

### Summary of Bible Study “Rediscovering the Book of Faith,” Session 3, 2/17/21

Due to copyright rules, we can't record these three sessions of Bible study. Here is a summary of what we talked about in our third and final session. Please tune in next week as we begin our Lenten study: *Life Together (Apart)*, based on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *Life Together*. The first week will be pre-recorded, and then we might try another round of Zoom discussions.

- A quick recap – in our first session, we talked about the Old Testament, and how it came to be in the form we have today. We talked a lot about *story*, and how the contents of the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) were passed down through oral tradition for generations and centuries before it was finally written down. In our second session, we talked about how the New Testament came to be in the form we have today. We talked about how much of the New Testament could be seen as an ongoing conversation in response to the question: “Who is this Jesus?”

- Today we'll be talking about the impact that the Reformation and, in particular, Martin Luther, had on the Bible and how people engage with it. Before we get into that, though, let's pray:

Mighty God, you are bigger than we could ever imagine. We stand in awe of your grace and mercy and praise you for your power and goodness. Be with us as we explore your Word and what it means for our lives today. Amen.

- The final canon of the Bible – Old and New Testaments, 66 books – was finally locked into place around the fifth century, after Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. And the official language of the Roman Empire was Latin. So, instead of the Old Testament in Hebrew or the New Testament in Greek, the standard translation of all the scriptures ended up in Latin.

As the Roman Catholic Church solidified across Europe, most people couldn't read or even understand Latin. Folks would follow along with the Mass, and they'd know the responses, but they didn't necessarily understand what was being said. There is a reason why stained glass windows started showing Bible scenes – it conveyed the stories of the illiterate. Only the elite classes could afford to have copies of the Bible produced for themselves, or to learn to read and understand Latin.

- Enter Martin Luther. In addition to the language issues, consider this from the study guide: “Martin Luther grew up with the common medieval notion that Christ is perfectly righteous and therefore hard for sinful humans to please. Even as he began his life as a monk, Luther feared Jesus' judgment, spending hours in confession. As a scholar, priest, and sinner, Luther dug deeper and deeper into Scripture, hoping to find a loophole or some secret to pleasing Christ. But something better happened. Through the written word of the Bible, Christ found Luther. Ephesians 2:8, along with texts from Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews, helped Luther understand God's grace and mercy in a different light and sparked a new hope in him.

“Soon, Luther began to speak out against abuses of power in the Roman Catholic Church. He used a new invention called the printing press to publish many copies of his writings. Most importantly, Martin Luther translated the Bible into German.” (This also, in part, grew out of the Renaissance drive to go back to the roots of philosophy, mathematics, literature, and more. Going back to the original languages of the Bible fit in with that dynamic.)

- Just imagine how amazing that would have been! To have the words of the Bible, the stories and conversations of God and God's people, *in your hands*. And in a language you could understand! Just think how subversive it would have been in the eyes of the Roman Empire of the time for each household, each pastor, to have the ability to read and interpret the scriptures for themselves!

In contrast, think about how many ways we have access to the Bible today: dozens, if not hundreds of translations; Bible apps; study Bibles and journal Bibles; children's Bibles and confirmation Bibles. Having the scriptures in our hands doesn't seem like much of a wonder. Having the Bible in a language we can understand just seems like a given; after all, you can pick and choose the translation that is the most convenient and comfortable for you.

Are you ever excited by the Bible? Or by the simple fact that you can read it, engage with it? What Bible story would you share to communicate with someone else that excitement? If you had only the time of an elevator ride to tell someone why even having a Bible to read is exciting and wonderful, what would you say? Would you have something to say? Or: if you suddenly had zero access to scripture, what would you miss about it? What stories would you hold on to in your memory?

- The Bible is a living Word. It is a collection of a myriad of types of literature, written by many different people over the course of a long time. It is a library-in-a-book, inspired by the Holy Spirit in the course of oral tradition, of writing and copying, of translating, and of publishing. Humans are involved in all of that, too, so of course there are mistakes and sin throughout the history of the written scriptures; but the Spirit always works through us and in spite of us to continue proclaiming the good news.

Martin Luther was not the first person to try to reform the church or reinterpret the scriptures in a new/faithful way. Jan Hus, for example, predated Luther by around a century, and was burned at the stake for trying to challenge the church's teaching and authority. By Luther's time though, the Spirit worked through his unique personality and drive; through the new invention of the printing press; through the political climate of the day; through the fledgling Renaissance; and more. When the Church/Empire wanted to arrest and kill Luther, he had protection, and while he hid out in the Wartburg Castle, he made what known as the "September Testament," called that because Luther feverishly translated the New Testament into German in just about one month. And that translation, along with the teachings and interpretations of Luther and others, spread. And it changed the church, and the world.

- As far as the canon goes, Luther would have been just fine to toss about a book like Revelation, which he found too incomprehensible to most to be of any use, or the book of James, which he did not think communicated much grace. But he translated all 66 books, eventually (the Old Testament took a lot longer and required more help), including some that are not in most Protestant Bibles today (the Apocrypha), and instead taught about "the canon within the canon." There are some books and passages that communicate Christ and the gospel more clearly. So, when you are encountered with difficult or confusing or contradictory passages, or laws that don't seem to apply to Christians anymore, you use those Christ-filled books to help you interpret the others. "Canon within the canon."

- Luther also contributed another lens/tool to help us read the Bible. Again, from the study guide: "Martin Luther recognized that the Bible speaks with two voices – law and gospel. The voice of the law requires action and perfection from us. It points out our brokenness and sin; it condemns us. With its gospel voice, the Bible proclaims that Christ has set us free from the law and made us God's children."

It's not that the Old Testament is Law, and the New Testament is gospel; any part of the Bible could function as one or the other, or even both. Think of the familiar John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." It could be gospel – "What grace God shows us!" But it could also be law: "Jesus died because of *my sins*."

- Look up the following Bible passages, and see if they come across to you as law, gospel, both, or somewhere in between: Ephesians 2:8; Romans 3:23; Joshua 1:5; Mark 12:31; Psalm 46:1; Matthew 19:23; Luke 22:19; Exodus 20:12; Isaiah 55:8; James 2:17.

- The last thing I want to share with all of you is that, even though the canon of the Bible is set, the effect of Scripture is ongoing. The *story* is ongoing; we are still part of God's story, the pages still turning, and we can find our place in that Story still. The *conversation* is ongoing; we still talk to the voice of the Word, to each other, and to folks who are new to all of this about who Jesus is. And the *translation* is ongoing; we are still called to translate the story, the conversation, and the gospel found in the Bible to new people in language, in words, and in actions that they will understand. Just as Luther rediscovered the book of faith and helped countless others to do so, we are always rediscovering the Word too as a part of our life of faith.

- Here are some other activities you could try this week:

Pick one passage of scripture and read three or four different translations of it side by side. What nuances are emphasized in the different versions? Do you get a fuller idea of the original meaning by pondering these variations?

Send a note to someone that includes a bit of scripture (you're the printing press this time!).

We often only get little snippets or passages of the Bible in church. Take some time this week to read one Gospel all the way through. (Mark is the shortest if that helps.)

Look up and read some of Luther's writings this week. Try the 95 Theses, The Freedom of a Christian, or something else. Let me know if you want some other suggestions.

If you are not a "word" person, check out artistic interpretations of Bible stories, or make some of your own.

- Thanks to everyone for participating in this short journey of Rediscovering the Book of Faith!