

The Bible Overview

For many people, the idea of reading the Bible is pretty daunting. You look at it and realize that it is not a very short book. My personal Bible has 1,358 pages of text to read! The Bible isn't something that you can probably read all the way through in one sitting. We have several people in our church who have resolved to read their Bibles all the way through in one year, and this is a much better pace, although it will still take the whole year. When you look at the Bible, you might think to yourself: "I could never read something that large." Perhaps you enjoy long books, but you might say, "I could never understand that thing." I hope you have a Bible, and if you do, you should be reading it. If you don't have one, we here at First Baptist Church would love to provide one for you, free of charge. Simply contact us via the contact information found at the end of this broadcast.

Perhaps you may be thinking that you could never understand the Bible because someone has told you that you would not be able to understand it. I have heard of churches that tell their members, "Don't bother with that book. You wouldn't understand it anyway." Let me say this about the Bible: It is sometimes difficult to understand, this is true. But let me also say that the more you read your Bible, the easier it is to understand. Psalms 119:104 says "Through thy precepts I get understanding." There were things that I didn't understand when I first read the Bible, but now I understand them much better. It is like that with any book, whether an informational book or a novel. You may not understand what is going on, but as you read you may start to understand. You may have to read it through several times. Eventually, though, you have a good idea about what the author is trying to say.

Let me also say this: there are parts of the Bible you may never understand. This is for two reasons. Reason number one is this: God is much more complex than we are, and so it is difficult for us to understand His ways. I don't understand how the Red Sea parted in Exodus 13. I don't understand how the sun stood still for a whole day in Joshua 10. But these things don't mean they are not true. I don't understand why the God of the universe would love me enough to send His Son to be my sacrifice, but that doesn't mean it's not true. Isaiah 55 says this: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." God's thoughts are higher than ours, and so there are some things we cannot understand.

Reason number two is this: God may not want you to understand. There is a story in Daniel 12 where Daniel sees a vision in heaven and says: "And I heard, but I understood not: then said I, O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things?" The answer that came back from God was this: "Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end." Daniel was not given understanding. In 1 Corinthians 2:7 Paul says "But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory:" In Luke 24, there is a story of two men who see Jesus after He raised from the dead, and the Bible says, "But their eyes were holden that they should not know him." Some things are not to be understood at this time, but may be revealed in the future.

Notwithstanding, most of the Bible is completely understandable. The Bible was written, not only for the intellectual, but for the common man. If you can read, you can understand the Bible. If little children can understand it, and many do, then you can understand the Bible. God wrote His Word so that everyone could understand it. Let me give you an example of this. The New Testament was written at a time when Greek was essentially the language of the world. Alexander the Great's conquest of the known world and the hellenization of it made for a one world language that everyone needed to know. However, there were two forms of Greek writing. There was classic Greek, for the academics, and there was Koine Greek, or Common Greek, for the common man. The Bible was written in Koine Greek.

"Well," you say, "that's because the people who wrote it were fisherman and peasants! They knew little else!" This is false. While it is true that uneducated men like Peter did write some of the Bible, not everyone was. Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, and he was a doctor. Throughout his book, he gives the

impression that he was very intelligent, even down to using the right names for city officials throughout his travels. Another intelligent writer was the Apostle Paul. Before his conversion, he was one of the most sought after rabbis in the Jewish world. He had attained credentials that no one else had at that time. Once, Paul went to Mars Hill, in Athens the seat of Greek thought, and was able to aptly debate against the men gathered there. Read the Bible for yourself. Does it seem as though it was written by simple men? The Old Testament, too, has numerous examples of intelligent men who could write to the people of their day. Moses was trained in the court of the king of Egypt, the most powerful empire at the time. Nehemiah was employed by the king of Persia, who ruled the known world at the time. These were not lightweights.

No, God used these men, who were intelligent, to write a Book that could easily be understood by the common man. God wanted people to be able to understand it. 1 John 5:13 says, "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God." The very last verse in the Gospel of John says this: "But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name." Paul, writing to his friend Timothy says this in 2 Timothy 3:15 "And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." Paul says that Timothy understood the Scriptures, and that he understood them when he was a child. God made it for us to understand.

But with the privilege of having God's Word also comes the responsibility. God has made the Bible available to mankind, and He holds them accountable for knowing what it says. When Jesus was on the Earth, He asked one group of people: "Do ye not therefore err, because ye know not the scriptures?" He said to another group: "Did ye never read in the scriptures." To yet another group He said this: "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me." Luke, the author of the book of Acts, commends people in one city because they understood and studied their Bibles. It says in Acts 17:11: "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." You not only can read and understand your Bible, but God says that you should.

Over and over again, the writers of the Old and New Testament write with the understanding that their readers would have a working knowledge of the whole of the Bible. Paul asks over and over: "What saith the Scripture?" before making a point. The psalmist wrote both Psalm 106 and Psalm 136 about things that happened in the Bible and had been previously recorded. He expected the hearers and the readers to know what was going on, having read it already. The same is expected of you. You need to know what the Bible says. If you feel as though you are having a hard time understanding the Bible, please let us know. We are not here to tell you what the Bible says, but we would like to study the Bible with you, and help you see things you may not be able to by yourself, at this point in your life.

That brings me to my next point. If it is true that God wrote the Bible to be understandable, and that He expects you to read and understand it, then it is also true that you don't need someone else telling you what the Bible says. If someone, including your spiritual leader, pastor or otherwise, tells you, "You can't understand that. Let me tell you what it says," BEWARE! That person is trying to get you to understand what they say the Bible says, not what the Bible says for itself. Don't believe the lie that you cannot understand the Bible without some human being's help, no matter how spiritual he is. You can read, learn, study, and understand the Bible for yourself. Now, that is not saying that sometimes it is not helpful to have others to study with. I myself attend a Bible study and enjoy the perspectives I get from it. We here at First Baptist Church are starting a men's Bible study at our church building on Thursday mornings. Please feel free to come and join. But you will not hear us tell you what the Bible says and that our interpretation is final.

Someone who tells you that is trying to control you. You cannot trust when man says what God says, unless he can show you where God said it. Let me say that again. You cannot trust when man says what God says, unless

he can show you where God said it. Get into your Bible and seek to understand it. Learn to be discerning enough to the point where if someone says something to you and claims that it is from God, you can say, “I don’t believe that that is the way the Bible portrays who God is.” If your church tells you what you should believe the Bible says, and you see something different in the Bible, you ought to find a church that teaches and preaches the Bible. Don’t be lied to about what someone or some church says the Bible says.

There is a very important verse you should learn. It is this: 2 Peter 1:20 “Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.” That verse says that nothing in Scripture can be explained by a human apart from the sanction of God. It is perfectly acceptable for you to say that John 3:16 talks about the way of salvation, because it is both obvious and plain and because it is in agreement with the rest of the verses in the Gospel of John. But no one is allowed to say that it says something that it does not. The next verse says the reason why the Bible is not open to private interpretation: 2 Peter 1:21 “For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” Since the Bible is God’s Words, not mans, only God can truly say what He meant by it. Compare Scripture with Scripture.

Now having said all of that, I would like to turn our attention to the idea of context. Context simply means that if you are having a hard time understanding what a verse in the Bible means when it says something, you can look at the verses around it to help you understand. For instance, when I read in Psalms 136:20 “And Og the king of Bashan: for his mercy endureth for ever,” what in the world does that mean? Should we be praising Og the king of Bashan? Where is Bashan? What kind of a name is Og? Why is he so merciful? To understand what this verse means, you must look at the verses around it. The verse before Psalm 136:20 names another king, and the verse before that says, “To him who smote great kings.” So obviously, Og was a king that was a smitten enemy. As you read, you realize that Psalm 136 is a song of praise, recounting what God did in Israel’s history. Every verse ends the same way: “For his mercy endureth forever.” When you know that context, it will help you to understand.

But it goes even further. When you know the context of the Psalms, you realize that this Psalm was written as a way to thank God for what he had done. The Psalms were songs written to help Israel understand who God was and what He had done for them. He had, at one point, smitten Og king of Bashan for them. But one step farther, and you can go find out about when that happened. If you read the first five books of the Bible, you understand that in Numbers 21:33 it is recorded that as Israel was walking through the desert, they were attacked by Og and his people, and God promised to deliver Og into the hands of the Israelites. He did, and they were able to take the area of Bashan without much of a fight. This you might not know if you don’t know your Bible well, or don’t know your way around it.

It is for that reason that I would like to take some time to talk about how the Bible is laid out. If I give you a general overview of where everything is in the Bible, it may help you to understand it better. Again, if you feel like you need a better understanding of the Bible, let me advise you to first read it, then to find a church that teaches it. If your church does not teach the Bible, or you never open your Bible during the service, find a new church. It is my prayer that this overview will be a help to you.

Before we go further, I need to point out some basic information. The Bible is divided into two parts. The first part, the biggest, is called the Old Testament. The second part, the smallest, is called the New Testament. The word “testament” means “promise,” and refers to the promises that God gave to the nation of Israel and those who would worship Him. The Old Testament has 39 individual books and the New Testament has 27 individual books, with 66 books in total. Those books are usually divided up into chapters and verses, although that was not part of the original writing. It was done in 1227 AD by Stephen Langton to help readers find their way and make references to it. The Old Testament is essentially the history of the nation of Israel. Jews today look to the Old Testament (the “Tanakh” to them) as their history. The New Testament is the record of Jesus Christ and his followers. They are very different from one another in one sense, and they are remarkably similar in another sense. Let us continue as we learn the big picture of the Bible.

The first five books of the Bible were written by Moses in 1300 BC. Until that time, much of what had happened was passed by oral tradition. This may sound as if those early records are unreliable, but remember two things. One, those people had very good skills when it came to remembering words to pass them on. Two, God told Moses what to write, and God has an excellent memory. 2 Timothy 3:16 says “All scripture is given by inspiration of God.” That word “inspiration” means “God-breathed.” God breathed those words into Moses to write down. He wrote the first five books at the command of God.

The first book of the Bible is Genesis. Genesis is one of the most important books in the entire Bible. If you don't get Genesis, you won't get much of what happens after that. I would like to in the future talk about why Genesis is important. For now, let me say this: In Genesis, you find out from where many things came. The word “Genesis” means “beginning.” It talks about the beginning of the earth, the sun, the moon, the animals, and mankind. Then in Genesis you read about the Great Flood and the eight people who survived. Genesis 12 introduces us to a man named Abraham, who God chooses to bless. Abraham is the father of the nation of Israel and many other nations, and is one of the most important historical figures who ever lived. Abraham had a son named Isaac. Isaac had a son named Jacob, and Genesis follows the story of this family. Jacob has twelve sons who become the twelve tribes of Israel. Thus the book of Genesis is a history of the nation of Israel, and how it came to be. Genesis ends with the story of Joseph, one of Jacob's sons. He is in Egypt and because of a famine, the rest of the family goes to Egypt as well.

The next book, the book of Exodus, comes 400 years after the events at the end of Genesis, and the nation of Israel has grown. They are enslaved by the Egyptians, and Exodus is the story of them leaving Egypt. God makes a promise to the nation of Israel in Exodus 20 and following, and they become His special people. Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy tell of God's instructions to Israel, how they rebelled, and God refusing to let them into the place He had promised for them. They wandered in the desert for 40 years, and at the end of Deuteronomy, Moses dies and Joshua takes his place.

Joshua is the story of how Israel conquers the land of Canaan, which is part of the land Israel occupies this very day. Israel conquered most of the land, and the book of Judges is about how they fared in the days after Joshua died. Ruth is the story of a young woman from another country who comes to live in Israel, and the end of Ruth introduces a character that figures in later. The book of 1 Samuel tells of Israel's first king, whose name is Saul. He is not a good king, and so God chooses a different king, whose name is David. David spends the second half of 1 Samuel running for his life from Saul, but Saul dies at the hand of Israel's enemies at the end of the book. 2 Samuel is a record of David's reign as king of Israel.

David has a son named Solomon, and 1 Kings begins with Solomon's reign. Solomon builds a beautiful temple for the worship of God, but at the end of his life, worships idols. Because of this, God allows a man named Jeroboam to start a civil war, which results in two separate nations: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. 1 Kings 15 and on are a record of how those countries act toward one another. 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, and 2 Chronicles, along with the second half of 1 Kings, is the historical record of Israel and Judah's history, using the kings as markers.

Is it mostly narrative, but in it you meet some great characters, such as Elijah, Elisha, Josiah, Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah. You will also meet some wicked characters, such as Ahab, Sennacherib, Pekah, and Jezebel. At the end of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, we find that both Israel and Judah have been taken captive by enemy nations. Some people are sent to Babylon, and eventually end up in Persia. This happens between 712 and 586 BC. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of how some of the Jews were allowed to go back into Israel and Judah to rebuild the temple and the wall in Jerusalem. Esther tells the story of a Jewish girl who becomes queen in Persia and is able to save her people.

The next five books of the Bible (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon) are called the Poetic Books, and are more rhythmical in nature. They use a lot of imagery and flowery language, and should not be put in the same category of understanding as the books preceding them. For instance, when Psalms 18:2 says “The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer,” it does not mean that David is worshipping rocks. It means that God is like a large rock that can be depended upon. Job is a story about a man who has everything taken from him, and his response to that. It is perhaps the earliest book written, maybe even before Moses was alive, and so is not in order.

Psalms is a collection of poems and songs about God. David wrote most of them, but there are some with no name attached to them. They vary in length, with the longest being 176 verses and the shortest being 2 verses long. The Book of Proverbs is a book written largely by King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived. It is a book filled with truisms and wise sayings. Ecclesiastes was also written by Solomon and is his reflection on a life wasted. Song of Solomon was written while Solomon was in love with a young woman, and it is full of romantic language.

The rest of the books of the Old Testament are written by men called “prophets.” Prophets were men who spoke for God. God had given these men special authority to speak on His behalf, and the remaining 17 books comprise their writings. The first five books are called the Major Prophets, because they are the longest of the prophetic writings. Isaiah was written before Judah went into captivity, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were written as the captivity happened, and Daniel was written after the captivity. They all contain stories, poems, and denunciations against various nations, including Israel and Judah. Lamentations was written by Jeremiah and is largely poetic as well.

The twelve minor prophets contain much of the same content. Hosea talks about Israel’s unfaithfulness, Obadiah talks about God’s anger at Edom, an enemy nation, and Jonah tells a wonderful story about a disobedient prophet. The Old Testament ends with the book of Malachi, written around 450 BC. Jews considered Malachi to be the last book written. After that, there were no more prophets from God. The people were to wait, and for four hundred years, sometimes called the Silent Years, the people of God waited for a sign from Him.

Thus we come upon the New Testament. The New Testament starts with the four Gospels, which are four different accounts of the life of Jesus. They all differ because they are speaking to different audiences, but none of them contradict one another. They were written either by Jesus’ disciples or by close associates of the Apostles. They cover the birth, life, teachings, and death of Jesus and are mostly stories, with sermons of Jesus interspersed throughout. Matthew was written to the Jews and portrays Jesus as the King. Mark was written to the Romans and portrays Jesus as a servant. Luke was written to the Greeks and portrays Jesus as a man, and John was written to the world and portrays Jesus as God. Each Gospel ends with a risen Jesus.

The beginning of Acts, written by Luke, starts with Jesus ascending into heaven. The eleven disciples wait for instructions from God, and receive them approximately one week after Jesus leaves. This is the beginning of the church, and it tells the story of how the early church went about proclaiming the good news about Jesus. The first half is focused on Peter and his ministry to the Jews, and in chapter 9 an enemy of the church, a man named Saul, is converted. Saul, who is later renamed Paul, takes trips around the Mediterranean Sea telling people about Jesus, and the second part of Acts is an account of his journeys.

The next thirteen books of the Bible are letters that Paul wrote to the churches he had helped start. They are all very different in theme and length. Romans is Paul’s long letter to the church in Rome, telling them the Gospel. 1 and 2 Corinthians are two letters to one church in Asia that was struggling. These letters, called epistles, are part encouragement, part teaching, and part rebuke. They are good sources for how the church ought to be run, and what God expects from Christians. 2 Timothy was Paul’s last letter before he was beheaded. Paul wrote them from 48 to 63 AD, while free and in prison.

No one knows who wrote the book of Hebrews, but it was written to explain to Jews who Jesus was, and why he was better than characters found in the Old Testament. The writer, more than any other, requires you have a good grasp on who is who in the Bible before you can fully understand what it says. The epistle of James and Jude were both written by men who were half-brothers of Jesus Christ. 1 and 2 Peter were written by the Apostle Peter, the one you can read about in the Gospels. He is writing to encourage a church that is being persecuted. 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John were written by the Apostle John, the same one who wrote the Gospel of John, and are very short letters talking about how to deal with false teaching.

The last book of the Bible is the book of Revelation. It was written by the Apostle John around 90 AD. The first three chapters are letters to churches, and chapter 4 to 22 are about what is going to happen at the end of time. It uses symbolism, so that things that will occur in the future, like world governments, are portrayed by things like dragons and beasts. Every aspect of the book should not be taken literally, though much of it refers to events that will be literally fulfilled. Revelation tells the story of how God will pour out his wrath on the world, culminating in the return of Jesus Christ, his reign on the earth, and the eventual judgment of all people. Revelation ends with this warning: "If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book." Thus, Revelation is the last book of the Bible, and God's last words about His last revelation: Jesus.

This is an overview of the entire Bible. It is my prayer that it has been helpful to you in your study and understanding of God's Word. It is a book that God has written to be understood, read, learned, studied, and loved. It is simple enough for you to understand, yet so complex that you could spend your entire life learning it and never exhaust it. Let me once again invite any man who would like, to join us on March 11 at 8:30 AM for our first Bible study. We will be meeting every Thursday for several weeks at our church building. If you have any questions about that or what we talked about this morning, please don't hesitate to contact us. You can do so in the following ways:

You can stop by our church building, which is located at 909 W. 8th St., by the softball diamonds. You can call us at 732-3321. You can E-mail us at church@fbcpr.org. That's CHURCH at F B C P R dot O R G. Or you can log on to our website, which is www.fbcpr.org. If you would like to have a copy of this broadcast, either in audio or transcript form, you can find it on our website tomorrow. Please join us again next week for the Way of Truth Radio Broadcast, brought to you by the First Baptist Church of Park Rapids, Minnesota.