



Great Themes of the Bible

SESSION 1

If we view the Bible as one whole document, what is it saying? What are the big messages by which interior messages are to be interpreted?

Goal for the Session

Participants will discern in their minds and hearts the critical character of *presence* in our lives, both human presence and God's Presence. They will also learn that the affirmation "God is with us" is a fundamental message of the Bible.

Preparing for the Session

- In this study, you will be trying to put participants in touch with the critical importance of human presence and of God's Presence. You will also want them to learn how the whole Bible was written to answer the question "Is anyone there?" Some of your group will "get it." Others may not. They may think of this as a mere psycho-game, or they may think at this stage in their lives that other people are not that important to them. You, the teacher, need to prepare yourself to treat all responses honorably and respectfully.
- The room needs to allow for two seating arrangements: (a) in a single group where all can be addressed by you and speak to one another, and (b) in sets of three where the three can talk comfortably.
- You need to have a writing board.
- Each participant will need writing paper, a pen or pencil, and a Bible.

Teaching Tips

To teach this session most effectively, do two things:

- Think through your own life and identify (as I have in the Participant Handout) occasions when the need for and value of *presence* have been particularly

strong in your life—first human presence and then God's Presence. What is at stake? What happens to us when there is "presence"? What happens, or fails to happen, when there is not? Think through your own experience.

- From the Bible survey in the Participant Handout and from your own Bible knowledge, identify what you think are the most persuasive indicators that the message "God is with us" is fundamental to the Bible. Do you come up with other biblical instances? Prepare to build with the group the Bible-wide picture I have surveyed and to include any other examples you want to add.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Introduce the Subject

Say: The Bible as a whole book contains several messages. We will study four. The first, today, is "God is with us." We will examine the importance of presence, of our being present with one another, and of the Bible's affirmation that God is present with us.

2. Litany

Have the class read responsively Psalm 139:1–18. Read the odd-numbered verses aloud, and ask participants to read the even-numbered verses.

3. Prayer

Almighty God, through this time together, open our minds and hearts to the presence of people who accompany us through life and to your Presence with us. Have us discern, if we do not already, how critical this is to our lives. **Amen.**

Exploring (30 minutes)

There are two parts in this exploration. Split the time approximately equally between them. You will not have a lot of time for either part but must continually nudge the group forward. There is plenty of time for them to get the point. The first part explores human presence in our lives and how important it is. The second part explores “God is with us” as a fundamental message in the Bible.

4. The Presence of Others

Instruct the group to imagine that they are looking at themselves straight on in a mirror. Have them roughly sketch their outline in the center of a sheet of paper, not using the whole page, and to label the figure “Me.” Now ask them to think carefully about people who most closely “accompany” them through life, people nearest and most important to them—whether living or dead. Have them pick three such people, at least two of whom are not close family members but are friends and acquaintances. Ask them to draw off to the side of their outline figures that represent the people they have picked. Have them name each figure and write a single word that states the major significance of that person’s accompaniment in their life. “Courage” might describe a person who, when they face a hard dilemma, gives them courage. “Companionship” might describe a person who, when they feel particularly lonely, tells them that they are not alone. Give no more than five minutes, preferably three, to this activity.

Then divide all participants into groups of three. Each person in the group is to tell about his or her sketch, to describe the persons who accompany him or her, and to explain the words attributed to each person. Each participant gets three minutes. Urge the groups to monitor their time carefully, and help them do so. Make sure all persons are heard.

Summarize by saying that we have talked together about people who “accompany” us in life. The point is for us to understand how important this is (critical to the emotional well-being of most of us!) and the roles such people play.

5. God’s Presence

Closely related to human presence in our lives is God’s Presence in our lives. This is one of the central messages of the whole Bible, that “God is with us.” There are many times when God does not seem to be with us, when God’s

Absence seems far stronger than God’s Presence, but the Bible affirms that *God does not abandon us!* To get a picture of this Bible message, do the following exercise.

Have the participants number themselves from 1 to 7. Assign the following sections from the Participant Handout.

Group 1 is to read “Presence in the Bible: Creation and Fall.”

Group 2 is to read “God’s Call to Abraham.”

Group 3 is to read “Cloud by Day and Pillar of Fire by Night.”

Group 4 is to read “Ark of the Covenant.”

Group 5 is to read “Destruction of Jerusalem and Exile.”

Group 6 is to read “King of the Jews.”

Group 7 is to read “The Revelation.”

Have one person from each group briefly report what the section says, and you, the leader, build a single picture of the Bible’s testimony, adding any other biblical data you think is pertinent. Conclude with the observation that the Bible certainly affirms “God is with us” as one of its primary messages, while the people of God believe they are experiencing at times God’s Presence and at other times God’s Absence in their lives.

If there is time remaining ask: Will one of you tell a brief story of a time when God was especially present with you, when you felt strongly supported and upheld? Analogously, can one of you tell a brief story of a time when God seemed absent, when you felt abandoned?

If no participant comes up with a good story, can you?

Responding (5 minutes)

6. General Review

Pose these questions: What have you learned here today? What have you become newly aware of? How, specifically, will it affect the way you live? What do you hear God calling you to do as a result of this session?

Closing (5 minutes)

7. Paul’s Understanding of God’s Presence

Point out to the group that the apostle Paul, who lived a tumultuous and tortured life, wrote one of the most

powerful statements in the Bible regarding God's Presence in his life. Have a volunteer read Paul's description of his life in 2 Corinthians 11:24–27. Then have the entire group read in unison Paul's statement about God's love, Romans 8:38–39.

8. Prayer

Lord God, when we walk the same journey traveled by Paul, one of challenges and hardships and tribulations, give us the same faith Paul had, that nothing can separate us from your love. Be ever present with us, we pray. **Amen.**

9. Preparing for the Next Session

Distribute the second Participant Handout and have participants commit to reading it before the next session.

Teaching Alternatives

- Read each of the following quotations to the group and have them ask themselves this question: Has there ever been a time when this statement represented me?

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,
Creeps on this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing! (William Shakespeare,
Macbeth, 5.5.26–28)

Hell is other people! (Albert Camus, *No Exit*)

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
A long way from home
A long way from home (old spiritual)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
(Ps. 22:1)

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your

hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.
(John 14:27)

- Create a role-play between one person and the rest of the group. Assume they are very good friends; they know one another well. The person is experiencing a great difficulty in life. He or she keeps praying to God for help, but help does not seem to come. The situation gets no better. This person describes his or her experience and expresses exasperation at God's Absence, at the repeated prayers with no answer. His or her final statement is, "I feel like shouting, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"

Let various participants express how they, believers in the Bible's message that "God is with us," would respond to their good friend. What is the best we can do for this person?

- Expand on the last paragraph of "Exploring" activity 5. Have each member write at the top of a sheet of paper the words "I know about." Beneath those words, list "Presence" and "Absence." Invite each participant to relate a story that tells why he or she knows about Presence or Absence.

For More Information

Quaker psychologist Douglas Van Steere has published a number of writings on this theme:

Douglas Van Steere, *On Being Present Where You Are* (Wallingford, PA: Pendleton Hill Publications, 1967).

Douglas Van Steere, *On Confirming the Deepest Thing in Another* (Philadelphia: Wider Quaker Fellowship, 1983).

Douglas Van Steere, *On Listening to One Another* (New York: Harper, 1955).

Douglas Van Steere, ed., *The Practice of the Presence of God by Brother Lawrence* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1950).

Douglas Van Steere, *Together in Solitude* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

The messages focused on in this four-session study are also at the center of the author's published work:

James O. Chatham, *Creation to Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).