

Reading Through the Bible

Introduction

An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Get up and go south to the road going down from Jerusalem to Gaza!” (This is wilderness.) Philip got up and went, and behold! An Ethiopian man, who was a eunuch and an official of Candace queen of Ethiopia, was over all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship, and he was returning, sitting in his carriage and reading the prophet Isaiah. The Spirit said to Philip, “Approach and stay close to that carriage!” Running up, Philip heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah, and he said, **“So, do you understand what you are reading?”** The man said, **“Well, how can I, unless someone guides me?”** And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. *Acts 8.26–31*

Reading through the Bible is an important part of building our Christian faith, especially for those who are starting out. Personally, I read through the New Testament before I committed myself to Christ, and I read through the Old Testament soon after. I continue to read through the Bible periodically. Having said that, I have to say that, although it was helpful, I didn’t understand what I was reading the first time through. That led me to read commentaries and then background material, such as histories. After a few decades of study, I think that I have a good understanding. My goal is to take what I’ve learned and to share the basics with others so that reading through the Bible makes sense the *first* time.

In General

Here are some suggestions when reading through the Bible.

- Small steps will complete a long journey if you keep walking. Try to read every day for a reasonable amount of time. Start with something realistic, like 15 minutes, and keep at it.
- Keep going! You will likely run across things that don’t make sense. Either ignore them or write them down and ask someone about them later. The prophetic books, which start with *Isaiah* in the OT, can be especially confusing because they depended on the author’s circumstances.
- Skim over, or even skip, genealogies and long lists of rules and regulations. These had a place in their time, but the details aren’t important in the big picture.
- The Old Testament can seem negative; that’s because God’s people constantly turned away from him. Part of the purpose of the events of the Old Testament was to teach God’s people that they were sinful and needed a savior.

Overview of the Bible

The Bible is composed of two parts, the Old Testament, OT, and the New Testament, NT. A *testament* is a binding agreement; God made two agreements. In the OT, he made an agreement with the Israelites, later called the Jews, through Moses. The details of this agreement were called the Law of Moses. In the NT, God made a second agreement, now open to all people, through Jesus Christ.

The OT starts with Creation and focuses on how God called a man, Abraham, and his descendants, Isaac, Jacob whom God renamed Israel, and Israel’s twelve sons, to become a nation

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set apart to God. What followed was ugly. The Israelites constantly turned away from God. In the midst of great prosperity, they split into two nations, Israel and Judah. Only Judah survived intact, and the Israelites became known as the Jews. The events in the OT start around 2,000 B.C.E. and end around 420 B.C.E.

The NT shows how God used the Israelites, now called the Jews, to fulfill God's ultimate purpose, to bring salvation to all nations through his Son, Jesus Christ. The events of the NT start around 3 B.C.E. and end around 97 C.E. Note the big time gap between the OT and the NT.

Both the OT and the NT are composed of books. A few authors, in particular Moses and Ezra in the OT and the Apostles Paul and John in the NT, wrote more than one book. However, the Bible had many authors who wrote over a period of 1,500 years. The Jews determined what books should be included in the OT, and the early Church determined the books of the NT. In both cases, this process took place over hundreds of years and involved huge amounts of discussion. Over all of this, God was ultimately in control.

The following is a brief summary of the main events in both the OT and NT; it focuses on God's overall purpose in the Bible.

- God created humankind in his own image so he could have a relationship with them
- Humankind quickly disobeyed God and corrupted themselves, turning themselves from a joy to a source of grief
- God tried to restart humankind with Noah, an upright man, and his family through the Flood, but that didn't work
- God turned to another plan, which was to build a nation from one man, Abraham, that was set apart for his ultimate solution, which was not yet revealed
- God built Abraham into a nation, sending Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, to Egypt so they could multiply in peace
- God used Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to the land God had promised to Abraham
- God, through Moses, gave the Israelites the Law, which told the Israelites how to live in order to receive God's blessing
- God then led the Israelites into the promised land, where they settled
- The rest of the OT describes how God tried to bless the Israelites, but they refused to worship God or to follow the Law faithfully, angering God and bringing harsh discipline and even judgment on themselves
- Late in the OT, God, through the prophets, spoke of a time of restoration and the coming of a Messiah, or Christ, who would save God's people, now called the Jews
- A 400 year gap happens...
- The Christ appeared in the form of Jesus, but he was not what the Jews expected
- Jesus displayed God's power through miracles, and he taught a deeper form of godliness than described by the Law of Moses
- The Jewish leaders rejected Jesus and brutally murdered him, but this simply fulfilled Jesus' mission, to take upon himself the sins of all who would believe in him
- Jesus rose from the dead, appeared to his followers, and then ascended into Heaven

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- Jesus' followers, empowered by the Holy Spirit, began to preach Jesus' message, at first only to Jews; many Jews believed, in spite of strong opposition from unbelievers
- After several years, Jesus' followers began to preach to non-Jews as well, and Jesus' message spread greatly, fulfilling God's plan to restore humankind, at least some of them, into a relationship with him
- The NT books themselves were written to address different situations as they occurred
- The first four NT books are called Gospels, which means Good News; they describe Jesus' ministry and teachings
- *Acts* records many events as the Church started and grew
- The rest of the NT books were letters written to address different situations

This may seem like a lot, but keep in mind it summarizes around 1,200 pages and over 2,000 years of history. This is part of the reason why we can read the Bible our entire lives and still learn about it and from it.

New to the Bible

If you are completely new to the Bible, I suggest easing into it.

The OT is important to fully understanding the NT, but it's huge and confusing. Therefore, I strongly suggest starting off in the NT, even though that's like reading the ending of a mystery. The NT has lots of references to the OT, but that won't stop you from understanding the NT.

In addition, I suggest reading two books of the NT first, *Mark* and *Acts*. *Mark* is one of the four Gospels, and it is the shortest. It will give you a good start on understanding who Jesus was. *Acts* describes many events in the early days of the Church, although it is not a history. This give you a good idea of how the Church started and grew. You can use some of the articles in the NT timeline to help figure out where things are and who the people were.

Reading Through the New Testament

The books of the NT are not in chronological order; instead, they are grouped by type and author. Note that the Apostle Paul and his close friend Luke wrote a large part of the NT. If you have read one of the Gospels and *Acts*, I suggest reading the NT books in the order that they were written. The NT timeline will give you perspective about the when they were written, and it provides a short article about each book. It also provides a number of articles containing background information. Here are the books of the NT in chronological order.

- *Matthew*
- *Galatians*
- *James*
- *1 Thessalonians*
- *2 Thessalonians*
- *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon* (written at the same time by Paul)
- *Philippians*
- *1 Corinthians*

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- *2 Timothy*
- *2 Corinthians*
- *1 Timothy, Titus* (written by Paul with the same purpose)
- *Romans*
- *Luke & Acts* (two volumes of one work)
- *1 Peter*
- *2 Peter*
- *Mark*
- *Hebrews*
- *Jude*
- *The Revelation*
- *1, 2, 3 John*
- *John*

Reading Through the Old Testament

Reading through the OT is a bit more complicated, as a number of the books overlap with the history books. In addition, individual contributions to *Psalms* and *Proverbs* were written over hundreds of years. Therefore, the following breaks up some of the history books in order to insert other books in context. I strongly suggest using the OT timeline, as it will help make sense of the historical context, as well as provide brief overviews of the individual books.

Reading through the *Psalms* and *Proverbs* can take some time. Once you start, you might consider reading five psalms or one chapter of *Proverbs* each day as you continue to read the history books.

- *Genesis* (see commentary on chapters 1–11, skim genealogies)
- *Exodus* (skim the rules and regulations)
- *Leviticus* (skim the rules and regulations)
- *Numbers* (skim the census, rules, and regulations)
- *Deuteronomy* (skim the rules and regulations)
- *Joshua*
- *Judges*
- *1 Samuel* 1–2
- *Ruth*
- *1 Samuel* 3–end
- *Psalms* (get started)
- *2 Samuel*
- *1 Kings* 1–5
- *Proverbs* (get started)
- *Song of Solomon*
- *1 Kings* 6–11
- *Ecclesiastes*
- *1 Kings* 12–end

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- *2 Kings* 1–15.7
- *Amos*
- *Jonah*
- *Hosea*
- *2 Kings* 15.7–16
- *Micah*
- *Joel*
- *2 Kings* 17–21
- *Isaiah* (it starts around the time of *1 Kings* 15 but ends during *1 Kings* 21)
- *2 Kings* 22–23
- *Nahum*
- *Zephaniah*
- *Habakkuk*
- *2 Kings* 24–end
- *Jeremiah*
- *Lamentations*
- *Ezekiel*
- *Ezra* 1–2 (this portion is historical, 50 years before Ezra's ministry)
- *Daniel* (*Daniel* starts at the end of *2 Kings* 24 and ends around *Ezra* 2)
- *Ezra* 3–7 (this portion is historical, 50 years before Ezra's ministry)
- *Haggai*
- *Zechariah*
- *Job*
- *Esther*
- *Ezra* 8–end
- *Nehemiah*
- *Malachi*
- *1 & 2 Chronicles* (re-tells the history of the kings, skip the first 9 chapters)