  
you will wear.

Matthew 6:25

(For example, the command 'Do not resist an evildoer' in Matthew 5:39 was to override the old idea of 'an eye for an eye.' By refusing to get involved in retribution, both sides can be liberated so that peace and restoration is possible.)

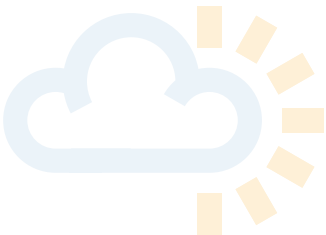
**Write some thoughts next to each one.**

**Which of these do you find the most challenging?**

**Which is the most compelling?**

**Do not judge.**  
Matthew 7:1

**You cannot serve God  
and wealth.**  
Matthew 6:24



**Do to others as you would have  
them do to you.**  
Matthew 7:12

## Prayer

Let us pray to God using the words of Paul:

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Romans 15:13

## Follow up

### Reflect

Reflect on the ways in which the Bible influences your actions and decision making. How does it impact your use of resources like time, energy, money, skills, etc? How does it inform the way you approach things like your relationships, your job, your engagement with the community? Are there areas where it might be worth exploring what the Bible might have to say by way of encouragement, wisdom or instruction?

### Act

Take some time this week to read Matthew 5-7; the whole of 'The Sermon on the Mount.' Which aspects do you find compelling, which do you find hard? What do you think you could apply or follow easily today? Which might take some creative thought or interpretation in order to get to the underlying values?

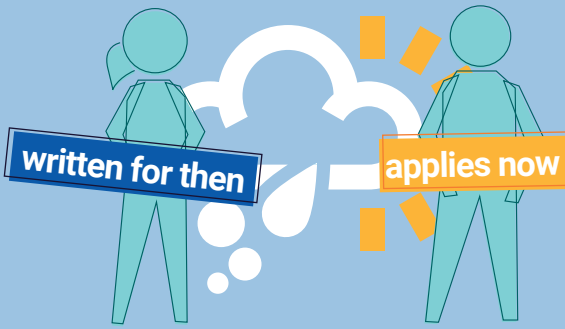
## Prepare

Next week will be our final session. Take a few minutes this week to glance back over your booklet and journal – what do you notice as you reflect back?

## Go deeper

- Peter Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2019
- Wilda Gafney, *Womanist midrash: a reintroduction to the women of the Torah and the throne*, Westminster John Knox, 2017.
- Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet*, Zondervan, 2019
- [BibleProject.com](https://www.bibleproject.com)





## Session 6: Is it relevant today?

The Bible was written for then ◀ ————— ▶ The Bible applies now

*We've suggested throughout this course that the Bible is God's self-revelation to us, but was all of it written for us? There are parts of it that seem oddly particular or even irrelevant. Jesus himself appears to consider some bits more important or authoritative than others. At times he even misquotes, or mashes different scriptures together. What are we to make of the Bible today? Just how relevant is it actually?*

### Watch 'Animation 6: Is it relevant today?'

#### The paradox

To what degree do each of these statements, which seem to contradict each other, describe your experience of reading the Bible?

#### The Bible was written for then

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

#### The Bible applies now

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

## The good news

Nothing in the Bible was written specifically or directly for us, which means that we should always question whether and how it is appropriate for us to follow it. We have permission to doubt, question, reflect and work out together how we faithfully draw upon it today. The Bible does contain much hard-fought wisdom about God and what it means to be God's people. We're called to build upon what we learn there, faithfully working it out in our own contexts today.

## Introductory reflection

*One generation shall extol your works to another  
and shall declare your mighty acts.*

*They will recount the glorious splendour of your majesty,  
and on your wondrous works I will meditate.*

*They will proclaim the might of your awesome deeds,  
and I will declare your greatness.*

*They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness  
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.*

*The LORD is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

*The LORD is good to all,  
and his compassion is over all that he has made.*

*All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD,  
and all your faithful shall bless you.*

*They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom  
and tell of your power,*

*to make known to all people your mighty deeds  
and the glorious splendour of your kingdom.*

*Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.*

Psalm 145:4-13



## Conversation starter

### How do you respond to the animation?

- Can you think of other examples of bits of the Bible that were clearly written for specific times, places, people or circumstances?
- Is it possible to still learn things for today from these passages that were clearly written for back then?
- How might we begin to discern between what might have been just for then, and what might be a bit more timeless and still relevant today?

*Use this space to make notes from the discussion and questions throughout the session.*





## Watch 'Conversation 6: Is it relevant today?'

### Response

#### Discussion

#### **Bible tool #6: Use it as a basis for improvisation.**

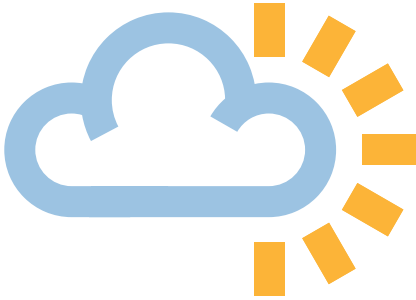
"Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play, most of whose fifth act has been lost...

Part of the initial task of the actors chosen to improvise the new final act will be to immerse themselves with full sympathy in the first four acts, but not so as merely to parrot what has already been said. They cannot go and look up the right answers. Nor can they simply imitate the kinds of things that their particular character did in the early acts. A good fifth act will show a proper final development, not merely a repetition, of what went before. Nevertheless, there will be a rightness, a fittingness, about the actions, speeches and final moves in the drama which will gain their authentication from their coherence with, their making sense of, the 'authoritative' previous text."

NT Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*

- New Testament scholar NT Wright imagines that the Bible might be compared to a partially completed play that we, as actors, are tasked with faithfully improvising the final scenes of. What do you make of this idea?
- Many of the New Testament letters were written to specific communities about their own specific circumstances but we still tend to take many lessons from these letters for the church today. Why do you think that is?
- What do you make of Jesus and Paul's engagement with the Old Testament? In what ways do you see them 'improvising' the Old Testament teachings? What might you learn from this in terms of your own engagement with the Bible?

## Activity



What bits of the Bible do you find the most helpful today? It could be a psalm, a teaching of Jesus, a parable, or anything else.



What bits of the Bible do you struggle with today?



## Ending well

Pause now before we finish this short series to consider what you would like to do differently because of all you have thought, heard and witnessed.

### Reflect

In what ways has the Bible served as a resource to help you live out your Christian faith historically? In what ways has the course helped you consider how the Bible might serve you moving forwards? What are the top three pieces of learning you will take from your engagement with this course?

### Act

Read 2 Timothy 4. Reflect on which bits of this chapter are specifically about Paul (the writer) and Timothy (the one being written to) and which bits are things that you might learn from or take as encouragement for you today. If you're happy to, consider highlighting the bits you consider relevant to you, and underlining the bits that you think were mostly just for Paul and Timothy. Are there any bits that you have both highlighted and underlined? How did you find this exercise? What do you notice?

### Go Deeper

- NT Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, 1992
- Angela N Parker, *If God still breathes, why can't I? : Black Lives Matter and biblical authority*, Eerdmans, 2021
- Craig Bartholomew, *The Drama of Scripture*, SPCK, 2006

## Final thoughts...

Although this course has ended, your Bible journey continues. Think about how you can keep exploring what you think about Scripture over the coming weeks and months. Would it help to join a Bible study group in your local church?

For more information and resources, go to

[methodist.org.uk/Notice](https://methodist.org.uk/Notice) and [methodist.org.uk/Sunshine](https://methodist.org.uk/Sunshine)



## Notes for course facilitators

### Course overview

This is a six-session course, each session looking at a different Bible paradox. It is probably best to run them in the order suggested as they build on previous sessions. You might want to run it over six consecutive weeks, but it can work over a longer timespan too.

This booklet can be used throughout the course to make notes and journal; as leader, please encourage participants to make use of it, including the sections to fill out before the meeting. This will help people reflect better and get more out of the course, as well as giving them a memento to look back on at the end. You can run the course with a small group meeting together physically, a bigger group that breaks into smaller groups for discussion, or online.

The six sessions each have a core paradox. We do not try and resolve them simplistically, but instead aim to find good news in the tension.

1. Whose word is it? God's word or human words?
2. Is the Bible trustworthy? Is it infallible or inconsistent?
3. Did it really happen? Is it history, or fiction?
4. Is the Bible clear?
5. Is it a rule book? Is it more limiting or liberating?
6. Is it relevant today? Was it just written for then, or does it apply now?

### Session outline

Each session has the following recommended structure, though of course you may need to adapt this to suit your circumstances.

#### **Welcome [5-10 minutes]**

Please tailor the introductions to your group. Be aware that not everyone will know each other – they may not even know you!

Session 1: Take time to introduce the team and the roles they are contributing (hospitality, pastoral support, facilitation etc.) Will you encourage people to sit with people they don't know or are you trying to build biblical confidence within

established local groups? You may find it helpful to give name badges and to ask people to sit with the group indicated on their name badge.

Introduce the **booklet** and explain that it mirrors the themes that will be followed each week. There is space to note down what stands out, to make a reminder of the top tips from others in the group and to note for yourself the actions you would like to take.

As people settle, play the Sunshine and Showers: The Bible's beautiful strangeness overview **animation**.

Sessions 2-6: As people arrive, introduce any newcomers. You might want to remind people of the theme of the course, or re-watch the introductory animation. Encourage everyone to share with each other how they have reflected on this week. What have they practised since the last session? Where have they experienced God at work? You might want to go first if people are hesitant to share. Remember, you are a participant too.

Finish the introductions with a short act of reflection. A suggested psalm is given in each session's notes. You could read it out, ask for a volunteer, or say a line each.

All weeks: Remind people of the ideas of paradox and dissonance on page 4, and the format of the session. Explain how to make this a safe and inclusive conversation:

- Recognise different views
- Celebrate where people are in their journey
- Step up or step back: if you tend to be quiet in discussions, step up and offer your thoughts. If you like to participate in discussions, step back and open the space for others.

### **Animation video [5 minutes]**

Play the short animation that introduces the session's paradox.

### **Small group discussion [15 minutes]**

Look at the first paradox statement. Ask people to give themselves a number between 1 and 10 in the box in the booklet, to reflect how often they feel this describes their own thoughts on the Bible. Encourage them to be honest with

themselves, and remind them that we are not trying to criticise ourselves or other people. They can believe both these things to be true (or not), or only believe one of them – they aren't opposing ideas. Encourage people to share why they gave themselves these scores, if they are comfortable to do so.

Repeat for the other paradox statement.

### **Conversation video [10 minutes]**

Play the video of people sharing their ideas and stories about this aspect of the Bible.

### **Response: Discussion [20 minutes]**

Each session in the booklet provides a selection questions, and a quote from an expert that can act as a tool for reading the Bible well. Use these to allow people to explore the paradox from different angles. You might want to pick which questions to discuss, or ask someone in the group to choose one that appeals to them during the session.

### **Response: Activity [20 minutes]**

Each session also provides a suggested creative activity that will give people a chance to reflect on the ideas in a different way.

### **Prayer [15 minutes]**

Spend some time praying as a group. You can say together the introductory psalm given at the start of each session. Each session also contains a prayer from the Bible that matches the theme of the session. Remember that not everyone may be comfortable praying out loud; allow people to participate in the way that best suits them.



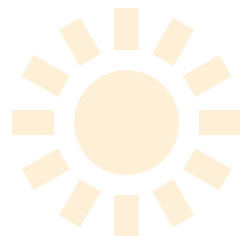
## Follow up

Each session provides three ways for people to continue to explore the theme:

- Reflect: suggestions for continued thinking about the issue.
- Act: a practical thing to try.
- Prepare: some thoughts to pave the way for the next session.

You might consider contacting people in between the sessions to check in with them individually, and remind them of what they can do to prepare for the next session. You could send them any tips or resources suggested during the session, and a link to where they can watch the videos online.

At the end of the course, you might wish to keep in occasional touch with people so you can share stories of how your Bible reading life evolves – make sure you get permission to do this.





## A closing prayer

***God**, the eternal and living Word, inspirer of this book,  
help us to notice you in these ancient words.*

*Spark our imagination through these stories, songs,  
poems and letters.*

*Help us to appreciate the diversity of the authors.*

*Grow us in wisdom,*

*and help us discover what faith in you looks like here  
and now.*

***Amen.***

A space for notes, doodles, prayers, questions and encouragements





The **Methodist** Church 