**A Parent’s Guide to Reading the Bible with Children**

**From a United Methodist Perspective**

**For the Faith Steps Program with Third Graders**

**Hyde Park United Methodist**

**Session 1: Introduction to the Bible** (Watch Online at <https://youtu.be/l2pevFaJo7c>)

Hi, my name is Magrey deVega, Senior Pastor of Hyde Park United Methodist, and I welcome you and your child to this Faith Steps journey. I want to first commend and congratulate you for the decision you have made to give your child a gift that will have eternal impact on them and on the world. You have chosen to initiate a relationship between them and the Bible, which will strengthen and sustain them throughout their lives.

You have decided to fulfill an important role in encouraging them to read the Bible, along with learning about the Bible alongside them. The time that you spend with your child will not only deepen their love for the Bible; it will draw them closer to you and to God.

The second thing I want to say is thank you. Thank you for inviting this church to be a part of your journey. You have recognized that the task of reading and relating to the Bible with your child requires the support of a faith community, with its generations of tradition, that will serve as a resource for you. We are very glad to come alongside you and your child.

That is why we have created this series of videos, so that you can use them to deepen your and your child’s understanding of the Bible.

Each of these videos will have two main objectives:

First, we’ll share with you some insights about the Bible, which include some essential ideas about its structure and content, answers to some commonly asked questions, and help for navigating some of the challenges associated with reading and understanding it. These insights will be rooted in our Wesleyan understanding of the Bible, so you can be reminded of what it means to be United Methodist.

Second, we will offer you some practical suggestions on how to read the Bible with your kids and some developmentally appropriate ways to help them understand it. We’ll share some passages you can read together, along with helpful discussion questions and exercises.

Now, if I were to pick a scripture passage that is key to understanding the role the Bible can play for us, it would be the same one that was so central to John Wesley’s view of the Bible. It is found in 2 Timothy 3:16: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”

John Wesley saw that verse as foundational to the way he read and understood the purpose of the Bible. It is to provide instruction and training in Christian belief and practice. Listen to the way Methodist scholar Randy Maddox explains Wesley’s use of this verse:

*Wesley considered attentive reading of Scripture to be one of the most central “means of grace”—one of the crucial ways that God has provided for receiving the assuring presence of the Holy Spirit that awakens and empowers our human response of love.”*

In other words, when you read the Bible, the Holy Spirit works within you to shape your life into being more loving, and being more like Jesus. That is the Bible’s primary role. It is to show us who God is, who we are, and what our relationship with God and each other is intended to be.

Also, notice an important word in 2 Timothy 3:16. It’s the word *inspired.* The Bible is inspired by God. That is a really important concept in our view of the Bible. There are terms that are often tossed around interchangeably when it comes to the Bible. Words like *infallible, inerrant,* and *inspired.* These are very different words that should not be treated as the same, for they are not all in line with a Wesleyan understanding of Scripture.

First, *inerrant.* That word means that the Bible is without error and is therefore entirely consistent with the truths of modern disciplines like history and science. People who believe in the inerrancy of scripture believe that the stories of Genesis, for example, are scientific, historical accounts of the origins of the universe. If science, archaeology, history, or any other academic endeavor concludes something contrary to an inerrant interpretation of the Bible, then the Bible is right, and those other disciplines are wrong.

Well, for his part, John Wesley did not believe in inerrancy. He never used that term, and never bought into the idea that science and reason needed to take a back seat to an inerrant view of the scriptures. If anything, such discrepancies between the Bible and reason did not trouble him that much, and was just as likely to elevate reason as a valid tool for interpreting scripture. Wesley was far less interested in discrepancies between the Bible and science and more interested in the Bible’s usefulness in pointing us to Jesus, leading us to salvation, and guiding us toward holy living.

Second, *infallible.* That word means that the Bible is incapable of inconsistencies. Literally, unable to deceive. People who believe in the infallible nature of Scripture believe that all the parts of the Bible that disagree with each other can be harmonized, rationalized, and explained. Again, this was not Wesley’s view. In fact, Wesley often made note of apparent contradictions in the Bible, such as the two separate creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, and the differing details of the four gospels on details in chronicling the life of Jesus. He was not troubled by these nuances in detail, because he was always primarily interested in the wider narrative of God’s love for all people revealed in Jesus.

This leads us to the word *inspired,* which is a key concept for United Methodists in understanding the Bible. To believe that the Bible is inspired means that God uses the words of Scripture to inspire us toward belief in Jesus and holy living. It also means that it was inspired in its original writing. The Bible, as you likely know, was written down by human beings. It did not appear out of nowhere, handwritten directly by God. Nor were the authors of the Bible in a trance-like condition when God dictated the words to the authors as they passively wrote them down. Wesley was too much an advocate for human free will to believe in that understanding of inspired.

To believe that the Bible was inspired by God means that God guided and persuaded humans to write down the truths of God based on words, images, and stories that resonated with their own cultural and sociological experience. They wrote in ways they could understand, and could communicate to people in their time. This is a very important point to remember, especially as we get into understanding the differences between the Old and New Testaments in the remaining two sessions.

These differences among infallible, inerrant, and inspired are important, especially when it comes to interpreting the Bible.

My theology professor in seminary once asked us this question. He said, “Suppose I grant you for a moment the idea that the Bible is infallible and inerrant. That it contains no inconsistencies within itself or with science and history. Suppose we agree that the Bible is true in that way.”

He went on. He said, “So what? What then? Doesn’t the Bible still need to be interpreted, in order for it to do us any good? So what is to ensure that this infallible, inerrant Bible is interpreted perfectly? Doesn’t it require fallible, mistake-prone, human beings to engage it, read it, understand it, interpret it, and apply it?”

That is why John Wesley emphasized interpreting the Bible with a wide array of perspectives, including tradition, reason, experience, in the context of community, conversation with each other, and prayerful attention to the Holy Spirit. This enables us to take all the of the Bible seriously, without needing to take all of it literally, as inerrant and infallible.

The Bible is inspired, and its usefulness is not as a history book or a science textbook, but as a tool for leading us to a relationship with Jesus, and instructing us in holy, faithful living.

So, what does this mean in terms of reading the Bible with your child? Well, it means that as you read these stories with them, you might keep in mind two questions to answer together along the way:

What does this passage tell us about God’s love for us?

What does this passage tell us about how God wants us to live?

These two questions help children and adults focus on the love of God and how we are to love each other, two hallmarks of the Wesleyan tradition.

So, here is an exercise that you can try with your child. Read together Exodus 3:1-15. It’s the famous story of Moses and the burning bush, in which God calls Moses to go to Pharoah and seek the freedom of the enslaved Israelites.

Walk through the details of the story. Who are the main characters? What is happening in the story?

Then ask some evaluative questions. What aspects of the story are the most interesting to your child? The most surprising?

Then, ask the two application questions we heard earlier:

What does this story tell us about God’s love?

What does this story tell us about how God wants us to live?

Finally, see what questions the two of you have about the story for which there may be no easy answers. Even feel free to leave some questions unanswered, for future pondering. It is important to communicate to your child that asking hard questions about the Bible is both permissible and helpful. It is what will help you and your child read the Bible without fear or frustration, and learn to unlock the power of the Bible to draw you into a deeper relationship with God and each other.

**Session 2: The Old Testament** (Watch Online at <https://youtu.be/7DM_-DxVoG0>)

Today our session focuses on the first 39 books of the Bible, often called the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible. It is the part of our Bible that is the same as the scriptures of Jewish people, because it describes the stories of shared history between Christianity and Judaism.

One of the most important things to notice about the Old Testament is the variety of genres, or styles of writing, among those 39 books. Some are written as history, some as rules and regulations, some as poetry, and some as prophetic oracles. This means that not all parts of the Old Testament are intended to be read or interpret in exactly the same way.

Here is an illustration from Jim Harnish, a former senior pastor at this church. When you read the newspaper, you know that it is filled with different sections, and different styles of writing. And you can tell, based on the style of writing, how you are supposed to read and understand that particular section of the newspaper. In other words, we don’t interpret the lead stories on the front page of the newspaper in the same way we interpret the classified ads, or the comics section, or the box scores in the sports pages, or the advertisements, or the weather forecast, or the opinion editorial section. Some sections in the newspaper tell a story, but other sections have a different purpose: to make you think, to make you chuckle, to help you feel prepared, to help you make a purchase, etc. The first thing you do is determine the genre, then you can determine how to read it.

That is exactly the approach when it comes to reading the Bible, especially the Old Testament. Some of it is written as history, to give an account of how the Israelite people were established and how they learned to follow God. These include the books of Genesis and Exodus, Joshua and Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, Ruth, and Esther.

Some of it is written as guidance and instruction for the people of God. These books include Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Some of it is written as poetry, offering inspiration and wisdom, such as the books of what is commonly called wisdom literature: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

Some of it is written as warning and encouragement to the Israelites, such as the books of the major and minor prophets, from Isaiah to Malachi.

So, just in those four broad categories, you have distinct genres that are intended to be read with their own purposes: history, instruction, poetry, and prophecy. To take the Bible seriously means to allow them to speak on their own terms, according their own genre.

The other helpful perspective to keep in mind is how the 39 books of the Old Testament fit into the grand, overall story of the Israelites, which is made up of five primary episodes:

Origin – Exodus – Monarchy – Exile – Return.

First, the origin of the people of God is covered in the book of Genesis, which describes the creation of the world and the creation of human community, leading to the Israelites who were eventually enslaved in Egypt.

Next, the Exodus describes how the Israelites escaped slavery in Egypt and wandered in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. These books include Exodus, along with the laws described in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Next is Monarchy. After settling into the Promised Land, the Israelites became a loose confederacy of tribes described in Joshua and Judges, before becoming united as one people under the kingly reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon. That united monarchy gradually divided into the southern and northern kingdoms, as described in the 1 and 2 parts of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles.

Next was Exile. After the monarchy divided, the northern kingdom was invaded and scattered by the Assyrian Empire, which is the basis for the story of Jonah. The southern kingdom was conquered by the Babylonian Empire and brought into exile in Babylon, which is the basis for the story of Daniel. And writings of the major and minor prophets, from Isaiah and Malachi, give the Israelites both warning about the exile and comfort while they were in exile.

This all led to the final segment of Old Testament history: Return. After being allowed by Babylon to return to the promised land, the Israelites of the southern kingdom returned and began to rebuild both their lives and their land. This is captured in the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah.

So, the narrative moments again are origin, exodus, monarchy, exile, and return.

To summarize this first section, there are two things to keep in mind when reading the Old Testament: the genre, or style of writing, of a particular Bible passage, and how that passage fits in the overall story of the Israelites.

But we know that even keeping these aspects in mind does not prevent all the trouble in interpreting the Old Testaments. There are passages that are hard and troubling to understand, especially to our modern sensibilities, and can be particularly difficult to read and discuss with your children.

In particular, what do we do with the violence in the Bible? And what do we do with behaviors and qualities of God that are difficult to understand in the Hebrew Bible?

I remember a clergy friend of mine telling me, “There are parts of the Old Testament that make an episode of *Game of Thrones* look like an episode of *Barney* or *Teletubbies*.” Certainly, you will be judicious about reading those violent parts with your child, depending on their age. But here is something to remember about allowing the Bible to speak to us through the lens of those who first circulated these stories thousands of years ago.

In the ancient world, acts of violence were a kind of language that demonstrated one’s faithfulness and obedience to the powers of the world, to the gods, and even to the one true God of the Israelites. Violence was a common way to show obedience to God in the ancient world.

We can certainly be thankful that today, we don’t equate acts of violence with demonstrations of faithful obedience. We can be especially grateful that the death of Jesus on the cross exposed the sin of violence and introduced new ways for us to be obedient today.

So, the central question for us in reading these stories is not, “How might we duplicate this violence today?” but, “How can we be just as obedient as the ancient Israelites, except using the ways of obedience that God has given us today?”

In other words, the Israelites often used the language of violence to show they were devoted to God. What actions has God given us today, and how can we be faithful in demonstrating it?

The other trouble spot in reading the Old Testament comes from the unsettling aspects about God that we might read.

What do we do about the passages in the Bible where God does things that don’t mesh with our understanding of God?

What about when God wants to destroy the world with a flood?

What about when God wants to do a sneak attack on Moses and kill him, right after God calls him?

What about when God demands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac?

What about when God orders the killing of people?

What about when God issues orders that not only make no sense to us, but paint a picture of God that we don’t want anything to do with?

Well, again, we need to remember that the story of human civilization is tens of thousands of years old. But what has always been true is this: God wants to be known by humans, and God will use the language, imagery, and worldview that resonates with human beings at that particular time in order to connect with them.

The ancient worldview understood gods to act capriciously, which means free to act in a surprising way, with sudden shifts of mood and action. That was the language and the worldview at the time. So, God was revealed to the Israelites in those ways, in ways the Israelites and the surrounding culture could understand.

So as humans have changed in their worldviews over time, that means that our views of God are also allowed to change over time. It is not that God changes. God always wants to be known by us and in a relationship with us. What changes is the way we view God. And that change is not only permissible; it is natural.

Think about any relationship you have had with a person for a long period of time. Perhaps a spouse or a partner. Think about how your relationship with that person now is different from the way it was at the very beginning. Years after first meeting them, you see each other in different ways. Maybe more mature, nuanced ways that use a different love language or imagery that is more fitting for where your relationship is. Did either of you change? Perhaps in some ways, but you are still essentially who you have always been. But has your relationship changed? Has the way you relate to each other changed? Absolutely.

The Old Testament records the ways humans related to God at the early stages of our courtship. We used language and imagery that were meaningful to us at the time, but now we see God differently because our relationship with God is allowed to change over time.

So, when we see troubling passages about God, it is permissible for us to say, “We don’t see God in that way anymore. And that’s both permissible and natural. It’s important to understand our origins as human beings. So how do we view God now? Especially in light of Jesus and in light of our worldview today?”

This is not to say that the New Testament is better or more important than the Old Testament. In fact, to the contrary. Only by understanding the Old Testament can we have a full appreciation for who Jesus is, in light of the grand sweep of human civilization and our ongoing attempt to understand who God is.

So, here is the exercise that you might do with your child. Read together Psalm 23, the iconic scripture that describes our relationship with God as a sheep is to the shepherd.

Ask yourselves some questions: Who are the characters? What is happening in this passage?

Ask some evaluative questions. When have I felt like what these verses are describing? What does this passage tell me about God? About myself?

And then ask some application questions: What is this passage telling me about how to live? What questions does this story raise for me? What might God be trying to teach me as I read this?

The Old Testament is a rich treasure trove of insights into the human experience and, more importantly, about the God who wants to be revealed and be made known.

**Session 3: The New Testament** (Watch Online at <https://youtu.be/-8TjW0C2_wc>)

So much changes in the 400 years between the end of the Old Testament and the start of the New Testament and the arrival of Jesus. It’s not just historical events, like the rise and fall of empires that governed the Jewish people. It’s massive changes in culture, economy, technology, and the nature of community.

Think about the differences between the land and people of the United States now, in the 21st century, and what it was like four hundred years ago, in the 17th century. That is a bit of the seismic shift in worldview and culture that takes place in simply turning the page from Malachi to Matthew.

First of all, there is a shift in economy and the nature of societies. We go from a mostly agriculturally based economy in the Old Testament to the emergence of cities, with various trades and occupations. We move from the pre-modern world of Assyria and Babylon to the world of Greek and Roman philosophy, ordered with Greco-Roman laws and language. And the people of God are referred to by a new name. No longer are they the Hebrew people of Exodus, or the Israelites in the rest of the Old Testament. They are referred to as the Jews, referring to their origin in the southern kingdom of Judea. These Jews have also developed new systems of obedience and community, centered in places of gathering and instruction called synagogues, which literally means, “to assemble,” and professionals who are formally trained in religious law, like the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Sanhedrin.

But what still remains is that the Jews, like their Israelite ancestors, are a conquered and occupied people. It is the Roman empire, with their extensive power structures and vast military machine, that maintain order in their lands through occupation and taxation. Despite numerous attempts at rebellion and uprising (recorded in many of the apocryphal books between the Old and New Testaments), the first century Greco-Roman world is one where the Jews are a subjugated people.

And that is where Jesus enters the picture.

By the time God is born in human form in the person of Jesus, the Jewish people – and the whole world – have hit their highest need for hope for a world of peace and justice. Jesus was born as a Jew, raised in the teachings of the rabbis, and began a public ministry at 30 years old, inaugurating a seismic change in the way people could be in a relationship with God. He called people to repent of their sins, be baptized by water and the Holy Spirit, and live according to a new standard of holiness, based on the love and grace of God. He did not come to abolish Jewish law, but to be the fulfillment of it, through his own sacrifice and self-giving love.

This story, of God’s salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is the good news of the Bible. It is the Greek word for *good news, euangelion,* that is ultimately translated into Old English as gospel. The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ, who revealed God’s love and is the means for a new relationship between God and all people.

The New Testament, as you probably know have four gospels, or four accounts of the life of Jesus. Mark was likely written the earliest after Jesus, which is why it is the shortest and most driven by plot and action. Matthew and Luke were written next, using Mark as source material, while adding teachings or sayings of Jesus that likely came from a separate source. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are so similar in overall content that they are often referred to as synoptic gospels, or “same perspective” books, even though they do have variations in finer points of plot and detail. Then there is the gospel of John, written after the other three, with a style of writing that is more poetic, has more flourish, and has a structure unlike the others.

It is likely that all four gospels were developed with different audiences in mind, with different emphases. Mark emphasizes repentance and the Lordship of Jesus. Matthew emphasizes the Jewish identity of Jesus and his roots in Israel. Luke emphasizes Jesus as the Messiah for all people, particularly for the marginalized. And John shows Jesus as the word of God made flesh, the light that has entered the darkness of the world.

After the gospels, we read the story of the book of Acts, which is connected to Luke’s gospel as a continuation of the story of Jesus. It is in Acts that the Holy Spirit comes down at Pentecost, and the early followers of Jesus form the first Christian community. It is also in Acts that we read about the calling of the apostle Paul, who would be the first and greatest missionary of the gospel. Much of the remainder of the New Testament is comprised of his letters, or epistles, which he wrote to the churches that he established during his three missionary journeys throughout the Mediterranean, including modern day Turkey, Greece, and Italy.

The New Testament rounds out with other epistles, written by other authors like James, the epistles of John, the letter to the Hebrews, and Jude. And it ends with the book of Revelation, which contains words of encouragement to early Christians who were suffering persecution at the hands of the Roman empire.

There are 27 books in the New Testament, fewer than the 39 in the Old Testament. And unlike the Old Testament, the genres are fewer and more straightforward. There are gospels, which serve as biographical accounts of Jesus, and there are epistles, which are letters of instruction, admonishment, and instruction to the early Christians.

This is not to say that there aren’t tricky parts of the New Testament to interpret. There certainly are. The gospels are filled with intentionally mysterious teachings by Jesus called parables, which are simple stories that are packed with meaning, and multiple ways to interpret it. There are miracle stories that are marvelous demonstrations of healing and Jesus’ command over nature, but are beyond our modern ability to comprehend them. And there are some teachings of Paul about women and slavery that we have to navigate through our modern understandings.

But as we said in the Old Testament, it is also true here: Rather than get tripped up, discouraged, or troubled by these finer details, we should remember that the authors of the New Testament were speaking out of a cultural lens that made sense 2,000 years ago. And to take the Bible seriously without needing to take it all literally means that we allow the Bible to speak on its own terms.

It also means that we hold on to what is central to our faith, and what is the overriding story of the New Testament: It is that Jesus was an actual historical figure who lived among us, and was the full embodiment of God’s divinity through his words and actions. It also means that Jesus died a real death, and three days later, literally and actually was raised from the dead by God, so that we can be in a full and free relationship with God forever.

All of smaller details about the gospels fit into that larger narrative, even if the four gospels themselves don’t always agree about the sequence of events.

As far as the epistles, they also fit into an overall narrative: God has called us to be in community with each other so that we can live life as God intends for us to live. We are called to live with love for one another, in peace and unity across our differences, with hope for the fulfillment of God’s promises, and with great joy. We can find in the stories of the early church communities the kinds of problems and solutions that can guide our life together today.

To experience the power of the New Testament, here is an activity we invite you to do with your child. Over the course of several nights, read the gospel of Mark together. It is the shortest, only 16 chapters long, and it will only take you a few days or a week to go through it.

As you do so, ask some basic questions about content: Who are the main characters in this passage? What are they doing? Where is it taking place?

Ask some evaluative questions: What is surprising in this story to me? What questions does it raise?

And ask some application questions: What does this passage teach me about God? What does this passage teach me about the kind of life that God intends for me to live?

What you will find, as you read through the New Testament together, is that these four gospels have such a unique perspective that we can appreciate each of them for what they have to offer, rather than our having to harmonize them all together to negate their differences.

The same will be true of the epistles. Each Christian community had their own strengths and their shadows, for just like churches today, there is no perfect church. What we do have is a precious resource that will tell us the stories of Jesus and point us to the heart of God.

This Bible, in the words of 2 Timothy 3:16, is inspired by God, and is valuable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. And because you are both encouraging your child to read it and reading it alongside them, you will grow closer to God, closer to each other, and closer to this marvelous and amazing book.

God bless you on your journey!