

How to successfully read the Bible for the first time.

"It is commonly known that the Bible, in its hundreds of different translations, is the most widely distributed book in human history. Moreover, in all its forms, the Bible has been enormously influential, and not only among the religious communities that hold it sacred. The literature, art, and music of Western culture in particular are deeply indebted to biblical themes, motifs, and images. Translations of the Bible... not only influenced literature but also shaped the development of languages." Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2000

It is very common for people who decide to read the Bible for the first time to do the logical thing: start at the beginning and read to the end -- just like they would read most other books. However, the typical experience of reading the Bible this way usually results in the following: no problem reading through the first two books, Genesis and Exodus, but by the time Leviticus and Numbers are reached, most people bog down in the seemingly pointless details of genealogies, instructions and rules concerning just about everything. At this point, many people give up on reading the Bible, feeling that it is just not relevant to their lives. But, this is not the way to read the Bible!

A quick overview of the Bible reveals its structure. It is, first of all, a **collection of smaller books** -- some of which themselves are collections -- bridging thousands of years of time and written in several different languages by a variety of authors including shepherds, kings and fishermen. It is true that the Bible is arranged in very approximate **chronological order**. That is one of the reasons it has two major divisions called the "Old Testament" and the "New Testament." Also the Bible is organized by **writing styles**. First there is history, then poetry, then the writings of the prophets in the Old Testament. In the New Testament the order begins with four biographies of Jesus, then the history of the early Christians, then letters of early Christian leaders.

Finally, there are **six basic concepts** that have worked well in guiding me in over 40 years of Bible study. These concepts help to give some guidelines to the recommended order for reading the books of the Bible. But, more importantly, they affect how the entire Bible is read.

Concept #1: If the Bible were a wheel, the person of Jesus would be the center, or hub, of that wheel. The Old Testament predicts Jesus, shows mankind's failures in relationship to God without Jesus, and sets the stage of Jesus' arrival. The Gospels (a word which means "Good News") of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell the same story of Jesus' life from four different perspectives. The next book, the Acts of the Apostles, tells of selected events among the Christians after Jesus' death and resurrection. The rest of the books are letters of several early followers of Jesus explaining the significance of His life and death. The final book of the Bible looks forward to and describes Jesus' return to earth. The entire Bible revolves around Jesus as mankind's access to God.

Concept #2: The Biblical literature contains a wide spectrum of literary styles that should be taken into account when trying to read and understand it. For example, historical books of the Bible clearly are meant to be taken literally as real, accurate history. On the other hand, some books are entirely or partially full of highly allegorical word pictures that are clearly not to be taken literally. There are examples in Revelation, Daniel, Ezekiel, Song of Solomon and others. There are some sections that have an allegorical as well as literal meaning, and in some cases even the Biblical experts disagree on the allegorical vs. literal interpretation of a passage. The important thing to remember is that it is usually clear from the context whether a section should be read literally or allegorically. In doubtful cases, consult a Bible reference book or talk with one or more Christians with a solid understanding of the Bible.

Concept #3: "The New Testament is in the Old Testament contained. The Old Testament is in the New Testament explained." I don't know who said this, but I heard it years ago and have found it to be true. What this means is that the New Testament is like the concentrated form, or the distillation (to use chemistry terms) of the Old Testament. A single phrase in the New Testament, such as, "love your neighbor as yourself," may be demonstrated and modeled in many Old Testament events and sayings. But it is more than that. The Old Testament is also the foundation of the New.

The other side of the above, that the "Old Testament is in the New Testament explained," has to do with the fact that, like reading a good mystery novel, many "clues" in the beginning (the Old Testament) are brought together and made clear looking backward from what is revealed in the New Testament.

Concept #4: While the entire Bible becomes meaningful the more it is read, for the first-timer it can be treated like an encyclopedia or a cookbook -- neither of which do most people read from cover to cover starting at the beginning. Both of these types of books are read "as needed" according to the practical situation. The Bible was meant to be meaningful in the real lives of real people. The Bible is a large book and life is a journey, so we have different needs in our lives at different times. There are always parts of the Bible that apply to where our lives are right now -- whether we are happy, sad, upset, discouraged, questioning -- or any other place of human emotion or situation.

Concept #5: God doesn't change, but His dealings with mankind change over time. Just as a parent doesn't change in his love for a child, yet the way the parent interacts with the child changes as the child matures. This example with the parent-child relationship mirrors how God can be unchanging and yet changes His methods of relating to people through history. Thus, the Bible documents God's relationship with man over time. This is part of the reason that, on first reading, God as described in the Old Testament and in the New Testament appear to be different. In the same manner, a particular concept may be progressively revealed throughout the Bible. For example, there is very limited mention of life after death in the Old Testament, but this teaching is thoroughly developed by the end of the New Testament.

Concept #6: The Bible is a spiritual book. This does not mean that one's intelligence is unimportant in understanding the Bible, but if only intelligence is used without an open heart, then the warning Jesus addressed to the religious leaders of his day apply: "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life." Christians don't have a relationship with the Bible, but with the author of the Bible. What this has meant for me, among other things, is that parts of the Bible I know quite well can have new meaning for me at different times. The same verses "speak" to me in new ways. For this reason someone once said, "We don't judge the Bible, we let the Bible judge us."

This also means that, over time through many readings, even what at first seemed to be just meaningless details becomes part of an understandable pattern and a meaningful whole.

Finally, suggested reading order...

So, given these six concepts and the chronological and literary style organization of the text, what is a recommended pattern for general reading of the Bible?

For first time readers of the Bible I would recommend starting with the
Luke, then
Acts,
Genesis,
Exodus,
John,

begin Psalms (a few each time you read several chapters in another book) and Proverbs (one chapter each time you read several chapters in another book);

Deuteronomy,

Romans,

(After reading the above, a person has a reasonable grasp of what the Bible is about.) However, hopefully a person will go on....

Isaiah,

Mark,

Ecclesiastes,

Hebrews,

Joshua,

Judges,

Ruth,

Ephesians, Job, Philippians, First and Second Samuel, the Gospel according to Matthew, Colossians, First and Second Kings, First and Second Corinthians, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Galatians, Song of Solomon, First and Second Thessalonians, Jeremiah, First and Second Timothy, Lamentations, Daniel, James, the rest of the New Testament, the rest of the Old Testament.

This recommended reading pattern above aims at presenting a "balanced diet" of Old and New Testament and the different literary styles.

A good alternative approach is to read the entire New Testament and then the Old Testament, skipping past the parts that are too detailed.

Keep in mind there are many ways to explore the Bible -- studies of a topic, a theme, a character, studies of a book, a chapter, a single word. You can do an Internet search on "How to Study the Bible" and find a lot of different methods.

One last note: The Bible is meant more to tell us how to live in relationship to God and men than it is intended to answer all our deep questions about life and the universe. The Bible will answer some of your questions, but it will also generate more - especially on the intellectual level. Time, prayer, consultation with other Christians and repeated readings of the Bible will help your heart "hear" more and more from God.

I hope your reading of the Bible will be as important in your life as it has been for me.

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