

Ryken's
BIBLE
handbook

LELAND RYKEN
PHILIP RYKEN
JAMES WILHOIT



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THE BIBLE AS A BOOK

God's Revelation to the Human Race

FORMAT. Old Testament: 929 chapters, 23,138 verses; New Testament: 260 chapters, 7,957 verses; Cumulative: 1,189 chapters, 31,095 verses

AUTHORS' PERSPECTIVE. God, the ultimate author, speaks with complete authority and knowledge. God used human authors to write the Bible's individual books, which provide both the human perspective and the divine perspective on life.

PURPOSES OF THE BOOK.

1. A revelatory purpose: The Bible reveals to people the things that God most wants them to know.
2. A salvific (pertaining to salvation) purpose: The Bible is designed to lead people to trust in Jesus Christ for salvation and eternal life.
3. A practical purpose: The Bible shows people how to live and what to avoid.
4. A nurturing purpose: The Bible is a means by which believing readers find refreshment and an infusion of grace.

SPECIAL FEATURES. The divine authority that is evident throughout the Bible; the immense range of subject matter; the large number of types of writing (literary genres); the pervasive religious orientation of the material; a format of two testaments, corresponding to God's old and new covenants with his people; the Bible's unified message across many books from many centuries; the only infallible, inerrant book ever written, and God's only written revelation to humanity

CHALLENGES FACING THE READER OR TEACHER OF THIS BOOK.

1. The immense length and magnitude of the book
2. The ancient strangeness of the Bible's world and customs, when compared to our own

3. The diversity of subject matter and forms of writing
4. The fact that most of the Bible is embodied in distinctly literary forms rather than the utilitarian prose of our daily lives
5. The way in which the Bible's refusal to gloss over human failing convicts us of our own failings
6. The need for spiritual discernment to understand the Bible's spiritual truth

HOW TO MEET THE CHALLENGES.

1. Relinquish the idea that you need to read the Bible through as you read a novel. Instead, read the Bible as you do other anthologies of diverse writings.
2. The Bible requires a "bifocal" approach: First, enter the world of the Bible, and then look *through* that world to your own.
3. Relish the Bible's different forms of expression.
4. Welcome the opportunity to put into practice what you have learned about literature and to learn more about how literature works.
5. Accept the Bible's bad news about human behavior, and pay attention to what the Bible says about God's gracious solution to the problem of human sinfulness.
6. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you into the truth of God's Word.

FACT SHEET

T*his great story has within it many complex parts—fragments of history, law codes, moral systems, stories, poems, prophecies, philosophies, visions, wise sayings, letters—but the main structure or outline is simple. It can be seen as a completed circle which first moves downward from the garden of Eden into the wilderness of human history, and then slowly and painfully back to the starting point, as man proceeds toward Eden restored or the New Jerusalem.*

ALVIN AND HOPE LEE
The Garden and the Wilderness

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy	Pentateuch	History	The Old Testament: 39 Books	Christ's Saving Work Promised and Foreshadowed	"Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets." (Hebrews 1:1)
Joshua through Esther: Twelve Books	History	Poetry and Proverbs			
Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs	Poetry and Proverbs	Major Prophets			
Hosea through Malachi ("The Book of the Twelve")	Minor Prophets	Major Prophets			
Matthew, Mark, Luke, John	Gospels	Minor Prophets			
Book of Acts	Church History	Gospels			
Romans through Colossians (Seven Epistles)	Epistles to Churches	Church History			
Thessalonians through Philemon (Six Epistles)	Pastoral Epistles to Individuals	Epistles to Churches			
Hebrews through Jude (Eight Epistles)	General Epistles	Pastoral Epistles to Individuals			
Book of Revelation	Apocalypse	General Epistles			
			The New Testament: 27 Books	Christ's Life and Saving Work Accomplished	"Now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son." (Hebrews 1:2)

The Bible as a Whole

Most people experience the Bible as a collection of individual pieces. This is not totally wrong, inasmuch as the Bible is made up of individual books. The very word *Bible* (*biblia*) means “little books.” But the Bible is also *a* book. The purpose of this introductory chapter on the Bible as a book is to delineate ways in which the Bible forms a unity.

The Form of the Book

In its external format, the Bible is an anthology of diverse works by separate authors. At this level, though not in its content, the Bible reminds us of an anthology of English or American literature. Its individual books were written by at least three dozen human authors over a span of nearly two thousand years. Like other anthologies, the Bible is composed of numerous different genres (types of writing, such as narrative and poetry). This comprehensive anthology, which is a book for all seasons and temperaments, covers every aspect of life.

The Bible as a Story

Although the Bible is not a single story, and even though it includes many nonnarrative genres, it is nonetheless helpful to think of the overall pattern

of the Bible as a story. If we take a wide-angle view, the Bible is a series of events having a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning is literally the beginning—God’s creation of the world, as narrated in Genesis 1–2, and humankind’s spoiling of that world, as narrated in Genesis 3. The end of the story is literally the end—God’s final destruction and banishment of evil and his establishing of eternal bliss for believers in Christ—as narrated in the book of Revelation. The middle of the story consists of God’s providential oversight of fallen human history.

- “The Holy Scriptures are our letters from home.” *Augustine of Hippo*
- “Think in every line you read that God is speaking to you.” *Thomas Watson*
- “The Bible is worth all other books which have ever been printed.” *Patrick Henry*

The overall shape of this story is like a *U* in which events begin in perfection, fall into corruption, and painfully wind their way back to the final defeat of evil and the triumph of good. The crucial turning point is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because the Cross entails the horrific death of God’s Son, it is the lowest point of all, yet paradoxically this proves to be the basis for elevating humanity to salvation, as the Resurrection proves.

While human actions are important in this story, the story of the Bible is primarily the story of God’s working out his purposes in history and

How We Got the Bible

The process that produced our English Bibles involved five distinct steps:

Revelation. This expresses the idea of an unveiling of something that is hidden so that it can be known and understood. When we speak of the Bible as revelation, it is a description of God's actively disclosing to people dimensions of his nature, character, glory, attributes, ways, will, values, and plans—in short, of himself as a person—so that humans may know him. Without revelation, there could be no Scripture.

Inspiration. When we speak of the word *inspiration* theologically, we use it in a different sense from what we mean when we say that an artist is inspired. In theology, inspiration refers to the fact that God infused the process of writing Scripture with his presence, so we can say that the words of Scripture are the very words of God. This does not diminish the genuine human element that was involved in the craft of writing the books of Scripture. The Bible is a product of human and divine activity. God guided the writing of the authors without bypassing their experiences, personalities, and literary craft.

Transmission. Several thousand years ago God gave humans a divinely inspired, self-disclosed, revelatory message. But this would be nothing more than an interesting bit of history were it not for the careful transmission of these texts through the centuries. The Bibles we have today are the product of Hebrew scribes and Christian monks who carefully copied the manuscripts and preserved them accurately.

Canon. The word *canon* means “measuring stick.” Since the fourth century, Christians have used *canon* as a term for the authoritative list of books of the Bible. It is a measuring stick in that it reflects the standard for determining the authenticity of books to be read in church and used in worship as the Word of God. The canon was not something imposed on the books of the Bible. It was a matter of *recognizing* the books that had risen to the status of an authoritative canon. This process of recognition occurred over several centuries and was never marked by a single up-and-down vote. The formation of the canon was a process of determining a book's historicity and in the case of the New Testament, ascertaining a clear apostolic connection.

Translation. The Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. To be of practical use, the Bible needs to be in the language of the people. The oldest and most important translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (into Greek) is what we know as the Septuagint. This translation had its origins in the third century BC in Alexandria, Egypt, and was the Bible used in the earliest churches. The impulse to translate the Bible continued with the famous Latin translations, and it is still going on today as the gospel is carried to every tribe and tongue.

eternity. Not only is God the One in control, but he also has a plan that unfolds as the story progresses. It is a story of providence (oversight and provision for the world); judgment against evil; and redemption from destruction through the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. (For more on the story dimension of the Bible, see “The Story Lines of the Bible,” page 9.)

The protagonist, or central character, in the story is the triune God. The unifying plot conflict is the great spiritual battle between good and evil, between God and Satan. God’s unfolding plan—centered on the saving work of Jesus Christ—weaves its way through this plot conflict. The setting encompasses total reality, including heaven, earth, and hell.

The Cast of Characters

The leading character, or protagonist, of the Bible is God. He is the One whose presence as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit unifies the story of universal history with its myriad of details. The characterization of God is the central motif, or theme, of the Bible, and it is pursued from beginning to end. Correspondingly, a question that will continually yield analytic insights for individual passages in the Bible is, *What do we learn about the character of God in this passage?*

All other characters and events interact with this divine protagonist. They are ultimately judged according to their relationship with God: He rewards those who seek him and depend on him for salvation, and he punishes those who rebel against him. The cast of characters appears endless. In one way or another, the Bible encompasses all creatures, including ourselves.

A distinctive feature of the Bible is the supernatural world that surrounds and transcends earthly existence. Earthly existence is not self-contained. Events and human experiences keep reaching beyond the earthly and physical realm to the supernatural and spiritual realm. Seemingly mundane events such as the falling of rain or the birth of a child are shown to be part of an unseen spiritual reality, which God calls people to believe in by faith.

Three Impulses That Govern Biblical Writers

One way to organize the material in the Bible is to distinguish among three impulses that governed the writers as they selected their material and three corresponding types of writing. They are as follows:

- The historical impulse: This means that much of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, is firmly rooted in the history of an author’s

The Story Lines of the Bible

To speak of *the* story line of the Bible, in the singular, is simplistic and a partial distortion of what we actually find in the Bible. It is more helpful to identify several story lines that unify the Bible as a whole.

The story of salvation history. The main story in the Bible unfolds as follows: God creates a perfect world. Adam and Eve introduce sin into the world. God's judgment stands against human sinfulness, but throughout human history God has had a plan whereby his grace saves those who believe in the atonement of his Son, Jesus Christ. The Bible's story of salvation history is an intricate network of interrelated events and references, all of them centering in the redemptive work of Jesus in his death and resurrection. (For more on the story of Jesus throughout the Bible, see the article on page 17.)

The story of how God governs history. God performs acts in addition to salvation. In the Bible we read the story of God's acts of creation, acts of providence (provision and control) in the history of nations and individuals, and individual acts of mercy and judgment. Because this story encompasses all creatures and all time, it is sometimes called universal history.

The story of how God intends people to live. Many passages deal with the conduct of life in the everyday world. By positive and negative examples and by means of many different genres, the Bible tells the story of how God intends people to live.

The great conflict. Another unifying thread in the Bible is the great spiritual and moral battle between good and evil. A host of details and characters make up this conflict: God and Satan, angels and demons, God and his rebellious human creatures, good and evil people, inner human impulses toward obedience or disobedience to God. Virtually every story, poem, and proverb in the Bible contributes to the ongoing plot conflict between good and evil.

The drama of the soul's choice. The story of salvation narrates the sovereign work of God in history, but there is a human counterpart in the Bible, consisting of the choices people make. On virtually every page, we observe the choices of characters. Some of these choices represent responses to God while others are responses of people to one another or to their external circumstances. The individual "chapters" in this story are series of actions and mental attitudes in which people choose between good and evil. Life is momentous as we witness characters at the crossroads of life. For the characters of the Bible, there is no neutral ground: They choose either for or against God.

time. The resulting writing is filled with historical facts and figures that require us to look for universal religious and moral principles that apply to our situation today.

- The literary impulse: Literature has two main characteristics: (1) the content of human experience, rendered as concretely as possible in order to capture the very qualities of life as we live it and (2) the embodiment of that content in distinct literary genres, such as story, poetry, vision, and many others.
- The theological impulse: In this type of writing, the primary aim is to express ideas about God and religion in a direct way. Because the Bible is a religious book, many people think that it is entirely theological, but in terms of how the material is presented, this is untrue. The other two types of writing are as much in evidence in the Bible as the theological type is.

These three impulses converge in the Bible. Most passages possess some qualities of all three. Nonetheless, one is usually dominant in a given passage, and individual passages will yield most if they are approached first of all in terms of the kind of material they contain and also the author's intention in the passage.

The Purposes of the Book

The Bible serves multiple purposes. Above all, the Bible exists to lead people to see their need of a savior and to believe in the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for salvation. Paul told Timothy that it was by “the holy Scriptures” that he was enabled to “receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15), and John said that the purpose of his Gospel was “that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life” (John 20:31). A second aim is to guide people in daily living: As the psalmist said, “Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path” (Psalm 119:105).

Additionally, the Bible informs and illuminates our minds, telling us the religious and moral truths that we need to know to make adequate sense of what we encounter day by day: “The teaching of [God’s] word gives light” (Psalm 119:130). Reading the Bible also equips believers to live godly lives. According to 2 Timothy 3:16-17, the Bible “is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.”

Finally, the Bible exists to exalt the triune God. The glorious character and works of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are continuously lifted up in our praise as we read the Bible. Thus the Bible enables us to achieve the purpose for which we were made, namely, to glorify God and enjoy him forever, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism states.

The Flow of the Book

The story of this massive book is episodic, not a single action such as we find in a novel. Additionally, the narrative sections are continually interrupted by nonnarrative elements. Still, there is an inner sequence to the material, based partly on historical chronology, partly on the progression from the Old Testament to the New, and partly on the literary genres of the Bible.

The broadest structure is found in the two divisions of the Bible: the Old Testament, or Old Covenant, and the New Testament, or New Covenant. The basic principle is that the Old Testament foreshadows its fulfillment in the New Testament. Events and themes in the Old Testament look forward to the New; events and themes in the New Testament look back to the Old.

The percentage of the Old Testament found in the New is larger than most people think. One-third of the New Testament consists of Old Testament allusions or quotations (Andrew E. Hill, *Baker's Handbook of Bible Lists* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 104). Northrop Frye has expressed the importance of this in this way: "References to the Old Testament in the New . . . extend over every book—not impossibly every passage—in the New Testament. . . . The New Testament, in short, claims to be, among other things, the key to the Old Testament, the explanation of what the Old Testament really means. . . . The general principle of interpretation is traditionally given as 'In the Old Testament the New Testament is concealed; in the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed'" (Northrop Frye, *The Great Code* [New York: Harcourt, 1982], 79).

As we move through the Bible from beginning to end, we can organize blocks of books into the following progressive phases:

- Creation and the Fall (primeval history—the Bible's story of origins)

- "All Sacred Scripture is but one book, and that one book is Christ, because all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ." *Hugh of St. Victor*
- "In the Old Testament, we have Jesus predicted. In the Gospels, we have Jesus revealed. In Acts, we have Jesus preached. In the Epistles, we have Jesus explained. In the Revelation we have Jesus expected." *Alistair Begg*

- Covenant (God's dealings with the patriarchs and the nation of Israel that stemmed from them—patriarchal and early national history)
- Exodus (law and epic as dominant genres)
- Conquest and early settlement in the Promised Land (history and hero stories—Joshua, Judges, Ruth)
- Israelite monarchy (court history, Psalms, and wisdom literature)
- Exile from and return to the land of Israel (prophecy)
- The life of Christ (the Gospels)
- Beginnings of the Christian church (Acts and the Epistles)
- Consummation of history (apocalypse)

The Religious Orientation of the Bible

The Bible is unified by its religious orientation. It is pervaded by a consciousness of God, and it constantly views human experience in a spiritual and moral light. Part of this orientation is the theme of two worlds—a visible earthly sphere and an unseen spiritual world that can be viewed only by faith. Biblical writers take it for granted that life exists simultaneously at these two levels. Their constant appeal is that people order their lives by the unseen spiritual realities that the Bible reveals.

Because human life is thus surrounded with spiritual and supernatural potential, the Bible invests human experience—our own experience—with a sense of ultimacy. All of life is revealed as having spiritual and supernatural importance. There is a constant penetration of the spiritual world into the earthly order and a continuous reaching of the earthly order upward toward the supernatural realm. God is a constant actor in human and earthly affairs. Every event takes on a spiritual and moral significance.

Another aspect of the religious orientation of the Bible is its vivid awareness of values. The sense of right and wrong is highlighted, and for biblical writers the question of what is good and what is evil is a preoccupation. Equally important is the sense of values, based on a conviction that some things matter more than others. Spiritual values hold a position of supremacy, and nothing assumes true value apart from its relationship to God.

Preoccupation with History

One thing that makes the Bible (especially the Old Testament) difficult for modern readers is the extensive attention that the biblical writers give to history. For us, this history is ancient history. The historical books of the Old Testament often read like “straight history,” and it is sometimes difficult to see what religious meaning or instruction we can extract from the

Ten Things the Bible Says about Itself

The Bible makes more claims about itself than perhaps any other book. The following are ten claims that human authors of the Bible make regarding this book:

- The Bible is God's Word and is thus more than a human book: "We also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God" (1 Thessalonians 2:13, ESV).
- God used human authors to write the Bible, and these writers wrote under God's direction: "No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21, ESV).
- The Bible is a guide that enables people to find their way through life: "Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105).
- The Bible teaches the way of salvation: "You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15).
- The Bible is necessary to life itself: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4, ESV).
- The purpose of the Bible is to equip people for Christian living: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17, ESV).
- The Bible is a living force in a person's life: "The word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires" (Hebrews 4:12).
- The Bible was written by authors who had mastered writing as a craft: "Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth" (Ecclesiastes 12:9-10, ESV).
- The Bible is accessible to us: "This command I am giving you today is not too difficult for you to understand, and it is not beyond your reach. It is not kept in heaven, so distant that you must ask, 'Who will go up to heaven and bring it down so we can hear it and obey?' . . . No, the message is very close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart so that you can obey it" (Deuteronomy 30:11-14).
- The Bible is stable and enduring: "The word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8); "Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words will never disappear" (Mark 13:31).

material. Combined with national history are other historical genres—the diary, the personal and family journal, biography, and hero story—that seem more accessible to us. Here is a specimen of the type of personal story that is frequently intermingled with national or public history: “A man from Bethlehem in Judah left his home and went to live in the country of Moab, taking his wife and two sons with him. The man’s name was Elimelech, and his wife was Naomi. Their two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. . . . When they reached Moab, they settled there. Then Elimelech died, and Naomi was left with her two sons” (Ruth 1:1-3).

Several avenues exist for assimilating the historical parts of the Bible. One is to understand that the Bible is not a fictional book but a history book in which the acts of God really happen. A second avenue is to be aware that the history of the Bible is kept within a moral and spiritual framework, so that in reading it we learn what we need to know about God’s dealings with people and nations. What happened in ancient history is what happens throughout history and reaches to our own lives as well. Biblical history thus yields moral and religious lessons. Third, much of the history of the Bible is really salvation or redemptive history—the history of the family and nation through which Christ the Messiah was born.

This history is progressive: It unfolds in successive stages until it reaches its culmination in Christ. There is an obvious movement in God’s plan from interacting with a man (Adam) to a family (Abraham) to a nation (Israel) to the world (Jews and Gentiles in Christ).

Unity of Outlook

Despite its variety of authorship and diversity of material, a unifying worldview emerges from the Bible. The Bible is not a theological outline, but its ideas are ultimately unified, producing a unity of faith. God and people are the same throughout the Bible. The physical world is not considered good in one biblical book and bad in another; it is always good as created, even if corrupted by sin. More important, the nature of sin and the plan of salvation by God’s grace remain constant. Although salvation is administered in various ways at various times (e.g., the Old Testament sacrificial system), there is only one way of salvation: faith in Jesus Christ. How, then, were people saved before his coming? By believing in the Savior to come. This overriding doctrinal framework is the context within which we should read the Bible’s individual parts.

Of course no individual passage of the Bible is likely to cover the whole territory on a given topic. The parts are interdependent, and we must view them as a coherent whole. As we do this, we see paradoxes emerge: The Bi-

ble maintains a balance between such poles as the goodness and badness of people, the justice and mercy of God, the friendliness and hostility of the world of nature, and human responsibility and divine sovereignty.

Unifying Stylistic Traits

In a book as comprehensive as the Bible, there are no features of style that are evident in every passage. Yet the writers of the Bible do show certain preferences, including the following:

- A preference for the concrete over the abstract: Writers describe God as a rock or a shepherd, for example, not as deity defined in theological terms such as *omnipresence* or *omniscience*.
- A preference for realism: The writers of the Bible portray life as it really is, including the evil and ugly.
- A preference for simplicity of style: Paradoxically, the writers accompany this with majesty of effect.
- A preference for universal experiences and images rather than exclusive ones: The Bible shows life at its core, such as all people in all places at all times have known it.
- A preference for brevity: Biblical writers prefer brief units over lengthy ones.
- A preference for affective power: The Bible has a unique power to move our affections as we read.

Key Doctrines

Revelation. The Bible itself is a revealed book. In addition, in its pages we read much about Scripture, about God's revelation in nature (natural revelation) and to people, and about Christ as God's revelation of himself in human form.

God (Theology). The triune God's existence, attributes, and actions

The Works of God. Creation, providence, judgment, and salvation

The Person (Anthropology). Men and women are creatures made in God's image, human sinfulness and the moral responsibility of the creature, the renewal of the believer in Christ by the Holy Spirit, the eternal destiny of every person in heaven or hell

Covenant. The divine-human love relationship as demonstrated in a series of binding promises that God made with people

Christ (Christology). The person of Christ (focusing on his incarnation as the God-man) and the work of Christ (focusing on his perfect life, his atoning death, his glorious resurrection, and his triumphant return)

Salvation (Soteriology). How God accomplished redemption through Jesus Christ and applied it to believers through the Holy Spirit. The specific doctrines of salvation include election, justification by faith, adoption, sanctification, and glorification.

The Church (Ecclesiology). The nature and work of the church, including the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper

Last Things (Eschatology). The return of Christ, the final judgment, heaven, and hell

Tips for Reading or Teaching the Bible

Read and analyze books and passages in terms of their literary type, or genre, such as story or poem. Every genre has its own methods of operating and rules of interpretation, and passages begin to fall into place for us when we know and apply these to what we read. (Each of the major genres of the Bible receives a one-page article somewhere in this handbook. See the “Index of Articles” on page 659.)

As you read a book of the Bible or an extended story such as the story of Abraham, a whole “world” takes shape in your mind and imagination. Taking time to describe that world in general terms is a good way to clarify your thinking about what a book or story teaches or embodies. For example, the world of the story of Ruth is a domestic world in which family relationships are crucial.

Ask yourself what a passage reveals about God and people. Virtually every passage in the Bible is a comment about the nature of God and the nature of people. It is nearly always helpful to look for those comments in a specific passage.

The writers of the Bible have a picture of the world and of what is right and wrong in it. Accordingly, we can nearly always ask these questions of a passage: (1) What is the nature of reality (i.e., what really exists)? (2) What constitutes good or right? (3) What constitutes evil or wrong? (4) What is of most value, and what is of least value (the question of values)?

Look on the characters about whom you read as representing people in general. The material in the Bible is both particular and universal. As readers, we look first *at* the experience in a given passage. But we must also look *through* the particulars to universal human experience, including our own. With the Bible, the way to our hometown is through Jerusalem, that is, through the particular lives and places about which we read. As part of the universality of the Bible, the particular lives and places carry a significance larger than themselves.

Jesus throughout the Bible

It was the most amazing sermon ever. Jesus—who had just been raised from the dead—was walking with two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. As they walked, they talked, and “Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). This crucial verse proves that the whole Bible, including the Old Testament (or “Moses and all the prophets,” as they called it in those days), is about Jesus.

This is most obviously true of the prophecies about the Messiah (which means “Christ”). Such details as the place of his birth (Micah 5:2), the focus of his ministry (e.g., Isaiah 61), the manner of his death (e.g., Psalm 22; Isaiah 53), the certainty of his triumph (Genesis 3:15), the blessings of his covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34), and the eternity of his kingdom (2 Samuel 7:11-13) are all recorded in the pages of the Old Testament.

Further, many of the people, places, and events of the Old Testament bear witness to Christ. The law displays his righteousness; the sacrifices anticipate his atonement; the Tabernacle is a symbol of his incarnation; the psalms are his praises; and so forth. Similarly, the prophets, priests, and kings of Israel teach us about the prophetic, priestly, and kingly ministry of Jesus Christ (for information about Jesus as prophet, priest, and king, see the articles on pages 351, 71, and 153).

How do we recognize these connections? Primarily by reading what the New Testament says about the Old but also by learning what is truly symbolic in the Old Testament and then considering how each symbol is fulfilled in Christ.

The New Testament also is about Jesus. The four Gospels tell the story of his life, death, and resurrection, showing that he is the Son of God and the Savior of sinners. People usually think that the book of Acts is about the church, and it is. However, the author (Luke) begins by referring to his “first book” (the Gospel of Luke) and describes it as being “about everything Jesus *began* to do and teach” (Acts 1:1, emphasis added). The clear implication is that Jesus had more to do and teach (through his Holy Spirit), and that is the subject matter of the book of Acts.

Acts is followed by letters to the church of Jesus Christ. Each of these epistles gives further teaching about Jesus Christ and what it means to follow him. Finally comes the book of Revelation, which celebrates Jesus’ glory and promises his ultimate triumph over sin and Satan.

To summarize, the Bible is about Christ from beginning to end. The Savior expected in the Old Testament is exhibited in the Gospels, explained in the Epistles, and expected again in the book of Revelation. As we read and study the Bible, we enjoy an ongoing encounter with Jesus and his saving work.

Read most Bible passages through a general grid that contains the idea of law and gospel, or warning and promise. Most passages have a stated or implied “bad news” dimension (sin and judgment) accompanied by a stated or implied “good news” aspect (grace and hope).

Relate every aspect of Scripture to its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. Every chapter in this handbook has a section that identifies how each book of the Bible contributes to the Bible’s story of salvation in Christ.

Make a distinction between the different ways of reading the Bible. One is *devotional reading*, in which we read mainly to take in God’s truth and receive nourishment for our spirits. We might also call this *formative reading* because we seek to be formed by what we read. A second is *analytic reading*, or what we normally call Bible study. We can think of this as *informative reading*, meaning that we desire to learn as much as we can about a passage. This careful study of a passage or book of the Bible takes two forms: a quick reading to grasp the big picture, followed by a slower, more detailed analysis to discern the full richness of the passage or book.

Strike a balance between individual Bible study and Bible study in a group setting with other believers (or unbelievers in an evangelistic or preevangelistic Bible study).

Allow the beauty of the Bible to quiet your spirit. The writer of Ecclesiastes tells us that he “sought to find words of delight” (12:10, ESV). The beauty of the Bible is one of its appeals. As you read, allow it to arouse your love of beauty wherever you find it.

As an extension of this calming of your spirit, you can relish the sense of being restored to right thinking as you read the Bible and bring yourself into line with what the Bible says about how things should be in your own life and in the world.

Frequently Asked Questions

If you have had conversations about the Bible with people who are not Christians or who may simply be unfamiliar with God’s Word on any but a very elementary level, you have probably encountered some of the same questions over and over again. It is important to be prepared to answer these, not because having the answers is guaranteed to convince others of the truth of the Scriptures, but because having clear answers to these questions is part of following God’s command to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15, NIV). The following are some of the questions Christians encounter again and again:

How Can I Know for Sure That the Bible Is True?

1. The writers speak with great authority, often claiming that their words are actually God's words; you can trust the authority and reliability of the biblical writers.
2. For centuries, Christian believers have staked their lives on the truth of the Bible, and their lives attest that they made the right choice.
3. At the level of human experiences embodied in the Bible, you can confirm the Bible's truthfulness to reality simply by looking at the world around you and observing the daily news.
4. If you read the Bible with the presupposition that it is true, it will confirm its truthfulness to you.
5. Ancient history and archaeology generally confirm the truth of the Bible.
6. Finally, the best and fullest proof comes from the Holy Spirit: The same Spirit who inspired the Scriptures works in your mind and heart to convince you that the Bible is the Word of God.

What Is the Difference between the Old Testament God and the New Testament God?

There is no essential difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. God's character and attributes are the same in both: He is always holy and just, powerful and merciful, loving and kind. People sometimes think that there are more frequent displays of God's anger in the Old Testament or that the New Testament says more about God's love. However, the Old Testament is just as thoroughly a message of grace for sinners as the New Testament is. Furthermore, in the New Testament, God the Father and God the Son remain angry at sin and at people who defy their authority, although it is probably true that the Old Testament contains more *statements* about God's anger. And while it is true that with the coming of Christ, the events in the New Testament lean more in the direction of salvation, it is also true that the New Testament speaks clearly about the final judgment.

Where Should I Start to Read the Bible?

You can read the Bible profitably anywhere within its pages. There is a broad chronology to the Bible (as noted earlier in the Flow of the Book section), but in the final analysis the Bible is such a large anthology of separate pieces that you will not be able to hold it all in your mind at once. In a sense, the Bible is a reference book. What follows are a few generalizations to aid your reading of the Bible:

1. The four Gospels are the place where you can learn most directly about Jesus and his saving work.
2. The book of Psalms, being a collection of lyric poems, gives expression to the emotional side of the Christian life, teaching as well how to pray and worship.
3. The book of Genesis informs you about how the world and basic human institutions such as the family began. In these beginnings you can see many of the foundational principles by which individuals and societies need to live.
4. The Epistles (i.e., letters) explain the doctrinal and ethical principles of the Christian faith and teach what it means to belong to the church of Jesus Christ.
5. The book of Revelation is the most complete—but not the only—repository of information about the end times.

Why Is It Important to Read and Study the Old Testament?

1. Knowing the Old Testament is necessary in order to get a complete picture of God's character and of his saving work in history.
2. The Old Testament is a rich repository of universal human experience; it covers aspects of life that the New Testament does not.
3. The Old Testament contains poems, proverbs, and prophecies that are part of a complete understanding of the Christian faith.
4. What the New Testament teaches about the way of salvation is rooted in the Old Testament.
5. The fact that God revealed himself in the Old Testament proves that it is an important object of study. Jesus said, "I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. . . . I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God's law will disappear until its purpose is achieved" (Matthew 5:17-18).

The Main Themes

1. **THE CHARACTER OF GOD.** The unfolding characterization of God as he interacts with his creatures is the aspect of the Bible that is most continuously present.
2. **THE ACTS OF GOD.** The God of the Bible is preeminently the God who acts. His mighty works occur in six main arenas: heaven, human history, the nations, the people of God (believers), external nature, and individual human lives. The acts that he performs within

Teaching the Bible

We composed this handbook with teachers of the Bible continuously in mind. It is our hope that small-group leaders, Sunday school teachers, and anyone else who teaches the Bible will use the information and “prompts” as a springboard for analyzing the text when they prepare Bible study lessons.

Effective Bible teaching rests on three principles: First, Bible teaching must focus on the actual text of the Bible and should not allow anything else to obscure the Bible itself. So-called background information *about* the Bible is never a legitimate substitute for looking at the Bible itself. Second, the goal of Bible teaching is to deepen the teachers’ and students’ friendship with God through Jesus Christ. Third, God has chosen to communicate his truth and beauty in the Bible through human language and ordinary forms of writing (including literary forms such as story and poetry).

One of the most effective ways to teach the Bible is through the inductive method. This method is question based and leads learners through a three-step process of discovering the Bible’s meaning. Such a study begins with careful *observation* of the passage, largely through asking the questions who? what? when? where? how? and why? The purpose is to get learners to stare at the text and see for themselves what it says. After observation comes *interpretation* of the text to see what it meant for the first audience and what it means for us today. Finally, the study ends with a focus on *application* of the Scriptures to our own lives.

Here are the primary rules for mastering a text and then serving as a “travel guide” for students:

- Approach and understand the text in keeping with the kind of writing it is. This means asking the questions appropriate to the genre (literary type) of the text. With a story, for example, you look at characters, setting, and plot. For poetry, you ponder the images and figures of speech.
- Determine what unifies the passage you are preparing to teach. Unity is both thematic (one or more ideas that organize the passage) and structural (how the material is organized from beginning to end).
- Remember that you must first journey to the world of the ancient text and enter fully into the spirit of a passage in its original context, then make a return journey to your own time and place, applying the principles to your own situation.
- The task of interpretation is not complete until you have related the passage to the Bible’s central message of salvation in Jesus Christ.
- In applying the Bible, remember that coming through the historical particulars of the Bible are the universal experiences of the human race.

these arenas include creation, providence, judgment, and redemption.

3. THE NATURE OF PEOPLE. By means of both direct statements and stories about characters, the Bible gives full treatment to the question of what people are like. A balanced view of the person emerges as the Bible shows that people are capable of both unspeakable evil and, by the grace of God, powerful good.
4. THE NATURE OF THE VISIBLE WORLD. Here, too, we learn many things about the world that God created. Of particular importance is the idea that people's problems do not stem from the outside world; events in that world provide the occasion for people to respond in godly or ungodly ways.
5. THE EXISTENCE OF TWO WORLDS. An important part of the biblical worldview is that reality consists of two spheres: (1) the visible earth and (2) an unseen spiritual world. People inhabit both of these simultaneously.
6. THE DIVINE-HUMAN RELATIONSHIP. God and people are inevitably related, and the Bible explores the nature of God's relationship to people and their relationship to him. Biblical authors write out of a painful awareness that sin has disrupted the relationship but also out of a hopeful awareness that God's grace can restore it.
7. SALVATION BY GRACE. Human beings are not saved by virtue of their own actions. They are saved in spite of their sin, and only through a sacrifice of atonement.

Applying the Bible

There are no magic formulas or gimmicks for applying the Bible to our lives. Some time-tested principles of application include the following:

- As we mentioned earlier in this chapter, the way to our hometowns is through Jerusalem. This means that before we apply the Bible to our own lives, we need to understand a biblical passage in its original context. Do not be impatient with this. Before we can apply Paul's statements about whether or not to eat food offered to idols, we need to understand the facts about the offering of food to idols in the ancient Roman religion. The important principle here is that we need to look *at* the literal details of a text before we look *through* them to our own lives and times.
- Once we have journeyed to the world of the biblical text, we need to make a return trip to our own situations. We need to build bridges

between the biblical world and the modern world. Looking for universal human experience in the Bible is a great ally in this regard. So is the knack of seeing the timeless spiritual principles that are embodied in the literary and historical details of the Bible.

- Reading the Bible has a corrective value as we bring our lives and values into line with what we find there. As we read the Bible, we find our way of viewing the world and ourselves refashioned and set right. This is a form of application of the Bible to our lives.
- The Bible’s message is two-pronged: The bad news of God’s law shows us our sin, but the good news of the gospel shows us that God has grace for sinners. These two messages run right through the Bible, often appearing in the same passages. We apply the bad news about our sin by seeing our need for repentance, forgiveness, and correction; we apply the good news of grace by coming to God in faith, receiving Jesus Christ, and resolving to live the way God directs us to live.
- The Bible is full of examples—both positive and negative—that show us how to live in a way that is pleasing to God. The supreme example is Jesus Christ, whose righteous life and patient endurance in suffering establish the pattern for our own lives in the world.
- Reading the Bible is intended to draw us into worship. On every page we encounter God’s attributes and see his saving grace. The proper response is to give him the glory, turning the themes of Scripture into prayer and praise.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE BIBLE

What a book the Bible is, what a miracle, what strength is given with it to man. It is like a mould cast of the world and man and human nature, everything is there, and a law for everything for all the ages. And what mysteries are solved and revealed. Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s fictional character Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*

The most striking quality of the Bible as a book is its variety.

David Norton

The Bible is not “partly true and partly false, but all true, the blessed, holy Word of God.” J. Gresham Machen

The symbols of the Bible are simple and universal symbols, such as men and women everywhere can understand: food and drink, hunger and thirst, love and hatred, . . . light and darkness, laughter and tears, birth and death. Roland M. Frye

[The Bible is] the light to our paths, the key of the kingdom of heaven, our comfort in affliction, our shield and sword against Satan, the school of all wisdom, the [mirror] in which we behold God's face, the testimony of his favor, and the only food and nourishment of our souls. Preface to *The Geneva Bible*

There is a sense in which the Bible, since it is after all literature, cannot properly be read except as literature; and the different parts of it as the different sorts of literature they are. C. S. Lewis

The scripture containeth . . . first, the law, to condemn all flesh; secondarily, the gospel, that is to say, promises of mercy for all that repent and acknowledge their sins. William Tyndale

The heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby the Bible doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts. From the *Westminster Confession of Faith*

I have found in the Bible words for my inmost thoughts, songs for my joy, utterance for my hidden griefs and pleadings for my shame and feebleness. Samuel Taylor Coleridge

The Scriptures teach us the best way of living, the noblest way of suffering, and the most comfortable way of dying. John Flavel

Scripture is like a river, broad and deep, shallow enough for the lamb to go wading, but deep enough for the elephant to swim. Gregory the Great

The Scripture is the library of the Holy Ghost. Thomas Watson

The word of God will stand a thousand readings; and he who has gone over it most frequently is the surest of finding new wonders there. James Hamilton