

Why Presbyterians are Like That

BIBLE STUDY AND RESOURCE
FOR CONGREGATIONS

WRITTEN BY

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PREPARED BY THE

OFFICE OF CHRISTIAN FORMATION

Presbyterian Mission Agency
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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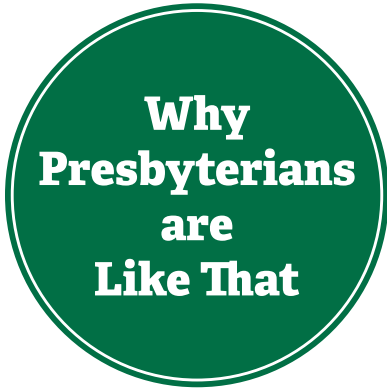
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[Office of Christian Formation in the
Presbyterian Mission Agency of the PC\(USA\).](#)
and has been adapted from a partnership project with
[UKirk Collegiate Ministries](#)

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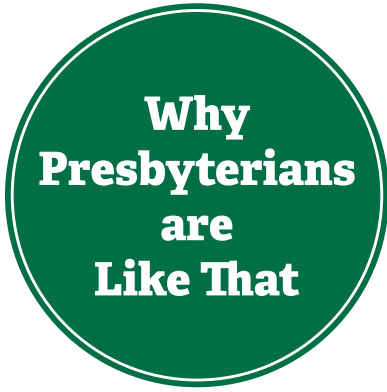
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Introduction and Overview

What follows is a series of Bible Studies intended to help participants think about why Presbyterians are the way we are.

Like most Christians throughout history, Presbyterians affirm the faith articulated in the Nicene Creed and Apostles Creed. We believe that

- God created the heavens and the earth,
- Jesus had a human mother like all of us,
- that he was uniquely related to God in a way that is not true about any of the rest of us,
- that he lived an exemplary life,
- was unjustly betrayed and executed,
- was as dead as we will all be,
- was resurrected on Easter, and
- remains our living Lord.

Presbyterians are distinguished by the particular ways we live out our faith in Jesus. We don't claim to be the only Christians who emphasize the elements of Christian faith discussed below, but we do believe that these common emphases and themes mark us as distinctive in the Christian family.

Presbyterians are the way we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe:

1

Studying the Bible prayerfully and together helps us figure out which things matter more than other things.

Presbyterians take the Bible seriously. We don't worship the Bible, but we worship the God we meet in the Bible. Our experience as Presbyterians has led us to conclude that

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the best way for us to live faithfully with God and with each other is to

- regularly study Scripture in community (not just by ourselves),
- pray for God's guidance as we do that, and
- listen to each other as we share thoughts and insights.

Presbyterians don't always agree. We don't all emphasize the same passages in the same way. We don't believe that any single verse, taken out of context, necessarily contains the full authority of the Bible. But we affirm that the Bible is always the best place to go to begin our conversations about which things matter more than other things.

The first Bible study in the "Why Presbyterians Are Like That" series, "Bible," will enable participants to discuss the way Presbyterians read the Bible through study of Exodus 34:6, Isaiah 9:6, and Acts 15:1–21.

2

Grace happens.

Presbyterians emphasize the grace of God. "Grace" is love that is unconditional, unearned, and undeserved. There are certainly Christians—and Christian congregations—who speak of Christian faith in terms of what individuals must do in order to receive forgiveness from God and acceptance into the church. While there are some passages in the Bible that suggest that individuals have to act in certain ways in order to get God to love them, Presbyterians believe that the message of the Bible as a whole is that God has always loved us, will always love us, and loves us right now. We believe God's grace is present in our lives whether or not we ever ask for, deserve, or earn that love. Presbyterians reject any suggestion that God's love has prerequisites. We believe God's love precedes any action on our part. We believe we are safe (saved) because of what God does, not what we do.

The second study in the "Why Presbyterians Are Like That" series, "Grace," will explore the notion of grace through study of Ephesians 2:4–10 and Luke 10:25–37.

3

God's grace invites response.

The idea that human salvation is purely the result of God's grace—with no required activity on the part of individuals—leads some to wonder why our behavior makes any difference if God's gonna love and save us no matter what we do. While Presbyterians don't believe we have to do anything to get God to love us, we also believe God's unconditional love constantly invites and empowers us to respond gratefully to God's grace by

worshiping God and striving to be instruments of God's love in the lives of others. We believe that the life and ministry of Jesus guides us as we respond to God's grace. We absolutely believe that God cares what we do—how we act— but we think our responsibilities, as individuals and as a faith community, are exactly that: “response-abilities.” We have important choices to make about how we respond to the love that is and will always be present in our lives. Individually and together, Presbyterians make grateful response to God's grace by worshiping God, studying Scripture together, and caring for all of God's children and all God's creation.

The third study in this series, “Response,” will enable participants to consider the responses to God's grace in Luke 17:11–18 and Luke 19:1–8.

4

God gave us brains and expects us to use them.

Presbyterians are wordy, literate people. We trace our origins to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The events, theological discussions, and disputes of the Reformation led Presbyterians and other Protestants to affirm the Bible as the highest authority for all Christians (as opposed to pronouncements and judgments of church councils or individual leaders). That emphasis means that all Christians (not just clergy) have the duty, right, and ability to read and study the Bible. Those concerns have led Presbyterians to value and promote literacy and eventually to support education in general. Presbyterians believe there's nothing we shouldn't ask about, learn about, and talk about. Presbyterians believe God created, loves, and sustains all things. So we believe there is nothing in our lives and in our world that is beyond the business of individual Christians or the church in general. There's nothing we shouldn't think about, learn about, and talk about. We believe that nothing in the Bible ever calls or requires us to pretend that we don't know things that we actually do know—about science, literature, history, or anything else.

The fourth study in this series, “Brains,” will enable participants to discuss how to maintain biblical faith and intellectual integrity through study of James 5:13–20, Genesis 1:26–31 and 2:18–19, and Psalm 19.

5

We are beloved, gifted, capable, and safe. Already. Right now.

By prayerfully studying Scripture together, Presbyterians have concluded that God has always loved us and will always love us. That means that God loves *you*—not just everybody, but *you* in particular. The truest thing about you is that you are a beloved, gifted,

capable, and safe child of God right now—just as you are.

Presbyterians recognize that God has given gifts to each of us individually and to all of us together as a faith community. We believe we are called to identify, develop, and use those gifts to serve the world.

We are confident that we can and should learn more about our world than we currently know.

And we are convinced that our status as God's beloved, gifted, and capable children is never in jeopardy and will never be lost.

The fifth study in this series, "Right Now," will allow participants to think through the ramifications of this statement by considering several seemingly contradictory passages from throughout the Bible including John 1:12, Matthew 25:41–46, Isaiah 43:4, Jeremiah 29:11, 1 John 3:1, 1 Peter 4:10, Romans 12:6a, Psalm 8:1–5, Ephesians 2:8–10, Psalm 139:7–8, and Romans 8:38–39.

6

God calls us to be on the side of the ones who are having the hardest time.

Studying the Bible prayerfully together has led Presbyterians to conclude that the people of God are always called to care for the most vulnerable members of the societies in which we live. From the command to love widows, orphans, and strangers in Deuteronomy 10 to Jesus' identification with hungry, thirsty, sick, and imprisoned persons in Matthew 25 (and dozens and dozens of other Scripture passages), the Bible teaches that faithful response to God's love in our lives always involves noticing, actively loving, and supporting others who face personal or communal difficulties.

The sixth study in this series, "Justice," will enable participants to discuss these ideas through consideration of Deuteronomy 10:17–19, Matthew 25:31–40, Amos 5:21–24, and Jeremiah 29:4–7.

7

Nobody's perfect.

Presbyterians talk about sin a lot because the Bible talks about sin a lot. We recognize ourselves, and our world, in the Genesis story in which the first two humans

- deny their dependence on anything beyond themselves (fruit),
- deny their responsibility for their actions (blame),

- separate themselves from each other (fig leaves), and
- separate themselves from God (hiding).

We see denial of dependence, denial of responsibility, separation from each other, and separation from God every day in our individual lives, in our life together, and in our world. We know sin is part of the truth about all of us. We know it's part of the truth about who we are—individually and corporately. We believe it's important to acknowledge and remember that.

But we also know it's not the whole truth.

Participants in the seventh study in the series, “Sin,” will engage in a detailed study of the story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit in Genesis 3:1-19 with additional references to Romans 3:23, 1 John 1:8, and Romans 5:8.

8

There's more Holy Spirit in a bunch of us than in any single one of us.

As a group, Presbyterians are appropriately confident that we are capable of using the brains God gave us to figure out how to live faithfully together in response to God's gracious love. But we also realize that we're all sinners and that no single one of us has all the wisdom, gifts, and insight necessary for us to determine how best to live out our faith in any particular situation. Presbyterians are often deservedly kidded for our hyper-organization and obsession with committees. But all of that structure exists to remind us to slow down and listen to each other. At its best, Presbyterian polity and organization enables us to give the whole church access to the gifts that God has given to individuals and communities beyond our particular contexts.

The eighth study in this series, “Presbyterian,” will enable participants to discuss this unique Presbyterian understanding of authority and the Holy Spirit through study of Acts 15:19 and 22–29, Romans 3:23, Micah 6:8, 1 Peter 4:10, Matthew 18:20, and 1 Corinthians 12:4–11.

9

God isn't finished.

When Presbyterians study the Bible prayerfully and together, our experience is that we are addressed from beyond ourselves by a living and faithful God who continues to respond to human sin by loving, calling, pursuing, empowering, and inspiring us to live with hope in a world where sin and death are real but Easter is true. That's why many

of us go to church every Sunday. It's why we continue to study the Bible together and participate in the ongoing story of God's interaction with the world through Christ and his body the church.

In the ninth study in this series, "Hope," participants will discuss living with hope in the real world through study of Habakkuk 1:1-4 and 2:1-3 and Exodus 20:1-17.

10

God's love is not limited to our particular faith community.

There are places in the Bible that suggest that God's love is limited to certain communities. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah strongly suggest that the people of Israel, the heirs to God's Covenant with Abraham, are superior to other communities with different religions (see for example Ezra 9:1-4 and Nehemiah 13:23-25). There are verses in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John, that suggest that only Christians know God (see John 3:16 and 14:6). But study of the entire Bible in an increasingly diverse context has led Presbyterians to hesitate to speak so definitively on God's behalf about persons who use different vocabulary than we do to talk about God. Presbyterians strive to speak humbly about the infinite. We believe the scope of God's love is bigger and more extensive than we are ever able to fully articulate or explain.

Participants in the tenth study of this series, "Humbly," will read the entire book of Jonah as well as Micah 6:8 and Genesis 9:13-17 and discuss what those passages teach us about how to interact with persons of other faiths or no faith.

CONCLUSION

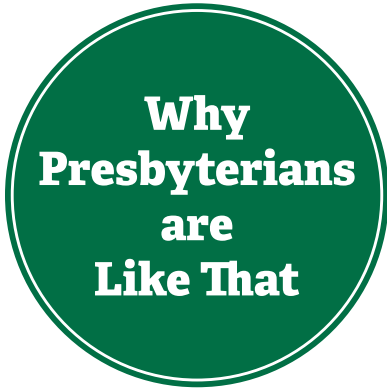
What follows are ten Bible studies intended to invite Presbyterians and others into conversations—based on distinctly Presbyterian themes—about how we can most appropriately respond to God's grace in the real circumstances of our real life together in the real world.

NOTES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- Leaders should read the entire lesson beforehand so they know which passages and themes will be part of the study.
- These studies are intended for multiple participants and multiple voices. When appropriate, have individual group members read

verses and paragraphs aloud. Allow time for conversation and discussion.

- **The lessons below include suggested discussion questions as well as an opportunity for participants to articulate a “Best Practice for Presbyterian Bible Study” based on the particular focus of each lesson. It might be interesting for the class to produce a concise list of “Best Practices” over the course of the study.**
 - Some of the following Bible Studies might require more than one session to complete—especially #7 (“Sin”), #9 (“Hope”), and #10 (“Humbly”). Consider scheduling 12 or 13 sessions to complete the entire series.
-



1. Bible

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe that studying the Bible prayerfully and together helps us figure out which things matter more than other things.

This session will enable participants to consider the way Presbyterians read the Bible through discussion of

- Exodus 34:6
- Isaiah 2:9
- Acts 5:1–21

OPENING PRAYER

*Merciful, gracious, patient, and abundantly loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message to us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us
as we read together,
talk to each other,
listen to each other,
and seek your will for us and our community.
Speak to us and speak through us
so that everything we do in your name
is appropriate in your sight
and consistent with your will for us and for the world.
Amen.*

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There are all sorts of ideas and opinions about the Bible in our congregations, in our communities, and in the larger society. Some folks regard the Bible as an outdated, anti-intellectual set of superstitions that have been used for centuries to justify and rationalize all sorts of colonialism, cruelty, and injustice. Others believe the Bible is the inerrant word of God that must be obeyed without question.

Presbyterians take the Bible seriously. We don't worship the Bible, but we worship the God we meet in the Bible. Our experience as Presbyterians has led us to conclude that the best way to live faithfully with God and with each other is to:

- regularly study Scripture in community (not just by ourselves),
- pray for God's guidance as we do that, and
- listen to each other as we share thoughts and insights.

There can be no doubt that, in the past, Presbyterians and other Christians have misused the Bible. The Bible has been used to defend human slavery, limit the role of women in the church and society, justify the exclusion and devaluing of LGBTQ+ persons, and rationalize other forms of personal and systemic injustice.

Continued, prayerful, and communal study of the Bible has led Presbyterians to change our minds about those matters.

Throughout our history, Presbyterians have especially benefited from insights gained and shared by Christians who were not part of the dominant culture. When we're at our best, Presbyterians attend to the perspectives of fellow Christians who have been overlooked, devalued, and dismissed—often by others who use the Bible to justify and rationalize that unjust behavior.

Presbyterians don't always agree. We don't all emphasize the same passages in the same way. But we keep going back to the Bible to have our discussions about which things matter more than other things. There is value in having a common, authoritative set of texts that give us vocabulary and categories for our conversations about how best to be faithful in changing circumstances.

Think of the Bible as the table around which Presbyterians gather to have our consultations and debates.

- We use some biblical passages **pastorally**, as a source of comforting language to remind and assure us that God loves each of us, all of us, and all creation.
- Sometimes Presbyterians and other Christians use passages **devotionally**. Biblical language and images often guide our individual and corporate responses to God's love. We are led by the Bible to express gratitude to God through worship,

fellowship, and study. Contemplation of Scripture leads us to encourage and exemplify justice, kindness, and humility in our dealings with our neighbors within and beyond the church (see **Micah 6:8** and **Jeremiah 29:7**).

- Presbyterians sometimes read the Bible **historically**. We recognize ourselves as part of the Covenant community described in the Hebrew Scriptures (what Christians have traditionally called the Old Testament). We recognize ourselves as part of the church defined and described in the New Testament. We work hard to study Scripture responsibly. We seek to understand the contexts in which particular texts were written, read, interpreted, and preserved.

In the sixteenth century, John Calvin wrote:

Just as old or bleary-eyed [people] and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.

(John Calvin, Institutes I.vi.1)

When Presbyterians look at the world through the “spectacles” of the Bible, a lot of things come into focus. Presbyterians believe the Bible is the Word of God because our experience has been that, when we study Scripture prayerfully and together, we are addressed from beyond ourselves and guided toward just, inclusive, and loving actions in the world.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What do you imagine to be the advantages of reading the Bible together, in community?*
 - *What are the advantages of reading scripture with those who are marginalized?*
 - *What difference does it make to view the Bible as a lens through which the world comes into focus?*
-

ENGAGING THE BIBLE

1

By way of introduction, let's look at a couple verses from the Hebrew Scriptures as we move into these Bible Studies.

EXODUS 34:6

**The LORD passed before [Moses] and proclaimed,
“The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.**

This verse is part of the story about Moses going back up the mountain to get a new copy of the Ten Commandments. He smashed the first copy when he saw the golden calf that the Israelites had built to worship while he was up on Mount Sinai (see **Exodus 32:19**). That's not particularly important for us in this context, but notice what God tells Moses when he gets back up the mountain that second time.

A better, more accurate translation of Exodus 34:6 would be:

*The LORD passed before [Moses] and proclaimed,
“I AM, I AM,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.*

Like the passage above, your Bible probably says “the Lord, the Lord” in this verse but God is using the Divine name—“Yahweh”—here.

“I Am” is a better translation (see **Exodus 3:14**).

Read it that way and you'll see that this is a sort of divine self-introduction.

And it's a hugely important verse in the Old Testament. There are six other passages in the Hebrew Scriptures that use this same language to describe God—gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love: **Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 103:8, Psalm 145:8, Joel 2:13, and Jonah 4:2.**

Biblical scholars think that's the oldest language in the entire Bible. It's like a creed; a sort definition of who God is. These words were part of the Hebrew oral tradition before any of the texts in our Bible were ever written down.

From as far back as we can know, the Hebrews understood themselves to be uniquely related to a gracious, merciful, patient, and steadfastly loving God.

That means that everybody who ever wrote any of the texts that make up the Bible knew this affirmation of who God is.

In turn, that means that any interpretation of any passage of Scripture that's inconsistent with this understanding of who God is (gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love) should certainly be questioned and probably rejected.

This ancient understanding of who God is seems somewhat inconsistent with the notion of an angry God who somehow needs to be paid back, satisfied, appeased, pacified, or compensated for human sin.

The people who wrote the Bible knew about history, poetry, literature, and metaphors. They wrote a wide variety of texts as they sought to articulate meaning in a complicated and confusing world in which they maintained faith in their gracious, merciful, patient, and consistently and extravagantly loving God.

The continuity of the Bible—the overarching theme that ties all biblical texts together—is the affirmation that God is always gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Remember that when you study the Bible.

2

Consider **Isaiah 9:6**.

ISAIAH 9:6

**For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

This verse was written approximately 750 years before the birth of Jesus.

Despite what many earnest and faithful Christians might wish to be true, there is no reason at all to believe that Isaiah was somehow writing about Jesus when he wrote this passage.

He was writing about the birth of King Hezekiah.

Centuries later, when early Christians were searching for language to articulate the meaning of the birth of Jesus, they remembered and appropriately applied Isaiah's language in that new context.

Texts can *mean* something other than what they *meant* when they were originally written.

That's how the Bible works. Scripture gives us language to articulate meaning in new and changing circumstances.

That's why Presbyterians keep going back to the Bible and studying prayerfully together.

Knowing the original context in which a particular text was written is certainly important, but it's not exhaustive. We also need to consider how those texts might help us articulate meaning in new contexts.

3

The story of the Jerusalem Council in **Acts 15** sheds some light on the ways the Bible has always functioned, and continues to function, in the life of the church.

Several features of that story are especially interesting and relevant for contemporary Presbyterians and other Christians.

The story contains disagreement about traditional interpretations of particular passages of Scripture, discussion between people who disagree, minds changed after hearing the stories and insights of others, and resolution of a particular issue by choosing the more inclusive option.

ACTS 15:1

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

The "certain individuals" represent a faction of former Jews in the early Christian church who thought Christianity was a form of the Jewish faith. They believed people had to become Jews in order to become Christians. Their position was based on 22 passages from the Hebrew Scriptures like **Genesis 17:11** ("You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you."). Based on these passages, "certain individuals" argued that all new members of the fledgling Christian church had to first become Jews and be circumcised.

ACTS 15:2

And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.

Paul and Barnabas had been proclaiming the Christian message to non-Jewish people (“Gentiles”) without ever mentioning circumcision (see **Acts 13** and **14**). They had “no small dissension and debate” with the circumcision advocates. The experiences and opinions of Paul and Barnabas were different from those who were maintaining that the traditional standards of membership in the faith community should still apply.

Different experiences of different early Christians led to different interpretations of Scripture and tradition.

This all happened in Antioch, where there was a sizable and growing Christian community. As that congregation realized that they didn’t all agree about the necessity of circumcision for full membership in the church, they decided to send Paul, Barnabas, and “some others” to Jerusalem (the acknowledged “home office” of the church) “to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.” Recognizing real conflicts about the authority and interpretation of Scripture and tradition, the leaders of multiple congregations in the early church decided to get together and talk about the matters at issue.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *In what ways is the presence of different experiences and interpretations a strength of Scripture?*
-

ACTS 15:3

So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles and brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters.

The Antioch church entrusted particular individuals to act on its behalf in conversation with representatives of other churches.

Apparently, Christians in Phoenicia and Samaria—“the brothers *and* sisters”—got pretty fired up when Paul, Barnabas, and “some others” told them about non-Jewish people hearing about Jesus and deciding to become Christians.

ACTS 15:4

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

So you've got these folks from Antioch who are very excited about the new and exciting things that are going on in the church among uncircumcised Gentiles who had previously been regarded as ineligible to be part of the faith community.

ACTS 15:5

But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses."

There's this other faction who are worried that this new bunch of converts are deviating from established interpretations of Scripture and tradition.

Those Pharisees are not making that up out of thin air. That's what their (and our) Bible said—you have to be circumcised if you want to join the community of faith. The Pharisees are trying to apply a traditional understanding of some specific passages of Scripture in this new and changing context.

Their logic is similar to that used by contemporary Christians who quote **Leviticus 18:22** and **Romans 1:26–27** to argue that LGBTQ+ persons have no place among the people of God. They are endeavoring to apply Scripture passages that had been written in one context to a new situation in the faith community.

ACTS 15:6

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.

In the face of serious disagreement, the leaders of the early church walked *toward* each other. They faced the conflict together. They talked to each other and listened to each other.

That's significant.

ACTS 15:7

After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers.

See the story of Peter and Cornelius in **Acts 10**.

ACTS 15:8

And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as [God] did to us,

See **Acts 10:45–48** and **Acts 2:1–11**.

ACTS 15:9

and in cleansing their hearts by faith [God] has made no distinction between them and us.

See **Acts 10:34** where Peter says, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality.”

One of the themes of the entire book of Acts is this steady expansion in the early church of the understanding of who can be part of the faith community.

ACTS 15:10

Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?

“[P]lacing on the neck” refers to a yoke; a common image for intentional lives of faith.

Peter is essentially asking, “Who do we think we are, expecting these new Gentile converts to follow Hebrew law to a greater degree than we or our ancestors have been able to follow it?”

ACTS 15:11

On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

Not by uncritically following an ancient set of rules that we’ve been following for a long time.

ACTS 15:12

The whole assembly kept silence and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the gentiles.

See **Acts 13** and **14**.

Now, watch what comes next. It's huge.

ACTS 15:13

After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me.

James was the brother of Jesus and a major figure in the Jerusalem church (see **Acts 12:17** and **21:18**).

ACTS 15:14

Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the gentiles, to take from among them a people for [God's] name.

When James mentions "Simeon" he's referring to Peter (see **Mathew 16:18**); referring to his stories as well as those of Paul and Barnabas.

This is important because James is acknowledging the relevance and legitimacy of the experiences reported by others in the assembly, even though he has not had similar experiences. He has never personally seen Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit and become Christians.

ACTS 15:15

This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

James is not arguing that the Scriptures recognized by the entire community are not relevant, he's not denying the validity of the circumcision texts, but he's referring to a different passage than those used by the circumcision party.

ACTS 15:16–18

**'After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;
from its ruins I will rebuild it,
and I will set it up,
so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.
Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things
known from long ago.'**

James is quoting **Amos 9:11–12**.

As he participates in the conversation with other church leaders about whether or not Gentiles who convert to Christianity must be circumcised, James doesn't quit looking to the Bible for language to interpret the things that he and others in the church are experiencing, but he finds language in a different passage (other than those enjoining circumcision) that helps him interpret the stories and experiences that have been recounted by Peter, Paul, and Barnabas.

ACTS 15:19

“Therefore, I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those gentiles who are turning to God,

After hearing the stories of others (Peter, Paul, and Barnabas), and thinking about the whole Bible, James *changes his mind*.

He begins to think about Scripture and tradition in a new way and comes to a different position about circumcision than he had held before.

ACTS 15:20

but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.

Even as he comes to the conclusion in verse 19 that “we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God,” James doesn't propose eliminating all standards for membership in the community.

In other words, just because we have concluded that one traditionally-understood restriction on membership in the community of faith (circumcision) is no longer relevant, that does not mean that we should eliminate all notions and rules about who belongs in the faith community and how they should behave.

ACTS 15:21

For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

James is essentially saying that the other traditional rules and restrictions about participation in the community remain relevant because they continue to contribute to the health of the community and its members. But his conclusion based on the stories and experiences of Peter, Paul, and Silas is that the requirement that all members must be circumcised is no longer relevant.

CONCLUSION

This is how the Bible works in the church.

As was mentioned above, there was once a time when Presbyterians and other Christians used the Bible to defend human slavery, to limit the role of women in the church, and justify the exclusion and devaluing of LGBTQ+ persons. Continued and prayerful study of the Bible together has led Presbyterians to change our minds about those matters.

The Bible hasn't changed. But the church's understanding of the witness of Scripture as a whole certainly has.

That's what happened in **Acts 15**. Leaders from a variety of congregations got together, talked and listened to each other, and then made a decision.

Some of them changed their minds.

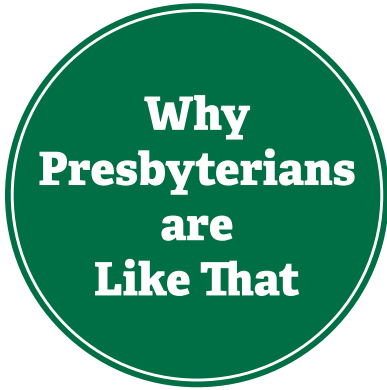
Presbyterians believe the Bible remains relevant for our life together. We sometimes have experiences that lead us to new understandings and interpretations of particular parts of the Bible. We think our best shot at discerning the leadership of the Holy Spirit comes when we prayerfully study the whole Bible, deliberate, and act together. When we do that, the Holy Spirit consistently leads us to more inclusive ways of understanding and articulating the scope of God's love.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *Why do you think members of the faith community thought the story of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 was so important that it needed to be written down and preserved?*
- *What guidance might we draw from this story for addressing disagreements within or beyond the church?*

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from this study and discussion?*
-



2. Grace

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe that grace happens.

This session will enable participants to consider the Presbyterian understanding of grace through discussion of

- Ephesians 2:4–10
- Luke 10:25–37

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
We give you thanks that you have not waited for us to seek you,
but have loved and cared for us
long before we could ever recognize, ask for, earn, or deserve your love.
As we engage in this study today,
we pray that you will help us recognize and understand
that your love for us is total, complete, and unconditional.
Amen.*

Many Christians in our congregations and in the larger society believe that God requires some action on the part of individuals before they can be “saved” and restored to right relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Some earnest, sincere, and Bible-believing Christians use language about “accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior” or “letting Jesus into your heart” as though the responsibility for the salvation of sinners rests with individuals who somehow must initiate a relationship with Jesus.

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Presbyterians emphasize the grace of God. “Grace” is love that is unconditional, unearned, and undeserved. While there are some passages in the Bible that suggest that individuals must act in certain ways in order to get God to love them, Presbyterians believe that the message of the Bible as a whole is that God has always loved us, will always love us, and loves us right now. We believe God’s grace is present in our lives whether or not we ever ask for, deserve, or earn that love. Presbyterians reject any suggestion that God’s love has prerequisites. We believe God’s love precedes any action on our part. We believe we are safe (saved) because of what God does, not because of anything that we do.

Through the centuries Presbyterians have prayerfully studied the Bible together and reflected on our common experiences as we live in relationship to God in Jesus Christ. We have realized that God’s love has been present in our individual lives and in our life together

- even when we didn’t recognize it;
- even when we did not live faithfully in relationship with God and each other; and
- even when we fooled ourselves into pretending that we had somehow earned or deserved God’s love.

When we’re at our best and when we’re at our worst, God’s love is there. Grace just happens.

The story is told of a man visiting the South for the first time. On his first morning in that region, he went to breakfast and ordered bacon, eggs, and toast. After a few minutes, the server brought him a plate with bacon, eggs, toast, and some other lumpy white stuff. Pointing to the unusual item on his plate, the man said, “What’s this?” “That’s grits,” the server replied. “I didn’t order any ‘grits,’” the man told her. “Honey,” she replied, “grits are like God’s grace—you don’t have to order it, it just shows up.”

Grace is a difficult topic for many contemporary American Christians to embrace.

There is a strong element of self-reliance in the dominant American culture.

As the culture has developed, that strong sense of independence and self-reliance has grown into a capitalist economy based on transaction and exchange. We tend to presume that anything of value that we receive from someone else is going to cost us. Many of us presume that the really immutable truths—the statements that are ultimately to be trusted and are beyond question—are economic ones.

- You don’t get something for nothing.
- You get what you pay for.
- There’s no such thing as a free lunch.

The statement that salvation—the state of complete and unquestionable safety in our relationship with God—is entirely the result of God’s grace is at odds with many of our notions of the way things really are. “Surely it’s not that easy,” many of us are likely to conclude. “God wouldn’t just save us whether we did the right things or not. God must require something from us. After all, everybody knows you don’t get something for nothing. You get what you pay for. There’s no such thing as a free lunch.”

Presbyterians believe our salvation is in fact a free gift from God.

There are no conditions. There are no requirements. There is no exchange. It’s not transactional. We who have placed ourselves in danger by separating ourselves from God and each other are simply made safe through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the central story of the Bible. Despite the inarguable fact that we do not deserve and cannot earn God’s love, God has made us safe. That’s just what God does.

ENGAGING THE BIBLE

1

Consider **Ephesians 2:4–10**:

EPHESIANS 2:4–10

**but God, who is rich in mercy,
out of the great love with which [God] loved us
even when we were dead through our trespasses,
made us alive together with Christ—
by grace you have been saved—
and raised us up with him and
seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,
so that in the ages to come [God] might show
the immeasurable riches of [divine] grace
in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus,
For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—
not the result of works, so that no one may boast.
For we are what [God] has made us,
created in Christ Jesus for good works,
which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.**

Check out that grammar. This passage is not primarily about us, the readers. God is the one who:

- “loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses;”
- “made us alive together with Christ;”
- “raised us up with him;”
- “seated us with him;”
- will “show the immeasurable riches of [God’s] grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus;”
- “made us what we are;” and
- “created us to walk in the good works that God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

The only verb in this passage of which humans are the subject is a passive voice verb: we “have been saved.”

Salvation stories are stories about what our gracious, merciful, patient, forgiving, loving God does.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *How is this notion that our salvation comes entirely from God—completely apart from any human action—at odds with our ideas about the way the world really works?*
- *Why do you think members of the faith community thought the words of Ephesians 2:4–10 were so important that they needed to be written down and preserved?*
- *What guidance might we draw from this passage as we think about our relationship with God?*

2

Consider the Parable of the Good Samaritan (**Luke 10:25–37**).

LUKE 10:25

An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

By placing this question in the mouth of a “lawyer” (probably a Pharisee who was well versed in the details of the Hebrew Scriptures), Luke sets up this story as an encounter between Jesus and a learned and faithful member of the local Jewish community.

Note the particular language of the lawyer’s question: “What *must I do* to inherit eternal life?” Think about that grammar as we get further into the story.

LUKE 10:26

He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

Understandably, Jesus answers the lawyer’s question by asking him about the law.

LUKE 10:27

He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.”

In response to Jesus’s question, the lawyer, accurately and appropriately, quotes **Deuteronomy 6:5** and **Leviticus 19:18**.

LUKE 10:28

And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

“Good job, man.”

“You nailed it.”

LUKE 10:29

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Pay close attention to Luke’s characterization of the lawyer’s motivation.

The lawyer asks this follow-up question in verse 29 because he wants “to justify himself.” To “justify” is to place in right relationship. By telling us the lawyer asked “who is my neighbor?” because he desired to *justify himself*, Luke is pointing out that the lawyer is asking Jesus what he has to do to get himself into right relationship with God. Remember his language from verse 25: “what *must I do* to inherit eternal life?”

Think about writing a letter or other document. In order to make the paper look right, you (actually, probably your computer) will “justify” the left margin of the document so that the beginning of each line lines up with the beginnings of the other lines. The lines need to be in right relationship with each other.

To “justify” is to place in right relationship.

Jesus tells the Parable that follows in response to a lawyer who assumes that there are actions that must be performed in order to inherit eternal life; that there are things *he* has to do to place himself in right relationship with God.

LUKE 10:30

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead.

It was probably foolish for this traveler to try to get from Jerusalem to Jericho alone. He ended up in a desperate situation.

LUKE 10:31–32

Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

It’s too easy to simply dismiss the Priest and the Levite as selfish, insensitive, cowardly jerks. Priests and Levites were individuals who had particular roles in Jewish religious life. They regularly performed sacrifices in the Temple before God on behalf of the entire faith community.

Those sacrifices were seen as essential features of the ongoing, day-to-day interactions between God and God’s people. If the priest or the Levite here in verses 31 and 32 had in fact paused to check on the ambushed traveler, and it turned out that the traveler was dead, then they would have been ritually unclean for a certain period and consequently unable to perform their duties to the community as a whole (see **Numbers 19:11**). They were probably just doing their jobs and trying to be responsible.

LUKE 10:33

But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with pity.

It’s hard for contemporary readers to have a sense of how shocking it would have been for first-century Jews to hear or read a story that suggests that a *Samaritan* could ever be an exemplary hero. There are examples throughout the Gospels of the tension and animosity between Jews and Samaritans.

Imagine as you study this story now that this new character in Luke 10:33 is an obvious and ardent supporter of whatever national political figure you respect the least, somebody who you think is consistently and aggressively wrong about almost everything.

Sit with that for a moment before you proceed.

Then you’ll have a sense of what it would have been like for a Jewish lawyer to hear Jesus tell a story in which a Samaritan is the hero.

LUKE 10:34

He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

Before discussing the Samaritan's actions in this story, it is important to note that there are at least three things that the Samaritan does *not* do when he sees the ambushed traveler.

1. He doesn't call a press conference to announce his plans to save the traveler.

There is no press agent. There are no microphones or cameras. The Samaritan doesn't make any speeches. He doesn't take a selfie. He doesn't publish a Tweet about his plans to save the ambushed traveler. There's no indication that the Samaritan does what he does for attention.

2. He doesn't do a jewelry check to see if the ambushed traveler is religious enough.

There is no mention of the Samaritan checking for fish rings, "I Am Second" tattoos, cross necklaces, WJJD bracelets, or baptismal certificates.

3. He doesn't do a background check to see if the ambushed traveler has done enough good works to deserve to be saved.

There is no "works audit." The Samaritan does not spend any time determining whether or not the ambushed traveler deserves to be saved. He just takes care of him.

Could it be that this whole story is intended to help the lawyer and the rest of us recognize what Jesus does for us?

Does Luke recount this story to remind his readers that, like the Samaritan, Jesus takes care of us, rescues us, and makes us safe?

Jesus tells this whole story to answer the lawyer's question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus' answer?

ZERO. ZILCH. BUPKIS. NUTHIN.' NADA.

"You don't have to do any more to be saved than that ambushed traveler did."

Presbyterians believe the story of God's saving love for us in Jesus Christ is not a story about us. It's not about what we do.

It's about God.

It's about how, in Jesus Christ, God treats each of us like the Samaritan treats the ambushed traveler. God responds to our separation from God and each other by coming all the way to us and doing everything necessary to rescue us, make us safe, and restore us to right relationship with God and each other.

By the way, later in Luke's Gospel (in chapters 22 and 23) Jesus will be more fully rejected by the community than any Samaritan as he is betrayed, arrested, and executed.

LUKE 10:35

The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

So the Samaritan takes the ambushed traveler to a safe place, entrusts him to the care of the innkeeper, provides some resources for the ongoing care of the traveler, and promises more and sufficient resources in the future.

There are multiple ways for us to see ourselves in this verse—as members of the Church in general and the Presbyterian Church in particular.

We can identify with the traveler in this story. There is a sense in which we all, having once been ambushed and abandoned, have been noticed by God in Jesus Christ, cared for, and led into community with others. It can be helpful for us to think about our faith life in those terms. We haven't really earned or deserved much, if anything, that has been done for us in our lives. But we've been rescued anyway.

We can also identify with the innkeeper. We, too, are part of communities to which Christ brings other rescued travelers. We are among those to whom Christ gives gifts and resources to care for others.

LUKE 10:36

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

In his answer to the lawyer's "Who is my neighbor?" question in verse 29, Jesus asks here in verse 36 "Who was the ambushed traveler's neighbor?"

It's important to note at this point that Jesus is inviting the lawyer to identify with the traveler and not the Samaritan.

LUKE 10:37

He said, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

The punchline of this story is “Go and do likewise.” That’s legitimately interpreted throughout the church as a call to notice and care for people in need, to stop and help folks who have been ambushed and abandoned. That’s an important lesson of this story.

But we also need to recognize that this is a story about grace.

The story begins with the lawyer’s question about what must be done to be saved (“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”). Jesus tells the Parable to teach the lawyer that he can’t *do* any more to inherit eternal life than the ambushed traveler did to get himself saved. Only after making that point does Jesus invite the lawyer to respond to grace by serving others.

CONCLUSION

Grace is an important concept for Presbyterians as we think about our relationship with God.

Without this important understanding of grace, we risk the arrogance of thinking that, despite the fact that we are all sinners, we can somehow do the right things to make God love us.

Without this notion of grace, we risk the despair that comes with the recognition that, in our fallen and sinful state, we will never be able to do all the things that God requires and expects of us.

Biblical passages such as **Ephesians 2:4–10** and **Luke 10:25–37** enable us to recognize that God’s love for us is constant, complete, and unconditional. God’s love for us is not related at all to any actions on our part that somehow qualify us to be loved by God.

Presbyterians insist that the story of our salvation is a story about who God is and what God does. It has nothing whatsoever to do with anything that any of us can or must do to earn God’s love.

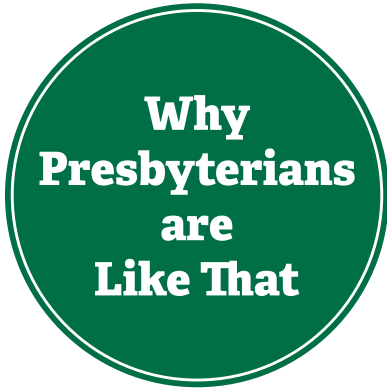
Presbyterians believe grace happens.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What might be the value of reading the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) as a story about grace?*
- *With whom do you most identify with in this story? Why?*
- *What do we learn in these passages (Ephesians 2:4–10 and Luke 10:25–37) about God?*
- *Ourselves?*
- *Each other?*

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from the study and discussion of grace in these passages?*
-



3. Response

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe that God's grace invites response.

This session will enable participants to consider the responses to God's grace in

- Luke 17:11–18
- Luke 19:1–8

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
We give you thanks that you have not waited for us to seek you,
but have loved and cared for us
long before we could ever recognize, ask for, earn, or deserve your love.
We recognize and acknowledge that your grace invites each of us and
all of us to respond to your love by following the example of Jesus
and dedicating ourselves
to acts of acts of worship, fellowship, sacrifice, and service.
Amen.*

Some Christians respond to the Presbyterian emphasis on God's grace by asking what is the point of having faith and trying to be a good person if God is going to save us no matter how we act. They essentially view Christian faith as "hell insurance"—as the thing people have to do so God won't send them to eternal punishment.

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While Presbyterians don't believe we have to do anything to get God to love us, we also believe God's unconditional love invites and empowers us to respond in gratitude by worshiping God and striving to be instruments of God's love in the lives of others. We absolutely believe that God cares what we do—how we act—but we think our responsibilities, as individuals and as a faith community, are exactly that: “response-abilities.”

We all have important choices to make about how we respond to the love that is and will always be present in our lives.

Individually and together, Presbyterians make grateful response to God's grace by worshiping God, studying Scripture together, and caring for all of God's children and all God's creation.

ENGAGING THE BIBLE

1

Consider two stories from the Gospel of Luke—the Healing of the Ten Lepers (**Luke 17:11–18**) and the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus (**Luke 19:1–8**).

LUKE 17:11–12

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance,

At the time Luke wrote this story (probably around 70 CE) the terms “leper” and “leprosy” were used to refer to a variety of highly contagious skin diseases. Contemporary readers need to remember that this story was written in a pre-scientific context. It was not unusual for ten “lepers” to be together. They “kept their distance” because everyone around would have known of their illness and would have been legitimately afraid of getting sick after contact with them.

LUKE 17:13

they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

Jesus clearly had a reputation as a healer, and it makes sense for these ten lepers to ask him to help them (see **Luke 4:31–37, 4:38–39, 5:12–13, 5:17–20, 6:6–11, and 8:26–39**).

LUKE 17:14

When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean.

It was often the case at that time that individuals who had suffered from one of the contagious diseases that were called leprosy got well. The disease went away. They were no longer contagious and were welcomed to return to the day-to-day life of the community. There are instructions in **Leviticus 13:2–8** and **14:2–32** for priests to examine lepers to determine whether or not they had recovered and could safely return to the community.

Note the grammar at the end of the verse. Luke doesn't tell us that the lepers “got well,” he says, “they were made clean.” The emphasis is on the healing action of Jesus.

LUKE 17:15

Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.

One of the ten healed lepers returns and thanks Jesus. He realizes that he has been healed, that he is a recipient of grace, and his response is to “praise God with a loud voice.”

LUKE 17:16

He prostrated himself at Jesus's feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.

This is another instance in Luke's Gospel in which a Samaritan, one who would likely have been derided and dismissed by the original audience and readers, is held up as an example of faithful behavior.

LUKE 17:17–18

Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? So where are the other nine? Did none of them return to give glory to God except this foreigner?”

Jesus is pretty clearly disappointed that the other nine healed lepers don't immediately respond by praising God and giving thanks. But it's also very important to note that Jesus does not get mad and “unheal” them, even though they don't respond in a way that he would have preferred.

The healing action of Jesus was not conditional on any behavior on the part of the ten lepers.

Grace.

When the Samaritan former leper praises God and thanks Jesus, he is *responding* to what God did first. His motivation is gratitude, not self-interest.

Presbyterians believe that we are as fully recipients of God's grace as those ten lepers.

And we understand that God's grace invites us all to respond as the Samaritan leper did—by “praising God with a loud voice” and regularly, repeatedly, and joyfully expressing gratitude to God. That's why we worship and sing and generally carry on about how awesome God is.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *How does this notion of worship as response to grace affect how you think about worship?*
- *What are other ways to think and talk about why we worship and praise God?*

2

But praising God is not all we're called and invited to do. Check out the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus in **Luke 19:1–8**:

LUKE 19:1

[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it.

At this point, we are 19 chapters into Luke's Gospel. Word was getting out about who Jesus was and what he did. It was kind of a big deal when he came to town.

LUKE 19:2

A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was chief tax collector and was rich.

A first-century audience who originally read or heard this story would have immediately recognized that Zacchaeus was a lousy, stinking sinner.

When the Roman empire conquered regions like Jericho, they sought local residents to collect taxes for the Romans from the conquered population. These tax collectors were responsible for passing a certain amount of money along to the Romans. The Roman army supported them in their efforts, even when the tax collectors took more money from the residents than they were to give to the Romans.

That's how tax collectors like Zacchaeus got rich.

LUKE 19:3

He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.

Luke reports this fascinating detail without comment. But it begs the question why this rich, sinful, and apparently vertically-challenged tax collector would want to see Jesus?

We don't know.

But this wouldn't have been much of a story otherwise.

LUKE 19:4

So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

The short guy was persistent.

LUKE 19:5

When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today."

Jesus does three things in verse 5 that can be taken as great models for ministry— especially ministry with marginalized and overlooked persons.

First, he "looks up." This implies that Jesus is not so focused on the path in front of him that he misses the opportunity to interact with a guy up in a tree. Ministry often involves recognizing opportunities to engage others that arise in unexpected places, at unexpected times, and in unexpected ways.

Second, Jesus calls Zacchaeus by his name. He doesn't refer to Zacchaeus by the categories he fits into—rich tax collector, short in stature, or as we'll see in verse 7, sinner. Jesus treats Zacchaeus as a whole person with a name.

Nobody is just a "young adult," a "person of color," a "queer person," a "believer," or a "sinner." Categories are very helpful for thinking about complicated things, but no individual is simply a representative of the categories they fit into.

Ministry involves recognizing that each individual is a whole, distinct, complete, and sufficient person with a name.

Finally, Jesus invites Zach to come down out of the tree and share a particular gift (his house).

Jesus calls Zacchaeus out of the audience and into the story.

Ministry similarly involves inviting folks to recognize themselves as gifted and encouraging them to share their gifts with the larger community. It's about inviting them to "climb down out of the tree" and play their role in the larger story. Ministry involves encouraging and enabling others to think of themselves as ministry partners and not just ministry recipients.

LUKE 19:6

So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

It felt good for Zacchaeus to be noticed, addressed by name, and invited to share his gifts.

That's true for all of us.

Attention is good.

LUKE 19:7

All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."

This is Zacchaeus' tacky neighbors trying to put him back in the boxes into which they had conveniently placed him. They'd rather think of him as a short, rich sinner than as a whole, gifted person with a name.

Luke doesn't report any response at all from Jesus to the neighbors' grumbling.

Jesus doesn't tell the tacky neighbors, "No, he's not really a sinner."

He doesn't say, "Yes, but I'm gonna fix him."

Jesus just ignores them.

Haters gonna hate.

That's not really what this story is about.

Now watch this:

LUKE 19:8

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

This is a happy ending to this story.

After having been marginalized by his grumpy but legitimately resentful neighbors, and after having been noticed, addressed by name, and invited to share his gifts, Zacchaeus tells Jesus that he’s going to share his stuff and clean up the messes he’s made.

It is important to note that Zacchaeus does not vow to share his stuff and clean up his messes *so that* he can get Jesus to notice him and come to his house.

Jesus has already noticed him and come to his house.

Zacchaeus’ change of behavior is not transactional. His motivation for giving away his stuff and paying back those whom he has defrauded is not self-interest; it’s *gratitude*.

Zacchaeus responds to the grace he receives from Jesus by vowing to change the way he behaves. He recognizes his giftedness and vows to use his gifts for others—especially for others who are facing difficulties.

The experience of being noticed, addressed by name, and invited to share his gifts leads Zacchaeus to think of himself as a partner in the ongoing ministry of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

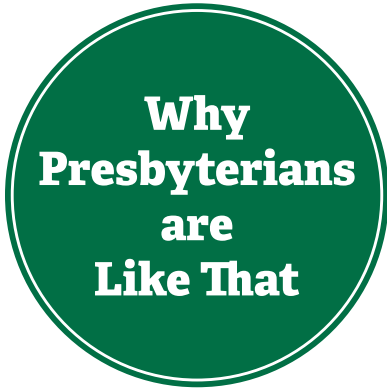
While Presbyterians clearly and repeatedly emphasize the grace of God, we also believe that God’s grace consistently invites us to make grateful response by praising God and sharing our gifts with others.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *Why might it be important to distinguish between actions motivated by gratitude and those done out of self-interest?*
- *How do you think the distinction between gratitude and self-interest is related to the idea of Grace?*
- *Under what circumstances have you been able to think of yourself as a ministry partner and not just a ministry recipient?*
- *What do we learn in these passages (17:11-18 and 19:1-8) about God?*
- *Ourselves?*
- *Each other?*

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from this study of the importance of responding to grace by acting out of gratitude?*
-



4. Brains

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe God gave us brains and expects us to use them.

This session will enable participants to consider the Presbyterian emphasis on education through discussion of

- James 5:13–20
- Genesis 1:6–31
- Genesis 2:18–19
- Psalm 19

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
We give you thanks that you have given us the gift of intellect;
that you have created us in your image
and endowed us with the ability to think and to question,
to study and to learn,
to describe and to decide.
We commit ourselves to use the brains you gave us with confidence,
courage, commitment, and compassion.
Amen.*

The Presbyterian Church traces its origins to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The events, theological discussions, and disputes of the Reformation led Presbyterians and other Protestants to affirm the Bible as the highest authority for

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all Christians (as opposed to pronouncements and judgments of church councils or individual leaders like the pope). That emphasis means that all Christians (not just clergy) have the duty, right, and ability to read and study the Bible.

In turn, those concerns have led Presbyterians to value and promote literacy and eventually to support education in general. Presbyterians believe there's nothing we shouldn't ask about, learn about, and or think about.

Presbyterians believe God created, loves, and sustains all things. So we believe there is nothing in our lives or in our world that is beyond the business of individual Christians or the church in general.

Close consideration of three distinct biblical passages will help us understand the significance of the Presbyterian emphasis on using the brains God has given us.

There are several passages in the Bible where the historical distance between the time of their writing and the context in which contemporary Christians read and study them presents some difficulties for understanding and interpretation.

ENGAGING THE BIBLE

1

One, for example, is **James 5:13–20**.

JAMES 5:13–16

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

Presbyterians believe that.

We pray regularly for ourselves, each other, and the whole world. Many of us have had the experience of being lifted up in prayer by faithful and dedicated fellow Presbyterians and others. As a body, we have no doubts about the value of prayer for those who suffer or face difficulties.

But Presbyterians don't just pray.

We also go to the doctor.

As nice as it sounds to proclaim with James that “the prayer of faith will save the sick,” and “the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective,” Presbyterians think we should probably do more than just pray.

JAMES 5:17–18

Elijah was a human like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth yielded its harvest.

James is referring here to a story from **1 Kings 17–18** where Elijah “prays fervently” and convinces God to make the rain cease for 3½ years!

JAMES 5:19–20

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Both of those statements in this James passage—about prayer healing the sick and God making rain cease for over three years—are troublesome.

They're difficult because we pretty much know why people get sick and why they get well. It's all a function of germs, bacteria, viruses, or genetics.

And we pretty much know why it rains. Rain (and all weather) can be explained by the properties of water, the orbit and rotation of the earth, and occasionally by unique geological factors.

So this passage where James talks about the prayer of faith saving the sick and Elijah praying so well that God makes rain cease for over three years raises some uncomfortable but unavoidable questions:

Does the fact that it rains more in some places than others mean that God likes the people who live in those places more?

If the book of James is the Word of God, does that mean we're supposed to believe that God heals sick people—but only the ones whose friends say good enough prayers?

Those are silly, exaggerated ways to talk about James' words, but this passage really does invite all of us to address a serious question:

Does our faith require that we pretend we don't know what we do know?

We should probably get a running start before tackling that question.

2

Consider **Genesis 1:26–31** and **2:18–19**.

GENESIS 1:26

Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

Note that, in this creation story, God does not create the first human until verse 26.

In the previous 25 verses of Genesis 1, God has been busy creating the environment in which the human could prosper.

The creation of the first human was intentional and involved careful and detailed planning and preparation.

GENESIS 1:27

So God created humans in [God's] image, in the image of God, [God] created them; male and female [God] created them.

This whole “image of God” thing is obviously a big deal. Theologians and preachers have spent entire careers thinking and writing and talking about what it means for us—each of us and all of us—to be created in the image of God. It's a fascinating theological subject.

More about that later.

GENESIS 1:28

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

It is absolutely appropriate, and probably essential, for contemporary Presbyterians and other people of faith to talk and think together about how we can make sense of this call to “be fruitful and multiply” in a world of scarce resources and widespread poverty.

We need to think about what this might mean in a world where the words “you’re pregnant” are not always received as joyful news.

Similarly, it’s very important for us to think critically about how misplaced efforts to “subdue” and “exercise dominion over” the earth have contributed to climate change and created widespread and ongoing environmental disasters.

GENESIS 1:29–30

God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.

There doesn’t seem to be much room for carnivores here in verses 29 and 30.

Just sayin’.

GENESIS 1:31

God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Verses 26 and 27 of Genesis 1 talk about human beings, male *and* female, being created in the image of God. Genesis 1 presumes a gender binary, but other places in Scripture (especially those that mention “eunuchs”) recognize additional ways individuals understood themselves beyond the male/female distinction.

The clear lesson of Genesis 1:26–27 is that *all* human beings are created in the image of God.

And the first biblical suggestion of what that might mean comes just a few verses later.

GENESIS 2:18

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the human should be alone; I will make . . . a helper as [the human’s] partner.”

Most of us know that, after that, God creates Eve. But that happens in Genesis 2:20.

The verse in between—**Genesis 2:19**—is often overlooked and not read as closely, but it’s a hugely significant verse for us as we think about what it means for us to be created in the image of God.

This verse helps us address the question of whether our faith requires us to pretend that we *don’t* know what we *do* know.

GENESIS 2:19

So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the [human] to see what [the human] would call them, and whatever [the human] called every living creature, that was its name.

There’s a lot going on in this verse.

God talked in verse 18 about how it’s not good for the human to be alone.

Here in verse 19, God makes birds and land animals.

But God has already created all sorts of living creatures in Genesis 1—including land animals and birds.

What’s new here is that, after creating these creatures God “brings them to the [human], to see what the [human] will call them.”

And then Adam gets to name the animals.

The verse goes on to say that “whatever [the human] called every living creature, *that was its name.*”

This notion that Adam—not God—names the animals is fascinating.

God could’ve done it. Genesis 2:19 is the fiftieth verse of the Bible. And the first 49 verses make it clear that God is entirely capable of doing whatever needs to be done.

But God lets Adam name the animals. That’s a hugely important feature of the relationship between God and humans that is depicted in these first chapters of Genesis.

This is not some hyper-functioning, super-Calvinist, obsessive God who can't let anything happen without completely knowing how everything will turn out before it even starts.

This is a God who created a human who has real ability to think about things and affect things and determine how things are. In this story, God chooses to step back and let Adam name the animals. God makes room for the human to make decisions that affect even God.

The image of God is evident in Adam's ability to observe and study and think about and name the things that God has put into the world.

The image of God is evident in the human's ability to be God's partner in the ongoing process of creation.

The image of God is evident in the human's ability to make choices.

Here in Genesis 2:19, God is inviting Adam to use that God-given brain.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What are the implications of this idea that God allows Adam and all humans to make real choices that have real consequences—even for God?*
- *Is that idea comforting or intimidating for you? Why?*

3

Now consider **Psalm 19**.

PSALM 19:1-6

**The heavens are telling the glory of God,
and the firmament proclaims [God's] handiwork.**

**Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.**

**There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;**

**yet their voice goes out through all the earth
and their words to the end of the world.**

**In the heavens [God] has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.**

**Its rising is from the end of the heavens
and its circuit to the end of them,
and nothing is hid from its heat.**

The author of Psalm 19 was clearly excited by their—and our—ability to learn about this God-created world in which we find ourselves.

The Psalmist sees God’s glory everywhere: in the panorama of the sky (verses 1-2); the vastness of the earth (verses 3-4); the steadiness of the rising and setting sun (verses 5-6).

For the Psalmist, all of these things are evidence of God’s glory and majesty.

In the first six verses of Psalm 19, we’re all called to look around with reverence and wonder and learn everything we can learn from the order and beauty and consistency of the whole physical world. It’s a pretty amazing place to wake up every morning.

The first six verses of this Psalm are a call to learn from the world.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *How can Psalm 19:1-6 be taken as a biblical warrant for all who dedicate themselves to STEM studies and careers (Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics)?*

Now watch what comes next:

PSALM 19:7-14

**The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.**

**More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.**

**Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.**

**But who can detect one's own errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.**

**Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.**

**Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.**

**Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.**

After pointing out all the evidence of God's glory in creation in verses 1–6, the Psalmist goes on to talk about the importance and value of the Law and decrees of the Lord (7); the precepts and enlightening commandment of the Lord (8); and the fear and ordinances of the Lord (9).

Psalm 19 calls us to go outside and look up and look around and learn all that there is to be learned from the world. But we're also called in this Psalm to learn what we can about God and the world through our life together in the community of faith. That's where we encounter the Law and decrees and precepts and commandment and ordinances of the Lord.

We're called in this Psalm to learn and study and watch and think—both out in the world and in our life together in the community of faith.

CONCLUSION

That finally gets us back to what James is up to in the verses from chapter 5 that we read earlier.

The author of James knew less than we do about why people get sick, why they get well, and why it rains. It's just a fact.

We know more about that than he did.

But what James knew—the point he’s making in chapter 5 and the point that’s absolutely relevant for us today as we seek the Word of God in his words—is that everything that happens to us happens in the context of our relationship with a good, loving, and faithful God.

For James, it’s all about community.

With all his examples of suffering and prayer and all his urgings to his readers to take themselves and each other seriously as God’s people, James is reminding us that our best times, our worst times, our accomplishments, our learning, our whole lives should always be understood in the context of our life together with God.

Put more simply, James’ message is that, whatever happens, God is always good and always calling us together to take care of each other.

And the relevance of that message does not depend at all on our pretending that we don’t know what James didn’t know.

We know more than James knew about health and about meteorology.

But what he knew—and what we need to learn from him—is that our whole lives are best understood in the context of our life together with God.

We need to remember that and remind each other of that truth whenever we’re suffering, whenever we’re rejoicing, whenever we’re sick, whenever anyone among us is having a hard time. We need to take each other seriously as God’s people. And prayer—for ourselves, for each other, for the world—is an important way for us all to live intentionally in that relationship.

Presbyterians don’t pray to get God’s attention. We don’t pray to tell God how to be God or to make God do things that God wouldn’t otherwise have done.

We pray to open ourselves to the care and guidance of God.

That’s a message that’s absolutely consistent with the theme of the book of James.

His concern was to encourage his readers to do more than just think about what they believed. He wanted them to act.

In James 5:19–20 we are called to pay attention to each other, to take each other seriously as God’s people.

And that clearly includes learning whatever we can learn and doing whatever we can do “for one another” (to use language from **1 Peter 4:10**).

Presbyterians believe God never calls us to pretend that we don’t know what we do know--about health, or rain, or anything else. Studying the Bible faithfully never requires checking our brains at the door of the church.

We believe God calls us to keep learning and always to use what we learn “for one another.”

That’s absolutely the *most faithful* thing we could do.

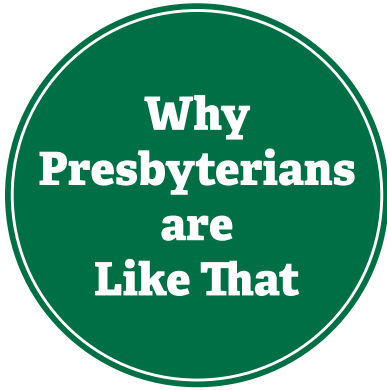
Presbyterians believe “God gave us brains and expects us to use them.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *How is the Presbyterian focus on literacy and education evident in your particular congregation?*
- *In the weekly life of your church?*
- *In the ways you interact with the larger community?*
- *What do you think are advantages of the Presbyterian concern to “use the brains God gave us”?*
- *What might be dangers or downsides of that intellectual emphasis?*
- *What do we learn in these passages (James 5:13-20; Genesis 1:26-31; Genesis 2:18-19; and Psalm 19) about God?*
- *Ourselves?*
- *Each other?*

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from the Presbyterian emphasis on literacy and education?*
-



5. Right Now

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe we are beloved, gifted, capable, and safe. Already. Right now.

This session will enable participants to discuss the assurances that we are beloved, gifted, capable, and safe through reference to

- Matthew 25:41–46
- Isaiah 43:4
- Jeremiah 29:11
- 1 John 3:1
- 1 Peter 4:10
- Psalm 8:1–5
- Ephesians 2:8–10
- Psalm 139:7–8

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
As we face times of uncertainty and anxiety in our lives,
as we hear and remember voices telling us or telling others
that we have to change before we can be loved,
we give you thanks for the clear and consistent message of the Bible
that all people are your beloved, gifted, capable, and safe children.
Amen.*

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There are those in our congregations and in the larger Church who use scripture passages quoted out of context to suggest that there are some people who—by virtue of their sexuality, gender identity, religious faith, or other factors—will have to change before God will love them.

By prayerfully studying Scripture together, Presbyterians have concluded that God has always loved all of us and will always love all of us.

Presbyterians have recognized that God has given us gifts as a faith community and as individuals. We believe we are called to identify, develop, and use those gifts to serve the world. We are confident that we can and should learn more about our world than we currently know. And we are convinced that our status as God’s beloved, gifted, capable, and safe (saved) children is never in jeopardy and will never be lost.

ENGAGING THE BIBLE

There are certain passages of Scripture that may cause us to wonder if our status as beloved, gifted, capable, and safe children of God may not be true for all of us at all times.

In discussing the birth of Jesus, **John 1:12** says

To all who received him, who believed in his name [Jesus] gave power to become children of God.

That language clearly suggests that our status as children of God is possible but not certain. We can “become” children of God *if* we “receive him” and “believe in his name.”

1

Similarly, in the second part of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, in **Matthew 25:41–46**, Jesus says

Then [the Son of Man] will say to those at his left hand [the “goats”], ‘You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

These familiar words from Matthew 25 can certainly be interpreted to mean that people who fail to care for hungry, thirsty, alien, naked, sick, or imprisoned persons will be sent to “eternal punishment” in the “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

Nevertheless, as Presbyterians have prayerfully studied the whole Bible together, we have concluded that the full witness of Scripture teaches that we are, have always been, and will always be beloved, gifted, capable, and safe—even when we fail to act as God calls and intends for us to act.

2

BELOVED

Consider **Isaiah 43:4**.

ISAIAH 43:4

**... you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you.**

There's much to be said about this verse.

These words of comfort and assurance were originally addressed to a particular exiled and embattled community (Israel). That historic Hebrew faith community has preserved those words for centuries because they believe themselves to be directly addressed by God through this passage and all of Hebrew Scripture.

Presbyterians and other Christians also understand ourselves to be part of the community to whom these words were addressed. We believe what God said to the Israelites then also applies to us now.

By the way, a better English translation of this verse would be “*Y'all* are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love *y'all*.”

One of the limits of formal English is that the second person singular pronoun and the second person plural pronoun are the same: “you.” This can lead to difficulties when reading, remembering, and reflecting on some biblical passages. It is important when studying Scripture to recognize when individuals are being addressed and when words are intended for the entire community.

Think about how this distinction affects how you read **Jeremiah 29:11**.

JEREMIAH 29:11

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

Many earnest and faithful Christians interpret this passage to mean that God has plans for them as individuals. But here in Jeremiah 29:11 the Hebrew word that is translated “for you” is “alekem.” “Alekem” is a second person *plural* pronoun. A better translation of that verse would be

“I know the plans I have for y’all.”

Some of us think “y’all” is very useful as a second person plural English pronoun.

Presbyterians believe we are part of the community to whom God expresses love in Isaiah 43:4 and promises a hopeful future in Jeremiah 29.

Consider the first lines of **1 John 3:1**:

1 JOHN 3:1

See what love the father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.

This verse was also written to a particular community in a specific context.

Most biblical scholars believe 1 John was written (probably around the year 100 CE) to a particular Christian congregation. Through the centuries since, the church has preserved these words because we recognize continuity between that early congregation and the congregations we are part of today.

Presbyterians rejoice that, in this passage, *we* are “called children of God.”

We’re comforted and assured by the statement that “*that is what we are.*”

There is no suggestion in 1 John 3:1 that our status as children of God is in question; that it is something we should aspire to or have to earn.

Presbyterians recognize and affirm that we are children of God. Already. Right now.

All of us.

Including you.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *How can we reconcile this idea that we are all beloved with passages of scripture which depict the judgment and punishment of some people for their actions?*
- *To what extent do our previous discussions of Grace help us as we consider the Presbyterian affirmation that we are all beloved?*

3

GIFTED

Consider **1 Peter 4:10**.

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.

Let's unpack this verse.

"Stewards"

Like the Presbyterian Church, the word "steward" comes from Scotland.

The first animals that the nomadic clans of ancient Scotland domesticated were pigs.

It made sense. Pigs thrived in Scotland. They could find plenty to eat.

They were hearty and prospered in the rough and rugged Scottish terrain.

The clan members figured out that it was good to have pigs around. They were a good source of meat, their hides and other parts were useful, and they actually gained weight (meat) as they traveled.

The ancient Scots eventually developed a whole economy based on pigs.

Everybody wanted to have some pigs.

But pigs are a little bit of trouble to keep. It takes some time, space, and energy to care for pigs. Individual families eventually figured out that—although it was great to have pigs around as a source of meat and hides—they also had a lot of other things to do to take care of themselves.

So the clans decided that the most efficient thing for them to do would be to keep everybody's pigs together. They would choose one person to care for everybody's pigs. That way the families would be free to do the other things they needed to do to survive, while knowing that their pigs were being well cared for.

That was a good idea, but only if the person in charge of everybody's pigs could be trusted to take good care of swine that didn't belong to them.

Each clan needed to find someone who was responsible, honest, trustworthy, and dependable. So they would identify an exemplary member of their community and put them in charge of everybody's pigs.

That person was placed in charge of the area where the pigs were kept.

They became the "warden" of the "sty": the sty warden.

The phrase "sty warden" is where we get the words "steward" and "stewardship." So whenever we talk about "stewardship" in the context of our life together, we're essentially saying that we should all be the kind of people the whole clan could trust with their pigs.

Presbyterians believe that when we are invited in 1 Peter 4:10 to "serve one another" as "good stewards of the manifold grace of God," we're essentially being reminded and encouraged to be the kind of people the whole clan could trust with their pigs. We're being reminded that the gifts at our disposal don't belong exclusively to us. They have been given to us, by God, to share with others.

Interestingly, the family name of the kings and queens of Scotland from 1371 to 1603, and of England and Scotland from 1603 to 1714 was "Stuart." Same root word. Sty warden. That's not really relevant for this lesson, but it's cool trivia.

"Manifold grace of God"

Different ones of us have different gifts.

See **Romans 12:6a** (*we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us*).

When it comes to all the things we are called to do to live faithfully together in relationship with God and each other, none of us can do all of them, each of us can do some of them.

Each of us can do some of them.

"Serve one another"

Our gifts are intended to be used to serve others.

"Whatever gift you have"

This verse assumes that every reader has gifts.

Presbyterians believe that we are all gifted, that we don't all have the same gifts, and that our individual and corporate gifts are meant to be used to serve one another.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *How might your life or the life of your congregation be different if your primary focus was on “serving one another with whatever gift you have”?*
- *How might that focus affect your congregation's relationship to your community?*
- *How might that focus affect the use of your church property?*

4

CAPABLE

Consider **Psalm 8:1–5**.

PSALM 8:1–5

**O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!**

**You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.**

**When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?**

**Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.**

The Psalmist recognizes and appreciates the fact that human beings—created in God's image according to Genesis 1—are one of the many evidences of the majesty of God. Psalm 8:5 contains the important and profound recognition that it's a good, amazing, wonderful thing to be human beings in general and a specific human in particular.

Presbyterians know about sin. We talk about sin a lot. We understand that we're not perfect as individuals or as a species. We can, and should, go on and on about the ways we fail to live the abundant life in Christ that God intends for each of us.

But, when we're at our best, Presbyterians also understand and affirm that we humans are capable of doing some amazing things. We make a lot of messes and we're much too cruel to each other. But we can also produce authentic acts of courage, compassion, sacrifice, service, and beauty.

Psalms 8:5 is right: it's good to be us. Not us Presbyterians, but us humans.

People can do some wonderful, good, faithful, life-affirming stuff.

5

SAFE

Consider **Ephesians 2:8–9**

EPHESIANS 2:8

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

“Saved” from what?

Presbyterians believe that our sin separates us from God and from each other.

We repeatedly turn away from God and fail to live the abundant life for which we were created.

The Presbyterian understanding of sin will be addressed more fully in the seventh Bible study in this series: “Sin.”

We are incapable of restoring ourselves to right relationship with God. If it were left up to us, we would remain estranged from God.

But through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God comes all the way to us and saves us from separation from God and each other.

God has made us *safe* in Jesus Christ.

And . . .

This is not a story about anything we do.

It's all about what God does in Jesus Christ.

EPHESIANS 2:10

For we are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

What God has done for us in Jesus Christ is to come all the way to us.

Because of what God does in Jesus, we are safe from the separation from God that was and is caused by our failure to live as we were created and intended to live.

Even though we screw things up, we are safe.

6

God will never abandon us—before or after we die.

Consider two verses from **Psalm 139**:

PSALM 139:7-8

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

“Sheol” refers to wherever we go when we die.

The huge and easily overlooked ramification of Psalm 139:8 is that we will never be anywhere—before or after we die—where we are beyond the reach of God’s love.

This is also Paul’s point in **Romans 8:38–39**.

ROMANS 8:38-39

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We’re safe. And that won’t change.

CONCLUSION

While we recognize and take seriously the warnings in the Bible about the consequences of our failure to live as God calls and intends us to live, Presbyterians affirm that—as a community and as individuals—we are all beloved, gifted, capable, and safe children of God.

All of us.

Already.

Right now.

Not because of anything we do.

But because of who God is.

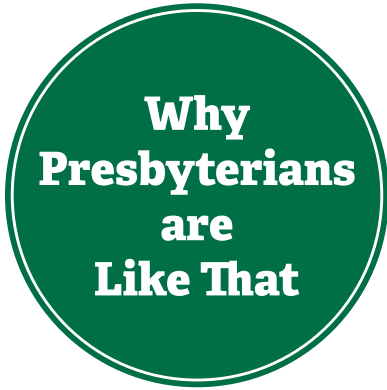
Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe we are beloved, gifted, capable, and safe. Already. Right now.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *How would you imagine a person's life would be who didn't understand or believe that they were Beloved?*
- *Gifted?*
- *Capable?*
- *Safe?*
- *If we seriously affirm that all are Beloved, Gifted, Capable, and Safe, what might we do to help others learn that truth about themselves?*
- *What have we learned in these passages about God?*
- *Ourselves?*
- *Each other?*

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from the approach this study has taken to the Presbyterian affirmation that we are already beloved, gifted, capable, and safe?*
- *What have you learned from discussion of historical context and word study in this session?*



6. Justice

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe God calls us to be on the side of the ones who are having the hardest time.

Participants in this session will consider God's call for justice through study of

- Deuteronomy 10:17–19
- Matthew 25:31–40
- Amos 5:21–24
- Jeremiah 29:4–7

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
We are aware that there are people
in our lives and in our communities who face particular difficulties.
Some experience real racism, sexism, or other forms of structural injustice.
Some are overlooked, dismissed, exploited, or injured.
As we engage in this study and continue with our life together,
continue to speak among and through us your urgent call for justice—
for all people and for the earth as a whole.
Amen.*

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Justice is a central theme of the entire Bible and a relevant concern in every Presbyterian congregation. It's impossible to take the Bible seriously without recognizing its consistent calls for justice. It's impossible to take our neighbors seriously without recognizing that some of them (and some of us) are victims of unfair and inequitable treatment. It is also almost certainly the case that some of our neighbors (and we) cause and benefit from unfair and inequitable treatment of others.

Studying the Bible prayerfully together has led Presbyterians to conclude that the people of God are always called to care for the most vulnerable members of the societies in which we live. From the command to love widows, orphans, and strangers in Deuteronomy 10 to Jesus' identification with hungry, thirsty, sick, displaced, and imprisoned persons in Matthew 25 (and many other passages), the Bible teaches that faithful response to God's love in our lives always involves noticing, actively loving, and supporting others who face personal or communal difficulties.

ENGAGING THE BIBLE

1

Consider **Deuteronomy 10:17–19**.

DEUTERONOMY 10:17

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe,

The tenth chapter of Deuteronomy is part of a long series of speeches from Moses to the Israelites delineating exactly what it means for them to be God's chosen, beloved, covenant community. The book of Deuteronomy is about the life of that covenant community (Israel) after they have escaped from slavery in Egypt. Deuteronomy is a sort of constitution for Israel as they seek to live faithfully together with God and with each other.

Here in verse 17, Moses is describing Yahweh (God) to the Israelites.

God's self-identification as "God of gods and Lord of lords" is important. This verse affirms that Yahweh (as God self-identifies in **Exodus 3:14**)—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel—is not just one of the many competing gods in the ancient world. Yahweh is the *only* God.

God's self-identification as "*the* great God, mighty and awesome" indicates that Yahweh is not engaged in any sort of battles or contests with other "gods." Yahweh is completely in charge. Yahweh has no rivals.

And this great, mighty, unrivaled God “is not partial and takes no bribe.”

The one God who has called us together and made us a people treats us all fairly and equitably, regardless of who we are. This is meant to distinguish Yahweh from other “gods” who were worshiped in the area at that time. The mythologies and narratives around those gods often involved bribery, treachery, and trickery.

DEUTERONOMY 10:18

who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.

Notice that Moses doesn't say that God demands justice.

The implication here is that God *causes* “the orphan and the widow and . . . the strangers” to receive what they need. Most biblical discussions of justice have to do with calling the members of the Covenant community to treat others (all others) with generosity, compassion, fairness, hospitality, and love.

Let's take a quick peek at **Micah 6:8**:

**[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?**

According to Micah, justice is something that we are required to *do*.

That's directly related to the statement here in verse 18 that Yahweh *executes* justice.

Verse 18 specifically states that God who is great, mighty, awesome, and impartial executes justice for the “orphan, widow, and stranger.”

In the patriarchal society in which these words were originally written and recorded, the status, prospects, and circumstances of any individual depended largely on the adult male to whom they were most closely related. In that context orphans, widows, and strangers were especially vulnerable because they had no adult male to look out for them.

The statement here in verse 18 that God “executes justice for the orphan and the widow” and “loves the stranger” means that the God of Israel who is “not partial and takes no bribe” looks out for those in the community who have no one else (no adult male) looking out for them.

DEUTERONOMY 10:19

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Here, Moses is reminding the Israelites that they were once in a place where no one was looking out for them (see **Exodus chapters 1–12**). He reminds them that they had been noticed and cared for when they were vulnerable and overlooked. And he calls them to notice and care for the vulnerable and overlooked ones in their midst.

Although we do not live in societies that are as completely patriarchal as the one in which Deuteronomy was written, Presbyterians believe we are called to notice and care for all of our neighbors who are dismissed, devalued, overlooked, or endangered.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *Who are people in your community who might have no one looking out for them?*
- *What is the significance of the recognition that justice is something that we're called to do?*

2

Consider **Matthew 25:31–40**.

MATTHEW 25:31–32

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,

In this metaphor, Jesus (“the Son of Man”) divides “all the nations” into two groups: sheep and goats. This would have been a familiar and accessible image for those who originally heard or read this story. Sheep and goats are separate, though closely-related, species. Their dietary needs are not the same. They don’t always get along well together in common herds. The long-term health of both herds is increased when sheep and goats are kept separately.

Separating sheep from goats is a little like separating whites from colors when doing laundry. It’s a good and easy way to avoid potential problems.

MATTHEW 25:33

and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

For a variety of reasons, many ancient cultures regarded the right side as superior to the left. To this day, many cultures maintain a preference for the right.

There are some reasons for that. You can look them up if you want to, but for now it's sufficient to say that the placement of the sheep at the right hand of the Son of Man implies preference for them. (See **Hebrews 1:3, 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22; Acts 7:55–56.**)

MATTHEW 25:34

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,

This is a clear and full-throated endorsement of the behavior of the sheep.

MATTHEW 25:35–36

for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

One of the amazing and exciting and inspiring features of the Bible is that the behaviors that Jesus commends in this story—

- Feeding the hungry;
- Giving drink to the thirsty;
- Welcoming strangers;
- Clothing the naked;
- Caring for the sick; and
- Visiting the imprisoned—

are as fully relevant and necessary in the world where we woke up today as they were when this story was originally written nearly 2000 years ago.

MATTHEW 25:37–39

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’

The sheep probably don’t mind the shout-out from the Son of Man, but they’re perplexed when he makes this a story about him.

“What do you mean, ‘you fed *me*’ and ‘welcomed *me*’? We’re pretty sure we would have recognized you if you had been there. We didn’t see you at all.”

MATTHEW 25:40

And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’

This is the punch line of the story.

Jesus—who is our clearest picture of who God is—identifies with those who are hungry, thirsty, vulnerable to the elements, displaced, sick, and imprisoned. He calls those at-risk persons “brothers and sisters of mine” and clearly praises the “sheep” because they care for them.

Presbyterians are Christians who believe God calls us to be on the side of the ones who are having the hardest time.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *In what ways do you—or your congregation, or the larger Presbyterian Church—care for people who are hungry, thirsty, vulnerable to the elements, displaced, sick, or imprisoned?*
- *What are other ways we can identify and care for people in our communities who are having a hard time?*
- *How can we / do we care for them?*

3

Study of other biblical passages such as **Amos 5:21–24** and **Jeremiah 29:4–7** has led Presbyterians to conclude that God’s call to be on the side of the ones who are having the hardest time is not only a call to us as individuals—though that is certainly part of God’s call. We also believe we are called to influence the societies and communities we are part of to notice and care for those among us who are having the hardest time.

Consider **Amos 5:21–24**.

AMOS 5:21

**I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.**

That’s a pretty harsh message from God to the community of Israel.

As is probably the case in your congregation and is certainly the case in the Presbyterian Church, the life of the Israelite community to whom God was speaking through Amos included several festivals and celebrations. Many of those festivals and assemblies are called for in the Hebrew Scriptures.

AMOS 5:22

**Even though you offer me your burnt offerings
and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.**

Again, God is referring to things that the Israelites are instructed to do in other places in their Scriptures—particularly in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers.

AMOS 5:23–24

**Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.**

It isn’t that God minds festivals, assemblies, offerings, or songs. Those are appropriate responses to God’s grace.

The point of Amos 5:21–24 is that those actions are only appropriate when they are accompanied by consistent efforts by the entire community to care for the ones who are having the hardest time.

Presbyterians believe God calls us to be on the side of the ones who are having the hardest time.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *How can we influence our communities to care for those of our neighbors who are having the hardest time?*

4

Consider **Jeremiah 29:4–7**:

JEREMIAH 29:4

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

This is God speaking through Jeremiah to Israelites who have been removed from a place in which theirs was the dominant religion—where nearly everybody thought about God the same way they did.

This is God talking to believers about how to be faithful in a very diverse place.

Since we are encountering this story in a society that grows more diverse every day, Presbyterians find much relevant insight in the words that follow.

JEREMIAH 29:5

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

That is, “Settle down and settle in. Don’t spend your time wishing things were how they used to be. Figure out how to be faithful, fully present, and hopeful where you are.”

JEREMIAH 29:6

Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.

Build families.

Keep living the way I taught you to live.

Read your Bibles.

Stick together.

Remember who—and *Whose*—you are.

Keep the faith.

JEREMIAH 29:7

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Don't resent the fact that there are other folks in the city where you find yourself who are different than you. They all matter too.

Do whatever you can to be good neighbors.

Live in such a way that everybody thinks it's good news that y'all are there.

CONCLUSION

Presbyterians believe that our duty to care for the ones having the hardest time is not limited to our particular faith community.

We believe God calls us to be full and loving participants in all of the diverse communities that we're part of. We believe we are called to seek the welfare of the cities—and other communities—where we find ourselves. And we believe we are called to care for the ones in those communities who are having the hardest time.

We believe we are called to exercise our influence in our communities on behalf of our neighbors who are hungry, thirsty, vulnerable to the elements, displaced, sick, and imprisoned. We believe we are called actively to dismantle unjust social structures and to cooperate with all our neighbors to build just and kind communities.

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe God calls us to be on the side of the ones who are having the hardest time.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

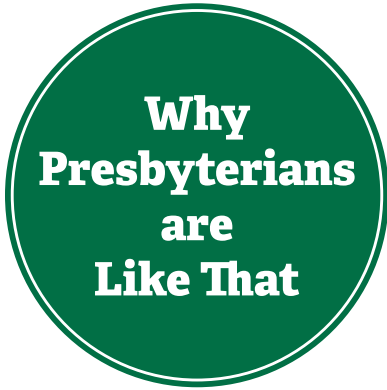
- *As an individual, or as a congregation, how can you/do you “seek the welfare of the city” where you are?*
- *What have we learned in these passages about God?*
- *Ourselves?*
- *Each other?*

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from the approach this study has taken to the Presbyterian recognition that God calls us to be on the side of the ones who are having the hardest time?*

This might be an appropriate time to remember this sentence from the first lesson in this “Why Presbyterians Are Like That” series:

Throughout our history, Presbyterians have especially benefited from insights gained and shared by Christians who were not part of the dominant culture. When we’re at our best, Presbyterians attend to the perspectives of fellow Christians who have been overlooked, devalued, and dismissed—often by others who use the Bible to justify and rationalize unjust behavior.



7. Sin

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe nobody's perfect.

This session will enable participants to discuss the Presbyterian understanding of sin through discussion of:

- The Book of Genesis in general,
- Genesis 3:1–19 in particular.
- Romans 3:23,
- 1 John 1:8, and
- Romans 5:8

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
Faithful God,
we are aware that, despite our best efforts,
we often deny our dependence on you,
we separate ourselves from each other,
we separate ourselves from you,
and we deny our responsibility for our own decisions and actions.
Forgive us, God, when we fail to be the people you intend for us to be.
Remind us of your abiding grace,
and help us to live as forgiven and forgiving people.
Amen.*

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Presbyterians talk about sin a lot because the Bible talks about sin a lot. We recognize ourselves, and our world, in the Genesis story of the first humans eating forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. We see denial of dependence, denial of responsibility, separation from each other, and separation from God every day in our individual lives, in our life together, and in our world. We know sin is part of the truth about each of us and all of us. We believe it's important to acknowledge and remember that.

But we also know sin is not the whole truth about us.

Presbyterians don't talk about sin just to make ourselves and others miserable. Our intention is not to humiliate people or cause them to fear punishment from an angry God.

Presbyterians talk about sin a lot because we believe it is important for us to recognize and remember the difference between who we are and who God intends for us to be. We talk about sin a lot because the world where we wake up every day is filled with hatred, violence, warfare, abuse, and greed. Thinking and talking about sin enables Presbyterians to look clearly and honestly at a world in which many suffer (including us) and many cause others to suffer (including us). Presbyterians talk a lot about sin because we recognize it every day in ourselves and in our world.

ENGAGING THE BIBLE

1

Let's think for a moment about the book of **Genesis**.

To understand what we've got in Genesis, we need first to look back at a passage (**Exodus 34:6**) we discussed in the first "Why Presbyterians Are Like That" study about how and why Presbyterians read and study the Bible.

Exodus 34:6 says:

*The LORD passed before [Moses] and proclaimed,
"I AM, I AM,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,*

Your Bible probably says "the Lord, the Lord" but God is using the Divine name—Yahweh—in this verse. "I Am" is a better translation.

That's a hugely important verse in the Old Testament. There are six other passages in the Hebrew Scriptures that use that same language to describe God:

Gracious
Merciful
Slow to anger
Abounding in steadfast love.

Biblical scholars think that's the oldest language in the entire Bible. It's like a creed, a sort of definition of who God is. It was part of the Hebrew oral tradition before any of the texts in our Bible were even written down.

From as far back as we can know, the Hebrews understood themselves to be uniquely related to a gracious, merciful, patient, and steadfastly loving God.

It's important to understand that before we turn our attention to the book of Genesis.

Genesis was written in a community of people who worshiped and sought to serve their gracious, merciful, patient, and steadfastly loving God.

But the world as they encountered it raised some questions for them.

- Where did all this come from?
- Where did we come from?

If God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love—which we believe—

- Why do people consistently disappoint and betray each other?
- Why are we scared of snakes?
- Why is childbirth so painful?
- Why is it so hard for us to get enough food?
- What's the deal with that flood that destroyed everything a few generations ago?

The book of Genesis can be helpfully and appropriately read as an attempt by pre-scientific people who knew about God—and also knew about literature and metaphors—to make sense of their imperfect world without abandoning their faith in their gracious, merciful, patient, and loving God.

If we read the book of Genesis as an attempt by a faithful community to address some questions about the world as they encountered it, **Genesis 3:1–19** can be read as a story that addresses questions like:

- Why do people consistently disappoint and betray each other?

- Why are we scared of snakes?
- Why is childbirth so painful?
- Why is it so hard for us to get enough food?

Think of Genesis as a collection of stories intended to help faithful people make sense of the world.

GENESIS 3:1

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

It is highly unlikely that anyone who wrote, read, or heard this story when it was originally created ever took it literally.

The ancient Hebrews knew about metaphors.

Taking the Bible seriously does not necessarily mean presuming that it is exclusively a record of historical facts.

Presbyterians do not believe that the meaningful ideas and insights in this story depend on a belief that there ever was a talking snake.

GENESIS 3:2–3

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’”

The woman is quoting **Genesis 2:15–17**:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

It’s not clear exactly what God is up to in those verses. Does God not want these two new humans to know the difference between good and evil? How would that make sense? Does God want to keep the humans ignorant about evil (which apparently exists before Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit)?

Or is “good and evil” a colloquial term that encompasses everything in creation—all the good stuff and all the bad stuff? Is God concerned that these fresh new people will suddenly know, or think they know, everything about everything?

GENESIS 3:4

But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die,

The serpent is directly challenging and contradicting what God just said in Genesis 2:17.

GENESIS 3:5

for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

The serpent is suggesting that if Eve eats the fruit that God told her and Adam not to eat then she'll know as much as God knows and so won't need God any more.

“It's all just a scam to keep y'all dependent on God—a cheap ploy to make you think you're not good enough to get by on your own.”

GENESIS 3:6

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

Eve, and later Adam, eat that tasty, pretty, nutritious food because they want to be “wise.”

They eat that fruit because they want to know everything about everything.

They don't want to be dependent on God any more.

The first thing the humans do in this story is *deny their dependence*.

They eat that fruit because they think they can handle everything by themselves.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *How is the notion of sin as denial of dependence relevant or helpful for you as you think about your own life?*

GENESIS 3:7

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

This is kind of a bizarre development.

Clearly, Adam and Eve had been naked all along.

But now, after eating that fruit, their nakedness has become a problem. All of a sudden, they feel compelled to cover up their “private parts” with fig leaves (that would be the “loins” that the “loincloths” were intended to conceal).

After eating the forbidden fruit, Eve and Adam suddenly feel something like shame. And they feel the need to protect themselves from each other and the world. They feel vulnerable in a way they didn't before.

The second thing the humans do in this story is *separate themselves from each other*.

GENESIS 3:8

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees in the garden.

Eve and Adam hear God coming and decide they need to hide.

All of a sudden, they're no longer comfortable facing God.

They're afraid.

They're ashamed for having done what God told them not to do.

And they feel vulnerable because they're naked.

So they hide.

The third thing the humans do after eating the forbidden fruit is to *separate themselves from God*.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *How does this language about sin as separation from each other and separation from God help you think about sin and the disappointments and difficulties that arise in our everyday lives?*

GENESIS 3:9

But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”

This is a huge verse.

The very first thing God says after Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, deny their dependence, and separate themselves from each other is “Where are you?”

Sin shows up early in the third chapter of the first book of the Bible. The remaining 65 books and 48-plus chapters are about how God responds to human sin.

God’s first response to human sin is to seek the sinners, to ask “Where are you?”

GENESIS 3:10

[Adam] said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

Adam, Eve, and God had been getting along fine.

Remember when Adam got to name the animals in **Genesis 2:19**?

Good times in the Garden of Eden.

But now, after they have denied their dependence on God, and after they have felt it necessary to separate themselves from each other with loincloths, they are suddenly uncomfortable in the presence of God.

And, apparently, it was the nakedness that did it.

GENESIS 3:11

[God] said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”

“Since when has nakedness been an issue?”

“What are you worried about?”

God has asked Adam a direct question: “Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”

Watch what Adam does next.

GENESIS 3:12

The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree and I ate.”

Adam doesn't deny that he has eaten the forbidden fruit. But he sure tries to dodge the blame.

“The woman whom you gave to be with me, *she* gave me fruit from the tree and I ate.”

Without actually denying that he did precisely what God told him not to do, Adam tries to blame everybody else in the story.

“It's not really my fault.

You gave me the woman.

And she gave me the fruit.

You can't really blame me.”

GENESIS 3:13

Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”

Eve blames the serpent.

Nobody takes responsibility for their behavior.

The fourth thing the humans do after eating the forbidden fruit is *deny responsibility for their own actions*.

So in these first 13 verses of Genesis 3, we see the first humans:

- deny dependence on anything beyond themselves;
- separate themselves from each other;
- separate themselves from God; and
- deny responsibility for their own actions.

One doesn't need to believe in talking snakes to recognize all those behaviors in the world where we woke up this morning (and in our own lives).

As you read Genesis 3:14–19, remember that these words were articulated in an ancient, pre-scientific culture. This text was produced in a community of people who saw themselves as specially related to the one and only God who created an orderly world, loved that world and its inhabitants, and expected them to care for themselves, each other, and all that God created.

Given that understanding, read these verses as attempts to make sense of the facts of the real lives of real people in a specific context.

- **Why don't snakes have legs and why are we so scared of them?**

GENESIS 3:14–15

The LORD God said to the serpent,

**“Because you have done this,
cursed are you among animals
and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.**

**I will put enmity between you and the woman
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.**

- **Why is childbirth so difficult and painful for women?**

GENESIS 3:16

To the woman [God] said,

**“I will make your pangs in childbirth exceedingly great;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.”**

That sure looks like a clumsy rationalization for a patriarchal social order.

Chauvinist patriarchy can be found all over the Bible.

As we have studied the whole Bible prayerfully and together over the centuries, Presbyterians have rejected any interpretation of this passage or any others that implies that:

women are inferior to men in any aspect of our life together;

sexual desire is related to sin; or
heterosexuality is normative for all people.

- **If God loves us so much, why do we get hungry and why is it so hard for us to get enough to eat?**

GENESIS 3:17-18

And to the man he said,

**“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree
about which I commanded you
‘you shall not eat of it,’
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.**

- **Why do we die and why do we decompose?**

GENESIS 3:19

**By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”**

Genesis 3:1-19 contains complicated, interesting, insightful, and troublesome ideas.

At times this passage can seem like a story about a petty, jealous, and capricious God who overreacts and punishes when the first humans do human things.

Yet Presbyterians believe there are significant and important insights in this story. This account of the actions of the first humans includes four particular things we believe are characteristic of every human since then—including us. In one way or another, we all deny our dependence on anything beyond

ourselves, separate ourselves from each other, separate ourselves from God, and deny responsibility for our own actions.

In **Romans 3:23**, Paul says *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*.

First John 1:8 says *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*.

Presbyterians recognize that.

We believe we're all sinners.

That's why we don't ever give absolute power or ultimate authority to any single individual.

It's why we confess our sins as part of our regular worship life.

But it's important to note that we don't confess our sins in order to be forgiven. We confess our sins because we recognize that we have already been forgiven.

CONCLUSION

Romans 5:8 says *God proves [God's] love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us*.

Presbyterians believe it's important for us to recognize that we are all sinners. But we also believe it's important for us to remember and recognize that our sin is not the last word.

Look back at **Genesis 3:9**: *But the LORD God called to the [human] and said to him, "Where are you?"*

Presbyterians believe God always responds to our sin by coming after us; by taking the steps to restore us to the relationship with God and each other for which we were created.

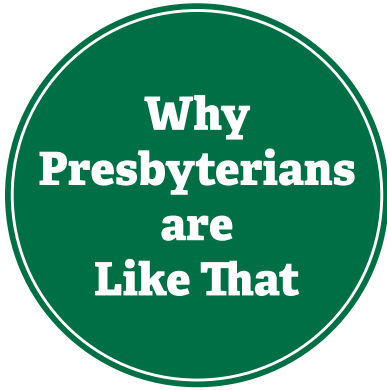
That's news that brings joy to the world.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What have we learned in these passages about God?*
- *Ourselves?*
- *Each other?*

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from Presbyterian recognition that all humans deny dependence, separate themselves from each other, separate themselves from God, and deny responsibility for our own actions?*
 - *Perhaps more importantly, what best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from the fact in Genesis 3:9 that God's first response to the first sin is to seek and call to the sinners?*
-



8. Presbyterian

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe there's more Holy Spirit in a bunch of us than in any single one of us.

This lesson will enable participants to consider the Presbyterian understanding of authority through discussion of

- Acts 15:19, 22–29
- Romans 3:23
- Micah 6:8
- 1 Peter 4:10
- Matthew 18:20
- 1 Corinthians 2:4–11

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and
consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
We give you thanks for this opportunity to study
the Bible together—
to read together,
listen to each other,
talk to each other,
and think together
about how best to live out our relationship with you
and with each other.*

From *Why Presbyterians Are Like That*, written by Rev. John Williams, Ph.D. Chaplain and Director of Church Relations Austin College, Sherman, Texas. Copyright © 2022 by the Office of Christian Formation in the Presbyterian Mission Agency of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and UKirk Collegiate Ministries.

*We are grateful for all who made it possible for us to be here
and do this today:
for pastors and teachers,
bible translators and scholars,
and fellow church members.
Help us understand and appreciate the gifts of all
who make up or support
the communities we are part of.
Amen.*

Community is an important but easily overlooked theme in the Bible.

There are many sincere and earnest Christians in our congregations and in our larger church who talk a lot about having “a personal relationship with Jesus” as though Christian faith doesn’t involve anybody except Jesus and a particular individual.

Presbyterians agree that faith should be personal. We believe God calls each of us individually to respond to grace through acts of service and worship.

But we don’t think faith can or should be private.

There are many stories in the Bible about individuals who have personal interactions and experiences with God. But the result of those individual experiences is that the individual is empowered and inspired to return to and actively participate in the faith community.

Presbyterians understand that, while we may well have personal, individual experiences with God, the result of those experiences will always be that we are called and sent into community with other Christians.

It’s all about community.

1

As a group, Presbyterians are appropriately confident that we are capable of using the brains God gave us to figure out how to live faithfully together in response to God’s gracious love. We also understand that no single one of us has all the wisdom, gifts, and insight necessary for us to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit in any particular situation.

Presbyterians are often deservedly kidded for our hyper-organization and obsession with committees. We have a lot of rules about how we make decisions. But all of that

structure exists to remind and enable us to slow down and listen to each other. At its best, Presbyterian polity and organization helps the whole church gain access to the gifts that God has given through individuals to our communities and the world.

It is certainly true that many of the themes discussed in these “Why Presbyterians Are Like That” Bible studies are not exclusive or unique to Presbyterians. Lots of Christians talk and think about grace, justice, and sin.

Presbyterians are distinctive among Christians because of the way we understand authority in the church.

The word “Presbyterian” means “ruled, governed, or led by elders.”

We recognize that every church member can’t be present for every discussion and decision that affects the life and ministry of the church. So we identify and entrust individuals from within our faith community to pray, study, deliberate, and make decisions on our behalf about church life.

ENGAGING THE BIBLE

2

Recall the story of the Jerusalem Council in **Acts 15** that we discussed in the first study in this series, “Bible.”

That material was about why Presbyterians look to the Bible for vocabulary and categories to help us figure out which things matter more than other things.

There was disagreement in the early church about whether or not persons who converted to Christianity had to be circumcised. Leaders from various Christian congregations gathered in Jerusalem, talked to each other and listened to each other. They studied Scripture together and some of them changed their minds.

3

Now consider **Acts 15:19** and **22–29**.

ACTS 15:19

“Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God,”

This is James talking.

He had been a leader in the pro-circumcision camp.

But now, after participating in serious and respectful discussion with other church leaders whose perspectives were different from his, James changes his mind . . .

ACTS 15:22

Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among them and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers,

The “apostles and elders” understand themselves to be acting “with the consent of the whole church.” That’s because they were specifically chosen to represent their particular congregations in the Jerusalem Council.

And they decide to send representatives from the Council out to individual churches with a brief, but authoritative letter.

ACTS 15:23

with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers and sisters of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.

The letter is addressed to various Christian congregations that are made up primarily of Gentile, not Jewish, Christians.

ACTS 15:24

Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds,

“Somebody’s been telling y’all you have to be circumcised if you want to be Christians, but it wasn’t us.”

Two things about that:

The authors of the letter are saying “We didn’t tell anybody to do that.”

Notice how the letter and its authors are assuming that they have some authority in these matters.

Also, it’s not hard to imagine why the mention of circumcision would be “disturbing and unsettling” for many new Christians.

ACTS 15:25–26

we have decided unanimously to choose men and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's fair to ask why the Jerusalem Council participants didn't send women as well. Despite the fact that women were the first to learn that Jesus had risen from the dead (see **Matthew 28**, **Luke 24**, and **John 20**), the Christian church took much too long to recognize the gifts and wisdom of women in our life together.

ACTS 15:27

We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.

“Our decision was unanimous.”

“We got together and made a firm decision that we're happy to explain to you.”

“We're sending out Barnabas, Paul, Judas, and Silas to explain our letter to you and answer any questions you may have.”

“They were here and part of the Council.”

“We trust them and you should too.”

ACTS 15:28–29

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

Don't overlook those first words in verse 28:

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us

Notice that the authors of the letter, the participants in the Jerusalem Council, *presume* that the Holy Spirit was directing the deliberations and conclusions of the Council.

There's a tired, old, and not entirely inaccurate joke among Presbyterians that the most *Presbyterian* verse in the Bible is **1 Corinthians 14:40** (*all things should be done decently and in order*).

Yeah. We get it. We can get pretty obsessed about rules and structure.

But a strong argument could be made that these first words of **Acts 15:28** (*for it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us*) are actually the most succinct depiction in the Bible of the way Presbyterians understand authority in the church and the best way for us to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Presbyterians believe there's more Holy Spirit in a bunch of us than in any single one of us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What are the ramifications of this idea that the Holy Spirit works in groups of people?*
- *How does that affect the way you think about the Holy Spirit?*
- *How does it affect the way you think about committees?*

OTHER RELEVANT SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

4

Because we understand the truth and relevance of **Romans 3:23** (*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*) Presbyterians never ascribe absolute, complete, inerrant authority in the church to any individual.

Because we recognize the truth and relevance of **Micah 6:8** (*what does the LORD require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?*), Presbyterians understand that “walking humbly” sometimes involves deferring to decisions made by our colleagues, even when we don’t agree with them.

Because we understand the truth and relevance of **1 Peter 4:10** (*Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received*), Presbyterians presume that each member of our community has received gifts from God that are intended to benefit our entire community and the entire world. We work hard to organize our life together in a way that enables each one of us to share our gifts within and beyond the church.

Because we understand the truth and relevance of the words of Jesus in **Matthew 18:20** (*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*), Presbyterians respond to God’s grace by worshiping, deliberating, and serving God *together*.

Although there are many stories in the Bible about individual encounters with God, those individual encounters never result in the individual being called away from the faith community. The individual encounters with God always result in the individual being sent back into the faith community, often with a specific call or commission.

5

Let's conclude this discussion of the Presbyterian belief that there's more Holy Spirit in a bunch of us than in any single one of us by considering **1 Corinthians 12:4-11**.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-6

Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates them in everyone.

We don't all have the same gifts.

None of us has all the gifts.

But each of us has some of them.

And they all come from the same place.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:7

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Whatever gifts we have come from God and are intended to be shared.

They're not just for us, they're for everybody.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:8

To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit,

Some of us have seen a lot and learned important and relevant things in other contexts.

Some of us know a lot.

Some of us communicate especially well.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:9

to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,

Some of us are especially good encouragers.

Some are really good caregivers.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:10

to another the working of powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.

Some of us are good at getting things done and completing tasks.

Some of us are good planners and dreamers and visionaries.

Some of us are good at cutting to the chase and articulating things clearly and concisely.

Some of us are compassionate observers and listeners and advocates.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:11

All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

We're not all alike.

We're not all identically gifted.

But we're all undeniably gifted.

That's how God rolls.

CONCLUSION

Presbyterians recognize that we are gifted people living among gifted people.

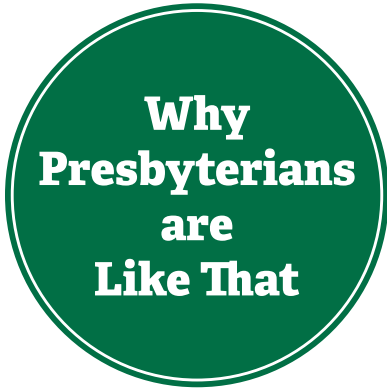
That's why Presbyterians believe there's more Holy Spirit in a bunch of us than in any single one of us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What have we learned in these passages about God?*
- *Ourselves?*
- *Each other?*

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from Presbyterian recognition that there's more Holy Spirit in a bunch of us than in any single one of us?*
 - *How can the insights discussed above inform the way Presbyterians study the Bible?*
-



9. Hope

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe God isn't finished.

In this session, participants will consider the Presbyterian belief that God isn't finished through study of

- Habakkuk 1:1–4 and 2:1–3
- Exodus 20:1–17
- Isaiah 11:6–9
- Jeremiah 31:33–34
- Revelation 21:3–6

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
God of Justice,
we sometimes grow weary and angry
as we see oppression, suffering, exploitation, and cruelty
in this world that you created and called good.
We pray that you will keep us impatient and active in the face of injustice
and compassionate toward all who suffer.
God of Peace,
remind us of your vision of Shalom for us, for all people, and for all creation.
Use us as instruments of your love
and help us live together in this world as you intend for us to live.
Amen.*

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It doesn't take long to find reasons to get discouraged about things that are happening in our communities, in our nation, and in our world.

We don't have to look far to find racism, homophobia, transphobia, political rage, hate speech, and prejudice.

Presbyterians know that's true.

Our experience is that, as we study the Bible prayerfully and together, we are addressed from beyond ourselves by a living and faithful God who continues to respond to human sin by pursuing and loving. We believe God continues to call, empower, and inspire us to live with hope in a world where sin and death are real, but where Easter is true.

That's why we go to church.

It's why we continue to study the Bible together and participate in the ongoing story of God's interaction with the world through Christ and his body the church.

It's why we continue to celebrate the Lord's Supper and baptize new church members.

It's why we continue to work for justice and help others who are having a hard time.

Presbyterians believe God isn't finished.

ENGAGING THE BIBLE

1

Consider **Habakkuk 1:1-4** and **2:1-3**.

HABAKKUK 1:1-2

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

**O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?**

**Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?**

Think about incidents of terrorism, mass violence, and unnecessary suffering that you are aware of right now.

Each of us could easily produce a long list like this; off the top of our heads; at pretty much any time.

And when we think about such things together, that list will probably grow.

Sadly, it's not all that hard for us to imagine Habakkuk's state of mind.

HABAKKUK 1:3

**Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?**

**Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.**

Turn on the news, open a newspaper, access social media, or just try to live relatively responsibly with some degree of ambient awareness in the society where you find yourself.

Wrongdoing and trouble, destruction and violence, strife and contention are pretty much unavoidable.

They can't really be ignored.

We don't have to look very far.

HABAKKUK 1:4

**So the law becomes slack,
and justice never prevails.**

**The wicked surround the righteous;
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.**

Corrupt politicians are not held accountable for their actions.

Well, sometimes they are, but often they are not.

Courts make decisions that seem clearly and obviously unjust to many of us.

Governments enact laws that disadvantage and sometimes injure us or the most vulnerable of our fellow citizens.

Governments enact laws that seem to unjustly benefit the most privileged of our society.

It's not hard at all for us to feel Habakkuk's vibe.

Isn't this a great way to begin a Bible study about Presbyterian hopefulness for the future?

Habakkuk is definitely pretty grumpy as his book begins.

He argues back and forth with God for another 14 verses in chapter 1, offering an exhaustive list of the ways his life in his community is far different from what he thinks it should be.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *Under what circumstances might it be valuable or appropriate to complain to God about wrongdoing, trouble, destruction, violence, strife, contention, and injustice?*

2

Then, when we get to chapter 2, a couple of really interesting things happen.

HABAKKUK 2:1

**I will stand at my watchpost,
and station myself on the rampart;
I will keep watch to see what [God] will say to me
and what [God] will answer
concerning my complaint.**

After doing all that whining and complaining, and giving voice to legitimate outrage and frustration, Habakkuk essentially says, “Okay God, it’s on! What have you got to say for yourself? I’m ready to have this out.”

Take a moment to appreciate that brashness.

One of the interesting things about this story is that, in the midst of all his outrage and frustration, Habakkuk assumes that he’s absolutely capable of complaining to, and even arguing with, God.

It is a significant feature of this story that, in chapter 2 verse 1, this individual from 2700 or so years ago, who faces many of the same disappointments and social strife that we all face, is presumptuous enough to ask for and expect an answer from God regarding this unacceptable situation.

That’s a remarkable sense of the value and prerogatives of one individual human character.

We don’t know anything else about Habakkuk. He wrote in the years around 600BCE, at a time when the Israelites were beset by threatening neighbors (the Chaldeans) and an incompetent and unethical king (Jehoiakim).

The story makes no claims that he’s special in any way.

As far as we know, he’s not royal, he’s not secretly divine, he’s not magic.

He’s just a grumpy, frustrated guy who has a legitimate bone to pick with God.

And then we get to verse 2:

HABAKKUK 2:2

Then the LORD answered me and said:

Write the vision;

**make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.**

That means something like “Publish the vision you have from me. Show it to everybody. Put it on a dadgum billboard. Make it so big that somebody rushing by won’t even have to slow down to read it.”

HABAKKUK 2:3

For there is still a vision for the appointed time;

it speaks of the end and does not lie.

If it seem to tarry, wait for it;

it will surely come; it will not delay.

It’s huge that God answers Habakkuk.

One of the distinctive features of the Hebrew Scriptures—what we Christians call the Old Testament—is all of the accounts they include of one-on-one, give-and-take conversations between God and individual humans.

There are conversations like that between God and Adam, Moses, Job, Jeremiah, Jonah, Habakkuk, and others.

Different ones of us probably have different theological opinions about those stories, but they make great literature. They’re great ways to for people like us to enter conversations about how things should be, and why they’re not that way.

It’s interesting to note that, in this story, God *answers* whiny, grumpy Habakkuk.

But, at first glance, God’s answer to Habakkuk is not particularly inspiring.

“Wait for it?”

Is that God’s best answer to Habakkuk? Or to us?

“Yeah, things might suck now, but they’ll get better someday.

Just wait.”

“Wait for things to get better” just doesn’t seem like an adequate response to the violence, trouble, strife, and contention that infect our lives and our world every day.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What frustration do you derive from God's instruction to Habakkuk to "wait for the vision if it seems to tarry"?*
- *What comfort can you derive from that same instruction?*
- *How can you balance that frustration and comfort?*

3

But that's not all God says to Habakkuk.

Before telling Habakkuk that there is a vision for the appointed time and to wait for it if it seems to tarry, God tells him to "write the vision."

Presbyterians believe that we certainly cannot and should not ignore the wrongdoing, trouble, destruction, violence, strife, contention, and injustice in the world.

We believe God calls and enables us to present, proclaim, and embody a different vision of how we can live together in this hurting and sinful world.

Presbyterians believe God continues to work in the world through us, in us, among us, for us, and sometimes in spite of us.

There are many biblical passages that give guidance to Presbyterians as we endeavor to "write the vision."

Presbyterians don't claim to know exhaustively all that God is doing or will do. Our common experience is that sometimes we can only fully recognize God's presence in retrospect. We're better at recognizing God's fingerprints than fully anticipating God's agenda.

Presbyterians believe our loving, gracious God continues to work with us, in us, through us, for us, and sometimes in spite of us, to bring comfort and healing to this vulnerable hurting world and its vulnerable, hurting inhabitants.

4

Consider The "Ten Commandments" passage in **Exodus 20:1-17**.

Most Christians through the centuries have tended to read the Ten Commandments as Ten Prohibitions. There is often a tendency, at least in our minds, to add an "or else" to the end of each commandment.

You shall have no other gods before me, or else . . .

Honor your father and mother, or else . . .

Thou shalt not steal, or else . . .

They might as well be the Ten Threats.

But some scholars (notably Albert Curry Winn in *A Christian Primer: The Prayer, the Creed, and the Commandments*) argue that it makes much more sense to read Exodus 20:1–17 as a list of Ten Promises.

God makes promises all over the Bible.

Think about the rainbow at the end of the Noah's Ark story (**Genesis 9:8–17**); and God's promise to make Abraham's descendants a great nation (**Genesis 12:1–3**); and Jesus' promises "Lo, I am with you always" (**Matthew 28:20**) and "I will not leave you desolate" (**John 14:18**).

Some of us maintain that reading the Ten Commandments as Ten Promises is much more consistent with the way God behaves in the rest of the Bible than reading them as Ten Prohibitions or Ten Threats.

Think about what was going on among the Israelites when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments.

God had delivered them from the terrible situation of being mistreated slaves in Egypt. It had to have been exciting to have followed Moses and God and gotten out from under the oppression of the Egyptians.

But it was probably a little scary too.

"We followed Moses and God helped him do some amazing things. I mean, it was pretty hard to ignore that Red Sea parting business. But now here we are out in the middle of nowhere. We're not slaves any more, but we don't have much to eat and who knows what's gonna happen next."

Go back and look at the chapters of Exodus that come right before the Ten Commandments. The people of Israel were getting pretty whiny.

It makes some sense to think that the gracious, merciful, patient, and abundantly loving God of the Hebrew Scriptures probably wouldn't have given the Israelites a list of prohibitions or threats at that point.

It's not as though the Ten Commandments were a recipe for earning God's favor. The Israelites already had God's favor.

The Commandments weren't requirements for being delivered from bondage. Israel had already been delivered from bondage.

Maybe the Ten Commandments are more like God saying to that scared and whiny bunch of people, "Chill out—here's ten things that are gonna be true about y'all by the time I'm finished with you. Here are ten promises from me to all of you."

EXODUS 20:1-3

Then God spoke these words,

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody has a clear understanding of what really matters; where nobody acts like there is nothing more important than money, or nations, or economic systems, or denominations, or "people like us."

That's where God has promised to lead us.

EXODUS 20:4-6

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody knows who God is and where God is. That's a world where everybody takes the right stuff seriously and everybody is more concerned with helping people who need help than with worrying about who sleeps with whom or whether they got dunked or sprinkled.

EXODUS 20:7

"You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses [God's] name.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody who talks the talk will walk the walk. That's a world where nobody claims to serve God and then abuses or takes advantage of other people.

EXODUS 20:8-11

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male and female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where nobody ever works so hard it makes them sick.

That’s a world where “busyness” never gets in the way of loving God and neighbor.

We seek to be diligent about caring for ourselves, for those we depend on, for those who depend on us, for all our neighbors, and for all creation.

EXODUS 20:12

“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD is giving you.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody has appropriate gratitude and respect for the people who came before them; and responsible and gracious concern for everybody who will come after them. That’s a world where we try to act with less selfishness and more concern for everybody else—past, present, and future.

EXODUS 20:13

“You shall not murder.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where the people of God are champions of life in all its forms. That’s a world where it is no longer necessary to kill, either in self-defense, or in war, or through capital punishment.

We imagine a world where those are just academic issues that are never relevant to real life.

EXODUS 20:14

“You shall not commit adultery.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody is faithful, where everybody can be counted on, all the time. That’s a world where nobody makes promises they don’t keep.

EXODUS 20:15

“You shall not steal.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody is gracious and generous. That’s a world where all people recognize that they are gifted children of God. It’s a world where everybody has what they need and respects the needs of others.

EXODUS 20:16

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody has the courage to tell the truth and to hear the truth—even when it’s inconvenient or uncomfortable. That’s a world where it never occurs to anybody to doubt the word of someone else.

EXODUS 20:17

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody pays more attention to what they have than what they don’t have. It’s a world where we think more about giving and sharing than acquiring and protecting.

5

It makes a lot of sense to think about the Ten Commandments as Ten Promises—ten descriptions of the future to which God is leading us.

The Ten Commandments are not Ten Prerequisites for becoming beloved children of God. The Israelites to whom the commandments were originally given were already God’s beloved children; and so are we.

These verses are much better understood as a list of ten promises from God about what it means to be beloved children of God; and as guidelines for us as we try to live like the beloved children of God that we know we are.

Like Habakkuk, we all woke up today in a world full of violence, wrongdoing, trouble, destruction, strife, contention, and injustice.

But Presbyterians believe that our Bible tells us that, while that's true, it's not the whole story.

When we read the Ten Commandments as Ten Promises, we see a clear vision of the life together to which God is leading us.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *What new insights do you gain from thinking about the Ten Commandments as Ten Promises as opposed to Ten Threats?*

6

In addition to the Ten Commandments, there are other passages throughout Scripture that provide categories and vocabulary for Presbyterians as we seek to “write the vision” of the life together to which God is leading us all.

ISAIAH 11:6–9

The wolf shall live with the lamb;

the leopard shall lie down with the kid;

the calf and the lion will feed together,

and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze;

their young shall lie down together;

and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,

and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy

on all my holy mountain;

for the earth will be full of the

knowledge of the LORD

as the waters cover the sea.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *How can these images inform our efforts as Presbyterians to live faithfully and hopefully in the real world?*

JEREMIAH 31:33-34

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD, for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *How might the promise in Jeremiah 31 be a source of comfort for individuals or faith communities?*

REVELATION 21:3-6

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

**“See, the home of God is among mortals.
[God] will dwell with them;
they will be [God’s] peoples,
And God . . . will be with them and be their God;
[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”**

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *How might these words from Revelation 21 be a source of comfort for individuals or faith communities?*

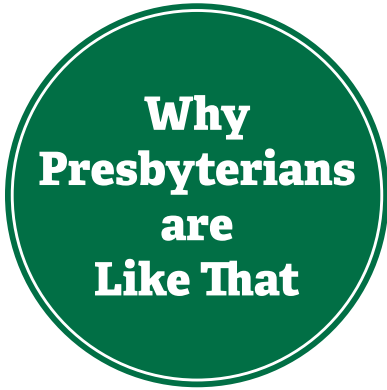
Presbyterians believe God isn’t finished.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What have we learned in these passages about God?*
- *Ourselves?*
- *Each other?*

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from Presbyterian recognition that God isn't finished?*
 - *How can the promises, insights, and images discussed above inform the way Presbyterians study the Bible?*
-



10. Humbly

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe God's love is not limited to our particular faith community.

Participants in this session will consider the Presbyterian recognition that God's love is not limited to our faith community through study of

- Ezra 9:1–4
- Nehemiah 13:23–25
- John 3:16 and 14:6
- The entire Book of Jonah
- Genesis 9:13–16
- Micah 6:8

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
We come before you in a world that grows more diverse every day.
While we are grateful for the words of the Bible that help us recognize
that we are beloved, gifted, capable, and safe,
we also recognize and affirm
that people who are not part of our religious community
are also created in your image
and every bit as beloved and valuable as we are.
Help us learn to live faithfully, responsibly, and lovingly
with all your children.
Amen.*

From *Why Presbyterians Are Like That*, written by Rev. John Williams, Ph.D. Chaplain and Director of Church Relations Austin College, Sherman, Texas. Copyright © 2022 by the Office of Christian Formation in the Presbyterian Mission Agency of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and UKirk Collegiate Ministries.

There are earnest and sincere Christians in our communities who believe that some religions are “right” and others are “wrong.” Most of us are aware of people who believe that God’s attitude toward individuals and communities depends largely on how they choose to worship, serve, and talk about God. For many among us, the notion that God loves people from other religions is a source of confusion and anxiety.

Many tend to adopt a sort of “zero sum” attitude toward religion. “Either we’re right or they are—it can’t be both.”

After prayerfully studying Scripture together, Presbyterians have concluded that it’s not quite that simple.

There are places in the Bible that suggest that God’s love is limited to certain communities. The books of **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** strongly suggest that the people of Israel, the heirs to God’s Covenant with Abraham, are superior to other communities with different religions (see, for example, **Ezra 9:1–4** and **Nehemiah 13:23–25**).

There are verses in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John, that suggest that only Christians authentically know God (see **John 3:16** and **14:6**).

But study of the entire Bible in an increasingly diverse context has led Presbyterians to hesitate to speak definitively, on God’s behalf, about persons who use different vocabulary than we do to talk about God.

Presbyterians try to speak confidently, faithfully, hospitably, and humbly about God.

We believe the scope of God’s love is bigger and more extensive than we are ever able to completely articulate or explain.

ENGAGING THE BIBLE

1

Consider the **Book of Jonah**.

There's a lot more to see than just a strange story about a hungry fish.

CHAPTER 1

JONAH 1:1-2

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me."

Nineveh was the capital of the ancient nation of Assyria.

It was located very near the contemporary city of Mosul, Iraq.

Given the way this story starts, it seems clear that Jonah knew about Nineveh. And since this story is in the Hebrew Scriptures—what many of us call the Old Testament—it's clear in the context of this conversation between Yahweh (the God of Israel) and Jonah that Jonah thought Nineveh was a huge city full of people who were Not Like Us.

So . . .

JONAH 1:3

Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

Jonah has no interest whatsoever in going to preach to people who are Not Like Him.

So he takes off.

JONAH 1:4-5

But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the sailors were afraid, and each cried to his god.

This is evidence that there was religious diversity on the boat.

Different people were calling on different gods.

They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep.

While the other sailors are trying to keep the ship from sinking, Jonah decides it would be a good time to take a nap. Hmm . . .

JONAH 1:6

The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up; call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”

Note the captain’s presumption that there might be a lot of gods potentially involved in this storm.

As a good captain, he’s trying to get everybody on board to pray to their particular gods.

“We need help from all the gods we can get.”

JONAH 1:7

The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.

You can’t ignore it: that’s just weird.

Everybody on the boat assumed that the storm was *somebody’s* fault.

Remember that this text comes from a pre-scientific context. The author(s) and original readers of this book knew all about storms. But they knew little or nothing about meteorology.

In this story, everybody apparently just assumed without question that casting lots would be the best way to find out which one of them was to blame.

It’s funny how this little detail goes by in the story without comment.

And it looks like Jonah drew the short straw—or however “the lot fell on him.”

JONAH 1:8

Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where did you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?”

“Fess up, man. What’s your story?”

JONAH 1:9

“I am a Hebrew,” he replied. I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

Jonah steps up and introduces his God—who he believes is really the *only* god—into this diverse community.

JONAH 1:10

Then the men were even more afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

“Why have you dragged the rest of us into this little drama you’re having with your god?”

JONAH 1:11

Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous.

“Your god is clearly causing this storm.

What’s it gonna take make it stop?”

JONAH 1:12

He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.”

There are two interesting things in this verse:

- Jonah also assumes/knows that his God is really in charge and causing the storm.
- And he’s apparently prepared to sacrifice himself for the sake of the others on the boat.

JONAH 1:13

Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them.

The others hesitate to just chunk a fellow passenger overboard.

It’s easy to miss the notes of compassion and mutual respect in verses 12 and 13. Jonah was prepared to sacrifice himself in verse 12 but the others were reluctant to do that in verse 13.

JONAH 1:14

Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.”

“You made this storm. We’re just minding our own business.

“Don’t kill us just because this guy doesn’t have the guts to do what you want him to do.”

JONAH 1:15

So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.

In a moment of fear-based self-preservation, the other sailors throw Jonah overboard to his certain death.

People will do some pretty extreme stuff if they’re scared enough.

But it works. The storm stops.

JONAH 1:16

Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

The sailors who had been praying to various gods figure out that Jonah’s god is not to be messed with.

JONAH 1:17

But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Mark this. It’s important.

Don’t get too hung up about how big a fish would have to be to swallow a person.

That’s not the point.

The point is that Jonah would have drowned if he hadn’t been swallowed by that fish.

This would be a short and boring story without the fish.

The fish is an instrument of God’s salvation.

The fish is how God keeps Jonah safe.

So, in chapter 1, three things happen:

- 1. God calls Jonah;**
- 2. Jonah responds (by running away);**
- 3. God acts to save someone in danger.**

2

CHAPTER 2

JONAH 2:1-2

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

**“I called to the LORD out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.**

“Sheol” is where dead people are.

JONAH 2:3

**You cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.**

In most Hebrew literature, including this text, water represents chaos, disorder, and terror. Remember how Genesis 1 says creation began as the Spirit of God was moving over the waters?

Water is chaos.

That’s what was so daunting and intimidating about the Red Sea in Exodus.

In the thought world that gave rise to this text, nothing is more terrifying and chaotic than being hopelessly immersed in water.

That’s where Jonah is at the beginning of chapter 2.

JONAH 2:4

**Then I said, 'I am driven away
from your sight;
how shall I look again
upon your holy temple?'**

Jonah began to realize that he'd made some poor life choices and should have known better.

JONAH 2:5-6

**The waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped around my head
at the root of the mountains.**

More spooky water stuff.

**I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the Pit,
O LORD my God.**

After assuming that his god had caused the storm, Jonah reaches the conclusion that the fish must have come from God as well.

This is huge.

The fish is on Jonah's side.

Without the fish, this would just be a story about a drowning coward.

JONAH 2:7

**As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the LORD,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.**

This is a theologically triumphant moment in which Jonah recognizes that God has saved him ("remembered") and he makes clear commitment to the God who he had learned to worship in the community in which he was raised ("holy temple").

JONAH 2:8

**Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.**

As Jonah is feeling good about God, this looks like a reference to people who are Not Like Him.

Jonah is exhibiting a bit of criticism toward people who don't worship God the way he and his community do.

JONAH 2:9

**But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.**

Jonah's response to God's saving action is to thank God for saving him.

Deliverance belongs to the LORD!"

This is foreshadowing.

JONAH 2:10

**Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out
upon the dry land.**

Apparently God was satisfied that Jonah had learned his lesson.

So, in chapter 2, Jonah responds to God's saving action.

He says a passionate prayer and vows to do what God calls him to do.

Mark the basic outline of Chapters 1 and 2:

- **God calls**
- **Jonah responds**
- **God saves**
- **Jonah responds**

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *What is the significance of recognizing that the fish is an instrument of God's salvation?*

CHAPTER 3

JONAH 3:1-2

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”

This is the same call as in chapter 1.

JONAH 3:3

So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across.

So this time Jonah—who probably still smells like fish guts—responds differently to God’s call than he did back in chapter 1.

JONAH 3:4

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

“My God says it’s about to get bad for all you people who are Not Like Me and my tribe.”

And then something completely unexpected happens:

JONAH 3:5-8

And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Humans and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.

So the whole Ninevite society, from the king to the nobles, even to their animals—they all figure maybe it’s time to straighten up and fly right.

They don’t seem to question Jonah’s message.

.....
By the way . . .

There's no historical evidence that royal pronouncements in Assyria ever came from "the king and his nobles" or that animals were ever used in Assyria in acts of public mourning.

The Persians did that stuff a few centuries later, but the Assyrians never did.

Could it be that the author of Jonah knew more about Persia than Assyria?

Could it be that this is not a historical account of an actual event?

Could it be that the author of the book of Jonah was not live-Tweeting these events as they happened?

Could it be that this is some other kind of literature?

How does this recognition affect the way we read Jonah?

.....
Anyway, the next thing the king of Nineveh says is fascinating:

JONAH 3:9

Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

It's worth a shot, folks.

JONAH 3:10

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed [God's] mind about the calamity that [God] had said [God] would bring upon them and [God] did not do it.

Sure enough, God decides not to destroy Nineveh after all.

So, chapter 3 is a lot like chapter 1:

- 1. God calls Jonah;**
- 2. Jonah responds—although this time not by running away but by going where God tells him to go; and then**
- 3. God acts to save someone in danger (the Ninevites).**

CHAPTER 4

JONAH 4:1

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry.

The fact that God decides *not* to destroy Nineveh is what makes Jonah mad.

This guy who would have drowned at the end of chapter 1 if not for God's saving act is now mad at God for having perpetrated a similar saving act that benefited people who were Not Like Him.

JONAH 4:2

He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment."

This is arguably the key verse to the whole book.

Note that there are five first-person singular pronouns in this one verse.

"I said";

"I was still";

"my own country";

"I fled";

"I knew".

This verse clearly emphasizes Jonah's selfishness.

And the phrase at the end is more significant than might be obvious.

As was discussed in the first Bible study in this series, "Bible," the phrase "Gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" occurs seven times in the Hebrew Scriptures—in **Exodus 34:6**; **Nehemiah 9:17**; **Psalms 86:15**; **Psalms 103:8**; **Psalms 145:8**; **Joel 2:13**; and **Jonah 4:2**.

Most biblical scholars believe that those words are the oldest words in the entire Bible. They were probably a sort of creed that existed in the Hebrew community's oral tradition before the Hebrew Scriptures were ever written down. Some say that it was first written in **Exodus 34:6** while others say the

words first showed up **Joel 2:13** but the consensus is that this description of God—gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love—dates back farther in the history of God’s people than any written documents.

It’s the single oldest theological statement in the entire Bible.

So it’s ironic that—when Jonah uses this phrase—he’s complaining to God.

In Jonah 4:2, Jonah chastises God for behaving exactly how the entire Hebrew tradition had always said God behaves.

At the end of this verse, Jonah is essentially telling God:

“Dadgummit! I just knew you’d be like this—all gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

Jonah is mad at God for proving to be exactly who Jonah had always been taught God was.

And then Jonah pitches a fit.

JONAH 4:3

And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

A nice, dramatic little tantrum.

JONAH 4:4

And the LORD said, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

“Hold on there, fish food.

Are you sure you want to go there?”

So, understand that Jonah is mad at God for choosing to save the Ninevites.

JONAH 4:5

Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

Jonah continues his tantrum and goes and plops down on a hill outside the city.

And then God starts just messing with him.

JONAH 4:6

The LORD God appointed a bush and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort, so Jonah was very happy about the bush.

Jonah likes it when God does something that makes him comfortable.

JONAH 4:7-8

But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

Another selfish, melodramatic tantrum.

JONAH 4:9

But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die."

Again, like a foot-stomping toddler.

JONAH 4:10-11

Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

"Get over yourself, fish food."

So, just like in chapter 2, here in chapter 4 Jonah makes a dramatic response to a saving act of God.

Note the similarity between basic outline of Chapters 1 and 2 and Chapters 3 and 4:

- **God calls**
- **Jonah responds**
- **God saves**
- **Jonah respond**

But his response is very different when God saves others instead of him.

There is much that suggests that the reason the book of Jonah is in the Bible at all is because it contains important lessons about how people of faith should interact with people who are Not Like Them. It holds important lessons about what God thinks about people who are Not Like Us—about people who are clearly not part of the same faith community, or don't have the same religious world-view—as the Israelites.

“Jonah” is actually the Hebrew word for “dove” and doves are a commonly used symbol for Israel in the Bible.

Perhaps the book of Jonah contains important lessons for Israel.

Perhaps the book of Jonah contains important lessons for those of us who are part of the majority religion in an increasingly diverse country today.

The book of Jonah teaches us that we should not be surprised or resentful when God proves to be who we've always said God is—gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love—even among people who are Not Like Us.

In a world and a nation that grows more diverse every day, Presbyterians think it's not particularly helpful—or faithful—to focus exclusively on the things that separate us from others.

Presbyterians believe that those of us who take the Bible seriously are called to do the same things we've always been called to do:

- do justice,
- love kindness and mercy, and
- walk humbly with God (which includes letting God love who God loves).

Presbyterians strive to rejoice and not resent, get mad, or worried, or jealous when God blesses and saves people who are Not Like Us.

We know that's exactly what we should expect, and exactly what we should pray for.

Because that's the gracious, merciful, patient, and abundantly loving God who we've known all along.

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe God's love is not limited to our faith community.

We believe God loves people who are Not Like Us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

In the discussion of the aftermath of Noah and the flood in Genesis 9:13–16, God says:

I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

This means that the first covenant mentioned in the Bible is “between God and every living creature.”

- *How might that affect how we think about God’s relationship with—and attitude toward—people who are Not Like Us?*

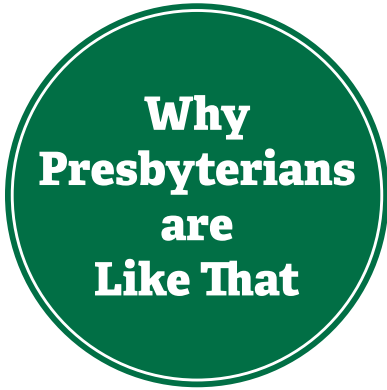
Consider Micah 6:8:

**[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?**

- *How can the idea of “walking humbly with God” inform our understanding of what God thinks about people who are Not Like Us?*

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from Presbyterian recognition that God’s love is not limited to our faith community?*
-



APPENDIX

References to the PC(USA) *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*

The following is intended to demonstrate the relationship between the claims made about what Presbyterians believe in the “Why Presbyterians Are Like That” Bible study series and the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*.

For decades, the PC(USA) has used the documents in the *Book of Confessions* to declare “to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do. (“Foundations of Presbyterian Polity”, *Book of Order*, F-2.01). The documents in the *Book of Confessions* “affirm a common faith tradition, while also from time to time standing in tension with each other (F-2.02).”

Based on the doctrines articulated in Scripture and the *Book of Confessions*, the *Book of Order* delineates the organization and functioning of the Presbyterian Church at the local, regional, and national level.

This document makes no claim to be exhaustive, but maintains that the generalizations about Presbyterians made in the “Why Presbyterians Are Like That” Bible study series are consistent with articulated positions of the PC(USA).

1. BIBLE

If any man, will note in our Confession any chapter or sentence contrary to God’s Holy Word that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity’s sake to inform us of it in writing, and we, upon our honour, do promise him that by God’s grace we shall give him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is, from Holy Scripture, or else we shall alter whatever he can prove to be wrong.

From the Preamble to the Scots Confession not included in the Book of Confessions)

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[Scripture is] the most complete exposition of all that pertains to a saving faith, and also to the forming of a life acceptable to God . . .

Second Helvetic Confession, BC 5.002

We hold that interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned from the scriptures themselves (from the nature of the language in which they were written, likewise according to the circumstances in which they were set down, and expounded in the light of like and unlike passages and of many and clearer passages) and which agree with the rule of faith and love, and contributes much to the glory of God and [humanity's] salvation.

Second Helvetic Confession, BC 5.010

[W]e do not permit ourselves, in controversies about religion or matters of faith, to urge our case with only the opinions of the fathers or decrees of councils much less by received customs, or by the large number who share the same opinion, or by the prescription of a long time.

Second Helvetic Confession, BC 5.012

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for [God's] own glory, [humanity's] salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of [humanity]. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are received in the Word . . .

Westminster Confession, BC 6.006

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly,

Westminster Confession, BC 6.009

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

Barmen Declaration, BC 8.11

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides [the] one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.

Barmen Declaration, BC 8.12

God instructs [the] church and equips it for mission through preaching and teaching. By these, when carried out in fidelity to the Scriptures and dependence upon the Holy Spirit, the people hear the word of God and accept and follow Christ. The message is addressed to [people] in different situations. Therefore effective preaching, teaching, and personal witness require disciplined study of both the Bible and the contemporary world. All acts of public worship should be conducive to [people's] hearing of the gospel in a particular time and place and responding with fitting obedience.

Confession of 1967, BC 9.49

*In the worship and service of God and the government of the church, matters are to be ordered **according to the Word** by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.*

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, BO F-1.0203

[The documents in the Book of Confessions] are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him.

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, BO F-2.02

There are truths and forms with respect to which [people] of good conscience may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, BC F-3.0105

2. GRACE

God, after the fearful and horrible departure of [humanity] from [. . .] obedience, did seek Adam again . . .

Scots Confession, BC 3.04

By grace alone [God] chose us in his son Jesus Christ before the foundation of the world was laid.

Scots Confession, BC 3.08

To put this even more plainly; as we willingly disclaim any honor and glory from our own creation and redemption, so do we willingly also for our regeneration and sanctification; for by ourselves we are not capable of thinking one good thought, but [God] who has begun the work in us alone continues us in it, to the praise and glory of [God's] undeserved grace.

Scots Confession, BC 3.12

3. RESPONSE

The cause of good works, we confess, is not our free will, but the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, who dwells in our hearts by true faith, brings forth such works as God prepared for us to walk in.

Scots Confession, BC 3.13

Q. 63 *Will our good works merit nothing, even when it is God's purpose to reward them in this life, and in the future life as well?*

A. *This reward is not given because of merit, but out of grace.*

Q. 64 *But does not this teaching make people careless and sinful?*

A. *No, for it is impossible for those who are ingrafted into Christ by true faith not to bring forth the fruit of gratitude.*

Heidelberg Catechism, BC 4.063-4.064

Q. 86 *Since we are redeemed from our sin and its wretched consequences by grace through Christ without any merit of our own, why must we do good works?*

- A. *Because just as Christ has redeemed us with his blood he also renews us through his Holy Spirit according to his own image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves grateful to God for [God's] goodness and that [God] may be glorified through us; and further, so that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits and by our reverent behavior may win our neighbors to Christ.*

Heidelberg Catechism, BC 4.086

[W]e do not spurn as useless the means by which divine providence works, but we teach that we are to adapt ourselves to them in so far as they are recommended to us in the Word of God. Wherefore we disapprove of the rash statements of those who say that if all things are managed by the providence of God, then our efforts and endeavors are in vain.

Second Helvetic Confession, BC 5.031

[A]lthough we teach with the apostle that [one] is justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and not through any good works, yet we do not think that good works are of little value and condemn them. We know that [humanity] was not created or regenerated through faith in order to be idle, but rather that without ceasing [we] should do those things which are good and useful.

Second Helvetic Confession, BC 5.118

Life is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage.

Confession of 1967, BC 9.17

To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as [God's] reconciling community.

Confession of 1967, BC 9.31

Because in Christ the Church is holy, the Church, its members, and those in ordered ministries strive to lead lives worthy of the Gospel we proclaim.

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, BO F-1.0302

[One of the Great Themes of the Reformed Tradition is] the election of the people of God for service as well as salvation.

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, BO F-2.05

4. BRAINS

For God in [God's] mercy has permitted the powers of the intellect to remain, though differing greatly from what was in [humanity] before the fall. God commands us to cultivate our natural talents, and meanwhile adds both gifts and success.

Second Helvetic Confession, BC 5.046

*In the worship and service of God and the government of the church, matters are to be ordered according to the Word by **reason and sound judgment**, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.*

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, BO F-1.0203

5. RIGHT NOW

In life and death we belong to God.

Brief Statement of Faith, BC 10.1.1

In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community.

Brief Statement of Faith, BC 10.3.29-32

*Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.*

Brief Statement of Faith, BC 10.3.47-51

To be thus joined with one another is to become priest for one another, praying for the world and for one another and sharing the various gifts God has given to each Christian for the benefit of the whole community.

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, BO F-1.0302

6. JUSTICE

The reconciliation of [humanity] through Jesus Christ makes it plain that enslaving poverty in a world of abundance is an intolerable violation of God's good creation.

Confession of 1967, BC 9.46

The church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by [humanity] when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together, or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time.

Confession of 1967, BC 9.47

*Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:
preaching good news to the poor
and release to the captives,
teaching by word and deed
and blessing the children,
healing the sick
and binding up the brokenhearted,
eating with outcasts,
forgiving sinners,
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.*

Brief Statement of Faith, BC 10.9-18

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

- *which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;*
- *which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace while believers of the same confession are in*

effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;

- *which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;*
- *which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.*

Belhar Confession, BC 11.2

We believe

- *that God has revealed [Godself] as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;*
- *that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged*
- *that God calls the church to follow [God] in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;*
- *that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind;*
- *that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly;*
- *that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering;*
- *that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right;*
- *that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;*
- *that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.*

Therefore, we reject any ideology

- *which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.*

Belhar Confession, BC 11.4

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall guarantee full participation and representation in its worship, governance, and emerging life to all persons or groups in its membership.

Form of Government, BC F-1.0403

[One of the Great Themes of the Reformed Tradition is] the recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God.

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, BO F-2.05

7. SIN

All human virtue, when seen in the light of God's love in Jesus Christ, is found to be infected by self-interest and hostility.

Confession of 1967, BC 9.13

*But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.*

Brief Statement of Faith, BC 10.33-40

8. PRESBYTERIAN

[T]he reason for councils [. . .] was [. . .] to give public confession of their faith to the generations following, which they did by the authority of God's written Word, and not by any opinion or prerogative that they could not err by reason of their numbers.

This, we judge, was the primary reason for general councils.

Scots Confession, BC 3.20

[L]et the ministers of the Church be called and chosen by lawful and ecclesiastical election; that is to say let them be carefully chosen by the Church or by those delegated from the Church for that purpose in a proper order without any uproar, dissension and rivalry.

Second Helvetic Confession, BC 5.150

The various offices in the Church do not establish a dominion of some over others; on the contrary, they are for the exercise of the ministry entrusted to and enjoined upon the whole congregation.

Barmen Declaration, BC 8.20

Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The Church strives to demonstrate those gifts in its life as a community in the world.

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, BO F-1.0301

[One of the Great Themes of the Reformed Tradition is] Covenant life marked by disciplined concern for order in the Church according to the Word of God.

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, BO F-2.05

Following opportunity for discussion [. . .] a majority shall govern.

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, BO F-3.0205

9. HOPE

We believe

- *that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity,*
- *that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world;*

Belhar Confession, BC 11.3

The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation.

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, BO F-.0301

10. HUMBLY

[A]lthough God alone knows who are [God's], and here and there mention is made of the small number of the elect, yet we must hope well of all, and not rashly judge any [one] to be a reprobate.

Second Helvetic Confession, BC 5.055

And when the Lord was asked whether there were few that should be saved, he does not answer and tell them that few or many should be saved or damned, but rather he exhorts every [one] to "strive to enter by the narrow door (Luke 13:24): as if he should say, It is not for you curiously to inquire about these matters, but rather to endeavor that you may enter into heaven by the straight way.

Second Helvetic Confession, BC 5.056

For we know that God had some friends in the world outside the commonwealth of Israel.

Second Helvetic Confession, BC 5.137

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.*

Brief Statement of Faith, BC 10.52-53

*We believe
that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel,
and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation,
but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief,
denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel,
must be considered ideology and false doctrine.*

Belhar Confession, BC 11.3

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at all levels seeks new opportunities for conversation and understanding with non-Christian religious entities.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at all levels will be open to and will seek opportunities for respectful dialogue and mutual relationships with entities and persons from other religious traditions. It does this in the faith that the church of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is sign and means of God's intention for the wholeness of all humankind and all creation.

Form of Government, BO G-5.0102