



Great Themes of the Bible

SESSION 2

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 learn that the affirmation “When God comes to earth, it is not to consult with kings on how to rule but with slaves on how to escape” is a fundamental message of the Bible, reflected across the entire book. They will also reflect on what this message means for our faith and life now.

Preparing for the Session

- In this session, you will be setting before the group a message that is highly prominent in the Bible but is often relegated to a low priority in the lives of Christians and churches: God’s special compassion for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the slave and God’s repeated admonition that you and I are to share that compassion. The most important thing for you, the leader, to do in preparation is to determine the position you want to represent. Can you wholeheartedly endorse the message as presented, or do you have reservations? What are your reservations, and where do they come from? From the Bible? From what you sense is reality? Define what you believe as clearly as possible. Don’t make the session just a proclamation of what you think, but on the other hand, if you bounce around from place to place, you will confuse the group.
- 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 small groups of two or three.
- You will need a writing board.
- Each participant will need paper, a writing instrument, and a Bible.

Teaching Tips

Your first major task will be to take the rather sweeping Bible panorama presented in the Participant Handout and turn it into a Bible-wide picture for the group. You will be calling on participants to help you, but I suggest you develop your own Bible-wide picture before you begin so that you will know where you are going.

Your second task will be to moderate a discussion of questions. Be prepared to note all major statements made, giving various positions respected status. You do not have to reach agreement.

Your third task will be to solicit and note statements of commitment, actions people may be ready to take.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Introducing the Subject

The Bible as a whole book speaks several messages. Today, we study the second of four: “When God comes to earth, it is not to consult with kings on how to rule but with slaves on how to escape.” We will first study the prominence of this message across the Bible and then raise questions about its meaning in our present-day lives.

2. Responsive Reading

Have half the group stand and read in unison Deuteronomy 8:7–10 and then the other half stand and read in unison Deuteronomy 8:11–18.

3. Prayer

Tune our minds and hearts to your Word, O Lord, that we shall hear what your faithful people of old have said to us and then hear what you are speaking through their words. **Amen.**

Exploring (30 minutes)

There are two parts to this exploration. You may need to allot the first part a few more minutes than the second. The first explores the many and varied expressions of God's passion for the oppressed as they occur across the Bible. The second part asks the meaning of this in our lives.

4. Small Groups

Create five small groups within the group. Number them 1 through 5. Assign the following sections from the Participant Handout.

Group 1 is to read "God Relates to Slaves."

Group 2 is to read "In the Law."

Group 3 is to read "In the Prophets."

Group 4 is to read "In the Psalms."

Group 5 is to read "In the New Testament."

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 this is the Bible's statement that when God comes to earth, it is not to consult with kings on how to rule but with slaves on how to escape and the Bible's expansion on what that means.

5. In Our Time

With the participants following along, read aloud the questions raised in the "In Our Time" section of the Participant Handout, beginning with the third paragraph and moving to the end of the section. Invite the group to suggest questions they would like to address. Identify three such questions. Place them in whatever order seems best, and let the group address and discuss them.

Then pose these questions: In what ways does this biblical message come across as good news to you? When is this word of God's grace spoken into your life?

Responding (5 minutes)

6. Evaluation

Conclude with these questions: Through this session, what have you heard the Bible saying? What, specifically, do you hear God calling you to do? What are you already doing that is given encouragement by this group?

Solicit statements from several people in response to these questions.

Closing (5 minutes)

7. Responsive Reading and Prayer

Close by moving through the group and asking individual members to read, one after another, the verses of Deuteronomy 15:7-15.

Then lead the same prayer with which you began the session:

Tune our minds and hearts to your Word, O Lord, that we shall hear what your faithful people of old have said to us and then hear what you are speaking through their words. **Amen.**

8. Preparing for the Next Session

Distribute the Participant Handout for session 3, and have members commit to reading it before the next session.

Teaching Alternatives

Other questions can be posed to the participants under this study, such as these:

- After I finished teaching a Sunday school class based on this material, a very well-off member of the class said, "I always liked what Dr. Wilson used to say: that if you took all the money in the world and distributed it equally among all the world's people, within five years you would get the same divisions of rich and poor that we have today. Some people just know what to do with wealth, and others don't. That's my philosophy." What do you think the Bible says to that philosophy? How do you evaluate it?
- In a sermon recently, the preacher said, "The most morally obscene language I know of today is the term *entry-level job*. It means paying someone an

inexcusably low wage to do work that deserves much more. The term is obscene because we use it to hide our own immorality from our own eyes and make it sound okay.” How do you evaluate that statement? What do you think the Bible says to it?

- Some people have understood this biblical message—that God has a special compassion for the poor—to mean that God especially cares for those of us who suffer poverty and oppression, that when we are weak and needy God especially cares about us. How do you evaluate that interpretation? Is it a cop-out, or is it legitimate?
- An oft-stated response to this theology is “Too much politics from the pulpit! This gets into matters the church should stay out of: worker pay and benefits, tax law, and economic policy. The church doesn’t have the expertise to speak in these areas. It needs to stick to what it does best: preaching repentance, saving souls, and directing people’s lives toward heaven.” How do you evaluate that interpretation?

- A newspaper story told of a woman in Dallas who for eight years has lived in a small apartment, worked very hard to send money back to her family and children in Mexico, lived as a law-abiding citizen and responsible community member, and kept a very low profile—she is an illegal alien. Is it possible that God considers this woman “a slave in Egypt”? Assuming, on the one hand, that it is realistically impossible to open the borders of this country to anyone from anywhere who wants to enter but realizing, on the other hand, that God has special compassion for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the slave, what sort of immigration policy would you favor for this country? What would be its major contours?

For More Information

The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976); see “poor” and “poverty.”

Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002).