

THE BIBLE UNWRAPPED

**MAKING
SENSE OF
SCRIPTURE
TODAY**

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STUDY GUIDE BY MATTHEW SHEDDEN



**HERALD
P R E S S**

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Note: This study guide is organized as a nine-week study to accompany The Bible Unwrapped. Leaders of small groups or Christian formation classes may want to extend the study for a longer period of time so that fewer chapters are covered each week. Additional resources can be found at MeghanLarissaGood.com.

WEEK 1

[Read chapters 1–4 and “Storytime: Unwrapping Joshua 5:13–6:27”]

Pray out loud or silently with your group, or on your own. As you start your journey of exploring the Bible as a place to meet the “living Christ,” take some time to invite God into the process. Pray that what originally drew you and other Christians into this distinctive and wonderful book will come alive and fresh for you again.

1. Good describes the Bible as a window in a cluttered cabin that enables us to see the “Really Real” (p. 20). Have you ever had an experience with the Bible that significantly changed your life or opened you to an encounter with God or the “really real”?
2. “What if God had something to say?” Good asks in chapter 1. “What if human beings were capable of hearing? More than that, what if God was closer than our breathing? What if God wore feet and walked our streets, caked in the dust of our neighborhoods?” (p. 28). Reflect on these questions together. How easy or difficult is it for you to imagine that these “what ifs” reflect the truth about the world?
3. You are not alone if you find parts of the Bible difficult to read or understand. Has a portion or story from the Bible ever caused you to ask, “Why bother?” What sections of Scripture have you found most baffling?
4. How were you first taught to view the Bible? Chapter 3 deals with one common paradigm: the acronym BIBLE: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth (p. 35). What are the merits of these approaches to reading or interpreting the Bible that you’ve encountered, and where have you found them lacking or misleading?
5. How is approaching the Bible as a book intended to form imagination for God-shaped possibilities different from reading it primarily as a rule book? What changes when we shift postures?
6. Together or on your own, make a list of practices or habits that you have found helpful when reading and making sense of the Bible. How have these habits or approaches helped to shape you “into the imagination of Christ” (p. 44)?
7. Alone or in a group, read Joshua 5:13–6:27. Where has your spiritual life turned into what feels like just walking in circles—as Good writes, “treading the same old ground again and again without getting anywhere” (p. 48)? Has a breakthrough ever come after a season of futility—a time when the walls have actually, finally, come tumbling down? What spiritual practices—prayer, worship, reading the Bible—have sometimes felt like walking in circles and sometimes brought a spiritual insight?

Close your time together with a song or a prayer. During the next week, pray for new eyes and ears with which to encounter Scripture.

WEEK 2

[Read chapters 5–10 and “Storytime: Unwrapping the Book of Jonah”]

Pray together that you will encounter Christ in the discussion and study this week.

We approach the Bible differently from the way we approach most books we read. We read it to meet and know more about God. How does that intention shape our reading of the Bible?

1. Many people struggle with faith when they learn about the process of biblical composition and canonization. Why do you think many people in the modern world balk at a divine book having so many human hands and minds contributing to it? What can we learn about God from God’s choice to speak in such a way?
2. Good describes the process of canonization as marking “where God had been clearly heard and experienced in the past” (p. 60). The decision about which books to include and which ones to exclude safeguarded “the essentials of the Christian story” (p. 59). Good writes, “In forming the canon, the church certified, ‘We hear God here’—precisely so we would be able to hear God reliably everywhere God speaks. The church certified, ‘We saw God act then and there,’ so that we will know with confidence when we see God acting here and now” (p. 60). Reflect on these ideas. How do these claims help you understand the Bible in a new light? Where do you recognize the voice of God in the world today given what you know of the voice of God in Scripture?
3. If you currently have a Bible, why did you choose that particular one to read? Did anyone in your group look up a Bible translation chart (see p. 65)? If so, share what you learned and how Bible translation charts might inform your decision in choosing a translation. If you can, look up one such chart now and find the translation you’re most familiar with on the chart.
4. We confront the Bible today in small amounts—a chapter here, a verse there—and forget that it has an overarching story. How did Good’s summary of the Old Testament (chapter 8) help put some of the pieces in order for you?
5. The New Testament summary (chapter 9) describes the grand and awesome work that God is doing with Jesus. Does this way of telling the New Testament story bring clarity or confusion for you? How are we in our churches and communities seeking to embody this “new world right in the middle of the old” (p. 75)?
6. Good writes that “the only way to truly comprehend the Bible’s message is to begin with obedience” (p. 82). Do you agree? Reflect on the two-part process that Good outlines in the same paragraph. How can we throw ourselves into “the Bible’s wild story and live as if it were true” (p. 82)?
7. In your group or on your own, think about which details from the book of Jonah most people know or are familiar with. Then, as time allows, read or skim the book of Jonah with Good’s summary in the “Unwrapping” section in mind. Name events and aspects of the book that are usually overlooked. How does the larger context of the book change your understanding of it?
8. Consider Good’s invitation to “engage, to experiment, to put skin in the game” with regard to hearing Scripture more clearly (p. 83). How might you do that this week?

End your time in prayer.

WEEK 3

[Read chapters 11–13 and “Storytime: Unwrapping Matthew 15:21-39”]

1. Pray for your time together. Then, to start this session, share about a time you misinterpreted what someone else was saying, or a time someone else misinterpreted you. What happened? Where did the misunderstanding lie? How did you get to the bottom of it?
2. Where do we see conflicts about interpretation of the Bible today? Should we seek to resolve those, or do we let the tension exist?
3. Take one of the sections of the Bible that Good discusses in chapter 12—Psalm 51 or Mark 12—and read it, either together or on your own. Consider how meaning gets distorted if you only consider a portion of the Bible. Can you think of other places where two extra verses change the shape of the story? (For example, read Romans 13:1-7. Stop and discuss. Then read what’s around it: Romans 12:18-21 and 13:8-10. Now discuss how these additional verses change the meaning of the original passage.)
4. Have someone in your group read a portion of the Declaration of Independence. While you listen, imagine you have to completely understand its meaning without having any historical background. What happens when we try to interpret texts without understanding anything about the time in which they were written? How does this play out in our study of the Bible?
5. Take time as a group to read the story of the Canaanite woman and Jesus in Matthew 15:21-28. Discuss how you feel about Jesus as he is portrayed. Now go back and read Matthew 15:1-20. Read Good’s analysis in this “Unwrapping” section. Have you struggled with this story? How does the context of the story help you understand Jesus differently?

Pray for each other in the week ahead. Pray together that you might read the Bible this week “humbly and tentatively, with openness to new learning” (p. 111).

WEEK 4

[Read chapters 14–19]

1. Pray for God's presence and guidance in your discussion. Together, talk about Good's image that the Bible is a bit like a "bookstore compressed into one book" (p. 120). Consider these questions: What difference does genre make? How does this idea—that the Bible is made up of books of different genres—deepen your appreciation for Scripture?
2. If your group is large enough, divide into pairs or small groups. Have each group (or individual) choose one of the genres covered in chapters 15–19: Old Testament narrative, Hebrew poetry, the Law, the Prophets, and wisdom literature. First read the chapter dealing with that genre. Then find a Scripture passage (several verses or a chapter) written in that genre. Spend time in reflection.
3. Now come back together and share with the group what you've learned about that particular genre. What do you notice about how truth is conveyed through that genre? Where do you find God's voice in the Scripture passage that you chose?
4. Discuss Good's statement that the Old Testament Law is not binding on Christians today (p. 140). Why is this the case? What is the proper Christian relationship to the Old Testament Law?
5. Together, reflect on how these genres are connected with God's movement in the world today. Have particular genres in the Bible inspired the people of God in particular ways? Consider these connections. (For example, reflect on the connection between the Prophets and the civil rights movement.)

WEEK 5

[Read chapters 20–22 and “Storytime: Unwrapping Luke 16:1-13”]

1. The Gospels reveal the life of Jesus. How have differences between the four gospels been a challenge for Christians? How have the four portraits given in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John been a blessing? Read John 20:30-31. How does this passage illuminate our reading of the Gospels?
2. Read Luke 16:1-13. Consider this story in light of Good’s description of how parables work (p. 160). What does the parable set you up to expect, and how is that expectation subverted? Look at another parable of Jesus and ask the same question again.
3. Describe a time that you read someone else’s mail or listened to only one half of a conversation. Were you able to understand all that was happening and piece it together? Or did you misinterpret things?
4. Discuss chapter 21, about the Epistles. Many people today struggle with the apostle Paul’s letters. To some readers, his writing may come across as arrogant or out of touch. Which parts of Paul’s letters are the most challenging for you? In the course of reading chapter 21, what did you learn about trying to understand them? What difference would it make if we had the other side of the correspondence?
5. If you have time, in your group, try writing a letter in reply to one of Paul’s shorter letters (such as Philemon).
6. What does it look like to be “governed by the Spirit” (see pp. 170–71)? How is that different from being “under the Law”?
7. Reflect together on chapter 22, about apocalyptic literature. Where have you seen people trying to match Revelation with current events? What would be different about our interpretations of the last book in the Bible if we saw it as “a glimpse of where history ultimately leads, where the cosmic struggle ends” (p. 182)? What changes if we read Revelation not as a code to be deciphered but as a book that “implicates both empires of the past and empires still to come” (p. 181)?

WEEK 6

[Read chapters 23–26 and “Storytime: Unwrapping Genesis 6:5–9:29”]

1. Pray together. How does our biblical interpretation change when we see Jesus as “the interpretive key to God’s whole revelation” (p. 186)? If Jesus is the clearest picture we have of God, are we able to see him in the difficult parts of the story of Scripture? How does Jesus function as the Bible’s “clear center” (p. 186)?
2. Does your congregation employ a Jesus-centered view of interpreting Scripture? Do you tend to use Jesus’ teachings and his life, death, and resurrection as “the authoritative blueprint for how God actually intends the pieces of Scripture to interlock” (p. 187)? How so or how not?
3. What stood out to you most from Good’s description of how Jesus read the Scriptures?
4. Good calls the cross the very heart of the Bible’s story. How is the cross not only “a revelation of God’s mission and motive” but also “a revelation of God’s methods, how God intends to defeat evil and deliver the world from bondage” (p. 197)? How does the understanding of the cross Good that outlines in chapter 25 overlap with your past understanding of the crucifixion? How does it challenge it?
5. Reading Jesus back into the story of Scripture—what Good calls “reading backward”—isn’t always easy. How does it help to clarify some of those difficult Old Testament passages? How might this method of interpretation also help us consider some of the wrong turns that we as the church have made?
6. Skim Genesis 6:5–9:29 and review Good’s reflections on it. Blessings and curses make up a significant part of the Bible—blessings both from God and from humans. How do the rains of Noah get remade with both the calling of Abraham and the person of Jesus? What might it look like for us to be “the world’s rainmakers, its showers of indiscriminate blessing” (p. 212)?

Pray for the week ahead. Consider reading another familiar story from the Old Testament this week, and try reading it through the lens of Jesus.

WEEK 7

[Read chapters 27–30 and “Storytime: Unwrapping Acts”]

1. Pray together. Then discuss several of these questions: What does your regular Bible reading look like? Do you have a specific time set aside each morning or evening, or is it sporadic? Do you do it alone or with others? Reflect on any season of your life in which you’ve found meaningful and regular ways to read the Bible. What did those times look like?
2. Talk about the six steps of reading for transformation that Good offers in chapter 27. Reflect on what each step entails. Have you ever tried a similar way of reading the Bible? How might these steps change your current way of reading the Bible?
3. Good describes discernment as “the art of figuring out how to apply the right word at the right time” (p. 228). Talk together about what this art of discernment looks like for yourselves as individuals and as a community of faith. How do you begin figuring out which is the right word for a particular situation?
4. Reflect on this claim: “To life’s most complex questions, the Bible’s answer is sometimes not just yes or no but rather ‘Yes and . . .’ or ‘Yes, sort of . . .’ or ‘No, but . . .’” (p. 231). Read the rest of that paragraph. How do you respond to this idea that truth exists in tension? How has it played out in your own life?
5. Chapter 30 focuses on the role of the Holy Spirit in interpreting the Bible. Good writes that “the Spirit bridges the gap between here and there, then and now. The Spirit teaches contextualization, how the truth about Jesus applies to an infinite variety of situations. The Spirit reveals what God is up to at any given moment and instructs Jesus’ followers on what they can do to get on board” (p. 237). Have you found the Spirit to be a helpful guide in reading and applying the Bible? Where and how do you believe you’ve heard the Spirit’s voice outside of the Bible?
6. Read the story in Acts 3, which contains an account of the miraculous power of the Spirit active in our world. Reflect on the events of the story in light of these sentences: “The early church believed that the God who breathed in the Bible also breathed in the Spirit-filled company of people who belong to Christ. They had not a low view of Scripture but a very high view of the Spirit’s involvement in the gathered community of faith” (p. 240). Where have you seen the Spirit’s activity in the church?

End with a time of prayer, asking what works of the Spirit God might prepare for you this week.

WEEK 8

[Read chapters 31–33]

1. Pray a blessing on your time together. Briefly discuss this question: When did you or a group of people in your church or workplace come to a difficult decision together—a decision in which no one “won” or “lost”?
2. Read Acts 15 together. What elements went into this time of discernment, and how did the early believers reach that decision together? What can we learn from how they discerned together? What changes when the church is seeking “the will of God, not the will of the majority; the voice of God, not the voice of whoever shouted loudest” (p. 265)?
3. What do you think of the evidence Good suggests of the Spirit’s activity (pp. 255–56)? Are there other pieces of evidence not mentioned that you think should be added to the list?
4. Respond to Good’s statement that “biblical action in the new Christian reality is not any activity that can find a verse somewhere to defend itself. Biblical action is activity that fully aligns itself with the character and mission of God revealed in Jesus” (p. 258). Do you agree or disagree? Why?
5. How are we sometimes guilty of “proof-texting” in our arguments about the Bible? How do we discipline ourselves to see and read the whole story, not just the parts that conveniently fit with our already formed opinions?
6. How has reading the Bible together with other people in the community of faith changed the way you understand parts of it?
7. What habits or practices can we engage in right now that will form in us the character that will enable us to discern God’s voice well when the pressure is on?

WEEK 9

[Read chapters 34–36, “Storytime: Unwrapping Acts,” and the conclusion]

1. “Discernment requires patience far beyond our normal custom, an ability to live boldly and with conviction but also with some level of tentativeness, knowing that all the pertinent information is not yet in our hands” (p. 272). How do we sometimes try to rush the discernment process? Is it possible for Christians to wait for an agreement to emerge on contentious issues? What might that look like?
2. What is your reaction to Good’s assertion that the discernment process can never be closed (p. 272)? Why is that the case?
3. Good reminds us that no matter how “boldly we hold and practice our own convictions, Paul asserts strongly that nothing gives us the right to ‘destroy someone for whom Christ died’ (Romans 14:15). In all circumstances, our treatment of each other is meant to reflect the price-less worth Christ has ascribed to us all by purchasing us with his life. No one wins when we dehumanize or destroy each other in disputes that spring from a mutual desire for faithfulness” (p. 281). What does it mean for us to guard each other’s worth even though we disagree? Have you ever seen this happen in a way that stands out?
4. Both the book of Job and the life of Jesus call us to life as people without simple answers. The Bible calls us to a place “beyond words, beyond silence, beyond questions, beyond explanations, beyond despair, beyond hope, beyond faith, beyond doubt” (p. 288)—a place where God remains. When has the church rushed to answers that have caused harm? When have you been tempted to do so? When have you chosen Jesus instead of answers?
5. Consider this claim: “The true enemy of biblical faith is not uncertainty. It is not doubt. It’s not being wrong on occasion. Uncertainty is faith confirming itself through experience. Doubt is faith keeping its eyes open. Being wrong is part of the journey of learning. Faith has only one natural predator: fear” (p. 293). As we discern the Bible together, how does fear harm our witness? How does it prevent us from hearing well? In what ways can we confront our fears and move toward freedom?
6. As your group ends its study, reflect on your discussions over the past weeks. Good writes that “anyone who grapples seriously with Scripture can expect to limp a little” (p. 298). In what ways do you leave limping? In what ways do you leave blessed?
7. Consider what it would mean for you to continue meeting and discussing the Bible together. What do you carry with you from your study of Scripture and *The Bible Unwrapped*? How might you share it with your larger congregation? How can you help others cling to, grapple with, and live out the story of Scripture today?