FAITH AND ONE SENSES

FOUR BIBLE STUDIES
FOR SMALL GROUPS

Faith and Our Senses

Four Bible Studies For Small Groups

Experiencing the "sensescape" of the Bible

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Introduction

This study series will introduce you to a word that you may not have heard before: **sensescape.**

It is common to describe everything that we can see at a given moment as a landscape, and everything that we can hear as a soundscape, but the word sensescape brings together both of these things, and much more besides.

The word sensescape is an invitation to consider how we encounter the world using our whole bodies.

Just as you can think of a landscape or a soundscape, the word 'sensescape' includes everything that we perceive with our senses in the environment that we find ourselves in. The way we interpret what we see, hear, smell, etc. is influenced by our culture and history.

Thousands of years ago, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle proposed that humans have five senses: hearing, vision, smell, touch and taste. Often, people still refer to this five-fold model of the senses today. But scientifically we now know that there are many other senses, including things like proprioception (a sense of where one's body is in space) and balance. Scientists recognise that people learn about the world through their bodies in a variety of interconnected sensory ways. As theologians, we think that people learn about God in these ways too. In this series of studies, you will be invited to learn more about why God created the senses, and the role that they play in worshipping and learning about God.

Sensing is part of every person's lived experience, but not everyone experiences sensory input in the same way. In particular, being autistic can mean that a person experiences the world differently compared to non-autistic people, and compared to other autistic people. To some extent, whether we are autistic or not, we all experience the world slightly differently. In research, we describe this as each person having a unique 'sensory profile'. But for autistic people these sensory differences can be very significant, and can impact day-to-day life both positively and negatively.

We recently carried out a research project where we wanted to find out about autistic people's sensory experience of church, and the impact that this can have upon their Christian life and worship.

The project involved multiple churches from around the world, and a range of denominations, including Anglican, Greek Orthodox and Evangelical congregations. This research opened up a wider question about how the sensory environment of church impacts all worshippers, autistic or non-autistic – all those who are seeking to encounter and learn about God as they gather.

Throughout this series of Bible studies, we will share some of the results of our research project and invite you to learn how your own sensory profile might impact your life of worship and prayer. As you get to know your own sensory profile, and that of those who worship alongside you in your church, you may want to consider how the sensory environment of your church can be shaped in response to what you have come to know.

Several of these Bible studies use a technique for reading scripture that is based (to some extent) on the practice of *Lectio Divina*. This involves reading the Bible in a slow and thoughtful way, expecting to personally encounter God as one does so. In traditional *Lectio Divina*, short passages of scripture are read slowly, often repeated several times. This creates space to silence one's racing thoughts and allow the body to respond to the text at the level of feeling and intuition. For Gospel texts, it can often help to imagine oneself present at the scene where Jesus is ministering or teaching – imagining the sensescape that surrounded those first followers of Jesus. This can help to bring new insight into passages of scripture, rendering the familiar unfamiliar, and allowing God to bring forth something new.

Throughout this Bible study series, we hope that you will:

- Encounter God in new ways through your senses;
- Learn what the senses are;
- Learn about the role of the senses in individual prayer and worship, and in prayer and worship with others;
- Learn that God created the senses and "saw that it was good";
- Be attentive to the different ways in which people experience the senses;
- Know better how to make church into a space that values different sensory profiles, especially those whose sensory profiles differ more strongly from typical ones, such as people who are autistic.

How to use this book

These studies are designed to be used by small groups. Each study is designed to take about 1 hour, but you may wish to allow longer, depending on the size of your group and how much each person wants to say in the times of discussion.

Approximate timings for each section are given to help group leaders with planning and facilitating the sessions. In addition, some activities are marked as 'optional' or 'if time allows.'



Opening Prayer - time set aside for the whole group to prepare for Bible study.



Group Exercise - (optional) a practical introduction to the theme, using discussion questions and/or group activity.



Introduction - some information to introduce the theme. Group members may want to read this in advance of the session.



Read the Bible - time to read the Bible together, with suggestions for new and interactive ways to engage with the text.



In Depth Study - questions to guide the group through the text, learning together through discussion and debate.



Concluding Reflections - a brief summary of the learning points from the study, with some concluding questions for reflection based on what you have learned.



For Further Study and Reflection - take-away ideas for what individual members of the group can do to put their learning into action.



Summary - A fuller discussion of the learning points of the study, showing how they link to the research behind sensecaping. Group members may want to take this away to read after the session.

Study 1



God created the senses

In this study you will:

- Think about why God created the senses, and how we use them to learn about the world.
- Learn about the role of the senses in worship.





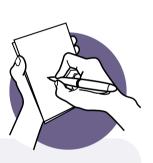
Opening prayer

Observe 3-5 minutes of silence as a group, bringing to God the concerns and cares of the day, and the tasks or the people that are in your thoughts.

If it helps, you may want to write these things down on a piece of paper, folded and kept private.

These things can be safely left with God while your focus becomes participation in this study.

Your group leader will open the session with prayer.



For group leaders...

Use this prayer, or your own:

Heavenly Father, we place this day and all that it holds (has held) for us into your hands, trusting that you receive the cares of our hearts in your mercy and with loving kindness.

We pray for your Holy Spirit to inspire us now, as we take time to read and reflect upon scripture.

In the name of Christ we pray, Amen.

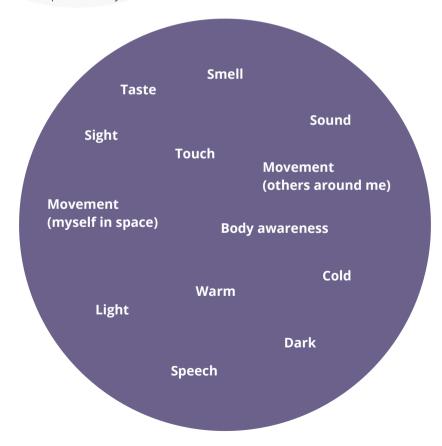
Space for Journalling



Group exercise



- Look through the sensory experiences listed below.
 During the period of silent prayer, were you aware of any of these experiences? For example, did you notice your own body posture, the temperature in the room, or any sounds?
- What role did these experiences play in your prayer? Did you find them a help or a hindrance to prayer?
- Reflecting on the time of prayer that you have just observed as a group, were some of the senses more important to you than others?



Introduction

What do you think makes for a "good" worship service, or a "good" time of prayer? Perhaps you might say it was good because you felt that you had connected with God. But this raises a question: what brings about this sense of connection?

It is easy to assume that connection comes mostly or only from the words that we read, hear, and sing during worship and prayer – words that lead our thoughts to God. However, worship is not all about words – the whole body can be involved, including all of the senses.

In the first Bible study of this series, we will consider why God created the senses, and reflect on the world as a sensory environment. From this beginning point, we can start to see how our sensory experience can be part of connecting with God.

Read the Bible Genesis 1:1-31



- Allow a period of silence for each member of the group to read the passage through silently.
- Or, one group member could read the text out loud for everybody.



Although this might be a very familiar Bible text, there may be aspects of it that particularly strike you this time, or that you had not noticed before. Note those down as you read/listen.



If time allows...

As a group, share the things you have noted down. Has thinking about the senses already affected the way you hear this Bible passage?

In depth study



- Genesis 1:2 says that the world was formless/chaotic or a totally dark void. The word "deep" refers to bottomlessness or endlessness.
 - What would the sensory experience of formlessness or a totally dark void be?
 - What thoughts or feelings come to mind when you reflect on this imagery?
- In the "void" there is nothing to see, touch, smell...nor encounter
 with any other sense. Yet we still find the Spirit of God "brooding"
 or "hovering" this is a word that can also sometimes mean "to
 cherish".
 - What could the writer be trying to say by placing the image of "void" and the image of the Spirit of God "brooding" together.
 - What thoughts or emotions does this stir in you?
- Dividing into pairs, take a short section of text each. If you had been present for the events described in this short section, what might the sensory experience have been like? (Smaller groups can begin at verse 11.)
 - Verses 3-5
 - Verses 6-8
 - Verses 9-10
 - Verses 11-12
 - Verses 14-19
 - Verses 20-23
 - Verses 24-25

Share your thoughts and reflections with the wider group.



Concluding reflections





- Has thinking about the senses changed the way you think about Genesis 1? Discuss this as a group, or take some time to journal privately.
- As a group, observe another 3–5-minute period of prayer. Each person should notice their senses at work during this time, and give thanks for them.

For group leaders: You may wish to move outside for this time of prayer, closer to the natural world. If time and space do not allow for this, you may want to provide some items from the natural world that can be held (e.g. small pebbles or leaves) and/or play natural sounds such as birdsong in the background.

For further study and reflection

To follow on from this study, take time to consider the sensescape of the space(s) that you typically use for personal prayer and worship. Are there things that you like or don't like about it? What sensory features help or hinder you in your worship? If you often pray indoors, separated from the natural world, you may wish to experiment with making changes to your habits and places of prayer, either by going outside or by bringing plants and natural objects into your space. Consider what, if any, difference this makes, and share your thoughts and reflections the next time that your study group meets.

Summary

God created the world to be full of light and dark, sound and movement, things to taste and things to smell. God spoke all of these things into existence and said that they are good. God gave us our senses so that we can perceive them all.

However, often we do not pay much attention to all our senses when we come to worship. For very practical reasons, worship most commonly takes place indoors, away from the natural world, and we tend to focus on the words spoken and sung, not the wider sensory environment.

Everybody's sensory profile is different. What one person finds helpful, another finds distracting. One reason that many of us tend to 'forget' about the sensory environment in worship, is that when it is comfortable we are able to put it out of our minds. But sometimes a change to the sensory environment, or a change in how we perceive it, can bring new things to our attention

The same can happen when we take time to learn about the sensory experiences of other people. As we will explore in the coming studies, these new insights can help us to learn not only about ourselves but also about God, and about God's creation, which is good.

In our research, we have found that the sensory experience of worship is very important to many people – and not just for those who experience sensory differences. (You will learn more about sensory differences in Study 3.)

To give some examples: some people said that the appropriate use of light and darkness in a worship service could create an environment that felt welcoming, calming, peaceful and helpful for worship. Sometimes this included changes to the light level at different points in a service.

For many people, movement was important too – either the movement of their own body in worship, or the movements of others.

As people discussed their experiences of worship, it was clear that the sensory environment within church buildings was significant in terms of people feeling that they could connect with God. Sometimes this was enhanced by visual details such as icons and images, and the use of incense in some churches further engaged both vision and smell.

Study 2



What are the senses and what do they do?

In this study you will:

- Learn about what senses the body has, and how the senses work together.
- Think about how the senses help us to learn about God.





Opening prayer

The group leader could bring a collection of stones, varying in size, texture and appearance, or group members could each be asked to collect a stone to bring to the meeting.

During a few minutes of quiet or silence, each of you should examine one stone closely, using as many of your different senses as possible.

In addition, you can consider what the history of your stone might be.



For group leaders...

Use this prayer, or your own:

Heavenly Father, thank you for our senses which help us to be attentive to the wonders of your creation. We pray that during this time of study and discussion, you will help us to use our senses to be attentive to you – to the promptings and encouragement of your Holy Spirit. In the name of Christ we pray, Amen.

Space for Journalling



Group exercise



- As a group, discuss the experience of prayerfully considering the stones. Did taking time to consider all the sensory aspects of the stone trigger any thoughts, feelings, or insights that you would like to share?
- From considering its texture and appearance of your stone, what ideas do you have about its history?



Before moving on to this session's study material, you may wish to take time as a group to discuss your thoughts and observations based on the "For further study and reflection" section of the previous study.

Introduction

We can learn a lot from reading books, especially the Bible, but learning happens in lots of other ways too. If you think about it, an infant cannot read or understand many spoken words, yet the first few years of a child's life are spent learning at a fantastic rate all about the world around them. When presented with a new toy or an object to explore, an infant will look at it, touch it, maybe shake it or bang it on the ground to see what noises it can make; they will probably also try putting it in their mouths and tasting it – a behaviour that causes much anxiety to parents and caregivers! But this too is an important part of learning and growth - the infant is learning through their sensory system

What is true of learning about the world is true of learning about God too – not least because, as Christians, we believe in a God who is alive and active in our world, not merely preserved in the pages of an ancient book.

In this study we will consider the ways in which we can encounter God at work in the world through our senses, communicating with us and leading us in our Christian lives.

Read the Bible 1 John 1:1-10





- Allow a period of silence for each member of the group to read the passage through silently, then hear it read out loud.
- This might be a familiar Bible text, but if there are aspects of it that particularly strike you this time, note those down as you read/listen.



If time allows...

As a group, share the things you have noted down. Has thinking about the senses already affected the way you hear this Bible passage?

In depth study



 John starts his letter with a reference to "the beginning" – what Bible passage is he echoing? What is he trying to say about Christ? (See also John 1:1)

In verse 1, John uses two words for visual perception. The first ("have seen" - horaó in Greek) refers just to seeing something, but the second ("have looked at" - theaomai in Greek) implies observing something or someone intently, with the expectation of learning or being influenced by it/them.

- How does your Bible translate these two terms? Why might John have chosen to use both words for visual perception here?
- Can you think of characters from the gospel stories who simply "saw" Jesus, in contrast to characters who took time to observe and learn from Jesus? (You may want to look at Matthew 8:18-22; Matthew 15:21-28; Luke 5:1-11; Luke 10:38-42 – or think of your own examples.) What might this difference look like in your own life?
- It is suggested that John emphasises touch as well as sight and hearing to prove that Jesus wasn't an apparition. Why did John think that this would be important to his readers? (You may wish to look at John 20:25-29 also.)



Jewish teaching on how to behave is literally called halakah – which is the Hebrew word for walking. Walking the right way is associated with obedience (Genesis 5:24). Likewise, in the Gospels, the Greek word akoloutheó– to follow – is often used of Jesus's first disciples emphasising that they literally walked with Jesus to show their obedience to His call (Luke 5:11).

- Consider 1 John 1:6 alongside verses such as Isaiah 9:2 and Psalm 1:1 – what does walking with Jesus look like for us these days, now that He has ascended into Heaven? Does this ever include thinking about (quite literally) the places that we go to, and the people that we spend time with?
- Verse 1 has made it clear that we can learn and communicate about God using our other senses too. How does this happen in your own churches and Christian gatherings? Do your times of worship ever include:
 - o Touch e.g., greeting one another, sharing the peace.
 - o Bodily movement e.g., kneeling, standing, dancing.
 - o Taste e.g., Holy Communion, fellowship meals.
 - o Smell e.g., incense, flowers.
 - o Vision e.g., icons, symbols, stained glass windows.
- What kind of things do we learn about God through these and other sensory stimuli? Are there ways that your church could bring the use of other senses into its worshipping life?
- Of course, we are always learning about God, even outside of the times when we gather with other Christians. Outside of dedicated times of worship, have there been times when you have felt that you met God, or learned something about God through your senses? This might include seeing natural phenomena, such as an unusual weather event, or sensing God's presence in more every day moments.

Concluding reflections





- In a time of prayer, repeat the exercise with the stones, but this time each group member should close their eyes (if they feel comfortable to do so) and be given a different stone – ideally from a new collection of stones that has not been visible during the session.
- During the prayer time, consider the properties of your stone using only touch and not vision. At the end of the silence, open your eyes to view the stone. Does it look like what you imagined? Is the stone more or less beautiful? Does the value or beauty of the stone feel different because you explored it with other senses before relying on vision?

For further study and reflection

When you next attend gathered worship in your church, try to pay attention to what you are learning about God through all your senses, even those we think about less often. Consider how you feel about things such as movement, smell and taste, touch and texture, and temperature. Do these sensory experiences impact or enhance your worship in any way? Do you think you can perceive God communicating with you through these different senses? Bring your thoughts and reflections to share next time that your study group meets.

Summary

The word "God" may invoke various images in people's minds, but none of us has ever "seen" God.

Yet, just like with the stones, we can use our other senses to learn about God, and this may lead us to a fuller appreciation of God's majesty and beauty.

In this study, we have considered how the first disciples learned about God in this way, and how we can do the same.

However, as already discussed in Study 1, each person has a unique sensory profile, and this can include being over, or under, sensitive to particular sensory experiences, leading to strong preferences and aversions, especially for someone who is autistic.

This raises a question: how can we worship and learn together well, when each person has a different and unique experience? This is the question that we will address in Study 3 and continue to think about during the rest of this Bible study series.

In our research, people have told us that objects in church, including icons and tapestries, can help them to feel connected with the wider world of the church.

A beautiful interior of a church was described by one person as communicating the beauty of God, and another described the light in their building as evocative of Christ's love.

Moments of contrast between sound and silence in worship were described as "beautiful" and "pregnant" with stillness - Creating a sense of divine presence. Movement, too, was understood by some as evoking themes such as hospitality, joy and welcome, as people arrived for worship, as they filed forwards for Holy Communion, or as they danced and raised their hands during times of singing.

These are just some of the ways that people felt they learned about God and encountered God using their senses. However, not all those who took part in our research experienced the whole sensory environment of church positively. For example, while some felt that movement of people in their church evoked positive things such as joy, some others said that they found it difficult to focus on worship when there were lots of people moving around.

Study 3



Sensory profiles

In this study you will:

- Learn about sensory profiles your own, and those of other people.
- Learn about how sensory differences can make church difficult for some people.



candlelight, and its smell.



Opening prayer

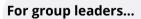
The group leader should light a strongly fragranced candle, or bring a selection of fragranced candles and give one to each participant.

During a 2-3 minutes of silent prayer, group members are invited to contemplate the

The group leader may wish to close the time of silence by reading the following excerpt from the **Psalms**

I call to you, Lord, come quickly to me; Hear me when I call to you. May my prayer be set before you like incense; May the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice. (Psalm 141:1-2)

For group leaders: You may wish to have some un-fragranced candles available for group members who are very sensitive to smell.



Use this prayer, or your own:

Heavenly Father, thank you for the ways in which our senses can help us to engage with you. May your Holy Spirit inspire both our thoughts and our discussions as we join together in this Bible study. Help us to enter into encounter with the risen Lord. In the name of Christ we pray, Amen.

Space for Journalling



Group exercise



The sense of smell can evoke powerful memories and emotions in us. For example, the smell of a pine tree might remind someone of childhood Christmases, or a particular perfume or scent can evoke memories of an old friend or loved one.

- Can you think of smells that you encounter which trigger strong memories for you? Share these with the group, if you are comfortable to do so.
- During the Covid pandemic, many people experienced what it is like to suddenly lose one's sense of smell and taste. By contrast, hormone changes, particularly during pregnancy, can increase a person's sensitivity to these things. Find out if anyone in the group has experienced these phenomena. What it is like to experience a change, suddenly or temporarily, in your sensory profile?



Before moving on to this session's study material, you may wish to take time as a group to discuss your thoughts and observations based on the "For further study and reflection" section of the previous study.

Introduction

As you have worked through the first few studies in this series, you may have already started to notice that different people in your group have different sensory profiles (that is, they experience the sensory world differently). Sensory profiles can also change over time or suddenly.

In this study, you will get a glimpse of your own sensory profile, and that of your fellow group members. To do this, you will read the Bible slowly and reflectively, considering what it might have been like to be present for the ministry of Jesus.

One of the most significant features of the Christian faith is that God became incarnate. Jesus is called *Immanuel* – literally: God with us. This means that (as we explored in Study 2) the first followers of Jesus were able to encounter Jesus and his ministry with all their senses, including walking with Him. However, we can surmise that each follower would have experienced this a little differently, each according to their own unique sensory profile.

Indeed, from the four different Gospel accounts in the New Testament we can already see that this is the case. Each Gospel writer records that a woman came to anoint Jesus with perfume from an alabaster flask – but only John (in John 12:3) notices that "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." (You can read and compare all four accounts in Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:36-40 and John 12:1-8.)

In this study, you will be invited to place yourself among those first followers of Jesus, and to imagine what it might have been like to experience *Immanuel* – God with us – using all your senses. Doing so may help to bring fresh insight into your understanding of the Gospel stories, and into your sense of being in a relationship with God.

Read the Bible John 21:1-14



- Allow a period of silence for each member of the group to read the passage through silently.
- One group member should then read the passage aloud, pausing for ten seconds after the end of each verse. During the ten seconds, you are each invited to imagine that you are present at the scene. What would it have been like for you if you had really been there? You may prefer to close your eyes for this, if you are comfortable to do so.



- Did you enjoy reading a Bible passage in this slow, reflective, and imaginative way?
- Did this way of reading scripture bring any new insight to you?



If time allows...

Discuss as a group your experience of reading the Bible this way.



In depth study



- Verse 1 locates the events of this story next to the Sea of Tiberias, sometimes also called the Sea of Galilee or Lake of Gennesaret. If anyone in your group has ever travelled to this region, can they describe the landscape? Your group may also want to look at some of the images and videos available online.
- Do these present-day images and descriptions match what you imagined during your reflective reading of this passage?
- It is striking that these events take place in a rural, everyday place such as Galilee, and not in Jerusalem, the bustling city where the Passion narrative had unfolded. In what ways do you think the rural setting affects the disciples' experience of meeting the risen Christ?

Verse 3 describes the disciples fishing at night-time. This was a common practice at the time; the fresh fish were then sold at market in the early morning, before the hot sun could spoil them.

- On a small boat, without electric light, what do you think fishing at night might have been like?
- Consider all the senses one by one, including vision, sound, smell, touch, taste, vestibular (balance) and anything else that vou can think of.

• Would you have enjoyed all the aspects of this sensory environment?

In verses 4-6 we learn that, after a long night of frustration, the disciples follow the guidance of what appears to be a stranger on the shoreline, and they throw their net over the other side of the boat. For centuries, scholars have debated why, in verse 11, we are told that the exact number of fish was 153. There is no consensus as to what the answer to this question may be. There are various ways that the number 153 may have been symbolic, or it may have just been a matter of fact. Perhaps what is of more interest is that the disciples thought to count them!

- When do you think that the disciples would have first realised that something miraculous had happened? What would have been the first sign?
- Discuss the sensory experience of verse 9, considering all the senses that you can think of one-by-one. How does this scene compare with your discussion of what it would have been like to go fishing at night?
- Elsewhere in John's Gospel, the speeches of Jesus are long, and full of deep metaphors which can be hard to understand. (See, for example, John chapters 16 and 17.) However, in verses 10 and 12, Jesus speaks very little, giving only simple instructions to the disciples. Why do you think he does so? (Consider the description in verse 12 of how the disciples were feeling).

In verse 14, John does not say that the disciples saw Jesus, but that by these events, Jesus was 'revealed' or 'made understandable' to them. The root of this word (*phaneroó* in Greek) is to do with something being illuminated.

 How does the whole sensescape of this story contribute to the risen Jesus being revealed to the disciples?

Concluding reflections



 One member of the group should read the story aloud one more time, pausing for 5 seconds at the end of each verse.



- Having discussed the sensescape of the story as a group, do you experience any aspects of the story differently?
- Are there sensory elements that you notice now, but didn't notice the first time through?



If time allows...

Discuss as a group:

What differences do you perceive in sensory profiles of each other? Is one group member more conscious of a particular sense, such as sounds or smells, than others?

What is the impact of this when you all gather together for worship services?

For further study and reflection

Between now and when your group next meets, take time to talk with at least one person in your church about their sensory profile. Find out what preferences, aversions and sensitivities people have, and what affects their ability to attend or participate in a worship service. Are there aspects of your church's sensescape that are disabling to some members? Can changes be made to address this? Keep a record of what you have learned and discuss it with the group the next time that you meet.

Summary

Each person has a sensory profile that is unique to them, including preferences and things that they don't like. For example, one person likes rock music, whilst another finds it to be an intolerable poise!

As well as preferences, we all have our own sensitivities too. You may have noticed that your hearing or your sense of smell is more sensitive than that of another person, or that you feel uncomfortable looking at 'busy' scenes such as crowded airports and railway stations or city streets, whilst your friends either don't mind, or even find it exhilarating.

Illnesses, stressful life events, and bodily changes such as pregnancy can cause changes (temporarily or permanently) in our sensory profiles.

As we have already noted, autistic people can have sensory profiles that are different to non-autistic people, which can be a positive thing and a negative thing. For example, a person may be particularly good at art and design tasks because of their visual perceptual abilities but may also feel stressed in a busy room full of people who are all moving around and wearing different colours and patterns on their clothes.

In our research, we found that differences in sensory profiles and levels of sensitivity impacts how someone feels about coming to church. Some people find the visual appearance of their church calming, but others are put off by over-busy sights such as a screen with moving images behind text, or pixelated graphics. Some love loud music in a worship service, whilst others feel that they need to wear headphones or leave the room if a service is getting loud. Touch can also be significant - some people find it very uncomfortable when other people are too close to them, such as in churches where seats are placed very closely together. All of these factors can influence a person's decision whether or not to attend a particular church or a service. Many autistic people, even if they attend church, need several hours or even days to recover from it.

Whilst we all have preferences, sensitivities can make church uncomfortable for some worshippers. However, because each person's sensitivities are different, there is no easy solution to accommodating everyone.

The one thing we *can* do is talk to each other and learn how to be aware of other people's sensory profiles – recognising that they may be different to our own, and that some differences can lead to disability.

When Jesus met the disciples in Galilee, he knew that they had experienced a huge shock, seeing Him crucified and then learning that He had risen from the dead. Their senses were likely to have been overwhelmed, they were confused and afraid. But Jesus met them in a quiet place, speaking to them simply, and allowing them to approach Him as they were ready.

Simon Peter, with his customary enthusiasm, was ready to jump into the chilly water and embrace the whole experience! The other disciples approached the shore more gradually, changing slowly from one sensory environment to another.

Even so, however they approached Him, Jesus welcomed them all with simple, uncomplicated kindness: "Come and have breakfast."





Will there be senses in heaven?

In this study you will:

- Think about the hope that Christians have of eternal life.
- Learn about how the senses are described in the book of Revelation and think about how this affects what we understand about the role of our senses today.





Opening Prayer

Participants should be invited to bring an item with them for prayer, such as a sparkling piece of jewellery, a finely textured garment (e.g., cashmere or silk), or a smooth piece of glass or shiny metal.

Alternatively, participants could be asked to walk slowly and reflectively around your regular worship space, taking time to quietly observe decorative features such as stained glass, highly polished wood, and colourful or inspiring artwork.

After 2-3 minutes of silent contemplation, the group leader should read the following passage slowly, pausing at the end of each phrase to allow time for prayerful reflection.

After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open!

And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said,

"Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."

At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne!

And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads.

Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God, and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.

Revelation 4:1-6

For group leaders...

Use this prayer, or your own:

Heavenly Father, thank you for our senses, which allow us to explore and appreciate the beauty of your world. May your Holy Spirit guide us now, as we consider the wonders recorded in the book of Revelation. In the name of Christ we pray, Amen.

Space for Journalling



Group exercise Optional Allow 10 mins.

Have you ever thought about what your body will be like when you enter eternal life? 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 teaches us a little, for example by saying that our earthly bodies will become heavenly bodies, which are different. However, there has been much debate through the centuries as to how to interpret Paul's teaching here, and about what our heavenly bodies will really be like.

- Think about your earthly body, as it currently is. Are there things about it which you hope would stay the same into eternity? (You do not have to share your thoughts with the group if you don't want to.)
- How much of what we think about our bodies comes to us from media, and contemporary culture? Does the Bible give us the same message?



Hint: you may wish to look at one or more of these passages:

- 1 Corinthians 6:19-20
- Romans 12:1-2
- Psalm 139: 13-18

Before moving on to this session's study material, you may wish to take time as a group to discuss your thoughts and observations based on the "For further study and reflection" section of the previous study.

Introduction

So far, these studies have prompted us to think about how senses and sensory profiles help us to discover, to encounter and to worship God in the here and now, but in this study, we turn our attention to eternity. What role will the senses have in the New Creation?

As Christians, we are called to appraise the value of things based on a future-orientated (or eschatological) perspective, for example when Jesus teaches:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

(Matthew 6:19-21)

But how does this perspective impact the attention that we pay to sensescapes and to our sensory profiles in the here and now?

The book of Revelation is described as a 'vision' – but as you have already heard in the short reading from Revelation 4:1-6, it is a vision that evokes a rich and detailed sensescape.

In this study, we will seek to enter into the fullness of that vision – considering what insight comes to us when we allow ourselves to dwell on what the book of Revelation sets before us.

Read the Bible Revelation 22:1-21





- Allow a period of silence for each member of the group to read the passage through silently, then hear it read out loud.
- As the passage is read aloud, group members should note down which sense experiences are mentioned or evoked – for example "...the angel showed me" (sight) "...twelve kinds of fruit" (tase/smell) etc.
- Discuss in the group what senses you have noted down.
- Are there any that seem unexpected?
- Are the sensory experiences in this Bible passage pleasant or unpleasant?

In depth study



- In verse 1 the angel shows a river, flowing with "the water of [eternal] life." There is a description of how this river looks, but how do you think it sounded?
- What thoughts or feelings do you associate with the sound of a flowing stream or river?



In verse 2 we are told of one tree which grows on both sides of the river and produces twelve different kinds of fruit. The references to the number twelve and the different varieties of fruit are thought to indicate the sufficiency and completeness of this provision: food in heaven will always be fresh and will never be monotonous! You may wish to compare the vision in Revelation 22 with a similar one recorded in Ezekiel 47:12.

 In your own country or region, which fruits or local produce taste best when they are fresh or in season? When something is harvested, how do you celebrate God's provision?

In the ancient world, leaves were often used medicinally, as well as to make slings and bandages. Many medicinal plants are mentioned in the Bible, most notably hyssop, which was understood to have both spiritual and physical cleansing properties (see Psalm 51:7).

- Which plant leaves do you use in your own context for cleansing and healing? Perhaps you use aloe for a burn, or eucalyptus and mint for cleaning your home. Which are your favourite fragrances?
- Based on the discussion so far of verses 1 and 2, describe as a group what the sensory experience of the heavenly city would be like.
- How is this different from the kinds of cities that we live in today?



In verse 5, the city is described as no longer needing the sun, because the Lord God will be the source of light. In the ancient near east, the sun could be a friend but also a foe; essential for life, but also able to burn up the ground, bringing drought and famine. By contrast, the light of God is described in Revelation 4:3 in a way that reminds us that pure light is in fact a gathering of colours, and that light can be split into many colours.

- Consider the pure light of Revelation 22:5 reflecting off the crystal water in verse 1. What does light look and feel like in this heavenly city?
- There is a contrast in verses 11-14 between those who remain "filthy" and those who wash their robes ready to enter the city. What does this contrast add to your ideas about the sensory experience of the heavenly city? What do you think the city would smell like?

In the ancient world, when there was so much less light pollution, people were much more aware of the stars in the night sky. However, even in a modern city, the "bright morning star" (Venus), which is referred to in verse 16, can be seen in the sky. The morning star rises in the sky just before the dawn – therefore Jesus is describing himself as a herald of the new day about to begin.

- In your day-to-day life, do you ever stop to notice the stars of the sky?
- In verse 17, both hearing and thirst/desire are mentioned as responding to the call to "come". Does it surprise you that there is reference to a bodily need for water?
- Do you think this is only a metaphor, or do you sometimes experience a longing for God in a physical way?

Concluding reflections



- As a group, observe a few minutes of silent prayer, during which each group member is invited to think about how their body feels. Can they perceive any sense of the "thirst" or "desire" for God that is referred to in Revelation 22:17?
- After the time of prayer, share how you felt, if you are comfortable to do so.

It is likely that there will be mixed experiences among the group members, and it is important to note that there is no right or wrong way to feel in prayer. As we have learned through the course of these studies – everybody's sensory profile is different, and Jesus meets each of us with simple, uncomplicated kindness.

For further study and reflection

Take time to review what you have learned through the whole course of these four studies. What changes will you make to your personal prayer and devotional life? What have you learned about your own sensory profile and that of others in your worshipping community? Will you make any changes to your worship space(s), or to the form and content of your worship services?

In your group, create an action plan for your church community's worship, based on what you have learned about the senses, and about each other's needs and preferences.

Summary

It is tempting to think of life after death, and our 'heavenly bodies' as something that will be disembodied, even though the resurrection body of Jesus was shown to be fully physical and tangible (see John 20:26-27). Yet the book of Revelation presents a rich sensescape, full of beauty and wonder, engaging every sense that a human body can perceive.

Overall, the book of Revelation confirms what we have already learned from reading the story of Creation in Genesis 1 – that God created the senses and called them good. Through our senses, God can meet with us and communicate with us, even sometimes intertwining our present reality with metaphor, giving us a sense of the things that lie beyond the reach of words. Although meeting with God in prayer and worship can involve a lot of words, it is first and foremost an embodied experience.

As discussed in Study 3, if our bodies are not comfortable in church, for example if we are distracted by an imbalance of sound, the fear of unwelcome touch, or the discomfort of being too hot or too cold, it can be difficult or even impossible to direct our attention away from these sources of discomfort and towards the worship of God. By contrast, positive sensory experiences can have the opposite effect – lifting our attention to God, sometimes despite many possible sources of distraction. A beautiful church building, an icon, an inspiring piece of music – all of these things (and others besides) can capture our attention, drawing us into meaningful moments of worship or prayer. The Heavenly Jerusalem is described as a place where everything one senses is inspiring, every facet reflecting the Glory of God.

Each person has their own sensory profile, with preferences, aversions and sensitivities. Learning about our own sensory profiles, and those of the people around us, can help us to create worship spaces that are comfortable, inspiring, and that do not create disability for people who have acute sensory sensitivities. By seeking to create these spaces in the here and now, we can gather to worship in a way that foreshadows the vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem; an ambient environment, where everyone can feel comfortable to worship, and where...

Behold! The dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God himself will be with them as their God. (Revelation 21:3)

Authors and researchers

Dr Henna Cundill is a writer and researcher based in Aberdeen. Working within the Centre for Autism and Theology, Henna researches topics to do with neurodiversity, church life and Christian practices. Her doctoral research examined how autsitic people describe the experiences of prayer and anxiety, and the relationship between the two. She is also the lead author and editor of the But...! Bible Study Series for young people. (www.butbiblestudy.com)

Dr Léon van Ommen is a Senior Lecturer in Liturgical Theology at the University of Aberdeen. His research focuses on autism (with a keen interest in other neurodivergences), liturgy/worship, and disability. Working in the area of Practical Theology he is interested in the lived and theological reality of religious practices and spirituality. Much of his work is focused on pastoral needs, especially the needs of marginalised people who are stigmatised and whose voices are not heard. His recent research has focused on autism and liturgy, resulting in the publication of various articles and a monograph (Autism and Worship: A Liturgical Theology, Waco: Baylor University Press, 2023); on the sensory aspect of church services; on autism and spirituality/religion, with a specific focus on non- or minimally-speaking autistic people as well as on Black autistic people and their faith communities. Léon is co-founder of the Centre for Autism and Theology.







Dr Katy Unwin is a Lecturer in the Department of Psychology, Counselling, and Therapy at La Trobe University, Australia. She is trained in Psychology, completing an Undergraduate degree in Psychology (BSc Hons), a Masters degree in Cognitive Neuroscience (MSc), and a Doctorate in Psychology (PhD). Following this, she was awarded the prestigious 'Future Leaders Fellowship' by the Waterloo Foundation, before taking up a research fellowship at the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC). She began the Lectureship at La Trobe in early 2023, continuing to work closely with OTARC. Her research is focussed on understanding sensory differences in autism to support autistic flourishing, as well as listening to the broadly 'unheard' voice of limited/minimally verbal autistic people. She employs a variety of methods in her work including basic visual perception paradigms, physiological measurement, micro-behavioural coding, and qualitative methods.

Cody Crawshaw is a researcher at the University of Aberdeen. Her doctoral project examines the interaction between faith and anxiety in the lives of Christian women, using qualitative research methodologies to engage with stories of mental health experiences. She also writes and teaches on climate anxiety and eco-theology, trauma theology, and neurodiversity. Previously she has served as an assistant convenor of Sophia – the theology and religious studies women's network at the University of Aberdeen – and as doctoral student representative on the British and Irish Association for Practical Theology's committee. In her free time, she enjoys journalling, reading, and going to the gym. She is also passionate about veganism and sustainable living.

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About the Centre for Autism and Theology

The Centre for Autism and Theology (formerly the Centre for the Study of Autism and Christian Community) aims to be an international hub for autism and theology research, with an interdisciplinary component and in connection with the third sector and more widely, any interested individuals or parties.

To this end, the Centre hosts interdisciplinary research into autism in Christian faith communities. The Centre aims to encourage research of the highest standards and to engage in dialogue with various faith communities. The Centre aspires to actively work together with autistic people and faith communities.

The Centre envisions a theological and interdisciplinary discourse around autism that has the potential to contribute to the wider discourse around autism, linked to the religious experience of autism, emphasising the God-given value of those on the autism spectrum.

Email us at: cat@abdn.ac.uk
Or visit our website: <u>www.abdn.ac.uk/sdhp/cat</u>





Appendix

Printable pages for group leaders.

The following pages can printed for use within groups, to minimise printing costs and environmental impact.



God created the senses

In this study you will:

- Think about why God created the senses, and how we use them to learn about the world.
- Learn about the role of the senses in worship.

Group exercise

- Look through the sensory experiences listed below. During the period of silent prayer, were you aware of any of these experiences? For example, did you notice your own body posture, the temperature in the room, or any sounds?
- What role did these experiences play in your prayer? Did you find them a help or a hindrance to prayer?
- Reflecting on the time of prayer that you have just observed as a group, were some
 of the senses more important to you than others?

Sight	Cold	Dark	
Li	ight	Sound	
Smell	Warm	Movement (others around me)	
Taste	Body awareness		
Movement (myself in spa	Speec	h Touch	

Read the Bible - Genesis 1:1-31

Questions from study 1

- Genesis 1:2 says that the world was formless/chaotic or a totally dark void. The word "deep" refers to bottomlessness or endlessness.
 - What would the sensory experience of formlessness or a totally dark void be?
 - What thoughts or feelings come to mind when you reflect on this imagery?
- In the "void" there is nothing to see, touch, smell...nor encounter with any other sense. Yet we still find the Spirit of God "brooding" or "hovering" this is a word that can also sometimes mean "to cherish".
 - What could the writer be trying to say by placing the image of "void" and the image of the Spirit of God "brooding" together.
 - What thoughts or emotions does this stir in you?
- Dividing into pairs, take a short section of text each. If you had been present for the
 events described in this short section, what might the sensory experience have
 been like?

For further study and reflection

To follow on from this study, take time to consider the sensescape of the space(s) that you typically use for personal prayer and worship. Are there things that you like or don't like about it? What sensory features help or hinder you in your worship? If you often pray indoors, separated from the natural world, you may wish to experiment with making changes to your habits and places of prayer, either by going outside or by bringing plants and natural objects into your space. Consider what, if any, difference this makes, and share your thoughts and reflections the next time that your study group meets.



What are the senses and what to do they do?

In this study you will:

- Learn about what senses the body has, and how the senses work together.
- Think about how the senses help us to learn about God.

Group exercise

- As a group, discuss the experience of prayerfully considering the stones. Did taking time to consider all the sensory aspects of the stone trigger any thoughts, feelings, or insights that you would like to share?
- From considering its texture and appearance of your stone, what ideas do you have about its history?

Read the Bible - 1 John 1:1-10

Questions from study 2

John starts his letter with a reference to "the beginning" – what Bible passage is he
echoing? What is he trying to say about Christ? (See also John 1:1)

In verse 1, John uses two words for visual perception. The first ("have seen" - horaó in Greek) refers just to seeing something, but the second ("have looked at" - theaomai in Greek) implies observing something or someone intently, with the expectation of learning or being influenced by it/them.

• How does your Bible translate these two terms? Why might John have chosen to use both words for visual perception here?

- Can you think of characters from the gospel stories who simply "saw" Jesus, in
 contrast to characters who took time to observe and learn from Jesus? (You may
 want to look at Matthew 8:18-22; Matthew 15:21-28; Luke 5:1-11; Luke 10:38-42 or
 think of your own examples.) What might this difference look like in your own life?
- It is suggested that John emphasises touch as well as sight and hearing to prove that Jesus wasn't an apparition. Why did John think that this would be important to his readers? (You may wish to look at John 20:25-29 also.)

Jewish teaching on how to behave is literally called <code>halakah</code> – which is the Hebrew word for walking. Walking the right way is associated with obedience (Genesis 5:24). Likewise, in the Gospels, the Greek word <code>akoloutheó-</code> to follow – is often used of Jesus's first disciples emphasising that they literally walked with Jesus to show their obedience to His call (Luke 5:11).

- Consider 1 John 1:6 alongside verses such as Isaiah 9:2 and Psalm 1:1 what does
 walking with Jesus look like for us these days, now that He has ascended into
 Heaven? Does this ever include thinking about (quite literally) the places that we go
 to, and the people that we spend time with?
- Verse 1 has made it clear that we can learn and communicate about God using our other senses too. How does this happen in your own churches and Christian gatherings? Do your times of worship ever include:
 - o Touch e.g., greeting one another, sharing the peace.
 - o Bodily movement e.g., kneeling, standing, dancing.
 - o Taste e.g., Holy Communion, fellowship meals.
 - o Smell e.g., incense, flowers.
 - o Vision e.g., icons, symbols, stained glass windows.
- What kind of things do we learn about God through these and other sensory stimuli?
 Are there ways that your church could bring the use of other senses into its worshipping life?
- Of course, we are always learning about God, even outside of the times when we
 gather with other Christians. Outside of dedicated times of worship, have there been
 times when you have felt that you met God, or learned something about God
 through your senses? This might include seeing natural phenomena, such as an
 unusual weather event, or sensing God's presence in more every day moments.

For further study and reflection

When you next attend gathered worship in your church, try to pay attention to what you are learning about God through all your senses, even those we think about less often. Consider how you feel about things such as movement, smell and taste, touch and texture, and temperature. Do these sensory experiences impact or enhance your worship in any way? Do you think you can perceive God communicating with you through these different senses? Bring your thoughts and reflections to share next time that your study group meets.



Sensory profiles

In this study you will:

- Learn about sensory profiles your own, and those of other people.
- Learn about how sensory differences can make church difficult for some people.

Group exercise

The sense of smell can evoke powerful memories and emotions in us. For example, the smell of a pine tree might remind someone of childhood Christmases, or a particular perfume or scent can evoke memories of an old friend or loved one.

- Can you think of smells that you encounter which trigger strong memories for you?
 Share these with the group, if you are comfortable to do so.
- During the Covid pandemic, many people experienced what it is like to suddenly lose one's sense of smell and taste. By contrast, hormone changes, particularly during pregnancy, can increase a person's sensitivity to these things. Find out if anyone in the group has experienced these phenomena. What it is like to experience a change, suddenly or temporarily, in your sensory profile?

Read the Bible - John 21:1-14

Questions from study 3

- Verse 1 locates the events of this story next to the Sea of Tiberias, sometimes also
 called the Sea of Galilee or Lake of Gennesaret. If anyone in your group has ever
 travelled to this region, can they describe the landscape? Your group may also want
 to look at some of the images and videos available online.
- Do these present-day images and descriptions match what you imagined during your reflective reading of this passage?
- It is striking that these events take place in a rural, everyday place such as Galilee, and not in Jerusalem, the bustling city where the Passion narrative had unfolded. In what ways do you think the rural setting affects the disciples' experience of meeting the risen Christ?

Verse 3 describes the disciples fishing at night-time. This was a common practice at the time; the fresh fish were then sold at market in the early morning, before the hot sun could spoil them.

- On a small boat, without electric light, what do you think fishing at night might have been like?
- Consider all the senses one by one, including vision, sound, smell, touch, taste, vestibular (balance) and anything else that you can think of.
- Would you have enjoyed all the aspects of this sensory environment?

In verses 4-6 we learn that, after a long night of frustration, the disciples follow the guidance of what appears to be a stranger on the shoreline, and they throw their net over the other side of the boat. For centuries, scholars have debated why, in verse 11, we are told that the exact number of fish was 153. There is no consensus as to what the answer to this question may be. There are various ways that the number 153 may have been symbolic, or it may have just been a matter of fact. Perhaps what is of more interest is that the disciples thought to count them!

- When do you think that the disciples would have first realised that something miraculous had happened? What would have been the first sign?
- Discuss the sensory experience of verse 9, considering all the senses that you can think of one-by-one. How does this scene compare with your discussion of what it would have been like to go fishing at night?
- Elsewhere in John's Gospel, the speeches of Jesus are long, and full of deep metaphors which can be hard to understand. (See, for example, John chapters 16 and 17.) However, in verses 10 and 12, Jesus speaks very little, giving only simple instructions to the disciples. Why do you think he does so? (Consider the description in verse 12 of how the disciples were feeling).

In verse 14, John does not say that the disciples saw Jesus, but that by these events, Jesus was 'revealed' or 'made understandable' to them. The root of this word (*phaneroó* in Greek) is to do with something being illuminated.

 How does the whole sensescape of this story contribute to the risen Jesus being revealed to the disciples?

For further study and reflection

Between now and when your group next meets, take time to talk with at least one person in your church about their sensory profile. Find out what preferences, aversions and sensitivities people have, and what affects their ability to attend or participate in a worship service. Are there aspects of your church's sensescape that are disabling to some members? Can changes be made to address this? Keep a record of what you have learned and discuss it with the group the next time that you meet.



Will there be senses in heaven?

In this study you will:

- Think about the hope that Christians have of eternal life.
- Learn about how the senses are described in the book of Revelation and think about how this affects what we understand about the role of our senses today.

Group exercise

Have you ever thought about what your body will be like when you enter eternal life? 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 teaches us a little, for example by saying that our earthly bodies will become heavenly bodies, which are different. However, there has been much debate through the centuries as to how to interpret Paul's teaching here, and about what our heavenly bodies will really be like.

- Think about your earthly body, as it currently is. Are there things about it which you hope would stay the same into eternity? (You do not have to share your thoughts with the group if you don't want to.)
- How much of what we think about our bodies comes to us from media, and contemporary culture? Does the Bible give us the same message?

Read the Bible - Revelation 22:1-21

Questions from study 4

- In verse 1 the angel shows a river, flowing with "the water of [eternal] life." There is a description of how this river looks, but how do you think it sounded?
- What thoughts or feelings do you associate with the sound of a flowing stream or river?

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For further study and reflection

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Space for Journalling

