



*"Wiragéphugi" by Bizzy Feekes*

# AN INDIGENOUS APPROACH TO THE BIBLE

A First Nations Bible Study

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# Introduction

My name is Bizzy Feekes, and I am Indigenous. My family comes from the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska and the Ho-Chunk people—People of the Big Voice.

I designed this study of New Testament Scripture with the sole intention of it being used by Indigenous people. I did not grow up with a Bible study specifically designed with Indigenous culture and practices in mind, so I decided to create one myself. I believe that through our traditions, ceremonies, cultures, experiences, and more, Creator makes himself known to us.

I recognize that Indigenous people are unique and each community has its own beautiful differences.

The practices and traditions mentioned in this study are ones that are common practice across many tribes and nations but not all. If you have different ceremonies and traditions, I encourage you to replace the ones mentioned in this study to best fit your own spiritual and traditional practices.

People who are not Indigenous are also welcome to read and use this study as a way to learn and grow in biblical and cultural perspective and understanding.

# The Five Ways of Being

This Bible study was written to be used in both group settings and individual devotions. If you are using this in a group setting, consider using the following “Five Ways of Being” as ground rules for your time together. It may be helpful to review them every time you meet.

## Five Ways of Being:

1. Be present (in mind, body, and spirit) to God, to each other, and to self
2. Avoid interrupting
3. Maintain confidentiality
4. Use “I” statements (rather than “you” statements); claim your statements instead of making universal claims
5. Keep the focus on the person who is speaking and sharing

## Structure

Each section in this Bible study has the following elements:

### Introduction

Each lesson begins with an introduction that combines the traditional teachings of Indigenous people and the teachings of Christian traditions. There is no distinct line drawn between these two teachings because they are not mutually exclusive; both are vitally important in the lives of Indigenous Christians.

### Scripture

This study uses the First Nations Version (FNV) of the Bible. The FNV is a translation of the New Testament that uses cultural and linguistic patterns following the tradition of Native oral storytelling. It uses words and concepts that are familiar to many Native Americans. This Indigenous translation uses names for God common in many Native cultures, including “Great Spirit” or “Creator.” Jesus is referred to as “Creator Sets Free.” Names of biblical figures echo their original meanings in Greek and Hebrew.

The lead translator of the FNV, Terry Wildman (Ojibwe and Yaqui), explained, “We believe it’s very important that the Gospel be kind of decolonized and told in a Native way, but being accurate to the meaning of the original language and understanding that it’s a different culture.”

You can learn more about this translation at [firstnationsversion.com](http://firstnationsversion.com).

### Reflection questions

If you’re using this Bible study as personal devotions, spend time reflecting on the questions in each section. If you’re in a group setting, you may use these as discussion questions.

### Spiritual Practice

Each lesson includes a practice that combines the teachings of the lesson with a related practice. Some of the practices are traditional Indigenous practices, while others are practices that are common in the Christian tradition.

### Prayer

Each lesson concludes with a prayer. These prayers can be adjusted to meet the needs of each individual or group using the Bible study.

# Part one: Identity

Identity is complex. According to one dictionary, identity is “who you are, the way you think about yourself, the way you are viewed by the world, and the characteristics that define you” (YourDictionary.com). Part of your identity includes your name, the place you’re from, the school you attend, your set of beliefs or religion, your racial/ethnic identity, and more. As human beings, we are multifaceted individuals with depth to our character. Think about the different parts of your identity.

Sometimes, different parts of our identity may seem in conflict with each other. For me, my bi-racial identity of being equal parts white and Indigenous has always felt like a point of tension. My identity as a Christian and my identity as a Native American has also felt like a point of tension when I consider history and traditions. Spend some time reflecting upon your own identity, and name some of the tensions you hold.

In Indigenous culture, identity is important. How we see ourselves and how others see us directly affects how we carry ourselves. Identity in Indigenous culture often leads us to a sense of belonging where we can see our place in a bigger unit. We are more than just individuals; we are part of a community, a clan, a tribe, or a nation. When we identify within our Indigenous spaces, we find ourselves beside our relatives and within the teachings and traditions of our ancestors.

As Christians, we find a sense of belonging in the bigger community of the family of God. As we find our identity in Christ, we join a long tradition of believers who hold to the truth that Creator God is the God of all, that his son Jesus Christ came into the world and saved us from our sins, and that we are empowered to continue sharing the Good News by the work of the Holy Spirit. Christians who believe in God and walk in his will are God’s chosen people.

## **Ephesians 1:3-8**

Chosen For Great Kindness

**“All blessings belong to the Great Spirit, who is the Father of Creator Sets Free (Jesus). From the spirit-world above he has gifted us with all spiritual blessings found in The Chosen One.**

**In the same way, before he made all things and because of his great love, the maker of life chose to make us pure and holy in his eyes. He also decided ahead of time, through Creator Sets Free (Jesus), to take us into his family, fulfilling his purpose and making his heart glad.**

**This great kindness he has shown us brings honor to him and gives us a highly honored place, together with his much loved son.”**

## Reflection questions

- What is one thing that stood out to you from this passage?
- What does it mean to you to be “chosen”?
- What questions do you still have about your identity?
- What is one way that how you think about yourself is different from how others might describe you?
- What does it mean for you to find your identity in God?
- Thinking about some of the tensions you noted relating to your identity. What are some of your feelings related to holding these tensions? How do these feelings impact your everyday life?

## Practice: Affirmation

Imagine being asked the question, “Who are you? Can you tell me about yourself?” Take some time to think about what your response is, and then write it down. Include all of the things that you feel are most important to you.

### Here is an example:

“My name is Bizzy Feekes, and I am multiracial and multifaceted. I am Indigenous from the Winnebago tribe and the Ho-Chunk people—People of the Big Voice. I am a follower of Christ, chosen by God, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. I am an artist, a writer, a first-generation college graduate, a seminary student, an educator, a wife, and a social justice advocate. I am strong, resilient, intelligent, caring, and passionate.”

After writing your own identity statement, read through it multiple times and then say it out loud. As you speak these words, notice the feelings you are experiencing. Be mindful of the ways that the words come out of your mouth and how you hear them with your ears. When you speak this aloud, you are affirming your identity as a Christian—and as a person made in the image of God—as well as affirming the other parts of your identity that you consider important. Consider making this a regular practice in your daily routine.

## Prayer

Creator, we come to you today with humble hearts and grateful minds. We praise you for your goodness, love, and mercy. Thank you for choosing us and calling us yours. May we continue to be empowered through the Holy Spirit to do the work that Christ has set out for us. Continue to speak life into our identities so that we can begin to see ourselves as dearly loved, valuable, and integral parts of our communities and the family of God.

Allow us to live in the tensions we feel and find comfort knowing that you love us. Be with us today and every day, and continue to guide us so that we may carry ourselves in a way that is honorable to you. Amen.

# Part two: Listening

Listening and observing are taught to Indigenous people starting at a young age. We value these actions for many reasons, and one of them is that it leads to learning and empathy. Many Indigenous people have had the opportunity to listen to elders, to their grandparents, to the matriarchs of their families, to the paternal figures in their life, and to valued community leaders. Listening is not simply letting words and noises hit your ears, but also letting them shape you, change you, and affect you. Being slow to speak, taking time to think deeply, and being attentive to the needs of others are all teachings that are passed down from generation to generation.

As you think about listening, think of times when you have listened to your elders, your relatives, and your community. What are some things that have changed you, shaped you, or affected you? What are some times that you felt like others listened to you? How did it make you feel?

## **James 1:19-21:**

**“Knowing this, my much-loved family members, we must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. For human anger will not take us down the path of Creator’s right ways. So scrape off all the mud of your evil ways and humbly receive what the Great Spirit has planted in you. This will set your heart free and make your mind whole.”**

## **Matthew 7:24:**

**“The ones who listen to me and walk in my ways are like a wise man who built a grand lodge on solid ground.”**

## **John 10:27:**

**“I know who my sheep are, for they know my voice and go where I lead them.”**

## **Luke 10:38-41:**

**“As they journeyed on, they went to a village where a woman named Head Woman (Martha) gave them lodging at their house. Her sister Healing Tears (Mary), who lived with her, sat next to Creator Sets Free (Jesus) on the floor, listening to his teaching.**

**Head Woman (Martha) was distracted trying to get the meal ready for the honored guests. When she saw Healing Tears (Mary) sitting down, she walked up to Creator Sets Free (Jesus) and said, ‘Wisdom-keeper, do you not care that my sister has left me to work alone? Tell her to help me.’**

**‘Head Woman (Martha), O Head Woman (Martha),’ he said, ‘I know many things worry and trouble you. But you must set your heart on the one thing that matters. That is what Healing Tears (Mary) has done, and I will not take it from her.’”**

## Reflection questions

- What are some things that stood out to you about these verses?
- What are some of the feelings you are experiencing after reading this?
- What do these verses say about the value of listening?
- How do these teachings compare to what you have been taught from your elders, relatives, and community leaders?
- How would you define listening?
- How are you practicing listening now? In what ways can you improve your listening skills?

## Practice: Smudging

Listening begins with mindfulness. Some of the ways that Indigenous people are taught to be mindful are through traditions and ceremonies. We are taught that when we braid hair, bead, hunt, prepare hides, sew, and more, our thoughts matter; we must be mindful of what we are thinking as we act. Another traditional practice that incorporates mindfulness is smudging. Through smudging, we can invite the Holy Spirit to cleanse us, speak to us, and work in us. We can use smudging to prepare our hearts to listen to the Holy Spirit and others.

If possible, burn some sage, sweet grass, cedar, or tobacco as you smudge. Some tribes and nations practice smudging differently; I encourage you to smudge in the ways that your tribe and elders instruct. If you don't have the sacred plants or the knowledge of smudging, consider doing some breathing exercises. As you smudge or do your breathing exercises, say these words aloud or silently:

“Holy Spirit, cleanse me and create in me a clean heart. Lead me in ways that honor Creator, honor my relatives, and honor the earth. Help me to be mindful of the ways you are speaking to me. Let me be quick to listen to those around me and be attentive to your presence.”

After doing this, sit in silence and observe what you are feeling. Think about what the Spirit has brought to the forefront of your mind. Take this time to rest in the presence of God.

## Prayer

Dear Creator, we praise you for the ways you are changing us and shaping us. Thank you for sending us elders and relatives to teach us your ways and honor you. We praise you for all of the opportunities that we have been given to listen, and we invite more of these experiences into our lives. Give us ears to hear, Creator, so that we may learn, grow in compassion, and change. Give us postures of listening and mindfulness so that we may be attentive to your will and your teachings. Amen.

# Part three: Honoring Creation

One common Indigenous teaching is love for and care of the earth. As Indigenous people, we believe that we were created to live in harmony with land, water, animals, and all of creation. We consider ourselves as part of the land itself because we were created with it. We believe that the land provides us with what we need. In return, we protect it and care for it.

Through colonization, the land that our ancestors protected and lived in community with was stolen, misused, and destroyed. Today, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are witnessing the ongoing harm that came as a result of this, including significant harm to our planet and its resources.

Indigenous people across the world are at the forefront of initiatives that advocate for and defend land, water, air, and animals. We do this not out of selfish ambition, but because we know that Creator has commanded us to do so. We continue the practices of our ancestors, which teach us to be stewards of the land.

## **Romans 8:19-25**

**“The creation all around us is waiting on tiptoe for Creator’s sons and daughters to be revealed in full beauty of who he has created them to be.**

**Creation itself became weak and powerless, unable to fulfill its destiny, not by its own choice but because of the one who had the power over it. But there is hope, for Creator has a plan to restore human beings. Then all of creation will share in the freedom of the life of beauty and harmony given to all of Creator’s children.**

**It is plain to see that all creation is groaning in pain like a mother giving birth. And even we who have first tasted of his Spirit are groaning on the inside. As we wait for Creator to finish the purpose for which he took us into his family, by giving us our new bodies that will never die. This is what Creator was planning when he set us free by his Spirit. It is the hope of all creation. We cannot fully see this hope yet, for who hopes for what has already happened? So we must be patient and wait for Creator to bring everything to completion.”**



## Reflection questions

- What are some things that stood out to you about this passage?
- What feelings are you experiencing after reading this?
- What does this passage say about creation?
- What are some of the teachings you've received about land and creation?
- In what ways does this passage resonate with your beliefs about creation?
- If you are not on the traditional lands of your tribe or nation, who were the original stewards of the land you are on? How are you supporting their efforts of care for creation?

## Practice: Offering Tobacco

One shared practice across many Indigenous cultures is the offering of tobacco. Traditionally, tobacco is offered as a way of asking for assistance. We offer tobacco to elders and leaders, and when they accept it, they are agreeing to help us. Indigenous people also offer tobacco to Mother Earth. Sacred tobacco is used for prayers of gratitude to thank the Creator for our many blessings, such as good health, great fishing, and good crops. Before we take anything or begin any activity, we offer tobacco. This traditional practice reminds us that we have a responsibility to the earth and that we are living with the land. Offering tobacco is also accompanied by prayer in which the person usually acknowledges the Creator, shares the ways they feel connected to the earth, and shows gratitude for creation.

Take some time to write out a prayer.

How are you in relationship with the land you reside on? In what ways do you feel most connected to the earth? In what ways do you benefit from what the world offers?

After you write your prayer, if possible, prepare a tobacco offering. Begin by finding a place where you feel connected to creation. Take a pinch of tobacco leaf or a bundle of tobacco in your hand and then take a moment to offer your prayer.

If you do not have tobacco to offer, offer your prayer at the place where you feel connected to creation. As you do this, be mindful of the feelings you are experiencing and the ways you feel Creator speaking to you through creation.

## Prayer

Creator, we come to you with hearts of gratitude as we reflect upon the beautiful creation you have made. Through your creation, you have shown us love and goodness. We praise you for the land, the water, the air, and the animals. Continue to teach us how to walk in a good way, honoring your creation and living in community with it.

May we continue to abide in your will and care for all of creation the way you have instructed us to. Amen.

# Part four: Community

One value among Indigenous people is community. Although Indigenous communities are diverse and distinct, there is a shared sense of belonging among Indigenous people across Turtle Island (North America). We have shared experiences, both positive and negative, that connect us. We have shared teachings, traditions, and practices. Unfortunately, we also share in the ongoing erasure and misrepresentation of our people groups in many areas of our lives, including in school, at work, in our worship communities, and more.

Frequently, we are reduced to stereotypes through mascots, costumes, logos, vehicle names, characters in media, and more. The treatment that many Indigenous people are subjected to in their everyday lives can be degrading and demoralizing. Yet our resilient existence stands as an act of resistance to colonialism, attempted erasure, and systems that do not stand to benefit us. In spite of all of the ways we have been mistreated, we still carry on the traditions, teachings, and love of our ancestors in hope of a better future. Through Scripture, we learn more about what Creator intends for his chosen people and the way we are meant to be in community with each other.

## **Acts 2:42-47**

**“This newly formed family continued daily to learn from the twelve message bearers. They lived together in harmony, ate ceremonial meals, and prayed with one another. Great respect and awe came down upon all, and the message bearers performed many powerful signs. As these new followers lived together in peace, their harmony grew stronger, and they shared all things. Many of them had a give-away to provide for all who were in need.**

**Each day they gathered at the sacred lodge. With good and pure hearts they feasted together in their homes and shared the ceremonial meal of frybread and wine given to them by Creator Sets Free (Jesus). They gave honor and thanks to the Great Spirit and were respected by the people.**

**Each day Creator sent more people who were being set free to join with them.”**

## Reflection questions

- What are some things that stand out to you about this passage?
- In what areas of your life do you feel a sense of community? Where do you feel a lack of community?
- How do the teachings of this passage compare to your experiences of community? How do they differ?
- Do you feel a sense of community with Indigenous people? Why or why not?
- What hopes do you have for your community?

## Practice: Hospitality

One way to foster and strengthen community is through acts of hospitality. Hospitality can look different depending on the setting, community, cultural practices, and more. Generally, acts of hospitality involve hosting others and providing them with a space where they feel appreciated, accepted, and loved. This might involve sharing a meal with others or inviting visitors to stay in your home.

What are some ways that others have been hospitable to you? What does your culture teach you about hospitality? As you reflect on these things, think about those in your community whom you could reach out to and extend hospitality. Maybe you reach out to a friend you haven't spoken to in a while and invite them to get coffee with you. Maybe you invite a family from your worship community to your home for a shared meal. Maybe you reach out to a co-worker or classmate and invite them to watch a movie or TV show with you. Maybe you invite your relatives over and prepare a traditional meal with them and share stories.

Write down realistic and reasonable ways you can practice hospitality in the next week, month, and year.

## Prayer

Creator, thank you for the ways you have provided us with community. Through living in community, we grow and learn more about you. Through community, we are also learning more about ways to honor you, your son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. We praise you for the communities we are part of, and we ask that you make your presence known in them. May we follow the examples you have set forth for us and be hospitable in ways that exemplify your love, grace, and compassion. Amen.



*"Hapok" by Bizzy Feekes*

## Land Acknowledgement

I currently reside, work, and worship on the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary lands of the Ihanktonwan Nation, also known as the Yankton Sioux Tribe. I recognize, support, and advocate for Indigenous sovereignty, for Indigenous individuals and communities who live here now, and for those who were forcibly removed from their homelands. By offering this land acknowledgement, I affirm Indigenous sovereignty and will work to hold myself and others more accountable to the needs of Indigenous peoples.