

# The Word of God

## Bible Study

A five part study

Suitable for use at Lent or other times of the year



Works used in producing this Bible study and for further investigation:

Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, (The Anchor Bible, vol. 28). New York: Doubleday, 1981.

William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah: Spokesman out of Time*. Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1974.

For an in-depth study of the Logos, see:

Jack N. Lawson, "Mesopotamian Precursors to the Stoic Concept of Logos." In: R. M. Whiting (ed.). *Mythology and Mythologies. Methodological approaches to intercultural influences*. Melammu Symposia 2. Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project 2001, 68-91. This article is available as a free PDF download on: <http://www.aakkl.helsinki.fi/melammu/>

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# *Introduction*

This Bible study is concerned with the 'Word of God'—both how the Bible portrays it and how we understand it. It has been written to coincide with '2011: The Year of the Bible,' as it marks the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible. So it is a good time to consider what we know, mean and understand by the 'Word of God'.

Words are the tools we use to frame what we know, to communicate with one another, to sing, to state our likes and dislikes, and to pray. Words are the tools we use to describe place, self and others—including God.

Again, this Bible study is focussed on the Word of God in all its facets, but particularly in its written form.

The passages in this study have been carefully chosen. I would encourage you to read these passages in advance of your meetings. Linger over the words and savour them! Meditate upon them as the Psalmist encourages and I'm sure you will discover things you never knew before! In the refrain from an old hymn by George Rawson ("We Limit Not the Truth of God"): *'The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from His Word.'*

Some considerations when using this material:

- Make sure that everyone has a Bible for the group sessions. Have spares available in case anyone should forget.
- Also, having different versions for the group study will help show how differently scripture can be translated and interpreted.
- Discussion questions are scattered throughout each week's material; feel free to address them as you go, discard them completely or hold them until the end.
- Facilitators might wish to provide a biblical time-line for those unfamiliar with the Bible's chronology. (Many study Bibles contain useful time-lines.)

# Week 1

## God's Word: Spoken & Written



### Before you begin

Make sure that everyone knows the other people in the group. You might like to ask each person to say why he or she was attracted to this group study.



### Warm up

Remember the saying from childhood?: “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me”? Is that saying true or false? Are there any times when you have been hurt by words? Are there any words which someone has said to you that you especially remember as having been helpful or that you value?

So we see from our own lives that words are powerful... none more so than in Genesis 1, when God speaks:



Read: Genesis 1:1-26



- Do you find it interesting that God only needs to speak in order for the world and universe—and everything in them—to be created?

“And God said... and it was so.” It is worth noting that in older creation narratives from the ancient Near East—for instance *Enuma Elish*, from Babylonia—heaven, earth, living creatures, etc. were fashioned through the physical efforts of their chief god, Marduk. (And the world was fashioned from the slain body of a rival god!) Yet in our scriptures, creation is brought into order purely and simply by the power of God’s spoken word. God speaks to ‘chaos’ and out of it is created ‘cosmos’—an orderly universe.



- What does it mean to you that we alone, of all God's creatures, have been created in God's image and have been given the gift of words/speech?

Throughout this Bible study, it will be useful to keep the following in mind: For the ancient Hebrews, their term for 'word' was *davar*. But *davar* has a much broader meaning than 'word' (spoken or written)—it can also mean 'event' or 'happening,' a 'thing' or 'substance.' What a person thinks or plans, what a person says or does, are all part of the same event. In the Israelite understanding, words have the same power to change situations fully as much as deeds do. Thus God's word, the words of prophets, even blessings or curses were understood to have a real effect.



Read: James 3:6-12



- Where do you find power in the spoken word in your life?
- Is it creative or destructive?
- How careful are you with your use of words? Can you recall the most life-changing words ever spoken to you?

Before we turn to Exodus, discuss the following:



- What is the difference between something spoken and written? (Permanence/impermanence?)
- Have you ever accidentally hit 'send' on an e-mail you didn't mean to send? What was the effect?

The written word contains no tone of voice and we cannot see the writer.



- How might this affect our understanding?
- Have you ever kept a very special note or letter? If so why?



Read: Exodus 19:1-6, 20:1-17 & 24:3-4. Ask different group members to read these passages.

These chapters describe the covenant God makes with the Israelites at Sinai and the giving of the commandments and covenant code. Up to this point in the story of God's chosen people, Moses has been the mouthpiece for God. In Ch. 19 we find the Israelites encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai. God's presence descends upon the mountain amidst cloud, thunder and lightning. Only Moses is allowed to ascend to meet with God and receive what we know as the Ten Commandments, plus many other statutes comprising the 'covenant code' (Ch. 20). In Ch. 24 we have a description of how Moses put all the commandments into writing. An alternative account in Deuteronomy 5:22 states that God himself wrote the commandments upon tablets of stone. Either way, what is clear is that God's ordering word for human society no longer depends upon Moses alone; rather, God's word is written down and dwells among his people in ark & tabernacle. The 1st century A.D. Jewish writer and philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, wrote that God promulgated the Ten Commandments "by a voice which—most paradoxical things—was visible!" What a fascinating way to describe God's words taking written form. Thus because God's powerful and effective word became visible, the scribes and leaders of the people were able to read and teach God's word to one another.



- What, for you, is the significance of God's word being written down?
- How does it move and shape your life?



### **Before you go**

Spend time in prayer together.

Sometimes prayers are more powerful when they are punctuated with silence. It is often in silence that we can best hear God's word to us as individuals. Perhaps pray for mindfulness in how we choose and use our words.



### **Arrangements for next week**

If the next session is at a different venue, then make clear when & where. Remind the group of the passages to be read in advance.

# Week 2

## God's Word: Lost & Found



### Before you begin

Always introduce any new members.



### Warm up

- Have you ever lost anything that was very dear to you or that you needed badly? How did that feel?
- Have you ever been lost without a map or SatNav? What were the consequences?

This week we consider a time when God's guiding word had been lost...

**2 Kings 22 & 23:1-25** During the time of King Josiah (in the late 7th century B.C.), the Temple that housed the ark of the covenant and the tablets of the law (God's instructions) had fallen into disrepair. While the repairs were being carried out, a scroll (probably what constitutes our book of Deuteronomy) was found. Hilkiah, the high priest, asked the secretary, Shaphan to read the book aloud to King Josiah. When Josiah heard God's instructions for his people—now long forgotten—he repented and brought “all the inhabitants of Jerusalem... both great and small” (23:2) to hear afresh God's covenant and instructions.



- Had the Temple building become more important than God's message and ordering word for his people?

This led to a reform of religious practice throughout the kingdom.



- How often do our church buildings become the church itself—forgetting that **we** are the body of Christ?

It might surprise us now to read the sorts of things and practices that had

found their way into the Temple and its surrounds.



Read: 2 Kings 23:4-14

Here we see mention of idol worship, male cultic prostitutes, child sacrifice, etc.



- What practices, habits, church furnishings, etc. might become 'idols' for us today?
- What things distract us from simply hearing and following God's word in our lives?
- Has God ever turned your life around?

Following John Wesley's encounter with God's 'amazing grace', the societies he founded were to promote 'scriptural holiness'—lives changed by the power of God's word—not unlike the reforms brought in by King Josiah. The original Methodist societies had no buildings—they met in homes, barns and the open air. They gathered around the word. As Methodism became another denomination of Christianity, it built buildings—thousands of them. These chapels/churches now require time, money and attention, like the temple of old—often to the expense of making new followers of Christ.



- How do you feel when your building takes more money than is given to local and foreign mission?
- How might we re-focus our priorities?



### **Before you go**

Spend time in prayer together. Perhaps remember those whose lives have lost direction or who have lost their faith. Pray that our lives might become a means of grace for others.



## **Arrangements for next week**

If the next session is at a different venue, then make clear when & where.  
Remind the group of the passages to be read in advance.

## Week 3

# God's Word: Inflames a King and is Put to the Flames!



### Before you begin

Always introduce any new members.



### Warm up

- Have any of us had experiences of being challenged by God's word: sermons, ministers, scripture?
- Were these experiences positive or negative?

2011 marks the 400th anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible.



- Why was there such resistance to the Bible being translated into vernacular language?

The prophet Jeremiah had the unenviable job of carrying God's challenging messages to none other than the king of Judah...

**Jeremiah 36** Jeremiah is one of the great prophets—and characters—in the Old Testament. Although we have more biographical information about King David in the Old Testament and more recorded words from the Apostle Paul in the New Testament, in the extent of both recorded words and biographical information, Jeremiah is difficult to match. His ministry began in the reign of King Josiah (around 627 B.C.) and lasted until the final destruction of Jerusalem by Babylonian forces in around 586 B.C.—one of the great turning points in the history of Israel. Chapter 36 is illustrative of the entire book in that Jeremiah is alone amongst all the prophetic books in expressing the problematic nature of God's word—for both prophet and king/nation.



Read: Jeremiah 20:7-12, 13-18

The events in Ch. 36 take place four and five years after the death of King Josiah. Josiah had died in battle with the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho in 609 B.C. Although Josiah's son Jehoahaz had replaced him on the throne, Necho deposed him and took him as a prisoner to Egypt. In marking the now defeated Judah as a vassal state, Pharaoh Necho placed another of Josiah's sons, Jehoiakim, on the throne (even giving him the name Jehoiakim!). Jehoiakim was not his father's equal in either ability or character. He made no real efforts to keep alive the reforms instituted by Josiah. When many in Judah were facing poverty, Jehoiakim set about building himself a new and luxurious palace—using forced labour from among his own people.



- How do you come to terms with the inequalities in our society?
- How do you respond to the starving and the homeless or to evils such as human trafficking?

Thus, when God spoke to Jeremiah, telling him to write down all of the prophecies he had been given against Judah—from the beginning of his call to be God's spokesman to the present—and to have these read to Jehoiakim, the stage is set for a showdown. Because Jeremiah had been barred from entering the temple area, he sent his scribe, Baruch, to read the words to the court officials. Among the many oracles given to Jeremiah would have been one decrying Jehoiakim's selfishness: "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbour serve him for nothing, and does not give him his wages." (Jer. 22:13) The prophecies read by Baruch struck fear in the court officials, so they told Baruch to return to Jeremiah and for both of them to go into hiding. Then the scroll was read to the king. As it was winter, the king was sitting by a brazier. As the secretary read three or four columns, Jehoiakim, cut them off the scroll with a penknife and threw them into the fire—thus demonstrating both his irritation and disregard for God's prophetic word. But it doesn't stop there: God speaks again to Jeremiah, telling him to find another scroll and to write upon it all that was on the previous scroll along with another prophecy: that Jehoiakim and Judah will suffer the same fate as the scroll which the king had destroyed.

It is often said that it is not what we don't understand about that Bible that troubles us; rather, it is what we understand all too well that troubles us! We might not consign scripture to the flames—as Jehoiakim did—but we very often ignore it or confine it to the dust of bookshelves. We might ask ourselves:



- How big—or small—is my Bible?
- Do I only read the 'feel good' parts of the Bible, whilst ignoring those parts which challenge me?
- How might I impede my growth in faith if I read only the parts I like?

Look again at the description of Jehoiakim's cutting up the word of God and then throwing it to the flames.



- How does it make you feel?



### **Before you go**

If any of your group use daily Bible notes—as a help for reading through the Bible—please share how this helps you. Take a few minutes to hold your Bible in your hands and, in silence, think seriously about how much and how often you read it. As you pray together, perhaps offer prayers for those Christians in areas of the world where just owning a Bible is a crime and punishable by death.



### **Arrangements for next week**

If the next session is at a different venue, then make clear when & where. Remind the group of the passages to be read in advance.

# Week 4

## God's Word: In Human Flesh



### Before you begin

Always introduce any new members.



### Warm up

- Have you ever conceived or designed something—a house, a garden, a syllabus, a dream holiday—and seen it come to fulfillment?
- How is it to see your idea unfold into reality?

In Genesis 1 we saw how God's thoughts/words became the world and material reality. In John 1 we see how God becomes part of that same reality.



### Read John 1:1-18

In Genesis, "in the beginning" God speaks and things spring to life and take shape; in the time of Moses and later, God's word is both spoken through human voices (prophets) and written down on scrolls and shared with the people in teaching. In Jesus, God 'trumps' all he has done heretofore and becomes one of us in his Living Word: the Word made flesh—Jesus Christ. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John wants his readers to think of Genesis when they read his opening words—this same Word: Jesus—was with God from the very beginning.



- Can God's word still come to us in/through human flesh?

We might recall from Session 1 that the Hebrew term for 'word' (*davar*) carries a variety of meanings in English—it can mean 'event' or 'happening,' a 'thing' or 'substance.' Similarly, the term that John uses for 'Word' also has a wide spectrum of meanings. It is the Greek word *logos* (λόγος). By the 1st

century A.D. *logos* had long been used by Greek philosophers to denote the universal governing principle which makes the world an orderly structure—a ‘cosmos.’ Interestingly, the first philosopher to use the term was Heraclitus of Ephesus—Ephesus being the traditional site of John’s Gospel.

So how did *logos*/word come to be used as a description for God in human flesh? Why not use a word that denotes God’s power—like *dunamis* (from which we get dynamite!)? We get a clue from the 1st Century A.D. Jewish writer, Philo of Alexandria:

*As then, the city which was fashioned beforehand within the mind of the architect held no place in the outer world, but had been imprinted on the soul of the craftsman as by a seal, even so the world (kosmos) that consists of the Ideas would have no other location than the divine Reason (logos of God), which was the author of this physical world (Opif.20)*

As odd as it might sound to our ears—God as Word taking human flesh—Philo’s writings help us to understand that the Greek-speaking Jews of Jesus’ day were prepared to hear such a message as contained in John’s Gospel. (And most of the first Christians were Aramaic/Greek-speaking Jews.) According to John, all that Jesus had been and was ever to become was present in God from the beginning of time—just as the design of a building is born within the mind of the architect, as we see in Philo’s writings. In Jesus, God’s mind and thoughts take human form.



- Can you remember words spoken to you that gave you a sense of new life or hope? What were some of those words and how were they spoken?

Jesus teaches that our sin and wrong-doing spring from our inner words, our thoughts: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.” (Matt. 15:19) For good or evil, words have lost none of their power. The radical difference for us is that God’s words no longer exist simply as words on a page. Rather, God’s Word—all that God wills and desires for us—comes to us in the person of Jesus, whom we can know firsthand.



- How can we face the challenge of speaking God's powerful word in today's situations?



### **Before you go**

Spend time in prayer. Pray for one another, that as Christians, our faith might be more than words and that our words might become acts worthy of the name 'Christian.'



### **Arrangements for next week**

If the next session is at a different venue, then make clear when & where. Remind the group of the passages to be read in advance.

# Week 5

## God's Word in Action



### Before you begin

Always introduce any new members.



### Warm up

- Can you think of situations in which scripture was used to defend unChrist-like actions or behaviour?—the slave trade? Apartheid in South Africa or racial segregation in America?

In all of the above instances, scripture was used by both sides to justify their positions. (For example, many who supported slavery or apartheid cited Paul's letter to Philemon as justification. In this letter, Paul sets out reasons why the runaway slave Onesimus should return to his master. It can seem to legitimise a caste society and slavery.)



- How often does right action rely on right understanding of scripture?

Jesus, too, had to discern the heart of scripture's meaning as we shall see.



Read: Luke 4:1-21

God's written word does not lose its authority once Jesus comes on the scene—but it takes on a new urgency: prophecies are being fulfilled and the kingdom of God is initiated. However, before Jesus announces the beginning of his extraordinary ministry (vss. 16-21), he first has to go through a period of trial (vss. 1-13): 40 days of fasting in the wilderness, and—when Jesus is at his weakest physically: temptation by the devil.

When we look at the passage concerning Jesus' time in the wilderness, we often understand his temptation to consist in the three 'dares' the devil puts to Jesus: to turn stones into bread, to worship the devil, and finally, to throw

himself from the temple. This wouldn't be wrong, of course, but I would like for us to consider the idea that the real temptation of Jesus consists in one tiny word: "If." The devil begins his temptations by saying: "If you are the Son of God..." "If" raises the question of doubt as to who Jesus really is.



- How often do we rise to such a challenge in our faith lives? ("If you really were a Christian, then you would...") and here we can fill in the blanks.

Often such challenges lead towards emotional blackmail.)



- How does it make us feel?

But Jesus' answer to all three temptations is to prove the challenge to his authority wrong. He does this by remaining obedient to his Father's will and refusing to be seduced into using his power or authority for any reason other than that for which he has been sent. Had Jesus responded to the challenge posed by "If", then it would suggest that even he had doubts about his person and mission.

Luke 4:1-13 is one of the Gospel accounts that give rise to the adage "even the devil can quote scripture." But note that Jesus counters every temptation Satan throws at him using scripture, with the true spirit of scripture. Would that we could battle evil in our time with such knowledge of scripture!



- Do we spend enough time learning our faith story? If not, how can we change that?

It is also important to note that at the end of his temptations, Luke tells us that the devil "departed from him until an opportune time." (RSV) In other words, Jesus' coming ministry will not be 'Satan-free'—any more than our lives are 'Satan-' or 'temptation-free.' Rather, the wilderness experience sets the tone for the entire ministry of Jesus.



- When we are tempted—in any way—do we ever consider that Jesus, too, was tempted as we are?

- In our times of trial, do we find any consolation that God, in Christ, knows all of our weaknesses and stands ready to strengthen us?— and when we fail, to forgive us?

Having vanquished the devil, Jesus returns to Galilee “in the power of the Spirit” to announce the beginning of his ministry in the synagogue, by reading those powerful words from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...” Let us never underestimate this: Along with being armed with the Spirit of God, Jesus is also armed with the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (Ephesians 6:17)



- How often, when we face temptation, is the word of God our first line of defence?
- How often does a particular verse, parable, psalm spring to mind and aid us? (Are we able to share it?)

Now look at verses 16-21 again. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (vs. 21)



- Is it simply that Jesus has earned the ‘right’ to say those words—by resisting temptation—or is it something more?

This Bible study on the ‘word of God’ has taken us from Genesis to the Gospel of John. As Jesus asked his disciples, so he asks us: “Who do you say that I am?” As with his first century followers, we, too, have to decide whether “scripture has been fulfilled” in Jesus. Will we find scriptural arguments for or against?



### **Before you go**

Spend time in prayer together. Pray for those who are facing great temptation— at home, at work or school. Pray for one another for the discipline of regular Bible study.

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