

THE BIBLE

What is the Bible?

The Bible is the Word of God, and therefore the supreme authority for all Christians. No person, organization or government possesses authority greater than that of the Bible. In any question of doctrine or practice, in any dispute over what to believe or how to behave, the Bible's answer is final. Every individual and every institution is required to submit to the authority of Scripture.

The Bible is authoritative because it is inspired by God. It is God's written communication to humanity. Therefore, the Bible is infallible; since God is its author, it is completely trustworthy. Everything the Bible affirms is true. We can have complete confidence in the Bible, and are called to give complete obedience to it.

How was the Bible written?

Except for the tablets of stone given to Moses on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 31:18), God did not write the Bible directly. Rather, we are told that "men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). God used men to record His words to us.

The Bible was written by some forty different men, over a period of about 1600 years. Yet the 66 books fit together to present one complete and consistent revelation of God. The Scriptures are said to be "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16). This means that through the Holy Spirit God directed men to write what He wanted written. Not that God dictated the words in a mechanical way; He allowed the writers to say what they wanted to say, to express themselves in their own words and writing styles. Yet God created and chose these men, and sovereignly directed their lives to prepare them to be His instruments. Then His Holy Spirit came upon them to inspire their writings, insuring that what they wrote would be the very words of God.

How do we know the Bible is the Word of God?

There are many good reasons to believe in the authority and inspiration of Scripture:

- (1) The Bible claims for itself divine authority. Time after time, the prophets whose words are recorded claimed to be delivering the "word of the Lord." Those who heard them often rejected the message, and sometimes reacted violently, even killing the divine messengers. The blood of the prophets attests to the truth of their words.
- (2) The apostles of Christ testified to the authority and inspiration of Scripture (Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21).
- (3) Jesus Christ, the Son of God, testified to the infallibility and eternal truth of the Scriptures as the written Word of God (John 10:35; Matthew 5:17-18; Matthew 4:4; John 17:17).
- (4) Scores of prophetic predictions recorded in the Scriptures have been fulfilled in history, thus confirming their divine authorship.
- (5) Archaeological discoveries continue to confirm the Bible's descriptions of ancient life and history.
- (6) Throughout its history the church has always affirmed that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. The holy and victorious lives of the saints through the ages demonstrate that the Bible is a true and sure foundation for living.
- (7) The unified message, enduring wisdom, and sublime beauty of Scripture point to a Source beyond the diverse and often unlearned men who authored it.

(8) No other book has sold more copies, been translated into more languages, had more influence on individuals and nations, or been persecuted and banned more often than the Bible.

(9) Finally, the Bible proves itself to be the Word of God in our own experience. It reveals the secrets of our hearts as only God can, and when we obey it, we find that God keeps the promises recorded therein. We can hear God's voice speaking directly to us in the words of the Bible, and discover for ourselves the truth of what is written there.

How did we come to have the Bible we use today?

The Bible we use has been translated from the original languages in which it was written, Hebrew and Greek. The original works penned by the Biblical writers no longer exist, but there are literally thousands of handwritten copies dating from the first centuries after Christ. It is from these, together with other early translations of the Scriptures, that our Bible has been translated by scholars who are experts in ancient history and languages. We can have confidence that the Bible we have today is a faithful and accurate translation of what was written by the inspired authors.

What about the different English versions of the Bible?

In the medieval era, only priests and scholars who read Latin could read the Scriptures for themselves, and the lack of printing technology meant that few people could own a copy. In the fourteenth century men such as John Wycliffe and William Tyndale were persecuted for trying to make God's Word accessible in the language of the common people. In 1611 the Authorized Version (or King James Version) was completed; it remains quite popular, even though its sometimes archaic language can be difficult for modern readers. In the twentieth century several new versions have been published which employ more modern and familiar English. These translations also make

use of recently discovered ancient manuscripts which were unknown in the days of King James.

Which version should you use? The beauty of the King James version is unsurpassed, but is of little benefit if the words cannot be understood. A paraphrased version (such as the New Living Translation or The Message) can be helpful, but a paraphrase reflects the interpretation of the author, and so should not be a substitute for a more faithful translation. The New International Version has become the most popular recent translation because it is accurate and easily understood, although the newly revised edition has been criticized for making too many changes for the sake of “inclusive” (not gender-specific) language. The English Standard Version is accurate and straightforward, and is now in widespread use. Many people find it helpful to use a version they can easily understand for daily reading, while keeping other translations and paraphrases on hand for purposes of comparison and study.

What is in the Bible?

The Old Testament contains the Scriptures used by Jesus and His Jewish contemporaries. It includes:

- (1) *Books of history* recounting the story of early mankind and the chronicles of God's chosen people Israel, and revealing God's laws (Genesis through Esther).
- (2) *Books of wisdom and poetry* expressing truths about life in this world and man's relation to the God who created it (Job through Song of Solomon).
- (3) *Books of prophecy* recording the warnings and exhortations of men called to deliver the messages of God to His often stubborn and disobedient people (Isaiah through Malachi).

The New Testament contains the Scriptures written by the apostles or their associates immediately after the time of Jesus. It includes:

- (1) *Four gospels* which record the words and deeds of Jesus (Matthew through John).
- (2) A *chronicle* of the formation and growth of the early church (Acts).
- (3) *Letters* to churches and individuals explaining the Christian faith and giving instructions on how to live the Christian life (Romans through Jude).
- (4) One final *vision* given to the apostle John describing the triumph of Christ and His people over Satan and all other enemies (Revelation).

Together the two Testaments constitute the greatest literary masterpiece ever written, giving us the whole counsel of God expressed in a variety of literary forms.

What is the message of the Bible?

The Bible deals with the fundamental issues that confront us all: questions of meaning and purpose, right and wrong, life and death. In it God tells us about Himself, about the world He created, about humanity, about Christ, and about salvation. The Bible does not tell us everything we would like to know, but it does tell us everything we need to know concerning our relationship to God and our life with Him.

As the Bible is the written Word of God, so Jesus Christ is the living Word (John 1:1, 14). Thus from Genesis to Revelation the central theme of the Bible is Christ (Luke 24:27). He is the link that connects all the very different books, and the key to understanding everything that is contained in them. The Old

Testament points forward to Christ, predicting His coming, describing His kingdom, and picturing the salvation He brings. The New Testament in turn completes the Old, revealing Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of all God's purposes.

Why should we study the Bible?

Though we are able to learn something about God through the world He made (Romans 1:20), without God's special revelation of Himself in His Word we could know nothing of the salvation provided for us in Christ. In order for us to know God, God must reveal Himself to us, and He has revealed Himself in the Bible. If we desire to know Christ, the living Word, we can learn of Him in the Scriptures, the written Word.

The Bible tells us who Christ is, who we are in Christ, and what God expects of us. It is full of promises and warnings that are essential to our well-being as Christians (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 1 Peter 2:2). It helps us to resist temptation (Luke 4:1-12), and keeps us from sinning (Psalm 119:9-11). We are commanded to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2), and our minds are renewed as we study the Scriptures. We then begin to lose the world's perspective and to see things as God sees them, to think with the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16).

Moreover, the Christian who wants to hear God speaking to him individually and personally will turn to the Bible, for the Spirit of God can illuminate a verse or passage that was written in the distant past and apply it to our present situation. Indeed, the Spirit often gives us direction by bringing to mind Scriptures we have read before (John 14:26).

How should we study the Bible?

There are many different ways to study the Bible. One good way is to take a particular subject, such as love or grace, and with the aid of a concordance or references, to study what the Bible has to say on that subject. Another is to study the lives of various individuals, such as David or Paul.

Perhaps the best Bible study method for beginners is to study a complete book at a time, so as to follow what the author is saying from start to finish. The important thing is to get started and to form a consistent habit of Bible study. Here are some principles you will find helpful whatever method you choose:

- **Be consistent:** Daily Bible study is best, even if some days you only have time to read a few verses.
- **Don't rush:** It is best to read slowly, carefully and prayerfully, alert to what God may be wanting to teach you in the passage.
- **Keep a record:** Write down special insights or lessons for future reference.
- **Commit to memory:** Memorize verses that have special meaning or importance, so they will become a part of your life.
- **Be systematic:** Develop a study plan that covers the whole Bible.
- **Be social:** Study both alone and together with others, so you can have the benefit of others' insights while also learning to understand the Bible for yourself.
- **Believe:** Always come to the Bible in an attitude of faith and humility, trusting God to speak to you and maintaining an open heart to receive what He shows you.
- **Be persistent:** Do not be surprised or discouraged when you come across something you don't understand. Your comprehension will increase as you study more and more. The rule is never to let something you don't understand obscure something that is clear.

- **Be obedient:** Always strive to put into practice what you read. It is the doers of the Word who really understand it, and who experience its blessings (James 1:22).

- **Depend on the Holy Spirit:** We are blessed to have the Author of the Scriptures, the Spirit of God Himself, present with us to help us understand them. Ask Him to give you insight into His Word.

Read the Bible! Give God's Word a central place in your life, and don't let anything crowd it out. Remember that "man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Read 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

1. What can Bible study do for us (v.15)?
2. What is Scripture useful for?
3. What will happen if we study and obey the Bible (v.17)?

Read Psalm 19:7-14.

4. How does the psalmist describe God's Word?
5. What things can it do for us?
6. Make a plan for regular Bible study. And start right away!