

A Bird's Eye View

Week 1

Our perspective can have a huge impact on how we perceive things. Even common, everyday items take on an entirely different light when they are viewed from a different angle. Anyone who's been on a plane knows exactly what this is like. Things we see everyday from eyelevel look like completely different objects when viewed from thirty thousand feet. Buildings, which tower over us while we are on the ground, look small and insignificant. Cars and people look like tiny dots on the landscape. Even clouds, which often appear to be insubstantial wisps from the ground, look as solid as rock when seen from above. The world, as seen by a bird, looks like a very different place.

There are times when a close-up, magnified perspective is very useful. There are other times when a zoomed-out, expanded perspective can also be valuable. The problem for us is that we don't have the ability to change our perspective of things very easily.

The same is true in many different areas of our lives, including how we view the Bible. It's sometimes easy to focus on one particular part or one particular passage of the Bible without seeing the grander landscape. While this isn't a bad thing, it is a limited perspective.

We are entering into a brand new series called "Birds Eye View," where we are going to be zooming out and looking at the Bible from the thirty thousand foot level. Over the next several weeks we will be looking at large sections of the Bible so we can get a better perspective of the entire landscape of the Bible, just as if we were looking at our world from a bird's eye view.

The Bible is a unique book. In reality, it's sixty-six unique books that are pieced together to tell the story of God. Throughout the Bible we come into contact with a wide variety of literary and writing styles. There are histories, biographies, poetry, music, and letters, to name just a few. It was written by at least forty different authors, in three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), and on three different continents. With all of the diversity within the Bible, one might expect a hodgepodge of material. Yet, there is also amazing unity.

It is sometimes hard, however, to see this unity without taking a zoomed out, wide view of the Bible.

The first thing we need to understand is nothing will replace actually reading the Bible. There are numerous guides, commentaries, and devotionals, which can be invaluable to our understanding and comprehension of the Bible. Yet, nothing replaces actually reading the Bible for ourselves. At the end of each booklet during "Bird's Eye View" there will be a brief list of key passages from within the section of the Bible we are focusing on. I encourage you to read and engage with these passages directly.

The first section of the Bible we will be looking at during "Bird's Eye View" is called the Pentateuch. The Pentateuch refers to the first five books of the Bible in the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The word Pentateuch is Greek and it literally means "five cases," or "five scrolls," which refers to the fact that books in the ancient world were written on scrolls. This section of the Bible is also commonly known as the Torah, which means "teaching," or "The

Law" in Hebrew. The Pentateuch forms the backbone of the Jewish faith as well as Christian theology.

Even a cursory glance at these books show that it would be impossible to do them justice in this short booklet. What we will attempt to do, however, is give several handles, which will enable us to engage more fully with the text.

"In the beginning . . ." are the first words of Genesis and so the Bible begins. The book of Genesis opens with the creation of the heavens and the earth. Genesis details the life stories of several people and their remarkable interactions with God, including Adam and Eve (Genesis 2-5), Noah (6-11), Abraham (12-25), Isaac (25-28), Jacob (28-36), and Joseph (37-50). The book of Genesis spans more time than any other book of the Bible, from creation up to 1800 BC.

What we see throughout Genesis is how God walks with these people and how he guides their histories. All throughout we see that God wants what is best for them as individuals as well as what is best for them as a collective group (and what will eventually turn into a nation of people). God says that this nation he is forming has the purpose of blessing every nation on earth (stated six times in Genesis).

Genesis sets the groundwork for the rest of the Bible. In it, God establishes who he is, what he is like, and God's dream for how we should interact with him.

The story of God's people continues with the book of Exodus, which begins with the people of God in Egypt. At this time the "nation" Israel numbers around seventy. Over the next four hundred years the Israelites multiply greatly and soon became the subject of great persecution by the Pharaoh of Egypt.

This ultimately leads to their enslavement by the Egyptians. Yet, in spite of the hardships and cruelty the Israelites people suffered in Egypt, God never stopped watching over them (Exodus 3:16).

The story of Exodus centers on the person of Moses. He is chosen to free God's people from slavery in Egypt. Through many miraculous means Moses leads a huge nation to freedom, which is celebrated every year with Passover.

Moses continues to lead this nation in the wilderness to Mount Sinai, where he is given the Ten Commandment by God. Throughout the book of Exodus, the faithfulness of God is demonstrated over and over again. The nation of Israel is confirmed as the people of God and are identified multiple times by God as "my people."

The last three books of the Pentateuch are admittedly very difficult to read because of their structure and content. Leviticus is a book that outlines, in great detail, the regulations and laws for holy days, sacrifices, and priests. The book of Leviticus is often believed to have been a handbook for priests. Unlike other books of the Bible, it is actually more useful for us to not focus on the details of Leviticus but on the big picture of what is happening. We are not held to these restrictions and dietary laws, but these laws say something about God, namely that the people of God are called to be set apart from the rest of the world.

The book of Numbers is an account of the numbering of the Hebrew people at Mount Sinai and the preparations that took place before the crossing of the Jordan River into the land God had promised for his people. Multiple times throughout the book of Numbers the

people of God "grumble" and complain at the hardships they are enduring.

The final book of the Pentateuch is Deuteronomy. This book comprises multiple sermons or speeches given by Moses to the Israelite nation, one of which covers 10 full chapters of the book (and you thought a half an hour was bad). One of the main focuses of these sermons is to remind the Hebrew people, many of who did not experience the miraculous signs that freed the nation of Israel from Egypt, who God is. The purpose was to remind these people of God's law and God's promises.

It might seem like there is very little in common with these books, but, in fact, there are several main themes that run throughout. If there is one focus of the Pentateuch it is the story of God and a people (Israel) and their relationship to one another.

It might not sound like much, but think about what these books reveal about God. These books show, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God genuinely cares about what happens to people down here on earth. He didn't have to. There is no law stating that God had to take a personal and invested interest in the events of human history. There is no signed contract floating in heaven that locks God into caring about humans.

Not at all. If there is one thing to be learned from the stories of the Pentateuch it is that God is not content to sit on the sidelines, but he is actively involved trying to help people become everything they were created to be. God's mission in the Pentateuch is clear, to lead people back to him.

Even the book of Leviticus, which to us can feel fairly worthless, is really a wonderful example of God's desire to be help people draw nearer to him. Do all the details listed in this book really matter? I mean, does God really care about what I eat and on which days I celebrate a certain holiday? What we see is that God is willing to use even the most trivial things to help us move nearer to him. God is so concerned for people that he even cares about things we normally don't pay much attention to. While these restrictions and laws are intended for a different set of people at a different time in history, God is still the same and he is still deeply concerned about every aspect of your life and my life. Remember, people started off being near to God. In the book of Genesis, the very first man and the very first woman had the unique pleasure of walking with God side by side. There was a closeness and a unity that existed between God and the first humans that we can scarcely understand. But when sin and disobedience entered into the story of human history, that closeness and unity become shattered. The dream of God and the story of the Pentateuch is God's journey to bring people back to him, back to the unity and oneness enjoyed in the beginning of things.

Here at CCC we often articulate our mission as "helping people find their way back to God." Sometimes we are asked why this is our focus. The answer is easy. It was (and is) the mission of God.

There is also a lot that we can learn from the Pentateuch from how people react to God.

One of the hardest things about looking backwards at history is that we already know how everything turns out. There is very little suspense about whether or not Moses is going to escape from the Egyptians who

are chasing down the Hebrew people, determined to kill them all. After all, we've seen the movie.

And there is no doubt in our minds about whether or not God is going to use elderly Abraham and Sarah to produce a great nation, even though their childbearing years are well behind them. Even if we've never read the stories, we know the final outcome.

This "flash-forward" mentality takes away some of what it really meant to live in the midst of the stories of the Pentateuch. Never forget that Moses didn't know how it would all work out when he turned around and saw the entire might of the Egyptian army bearing on him, vengeance and blood in their eyes. Remember that Sarah's first reaction to being told that she, in her advanced year, was going to be the mother of a great nation was to laugh. It was not a foregone conclusion that a great nation would spring from Abraham and Sarah. To them it just sounded ridiculous.

Yet, what we see over and over again is a group of people who turned to and trusted in God. In the depths of their challenges and in the face of what appeared to be impossible obstacles, these people trusted God.

What can we learn from the Pentateuch? Well, quite a lot. We can learn more about the character of God. We can learn more about how deeply God cares about people and how he longs to restore us to himself. We can learn about how God calls people to do great things to accomplish his ends. We can also learn more about regular people who decided to trust God, even when that trust wasn't easy.

Here are some key verses from the Pentateuch for further study:

Genesis 1-3 - The story of the creation of the world and the fall of mankind.

Genesis 12:1 - 3, 15: 4 - 5 - God calls Abraham to leave his home and promises that he will be the father of a great nation.

Genesis 46:1 - 47:12 - The story of Jacob and the Israelites going to Egypt.

Exodus 2:7 - 10 - Moses is raised in Pharaoh's house.

Exodus 3:7 - 15 - God calls Moses to set his people free.

Exodus 19:1 - 24:18 - The giving of the Ten Commandments and the Law

Leviticus 26:12, 40-41 - God's reaffirmation of his relationship with Israel

Numbers 13-14 - Spies report on the land they are to occupy and reasons for their wandering expanded upon.

Numbers 35: 34 - God promises his presence

Deuteronomy 6:4 - 9 - Important prayer of faith

Deuteronomy 11: 26-28 - God's people must choose between a blessing or a curse.

**A Bird's Eye View
Week 1
Small Group Guide**

1. Describe a time when your perspective of an item or event altered how you perceived it.
2. When, in general, is it useful to have a "zoomed-in" view of things and when is it useful to have a "zoomed-out" view?

Read: **Genesis 28:15, Genesis 12:1-3, Exodus 3:7-15, Leviticus 26:12, Number 35:34, Deuteronomy 6:4-9**

3. One of the key themes of the Pentateuch is that God is with us and is faithful. What is your reaction to this statement?
4. Have you ever felt God's presence during a difficult time? Describe that time.
5. Another key theme of the Pentateuch is regular people's obedience to God in the face of very difficult situations. In what ways can you relate to this theme in your personal life?
6. God's people are called to be a blessing to the whole world. In what way has this been or not your experience?
7. What can you do to be more of a blessing to the world around you?

A Bird's Eye View

Week 2

Why are maps useful? The answer seems obvious; they help us find our way when we're lost. Yet, the only way this can happen is if the map has a wide enough perspective for you to see where you are and where you

want to go. If a map were "zoomed in" too far, its usefulness would be very limited. On the other hand, if the map has a wider perspective it is able to guide us.

The same is sometimes true with how we view the Bible. It's possible for us to have such a "zoomed in" view of the Bible or a specific passages of the Bible that we miss some of the larger things taking place, such as context, connections with other areas of the Bible, and an overall view of the Bible.

We are in the second week of a series called "A Bird's Eye View" where we have been taking a wider view of the Bible, like a map with the right perspective to be useful. The goal of this series is to give us a broader base on which to build our understanding of the Bible.

Last week we looked at the first five books of the Bible, also known as the Pentateuch or the Torah. This week we will be looking at what is commonly known as the books of history. These books include: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. The content of these books accounts for nearly a quarter of the entire Bible.

Many people cringe at the thought of learning history, the impression being that history is boring and useless. If this is your sense of history, I would encourage you to actually read these books of history in the Bible. You might be shocked at what you find there.

Here are some examples of what I mean, of stories that are not exactly what you'd expect from the Bible.

Three hundred men, armed only with torches and trumpets, defeat a massive army. A donkey literally speaks to a man and saves his life. A prostitute rescues the lives of foreign spies. A left-handed assassin kills a king in a very disturbing way. A prophet calls out two bears, which attack a gang of youths who were harassing him. A different prophet of God challenges a group of false prophets to see whose god is stronger, a story that includes fire and some bathroom humor. A widow falls in love with someone she is not allowed to marry and so she seduces him. A beautiful, seductive single woman saves all of her people from the whims of a lunatic with political power. One of the king's chief officers uses a spear to kill eight hundred men in a single battle.

What we see in these books of history in the Bible looks a whole lot more like an action movie or a romance novel than what we most likely encountered in high school history. You might be shocked to find that you are fairly well entertained by this part of the Bible.

The books of history tell the life story of a number of people, yet all of these stories have the greater purpose of following the history of the nation of Israel.

The books of history open with God's chosen people, the ancient nation of Israel, being led to the land God promised for them. It continues to the time of the judges, when the nation of Israel was led by judges who stepped in to govern during times of crisis. Then Israel's first king, Saul, was crowned. Then David, perhaps the most famous person of the books of history in the Bible becomes king of Israel, followed by his son Solomon.

Then things take a turn for the worse. The kingdom of Israel becomes divided into two kingdoms, igniting a civil war. The southern kingdom was called Judah, which included the city of Jerusalem, while the northern kingdom continued to be called Israel. The two divided kingdoms often warred with each other, weakening each. Seeing this weakness, outside powers began to attack, first capturing the northern kingdom, then the southern.

A common practice of the ancient world was to take people you've captured and to move them away from their homelands to distant countries. This is especially the case with the elite and the educated people of a captured country, who were taken into the foreign courts and trained in the ways and traditions of the foreign conquerors.

The point of this was to not only take control of a country's land, but to etch away at its very essence. The conquerors would take away everything that made a nation united, its land, its culture, its religion, and its language. The end result was people who looked more like the conquerors. The goal was to fully incorporate the conquered people within the culture of the conquerors, because when you do you don't have to worry about revolts or rebellions. You don't have to worry about governing a foreign people, because they aren't a foreign people anymore, they are trained to be just like the conquerors. And this time frame for the nation of Israel is called the Diaspora, which is Greek for scattered.

This could have very well been the end of the Jewish faith. This could have been the end of the nation of Israel. After all, these foreign powers were trying very hard to squash both the nation and their faith. There are many reasons why both persisted, but there

is a clue given in the Bible in a phrase that comes up over and over again in the books of history. It's a phrase you see when the nation is just being formed. It's a phrase you see during the years of prosperity under David and Solomon. It's a phrase you see when the Jewish people were scattered to the winds.

This phrase that is used over and over again is used to refer to God. The people of Israel would often use the phrase "the God of Israel," or "the God of Jacob," or "the God of David," or "the God of Abraham" when referring to God. Maybe the most common phrase used to refer to God in the books of history in the Bible is as "the God of our fathers."

So what's the point?

The point is this: the people of the nation of Israel, the people that these books of history are about, never forgot what God did in their past. They never lost touch with their history and God's role in it. Very often when they spoke about God, they spoke of him in relation to how he worked in the past.

So who's responsible for this victory on the battlefield? God is, the same God who was active in the life of Jacob, who protected him and his family from a great famine and who raised the twelve tribes from his sons.

How did that miracle happen? God performed it, the same God that promised Abraham in his old age that he would be the father of a great nation, which would outnumber the stars.

Who are you worshiping here in this foreign land? God, the same God who anointed David as a mighty king

over the nation and who empowered David to victory after victory.

Why do you act differently from other people? Why are you so concerned with being holy and pure? Because we follow and worship the God of our fathers, the God that we've seen active in the history of our people and in the history of our own lives.

Imagine how this perspective would have impacted the lives of people whose faith and culture were under attack. In a world that embraced multiple gods and who worshiped tons of different deities, the people of the nation of Israel worshiped and followed a God they knew. They had a deep sense of themselves and their history. They knew where they had come from and the hardship they had been through.

Sometimes there's an impression that it's a waste of time reading and learning about things that happened thousands of years ago. I mean, what difference does it make to us today? In our modern culture, which seems so far removed from the ancient world, what value does the history found in the Bible have for us?

The value in reading and engaging with the books of history in the Bible is that it connects us with what God has done in the past to offer us encouragement and guidance for our present, and hope for our future.

For the people of the Diaspora who were taken away from their homes and who were actively separated from their culture and their places of worship, the connection to the past and to their history supplied them with a deep basis for their faith.

The problem for us is that we very often do not have these connections. We, by in large, are a people who

have no real sense of our spiritual heritage and history. Yet, when we do have a connection to the past, it can make a huge difference in our lives.

I want to encourage you to engage with or reengage with these books of history in the Bible, because they are not just general history, they hold our history as well.

A Bird's Eye View
Week 2
Small Group Guide

1. Describe an experience when you've used a map? What made the map useful or not useful in that situation?
2. Do you know your family tree? Why is this information interesting or useful?

Read Hebrews 11 through 12:3

3. What stands out to you about the list of people mentioned in Chapter 11?
4. Why is it so important to know the spiritual heritage, those who came before us?
5. In what ways can people that have come before us help us to "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles?"
6. In what ways do you need a deeper connection with the history written in the Bible to help you run the race marked out for you?

A Bird's Eye View

Week 3

We are in the third week of our series "A Bird's Eye View" where we've been looking at the Bible from a broader perspective. We began by looking at the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) and last week we looked at the Books of History in the Bible. Today we'll continue by diving into wisdom literature.

Wisdom literature is the term applied to the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs (sometimes known as The Song of Solomon). While there is wisdom found in many different areas of the Bible, these books have a somewhat different point of view when compared to others books of the Bible. These books of wisdom are deeply concerned with how to live well.

As we've look over what we've seen in the last two weeks, it's easy to get the impression that the people written about in the Bible were constantly in the midst of a major crisis. While it's true that there were many emergencies and disasters that befell the people we read about in the Bible, there were also long stretches of time when everything was normal. During these times there were no great struggles taking place and there were no invaders waiting at the borders. During these times the hard work was normal life. There was just the daily routine of life that preoccupied most of the ordinary people of the land with the mundane questions of how to get along.

Wisdom literature in the Bible sets out to address this exact situation: normal, daily life.

There is an impression that exists that the Bible full of pie in the sky promises and that it isn't very practical. Anyone who has ever made this statement hasn't read any wisdom literature from the Bible. What we see throughout these books is concrete and sensible teaching about everyday life.

What we must understand before we can fully engage with the books of wisdom literature is what exactly wisdom is. For most people, the first thing they think of when they hear the word wisdom is intelligence. We often think of highly intelligent people as having wisdom. Yet, this is not what the Bible regarding wisdom. People who make good decisions and who live their lives well characterize what wisdom means in the Bible. It is not, fundamentally, an issue of intellect or IQ. Wisdom is not about how much money you have or how successful you are, though wise people are often successful. Wisdom is not about how old you are, though the ability to make wise choices is often a skill learned as we get older. Wisdom is about our ability to live well.

In the context of the Bible, wisdom is the ability to live our lives as God instructs and desires. Those people who are called wise in the Bible are those who recognize that the path God has laid before them is the best path they can walk, and they are people who follow that path with diligence and perseverance.

Wise people live well.

This change in thinking, that wisdom is about living well and not about intellect, is essential if we are

to engage with the books of wisdom literature in a meaningful way.

So how do we begin? How do we start to become people who are wise and who live well?

The Bible actually tells very directly where the beginning of wisdom can be found.

Multiple times (**Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 1:7, Proverbs 9:10**) we are told that the beginning of wisdom is found in "the fear of the LORD."

Fear is not a word that we often associate with God. We normally reserve the word fear for things that we actively avoid, like spiders, snakes, and the dentist. Fear is not a term we use for people we love or respect.

So what does it mean to have fear toward God and what does it mean that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom?

First, we must understand that the word fear has a different connotation here. The word fear when referred to God has the meaning of deep reverence, awe, and respect. Fear is not understood in the sort of terrified terms we think of the boogiemán. We do not fear God because God is waiting to jump out and get us. We do not fear God because if we mess up God is going to lay the hammer down and then we'll pay. We fear God because we know that he is mightier, greater, and more powerful than anything else in the universe. It is a good idea not to take someone like that lightly. And we give our obedience to God not because he will crush us if we don't, but because God is good.

Think of it in human terms. A loving and caring father will often garner the respect and admiration of his children. His children will listen and obey him, not because they fear punishment from the father but because they know that the father has their best interests at heart. Compare that to a father who is rigidly authoritarian and who delights in punishing his children. These children might also obey their father, but it would not be out of love.

God does not desire that we obey him out of terror or fear of retribution. God wants us to obey him out of love and reverence. The Bible tells us that this is the beginning of wisdom. It's worth asking why. Why is the fear of the God the beginning of wisdom?

When we obey God out of love and when we have a deep reverence for God, what we are doing is ordering our life under God. When we have the fear of the God in our lives, we are actively placing God above all of the joys and worries, all of the pleasures and pains, and all of the good and bad things under God.

You see, I think our tendency is to elevate things above God. We don't always mean to, maybe we rarely mean to, but those things that feel urgent and pressing in our lives get elevated in importance. When we obey God, when we fear God, we are placing God above all other things.

There are two examples from the books of wisdom literature in the Bible that display this very same thing in action.

The first is in the book of Ecclesiastes. The book of Ecclesiastes, believed to be written by Solomon, is about someone who has every luxury and opportunity at his fingertips. There are no desires or whims that

are not indulged. There is nothing that is denied him.

Yet, in spite of what we might think is the perfect situation, the author states time and again that everything is worthless or pointless. Life for the author has become meaningless. At the very end of the book the author comes to this conclusion: fear God and obey him (**Ecclesiastes 12:13**). Pleasures and desires and comfort can sometimes dull our senses and make us forget this one important facet to life, that we were created to fear and obey God. Nothing will replace that in our lives.

Another of the books of wisdom literature, this time the book of Job, illustrates the same principal but on the other end of the spectrum. Job has it all. He has a large family, he has money and possessions, and he has his health. Then, in the blink of an eye, it's all gone. Everything. Job spirals down into deep despair.

The advice he receives from his friends is to give up on God. His wife actually tells him that he should "curse God and die" (**Job 2:9**).

Yet, Job does not and the reason he does not is because he fears God (**Job 28:28**). Job knows that God should be revered and respected, no matter what his personal situation is.

These two stories illustrate ways we can sometimes get distracted from giving God our reverence and fear. In our comfort and the pursuit of our desires we can forget to honor and fear God. In our pain and the hardships of life we can shift our focus onto our situation and ourselves. Either way, we have altered

the proper order of things and have allowed something to be elevated above God.

The fear of God is a proper ordering of things in our lives where God is at the very top. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

A Bird's Eye View
Week 3
Small Group Guide

1. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word fear? What are some things you fear?
2. How is your life different because of the things you fear (for example: the fear of getting a speeding ticket, the fear of getting sick, the fear of failing a class, etc.)?

Read Proverbs 9:10, Psalms 111:10, Job 28:28, Ecclesiastes 12:13)

3. What is your first reaction to the statement "the fear of the Lord?"
4. How is this fear different from the fears we normally have in life?
5. There are two ways described in this week's reading of how we sometimes get our priorities off: by focusing on our comfort and desires and by focusing on our pain and hardships. Which of these is harder for you?

6. Right now in your life what would it look like for you to fear and honor God more?
7. In what area of your life could you use more wisdom, the ability to live well?

A Bird's Eye View

Week 4

There are many books of the Bible that are confusing or hard to understand. Yet, perhaps the most misunderstood books of the Bible are those concerning prophecy. This week we'll be looking at the books of the prophets. There are considered to be four books by Major Prophets, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel and twelve books by Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. If you've ever read the second half of the Old Testament portion of the Bible, you've most likely encountered a book by one of these prophets.

It should be noted that the distinction between major and minor prophets relates completely to the relative length of their books, not to their importance. It might be better to think of them as the longer and the shorter prophets.

If we are being completely honest, these books are difficult to read and comprehend. They're different than anything else we read. If we have trouble understanding these books, we're in good company. Martin Luther, one of the great thinkers of

Christianity, once wrote with regard to reading the prophets: "They have a queer way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next so that you cannot make heads or tails of them or see what they are getting at." This is a statement that I can relate to.

I think there are several reasons why these books are often difficult to understand. The first reason the books of the prophets are difficult for modern reads is because of a misunderstanding of what the words "prophet" and "prophecy" mean. For modern readers, we often limit the meaning of prophecy to the telling of the future or predicting future events. This is one aspect of being a prophet, but not the primary function. The main function of a prophet was not to "foretell" but to "tell forth" or to proclaim God's word. Their function was to call God's people away from their mistakes and sins and back into a deep relationship with God.

The main function of a prophet was to speak for God. This often meant speaking a hard word or delivering a hard message on God's behalf. Most of the times when we read about a prophet telling the future deal with events that concerned the immediate future of Israel, Judah, and the surrounding nations, not our future. This is something we must understand. When we rush to take a prophetic announcement and relate it to ourselves, we could be missing the point of what that announcement was about in the first place.

It is true that prophets were given information about the future and sometimes their writings reflect this foreknowledge. One of the things that they would write about when telling about the future was the coming of Jesus to earth, but even these passages

represent only a very small fractions of all the prophetic writings.

This change in understanding can make a tremendous amount of difference in how we read and interpret these books of prophecy.

A second factor that makes understanding these books of the prophets difficult is the sheer historical distance between them and us. Things that would have been clear and perfectly understood by someone living in the ancient world are a complete mystery to us. We simply do not have the context to place the statements and proclamations in a proper perspective.

A third factor that interferes with our understanding of these books is the spoken nature of the prophets. Of all the prophets on Israel and Judah, and we are told that there are many, there are only sixteen with their words recorded as found in these books. We know of other prophets, some of them great and powerful people, namely Elijah and Elisha, but we know more about their actions than about their words.

When we look at the Old Testament, the reality is that we often hear more *about* prophets than *from* prophets. What we get from the prophetic books are words directly from the prophets, but we know very little about the prophets themselves. This single difference between these books of prophecy and other books of the Old Testament can account for much of the misunderstanding that arises from these books.

A final reason why these books are so hard for us, in general, to embrace and understand is because they are written like poetry. It's easy to scoff and roll our eyes when we come across something that is poetic, since for most of us the only poetry we read comes in

the form of a cheesy poem on the inside of a greeting card. Yet, for the ancient world (and for us too) there is something about poetry that is memorable and that speaks to the deepest parts of us.

The prophets employed a style called poetic prose, which is a style of writing that employs many of the characteristics of poetry, but with less structure and consistency. What it created was something that was much easier for people to remember and to "take with them," since in the ancient world people did not have access to personal Bibles. These books of the prophets use poetry extensively, and some of them are entirely poetic in nature. It is worth learning more about biblical poetry and how to read it well.

One of the main features of biblical poetry was the use of imagery. Poetry uses devices such as simile (comparing two things using "like" or "as"), metaphor (comparing two things without using "like" or "as"), personification (giving human characteristics to something that is not human or alive), and hyperbole (exaggeration to prove a point) to create images that evoke a sensory experience in our imagination. It is therefore important that we be able to identify and interpret the devices of poetic language because poetry must be read, understood, and interpreted as poetry, not as anything else.

We sometimes make the mistake of interpreting poetry as facts or reading poetry in the Bible the same way we might read a textbook. This leads us to drawing conclusions where we should not and missing the purpose of the poetic text.

Another tool of the biblical poet is a structure of writing called parallelism. Almost all poetry found in the Bible uses some sort of parallelism and this is

especially the case when reading the prophets. Parallelism is when two or more consecutive lines of poetry will strengthen, reinforce, or develop a single thought. The most common types of parallelisms are: synonymous, antithetical, and synthetic, all of which are seen in the prophets.

Synonymous parallelism is where the second or subsequent line repeats or reinforces the sense of the first line, as in Isaiah 44:22 or Amos 8:10.

Antithetical parallelism, on the other hand, is where the second or subsequent lines contrasts the thought of the first, as in Hosea 7:14.

Synthetic parallelism, perhaps a little harder to discern, is where the second or subsequent line adds to the first line in any manner that provides further information, as in Obadiah 21.

There are more complex forms of parallelism as well, but these three structures form the backbone of much of the poetic text found in the Bible. As you read and engage with the books of the prophets, these tools can prove invaluable in how we understand what we are reading and can make reading the prophets very rewarding.

While these books can be confusing, the place to begin reading them is with the understanding of their purpose, and the purpose of prophets in general. As mentioned before, the goal of a prophet was to speak to God's people for God and to call them back to God. So what was a prophet calling them back to? Prophets called people back to the Covenant relationship between God and his people.

In an earlier portion of the Bible, the Pentateuch, also known as the Torah or the Law (week one of "A Bird's Eye View"), we discussed how God desired to expand the circle of his family. One of the ways God did this was through the Law, sometimes called the Law of Moses. Prophets acted as enforcement officials for the Law and the Covenant. The Covenant between God and his people was established with not only the rules that they were to keep but also a list of blessings if they kept the Law and a list of curses if they failed to keep the Law.

God did not only set up boundaries within which he desired us to live, he also enforced those boundaries. When people were faithful to the Law, there is a positive enforcement in blessings. When people were unfaithful to the Law, there is a negative enforcement in curses. Prophets existed to help enforce the Law and to remind people, sometimes in very loud or dramatic ways, of what the consequences of their keeping or breaking of the Covenant.

This is why very often when you read these books of the prophets you will come across a prophet promising wonderful blessings to people, such as prosperity, agricultural abundance, health and long life, safety, and respect. You'll also come across prophets who promise harsh curses, such as destruction, deportation, or death.

When you are reading the books of the prophets, keep your eyes open for this pattern: either (1) an identification of Israel's sin followed by a prediction of cursing (see Hosea 8-9 for examples of this), or (2) an announcement of God's faithfulness and love for Israel followed by a prediction of blessing, depending on the circumstance (see Amos 9). Most of the time, that is what the prophets are

conveying and this is often the purpose of these books.

While the specific blessings and curses enumerated in the books of the prophets are not directly spoken to us, the principal at work does. When we follow the path God has laid out for us and when we journey closer to God, we will find that we often avoid painful and difficult roadblocks in our lives. On the other hand, when we stray from God and from what God desires for our lives, there are often natural and agonizing consequences.

Our job when reading the prophets is to try to understand the situation into which the original book was being written and to hear what God was saying to Israel through the prophet. When we do what we often see is that the sin that is being addressed is often a sin with which we can relate and from which, just like Israel when these prophets were speaking to them, we need to turn away from and repent. God desires us to see our sins clearly for what they are and to turn away from them. The prophets give us a chance to look at our sins and mistake more clearly and to address them head-on.

As you work through the books of the prophets, keep an eye out for places where you may have to turn and return back to God as well.

A Bird's Eye View
Week 4
Small Group Guide

1. What is the first thought you have when you hear the word "prophet?"
2. What has been your experience with the books of the prophets from the Bible?
3. Why do you think these books are often so hard to understand?

We will use portions of Jonah for this week's small group study:

Read **Jonah 1:1-3, 3: 1-10, 4:1-4**

4. In what ways is Jonah a prophet, as described in this week's reading?
5. Who does God want him to call to repent, or to turn toward Him?
6. What is Jonah's reaction?
7. When have you been asked or felt led by God to do something you didn't want to do? What was your reaction?
8. What can you learn from the story of Jonah about God? About obedience? About mercy?

A Bird's Eye View Week 5

We are continuing our series "A Bird's Eye View" where we've been looking at the Bible from a zoomed out perspective. Our goal has been to get a broader view of the Bible and to see how everything fits together. Over the last four weeks we've worked through the Old Testament portion of the Bible, from the Pentateuch to the prophets.

Today we are looking at the beginning of the New Testament, often called the Gospels. The Gospels are

four books, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which give a biography of Jesus' life. These four books give us a description of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The word Gospel is an Old English derivative of the words god (good) and spell (to tell). The word gospel is used as an equivalent of the Greek word *euaggelion* (*eu* well, *aggello*, I bear a message). So if this portion of the Bible means "good news" or "I bring a message of good news," then what is the good news?

In short, the good news is Jesus. The Jewish people of the first century, and many centuries before that, waited for the Messiah. The word messiah means "anointed one" which refers to the practice of anointing kings during their coronation. The Messiah was a promised gift from God.

During the first century, the nation of Israel had fallen on hard times. They had been conquered by the Roman Empire and were held under the boot of this powerful regime. But they remembered the promise of God. So the nation of Israel was waiting for the promised "anointed King," which they hoped God would send and who would restore their kingdom.

While their situation was difficult, hope ran high. There were many people who claimed to be the Messiah, the anointed King, during this timeframe. There was Simon, a former slave of Herod the Great, who rebelled against him. There was Judas of Galilee, who incited a bloody revolt against the Romans. There was Theudas, who led an uprising against the empire. There was a man known as "The Egyptian," who gathered around him 30,000 followers.

Each of these men would drum up a following, would teach about God, and would inspire unspeakable amounts of hope and anticipation. Over and over again a single question would be asked among the Jewish people: Is this the one? Is this the one that we've been waiting for? Is this the one that was sent by God and who will restore us to our proper place in the world? Is this the one who will free us from the tyranny of Rome? Is this the Messiah?

Yet, all of these "messiahs" came to the same end.

Their following would begin to grow and they would attract the attention of Rome. And Rome, not being one to share her power, would squash the rebellions and revolts with brutal efficiency. Roman soldiers would descend upon the so-called messiahs and would destroy them and their followers. The leaders were often crucified, along with their followers, as an example of Rome's power. And again the people of Israel would wait and wonder when the anointed one would come.

It is into this atmosphere that Jesus was born.

Jesus, when he was thirty, began to accept for himself the title of Messiah. Like other people who claimed to be the Messiah, Jesus taught about God. Yet, his teaching was unlike anything that anyone had ever heard before. Jesus did not try to gather together a group of people to revolt against Rome, though some of his followers thought he should do just that. He didn't teach about political power or about marshalling an army to reclaim the nation. Instead, he taught about the love of God. He taught about the amazingly high standards that God requires for us. He taught about what it really meant to be a follower of God. Jesus taught with the goal of revealing God to those who listened to him.

Jesus also inspired some professional jealousy among the religious elite of his day, a jealousy that blossomed into hatred. These religious leaders turned Jesus over to Rome so they could deal with him the same way Rome dealt with all people who claimed to be a king. And so the Romans took Jesus and crucified him, executing him by nailing him on a cross.

The Gospels, the good news, is that Jesus didn't stay dead. Jesus was killed by Rome on a Friday evening. He was placed in a tomb, which was sealed with a massive boulder and guarded by Roman soldiers. Yet, on Sunday morning Jesus was no longer a non-living resident of that tomb. He had risen from the dead.

The good news is that Jesus really was the Messiah, the promised King sent by God. The good news is that because Jesus came to earth we have access to draw near to God. The good news is that the love God has for us was displayed in Jesus. The good news is that the amazingly high standards that God requires was supplied for us in and through Jesus. The good news is that because of Jesus we can all be followers of God.

This is the good news that the Gospel tells.

One question that often arises when faced with the story of Jesus is "why Jesus was killed?" We often get the impression that Jesus is sort of like a religious Mr. Rogers. And who would kill Mr. Rogers? Why would any nation or empire fear having Mr. Rogers around?

First of all, you must remember the political and religious atmosphere in which Jesus was born. During the time of Jesus, the Jewish people were ruled by

Rome, an empire noted for its stranglehold onto power. The Jewish religious leaders of the day were allowed to maintain their places of standing because Rome gave them permission to. They were allowed to worship because Rome allowed them to. They had power and authority largely because they colluded with Rome. This isn't to say that they didn't take their faith seriously, they did. Very seriously. But they also knew what side their bread was buttered and so they were cautious to appease Rome.

It is into this scene that Jesus enters. And Jesus says some pretty amazing things and some startling things as well. Perhaps some of the most disturbing of these teachings was that Jesus claimed, multiple times, to have equality with God. (See Matthew 27:11; John 5:17-18, 23-24; John 10: 25-33; Matthew 16:15-17; Mark 14:61-62) The importance of this is somewhat lost to us, but remember that this was being said in the midst of the Jewish religion, where the very name of God was so deeply venerated that it was not even spoken. Jesus is taking on a role that no human should take. He is calling himself a king, something the Romans couldn't tolerate, and he was making himself equal to God, something the Jewish leaders couldn't ignore.

To make matters worse, if that was even possible, Jesus went into the temple and flipped over the moneychanger's tables, which was a highly lucrative means of income for the religious leaders (see Luke 19:45-48). This was the figurative last straw. Now Jesus was not only threatening the religious leader's relationship with Rome and taking on equality with God, now he was also threatening their money.

The chief priests drummed up some fake witnesses and had Jesus arrested for a trial that was a complete

set-up job from the start. They tried to level multiple charges at Jesus but the only one that would stick was that he blasphemed by saying that he was God. The sentence for this, the chief priests said, should be death. But since they had no means to kill Jesus legally, they handed him over to Rome, hoping that they would get the bloody job done.

Jesus' trial before the Roman government was just as much of a travesty of justice as the Jewish one had been. First there was a "pass-the-buck" game because no one wanted to deal with Jesus. Then the governor, Pontius Pilate, knowing that Jesus did nothing wrong, tries to free him but does not because he fears it might start a riot. Pilate relents to the angry mob and has Jesus killed. The reason: for claiming that he was a king, a form of treason against the Roman Empire.

Jesus is killed because he claimed to be God and because he claimed to be the Messiah, or the anointed king. And here's the thing that we so often miss: if Jesus wasn't God and he wasn't a king, then it was completely within the rights of the law to kill him. It sounds harsh, but let me explain.

There are really only three options available to us when we address Jesus. The first option is that he was telling the truth and he was equal to God and a king. The second is that he was a liar and he knew that he wasn't equal to God or a king, but he was trying to deceive people into thinking that he was. The third option is that Jesus was insane and fully believed the things he was saying, but he was mentally incompetent to be held accountable for his words.

These are the only options available to us. We like the idea that Jesus was a good teacher and that he had

a lot of nice things to say, a kind of Mr. Rogers figure. But we can't stop there with our evaluation of Jesus, because he claimed to be God and a king. If there were someone today who was a wonderful teacher, but he also claimed that he was the president of the United States and that he existed before the beginning of time, we wouldn't simply ignore that aspect of his or her teaching. Jesus made similar claims. We cannot just called him a "good teacher" and ignore the other extraordinary claims he made about himself.

So Jesus was either insane, on par with someone who walks around claiming that they're a roast beef sandwich. Or he was a liar, and a deeply vicious liar at that, the type that deserves to be punished for their lies. Or he was who he said he was.

Jesus was killed because the religious elite and the Roman government believed that he was a liar. If we ignore all of the political and religious maneuvering and posturing for power, which I hope we don't but even so, what we'd find is that Jesus was killed because the people in power thought he was a liar.

They did not regard him as a good teacher who had some really strong moral sayings. They did not regard him as an instructor of peace and love. They did not venerate him for the amazing way he used parables and stories to illustrate very tangibly deep ideas about faith and life. What they saw when they came face-to-face with Jesus was someone who had made extraordinary claims, including that he was God.

The great irony is that Jesus was executed for being who he was. Jesus was (and is) God. Jesus was (and is) the Messiah, the King. Of the three options available, those in power decided that Jesus was a liar. Those who followed him decided that Jesus was

telling the truth. Those in power won the day and Jesus was killed. Yet, even death could not stop Jesus, because he was everything he claimed to be.

I wonder about us. When we're presented with Jesus, when we come face-to-face with him, are we tempted to write him off as a "good teacher" who had some nice things to say? Or will we realize that we have the same three options when we look at Jesus. He was either a liar, a lunatic, or he was who he said he was. Whatever your choice, I hope that we can engage fully with the Jesus that is revealed in the Gospels, not the caricature presented in other areas. Because if we really read the Gospels, we will come to see that Jesus made significant claims about himself that we cannot ignore. They were, after all, claims that got him killed.

But don't be content to let someone else tell you what the Gospels say, not even me. Read them for yourself. If you're not sure where to start, I'd encourage you to begin with the book of John. This book, written by one of Jesus' followers, is a little different from the other books of the Gospels in its style and focus, and it is fascinating to those who want to encounter Jesus. And within its pages you will see why these books are called the Gospels, the good news.

A Bird's Eye View
Week 5
Small Group Guide

1. What is the best news you've received in the last year? Why was it such good news to you?

2. When was the first time you remember hearing about Jesus and what did you hear? What was your reaction to it?
3. What do you think is the general impression people have about Jesus? Why do you think people have that impression?

Read: John 5:17-18, John 10:25-33, Mark 14:61-62, Matthew 27:11

4. According to these passages, who does Jesus claim to be?
5. What would we think of someone who made these sorts of claims today?
6. People sometimes like to think of Jesus as just a "good teacher." As mentioned in the reading for this week, that is simply not an option when you take these statements into account. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?
7. During the reading for this week it was stated that we could either view Jesus as a liar, a lunatic, or who he said he was. What is your reaction to this statement?
8. Of these three options, where do you most often land when faced with who Jesus was and what he claimed about himself?

We are in the sixth week of the series "A Bird's Eye View" where our goal has been to take a look at the Bible from a zoomed out perspective. Throughout this series we've been looking at different segments of the Bible containing numerous books but with a unifying theme, such as the books of history or the books of the prophets. Last week we began looking at the New Testament portion of the Bible by examining the stories about Jesus' life, called the Gospels. The second segment of the New Testament is actually only one book. This week we will be looking at the history of the early church in the book of Acts.

The book of Luke and the book of Acts were written by the same person as a two volume collection, both written for the same purpose: to give an orderly account of what happened in the life of Jesus and the early church.

I think there is something interesting about how things are made. We are intrigued about how things begin or are formed. There's a show on TV that details how all sorts of common day items come into being. We don't normally think about how toothbrushes or windows or Twinkies are made. Yet, it's fascinating to watch things that we see everyday come into being from just the ingredients or materials that form the item.

I wonder how many of us stop to think about how the Church was started. Most of us see some sort of church during the course of our day, but how did everything get started. This is the story that the book of Acts details.

The book of Acts is primarily a book of history and we need to read it as a book of history. The book of Acts is presented in a very organized and structured way, making it one of the more approachable books of the Bible. Acts centers primarily around the work and lives of two men: Peter and Paul. The first portion of Acts (Acts 1 - Acts 12:24) keys on the person and work of Peter and the second portion (Acts 12:25 - Acts 28:31) keys on the person and work of Paul. Yet, this division creates a false sense of separation between the two. Peter and Paul's stories are not separate stories and they are related to each other and overlap at multiple points of Acts.

The book of Acts begins with Jesus telling his followers:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Acts 1:8

Jesus gave his followers a mission, a mission that they took to heart. There is a clear progression within the book of Acts that shows the spread of the church. This can be seen in two ways: geographic and ethnic. The events described in the book of Acts began in the city of Jerusalem and was ethnically Jewish. From Jerusalem it expanded to Samaria and Judea. Then to Damascus, Antioch, and Asia. It expanded further to Europe and Asia Minor. The book of Acts closes with Paul in Caesarea and Rome and Christianity is now ethnically diverse, including both Jewish people and Gentiles.

One thing that the book of Acts makes very clear is that Jesus is the universal Savior. Jesus' grace and love is not limited to one group of people or to one

segment of society. The Gospels can be said to be the story of Jesus calling people to follow him and to turn toward God. The book of Acts shows this mission continuing through the witnesses that Jesus sent into the world. And as Jesus promised, this witness is also empowered by the Holy Spirit.

During an event which has come to be known as Pentecost (which means "the fiftieth" and is called so because it was fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus). This event, which marks the beginning of the Church, took place ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven and is a unique event in history.

The church began with a miracle.

The celebration of Pentecost was initially a Jewish religious day called the Feast of the Firstfruits and it was closely related with the celebration of Passover. The Feast of the Firstfruits commemorated the first produce of the Promised Land, the place God provided for the people of Israel. There couldn't be a more appropriate day for the Holy Spirit to come to earth since the Spirit of God is the firstfruits of someone who believes in Jesus.

All of the disciples were gathered together, hiding and praying for the Holy Spirit to come to them. And suddenly the house is filled with the sound of a rushing wind and tongues of fire. What has arrived at the house is the divine presence of God. The tongues of fire come to rest on each of the disciples, an outward representation of the inward reality: the Spirit of God had come to them.

The disciples are empowered by God with the ability to speak in languages other than their native tongue. A group of people, apparently also hearing the sound of

wind, gathered with the disciples at the temple. This is no ordinary gathering but an odd collection of Jewish people from a multitude of different nations. When the disciples began to teach about Jesus, salvation, and grace, each of these people heard the teaching in their own language.

The crowd was amazed.

The people in the crowd begin to list off their nationalities, which range from all corners of the Roman Empire. Even from the very beginning of the church, the global and inclusive nature of the Gospel of Jesus is emphasized.

The people began to wonder why this is happening, both the reason and the significance of hearing the teachings of the disciples in their own language. Some are cut to the heart and believe that God was working on something new. Many had no idea what was happening, but showed their willingness and openness to God. Others just mocked the event, accusing the disciples of being drunk.

And this is how the church was started. It was started with the coming of the Holy Spirit, a miracle that amazed some and was merely the source of a joke for others. But for those who were open, to those who heard, and to those who decided to follow, this marked the beginning of their journey with God and the Church.

The book of Acts is filled with stories of God empowering people to grow his church.

Throughout this week I encourage you to take time reading about some of the experiences of the Holy

Spirit and the early church. Below are a few examples from the book of Acts.

Acts 3:1-10: Peter and John teach in the temple and heal a beggar.

Acts 5:1-11: Ananias and Sapphira try to lie to make themselves look better and suffer because of it.

Acts 6:8-7:60: The arrest and martyrdom of Stephen

Acts 9:1-22: Saul is called on the road to Damascus.

Acts 10:1-7: A faithful Roman is visited by Peter.

Acts 12:1-19: Peter's escape from prison

Acts 16:16-40: Paul and Silas in prison.

Acts 17:16-34: Paul in Athens on Mars Hill

Acts 20:7-12: A miracle happens at Troas

Acts 23:12-22: A plot to silence Paul

Acts 27:27-44: Paul shipwrecked on the way to Rome

Acts 28:17-31: Paul continues to speak about Jesus while under house arrest in Rome

Each of these stories tells how the Holy Spirit was working to form the Church. Through the teaching of Peter and Paul, through the sacrifice of Stephen, through the miraculous and the mundane, God was working to form his Church. The Holy Spirit has been working ever since to establish, protect, and expand the church. He is working among us still.

A Bird's Eye View
Small Group Guide
Week 6

1. What are some common, everyday items that of which you have no idea of how they are made or constructed?
2. How many churches do you normally see during the course of a regular day? How often do you think about how the Church was founded?

Read: Acts 1:8, 2:1-13

3. What importance is there in the mission that Jesus gives his followers?
4. What is your reaction to the thought that the Church, from its very inception, was multicultural and global? What does this say about Jesus and God?
5. What do you think is the significance of the miracle of Pentecost, that all of the disciples could teach in languages they never learned?
6. To what degree do you, intentionally or unintentionally, limit the scope of the Church, whether geographically, ethnically, or socially?
7. At Pentecost, some people believed what was taught, others were unsure but curious, and others simply mocked the event. These are often the reactions people have about church still. What has been your reaction to Church? How have you experienced the other reaction as well?

A Bird's Eye View

Week 7

One of the main types of writings found in the New Testament portion of the Bible are letters. Some of these letters are written to groups of people or to churches, several others were written to individuals, but all of them are vitally important to our faith. You will sometimes hear these letters referred to as Epistles, which is a form of the Greek work *epistolē*, which simply means "letter."

These letters are normally divided into two sections: the Pauline Epistles (letters written by Paul), and the General Epistles (letters written by other people). While there is debate over the authorship of some of these letter (and some letters are of unknown authorship, such as the letter to the Hebrews) the Pauline Epistles include Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. The general epistles include Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, and Jude.

It might seem strange that we are reading letters written to other people as part of the Bible, but remember that letters were not viewed the same way that we think about our e-mails. These letters were written with the expressed purpose of being shared. When a person or a community received a letter, it would be read aloud to the entire community so that everyone could learn and grow from it.

There are several things we must keep in mind while we are reading the Epistles in the Bible. First, we must remember that these are letters. This seems stupidly obvious, but maybe the implications that we are reading letters are not. Since these are letters, they were written with a specific audience in mind. Whether it was a specific person or a specific group of people, the epistles were penned to a recipient. So our first job when reading these letters is to determine to whom the letter was originally written to. This can sometimes give us a deeper understanding of what we are reading.

Even more than that, the writer of the letter was writing to that specific audience for a specific reason. Some of these letters address a particular topic or issue that has arisen. Others are written to help give instruction on how to live better lives and how to follow God more fully. Others are written to be an encouragement and to bolster flagging hearts. Still other letters were written to offer a challenge to those following after God to live up to a higher standard.

Once we know to whom the letter was written, it's our job to assess why it was written. We have to remember that, unlike other written material, letters are situational. They were written into a particular situation and if we ignore this fact we might miss some nuances and details found within the letter.

All of this is to establish the context of what we are reading. Context is everything outside of the actual written words, but which sets the framework for the writings. When we read the Bible, it is absolutely vital that we "read in context." Our tendency is to take the writings of the Bible and to place them

immediately into our own context. It's not wrong to think about how the Bible addresses and speaks to our personal context, but we will be deeply confused and at risk of misreading the Bible without knowing the original context into which it was written.

When we are able to answer the questions of to whom the letter is written and why was it written, we are getting closer to knowing the context of the letter.

In light of knowing the deeper context in which these letters were written, a question arises: What in these letters was specific to that situation in the past and what is universally relevant for us today?

What we are talking about is discernment. Discernment is the ability, with the help of God through the Holy Spirit, to determine how to best live in light of what is reveal in the Bible. Part of how this discernment takes place is by knowing the context of what was written in the Bible. Discernment was not (and is not) intended to be done individually, but is done in the midst of a community of faith.

With discernment we are able to see how best to live out the Bible in our own lives.

When asked what parts of the Bible they live out, I think people sometimes toss out the easy answer that everything in the Bible is relevant for us today and that we should do everything literally as it's written in the Bible. This might be a noble thought and I'm sure the motivation behind it is entirely pure, but the truth is that no one follows every single letter of the Bible. No one does.

This might seem like a strong statement, but it's true. I think it's all too easy for people to glibly

say that they just do whatever the Bible says. Yet, there are clear teachings in the Bible that few, if any, Christians follow. I want to apologize beforehand because I might be about to step on some toes, but I ask that you hear me out as we take a look at just a few examples.

There are clear instructions in the Bible (Genesis 17:9-14) that every male child should be circumcised, forever. Circumcision was a big deal for the Jewish people and all Jewish converts were required to undergo circumcision. It was only natural that Jewish followers of Jesus wanted new followers of Jesus to be circumcised (Acts 15), just like any new follower of Judaism. Gentile (and therefore uncircumcised) Christians were being held to this standard. But the question arose: What should be required of new followers of Jesus? What the early church did was use discernment to say that circumcision (the ageless command from Abraham) was not necessary for Jewish converts.

Paul takes this discernment even further for the communities he was serving by saying that circumcision didn't really matter (Galatians 5:6), that circumcision was simply a reflection of the heart (Romans 2:28-29), and that baptism replaces circumcision (Colossians 2:11-12). Paul uses Spirit-led discernment about what following the Bible means in his life and in his community while evaluating circumcision.

Another example of discernment in the life of Paul is seen in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. In this amazing portion of the Bible, Paul states that he would become whatever he needed to become to draw people nearer to God. To reach the Jews, he became like a Jew. To reach Gentiles, he became like a Gentile. To those

that followed the law, he became like someone that followed the law. To those that did not live under the law, he became like one who did not live under the law. To reach the weak, Paul became weak. Paul concluded by saying, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessing."

To Paul every action and idea was submitted to the criteria that whatever advanced the gospel of Jesus the most and reached people for God was what he wanted. Paul was a chameleon. He would change colors for whatever situation he was in but he always retained the same body: his commitment to Jesus and to the gospel of Christ.

As expressed by Scot McKnight in *The Blue Parakeet*:

What is good for Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Ezra, Jesus, Peter, and Paul is also good for us. But, the precise expression of the gospel or the manner of living of Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Ezra, Jesus, Peter, and Paul may not be our expression or our manner of living. Living out the Bible means living out the Bible in our day . . . by discerning together how God would have us live.

When it comes to the Epistles, this is where the hard work comes in. Part of what we need to determine when reading the Epistles is what is descriptive and what is prescriptive. In order to do this we need to do several things. First, we need to read the Bible. Again, this sounds obvious, but we need to read enough of the Bible to know what is consistent with the deeper underlying story of the Bible. In order to

know how to be faithful with what the Bible teaches, we need to know what it teaches.

One thing to look for when reading these letters is whether what we're reading is consistent with the rest of the Bible. If something seems inconsistent, it's possible that we are missing a piece of the context that helps us understand what's going on in the letters we're reading. Remember, the Bible is made up of many different books, but it is one consistent story of God and his creation. If there is something that doesn't seem to fit, we need to examine it closer.

The way that the Epistles will be most valuable to us is if we get really good at seeing how our present situation mirrors or parallels the situations addressed in the letters. We must learn to see ourselves in the instruction, correction, and encouragement of these letters. And when we do see ourselves in these letters, we need to pay attention to what it says very closely.

These letters can be difficult to read and understand. Yet, they are packed full of wisdom, instruction, and encouragement. When we look at the wider context of these letters and learn how our own context fits into them, we will grow closer to God. This, after all, is the whole point.

A Bird's Eye View
Week 7
Small Group Guide

1. When was the last time you received a handwritten letter? What was it about?

2.How are letters different than other types of writings?

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

3.What do you think Paul means that "he became all things" to reach others for God?

4.In what ways does the mindset described in this passage require discernment?

5.What is your personal reaction to the idea of becoming like others to reach them for God?

6.In our current context, what do you think this passage means for churches today? For you personally?

**A Bird's Eye View
Week 8**

There is no book of the Bible that raises more questions, wild speculations, and confusion than the book of Revelation (also known as The Revelation of John). During this series, A Bird's Eye View, we have been taking a broader view of the Bible, looking at each of the component parts that make up the whole. This zoomed out view is essential to get a meaningful understanding of the book of Revelation.

Revelation is a poetic book penned by John on the island of Patmos serving a term of exile. There is some debate over who exactly John is, whether the original disciple of Jesus and the author of the book of John or an elder and leader of the early church. It is clear however, that John was inspired by God to writing this amazing book.

As we've seen throughout this series, the Bible is composed of many different types of writing: including poetry, biographies, histories, and letters, just to name a few. The book of Revelation is also a specific type of literature called apocalyptic literature.

That word, *apocalyptic*, has massive connotations for us. The English word *apocalypse* is a cognate of the Greek work *apokalypsis*, which means to remove the covering from something to reveal what had been concealed, an unveiling or a revelation. As a form of literature, *apocalyptic* writing reveals the mysteries of a transcendent world, information about how the cosmos works or a glimpse at the future of the world. This word, *apokalypsis*, is the first word of the book of Revelation in the original Greek, translated in English as "The revelation of Jesus Christ . . ." which gives this book its name.

There are several distinctive factors that mark apocalyptic literature that we need to keep in mind, each of which we will look at in turn. The first of these distinctive factors is the use of images and word pictures, some of them very odd and disturbing. These images often include fantastic creatures and symbolic numbers. Second, apocalyptic writings are always framed in the context of dualism, where light and dark, good and evil, truth and lies, are all in a constant struggle and are held in a sharp contrast. Third, apocalyptic literature is written with the expectation that there will be an end to history.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of apocalyptic literature to modern readers is the pervasive use of images. These images seem strange to us but they would have been very accessible to the original readers. Think about how easily we accept political

cartoons that represent groups of people as elephants and donkeys wrestling for power, because we recognize the genre and meaning of the cartoon. The same was true of ancient readers and the images found in Revelation.

The images used in Revelation have two distinct functions: to describe things that are impossible to describe in human language and to hide the meaning of the message from outsiders that were hostile toward Christianity in the first century. Yet, we must keep in mind that these images and symbolic language is not a "code" with a one to one correlation between symbol and meaning.

Remember, Biblical images are not empty, disposable containers of meaning. Instead they serve to point our minds to things that cannot be expressed otherwise. There were a number of people who would have liked nothing more than to crush the Christian movement in its infancy. This meant that the writings of Christianity, including the book of Revelation, were scrutinized so that if anything suspect was found it would be a reason to take an overly aggressive action against the church. Therefore, these images in Revelation often served as a way of communicating to the original reader in a way that "outsiders" would not have understood.

An example of this is seen in the "number of the beast" shown in Revelation: 666. In Revelation we read:

This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666.

Revelation 13:18

Let's take a closer look at this verse. John writes that to understand this verse calls for wisdom, Bringing the reader's attention to the fact that someone needs to use "insight" and to "calculate" the number, which is a "man's number." In ancient languages, letters were not just used for words, but also to represent numbers.

What John is saying is that this number, 666, represents a man and that it needed to be calculated to solve whom the man was. Most scholars believe the letters correspond to the Hebrew letters: Noon (50) Resh (200) Vav (6) Noon (50) Qof (100) Samech (60) Resh (200) which totals 666 and which spells NRON QSR.

Doesn't look like much, but remember that in Hebrew vowels weren't written, only constantans. This then spells: Neron Qaesar which corresponds to the Greek Nerōn Kaisar, which we would know in English as Nero Caesar. Nero, who ruled as Emperor of Rome, killed Christians through a variety disturbing means, including crucifixion, feeding them to beasts, and wrapping them in combustible clothing and burning them alive. John is writing about Nero in such a way that he can encourage Christians suffering under his rule without actually saying his name, which would have been suicidally dangerous.

All of this is to say that we must take care when we encounter images in the book of Revelation. People can sometimes jump immediately to the conclusion that every image in the book of Revelation is completely literal, as if there were only two options: 100% literal or complete fiction. This is simply not the case. Some of these images are an attempt for a human to capture, in human language, things beyond all human comprehension. John tells us that the images were revealed to him in a dream in order for him to

understand things about God and heaven. Some of these images are just that, an attempt to describe God and heaven in words that are just too small to capture this.

Other images are like the one explained above and refer to very real things of the past. Other images are mysterious and it's impossible for us to know if they are literal or not. As you read and engage with the book of Revelation, take special note of the images that you come across.

Another aspect of apocalyptic literature found in the book of Revelation is the struggle between good and evil. The book of Revelation makes it very clear that there are two forces active in the world: God and Satan. These opposing forces are seen in Revelation as battling in cosmic episodes. Yet, let's not be fooled into thinking that these encounters are something purely extraterrestrial and removed from our lives.

The epic description of this battle between God and the powers of darkness mirror the reality of struggle and warfare that happens in each of our lives everyday. One of the stories in the book of Revelation is actually a retelling of the Christmas story. We might be familiar with the traditional Christmas story where a baby Jesus enters the world amidst a cadre of shepherds and barnyard animals. Yet, from the view of heaven things look entirely different (read Revelation 12).

Think of it, the birth of a baby, which went largely unnoticed by the world when it happened, caused quite a stir in heaven. There are not shepherds or inns or even a single sheep. Instead, in Revelation we read about a great dragon who is hunting down the baby to

try and kill it. Not exactly the scene portrayed on most Christmas cards.

Yet, what this section of Revelation makes clear is that there is a whole different way of looking at the everyday events of our lives: from the standpoint of heaven.

It's easy to think our lives are isolated things and that the minor events of our days and nights don't really matter. What we see in the book of Revelation is that this simply isn't the case. Our lives matter and to a degree we don't often realize. As you read through the book of Revelation, don't miss how often the lives of simple, faithful people are noticed in heaven.

A final characteristic seen in apocalyptic literature is the belief that at some point in the future history will end. This is possibly the most well known aspect of the book of Revelation, a description of the end of time. It's this aspect of Revelation that inspires outlandish movies and tabloid headlines. The thing is, if we read the book of Revelation we might find something we didn't expect with regard to the end of time. What we find is hope.

If there is one overarching theme throughout the book of Revelation, it is this: hope. Over and over again we see that God is in control. Satan opposes God. For the time being Satan has some power, at least for now. Like a mortally wounded lion, Satan still prowls the world and his bite is still powerful. For those who wander into the range of Satan's reach, there is real danger and pain and hardships. But his time is short. In the end, Satan's power is simply insignificant compared to God's.

There is nothing that happens that is beyond the strength of God. And there will come a day in the future when all of the pain and tears of our world will be wiped away. There will come a day when the powers of darkness will be overthrown and all of the evil of the world will be destroyed. Even death, the ancient adversary of mankind, will itself die.

As it says in Revelation:

Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

Revelation 21:3-4

There will be a time when all of the things that are wrong with the world will be set right. There will be a time when broken hearts will be mended. There will be a time when all of the old things will pass away. Because God is in control.

God is in control. This is something worth remembering. This was something that those who suffered under Emperor Nero or Domitian or Trajan or any other ancient power needed to remember. They were surrounded by might and strength and were held under the thumb of people who were in charge. But they needed to be reminded that God is greater than all of these men. God is stronger than all authority and powers of the earth.

In our lives, worries and pain and hardships surround us. And they can bombard us and we can feel overwhelmed. Yet, in the book of Revelation we see hope, because God is stronger than any hardship. God

is in control. God is the King. In that there is great hope.

In Revelation we read:

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"

Revelation 5:13

This is the story of Revelation. A story of God's power. A story of God's victory. A story of the great hope we have in God.

**A Bird's Eye View
Week 8
Small Group Guide**

1. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about the book of Revelation?
2. What are ways in which Revelation is often portrayed?

Read **Revelation 21:3-4, Revelation 5:13**

3. In what ways is the book of Revelations a difficult book to read?
4. What is your reaction to the statement that Revelation is really about hope?
5. How does Revelation 21:3-4 reflect hope for the future? For the hope of your personal future?

6. In passages read for today, how do you see God's power and how might this power offer you hope?
7. Revelation was written to offer encouragement to Christians struggling during hard times. In what ways do the verses we've read today encourage you?

A Bird's Eye View

Week 9

Throughout the series "A Bird's Eye View" we've been looking at the Bible from a zoomed out perspective, and focusing on large segments of the Bible. Our goal is to see how everything fits together. Yet, there are some general questions and concerns about the Bible. This week we'll take a look at questions related to the credibility and authority of the Bible.

Perhaps you've heard people glibly use the rational "because the Bible says so" as a reason to explain or excuse an assortment of things. Maybe you feel like you have to simply swallow blindly that the Bible is true or reliable.

Well, let's take some time to evaluate the Bible, not just as a document of faith, but also as a historical document. I want to make it clear that I do believe that the Bible was inspired by God, but to use that as "proof" that the Bible is reliable is like using a word to define itself. A good place for anyone who struggles with questions about the Bible to begin is to investigate it as an ancient, historical document.

We're going to be spending some time this week doing just that, taking a look at the historical

authenticity of the Bible and specifically the Gospels, or the stories about Jesus' life.

There are two main areas that textual critics (people who evaluate writings for a living) look at while addressing the historical veracity of a document: internal and external criteria. Internal criteria pertains to all information inside of the document in question while external applies (obviously) to all criteria outside of the document. This distinction will be made clearer throughout this week's readings.

Let's look at some of the internal questions that are asked of any ancient document (including the Bible) and determine how the Bible stacks up. I've borrowed these internal questions from Dr. Gregory Boyd's book *Letters from a Skeptic*. They are as follows:

1. Was the author in a position to know what he or she is writing about? Does the text claim to be an eyewitness account or is the text based on eyewitness accounts?
2. Does the document contain specific and largely irrelevant details?
3. Does the document contain any self-damaging material?
4. Is the document reasonably self-consistent?

These questions form the backbone of how to critique an ancient document for the internal criteria. Now let's answer these questions with regard to the Biblical accounts of Jesus' life (the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), also known as the Gospels.

Question 1 - The book of John directly claims to be an eyewitness account of the life of Jesus. The book of Luke tells that the author sought out and investigated

eyewitness accounts in order to write "an orderly and truthful account" of the life of Jesus. The books of Matthew and Mark are written from an eyewitness perspective, but they do not state so explicitly. If a book does not even claim any firsthand information, then it should be disregarded as a reliable historical document. The Bible does make this claim.

Question 2 - Firsthand sources typically contain many specific details not central to the story while fabricated and fictional material tends to be more general in nature. The Gospels are full of such extraneous, specific details. Take the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb as an example (found in John 20: 1-8).

The day of the week is given (who cares?) as well as the time of day (does it matter?). John, the author, refers to himself as "the one Jesus loved," another detail of authenticity, since it would have been clearer to simply state his name. John remarked that he and Peter raced to the tomb and that John won the footrace (so what?). John bent over and looked into the tomb (tombs in ancient times were low, a detail that adds authenticity) and John sees strips of linen but doesn't enter (why not, why even include this detail?). Peter catches up and enters the tomb to find the burial shroud (an irrelevant detail of what was Jesus wearing). More than that, the cloth was folded and separate from the linen (is there any detail more irreverent than this, that Jesus folded his burial shroud before leaving the tomb?). Finally, John enters the tomb (who cares what order they entered?).

These details add nothing to the content of the story and are added with the author's recollection as he wrote. This, again, adds tremendous levels

authenticity. These sorts of details are littered throughout the Gospels and clearly answer the second question of internal authenticity.

Question 3 - The Bible is full of self-damaging material that would have been removed if the account was written later or was a fabrication. In the passage we just looked at, the first person to discover the empty tomb was a woman (Mary Magdalene), which would have damaged the claims that Jesus rose from the dead in ancient times, since the word of a woman was not considered trustworthy. All throughout the Gospels the disciples are consistently shown in a negative light, they just don't seem to get it. There are also details included in the Gospels that would not have been included if one was fabricating a story to convince people Jesus was God, such as Jesus crying out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is a difficult teaching and it would only make sense to include this quote if Jesus actually said it.

Question 4 - The Gospel accounts are amazingly consistent across the four books, yet each contains significant differences. If the story isn't true, where does the consistency come from? If the four Gospels were fabricated together, the differences would have been smoothed out or deleted. Slight inconsistencies between different witnesses adds credibility. This is a sign of authenticity.

I hope you're beginning to see that the Gospel accounts stand up very well to internal textual criticism.

As far as the external criteria, we'll again ask several questions that are used to determine the

validity of an ancient document. These questions include:

1. Would the authors of the document have had motive for fabricating what they wrote?
2. Are there any other sources outside of the document that confirm material found in the document and/or which substantiate its genuineness?
3. Does archeology support material in the document?
4. Could contemporaries of the document falsify its account, and would they have motive to do so?

So, once again, how does the Gospel accounts stand up to these questions.

Question 1 - What possible reason did the authors (Jesus' disciples) have for fabricating the Gospel accounts? Far from gaining anything from this, they suffer greatly for it. Why would the disciples create a lie and then maintain that lie in the face of severe persecution? There are no compelling reasons to think the disciples fabricated the Gospels for their own gain, since they gained nothing from creating them. There are virtually no scholars (Christian or otherwise) that doubt the disciple's sincerity.

Question 2 - Numerous sources in the second century attest to the authorship of the Gospels. There is also information about Jesus, the early church, and the disciples from accounts found outside of the Bible, including in writings by: Tacitus (ca. 55-120), Suetonius (early second century), Josephus (ca. 37-97), Thallus (mid first century), Pliny (early second century) and ancient Jewish writings against Christianity (called the Talmud). Each of these helps substantiate the Gospel accounts.

Question 3 - There are no conclusive archeological finds that refute any biblical account. There are, however, many that support the Bible. There are too many examples to list, but one of note is the census taken under the governor Quirinius, which resulted in Jesus being born in Bethlehem. It was believed that archeological finds would refute this claim, but further evidence strongly supports this historical event described in the Gospels.

Question 4 - There were many different people and groups that wanted to undermine Christianity and the claims made in the Gospels, if they could have. Judaism viewed Christianity as a cult that needed to be stamped out. Why not just present the body of a dead Jesus and extinguish Christianity once and for all? Yet, in spite of the opposition, Christianity spread like wildfire. Even those who opposed Jesus never discredited his miracles or even that his tomb was empty, only that he accomplished these things through trickery, the power of Satan, or that the disciples stole the body (but remember, what did they have to gain from pretending that Jesus rose from the dead?). If the claims were false and there was strong opposition, it stands to reason that the opposition would have exposed the falsehoods.

To sum all of this up, internally and externally, the Gospel accounts are good sources of history and are reliable documents. And this has nothing to do with the Bible being God's word or being "inspired." What we can rely on is that the Bible is a reliable historical document. This means that we have solid ground to stand on when reading the Bible, and we have good reason to believe the claims found there.

Another objection people sometimes have about the Bible is with regard to the miracles and "myths" in the Bible. After all, how can you trust a document that is filled with supernatural and (for some literally) unbelievable stories?

First of all, we have to understand that the miraculous things we read about in the Bible were not commonplace back then any more than they're commonplace now. God parted the Red Sea *once*. God created a giant fish to swallow a disobedient prophet *once*. God saved three faithful men from the flames of a fiery furnace *once*. We sometimes get the impression that these things happened all of the time because they are recorded in the same book. This impression is false, as indicated by the reaction that normally accompanies these miraculous feats, which is always amazement, doubt, and fear.

Second, we must realize that we've bought into a very misguided idea that the Bible must be 100% literal in order to be 100% inspired by God. In the Bible, God uses poetry, songs, metaphors, and symbolism in order to reveal some aspect of truth about himself. There is no reason to believe that God must limit himself to the genre of historical literature as a means of revelation. If you're familiar with how Jesus taught you'll see this point expressed another way. Over and over again Jesus teaches by telling stories that are not literally true but that are true in a much deeper (and more important) way.

This begs the questions, of course, how do you know what is literal and what is symbolic in the Bible? This is an important question, but in the end, not very much depends on it. You see, we have bought into the mindset that everything must be literal to be true instead of believing that it's true in the deepest

sense simply because it's God's word and must, therefore, be taken seriously.

So, if you have a problem with the story of creation because it includes a talking snake, remember that the point of the story is not about a snake's ability to talk, but about sin, disobedience, temptation, and turning away from God. This story is incredibly profound. Is its ability to teach us and guide us determined solely on whether the talking snake is literal or not? I hope we don't get so caught up into determining the literalness of these sorts of details that we miss the real point of the story in the first place.

This touches onto the point of who authored the Bible. Again, I don't mean to downplay this question, but very little hangs on this. Some people believe that Moses authored the first five books of the Old Testament while others do not. But what does it change? Does it change its impact of the book of Genesis if Moses didn't write it? Does it make it less God's word? I don't think so.

I know this is challenging to many people, but remember that the Bible was not written in our modern (and now postmodern) times. We sometimes place importance on things that Biblical writers would not have. I hope none of us miss the forest for the trees. Don't let small details get in the way of letting the Bible instruct, lead, and inspire you into a deeper relationship with God.

Another question that often arises about the Bible is how it was "put together." This process is called "canonization" and it is where the Biblical canon (that's with one "n" not two), the books of the Bible considered authoritative and authentic, was formed.

Movies like *The Da Vinci Code* give people the impression that the Catholic Church put together the Bible in the fifth century and that a group of bishops arbitrarily voted on which books were allowed into the Bible and which were not, based primarily on personal or selfish reasons. How could a group of bishops hundreds of years after the books of the Bible were written decide which got into the Bible and which didn't? How can we trust the Bible in light of this?

There are several misconceptions we need to clear up with regard to this question. It's true that a formal list of the canonical books of Bible wasn't established until the fifth century and that there were a few people who quibbled over a couple of books in the Bible for some time (people still do, by the way).

But the early church recognized and used the books of the Bible as authoritative long before this official formation of the canon. If you looked at nothing except the writings of early church leaders (often known as the church fathers), you could piece together 90% of the New Testament just from quotes in their writing up through the third century. The early church fathers clearly held the Bible as we know it now as authoritative.

In fact, the only reason an "official" canon became necessary was because of a man named Marcion. Marcion hated Jews, hated the Old Testament, and started his own twisted form of Christianity. He also decided to create his own bible. He excluded the Old Testament (which he claimed was written by an evil god) and used only fragments of the New Testament that he cut and paste together to fit his own self-serving and heretical theology.

Marcion's movement began to catch on and the leaders of the church had to take a stand on what was and wasn't true in the New Testament. It wasn't that the church established a new canon as much as they were confronting a false teaching. The truth is that the canon of the New Testament was acknowledged as inspired almost right from the start. But because of some incorrect teaching and fabricated accounts there was a need to close the canon so that false teaching would not proliferate.

We must also keep in mind that the official formation of the Biblical canon was not something that was done flippantly. These people were dying for their faith and they wanted to be sure that what they were dying for was from God. No one wants to be killed over a lie. They applied pretty stringent criteria on the books in the official canon. Who wrote it? When was it written? Is it consistent with other book of the Bible that are held by everyone as being inspired? Did churches receive it as being inspired right from the start? Does it contain the transformational power of God?

This is the reason why some other book, namely books like the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas (often known as the Gnostic Gospels), are not included in the Biblical canon, because the answers to the above questions found them lacking.

Perhaps you still wonder if we got it right. What if some worthy book was left out? What if some inferior book got in? In the end, all of the evidence and arguments can't help us take the step of faith required to trust that God was just as active in the process of forming the canon as he was in the original process of writing the books of the Bible. God went to such great lengths to reveal himself to us through

Jesus and to save us through the sacrifice of his Son that I have to believe God would also oversee the process of how that information is passed down to us.

There are many more questions about the Bible that can be asked and I hope this week has equipped you to ask them more confidently. Please allow me say one final word concerning this topic. If you have hang-ups or reservations are about the Bible, I would encourage you to open up the book and read it. It's easy to find reasons to *not* read the Bible if you want, people have been coming up with new ones for generations. But I would encourage you to engage fully with the Bible for yourself. Through it, God shows himself to us in ways that are both beautiful and powerful.

A Bird's Eye View
Week 9
Small Group Guide

1. To what degree do you struggle with questions about the Bible?
2. What was your understanding of the Bible when you were a child?
3. What are some of the common questions or doubts people have about the Bible?
4. What value is there in looking at the Bible as a historical document as well as a document of faith?

Read: 2 Timothy 3:10-17, Psalm 119:104-106

5. The Bible describes itself as being useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training, as

well as being a lamp to our path. Which of these do you most often think of with regard to the Bible and why?

6. After reading this week's daily thoughts, do you feel more equipped to engage with the Bible? Why or why not?
7. In spite of any doubts or questions, how often and how deeply do you engage with the Bible?

NOTES: