



Exploring tough questions
facing youth today

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

Building Skills for Bible Study



The Pastoral Center

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Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth

» OVERVIEW

When conversing online, the acronym IRL stands for “in real life.” The virtual world of social media, text chats, blogs, and more have the power to remove us from the real world. What we experience online can skew our perspective on what it means to be human. It can numb us, incite us, distract us, depress us, confuse us, and make us rude or impatient. Strangely, this supposedly “social” and “connected” technology can profoundly disconnect us from others.

Religious faith can also place us in a bubble, especially when it distances us from others. When we keep the prophetic message at a safe distance, obscured in theological language and abstractions, we are missing the whole point. And when we see our parish as an insider club that serves itself, we can forget the radically inclusive message entrusted to us: God’s love is for *everyone*, and God expects us to transform the *whole world* through that love.

Through the incarnation, God showed up in the real world to show us that our faith is not just about talking the talk, but also walking the walk. It can be risky. It can be confusing. It can hurt. But living out our faith can also bring us great purpose, peace, and joy.

This series connects the Bible with the tough questions that youth (and adults) encounter in their neighborhood, in school, among friends, and even online. This process will help you as a leader break open these issues in a fun and meaningful way, sparking conversation and the kind of life change Jesus invites us to embrace.

» THE ROLE OF PARENTS

As children enter middle school and high school, they become more independent, self-reliant, and, well, self-centered. This can bring parents to make assumptions that this is the time to step back, giving their child more space to form their identity. While there is truth to that at some level (adolescents definitely shouldn’t be smothered), this is a stage of life when parents should in fact *lean in*. The apparent confidence and bluster youth show on the outside can mask the insecurity and confusion on the inside. Youth need their parents to be involved more than ever.

» WHOLE FAMILY FORMATION

Parents are the primary teachers of their own children, and parishes are waking up to the fact that faith formation programs need to bring parents into the process if they hope to see faith passed on to the next generation. Recent studies give us more and more evidence that the role of parents is the most important factor in determining whether a child will embrace faith as they move toward adulthood. Research from the Center for the Applied Research on the Apostolate shows that parents who talk about their faith and show through their actions that their faith is important to them are more likely to have children who remain Catholic.

More about Whole Family Formation >>>

To learn more about how your parish can take a comprehensive whole family approach to faith formation, visit GrowingUpCatholic.com.



While whole family events with elementary-aged children are on the rise, the role of parents can be an afterthought in youth ministry. We have designed the sessions in this series to work with or without parents present, and we encourage you to offer them as parent-child events.

If you choose to involve parents, it is important to consider before each session how to best do so. Many of the activities in this series are high-energy, creative, or silly. Some parents may need some encouragement to get out of their heads and have fun with the group. A few activities involving physical contact would be inappropriate for parents and youth to participate together, and we have noted them as such.

There are a number of ways to approach discussions with parent participation. Unless you have a small group, you will likely want to break into smaller groups for conversation. Some youth may be self-conscious and unable to be completely honest and open in a group situation with a parent present. For this reason, you may choose in some cases to assign parents to different groups from their own children, or to have separate parent and child groups altogether. Be sure to cover expectations around confidentiality. It is inappropriate for a parent (or youth) to share with another parent what their child said in a small group.

Note that even if parents and their children do not share all conversations together in the session, they will still have a valuable shared experience and can have extended conversations about it later.

>> **THANK YOU**

The role you play in gathering, animating, praying with, and forming youth is a valuable one. Thank you for all you do to serve the church and its families!

Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth

» HOW TO READ THE BIBLE «««

Building Skills for Bible Study

» INTRODUCTION

Do you feel as though you've inherited one of the downswings of the Bible literacy pendulum? Why don't people, particularly youth, read this wonderful resource called the Bible? You start with Genesis 1, with great intentions, and quickly get bogged down in genealogies and technical legalities. You get *bored*. So how can we read the Bible and fall in love with it?

One of the best things Bible study leaders can do is let their own love of the Bible *show*. That kind of love is contagious. Then start with the important things like, What does the Bible tell us about God? How did the Bible come to be? How did God communicate with people before there was a Bible? Who wrote it? Where did it come from and where will it lead us? What does God expect from us? What does it have to say to us today?

The Catholic take on the Bible is summarized in an important document from the Second Vatican Council called *Dei Verbum*, also known as the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*. In this document, the bishops teach that the Bible is one of many ways God has been communicating who God is to us. In fact, God has been trying to share this with us since the beginning of time—through creation itself, then through specific individuals like Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Miriam, and the other prophets. This revelation of God is then perfected in the words and actions of God's Son, Jesus (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 3-4).

The Bible represents the part of revelation that was written down—the stories the people of God considered most sacred and important to pass on. However, it is important to remember that revelation came first, before it was written down as Sacred Scripture, and that not *all* revelation was written down. Some of it was handed down to us through the life, worship, and oral traditions of the people of God, and we call that Sacred Tradition. In the Catholic faith, Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition are two especially important sources of revelation. The one can't exist without the other, and they both have the same origin—God (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 9).

We also need to remember not to make either the Bible or Tradition into an idol. Both point us to God, but they are *not* God. While they can draw us closer to God, they should never be the object of our worship.

»»»
“[T]here exists a close connection and communion between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end.”

Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 9.





EXTENDER SESSION

Extender sessions suggest special activities related to the issue of the unit. They help accommodate the diversity of parish schedules. Since each unit is undated, participants may study units in their entirety and still participate in special events of the parish that get scheduled simultaneously with youth group time. Extender sessions can be used anytime, but the one for this unit best follows **Session 5**. Calculate now whether or not you will be using the extender session, and when.



In this series, we will focus on helping participants learn to read, love, and draw inspiration from Scripture. As Christians and as leaders, we want to pass on the life-giving and life-shaping stories of the Bible. Even better is to offer to young people the tools for delving into that rich storehouse of faith, so that they do not have to depend on someone else for knowledge and decision-making about the Bible, like people did before literacy was available to “common people.”

The goal of this unit is to help participants find their way through the Bible and make it an effective study tool for their life of faith. The unit includes resources that help participants study the Bible and understand the context in which the stories were handed down. What it *can't* necessarily convey is a love of the Bible and a relationship to the God toward whom it points. That's *your* job. But you don't have to do it alone. Ask the Spirit to help you!

» PREPARATION ALERT

Some of the participants in your group may have been given Bibles when they were in grade school. They're probably ready for a different kind of Bible now, one with study aids that will help them dig deeper. Consider getting youth to “own” their Bibles by pairing them up with adults who will shop with them for a study Bible. Perhaps you can get your congregation to foot the bill. This activity is the crux of the Extender Session. Feel free, however, to go on the Bible-buying spree *before* you start the unit, if you want participants to learn by using their own Bibles throughout this study.

The study also makes use of a number of Bible study helps, such as concordances, commentaries, study Bibles, and Bible dictionaries. Gather as many of these as you can find, and create a temporary “library” of Bible study resources to have on hand throughout the course. You can find a good selection at <http://pastoral.center/scripture-reference>.



THE TEACHING PLAN: The parts of the session guide

» **Faith story.** The session is rooted in this Bible passage.

» **Faith focus.** This is the story of the passage in a nutshell.

» **Session goal.** The entire session is built around this goal. What changes—in knowledge, attitude, and/or action—do you desire in your group?

» **Bible study skills to be practiced in this session.**

This focuses on the tools and resources needed for in-depth Bible study.

» **Materials needed and advance preparation.** This is what you will need if the session is to go smoothly. You'll feel more at ease if you've taken care of these details before you meet your group.

» FROM LIFE TO BIBLE TO LIFE

The teaching plan we use is called *life-centered*. However, when we write each session, we always begin with Scripture. We ask, what does this particular passage say, especially to youth? Each session moves from life to Bible to life. So the Bible is really at the center of this way of teaching.

In every session we try to hit upon a tough question that participants might ask. Find out what questions on this issue are important for your group. Feel free to bring your own input and invite your group members to add their own experiences.

» TEACHING THE SESSION

The five step-by-step movements will carry you from *life to the Bible and back to life*. Each session takes about 45 to 50 minutes. If there is a handout sheet for the session, take note of any complementary activities and stories.

1. **Focus.** This activity is intended to create a friendly climate within the group and to draw attention to the issue.
2. **Connect.** Talking, drawing, role playing, and other activities invite participants to express their own life experiences about the issue. Also use memory, reason, or imagination to get the group thinking about *why* they view the issue the way they do.
3. **Explore the Bible.** With a minimum of lecturing, dig into the faith story and search for answers to questions raised in the first activities. The Insights

from Scripture section will help clarify the faith story. Help participants discover how the faith community understands the Bible passage.

4. **Apply** the faith story. This is the “aha!” moment when participants realize the faith story has wisdom for their lives.
5. **Respond.** What will the group do about the issue in light of what they have learned from their own experiences set alongside the faith story? At this point, the faith story becomes lived rather than a mere intellectual exercise.

» LOOK AHEAD

Here are reminders for what you need to do for the next session or two.

» INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

Here is a resource for Explore the Bible. Don't try to use all the material given. Take what you need to lead the session and answer questions your group may have. Let the Insights section inspire you to think and study more about the passage for the session.

» HANDOUT SHEETS

Occasionally, there will be a handout sheet to complement your session. If you choose to use this, you will need to make enough copies for the group. These sheets may include questions, stories, agree/disagree exercises, charts, pictures, and other materials to stimulate your group to think and discuss.

Generally, no participant preparation is required unless the session plan calls for you to contact selected group members for specific tasks.



“You forget your mobile phone – oh! I do not have it, I go back to look for it... What would happen if we treated the Bible like we treat our cell phone? Think about this. The Bible always with us, close to us.”

Pope Francis



SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

»» SESSION 1

WHEN THERE WAS NO BIBLE »»

The Bible as Revelation

»» KEY VERSE

"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." (Genesis 12:2)

»» FAITH STORY

Genesis 12:1-7; 15:18-20; 17:15-22

»» FAITH FOCUS

This is the story of how Abraham and Sarah became aware of God and God's promise. Even before there was a Bible, Abraham and Sarah came to know God because they responded to God's promises in faith and trust. Thus, beginning with Abraham and Sarah, a people with no Bible came to know God. Eventually, people wrote about their experience of God's revelation. Some of those stories became the Bible. Though the story of Abraham and Sarah is ancient history, God is interested in communicating with us at all times. It's up to us to be open to hear and respond to God.

»» SESSION GOAL

Help participants see how the Bible is a people's testimony of how they experienced God and how God's character and will were first revealed because God made and kept promises.

»» Materials needed and advance preparation

- Writing paper
- Antique tool or kitchen implement (could even be an invention of your own, the use of which is not readily recognizable)
- Bibles
- Four drinking glasses and three table knives (*Option A* in Apply). Fill one of the glasses with water. Practice the stunt ahead of time.
- Chalkboard/chalk or newsprint/marker
- Copies of the handout sheet for Session 1



TEACHING PLAN

1. FOCUS 5 minutes

Put an antique tool or kitchen implement, something youth would not likely recognize, on a table in the middle of the room. Let people look at it, handle it, wonder about it. Ask, *What do you think it's used for? What might you call it? How could we find out about it?* (If someone *does* know what it's for, ask them to imagine that they don't know what it is, and think of other uses or meanings for it.) The point is to get people thinking about how they get familiar with an unfamiliar object.



2. CONNECT 5-10 minutes

Now move from getting to know the *object* to the *people* in your group. Have each person tell something about themselves that others do not know. It could be a hobby or special interest or special dream or something they have done. The idea is not to share some deep secret, but simply some information. Start the process by sharing something about yourself. Keep it short by restricting stories to 25 words or less.

Then pick up the antique and say, *It's easy to get to know **things**. You see, touch, smell, taste, or hear them. But how do you come to know a **person**? What do you think?*

You will probably get responses phrased in terms of what people *said* and *did*. Point out how each of the responses show up things that *reveal who the person is*. **We know a person through self-revelation!** Make this point.

But there is something missing. A person may be known differently by two different people, even if they've heard and seen the same things. Why? In order for us to know a person there has to be self-disclosure (revelation) from the person we are learning to know, and we have to respond appropriately to that revelation.

Now help the group take the next step. Ask: *How do we learn to know God? Imagine there are people who know nothing about God. They have no Bible. There is no one to tell about God. How can God connect with such people?* Ask for suggestions.

Participants may say "God spoke to them" through a dream or some critical event. But regardless of the means through which it is suggested that God was revealed, ask how they know it to be true. Is it more than wishful thinking or inherited belief?

Shift to the next activity by saying: *Of course, there really was a time when there was no Bible, and no one to tell about God. Abraham and Sarah and their people lived at such a time. But the way they came to know God is the way we can come to know God. Let's see what happened.*

3. EXPLORE THE BIBLE 25 minutes

Divide into three groups. Assign one of the following Bible passages to each group:

- Genesis 12:1-7
- Genesis 15:18-20
- Genesis 17:15-22

Ask each group to identify the promise God made to Abram and Sarai. After a few minutes, have them **identify the promise** of their passage with the larger group. (Make sure participants are not confused by the names Abram/Abraham and Sarai/Sarah—see Genesis 17:5, 15).

Then give the following mini-lecture. Write the main headings on the chalkboard or newsprint.

The setting

Abram and Sarai and their people left their homeland in Ur of the Chaldeans. It could have been because of war or famine; we are not told. We know that Abram and Sarai were concerned about the life of their people. Where should they graze the cattle? How could they survive without land?

God is present to Abraham

God came to Abraham in this crisis with the promise of life. It was a promise, and there were as yet no guarantees. It could have been a subjective, inner feeling on

the part of Abraham for he did not yet know that God would keep the promise. But Abraham became aware of God's presence with him and he received the word of promise.

God's promise

God's promise was related to Abraham and Sarah's deepest concerns. Their first concern was about being able to survive as a people. God promised that they would become a great people! They had no land and God promised them land! Abraham and Sarah had no son to inherit their property and people, and God gave them a son. The promises all related to their need. It was almost too good to believe.

The response of Abraham and Sarah

Abraham and Sarah believed in and accepted God's message as a promise of life. Maybe they felt they didn't have any better prospects! At any rate, they staked their lives and that of the people on the promise. They acted on it.

The confirmation of the promise

Even though it wasn't always easy to "keep the faith," Abraham and Sarah eventually realized that God had indeed kept the promise of life. God protected them on their journey. They came to no harm though they were in enemy territory. God gave Abraham and Sarah a son. At the end of Sarah's life, Abraham managed to buy the cave of Macpellah and took this as a sign that the land would someday belong to his people.

By believing and responding to God's promises, Abraham and Sarah learned that God is faithful. They might have been going out on a limb to believe in the first place, because they had little to go on. But eventually, the evidence piled up: God makes promises full of life, and keeps them.

Witness to the revelation received

This confirmed promise had to be shared with others, and what they shared became the basis of other people's faith and trust in God. As more and more people confirmed the truth of God's promise, it became important to remember what God had done for the people. It was so important that it became a sacred trust.

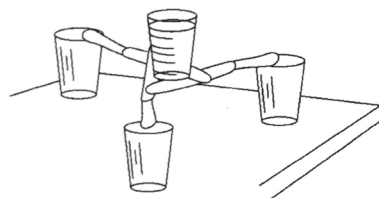
4. APPLY 8 minutes

» **Option A:** Put participants in the place of Abraham and Sarah, the ones who learn to trust the promise, by doing the following stunt:

Place three glasses on a table in a triangle a little longer than a knife-long span away from each other. Say:

*I plan to support the fourth glass, full of water, in the middle of the other glasses at glass-height above the table, using the three knives. Who believes I can do it? (Wait for response.) Who is willing to take off their shoe and put it in the middle of the glasses, **under** the full glass of water? I promise I won't get it wet.*

Weave the knives as shown, and the support you create will hold the fourth glass easily.



Go on to *Option A* in Respond.

LOOK AHEAD

Keep adding to your “library” of Bible study resources for this unit: Have study Bibles and concordances on hand for the next session. A digital camera or phone camera is also called for in one option.



The Bible is actually a “library” of 73 books (66 for Protestants) written over a span of more than 1000 years. What ties these books together, says Bible scholar Etienne Charpentier, is that they are written by people “seized with a passion for God.”



» **Option B:** Put participants in the place of the promise-maker. Say: *Like God before the Bible, you as a worker don’t have much written work history to recommend you to a potential employer. How do you get an employer to take you when you have no experience?*

Distribute handout sheets (“Job Recommendation”), and ask everyone to think of their dream job. How would they get someone to believe they could do it? Then divide the group into pairs to role-play a job interview. One person will be the job seeker, the other the employer. The job seeker has two minutes to convince the employer to take them on, and the employer should take written notes on the back of the handout sheet during the two minutes. (If participants have trouble getting started, suggest these things for convincing the employer: *Who can verify that you are trustworthy? References? What have you done in the past? What do you promise for the future? What assurances can you give?*)

After the two minutes, switch roles, so everyone gets a chance as employer.

Go on to *Option B* in Respond.

5. RESPOND 5 minutes

» **Option A:** Distribute paper and pencils, and ask everyone to **leave some kind of record** of what happened here. *What will you tell about the event of the amazing knives? What will you tell about the leader who did this?* (Though it may look like you as leader are fishing for compliments, the point is to show that you kept a promise to do something that looked as if it couldn’t be done.) When participants write down the story of how that promise was kept, they are leaving a record just as those who wrote down the events in the Bible left a record of how God keeps promises.

Close with prayer, thanking God for communicating with us, and asking for ears to be open to the message of love and care and promise. Then leave the “records” in the room, posting them on walls or on the chalkboard, so they will be reminded at the next session what happened.

» **Option B:** Have everyone think back to their role as employer, or even use the notes they took. On the front of the handout sheet, each person should write a job recommendation for their partner, using the questions on the sheet.

Sharing the recommendations will also be a way of affirming each other. Then point out that the Bible is like a letter of recommendation—a people’s testimony of how they experienced God and how God was revealed through promises made, and kept.

Suggested benediction: *God blesses us by keeping promises. Go and tell others.*



INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

» REVELATION IS PRIOR TO SCRIPTURE

Scripture is *about* revelation and comes *from* revelation. The Bible shows us that God wants to communicate with us, wants to have a relationship with us. It is not primarily a rule book, but a book telling us about who God is and about God's vision for us. But God is never fully disclosed, and God can communicate even without a book, and did so before there was a Bible.

The Bible came into being as a result of revelations received from God over many years. Yet we can hardly imagine a time when there was no Bible that told us about God. We have the idea that our knowledge of God came from the Scriptures, and it does in a sense, but originally the Scriptures came from the revelations of God to people in various times and places. In other words, the story of how we got the Bible begins with Abraham and Sarah, those to whom God was first revealed, rather than with the creation stories. Writing down the *experience* of God came after the realization that there *was* a God who made promises and kept them, who created the earth, our home.

» WHAT IS 'REVELATION'?

Revelation occurs when God becomes present to someone. It can happen at any time and any place, but it often happens in a time of crisis when we seem to be most open to God. We can only describe it as a moment in which we become aware of the presence of another person, a higher being. We know ourselves to be in the presence of a holy Other.

Out of this encounter with God a promise is born. We receive some message that relates very directly to our deepest concerns and needs. It was out of such an encounter that Abraham and Sarah received the promise.

But revelation is also related to our openness to God. If we are not open, the promises of God will not be met with faith, trust, and commitment. They will have no way of being fulfilled. Knowledge through revelation occurs only where there is revelation and an appropriate response of faith and trust to the revelation. But how does this work?

» ESTABLISHING THE TRUTH OF REVELATION

Experiencing the presence of God and receiving the promise of God are subjective experiences. They can't be proved. What is required is an appropriate *response*. We need to believe the promise strongly enough to place our lives on it. Once we do that, it has the possibility of becoming reality.

If and when the promise is fulfilled, we gain knowledge. We call it knowledge because it has been fulfilled in events in history. We now know something about the promise and the one who gave the promise. We now know that the promise of God is true and we know that God is faithful and true.

Let's say I come to a bridge with a heavily loaded truck. I fear that the bridge may not be strong enough to carry the weight. So I go underneath the bridge to inspect it. I judge that the bridge promises to carry the load. I do not yet know this but I believe it to be true. The point is, I have to believe it strongly enough to return to the truck and drive across. I have to place my life on it! But if I do, and once I am across the bridge, I know it is strong

"If we are to understand, we need to believe, and the fact of understanding reinforces our belief. In this way, then, we progress as though up a spiral staircase: We keep going round, but at each turn we progress further.... [The people who wrote the Bible] told of events, but these events took on meaning because they believed."

Etienne Charpentier,
How to Read the Old Testament





“This marvelous anthology of books and letters called the Bible is all for the sake of astonishment! It’s for divine transformation, not intellectual or ‘small-self’ coziness.”

Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM,
Things Hidden



God was not first revealed by a book, and is not confined by written pages. God is ever revealing love and promise. Listen and look!



enough. If I had not responded to the promise I would have never known whether the promise was true.

The truth of the promise is confirmed through its fulfillment. When Abraham and Sarah received God’s protection, a son, and land, the promise was confirmed, and they learned something about the character of God.

» WITNESS TO REVELATION

The experience of Abraham and Sarah in responding to the promises of God has been repeated over and over. Other ways God was revealed and promised life to the people of Israel include:

- delivering them from slavery in Egypt
- establishing a covenant with them at Sinai
- leading them into the Promised Land
- giving them a king
- repeatedly sending prophets with a message from God

Through the fulfillment of these promises the people came to know that God was interested in their welfare. This was life-saving news! It was so important that it had to be shared with others.

As the truth of God’s promises continued to be confirmed, a community of faith was born. The events of revelation became sacred to the community, who made sure those stories would not be forgotten by the next generations.

» THE SCRIPTURES

At first the witness to the revelation was oral. People talked about it and shared it with others. Then they entrusted the transmission of the sacred stories to specific appointed persons, first priests and later scribes.

As time went on, certain parts of the sacred tradition were *written down*. Some of the laws and teachings were written down early. Songs and hymns used at public commemorations were also written down. These fragments of written material were later incorporated into the works of other writers.

Eventually, full-length documents were written. There were books of the law, of history, and of prophecy. There were also books we could call collections, such as the psalms, proverbs, and books of wisdom.

Finally there were so many writings that claimed to be from God that the people had to determine which ones were to be remembered. In this way the books that were regarded to be of God were established. The Jewish community accepted the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings as sacred books, as *canon*. Christians accepted the Jewish canon as well as the tradition about Jesus (the New Testament) as sacred books, as canon.

But just as God was not first revealed by a book, so is God not bound by the confines of written pages today. God is ever revealing love and promise, and is ever being revealed in the experiences of people of faith. Listen and look!

JOB



RECOMMENDATION

You are an employer who's been asked to write a recommendation for the employee you just interviewed. Write your recommendation in the space below. Use the questions at the bottom to help you.

Name:

Position wanted:

Recommendation:

What did the employee say that most convinced you that s/he could do the job?

Did the employee make any promises? What were they? Why might you trust those promises?