



4. Brains

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe God gave us brains and expects us to use them.

This session will enable participants to consider the Presbyterian emphasis on education through discussion of

- James 5:13–20
- Genesis 1:6–31
- Genesis 2:18–19
- Psalm 19

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
We give you thanks that you have given us the gift of intellect;
that you have created us in your image
and endowed us with the ability to think and to question,
to study and to learn,
to describe and to decide.
We commit ourselves to use the brains you gave us with confidence,
courage, commitment, and compassion.
Amen.*

The Presbyterian Church traces its origins to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The events, theological discussions, and disputes of the Reformation led Presbyterians and other Protestants to affirm the Bible as the highest authority for

From *Why Presbyterians Are Like That*, written by Rev. John Williams, Ph.D. Chaplain and Director of Church Relations Austin College, Sherman, Texas. Copyright © 2022 by the Office of Christian Formation in the Presbyterian Mission Agency of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and UKirk Collegiate Ministries.

all Christians (as opposed to pronouncements and judgments of church councils or individual leaders like the pope). That emphasis means that all Christians (not just clergy) have the duty, right, and ability to read and study the Bible.

In turn, those concerns have led Presbyterians to value and promote literacy and eventually to support education in general. Presbyterians believe there's nothing we shouldn't ask about, learn about, and or think about.

Presbyterians believe God created, loves, and sustains all things. So we believe there is nothing in our lives or in our world that is beyond the business of individual Christians or the church in general.

Close consideration of three distinct biblical passages will help us understand the significance of the Presbyterian emphasis on using the brains God has given us.

There are several passages in the Bible where the historical distance between the time of their writing and the context in which contemporary Christians read and study them presents some difficulties for understanding and interpretation.

ENGAGING THE BIBLE

1

One, for example, is **James 5:13–20**.

JAMES 5:13–16

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

Presbyterians believe that.

We pray regularly for ourselves, each other, and the whole world. Many of us have had the experience of being lifted up in prayer by faithful and dedicated fellow Presbyterians and others. As a body, we have no doubts about the value of prayer for those who suffer or face difficulties.

But Presbyterians don't just pray.

We also go to the doctor.

As nice as it sounds to proclaim with James that “the prayer of faith will save the sick,” and “the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective,” Presbyterians think we should probably do more than just pray.

JAMES 5:17–18

Elijah was a human like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth yielded its harvest.

James is referring here to a story from **1 Kings 17–18** where Elijah “prays fervently” and convinces God to make the rain cease for 3½ years!

JAMES 5:19–20

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Both of those statements in this James passage—about prayer healing the sick and God making rain cease for over three years—are troublesome.

They're difficult because we pretty much know why people get sick and why they get well. It's all a function of germs, bacteria, viruses, or genetics.

And we pretty much know why it rains. Rain (and all weather) can be explained by the properties of water, the orbit and rotation of the earth, and occasionally by unique geological factors.

So this passage where James talks about the prayer of faith saving the sick and Elijah praying so well that God makes rain cease for over three years raises some uncomfortable but unavoidable questions:

Does the fact that it rains more in some places than others mean that God likes the people who live in those places more?

If the book of James is the Word of God, does that mean we're supposed to believe that God heals sick people—but only the ones whose friends say good enough prayers?

Those are silly, exaggerated ways to talk about James' words, but this passage really does invite all of us to address a serious question:

Does our faith require that we pretend we don't know what we do know?

We should probably get a running start before tackling that question.

2

Consider **Genesis 1:26–31** and **2:18–19**.

GENESIS 1:26

Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

Note that, in this creation story, God does not create the first human until verse 26.

In the previous 25 verses of Genesis 1, God has been busy creating the environment in which the human could prosper.

The creation of the first human was intentional and involved careful and detailed planning and preparation.

GENESIS 1:27

So God created humans in [God's] image, in the image of God, [God] created them; male and female [God] created them.

This whole “image of God” thing is obviously a big deal. Theologians and preachers have spent entire careers thinking and writing and talking about what it means for us—each of us and all of us—to be created in the image of God. It's a fascinating theological subject.

More about that later.

GENESIS 1:28

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

It is absolutely appropriate, and probably essential, for contemporary Presbyterians and other people of faith to talk and think together about how we can make sense of this call to “be fruitful and multiply” in a world of scarce resources and widespread poverty.

We need to think about what this might mean in a world where the words “you’re pregnant” are not always received as joyful news.

Similarly, it’s very important for us to think critically about how misplaced efforts to “subdue” and “exercise dominion over” the earth have contributed to climate change and created widespread and ongoing environmental disasters.

GENESIS 1:29–30

God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.

There doesn’t seem to be much room for carnivores here in verses 29 and 30.

Just sayin’.

GENESIS 1:31

God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Verses 26 and 27 of Genesis 1 talk about human beings, male *and* female, being created in the image of God. Genesis 1 presumes a gender binary, but other places in Scripture (especially those that mention “eunuchs”) recognize additional ways individuals understood themselves beyond the male/female distinction.

The clear lesson of Genesis 1:26–27 is that *all* human beings are created in the image of God.

And the first biblical suggestion of what that might mean comes just a few verses later.

GENESIS 2:18

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the human should be alone; I will make . . . a helper as [the human’s] partner.”

Most of us know that, after that, God creates Eve. But that happens in Genesis 2:20.

The verse in between—**Genesis 2:19**—is often overlooked and not read as closely, but it’s a hugely significant verse for us as we think about what it means for us to be created in the image of God.

This verse helps us address the question of whether our faith requires us to pretend that we *don’t* know what we *do* know.

GENESIS 2:19

So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the [human] to see what [the human] would call them, and whatever [the human] called every living creature, that was its name.

There’s a lot going on in this verse.

God talked in verse 18 about how it’s not good for the human to be alone.

Here in verse 19, God makes birds and land animals.

But God has already created all sorts of living creatures in Genesis 1—including land animals and birds.

What’s new here is that, after creating these creatures God “brings them to the [human], to see what the [human] will call them.”

And then Adam gets to name the animals.

The verse goes on to say that “whatever [the human] called every living creature, *that was its name.*”

This notion that Adam—not God—names the animals is fascinating.

God could’ve done it. Genesis 2:19 is the fiftieth verse of the Bible. And the first 49 verses make it clear that God is entirely capable of doing whatever needs to be done.

But God lets Adam name the animals. That’s a hugely important feature of the relationship between God and humans that is depicted in these first chapters of Genesis.

This is not some hyper-functioning, super-Calvinist, obsessive God who can't let anything happen without completely knowing how everything will turn out before it even starts.

This is a God who created a human who has real ability to think about things and affect things and determine how things are. In this story, God chooses to step back and let Adam name the animals. God makes room for the human to make decisions that affect even God.

The image of God is evident in Adam's ability to observe and study and think about and name the things that God has put into the world.

The image of God is evident in the human's ability to be God's partner in the ongoing process of creation.

The image of God is evident in the human's ability to make choices.

Here in Genesis 2:19, God is inviting Adam to use that God-given brain.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What are the implications of this idea that God allows Adam and all humans to make real choices that have real consequences—even for God?*
- *Is that idea comforting or intimidating for you? Why?*

3

Now consider **Psalm 19**.

PSALM 19:1-6

**The heavens are telling the glory of God,
and the firmament proclaims [God's] handiwork.**

**Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.**

**There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;**

**yet their voice goes out through all the earth
and their words to the end of the world.**

**In the heavens [God] has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.**

**Its rising is from the end of the heavens
and its circuit to the end of them,
and nothing is hid from its heat.**

The author of Psalm 19 was clearly excited by their—and our—ability to learn about this God-created world in which we find ourselves.

The Psalmist sees God's glory everywhere: in the panorama of the sky (verses 1–2); the vastness of the earth (verses 3–4); the steadiness of the rising and setting sun (verses 5–6).

For the Psalmist, all of these things are evidence of God's glory and majesty.

In the first six verses of Psalm 19, we're all called to look around with reverence and wonder and learn everything we can learn from the order and beauty and consistency of the whole physical world. It's a pretty amazing place to wake up every morning.

The first six verses of this Psalm are a call to learn from the world.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *How can Psalm 19:1–6 be taken as a biblical warrant for all who dedicate themselves to STEM studies and careers (Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics)?*
-

Now watch what comes next:

PSALM 19:7–14

**The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.**

**More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.**

**Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.**

**But who can detect one's own errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.**

**Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.**

**Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.**

**Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.**

After pointing out all the evidence of God's glory in creation in verses 1–6, the Psalmist goes on to talk about the importance and value of the Law and decrees of the Lord (7); the precepts and enlightening commandment of the Lord (8); and the fear and ordinances of the Lord (9).

Psalm 19 calls us to go outside and look up and look around and learn all that there is to be learned from the world. But we're also called in this Psalm to learn what we can about God and the world through our life together in the community of faith. That's where we encounter the Law and decrees and precepts and commandment and ordinances of the Lord.

We're called in this Psalm to learn and study and watch and think—both out in the world and in our life together in the community of faith.

CONCLUSION

That finally gets us back to what James is up to in the verses from chapter 5 that we read earlier.

The author of James knew less than we do about why people get sick, why they get well, and why it rains. It's just a fact.

We know more about that than he did.

But what James knew—the point he’s making in chapter 5 and the point that’s absolutely relevant for us today as we seek the Word of God in his words—is that everything that happens to us happens in the context of our relationship with a good, loving, and faithful God.

For James, it’s all about community.

With all his examples of suffering and prayer and all his urgings to his readers to take themselves and each other seriously as God’s people, James is reminding us that our best times, our worst times, our accomplishments, our learning, our whole lives should always be understood in the context of our life together with God.

Put more simply, James’ message is that, whatever happens, God is always good and always calling us together to take care of each other.

And the relevance of that message does not depend at all on our pretending that we don’t know what James didn’t know.

We know more than James knew about health and about meteorology.

But what he knew—and what we need to learn from him—is that our whole lives are best understood in the context of our life together with God.

We need to remember that and remind each other of that truth whenever we’re suffering, whenever we’re rejoicing, whenever we’re sick, whenever anyone among us is having a hard time. We need to take each other seriously as God’s people. And prayer—for ourselves, for each other, for the world—is an important way for us all to live intentionally in that relationship.

Presbyterians don’t pray to get God’s attention. We don’t pray to tell God how to be God or to make God do things that God wouldn’t otherwise have done.

We pray to open ourselves to the care and guidance of God.

That’s a message that’s absolutely consistent with the theme of the book of James.

His concern was to encourage his readers to do more than just think about what they believed. He wanted them to act.

In James 5:19–20 we are called to pay attention to each other, to take each other seriously as God’s people.

And that clearly includes learning whatever we can learn and doing whatever we can do “for one another” (to use language from **1 Peter 4:10**).

Presbyterians believe God never calls us to pretend that we don’t know what we do know--about health, or rain, or anything else. Studying the Bible faithfully never requires checking our brains at the door of the church.

We believe God calls us to keep learning and always to use what we learn “for one another.”

That’s absolutely the *most faithful* thing we could do.

Presbyterians believe “God gave us brains and expects us to use them.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *How is the Presbyterian focus on literacy and education evident in your particular congregation?*
- *In the weekly life of your church?*
- *In the ways you interact with the larger community?*
- *What do you think are advantages of the Presbyterian concern to “use the brains God gave us”?*
- *What might be dangers or downsides of that intellectual emphasis?*
- *What do we learn in these passages (James 5:13-20; Genesis 1:26-31; Genesis 2:18-19; and Psalm 19) about God?*
- *Ourselves?*
- *Each other?*

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from the Presbyterian emphasis on literacy and education?*
-