



WEEK ONE:

# MAKING SENSE OF THE BIBLE

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO  
UNDERSTAND THE GOSPEL STORY?

**Gather & Open with Prayer**

**Opening Discussion (10 minutes)**

Welcome to *The Story of Holy Love!* This is a six-week course where we will be exploring the big story of the Bible, and how it changes our lives today.

**If the group members do not know each other already:** Have everyone introduce themselves and say briefly why they are taking the course or what they hope to get out of the time studying the big story of the Bible.

**If this is a regular group that already knows each other:** Ask each person to say briefly how knowing the story of the Bible has made a difference to them—or how they think it might make a difference to them.

In either case, as you ask them to do this, mention that time is limited and everyone needs to get a chance to speak, so each person should make only a brief comment.

**Introduce Video**

In this video, Kevin Vanhoozer of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School explains that we all use stories to make sense of our lives, and the big story of the Bible will change our lives if we accept it as the truth.

**Watch Video: (12 minutes) [tiu.edu/makingsense](http://tiu.edu/makingsense)**



### Discussion (20 minutes)

What are some examples of how we use stories to make sense of our lives and know how to make decisions in our families, our jobs and our communities?

The Bible tells us a big story about what God is doing in the world, from the beginning of the story, where he makes the world, to the end of the story, where he fixes everything wrong with the world. What difference does it make to us—how will we live differently every day—if we think that story is true?

What happens when people look to the Bible only for a list of commands (do not kill, do not steal, tell the truth, keep your promises and so on) and not for a story—how does that change things?

When people hear the message of the Bible, they can either embrace it as true and allow it to transform their lives, or they can push it away. Why would people want to push it away?

### Introduce Bible Passage

The first passage of the Bible we will be looking at together is Psalm 1. “Psalms” is one of the biggest books in the Bible, and it is a songbook. It has 150 songs that were used to worship God in ancient Israel, during the time before Jesus came to earth. So, this is sort of the hymnal or “worship songbook” of God’s people from that time.

We are going to be looking at the very first song in the book. This is the first song for a reason. It sets up an important theme that is going to run through the whole songbook of Psalms, and in fact it runs through the whole Bible.

In the video, Kevin Vanhoozer said that people who embrace the message of God can live a wise and good life, while people who push the message of God away are not going to have the kind of life they should have. That is what Psalm 1 is all about.

This psalm talks about the “law” of the Lord. When it says “law,” that does not just mean God’s commands. It includes God’s commands, which are important, but it also includes the big story that God tells in the Bible. They used the word “law” to include everything God had to say, whether it was a command or a promise or a story. So, let’s look at what this song says about people who embrace or push away the “law” of the Lord.

### Read Passage: Psalm 1

### Discussion (10 minutes)

The song paints a beautiful picture of what happens to people who embrace what God has to say to them as the truth. They are like a tree planted by streams of water, that bears fruit in season and never withers. When you picture that tree, what comes to your mind—how does it make you feel, and what do you think this kind of person would be like?

### Key Insights:

- The scene is peaceful, restful, secure, safe, etc.
- The tree is nourished, taken care of, has what it needs (“planted by streams of water”).
- The tree provides for others; it is reliable, fruitful, productive, serves others (“bears fruit”).
- The tree has a good life, the kind of life we should have and want to have.

The song even says that for the person who embraces what God has to say, “in all that he does, he prospers.” But we know from the rest of the Bible—like in the book of Job—that this is not a promise we will get healthy and rich and powerful, and our lives will become a playground. People who follow God continue to have suffering and challenges in their lives, the same as everyone else. The song is not saying that people who follow God will have success in the way that the world around us defines success. So, what do you think it might be saying?





**Key Insights:**

- God defines “success” or “prospering” differently than the world does.
- Being the kind of person we see in Psalm 1 is what God defines as “success” or “prospering.”
- If that is true, a lot of our ideas and attitudes—our goals in life—will need to change!
- If you have time: How does that work out in our lives?

**Introduce Bible Passage**

Jesus was constantly telling stories, which were called “parables.” He used these stories to teach people in many different ways, from helping them understand God’s character to challenging people about their wrong behavior. This is another example of how important stories can be to the way we learn.

The next passage we will look at together is in the book of Matthew, which is one of the books that tells the story of Jesus’ life. In chapter 13, verses 1–9, Jesus tells a short story. In verses 18–23, he explains what the story means. And in between, in versus 10–17, he explains an important reason why he uses stories to teach people.

The first part we are going to read is the part in the middle, the part where Jesus explains why he teaches in “parables” or stories.

**Read Passage: Matthew 13:10–17**

**Discussion (10 minutes)**

Looking at this passage, why does Jesus use stories to teach?

**Key Insights:**

- When people do not want to listen, they are “hardened” against understanding the message.
- Sadly, many people really do not want to understand what God has to say.
- Jesus is not interested in trying to “teach” unteachable people.

What about the people who did want to hear what God had to say—how did they get an understanding of Jesus’ message?



**Key Insights:**

- The people who want to understand Jesus come to him and ask, and he helps them.
- Jesus will teach anyone and everyone who really wants to know!
- Whatever kind of life you have led or whatever you have done wrong, he takes everyone back.

**Introduce Bible Passage**

Now let’s look at the story Jesus told. It is a story about how people respond when they hear Jesus’ message about the kingdom of God. This message about the kingdom of God is the big story of the Bible, the story we are going to be looking at in this course. Let’s look at the different ways people respond when they hear the message.

**Read Passage: Matthew 13:1–9 and 18–23**

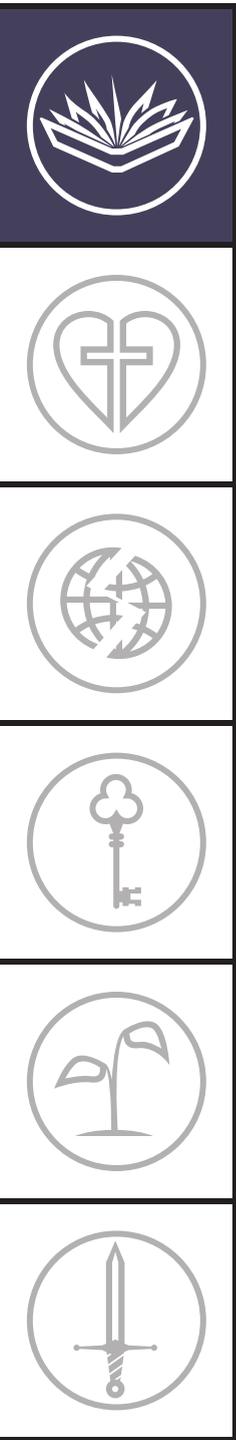
**Discussion (10 minutes)**

Jesus describes four types of people and the different ways they respond to his message about God’s kingdom. The first kind of person is like a hard path or road. The seed falls on the road, but it does not sink in, and before long the birds come and take the seed away. Jesus says this is a person who does not understand the message of God’s kingdom—they hear it, but they just do not understand it at all. Do you know people like this? **[Give people a quick opportunity to nod or affirm.]** Think about the image of a hard path or road. Why might a person be like this—“hardened” against understanding the message?

**Key Insights:**

- If they understand God’s message, they will be responsible for how they respond.
- People do not want to obey God if it is going to be difficult or painful for them.
- So, they tell themselves that they cannot understand God, making themselves unteachable.

The second kind of person is like a rocky soil where the seed has no space to grow roots. When the sun gets hot, the plant withers. They hear the message about God’s



kingdom and dive right in—they love it! They are so joyful and enthusiastic! They cannot get enough of Jesus! Until following Jesus gets difficult for them, that is. Then they drift away. Jesus says this person “has no root in himself.” Do you know people like this? **[Give people a quick opportunity to nod or affirm.]** Think about the image of a shallow plant with no roots. Why might a person be like this—understand the message and then fall away when things get difficult?

**Key Insights:**

- Understanding is not enough; this person was not willing to obey God.
- When things got tough they chose to go back to the easy way instead of accepting hard truth.
- We have to be willing to obey God if we want to be “rooted” people, not “shallow” people.

The third kind of person is like a soil filled with weeds that steal the nutrients of the soil away from healthy plants. They hear the message of God’s kingdom and start following Jesus, but then they lose their way because they are paying more attention to “the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches.” Do you know people like this? **[Give people a quick opportunity to nod or affirm.]** Think about the image of a plant surrounded by weeds. Why might the anxieties of daily life, or a concern for wealth, draw people away from God?

**Key Insights:**

- Understanding and obedience are not enough; this person does not trust God.
- Our “cares”—anxieties—make us decide whether we trust God to take care of us.
- Often, we trust in money to take care of our problems (this is the “deceitfulness” of riches).

The fourth kind of person is like a field that is bursting with crops. These people are willing to understand the message of God’s kingdom, they are willing to obey God when things get hard, and they are willing to trust God to take care of

them. Do you know people like this? **[Give people a quick opportunity to nod or affirm.]** Think about the image of a field full of crops—like wheat or corn—that is just bursting with growth and provides tons of food. What does this image tell us about people who embrace God’s kingdom?

**Key Insights:**

- They grow enormously—growing by thirty, sixty or even a hundred times!
- They grow from a small starting point—all it takes is a seed to get started.
- They are “fruitful”—they provide for others, like a village depends on the field for crops.

**Homework**

Read the book of Matthew, preferably in one sitting. Underline or highlight each place where you see the phrase “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven.” (In the Bible, these two phrases mean the same thing—God’s rule from heaven over our world as its rightful king.)

**Memorize Psalm 1:1–3.**

**Close with Prayer**