

**TUTORIAL**  
**7.6**

# Access to the Bible

This tutorial discusses the first question in the area of *Word*: 'Are they able to access the Bible in a form that clearly and faithfully communicates God's revelation to them?'

## Last time

We looked at the W.I.L.D. outline in the form of 20 questions - five in each of the different areas of Word, Identity, Life and Discipleship. We discussed that it can be used in a number of different ways but we chose this form so as not to limit its application; also to reflect the fact that when we look at how Truth is producing life, growth and fruit in a person or in a group of people, we are talking about a process - a journey - not a completed product or destination. We also shared some thoughts on the *order* of the four categories: How the entrance of God's *Word* is the first in order because it changes who we are, then clarity about *Identity* is foundational to *Life* changes, etc.

Finally we asked why we chose these four areas specifically...and reflected on the fact that while they are not "inspired" they are a very appropriate way of describing the primary threads in God's Word that start with His own Being, run through His interactions as Creator with His creation, tie together in the person of Christ, and reach out to the Church.

## A reminder - the "W" in W.I.L.D.

In the next few tutorials we want to look further into the area of *Word* and how it relates to the life, growth and fruit of a person/group/church. Here again are the five questions that we proposed asking when we considered the first area - Word - in our W.I.L.D. categories. There is a lot of implicit stuff embedded in each of these questions, so we're going to go through and consider each of them in turn, starting with this first (underlined) question.

- Are they able to access the Bible in a form that clearly and faithfully communicates God's revelation to them?
- Are they having God's Word presented to them in a way that allows it to enter and engage their hearts at a worldview level?
- Are they learning to give God's Word its proper place and authority?

- Are they growing in their ability to correctly understand God's Word as His complete Narrative, with Jesus Christ as the heart of the story and its interpretive key?
- Are they increasingly able to make use of God's Word as He intends for His children and His Church?

## God communicates

In any attempt we make to describe God, the fact that He communicates must feature very prominently. Even that we know He exists at all is clear evidence of this. Just because many human beings have an opinion, born from their limited, fallen, perspective, about what *they* feel would be a compelling form of communication from God, doesn't change things even slightly. The fact is, He has revealed Himself in the best possible ways to get through and tell us what we need to know. As we've noted many times, and as His own Word attests, the universe we live in is a form of His communication to human beings that never stops (Romans 1:20). But the primary way He has communicated of course, as the opening words of the book of Hebrews say, is through the prophets: through His thoughts that have been expressed in human sounds, words, sentences and paragraphs and written down by His specially gifted servants. But now, in this final stage of His great Narrative, "He has spoken to us through His Son" (Hebrews 1:2).

An astounding thing to note is that God's communication is always representative of His grace. No one, individually or collectively, deserves to have God speak to them. Communication, language, speech, discourse; these are all a gift from God to us as His image-bearing race. This connection between communication and grace as essential qualities of His being are highlighted against the backdrop of human sin and corruption. This was the case down through Old Testament history, as it is today. And just like everything else about God, where this is revealed to us most clearly and understandably is in the Incarnation, in Jesus Christ. He, the living expression of God, came to the world, lived in a human form that didn't set him apart in any way, lived within a particular cultural setting, spoke a language with human vocal chords. Why? Because God takes it on Himself to give us *access* to truth, to His revelation. He takes on Himself the burden of communication.

## More than just available

So our question about whether someone has *access* to God's Communication stems from this source. We see overwhelming evidence all the way through God's Narrative that He desires people to have full access to His Word, and that because of His grace He takes it on Himself to provide a way for them to have that access. His commitments go far beyond simply making information *available* so that someone somewhere might find out about Him if they try

hard enough, or happen to belong to some privileged group. But this also intersects with another essential part of God's character: He draws human beings into real partnerships with Himself in His purposes. As well as being the God who communicates and a God of grace, He is also the God who *equips* and *sends*. In our present time of history defined by the New Covenant, He has chosen His Body, His Church and its members - us - as the means by which His Communication is to be made accessible.

So when we are involved in giving a friend, a group of people, a community, or a whole people group real access to God's revelation, we are participating in something that flows directly from the being of God Himself. As His chosen hands, feet, mouths, minds and hearts on earth, He wants us to be committed to providing real access to Him and His Truth in the way Jesus was when He gladly gave up His divine rights to become a human being, to serve and to die for that purpose. Providing people with access always involves a cost for those who provide it. That's why it's linked directly to God's grace. The further we're willing to go in this, the more the cost. Down through history servants of God and His Church have paid the price by giving up their careers, their ambitions and even their lives. Others have been willing to give their finances to support the efforts of others. But often the cost is in less dramatic or obvious ways, and there are a million reasons to stop at different points along the way...perfectly good, sensible, rational reasons.

Our first W.I.L.D. question links *access* to the issue of an individual or group being able to engage with the Bible "in a form that clearly and faithfully communicates" to them. This obviously leads us to talk about language. Even if I know the book in my hotel room is a Bible, it's hardly available, much less accessible, to me if it's in a language I don't speak at all. So the question would be relatively simple to answer if it was just a matter of determining which languages someone speaks, or if there's a Bible translation in a given language.

Hopefully we agree that God's commitment to providing access to His revelation means that individuals, communities and churches should be able to read the Bible in a language they are familiar with. We can even go further than this and talk about optimum access through "heart" language, the language of the home, the language in which people conceptualise their worldview, the language in which they pass on their beliefs from one generation to another. But to really do justice to this subject we'd have to consider a whole web of related issues such as the role of language domains, bilingualism, and links between culture and language, just to name a few. These topics are investigated in more depth elsewhere in the *AccessTruth* material (Communication Foundations) and so we won't dig into them here.

Of course this first question should be fairly easy to answer if we're talking about any of the estimated 209 million people from the 2000 languages

without a Bible translation in the world. But how does our initial W.I.L.D. question relate to a context such as the UK, USA or Australia where translations have been available in the dominant language, English, for many generations? Well for one thing, it is more than obvious that English is not the first language for many of the people we meet at work, at school, selling us fuel at the service station or coming into our churches. As an example, in Australia over a quarter of residents were born overseas; 20% of the population prefer to speak a language other than English at home; nearly half a million people don't speak English.

So whether it's someone we've been building a friendship with at work, a new couple who've been attending a Bible study...if we're evaluating the outreach ministries of our church, or thinking about an appropriate witness to migrant workers in an Asian city, the dynamics are obviously different but the basic questions about access to God's revelation are very similar. We are not trying to draw hard and fast conclusions or make a list of rules. What we are considering together is categories and principles that tie into God's character and flow through His Narrative to evaluate our involvement (current or future) in building His Temple, nourishing His Body and equipping His Bride.

## Providing real access

You'll notice that the question we initially asked refers to "a form that clearly and faithfully communicates..." Here there's an obvious application to new Bible translation projects. In Module 8 of the *AccessTruth* material, we present an introduction to the translators' challenge of clearly and faithfully transferring meaning from one language to another. In other words, from the original Hebrew and Greek texts in which the prophets and apostles wrote God's Word to a "receptor" or "target" language. But these principles are also relevant to the issue of English versions and very pertinent as we consider real access in any situation. It's not only transfer of meaning from one recognised language to another we have to consider when we're thinking about sharing God's Word with someone, but also their culture, generation, social status, education, etc. All of these things relate to our commitment to share His Communication clearly with them. We'll discuss this more extensively when we tackle the next W.I.L.D. question that goes beyond the *form* of an accessible Bible into the effective presentation of Truth at a worldview level.

Finally, a few more thoughts about the *form* in which people encounter God's Word. We believe that it's significant that God gave us a lasting *written* record of the words, sentences, paragraphs, books and letters that He has preserved as the canon of Scripture. In Module 8 we'll present a much more in-depth argument for the enormous benefits of literacy, for individuals and for churches. Unfortunately, some recent missiological models have tended to characterise a value for the written word and the reading and writing skills of literacy as somehow paternalistic and tied to a western logic system. These

“oral communication” theories have tended to pit traditional ideas of the written Bible against “Bible Storying” which is expressed through Narrative and other indigenous forms of communication such as chanting and dance. We believe that this labeling and dichotomising is unhelpful. It is not an either or choice. Anyone sharing God’s Word should be seeking to hone their skills as a story-teller. God, after all, as we’ve said many times, is the Divine Story-teller, the Author of the great Narrative of Creation and reality.

Our commitment to providing *access* should lead us to utilise every appropriate communication means available that does not distort the Message. In many contexts now that means using technology - smartphones, the internet, social media - just as in other contexts it means learning to tell God’s Story in compelling natural ways or working many long hours at a computer to produce a clear and faithful translation. This was the commitment Paul was describing to his friends in Corinth when he said, “...I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings” (1 Corinthians 9:22–23).

## Some extra questions

To go along with the first question under *Word* - ‘Are they able to access the Bible in a form that clearly and faithfully communicates God’s revelation to them?’ We can now add some extra questions:

- *Does it feel as though it’s God Himself speaking to them through the Bible when they hear or read it, OR does the language tend to create barriers and give the idea that it is for someone else?*
- *Does the language they are hearing the Truth in give them the ability to talk about it in their homes, with their friends, and in the community?*
- *Are they able to access God’s Word in the available media and technologies that the wider society is using?*



## DISCUSSION POINTS

### *Access to the Bible*

1. Reflect on the idea that access to Truth always costs those who provide it. Can you put into words your own personal current level of commitment to providing others access to God’s Word? Are there any fears or reservations related to this?

2. What are the top 5 reasons in your view for the huge number of languages in which there is not yet a translation of God's Word?
3. Have you ever tried personally to share God's Word with someone for whom English is their second language or observed someone in that situation who attended your church or somewhere similar? Describe their level of access. (Reference the extra questions in the paragraph above to describe it if possible.)