

Learn to Read the Bible Effectively

Distance Learning Programme

Session 1



SESSION 1

Section 1

Background to the Bible	Page 1
Bible facts	2
The Bible - a library of books	3
Translations	4
About the writers	5
Inspiration	5
The importance of Bible study	6

Section 2

The Bible interprets itself	7
Bible echoes	8
Summary of do's and don'ts	10
Index to the books of your Bible	12

Section 1

Background to the Bible

Let's look at a little background to this unique book. What can we say about it? It is like walking past a building site when a new office block is being built in a city. We peer through the gap in the fencing, and all we see is mud and holes, cranes and scaffolding, noisy activity with no obvious end-product.

We know, of course, that the activity is not really aimless. Tucked away in an office on the building site are drawers full of plans and flow charts listing the dates on which the foundations, walls, roof and services are scheduled to be completed. If we were good at technical drawing we could leaf through the plans and visualise the final appearance of the building, admiring the beauty and practicality of the design. But at first sight, just walking by, we may go home and wonder about it, not understanding what it could possibly be, and doubting its very need.

Looking at God's Word is very much like that. We shall never see things in perspective unless we step inside the office and look at the plans.

That is where this course is designed to help, by opening up God's great design, revealed in the Bible.

With that analogy in mind, let's look at the building blocks of the foundation.

Bible facts

The Bible is no ordinary book. Look at the two words on its spine: Holy Bible. The word “holy” means separate, and “Bible” means book. So the inference is that you have in your hands a book that is unique when compared with all others. Millions of copies are sold every year, and copies have been printed in hundreds of different languages.

The Bible comprises sixty-six books, as the chart opposite shows. There were forty independent writers involved in its compilation. These writers had twenty different occupations, and lived in ten different countries. They wrote over a 1,600-year time span. The book was originally written in Hebrew and Greek (with some short sections in Aramaic). It has a cast of 2,930 characters in 1,551 places. It covers a huge number of different subjects. Its message is expressed in all literary forms (narrative, poetry, prose, letters, etc.).



Of the sixty-six books in the Bible, some are small and not very easy to find. Turn to the contents page at the front of the Bible you will be using for the course. The contents page gives the page numbers where all the books start. Fill in these page numbers of the books of the Bible in the table on the back page of this booklet. This table will then help you find verses without having to find the contents page of your Bible every time.

The following may help you to start remembering where at least some of the books are:

The books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) are at the beginning.

The historical books, including Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, are placed after the books of Moses and before the Psalms.

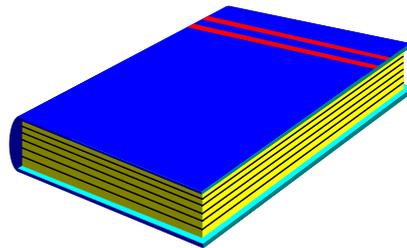
The Psalms are roughly in the middle.

The Prophets are after the Psalms.

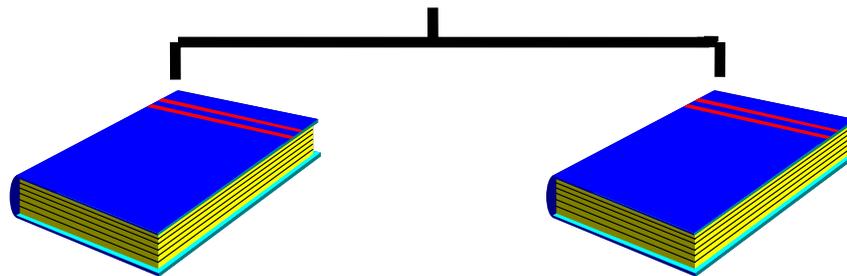
The four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are at the beginning of the New Testament, which starts about three quarters of the way through the Bible.

We would encourage you to learn by heart the order of the books of the Bible. This will speed up the effectiveness of your Bible study.

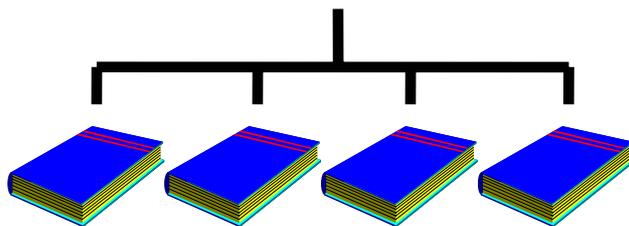
The Bible - a library of books



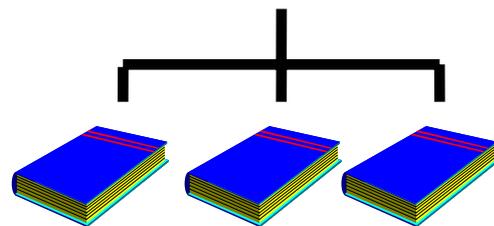
The Bible



Old Testament



New Testament



The Pentateuch	History	Poetry & Wisdom	The Prophets	History	The Letters	The Apocalypse
Genesis	Joshua	Job	Isaiah	Matthew	Romans	Revelation
Exodus	Judges	Psalms	Jeremiah	Mark	1&2 Corinthians	
Leviticus	Ruth	Proverbs	Lamentations	Luke	Galatians	
Numbers	1&2 Samuel	Ecclesiastes	Ezekiel	John	Ephesians	
Deuteronomy	1&2 Kings	Song of Solomon	Daniel	Acts	Philippians	
	1&2 Chronicles		Hosea		Colossians	
	Ezra		Joel		1&2 Thessalonians	
	Nehemiah		Amos		1&2 Timothy	
	Esther		Obadiah		Titus	
			Jonah		Philemon	
			Micah		Hebrews	
			Nahum		James	
			Habakkuk		1&2 Peter	
			Zephaniah		1,2&3 John	
			Haggai		Jude	
			Zechariah			
			Malachi			

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Most of the books of the Bible are divided into chapters. Each chapter is then divided into verses. This helps us to find a particular section easily. When we write Genesis 1 v 2, we mean that the section will be found in the book of Genesis, chapter 1 and verse 2. One or two books have only one chapter, so Jude v 4 means the 4th verse of the book of Jude. This is the convention we shall use throughout the course.

Translations

There are many different translations, but because we are all different, we may find one more acceptable than another. If you have the choice, we recommend you select a version that is comfortable for you. In addition to this, bear in mind that some versions reflect the original text much more closely than others. Again, if you have a choice we would recommend those versions which reflect the original text as faithfully as they can. Examples of these versions are:

- The Authorised Version (also known as the King James Version)
- The Revised Version
- The Revised Standard Version
- The New King James Version

We shall look at the different types of translation in Session 9, Section 1.

If you are considering buying a Bible, look for one with marginal references. You will see the reason for this advice later in the course.

All versions are translated by people and not by God. So it is best not to rely on one version alone, but to compare several versions and then use a Concordance to ensure that the original Greek or Hebrew is translated accurately into English. We shall show you how to use a concordance in the 'Concordances' section (Session 5, Section 1).

The Authorised Version is still a very popular version and is frequently used in many churches. Because it was translated in 1611, its language can sometimes appear old-fashioned and difficult. This problem can largely be overcome by using the New King James Version, which is basically the 1611 version with the old-fashioned words brought up to date.

When we quote verses in this course they will be taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise stated.

About the writers

When considering the writers, we learn that there were many different types of people: kings and ordinary people, doctor and fishermen, princes and shepherds, poets and labourers, rich and poor, educated and unlearned.

As these servants of God were all different types of people, so their writings were designed to be relevant to all. *Yet there is no discord.* Though they were divided by class, time, country and disposition, there is wonderful harmony in all that they wrote.

There is no contradiction, no disagreement. We shall discover why in the next paragraph.

Inspiration



Look at these words that people in the Bible have written

2 Timothy 3 v 16 and 17

2 Samuel 23 v 1 and 2

Jeremiah 30 v 1 and 2

2 Peter 1 v 19 to 21

The Bible claims that God is its author.

In the first passage you looked at we are told that all Scripture is “inspired” or “God breathed” as the original word in Greek means. When we speak, the message comes through our breath for all to hear. So God has spoken and the message is in our Bible.

You will often read in your Bible the phrases: “Thus says the Lord...”, or “The word of the Lord came to me saying...”. The Bible writers never claim that the message is their own. They are not wanting to make a name for themselves or build up their own esteem.



Look at Isaiah 40 v 6 to 8

Proverbs 30 v 5 and 6

God’s Word is always reliable and it needs no addition from men.

The importance of Bible study

When we look at the Bible and accept it as God's Word, then we also begin to understand the importance of Bible study. We have a need and a responsibility to find out what it has to tell us. Let's have a look at a few things that the Bible says:



Look at 2 Timothy 3 v 14 to 17

- The Bible gives us the information that we need so that we can understand God's plan to save us from lasting death.



Look at Romans 1 v 16 and 17;
15 v 4

- Understanding the Bible gives us real hope for the future. It is "the power of God to salvation."



Look at Proverbs 13 v 13

- Ignoring the Bible message is fatal in the long term.



Look at Psalm 119 v 105
Joshua 1 v 8

- The Bible gives us direction for daily living.
- The Word of God gives real meaning to our life.

Section 2

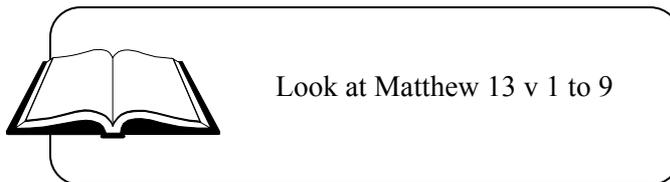
The Bible interprets itself

We need to realize that the key to easier (not easy) understanding of the Bible is found in its own pages. Our tendency is not to look far enough for answers inside the book when we find something that we do not understand. A basic principle in reading the Bible more effectively lies in the simple fact:

Your questions about what the Bible teaches are answered in the Bible.

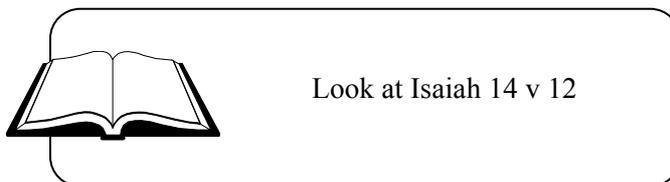
This cannot be emphasized too much. Sometimes, instead of looking to the Bible, we ask others for help. This can lead us in wrong directions. Remember, the Bible is the inspired Word of God. Bible commentaries and other books are not inspired and so we should not give them the same respect as the Bible.

The explanation of a problem is sometimes to be found in the same chapter in which it occurs, or in a chapter nearby. Let's look at a couple of examples:



In this chapter we are presented with the parable of the sower. If you keep on reading, starting at verse 18, you find that you are given a complete explanation of the parable.

Another example of the Bible explaining itself is found in the prophecy of Isaiah.



Many statements have been made about this verse, but if we just look at verse 4 of the same chapter, which introduces the section, we see that, clearly, it is talking about the king of Babylon.

Sometimes the answers or explanations are to be found in different books of the Bible.

Bible echoes

One very good way of reading the Bible effectively is to listen for “Bible echoes”. Whenever you read the Bible keep asking yourself, “Where have I heard that word or phrase before?” When you have difficulty in understanding a section, look for these “Bible echoes” in other parts of the Bible. We shall show you how to track down these “echoes” when we look at the use of a concordance later.

One chapter in the Bible that has “echoes” throughout the rest of the Bible is Isaiah 53.



Read Isaiah 53

On first reading it is clear that the whole chapter is describing someone who was to suffer terribly. Verses 4 to 6 would seem to indicate that these sufferings are relevant to us. If we look at the “echoes” in the rest of the Bible it becomes clear who this chapter is talking about.



Read Matthew 8 v 14 to 17

The last verse of this passage clearly tells us that when Jesus healed people he was fulfilling the first half of Isaiah 53 v 4.



Read 1 Peter 2 v 21 to 25

Verse 22 of this passage “echoes” the second half of Isaiah 53 v 9.

The first half of verse 23 “echoes” Isaiah 53 v 7.

Verse 24 “echoes” Isaiah 53 v 4, 5 and 11.

The first half of verse 25 “echoes” Isaiah 53 v 6.

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These references again tell us that Isaiah 53 is talking about the Lord Jesus Christ.



Read Matthew 26 v 62 and 63
Mark 14 v 60 and 61
John 19 v 9

These verses “echo” the fact that Isaiah 53 v 7 talks of remaining silent despite provocation.



Read Acts 8 v 29 to 35

Again there can be no argument that verses 7 and 8 of Isaiah 53 are talking about Jesus Christ.



Read Matthew 27 v 57 to 60

The events described here “echo” the phrase “they made his grave with the rich at his death” in Isaiah 53 v 9.



Read Romans 8 v 34

The end of this verse “echoes” Isaiah 53 v 12 in the reference to “making intercession”.

All of these “echoes” point clearly to the fact that Isaiah 53 must be talking about Jesus Christ. This is just one example of how listening for “echoes” lets the Bible explain itself.

There are in fact many more “echoes” in this chapter. We shall show you how to find “echoes” in the “Concordances” and “Cross-references” sections.

Summary of do's and don'ts

Do:

- Look **first** to the Bible for answers to your questions.
- Listen for “echoes” to find answers to your questions.
- Write down your questions that you cannot answer immediately. (It may be a while before you “hear the echo” giving the answer.)

Don't:

- Expect quick answers.
- Look at isolated passages and draw conclusions.

Notes

Index to the books of your Bible

To help you find your way around your own Bible, fill in the page number of the start of each book in the table below. If you keep this table handy you can then find any book of the Bible without having to find the contents page every time.

Most Bibles number the pages of the Old and New Testaments separately. If you put the page number at the end of the dots, the number will then be in the correct column to remind you which Testament each book is in.

	Testament		Testament	
	Old	New	Old	New
	Page	Page	Page	Page
Acts.....			Judges.....	
Amos.....			1 Kings.....	
1 Chronicles.....			2 Kings.....	
2 Chronicles.....			Lamentations.....	
Colossians.....			Leviticus.....	
1 Corinthians.....			Luke.....	
2 Corinthians.....			Malachi.....	
Daniel.....			Mark.....	
Deuteronomy.....			Matthew.....	
Ecclesiastes.....			Micah.....	
Ephesians.....			Nahum.....	
Esther.....			Nehemiah.....	
Exodus.....			Numbers.....	
Ezekiel.....			Obadiah.....	
Ezra.....			1 Peter.....	
Galatians.....			2 Peter.....	
Genesis.....			Philemon.....	
Habakkuk.....			Philippians.....	
Haggai.....			Proverbs.....	
Hebrews.....			Psalms.....	
Hosea.....			Revelation.....	
Isaiah.....			Romans.....	
James.....			Ruth.....	
Jeremiah.....			1 Samuel.....	
Job.....			2 Samuel.....	
Joel.....			Song of Solomon.....	
John.....			1 Thessalonians.....	
1 John.....			2 Thessalonians.....	
2 John.....			1 Timothy.....	
3 John.....			2 Timothy.....	
Jonah.....			Titus.....	
Joshua.....			Zechariah.....	
Jude.....			Zephaniah.....	