

An Excerpt From:

HOW TO READ AND UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

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Introduction:

The Bible is the greatest book ever known in human history. It has sold more copies than any other book in history. It has been translated into more languages than any other book, has been proven to be more historically accurate, and has impacted nations and empires more than any other book in history.

On the other hand, the Bible has also been criticized, attacked, misused, quoted out of context, shredded, banned and manipulated more than any other book in human history.

What makes the Bible such a controversial book? It might be because of its claims. The Bible calls itself the revelation of God. It is said to outline God's plan for humanity, both the beginning and end of history. It claims to be a complete revelation, meaning there is no need for any other religious books. However, its language can seem ancient at times, and events in the Bible seem to be illogical. How can a person read the Bible, believe it to be true and accurate, and understand it completely?

The goal of this booklet is to give you a frame of reference. A frame of reference is like a point on a map that says, "You Are Here!". It lets you know where to begin to understand the rest of the map. Developing a frame of reference is important in reading and understanding the Bible.

Full 80 page book available at Foothills Christian Church
Dr. Douglas Peake, Lead Pastor
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You Are Here!

The first step in understanding the Bible is to put yourself in the right frame of mind. There are four principles a person must keep in mind in order to be able to understand what the Bible is teaching or saying.

Principle #1: Understand Your Perspective

You are reading the plan of God, played out over 1,500 years. Even though the Bible begins with God creating the heavens and the earth, the plan of God begins to get personal in Genesis, Chapter 11, with Abraham.

The story of Abraham begins in approximately 1900 B.C. The plan of God is played out over the next centuries culminating in the birth of Jesus Christ around 3 B.C. (even though dating revolves around the birth of Jesus and then His death, the monk who did this didn't calculate very well.) This section is often referred to as the Old Testament. The New Testament begins with the birth of Jesus and concludes approximately around 90 A.D., when the Apostle John recorded his vision called "The Apocalypse", commonly called the Book of Revelation.

When a person reads about events in the Old Testament - dating back 3,000 years - it is easy to misunderstand why God had them do what they did. For instance, why would God have the Israelites go to war with another tribe of people and ask them to wipe out the tribe? On the surface it doesn't seem to make sense. It doesn't "fit" with what the rest of the Bible teaches about the character of God.

When you hit questions like this, try to remember your perspective. Remember that you are seeing these events from a far-off perspective, looking back thousands of years. All that time makes a huge difference in understanding. For instance, slavery in America was practiced until the Civil War, which happened only over 150 years ago. What were they thinking only 150 years ago, where they thought slavery was an acceptable practice? In some cases, people tried to use the Bible to support slavery. Yet, when a person reads the Bible today, they think, "How in the world did people get the Bible to support slavery? I see it mentioned, but I certainly don't see the Bible teaching it as the thing to do!".

Therefore, make sure that when you read the Bible and you come across the events that don't make sense, remember that you are reading about things that happened a long time ago and were in a culture that is far removed from your own frame of reference. There are answers, but a person has to dig deeper to truly understand what God was doing.

Principle #2: Give It the Proper Respect

Thomas Jefferson once said, "Not only is yesterday's news fit only for the bottom of a bird cage, but today's as well."

He didn't have much respect for the newspaper medium. However, the Bible calls itself the very words of God(1). Consequently, a person must read it in an attitude of respect. When the attitude of respect is gone, the Bible becomes difficult to understand.

God, speaking through Paul, states, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."(2)

When a person reads the Bible with respect, they are seeking to read through spiritual eyes. They are requesting the Holy Spirit to use the words of the Bible to speak to them. Therefore, when a person who doesn't believe the Bible to be the Word of God reads it only to critique it, it sounds like foolishness to them. Also, when a person reads the Bible to grind an agenda not in sync with God's will, the Bible sounds harsh and rigid.

It is important that a person seek to read and study the Scriptures in the right frame of mind. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring them understanding and wisdom in the reading of the words of God.

(1)2 Timothy 3:16: "All scripture is God-breathed..."

(2)1 Corinthians 2:14

Principle #3: The Events Are in a Context

When you are reading passages from the Old Testament, you are reading about events or situations that were meant to show man's need for a Savior. When you are reading the New Testament, you are reading about how God sent a Savior for humanity and how that incident affected the world.

Secondly, it is also important to note that the Old Testament is written in many different styles. Some of the books are like history books, telling about events in a chronological order. These books record good things and bad things that men did. Other books are poetry - like Psalms - which record how people felt about God in ancient days.

In the New Testament, the four gospels are biographies on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Book of Acts is the history of the church, how it began and what it did in the 30 years immediately following the resurrection of Jesus.

Principle #4: The Bible is About God, Not You

It is about His plan, His thoughts, His ideas and why He ultimately is doing what He is doing. John Piper once preached a message where he stated that preaching Scripture is tough because ultimately it is difficult to really comprehend the mind of God. It requires concentration, effort, focus, and plain old mental energy.

Consequently, when I read the Bible, I have to expect that I will not immediately "get it". Sometimes I need to think, reflect and mature before I truly understand what God is saying. The Bible is a revelation of what God is doing and why.

On a personal note, try as I might, I won't always understand what He was doing and why He said what He said. At times it can be perplexing, but I read and seek to understand. When I don't "get it", I pray God gives me wisdom to understand. Most importantly, I pray for willingness to bend myself to what God is teaching me through the Scriptures. Often, the issue is not that I cannot understand what God has included in the Bible, it is that I don't want to believe it. In these instances, it is not wisdom I need, but willingness. I need to make the commitment not to doubt the Scriptures, rebel against them or reject them. I pray that understanding will come to me as I bend myself to what He has written.

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

Introduction:

The first step in reading and understanding the Bible is to begin your journey in the New Testament. The Old Testament scriptures were included as a part of the Bible because the Apostles argued from them that Jesus was the Messiah. However, once the the New Testament came into existence, it is the better place to start.

One of the reasons for this is because when a person starts with the Old Testament, they have a tendency to mix Christianity and Judaism together into one belief system, and that can cause confusion. Therefore, as a Christian, it is best to begin with the New Testament so that you can gain a solid understanding of Jesus Christ and then study the Old Testament to see how they point to the Messiah - Jesus Christ.

Step One: Mark, Matthew, John and Luke

Read the biographies of Jesus, which are often called the Gospels. Please note that Matthew, Mark and John are not attempting to be a chronological account of His ministry. This is left to Luke.

Also, remember the target audience of each Gospel. Matthew was writing to convince Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. Mark was trying to give a quick account and John was asserting that Jesus was God's only Son. I strongly suggest that you end with Luke.

Step Two: Read the Book of Acts

This is where you will learn how the church was started and what happened to it in the first 30 years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the first half of the book, Peter seems to be the main character. In the second half, Paul becomes the main character. Finally, reading Acts will show you why all the rest of the letters - or epistles - were written.

Acts will show you that Peter and Paul (along with others) began planting churches in various towns. The letters (epistles) which make up the rest of the New Testament, are written to these churches.

Step Three: Read 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus

These three letters are called the “pastoral letters”. They were written by Paul to two of his close disciples toward the end of his ministry. Reading them gives you the idea of what is important to Jesus concerning His church. You also see how it is important to continue to grow in your faith and gain maturity.

Step Four: Read 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon

These are letters written to churches by Paul. They are great to read because they show you all the issues the early church dealt with and how they overcame problems. They are also good because there is a lot of instruction on how to live your life as a follower of Jesus Christ.

Step Five: Read James

The Book of James was not written by the Apostle, but by the brother of Jesus. James, the brother of Jesus, was the chief elder (sometimes called bishop) of the church in Jerusalem. He writes an excellent book for Christian living. After you have read all of the previous letters by Paul, it helps to read James to round out your understanding of what it means to follow after Jesus Christ.

Step Six: Read 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, Jude and 1 & 2 Thessalonians

These are a great grouping of books because they are not necessarily long, and they show the different aspects of growing deeper in the faith. John is exceptionally good at teaching about the love God has for us and how we are called to love as His followers.

Step Seven: Read Romans, Hebrews and Revelation

These are deep books. Romans is a book of deep teaching. Paul wrote it to lay out specific arguments about how faith in God is based upon the redemptive act of Jesus Christ on the cross. Here you will discover how important faith in Jesus Christ is to God.

Hebrews was written to Jews who had become Christians, but were thinking of returning to Judaism and rejecting the idea that Jesus was the Messiah. The book is an excellent in depth study of the importance of Jesus and His work on the cross; most specifically, how God intended everything to rest on His sacrifice.

Finally, the most difficult book to understand is Revelation. Don't be surprised if much of what you read does not make sense. The reason for this is found in the very first chapter. John tells us that this book is a record of a vision - or dream - he had while exiled on the island of Patmos.

Visions and dreams are often difficult to describe, let alone completely understand. Look for themes and general ideas as you read. Try not to get locked down in all of the imagery and detail.

Readings in the Old Testament:

Step One: Read Genesis and Exodus

There are many good books to read in the Old Testament that will teach you about the character of God and His desire to come and save His people. The best place to start is to read the Book of Genesis and the Book of Exodus. These two books show you the earliest plan of God and His heart to connect with His creation.

When you read Genesis, take note of the covenant God makes with Abraham in Chapter 12:1-3. This is a significant anchor for the rest of the book. As you continue to read, look for these covenants. They are the stepping stones of understanding the plan of God.

Step Two: Read Joshua and Judges

These two books tell about the early history of the nation of Israel after they were set free from their Egyptian slavery.

Step Three: Read 1 & 2 Samuel

The reading of these two books of history will show you how King David came on the scene and what happened in his life. They are excellent books when it comes to understanding the importance of King David.

Step Four: Read Psalms

Once you understand where King David comes from, then it is easy to understand the psalms. David wrote many of the psalms as worship songs to God.

Step Five: Read Isaiah

Isaiah was the most prolific book of prophecy concerning Jesus. It is an excellent book to read and see how God had planned from the beginning of the creation of the world to send His Son.

Conclusion:

There are many other books in the Old Testament to read. However, these revolve around a very confusing history of the nation of Israel and how God sent prophets to convince the people to turn back to God. Once you have read this far and feel you have a solid understanding of the Bible, look for materials that will help you understand the other books of the Bible in the Old Testament.

The Bottom Line: Keep Going!

There is so much to discover and learn. Reading the Bible has become a source of great encouragement and instruction for millions of people for centuries throughout the world.

Let God speak to you through HIS GLORIOUS WORD!