

How to Understand the Bible

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Introduction

The Bible is a complex book. To understand what the Bible is teaching and how to apply those messages in our lives, we need to study the Bible regularly, patiently, and carefully. To do that, we need to understand how the Bible is written, who it was written to, what story it is telling, and how it is put together. Can you learn the basics of the Bible's "big ideas" without getting into all that? Sure. In some ways, the Bible is simple enough that a child can understand it. But if you learn the following concepts and practices, they will help you in two really important ways:

- 1) You will find more depth and beauty in the Bible which will lead to a better understanding of God, yourself, and others.
- 2) You will be able to avoid mistakes in reading the Bible that could lead to feeling confused, discouraged, or misinformed.

What is the Bible?

The Bible is not a single book – it is actually a collection of 66 different books, like a small library, that were written and put together by many different authors over the course of several centuries. It contains books of history, poetry, and letters that have been recognized throughout history as spiritually important and reliable writings. These books are ancient, with all of them being at least 1900 years old and older. While many ancient books have been lost to history, or outlived their relevance to society, the books of the Bible have stood the test of time and continue to be reliable, insightful, and relevant to our lives today.

What do Christians believe about the Bible?

For hundreds of years Christians have believed the books of the Bible are inspired by the Spirit of God, that they communicate the truth without mistake, and that they trump every other teaching, philosophy, or tradition. This includes the belief that God has inspired people throughout history to preserve what was written and collect the books into the Bible we have today. For these reasons, we treat the Bible as the final written authority for understanding how to live our lives, relate to God, and act towards other people.

How did the Bible come together?

The Bible contains **two separate collections** of scriptures:

- **The Old Testament** is a collection of ancient Jewish writings that was put together somewhere between 400 B.C. and 100 A.D. We know from other historical documents and records that the Jewish people believed these 39 books to be reliable, important scriptures. While other Jewish writings existed, they were not recognized as having the same value or authority as these 39 books.
- **The New Testament** is a collection of books and letters written between 50 A.D. and 100 A.D. by the first followers of Jesus, most of whom had seen and known Jesus personally. These 27 books were soon recognized by the early Church as new scriptures that continued the story and teachings that began in the 39 books of the Old Testament.

How do we know the Bible hasn't been changed?

The books of the Bible have been preserved in more ancient copies than any other ancient writings, with thousands of ancient copies (some dating all the way back to 150 B.C.) still matching what we have today. Combined with the history of how the books were copied and shared, and references from other historical writings from ancient times, there is a lot of good evidence for believing that the books of the Bible we have today still match the originals.

What about translations and interpretations?

It's important to understand that when we say we believe the Bible doesn't have mistakes, we're talking about the original copies. Of course, mistakes can be made in translating these books into modern languages, and there are things in the Bible which are difficult to understand from our modern perspectives. All of that can result in people having different interpretations of what the Bible is teaching. That is why it is so important to take the time to learn things like context, original meaning, and Biblical history and culture in order to avoid creating new, modern interpretations. It's also important to look for good Bible translations that are done by teams of translators that cross-examine each other's work and include good footnotes for why they translated things the way that they did.

What are some examples of “good translations”?

The good news is that most Bible translations out there are pretty good. But, there are some bad translations out there too. So you will want to do some research before settling on one. Here are some that we recommend:

- **ESV – English Standard Version** | This is one of the best word-for-word English translations. It does a good job of providing a literal translation of the Bible into modern English. (Also see NASB & NKJV)
- **NET – New English Translation** | This version is entirely free and online at netBible.org and is also available in many Bible apps. It is a good translation that is constantly being checked and revised. We recommend this one because it has a ton of really helpful notes on translation choices, as well as study notes on context and history, which make it a great choice for anyone getting started with the Bible.
- **NLT – New Living Translation** | Rather than being a word-for-word translation, the NLT translates on what’s called a “thought-for-thought” method, making some difficult scriptures a little easier to understand and providing a smoother reading experience. The NLT is kind of that sweet spot between a literal translation and a paraphrase.
- **MSG – The Message** | This is not a translation of the Bible – it is a paraphrase of the Bible. We would not recommend this as your primary Bible, but it can be helpful in understanding the message of the Bible, especially for anyone still struggling to understand the Bible after trying other translations. We would recommend that you read this AND a more literal translation, using the two of them together as you study.

What translations should I avoid?

Remember, a good translation is done by a team of people from multiple churches or organizations working together and checking each others work. So in general, any translation done by one person (or one church or organization) should be avoided. Frankly, these translations are the most likely to have intentional changes or mistranslations in order to reinforce a particular culture or set of beliefs. Examples would be: The Passion Translation, The Living Bible, The Mirror Bible, and the New World Translation.

Some other translations aren’t bad, they’re just not the best choice – such as translations that are in older versions of English. These should be avoided simply because the meanings of many English words have changed over the years and so reading these translations can lead to confusion or misunderstanding. An example of this would be the King James Bible, which was a great translation when it was released, but uses English words and grammar that are now 400 years out-of-date.

So is the Bible poetry? History? Is it figurative or literal?

Yes, yes, yes, and yes. There are actually three main writing styles found in the Bible: **Narrative**, **Poetry**, and what's known as **Prose / Discourse**.

- **NARRATIVE – 43% of the Bible**

- Most of the Bible is written like a story. Why? Because story is an attention-grabbing, memorable way to communicate an idea or illustrate a lesson. Some of the most effective ways to remember important lessons are by expressing them in stories. Examples of this style would be books like Genesis, Joshua, Nehemiah, the Gospels and the book of Acts.

- **POETRY – 33% of the Bible**

- A huge part of the Bible is poetry. That doesn't mean those parts aren't true – in fact, poetry is one of the most engaging and powerful ways to express the truth. When we think of the kind of truth that God is revealing in scripture, it makes sense that He would have inspired nearly a third of it to be written in poetry. Examples would be books like Job, the Psalms, many of the prophetic books like Isaiah, Amos, and Joel, and the book of Proverbs.

- **PROSE / DISCOURSE – 27% of the Bible**

- In this style, lessons and concepts are taught directly and clearly – less aimed at the heart and more at the head. These sections of the Bible are usually easier to understand and apply. They typically help to *clarify* and *summarize* lessons from the **narrative** and **poetic** parts of the Bible. Common examples of this style of writing would be Paul's letters to the churches, which make up most of the New Testament.

Should I do everything I read in the Bible?

No. Everything in the Bible will fall into one of two big categories, and those are **Prescriptive** & **Descriptive**. It is important to identify which one of these two categories a passage in the Bible falls into so that you can know how to understand and act on what you're reading. Here are some simple ways to identify **prescriptive** vs. **descriptive** writings in the Bible:

- **PRESCRIPTIVE | "What should happen"**
 - Passages in this category are giving clear, direct teachings or providing examples of what we ought to do. You will mostly find **prescriptive** passages in the parts of the Bible that are **prose / discourse** (like the book of Romans) and also in the **poetry** parts of the Bible (like the book of Proverbs or some of the Psalms).
- **DESCRIPTIVE | "What has happened" or "What someone or something is like"**
 - Passages in this category are meant to help us understand a concept, a person, a cause & effect relationship, what God is like, etc. You will mostly find **descriptive** passages in the **history** books of the Bible (like Joshua or the book of Acts) and also in the **poetry** parts of the Bible (like the book of Job or some of the Psalms)

How is the Bible organized?

In addition to different writing styles, the Bible also contains many different types of literature (also known as "genres"). The Bible is not organized in the order of the story, it is grouped together by genre. Here is a breakdown of how the books in the Bible are organized:

- **Old Testament** (Jewish Scriptures)
 - **The Law:** Genesis – Deuteronomy (5 books)
 - **History:** Joshua – Esther (12 books)
 - **Poetry:** Job – Song of Solomon (5 books)
 - **Major Prophets:** Isaiah – Daniel (5 books)
 - **Minor Prophets:** Hosea – Malachi (12 books)
- **New Testament** (Apostles' Writings)
 - **The Gospels:** Matthew – John (4 books)
 - **History:** Acts (1 book)
 - **Epistles:** Romans – Revelation (22 books)

HELPFUL TIP: For these structural reasons, a chronological Bible reading plan can be very helpful for understanding the full story of the Bible. (You will find one at the end of this guide)

NOTE: Many books in the Bible contain all three writing styles and cross over a few genres, but each book usually has a dominant writing style and belongs mostly to one genre.

Who was the Bible written to originally?

Knowing the original audience for the passage of the Bible that you're studying will really help you have a better understanding of how to apply what you are reading. The Bible was written for us, but not to us. In other words, while modern people are obviously not the original audience for the books of the Bible, the Bible was recorded and preserved so that we could learn and understand what God wants us to know. This may seem like a small point, but you will find this distinction to be very important in understanding how to apply some parts of the Bible to your life. Here is a simple look at the original audiences of the Bible:

- **Old Testament** | Written to the ancient Jewish people in the region now known as the Middle East. The Jewish (Hebrew) people had been singled out by God, were biological descendants of Abraham, and lived under a civil government appointed by God with a system of laws given through their prophets.
- **New Testament** | Written to both Jewish and Gentile people living in the Mediterranean and Middle East roughly 2000 years ago. "Gentile" was a label given to everyone who wasn't Jewish, which at that moment in time meant mostly Greek and Roman people. Most of the New Testament was written directly to the first Christian churches (which also explains why so much of it was written prescriptively).

Ok, so what is the story of the Bible?

Understanding the overall story of the Bible is incredibly helpful in understanding anything you read in the Bible. Here is a simple breakdown of the story of the Bible and the books and chapters that cover these parts of the story:

- **God creates the physical world**, all forms of life, and humanity to enjoy relationship with Him. Humanity is separated from God by their sin and corruption. Generation after generation, humanity's sin gets worse and eventually leads to a total separation between God and all of humanity.
 - *GENESIS 1-11*
- **God creates the nation of Israel to be His people.** God chooses Abraham and his descendants to be a people group that would represent Him to the rest of the world and bring all of humanity back into relationship with Himself. God rescues the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt and brings them into a land that He has chosen for them. For generations, God chooses prophets and judges to lead Israel in following Him and defending them against their enemies.
 - *GENESIS 12-50 › EXODUS › LEVITICUS › NUMBERS › DEUTERONOMY › JOSHUA › JUDGES › 1 SAMUEL 1-7*

Ok, so what is the story of the Bible? (continued)

- **Israel asks God for a king** so they can be more like the other nations around them. This is a rejection of God's leadership and special purpose for them as a nation. This leads to generations of ups and downs with both good and evil kings. Israel eventually splits into northern and southern kingdoms that experience increasing instability as their loyalty to God fades.
 - *1 SAMUEL 8-31 › 2 SAMUEL › 1 KINGS & 1 CHRONICLES › 2 KINGS 1-18 & 2 CHRONICLES 30*
- **The Jewish lands are conquered and the people are exiled** after generations of God warning them that this would happen because of their sin and rejection of Him. The people of Israel (the northern kingdom) are scattered, and the people of Judah (the southern kingdom) are taken into captivity in Babylon for 70+ years.
 - *2 KINGS 19-25 & 2 CHRONICLES 31-36 › EZEKIEL › DANIEL*
- **The people of Judah are released from exile and return to Jerusalem** and begin rebuilding the nation of Israel. They renew their loyalty to God and begin to look forward to a "Messiah" (which means "chosen one") – a man that the prophets had told them was coming who would lead Israel as an eternal King that would rule over all the nations of the Earth. The prophet Isaiah called this person "Immanuel" which means "God with us."
 - *EZRA › NEHEMIAH*
- **Jesus is born and said to be the "Messiah"** that the Jewish people had been waiting for, but the Jewish leaders do not believe Him and have Him executed for claiming to be God. After three days He rises from the dead – proving His claim – and sends His followers to start the church and preach the Good News (a.k.a. the "Gospel") about Him to Israel and the whole world – the news is that Jesus takes away sins and restores relationship with God.
 - *MATTHEW, MARK, LUKE, & JOHN*
- **The followers of Jesus spread the Gospel** through Israel and the surrounding countries of the Mediterranean, establishing the first Christian churches.
 - *THE BOOK OF ACTS*

What should I pay attention to when I read the Bible?

There are many repeating themes and ideas that run like threads through the story of the Bible. Noticing and paying attention to them will help you connect the “big ideas” together and make sense of what the Bible is teaching. Below is a list of some of these that repeatedly pop up in the Bible – so when you see them, definitely pay attention.

- **Heaven and Earth |** These words describe the place where God “lives” (heaven) and where humans live (earth). When connected, this phrase reminds the reader that God wants these two dimensions to overlap so that God and humanity can live together in the same space. The story of the Bible begins and ends with “heaven and earth” totally overlapping.
- **The Image of God |** This is the idea that humans were created to be representatives of God on the Earth, which gives humanity a unique value and purpose in God’s creation.
- **Holiness |** Holiness describes God’s perfection, purity, and life-giving power, making Him totally unique in the universe. It also carries the idea of how God’s presence is incompatible with evil and dangerous to anything that is evil and corrupt.
- **The Law |** God’s moral code that was given to the Jewish people. It was meant to make them different from other people groups, establish justice and equity in their community, and help them understand the holiness of God. It also served to point out humanity’s imperfection and their need for God to forgive, heal, and restore them.
- **Sin |** Sin is behaviors and thoughts that are incompatible with God’s character and holiness. Sin also contradicts the Image of God that humanity was designed to be. Sin is described as something that always results in death because it separates you from God’s holiness which is the source of life.
- **Repentance |** Repentance means to turn away from sin and to turn towards God. It is a major theme in the Bible. It carries the idea of a change in a person’s heart that results in obeying God and surrendering their own understanding of what is good and bad.
- **Redemption |** A major thread in the story of the Bible is that God wants to restore the relationship between Himself and humanity that was broken by human sin. Redemption is about God rescuing people, “buying them back” from the consequences of their sin, and restoring them into the people He created them to be.
- **Sacrifice and Atonement |** Because sin is so deeply embedded in humanity, sacrifice and atonement are God’s way of getting rid of the direct and indirect effects of sin, without having to destroy humanity also. Sacrifice provides justice for the direct, immediate effects of sin, while atonement is about purifying people and their environments from the indirect, long-term effects of sin. In the Old Testament, sacrifice and atonement was accomplished through animal sacrifices. But when Jesus came, He used His own death to provide a perfect and eternal sacrifice and atonement for all people, through all time.

What should I pay attention to? (continued)

- **The Covenants** | Covenants were agreements made between God and people that established terms and set expectations of the relationship. The story of the Bible follows a sequence of covenants that all end up being broken by people who are unwilling or unable to keep up their end of the agreement. So God makes a “New Covenant” through Jesus, where God is the one who holds up both ends of the agreement.
- **The Messiah (“Christ” in Greek)** | There is a recurring theme that runs all the way through the Bible, that God was going to send a “chosen one” or “Messiah” in the form of a human who would perfectly represent God, make people holy, and bring heaven and earth together in relationship. This person was Jesus – God as a human.
- **The Day of the Lord** | There are multiple “Days of the Lord” that happen in scripture that are moments of God bringing justice, punishing sin, and restoring people. Every “Day of the Lord” serves to point to one final, ultimate Day of the Lord when God will permanently remove all sin from the world, serve final justice against every evil ever committed, heal and restore people, and live together with humanity for the rest of eternity.

How should I start reading the Bible?

It is easy to get overwhelmed when you first start reading the Bible, so here are some tips that may help:

- **Pick a book |** You don't need to start at the beginning – as we've already said, the Bible isn't laid out like that. Find a book in the Bible that you find interesting and slowly study through it. Some good places to start are:
 - **The Gospel of Mark** (*simple introduction to Jesus*)
 - **Ephesians** (*a letter that is great for new believers*)
 - **Genesis** (*helps you understand the origin of a lot of things*)
 - **Proverbs** (*lots of practical wisdom and advice*)
 - **Psalms** (*helps you understand how to pray, share your emotions with God, and trust Him in things you don't understand*).
- **Make it normal |** Make a habit of studying the Bible regularly that actually works for you – then hold yourself to it, even when you don't feel like it. You may not have a big, life-changing realization every time you read the Bible. That's ok. Sometimes you just have to come back to it and keep going. Being consistent with your Bible reading makes a huge difference in how much you get out of it.
- **Read to understand |** It's tempting to read too much at one time and get overwhelmed. The Bible is actually designed to be read slowly and thoughtfully, so take your time with it. Read the amount that you feel you can understand and then spend time thinking about it. Maybe memorize a verse that stood out to you, do some journaling about what you read, or write down questions that you have and share them with others that you're studying the Bible with.
- **Listen instead of reading |** Some people find that they understand it better when the Bible is being read to them, and many Bible apps and websites will do that. Find one of those and listen to the Bible while walking, relaxing, driving to work, etc. Even if you like reading, you may get a whole different perspective on a book of the Bible by listening to it straight through.

How can I avoid misunderstanding what I am reading in the Bible?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT | So far, we have talked about literature types, genre, organization, storyline, and themes – we have to put all of that together to understand context. Context is so important because the context of a passage in the Bible can completely change the meaning of what is being said. The biggest mistake people make in reading the Bible is not taking the time to understand context. **Here are some important discovery questions you can ask yourself to understand the context of what you're reading in the Bible:**

- What kind of book in the Bible is this?
- What is the writing style of this passage?
- Who was it written to?
- When was it written?
- What was going on at that time?
- What words or phrases are being repeated in the passage, and how are they used throughout this book?

STUDY THE BIBLE WITH OTHERS | Everyone should take the time to study the Bible on their own, but it's also important to study the Bible together with other people. As we've already said, the Bible is a very complex collection of books. Studying together with other people can really help us understand what we're reading. It can also help us catch things we might have missed or see something we just read from a different point of view. The Bible is actually designed to be read, studied, and lived out in a community – so this makes sense. Plus, if you're new to reading the Bible, studying with others is maybe the best way to get comfortable reading it on your own.

PRAY | One of the things the Bible teaches is that God will actually help us understand the Bible when we ask Him to. So, whenever studying the Bible, start by praying and asking God to help you understand what you are about to read. You may be surprised by the difference it makes.

Other resources?

Below is a list of resources that contributed to much of what we have covered so far. These sources also contain helpful tools and content for studying the Bible. Make sure to check them out.

- www.netBible.org
- www.BibleProject.com
- www.blueletterbible.org
- www.BibleGateway.com
- www.DrMsH.com
- www.BibleThinker.org

The Bible story in order...

This chronological outline will take you through the Bible in the order things happen in the story

- Genesis 1-11
- Job 1-42
- Genesis 12-50
- Exodus 1-40
- Leviticus 1-27
- Numbers 1-15
- Psalm 90
- Numbers 16-36
- Deuteronomy 1-34
- Psalm 91
- Joshua 1-24
- Judges 1-21
- Ruth 1-4
- 1 Samuel 1-20
- Psalms 11, 59
- 1 Samuel 21-24
- Psalms 7, 27, 31, 34, 52, 56, 120, 140-142
- 1 Samuel 25-27
- Psalms 17, 35, 54, 63
- 1 Samuel 28-31
- Psalms 18, 121, 123-125, 128-130
- 2 Samuel 1-4
- Psalms 6, 8-10, 14, 16, 19, 21
- 1 Chronicles 1-2
- Psalms 43-45, 49, 84-85, 87
- 1 Chronicles 3-5
- Psalms 73, 77-78
- 1 Chronicles 6
- Psalms 81, 88, 92-93
- 1 Chronicles 7-10
- Psalms 102-104
- 2 Samuel 5
- 1 Chronicles 11-12
- Psalm 133, 106-107
- 1 Chronicles 13-16
- Psalms 1-2, 15, 22-24, 47, 68, 89, 96, 100-101, 105, 132
- 2 Samuel 6-7
- 1 Chronicles 17
- Psalms 25, 29, 33, 36, 39
- 2 Samuel 8-9
- 1 Chronicles 18
- Psalms 50, 53, 60, 75
- 2 Samuel 10
- 1 Chronicles 19
- Psalms 20, 65-67, 69-70
- 2 Samuel 11-12
- 1 Chronicles 20
- Psalms 32, 51, 86, 122
- 2 Samuel 13-15
- Psalms 3-4, 12-13, 28, 55
- 2 Samuel 16-18
- Psalms 26, 40, 58, 61-62, 64
- 2 Samuel 19-21
- Psalms 5, 38, 41-42
- 2 Samuel 22-23
- Psalms 57, 95, 97-99
- 2 Samuel 24
- 1 Chronicles 21-22
- Psalms 30, 108-110
- 1 Chronicles 23-25
- Psalms 131, 138-139, 143-145
- 1 Chronicles 26-29
- Psalms 127, 111-118
- 1 Kings 1-2
- Psalms 37, 71, 94, 119
- 1 Kings 3-4
- 2 Chronicles 1
- Psalm 72
- Song of Solomon 1-8
- Proverbs 1-24
- 1 Kings 5-6
- 2 Chronicles 2-3
- 1 Kings 7
- 2 Chronicles 4
- 1 Kings 8
- 2 Chronicles 5
- 2 Chronicles 6-7
- Psalm 136
- Psalms 134, 146-150
- 1 Kings 9
- 2 Chronicles 8
- Proverbs 25-29
- Ecclesiastes 1-12
- 1 Kings 10-11
- 2 Chronicles 9
- Proverbs 30-31
- 1 Kings 12-14
- 2 Chronicles 10-12
- 1 Kings 15
- 2 Chronicles 13-16
- 1 Kings 16
- 2 Chronicles 17
- 1 Kings 17-22
- 2 Chronicles 18-23
- Obadiah 1
- Psalms 82-83
- 2 Kings 1-13
- 2 Chronicles 24
- 2 Kings 14
- 2 Chronicles 25
- Jonah 1-4
- 2 Kings 15
- 2 Chronicles 26
- Isaiah 1-8
- Amos 1-9
- 2 Chronicles 27
- Isaiah 9-12
- Micah 1-7
- 2 Chronicles 28
- 2 Kings 16-17
- Isaiah 13-27
- 2 Kings 18
- 2 Chronicles 29-31
- Psalm 48
- Hosea 1-30
- Isaiah 31-39
- Psalm 76
- Isaiah 40-48
- 2 Kings 19
- Psalms 46, 80, 135
- Isaiah 49-66
- 2 Kings 20-21
- 2 Chronicles 32-33
- Nahum 1-3
- 2 Kings 22-23
- 2 Chronicles 34-35
- Zephaniah 1-3
- Jeremiah 1-40
- Psalms 74, 79
- 2 Kings 24-25
- 2 Chronicles 36
- Habakkuk 1-3
- Jeremiah 41-52
- Lamentations 1-5
- Ezekiel 1-48
- Joel 1-3
- Daniel 1-12
- Ezra 1-6
- Psalm 137
- Haggai 1-2
- Zechariah 1-14
- Esther 1-10
- Ezra 7-10
- Nehemiah 1-13
- Psalm 126
- Malachi 1-4
- Luke 1
- John 1
- Matthew 1
- Luke 2
- Matthew 2
- Matthew 3
- Mark 1
- Luke 3
- Matthew 4
- Luke 4-5
- John 2-4
- Matthew 8
- Mark 2
- John 5
- Matthew 12
- Mark 3
- Luke 6
- Matthew 5-9
- Luke 7
- Matthew 11
- Luke 11
- Matthew 13
- Luke 8
- Mark 4-5
- Matthew 10
- Matthew 14
- Mark 6
- Luke 9
- John 6
- Matthew 15
- Mark 7
- Matthew 16
- Mark 8
- Matthew 17
- Mark 9
- Matthew 18
- John 7-10
- Luke 10-17
- John 11
- Luke 18
- Matthew 19
- Mark 10
- Matthew 20-21
- Luke 19
- Mark 11
- John 12
- Matthew 22
- Mark 12
- Matthew 23
- Luke 20-21
- Mark 13
- 311. Matthew 24-26
- Mark 14
- Luke 22
- John 13-17
- Matthew 27
- Mark 15
- Luke 23
- John 18-19
- Matthew 28
- Mark 16
- Luke 24
- John 20-21
- Acts 1-14
- James 1-5
- Acts 15-16
- Galatians 1-6
- Acts 17
- 1 Thessalonians 1-5
- 2 Thessalonians 1-3
- Acts 18-19
- 1 Corinthians 1-16
- 2 Corinthians 1-13
- Romans 1-16
- Acts 20-28
- Colossians 1-4
- Philemon 1
- Ephesians 1-6
- Philippians 1-4
- 1 Timothy 1-6
- Titus 1-3
- 1 Peter 1-5
- Hebrews 1-13
- 2 Timothy 1-4
- 2 Peter 1-3
- Jude 1
- 1 John 1-5
- 2 John 1
- 3 John 1
- Revelation 1-22