

## 6 The living word

We study the Bible not just for information but for transformation. What God has decreed for the world comes to life in us. We become like the God we worship. The world discovers its heavenly sovereign as his word comes to life in us.

### 6.1 How can the world see God?

Most of what exists is not visible to the naked eye. There are billions of stars in the universe, but only a few thousand are visible to us. So, we build telescopes with huge mirrors to collect and focus light from distant stars.

We put the Hubble telescope in orbit beyond the earth since the atmosphere scatters the light. We launched the James Webb Telescope (JWT) 1.5 million kilometres from earth, so earth doesn't block its few. To see far into space, JWT needed a mirror larger than the rocket that carried it. Eighteen hexagonal mirrors—each 1.3 metres across—were unfolded in space and focused to work together as a single reflector. Now we see what it was designed to reveal: the early universe from 13 billion years ago.

But no telescope can reveal God. The Creator is not part of creation. So how can people see God?

In many cultures, people constructed idols—a visible image to represent their god. But calling an inanimate object a “god” insults the living God (Exodus 20:4).

Only a *living* being can image the *living* God:

- To be human is to image God. Among all the creatures of earth, we represent heaven's authority (Genesis 1:26-28).
- Since humans went their own way, creating their own gods, Israel was called to image God, to represent *the living God*.<sup>29</sup>

But like the rest of humanity, Israel struggled to live as the people who reveal God to the world. God set them up as *a light to the nations* (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6), but darkness spread over them too, as they fell to the nations (Isaiah 8:22–9:2). The whole world went dark, yet God promised the world would see him in his people (Isaiah 60:1-4).

The light of God's reign had gone out for 600 years. Ruled by the kingdoms of this world instead of by God, they were living in darkness, like the nations.

They needed a glimpse of God to keep them going:

<sup>29</sup> Deuteronomy 5:26; Joshua 3:10; 1 Samuel 17:26, 36; 2 Kings 19:4, 16; Psalm 42:2; 84:2; Isaiah 37:4, 17; Jeremiah 10:10, 23:36; Daniel 6:20, 26. Compare Isaiah 44:9-20.



James Webb Telescope. Photo: NASA.  
<https://science.nasa.gov/mission/webb/webbs-mirrors/>

**John 14:8-10 (NIV)**

<sup>8</sup> Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

<sup>9</sup> Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has **seen me** has **seen the Father**. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”

<sup>10</sup> Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.”

Want to see God? Look at Jesus!

In the beginning, God spoke *light* and *life* to a dark and lifeless world.

As people turned from God, *darkness* returned, and *death* reigned.

Into the dark and dying world, came **the living word** (John 1:1).

In the beginning, God decreed, “Let there be light!” That decree came to life in Jesus: *In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind* (John 1:4).

In him, *the true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world* (1:9).

The *light* and *life* that God decreed for us in the beginning was visible on earth again:

**John 8:12 (NIV)**

He said, “**I am the light of the world**. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the **light of life**.”

We come back to *life* again in him. *The light of the world* doesn’t leave us floundering in the dark to find our own way. He is *the way* to the Father; *the truth* God decreed for creation; *and the life* God breathed into humanity resurrected (John 14:6).

In summary, Jesus is the living word of God, the word come to life. That’s where Bible study takes us. Would you like to discuss what John did here?

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But it isn’t only in Jesus that God’s word comes to life. As he lives in us, God’s word comes to life in us. The community where he lives becomes the light of the world:

**Matthew 5:14-16 (NIV)**

<sup>14</sup> “**You** are the **light of the world**. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let **your light** shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Wow! We are *the light of the world* because *the Light of the world* lives in us. We come to life in him, so the world sees the living God living in us. If the resurrected Christ is living in us, can we say, “If you’ve seen us, you’ve seen the Father. ... The Father, living in us, is doing his work in and through us”?

Crucially, the *you* is plural here. I am not the light of the world, but together we are. As humanity coming back to life in the resurrected Christ, we are the light that God has set up for the world; the way, the truth, and the life of the Father.

Do you have any stories of the word of God coming to life in us?

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In reality, not everyone sees God in his people.

No farmer gets 100% strike rate from the seeds they plant:

- Some of the seed lands in places where it never comes to life.
- Some germinates in shallow places where it cannot take root.
- Some comes to life, but doesn't survive among the thorns and thistles.
- Yet, some of the seed grows and produces the harvest the farmer intended.

The parable of the sower is Jesus explaining how the word of God comes to life in the earth. "*The seed is the word of God*" (Luke 8:11), for God decreed fruitfulness for the earth (Genesis 1:11-12). But the rebellion against God has frustrated the harvest. The earth grows thorns and thistles, death where God intended life (Genesis 3:18-19).

The frustrated farmer in this story is Jesus: "*This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.'*" (Matthew 13:13).

But even though he feels the anguish of a world that resists what God has said, Jesus keeps planting *the message of the kingdom* (Matthew 13: 18). Though many seeds are unproductive, the earth will produce the harvest God decreed:

**Isaiah 55:10–13 (NIV)**

<sup>10</sup> As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

<sup>11</sup> so is my word that goes out from my mouth:

It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

<sup>12</sup> You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. <sup>13</sup> Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD's renown, for an everlasting sign, that will endure forever."

God's word will not echo back from an empty void, producing nothing. The sower keeps planting in tears, for the harvest that will fill heaven and earth with joy.

The word of God comes to life in the people how recognize Jesus as our heaven-appointed ruler and live as his kingdom. That's what these parables of the kingdom are saying.

Discuss? Are you comfortable with being the living word of God, the word that comes to life in us? Do you feel the frustration Jesus felt? Do you share the sower's hope of a harvest?

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Okay, let's clarify our role in the world. Some Christians fear Western society is losing its moral fibre. They call us to be *salt a light*, by which they mean standing up against the evil doers and evil legislators who undermine godly values and moral purity.

That was not Jesus' agenda. He did not say, "You are the moral police for my kingdom, to shine a light on the criminals and highlight their dark deeds." That's not what Jesus did, though it is what the Pharisees did.

Being the light of the world is not a call to fight against the darkness. God set us up as the light of heaven's presence on earth, to "*give light to everyone in the house ... so that they see your good deeds and glorify your Father in the heavens.*"

Similarly, the *salt* metaphor is not a call to try to preserve a world that's already gone rotten. It's not about the rotten meat; it's about the salt's flavour. If God's people lost their distinctiveness, they were *no longer good for anything except to be thrown out [exiled] and trampled underfoot* by the nations (Matthew 5:13). While salt (sodium chloride) cannot lose its distinctive flavour, God's people had lost their God-flavour.

Eugene Peterson got the metaphors right:

*You're here to be the salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavours of this earth. ... You're the light, bringing out the God-colours in the world.* (Matthew 5:13, 14, Msg).

The goal of bible study is **to be the living word**. Knowing God changes us, so the world sees God dwelling in us. The community that trusts and follows Christ reveals God's sovereign authority on earth.

## 6.2 We share in Christ's life together

Some of Jesus' audience missed the point of Bible study:

### John 5:39-40 (NIV)

<sup>39</sup> "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me,

<sup>40</sup> yet you refuse to come to me to have life."

The Bible is not the source of life. Jesus is. Even the Old Testament leads us to him. Bible study is relational: knowing Christ, rather than knowing stuff.

So, what does it look like for us to be the people who have found life in Christ? Crucially this is something we must do together.

### ***It's not about me***

In my younger days, I thought the Bible was about me. Bible reading was a spiritual discipline, a quiet time to develop my piety. I was the person in the story: Joshua taking the land, or Daniel being rescued from lions. I called Jesus *my personal Saviour*.

The Bible never asks me to get alone with Jesus, and it never refers to him as my personal Saviour. It calls *us* into communal relationship with Jesus as our God-appointed leader, and it calls him *the Saviour of the world* (John 4:42; 1 John 4:14).

Now, please don't misunderstand. Each of us needs time with God, as Jesus did when he *went off to a solitary place where he prayed* (Mark 1:35). Each of us bows to Jesus, as Thomas did when he said, "*My Lord and my God*" (John 20:28). But don't make self the centre of the story. It's a communal story about a king and his kingdom, the anointed ruler (*Christ*) and the community that lives in his leadership (*in Christ*).

The problem comes from our culture where the individual is king. *The kingdom of God is within you*, says Luke 17:21 (KJV). That has led to many books and podcasts on having the kingdom of God within *me*. Do you realize how nonsensical that is? A kingdom is a community of people under a royal leader. If I had a kingdom living inside me, I'd be tormented like the guy in Mark 5:9.

In 1611, when the King James Version was translated, Luke 17:21 was unambiguous. Back then, English used *thee* or *thou* for you (singular), and *you* was plural. We misunderstand today because we've lost the English words to distinguish *you (singular)* from *you plural*). Language changes to reflect culture.

But even when the Bible was clearly speaking communally, I was taught to change it!

- John 3:16 says, "*For God so loved **the world*** (John 3:16), but I was taught to substitute *me*: "For God so loved me (insert my name)." In something closer to solipsism than the gospel, I was told, "If I was the only person in the world, Jesus would have died just for me."
- I heard the gospel as, "*Jesus loves **me**; this I know for the Bible tells **me** so.*"

But the Bible does not say that. Whether it's speaking of the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit, it always says God loves **us**:

- *See what great love the Father has lavished on **us**, that **we** should be called children of God! And that is what **we** are!* (1 John 3:1)
- *Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved **us** and gave himself up for **us**.* (Ephesians 5:2)
- *God's love has been poured out into **our** hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to **us**.* (Romans 5:5)

The gospel turns us inside out. Rather than fighting to preserve his own life, Jesus gave his life to rescue a world that resisted his authority. To follow Jesus is to crucify the self:

**Mark 8:34 (my translation)**

Having gathered the crowd with his disciples, he said to them,  
“Anyone who wants to follow me is to pay no attention to the self,  
to lift up his/her cross and follow me.”

The world will never be set right while each of us focuses our energy and resources on the self, my own appetites and power. That’s not our priority:

**Matthew 6:33 (my translation)**

“Live first for God’s kingdom, for his reign that sets everything right.  
Everything will be provided to you.”

Jesus called himself *the son of man*. He is the human descendant who received the dominion God gave humanity in the beginning, the vocation to fill the earth with heaven’s reign (Genesis 1:26-28). The earth and its creatures have been terrorized by hunters who subjugate the world to their own power. Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem. Alexander the Great conquered everyone from Greece to Persia. Julius Caesar changed the world as they knew it from a republic (ruled by a senate) into an empire where he (as emperor) held unchecked power. This is the violent world our heavenly sovereign so loved that he sent his Son so that those who trust his leadership will not perish but participate in his enduring life (John 3:16). This is the kingdom Jesus called us to seek, with the promise that everything else people pursue comes through seeking his Father’s reign restored to the earth in the Christ.

I’m not saying, “Don’t read the Bible on your own.” I do that every day. But the goal is shared relationship in his leadership, life together in him.

***The gospel***

Salvation is not just a personal thing. God is working on a global rescue:

**Colossians 1:13 (NIV)**

He has **rescued** us from **the dominion of darkness**  
and brought us into **the kingdom of the Son** he loves.

What God has done in Christ is what God has been doing from the start. God *rescued* Jacob’s family from *the dominion of darkness* (their oppression under Pharaoh). God formed them into *the kingdom of light* through the Sinai covenant for the sake of the nations. The *holy people* (Deuteronomy 28:9) received the land as their *inheritance* (Joshua 11:23).

That story now continues in Christ, for all the peoples of the earth. Rescue. Kingdom. Commission as God’s holy people. Inheritance for all in Christ’s kingship:

**Colossians 1:12 (NIV)**

The Father ... has qualified you [i.e. Colossian gentiles] to share in **the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.**

God did not abandon Israel in favour the nations. God includes us gentiles in *the inheritance of his holy people*, as citizens of the *kingdom of light*, participating in Messiah's life (compare Ephesians 2:19-20).

The Messiah has received the earth as his inheritance (as in Psalm 2:8). So God is visible to the earth in the Son who heads up God's family (*firstborn over creation*):

**Colossians 1:15–20 (NIV)**

<sup>15</sup> The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup> For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

<sup>19</sup> For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, <sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

The *church* (verse 18) is the community that gathers around King Jesus, making his kingship known on earth. As his community, we are the place where people see the gospel reconciling people to God and to each other.

Jesus did not make peace by shedding the blood of his enemies (war). Jesus offered his life to make peace with those who wanted his blood (the cross). We trust him that this is how God will reconcile the whole creation to himself.

What a vision! It's more than individuals regenerated with the life of Christ. It's a cosmic salvation: all the broken and dislodged pieces finding their place in his leadership like a magnificent mosaic reflecting the majesty of its heavenly king (verse 20).

So, in reading the New Testament letters, don't just take it personally. The question is: **how can we treat each other in response to the way our king treats his kingdom?**

**Colossians 3:12-14 (NIV)**

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup> And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.



Artwork from broken pieces.

<https://www.madebybarb.com/2023/04/22/how-to-make-your-own-tesserae-for-mosaics/>

How would we treat God’s chosen people if we saw them as God does: *holy* and *dearly loved*? We live in a culture where people take advantage of each other sexually, where capitalism presents greed as the root of all good when it’s actually a false god, a world where we use anger and deception to manipulate people (3:5-9).

But now we’ve seen in Christ what it means to be human, we put off those attitudes as unsuitable clothing, *clothing ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience* (verse 12).

Since God released us for our rebellion against him, we release each other from the grievances we hold against each other. Only then can we be a unified community, bound together in perfect unity by the love God has given us in Christ (verses 13-14).

The gospel that makes peace between people and God also makes peace between people who were previously at war with each other:

**Colossians 3:15-17 (NIV)**

<sup>15</sup> Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. <sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

God’s gospel—the good news of his Christ as our Lord—releases *his rule in our hearts* (our attitudes towards each other). Together we are Jesus in the world (his *body* corporate), *members* of the kingdom that is *at peace* in him, thank God! (verse 15).

The gospel forms us into a temple where God lives on earth. *The king living in his kingdom* imparts a *richness* to us, helping us embody the *wisdom* of our heavenly sovereign by focusing our hearts on living for his honour, a life affirmed in the harmonies and melodies of our *psalms, hymns, and the songs of the Spirit*) (verse 16).

So, whether you’re at home, at work, in a church meeting, with family, playing sport, or helping a neighbour, our words and deeds all express the same reality: the authority of King Jesus, our gratitude to belong in the family of the Father in the Son (verse 17).

That’s the message everywhere in the letters of the New Testament: the living, breathing reality of life under Jesus Christ our Lord.

Your thoughts?

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## 6.3 Conclusion

Next week's session is dedicated to your questions. Email questions to:

[allen.browne@riverview.church](mailto:allen.browne@riverview.church)

with the subject:

“Question for Exploring the Bible.”

There will be no notes or podcasts, so this invitation is for those who attend in person.

We've seen how the Bible is one congruent story from creation to new creation. Our heavenly sovereign never gave up on his earthly realm, responding to the rebellion by making himself known through humans: through Israel, through Christ, and through the people who live under his Christ today.

As we remove our masks and look into the face of God in Christ, our humanity is being restored. His Holy Spirit is reconstructing us as God's mirror for the world:

### **2 Corinthians 3:18 (NIV)**

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

The word *hermeneutics* means the interpretation of the text:

Hermeneutics is not simply about getting the text right. It is about being rightly formed by the text so that God's people can live faithfully within his unfolding story. The goal is not to master Scripture but to be mastered by it.<sup>30</sup>

For examples of Jesus interpreting Scripture relationally, see:

<https://allenbrowne.blog/2021/01/22/the-god-who-raises-the-dead/>

<https://allenbrowne.blog/2021/01/28/davids-lord/>

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<sup>30</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, What Is Hermeneutics? <https://www.logos.com/grow/live-hermeneutics-vanhoozer/> 2026.