



# Great Themes of the Bible

## SESSION 4

*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 the meaning and breadth of the statement "God is always bigger than we think." They will learn how the Bible repeatedly affirms that the statement is true. They will learn of the natural human tendency to cast God smaller than God is.

### Preparing for the Session

- The most necessary element in leader preparation is to try to make sure you yourself get the point. American culture (indeed, almost all cultures) does a grand and magnificent job of domesticating the Holy, of reducing God to the size of our religion, our church, our beliefs, our needs, our wants, our preoccupations, our nation, our interests, our type of people. This God reinforces our viewpoints. This God also *sells*, creating large congregations, huge book sales, well-funded television programs, and excellent fundraising. God, our God, is America's pet. The Bible insists that every time we domesticate God, God steps outside our boundaries into strange and foreign territories and confounds what we thought we knew. God is marvelously free of the definitions and restraints we impose, and God expresses that freedom repeatedly! Prepare for leading this session by comprehending this point accurately and being able to represent it well, whether you agree with it fully or not.
- The second preparation is to get into your mind the whole biblical picture presented in the Participant Handout. The concept is alive and always moving.
- The third preparation is to bring to your consciousness as many instances as you can in which our culture domesticates God. These include crossing

ourselves before shooting free throws, asserting that God is on our side in a personal or international conflict, believing that we know God's will because the Bible states it point-blank, and writing books or praying prayers that imply that God is consumed with the issues of our personal lives and little more.

- On this subject, you may have a broad spectrum of opinion in your group. Prepare yourself to acknowledge and honor the whole spectrum. The assertion in this study may deeply honor the faith of some members and deeply offend others.
- The room needs to allow for two seating arrangements: (a) in a single group that you can easily address, and (b) in sets where two or three can talk with one another comfortably.
- You need a writing board.
- Each member will need writing paper, a writing instrument, and a Bible.

### Opening (5 minutes)

#### 1. Introducing the Subject

The Bible as a whole book speaks several messages. We have studied three: that God is with us; that when God visits earth, it is not to consult with kings on how to rule but with slaves on how to escape; and that God loves us. Today we study the fourth: that God is always bigger than we think. You and I, human beings, repeatedly perceive God in terms that are too small, too limited, too domesticated. We did this in biblical times, and we do it in our own time. The Bible seeks repeatedly to enlarge our perception of God. In this session, we will study several major occasions, and then we'll examine instances in which we now make God too small.

## 2. Scripture Reading

Read in unison Isaiah 55:8–9.

## 3. Prayer

Lead the class in the following Scripture passages as the opening prayer:

“I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him. . . . One called to the other and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory’ (Isa. 6:1–3). In awe we stand before your Presence, almighty God, aware that we are but threescore years and ten while You are from everlasting to everlasting (from Ps. 90). **Amen.**”

## Exploring (30 minutes)

### 4. Presenting the Theme

Consider how to present the following information. You may want to read sections or retell the following paragraphs in your own way and with your own words.

Ask the group to name several commonly heard descriptions of God, such as “God is our shepherd,” “God is our comforter,” “God is our father (or parent),” “God is a spirit,” “God is love,” “God is a potter,” “God is my strength,” “God is my guide,” “God is my salvation,” “God is my copilot” (from World War II), and so on. List several on the writing board. Then move down the list and note by each whether it emphasizes mainly God’s immanence or God’s transcendence. Guaranteed, at least 80 percent, if not 100 percent, will emphasize God’s immanence. Point out that this is the aspect of God’s being we humans naturally emphasize: God with us! The Bible places plenty of emphasis on it: Psalm 23; Psalm 139; Genesis 2; Genesis 22:1–14; Luke 15; John 14; Romans 8:38–39, to name a few of the many, many texts and stories. We tend to place this theology at the center of our faith. “God is very near to us” can be a highly popular theological notion. If we examine the books published each year under categories such as spirituality or popular religion, we will find that 99 percent dwell on some aspect of “God immanent.” If we listen to the preaching in the biggest and most popular churches in the country, we will find that the deity proclaimed is almost exclusively “God immanent.”

It is easy to forget that the Bible also presents another face of God: God transcendent, God not readily avail-

able, God not living at our fingertips and present at our beck and call, but God high and lifted up, God whose ways are far above our ways and whose thoughts are infinitely beyond our thoughts (Isa. 55:8–9), God who is “from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps. 90:1), God who created a universe that was good, good, good, good, good, good, and very good without a word of consultation with us (Gen. 1).

In certain situations, the Bible proclaims “God transcendent” very strongly and wants us to hear the proclamation. There come times in human life when this word is the Word. It can be exceedingly good news spoken to downcast, defeated people, or it can be exceedingly difficult news spoken to haughty, arrogant people—everything depends on the human situation. In this study, we will examine the Bible’s repeated, unending assertion that God is always bigger than we think.

### 5. Working in Groups

Divide into four work groups. Assign the following sections from the Participant Handout:

Group 1 is to read “Abraham and Sarah” and “Slaves in Egypt.”

Group 2 is to read “In the Promised Land.”

Group 3 is to read “In Exile.”

Group 4 is to read “In the New Testament.”

Bring everyone back together. Have one person from each group report briefly on what the section says. Build a single picture of the Bible’s testimony. Conclude with the observation that in many and diverse situations, bearing differing meanings, the Bible proclaims, “God is bigger than we think.” When we are destitute and oppressed, the message carries one meaning; when we are successful and pretentious, it carries another meaning; and when we are blind to an emerging reality, it carries yet a different meaning. But it is one of the Bible’s constants: “God is always bigger than we think!”

### 6. The Biblical Message for Us

Invite participants to name particular current instances when this may be the Bible’s message to us. Instances that come to my mind follow.

I found in a religious bookstore recently a small, pocket-size book titled *A Moment with God*. The book included half-page thoughts designed to turn our attention from

worldly stresses toward the assurances of the Eternal. It promised that if we would but seek God, God is always there for us, instantly present to respond to our needs. Given the Bible's testimony, I wondered what God thought of this arrangement.

There is no greater issue facing our world today than this: How should I relate to the person not like me? How should I think of the stranger, the person who has a different history, a different culture, a different language, a different color skin from mine? All of us have come forward from our past (in most cases a fairly parochial past) with suspicions and prejudices toward strangers, mental images that tend to make them a threat. I suspect that God, right now, is calling all of us believers to embrace a much wider theology, to realize that despicable Samaritans may have within them enough of God's love to aid a beaten traveler lying at the roadside (Luke 10:25–37), that military captains of the hated empire may receive the Holy Spirit and become disciples (Acts 10). I believe that God, who is transcendent over our pasts and our prejudices, is calling us faithful people to see the divine presence in the face of the stranger.

## Responding (5 minutes)

### 7. Evaluation

Pose these questions: What have you learned or perceived here today? What voices have spoken to you, and what have they said? Name one specific effect this study will have on the way you live your life. Let individuals respond.

## Closing (5 minutes)

### 8. Litany

Say the following litany. The group response is the same throughout, "From everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps. 90:2c).

**Leader:** Almighty God, in awe and wonder we stand before you.

**Participants:** From everlasting to everlasting you are God.

**Leader:** We live our days thinking that *we* are the center of time and space.

**Participants:** From everlasting to everlasting you are God.

**Leader:** Our opinions seem to us all important, right, and just in your eyes!

**Participants:** From everlasting to everlasting you are God.

**Leader:** We fight and bicker, certain that we must prevail!

**Participants:** From everlasting to everlasting you are God.

**Leader:** Teach us humility.

**Participants:** From everlasting to everlasting you are God.

**Leader:** Almighty God, in awe and wonder we stand before you.

**Participants:** From everlasting to everlasting you are God.

**All:** Amen.

## Teaching Alternatives

- Have the participants examine Genesis 1–2, two separate creation stories (the first story ends in 2:4a, and the second begins in 2:4b). Note the character of God in each story. In the first story, God is the builder of a vast cathedral the size of the universe, never once speaking with the humans—God transcendent. In the second story, God is a potter who scoops up fistfuls of clay and fashions a small, intimate garden with its contents—God immanent. Note what the Bible editor was doing by placing them side by side: offsetting an immanent God with a transcendent God and letting us know that the Bible wants us to maintain the tension.
- Compare Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 with the same analysis. The order is reversed.

## For More Information

J. B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small: A Guide for Believers and Skeptics Alike* (New York: Touchstone, 2004).

William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Continuum, 2002).