

Lesson Plan & Study Guide



Exploring Christianity: How God Communicates

iFOLLOW

Meeting with Jesus

The iFollow Discipleship Series

Version 1.0 - 11/4/10



About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

Credits

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How God Communicates

This presentation is designed for people who have not yet come to a point in their spiritual journey where they have decided to become a follower of Jesus. There is a second unit on this topic

Learning Objectives

1. Realize that God is still speaking to us today.
2. Learn the values and limitations of some of the ways God communicates.
3. Learn how to watch and listen for God yourself.

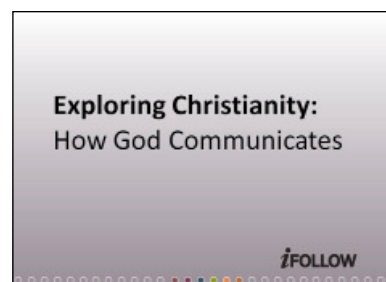
Content Outline

1. Intro-God is still speaking
2. God communicates through creation
3. God communicates through people
4. God communicates through Jesus
5. God communicates through Scripture

Background Material for the Presenter

A man and his wife were having some problems at home and were giving each other the silent treatment. Suddenly, the man realized that the next day he would need his wife to wake him up at 5 a.m. for an early morning business flight. Not wanting to be the first to break the silence (and lose), he wrote on a piece of paper, "Please wake me at 5 a.m." He left it where he knew she would find it. The next morning, the man woke up only to discover it was 9:00 a.m. and he had missed his flight. Furious, he was about to go and see why his wife hadn't awakened him when he noticed a piece of paper by the bed. The paper said, "It is 5 a.m. Wake up!"

Oh, the pain of poor communication! Communication experts define effective communication as taking place only when the receiver accurately understands the intended message of the sender and vice versa. Often we just flood



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people with information and never stop to see if we're being understood or not. Which helps to explain why so little effective communication actually takes place between people.

One of the fundamental truths about God is that God communicates. God is not silent, withdrawn, aloof or distant. God desires to be known. Which means that God chooses to communicate with people for that to take place. The question is, how does God communicate? What are the ways God chooses to be revealed? How does God interact with people? Let's outline a few and notice the dynamics of each divine process.

God Communicates Through Creation

As the lyrics speak of the composer's heart, as the penned words reveal the author's mind, as the painting points to the artist's soul, so creation communicates the Creator's design. The Creator speaks through what he creates.

Here's how one poet puts it: "The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make him known. They speak without a sound or word; their voice is never heard. Yet their message has gone throughout the earth, and their words to all the world." (Psalm 19:1-4; all Scriptures in this presentation are NLT unless otherwise noted)

There's a continual communication going on from God through his created life (day and night). And though you can't hear an audible voice, there is a revealed message from God that circles the globe. Wherever there's creation, there's communication from God.

One mystic has admonished, "Contemplate what lies before you. It is God's way of making himself present." (Huggett, p. 119) What happens when you contemplate creation? What do you "hear" from God? What does God "say" through his created works? The poet describes the heavens proclaiming the "glory of God," displaying God's craftsmanship. The word for "glory" literally means "character." What about God's character is revealed in nature? What qualities of God are seen when we look around and pay attention to, as the mystic said, what lies before us? Perhaps several things might come to mind.

One, God is a creative being, a craftsman, as the poet put it. And what does that necessarily imply? God thrives on the process of dreaming and putting into place what he dreams. Watch the poet or artist or sculptor at work. They are passionate about revealing their view of life through their works. The creative process involves the use of the whole being: body, mind, heart, and soul. So all of God (whatever God is, whatever God's being is) is involved in providing a unique window to the world through His art. It's a way of expressing what's in the heart.



Artists value not only the end result but also the process of producing it.

Two, God values diversity. You can't help but see this side of God by looking even with a cursory glance at nature. There's such infinite variety in complexity, color, essence, size, shape, ability, function. For example, some experts estimate that among birds alone there are as many as 9,703 different species! (See www.earthlife.net/birds/intro.html.) Diversity!

Three, God values interdependence. Our ecosystem is comprised of biosystems where living organisms interact with and influence each other in mutually beneficial ways. One of the paradigms of physics is that forces (interactions between objects) always occur in pairs – an action always involves a reaction. Single, isolated forces never happen. The universe is composed of constant simultaneous interactions. And since nothing happens in isolation, every action has an impact on the whole.

Nature definitely has a cooperative side. The scientific terms “symbiosis” and “mutualism” both refer to numerous instances in which organisms live together and help one another out. The organisms can be of vastly differing species, such as an anemone and a hermit crab, or reef-building corals and algae. Many of these arrangements are truly astonishing; like the flashlight fish, which lures luminescent bacteria into chambers inside its body and then uses the cultures to light its way through the dark ocean and signal other fish about sex and danger. (Fausto-Sterling)

The poet John Donne, applying this to human life with the famous phrase “no man is an island”, put it this way:

“All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated...As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon, calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come: so this bell calls us all: but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness. ... No man is an island, entire of itself.. any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” (Donne, Devotions)

God designed creation in such a way that interdependence is an operative principle. But what about competition, the often fierce struggle for dominance, the “survival of the fittest” concept? What about those brutal examples of violence that occur in nature? If nature speaks for God, how does that reflect on God's glory? What does that say about God?

It's interesting that in the Jewish Scriptures (for example, the prophet-poet Isaiah's writings) the future world of God is described as a place where the following will be commonplace:

“The wolf and the lamb will live together;

the leopard will lie down with the baby goat.

The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion,
and a little child will lead them all.

The cow will graze near the bear.

The cub and the calf will lie down together.

The lion will eat hay like a cow.

The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra.

Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm.

Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.” (Isaiah 11:6-9)

That’s quite a picture of peace and harmony! Obviously not here yet. But perhaps it provides a glimpse into the way God originally intended the world to be and what God wants for the ultimate future. That is the view of some of the major world religions like Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. God created the world as a place of natural beauty where all created things live and exist together in peaceful harmony and unity – interconnected, interdependent, cooperative, collaborative, and mutually supportive – where cooperation rather than competition is the primary principle of life existence and survival.

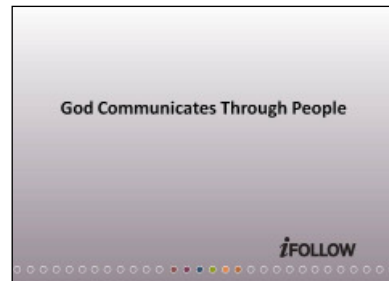
The context of the above poem describes how instead of that natural harmony there exist aggressive human rivalry and injustice and exploitation of people. The results are extreme poverty, slavery and bondage, which creates a culture of the “haves” and the “have not’s,” the rich and the poor, the free and the enslaved. That relational paradigm certainly has impacted the natural world. Human greed and selfishness, violence, power and control have too often created an environment of abuse and fear and lack of freedom and waste.

Leonardo de Caprio’s documentary *The 11th Hour*, dealing with today’s environmental crisis, suggests that human greed and selfishness are what continue to perpetuate our exploitation of the planet. We are slaves to our own needs and desires and lusts and so continue our thoughtless ravaging of the world. Very profoundly and poignantly, the documentary brings home our reality: if we are going to survive, we have to change our behavior from competition and aggression to cooperation and admiration.

In other words, we in essence must return to God’s original plan for global life, where all life lives in harmony from mutual respect, value, support and interdependence. That would reflect accurately on God and what God values and how God has created life. But given these current conditions of creation, is it possible to use only nature as an adequate revelation of God? Or has God chosen to use other means to communicate Himself to His creation?

God Communicates Through People

Have you ever been around a person for a while and then left their presence saying to yourself or to someone else, “Now that’s a godly person. It feels good being around them!” Or have you had an emergency of some kind and someone unexpectedly showed up and helped you and you said, “You’re an angel! God must have sent you!” Or perhaps you’ve had a “toxic” encounter with someone who claims to be a follower of God and you’ve gone away saying, “If that’s the way God is, forget it!”



It’s interesting how we at times conclude that God in some way has used people to connect with us or be helpful to us. In fact, that is a primary paradigm suggested in the Christian Scriptures. Here’s one of them: “Don’t forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!” (Hebrews 13:2)

There could be several implications in this perspective. One, the “strangers” being served and helped are to be viewed as God’s messengers. We are to see others as God in the flesh, which highlights the significance of compassion and service to people in general. Each person has infinite significance and importance. Two, God sends angelic messengers clothed in human form to give us opportunity to show compassion and unselfish service, a kind of human laboratory to grow our love in practical and tangible ways.

Jesus echoed this paradigm and raises the stakes even higher: “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.’

“Then these righteous ones will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

“And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’” (Matthew 25:34-40)

Jesus is saying in no uncertain terms that caring for those in need is the same as caring for Him, that He shows up in the form of hurting, broken humanity as an opportunity for people to live out compassion and service. God does indeed use people to communicate Himself.

The story is told of one of the feared persecutors of the early followers of Jesus, Saul. (Acts 9:1-9) He was on his way to arrest a group when suddenly a bright light, brighter

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than the noonday sun, struck him and knocked him off his horse, blinding him. He heard a voice which said, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" He had no idea who the voice was until it identified itself as belonging to Jesus. Saul immediately saw the point: his persecuting of these people was in fact a persecuting of Jesus Himself. He was instructed to go into the closest city and wait there for someone to come help him.

In the mean time, God spoke to one of the sincere believers, a man named Ananias, telling him to go the house where Saul was staying and pray for him that he might be healed of his blindness. So he went, found Saul, and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And instantly, Saul regained his sight. He later became one of the most passionate and successful missionaries of the early Christian church.

Apparently, God has been in the habit of using people to communicate Himself to others. When God wants something done, He often uses people to do it, people who in the name of God and under the direction of God accomplish things for God. Moses, the great Jewish leader, under God's direction frees the Jews from slavery in Egypt and leads them to the land of freedom and opportunity. Mother Teresa responds to a call from God to give herself unselfishly to the broken and dying humanity on the streets of Calcutta so that when they die they can die knowing someone loves them.

But God also took a huge risk when he chose to use people to communicate Himself to others. Think of all the horrible, destructive things people have done in the name of God through the centuries – the Crusades which slaughtered millions of Muslims, the Inquisition which persecuted millions of nonbelievers, or believers who didn't believe exactly the way they were commanded to, the Holocaust which exterminated millions of Jews, and the murdering of thousands today by terrorists of all kinds who do it in the name of God. Think of the judgmental attitude and ostracism and marginalization and abuse church people have perpetrated against those who believe or act or choose differently than they do. The list is endless.

Obviously, God being able to communicate clearly through broken people has its limitations. One author picked up on the reality of incongruity when he wrote, "If someone says, 'I love God,' but hates a brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see? And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their brothers and sisters." (1 John 4:20-21)

There is too often a major disconnect between what people say and what they end up doing. That is the inherent limitation God faces in using people to communicate Himself to others. Either their views are simply distorted and their behavior reflects that distortion, or they don't live in alignment with what they do believe. And even though God ends up on the short end of the stick, He continues trying to use people to reveal himself.

Given these current conditions of broken humanity and misguided revelations of God, there must be more effective ways for God to reveal Himself to people. How else has He

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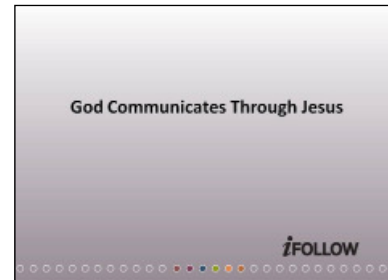
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chosen to communicate?

God Communicates Through Jesus

You would think that after the way humans mess up the whole communication process because of their inherent selfishness and obsession with self-preservation God would give up on that approach. But there is something to be said for the effectiveness of the human touch, especially when it's done right. After all, getting communication from extra-terrestrial beings or ants might not have the same connection possibilities! We relate much better to people like us or to those who can speak our language or who know what it's like to be us, to live where we live, to experience what we experience. We might be in awe of aliens coming in the name of God to communicate God, we might be fascinated by ants suddenly speaking to us about God in words we understand, but it's highly likely that the immediate curiosity would wear off in time.



The Jews even had God appear visibly in a cloud, in a pillar of fire, thundering His voice to be heard. They saw God intervene miraculously to divide the Red Sea providing a way of escape from the pursuing Egyptians. God showered them with food and water to keep them alive in the desert. God even caused the sun to stand still so their armies had more daylight to battle their enemies. Talk about powerful visible manifestations of God! But even those revelations wore off, the impact wore thin and they eventually turned a deaf ear. There must be a better way.

So God decides to pull out all the stops. Here's the way one author wrote about it: "Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son." (Hebrews 1:1-2)

The author is describing an ascending level of communication significance and importance. God begins in the early days by communicating through special messengers called the prophets. Their role was to continue giving messages from God to the people in order to keep them following God's plan and God's leading. As it turned out, the people often turned a deaf ear to the prophets' appeals.

So then God decided to send His own son as His primary spokesperson. If anyone knew God well enough to communicate Him to people, it would be God's son. Here's the way the above author continued: "The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God." (Hebrews 1:3) Who better to communicate God and what God is really like than the one who knows God best, His own son, the one closest to the heart of God?

So into the scene of human history comes God Himself through his son. And how did this work? Here's the way the author John described it: "In the beginning the Word already

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existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.” (John 1:1-3)

You see described here a fascinating process. The one called “the Word” is with God and in fact has the very character of God. The Word is the agent of creation and of life. In other words, when the Word is around, life happens, life is full and abundant. And with the coming of the Word, darkness is dispelled. Darkness is often a symbol of ignorance or misunderstanding or lack of clarity. So the Word is portrayed as giving clearer meaning and understanding to life and to God.

Who is this Word that gives life and light to people, that dispels ignorance and lack of clarity about God? John continued: “So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unending love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son ... For the law was given through Moses, but God’s unending love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. He has revealed God to us.” (John 1:14, 17-18)

Jesus was God’s son and came as the ultimate revelation of God. Who better to communicate the truth about God than the one closest to God, the one described above as nearest to God’s heart. And what about God did Jesus come to communicate and reveal? God’s “unending love and faithfulness.”

How did it happen? “The Word became human and made his home among us.” What a concept! God’s ultimate self-revelation came about by becoming human and, as one author put it, “moving into the neighborhood.” (John 1:14, Message) God knew that the only true way to become known was to become one of us, to live like us, to look like us, to talk like us, to feel what we feel, to experience what we experience, to truly enter into the human world in every way. And in rubbing shoulders with humanity, He would be able to describe God in understandable ways. People would be able to relate to Him and therefore to the God He came to reveal. “God with us,” Immanuel, is one of the Hebrew names of God given to Jesus.

Jesus lived out His life with that purpose in mind. So that before He died, He said to one of his disciples who had asked to see God, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and yet you still don’t know who I am? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!” (John 14:9)

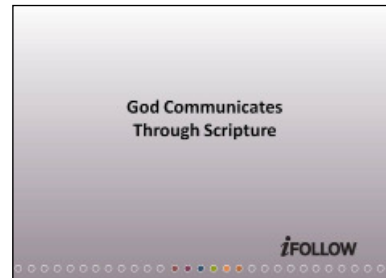
And what did Jesus’ life say about God? Jesus’ life centered around going to great lengths to love and embrace people, especially the marginalized and disenfranchised, the ones considered by others as living under the curse of God or rejected by God. Jesus touched them, accepted them, and restored their dignity by associating with them and eating with them. He went out of His way to include everyone in His life and to com-

municate that they belonged to God, too. It was a radical and revolutionary mission. It was God's ultimate attempt to reveal himself to humanity in the clearest way possible.

And then, in an act of complete unselfishness and self-sacrifice, in the final demonstration of complete love, Jesus gave up His life on the cross. He was executed for His radical life of inclusion and refusal to compromise love even when it butted heads with the establishment and institutions of his day. What more could a person do to prove their love than to say, "I will lay down my life for you no matter what! If embracing you and lifting you up leads to my death, so be it! I want you to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I'm committed to you at all costs! You are worth it all!"

God Communicates Through Scripture

If Jesus is the best there is from God, if He was sent to communicate the truth about God, how is the rest of the world who wasn't there at the time going to get in on it? How are the acts of God on behalf of the human family before and after Jesus' time going to be known and understood and vicariously experienced? How are the stories about God through many different revelations going to be heard? How are the billions of people not immediately privy to God's communications through the prophets and ultimately Jesus (people who weren't there at the time) going to be in on God's revelations?



The transmission of stories for millennia was by mouth. People told the stories to each other and from one generation to another. I remember growing up on stories about my dad. He told them to me and my brother every night at bed time. I loved hearing about his escapades as a kid, the good and the bad, his successes and his punishments. I learned some valuable lessons about life through those stories. And when I became a father to three children, I told those same stories to them. They learned about their grandpa and the same life lessons.

Eventually, the stories about God and God's dealings with people were written down. The effectiveness of transmission could be a bit more controlled that way. And more generations could benefit from the life lessons. One of the authors of the New Testament, the great theologian and missionary Paul, described the value this way:

"These things happened to them [the people God dealt with in the Old Testament times] as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age. If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure." (1 Corinthians 10:11-13)

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The value of written Scripture is to provide us lessons about life – as we see how God dealt with people in times past, we learn how God can deal with us in our own human dilemmas and journeys. Written stories that tell about human successes and failures and how God relates to them empower us with courage and tenacity in our faith. Stories provide us with emotional connecting points and in that way offer life transformation in our contemporary setting. Reading about how God’s story intersects with humanity’s story helps to give significant perspective on our individual lives and has the potential to build our personal faith in God.

Paul wrote extensively in order to help people remember the truths he taught them while he was living among them. Since he traveled so much, he wrote letters constantly and sent them to the various groups of believers he nurtured. He encouraged, reminded, rebuked, taught, consoled, reprimanded, loved on, and warned with his letters and written stories. He was prolific. And he often referenced the written Old Testament Scriptures of his day that many of his people read and were familiar with.

Writing to a young man who had studied under him and had become a fellow spiritual leader to some of the believers, Paul reminded Timothy of the value of scripture: “You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

God has chosen to communicate Himself through the written word, the stories of His interactions with people through the ages, in hopes that people would find comfort and encouragement in trusting Him and his leading. God wants to be known. He desires to be understood. And so He communicates.

But this form of communication isn’t without its pitfalls, either. Generations removed from the actual recorded events have to interpret what they read. They have to learn who recorded the stories, what that author’s intent was, who the author was writing to, what the setting surrounding the writing was, what language the author originally wrote in. And then we have to also recognize that the original author’s manuscripts no longer exist and were copied and then copied and copied again and again by transcribers and scribes as best as possible, but with the potential of the scribes either inserting their own personal bias into the process or simply making copy errors (as the tedious process was all done by hand).

So every written story simply has its inherent limitations. But the stories still have their transforming power. Is it possible that God uses even the most tentative of processes, often fraught with potential weaknesses, to still communicate the truth about Himself? One of the closest followers of Jesus, Peter, seems to think so. Reminding the readers that he was an original eye witness to Jesus’ life, he described the whole revelation process

this way: “Because of that experience [seeing Jesus and hearing God’s voice on several occasions], we have even greater confidence in the message proclaimed by the prophets. You must pay close attention to what they wrote, for their words are like a lamp shining in a dark place, until the Day dawns, and Christ the Morning Star shines in your hearts. Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet’s own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God.” (2 Peter 1:19-21)

Peter suggested that, in spite of the very human instruments that God used to communicate the stories about life and God’s interaction with people, God’s Spirit infused the process. What does that mean? It means that God is still in the stories. Reading the stories shines the light of Jesus’ life into our hearts. Transformation happens. Trust grows. Faith develops. And God is experienced.

There’s another very subtle danger with the written words of Scripture. Jesus confronted it head on with the religious leaders of his day. They were big on Scripture, memorizing entire books and passages and reciting them in front of people to show off their spiritual veracity. But is it possible to know Scripture backwards and forwards and still miss the point? Here’s how Jesus put it: “You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life.” (John 5:39-40)

What was Jesus getting at? The whole point of Scripture (the written stories of God’s interactions with people) is not to provide religious information to satisfy the cravings of spiritual junkies. It’s not to be a tool to show how religious and knowledgeable someone is. It’s not a weapon to hit someone with to coerce them into behaving a certain way. Scripture is for the purpose of experiencing Jesus’ life, of knowing Jesus and the God Jesus came to reveal. The stories about Jesus and about God are primarily transformational not informational. They are tools from a God who longs to be known, to be trusted, to be embraced and experienced.

We can never completely understand and know the Divine. God is bigger and greater than we can imagine. God is cloaked in infinite mystery. We can only be in awe of that Mystery and Unknowing. But because God has chosen to reveal himself in some ways, we can also be in awe of what we do encounter and see about God. In the end, is there anything more awe-inspiring than pure Love?

Summary

So the various methods of God’s communications and revelations in the end must all be filtered through His finest and best, His son Jesus. What Jesus reveals about God is the truest and clearest picture of who God really is and



what God is really like because Jesus alone is God's son, one with his heart. Creation itself is inadequate, as we've seen. People are insufficient, too. We've all seen the distortions and destructive effects of people claiming to be speaking for or acting on behalf of God. Scriptures have been misused and misinterpreted to terribly destructive ends. So Jesus becomes extremely significant in both understanding God and hearing God speak.

Creation reveals a powerful God, creative, valuing diversity and interdependence. People reveal a persistent God, diverse, unselfish and caring. Scripture reveals a passionate God who loves people enough to interact, to intervene, to respond, to act on behalf of. God loves diversity enough to call hugely different people to write the stories, the good and the bad, the pretty and the ugly. And Jesus brings it all together. He brings the best into focus, showing what God truly values and wants for global life – self-sacrificing love, compassion and active service to others, a willingness to give all for the sake of the other, a self-confidence that springs from a clear self-identity that empowers a radical unselfishness.

One of the early Christian hymns recorded in the New Testament described the true nature of God as revealed by Jesus. Here's what it said:

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but emptied himself,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5-8)

Jesus shows that the very nature of God is one of self-emptying and self-sacrificing and humble giving for the good of others. Jesus didn't give up something to become like us. His act was in complete harmony with His nature – He was acting in perfect alignment with what it means to be God. God gives at all costs, period. That's why Jesus is the best and most complete communication and revelation of God. Thank God for those stories that still live today.

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Handout in this Package

1. Participant's Notes



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**Exploring
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Additional Resources

- Eldredge, John (2008). *Walking with God: Talk to Him. Hear from Him. Really.* Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Huggett, Joyce (1987). *The Joy of Listening to God.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Hybels, Bill (1998). *Too Busy Not to Pray: Slowing Down to Be With God.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- McLaren, Brian (2006). *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything.* Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Thompson, Alden (1991). *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers.* Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.
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- Wright, N.T. (1999). *The Challenge of Jesus: Recovering Who Jesus Was and Is.* Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.

Articles

- Donne, John (1572-1631), "Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, Meditation XVII."
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne (1993). "Discover", April 1993.

Video

- DiCaprio, Leonardo (Producer) & Peterson, L. C. and Connors, Nadia (Directors). (2007). *The 11th Hour* [Motion picture]. United States: Warner Independent Pictures.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe a time when you experienced a communication breakdown with someone. What happened and why? How did it make you feel?
2. Have you ever felt you could “hear” or “see” or otherwise sense God? How?
3. Do you agree that God communicates through nature? Describe a time when you were out in nature and sensed the Divine. What did you feel was communicated to you?
4. Have you seen ways in which God communicated through other people? Describe a time when you felt you received a message from the Divine through what another person said or did. How did you feel?
5. What are some of the concepts you think God communicates through the life of Jesus?
6. Have you read sacred Scripture? What are some of the things you believe God has taught you through this means?
7. What is one story you grew up on and what was the value of that story for your life?

Group Activities

Purpose: To dig deeper into ways of listening to God.

Preparation: Set up four tables (or four types of tables, if your group is larger than about 50). Put large tent cards and supplies on the tables as follows:

1. The card says, “God communicates through creation.” On this table place plants, animals (or pictures of animals), rocks, and beautiful photos of scenery.
2. The card says, “God communicates through people.” On this table place newspapers and magazines with lots of pictures and stories of people doing all kinds of things. You could also place a few devotional books here.
3. The card says, “God communicates through Jesus.” On this table place figurines and pictures of Jesus, a New Testament, and some books about the life of Christ.
4. The card says, “God communicates through Scripture.” On this table, place Bibles of various versions, especially illustrated ones, if you can get them. (You may also place Qu’rans, Baghavad Gitas, and other sacred scriptures if you wish, if the group has people from various faiths or includes secular people of no particular faith.)

Assignment: Allow participants to choose a table. If some tables are too full and some are too empty, ask some to make their second choice. Ask the groups to come up with some ways that God speaks through their method. Then, ask one spokesperson from each table to share with the larger group.

Debrief: After each table has shared, ask how the fourth method, the sacred Scripture table(s) makes the other tables complete. Could we learn about God only through nature and other people? Presumably, we wouldn’t have much of a story of Jesus if we didn’t have sacred Scriptures. But if we didn’t have them, we also would have no way to measure and evaluate the pictures we get of God through other means. If they had to pick just one, which would different participants pick? (Be sure they are free to really say their own choice.)

Time: Allow a couple minutes for table choice and movement, about ten minutes for discussion at the tables and another ten minutes for sharing (about three minutes from each table). Allow at least ten minutes for follow-up discussion with the whole group.

Handout

How God Communicates

Participant Notes

1. God Communicates through Creation

“The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make him known. They speak without a sound or word; their voice is never heard. Yet their message has gone throughout the earth, and their words to all the world.” (Psalm 19:1-4, New Living Translation)

“Contemplate what lies before you. It is God’s way of making himself present.” (Carlo Carretto)

Glory = _____

What characteristics of God are revealed in creation?

- A. _____
- B. _____
- C. _____

What would you add to that list?

“All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated...As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon, calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come: so this bell calls us all: but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness. ... No man is an island, entire of itself...any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” (John Donne, “Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, Meditation XVII”)

“The wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard will lie down with the baby goat.

The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion, and a little child will lead them all. The cow will graze near the bear. The cub and the calf will lie down together. The lion will eat hay like a cow. The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra. Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm. Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.” (Isaiah 11:6-9, NLT)

2. God Communicates through People

“Don’t forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!” (Hebrews 13:2, New Living Translation)

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.’

“Then these righteous ones will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’” (Matthew 25:34-40, NLT)

What are some of the inherent risks of having humans communicate with God?

“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates a brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don’t love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see? And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their brothers and sisters.” (1 John 4:20-21, NLT)

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Has God ever communicated a message to me through someone else? If so, what was it? What might God be trying to tell me through some of the people I’ve encountered?

3. God Communicates through Jesus

“Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son.” (Hebrews 1:1-2, NLT)

“The Son radiates God’s own glory and expresses the very character of God.” (Hebrews 1:3, NLT)

“In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness can never extinguish it.” (John 1:1-3, NLT)

“So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son ... For the law was given through Moses, but God’s unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. He has revealed God to us.” (John 1:14, 17-18, NLT)

What did Jesus’ life reveal about God?

4. God Communicates through Scripture

“These things happened to them [the people God dealt with in the Old Testament times] as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age. If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.” (1 Corinthians 10:11-13, NLT)

The value of written scripture is to provide us _____
_____.

Stories provide us with _____ and in that way offer _____ in our contemporary setting.

“You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:15-17, NLT)

Some Inherent Limitations of Scripture

- A. _____
- B. _____
- C. _____
- D. _____

“Because of that experience [seeing Jesus and hearing God’s voice on several occasions], we have even greater confidence in the message proclaimed by the prophets. You must pay close attention to what they wrote, for their words are like a lamp shining in a dark place—until the Day dawns, and Christ the Morning Star shines in your hearts. Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet’s own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God.” (2 Peter 1:19-21, NLT)

“You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life.” (John 5:39-40, NLT)

Jesus’ Point: _____

5. The Core of God’s Nature: Why He Communicates

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5-8, New International Version)