

CHAPTER 13

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

*what about sickness and death?
...and how about healing and life!*

Before reading this chapter, how would you explain the Bible to someone who has never read it?

Understanding the Bible

Don't be surprised if you struggle with the Bible. Everyone finds it hard to understand. Rather than a single continuous book, the Bible is a collection of sixty-six books. It is written by different people, with different themes and at different times. Sometimes it is in chronological order and sometimes not. There are no divisions into different subjects to make the Bible easier to read. Also, the Old and New Testaments are profoundly dissimilar.

Probably the easiest place to start with are the historical accounts which are found mostly in the earlier books of both the Old and New Testaments. In contrast, the wisdom, prophetic and teaching sections will be much harder. Peter found Paul's teachings difficult to understand, so it is very likely we will as well (2Peter 3:16).

Preparatory reading can assist us in understanding the Bible. Maps, time charts, and basic history can give us important background knowledge and outlines can prove very useful as well.

We need the Holy Spirit to help us

There is a spiritual side to understanding the Bible. Nicodemus could not understand the new birth, yet he was a religious teacher and would have known much about the Bible (John 3:1–13). Academic learning alone is not enough and we are dependent on the Holy Spirit to teach us.

Learning from others

We can learn a great deal from others. Particularly from those with a love for His Word and a heart to serve God—those who have a steadfast faith through good and difficult times.

God has placed teachers in the church for our benefit, and it can be very helpful indeed to learn from them (Ephesians 4:11–12). An anointed teacher (someone being helped by the Holy Spirit) can

present their teaching in a way which is relevant, interesting and appropriate to us and we can learn quickly as a result.

Although teachers can greatly help us, we still have the responsibility to understand the Bible for ourselves. We have many warnings in scripture about false teaching (Acts 20:29–31; 2 Peter 2:1).

The difference between the Old and New Testaments

Perhaps the first thing to understand about the Bible is the difference between the Old and New Testaments.

The Old Testament is so named because it refers to the covenant God made with Israel. In actual fact, God made several covenants with them. The main covenant was when they left Egypt. This is referred to as the old covenant in the Bible (or the Mosaic covenant). But God also made covenants with Abraham and David which affect Israel to this day.

The New Testament is about the new covenant made though Jesus Christ dying for our sins. This opened up a way where anyone through faith could become a child of God and have God as their Father.

We should note that the name Old Testament is slightly misleading, as it includes the time before God made the covenant with Israel. We should also note that God made other covenants with man, such as when He promised Noah He would never again destroy the earth with a flood (Genesis 9:8–17).

Bible timeline

The Bible covers a wide breadth of history, so a quick overview can help us get going. The following list of events, in chronological order, gives us an idea what we will encounter when reading the Bible. For simplicity, many events are not shown.

Old Testament timeline

- Creation of the earth
- Creation of Adam and Eve, the first humans to live
- Adam sins, so bringing the curse of death to all mankind
- The descendents of Adam and Eve become exceedingly wicked
- God sends the great flood destroying everyone on the earth
- Only Noah and his family are saved in the Ark
- The population grows again through Noah's family
- God scatters them by giving them different languages
- The nations go astray from God again
- God decides to raise up a holy nation that will serve Him
- He makes a covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob/Israel
- God makes a covenant with Moses and gives His Law to him
- The Israelites build a Tabernacle for God
- Through Joshua, the Israelites gradually conquer their land
- Israel then forsakes God and serves other gods
- They end up in trouble and need rescuing
- God raises up deliverers who rescue them from their enemies
- Israel then serves God while the deliverer lives.
- Afterwards they go astray. This cycle is repeated multiple times
- Eventually Israel starts having kings beginning with Saul
- God makes a covenant with David
- Solomon builds a temple for God in Jerusalem
- After Solomon's reign, Israel is divided into two nations
- Separate kings rule over the Northern Kingdom and Judah
- God sends prophets to warn Israel about their sin
- The Northern Kingdom is conquered by Assyria in 722 BC
- Babylon conquers Judah in 586 BC and relocates the Israelites
- After seventy years, God brings back Israel to their land

New Testament timeline

- By this time, Israel had been conquered by Greece, then by Rome
- Jesus is born to Mary supernaturally by the Holy Spirit
- John the Baptist calls on the Israelites to repent
- Jesus receives the Holy Spirit and starts His ministry

- He gives profound teachings and heals many people
- The Jewish religious leaders envy Him and seek to kill Him
- He is crucified and raised from the dead after three days
- After forty days, He ascends to Heaven
- His disciples receive the Baptism of the Holy Spirit
- His disciples preach about Jesus and perform many miracles
- Severe persecution breaks out against the Christians
- They flee to other nations and spread the gospel to non-Jews
- Paul, a persecutor of Christians, is saved and starts preaching
- Paul travels extensively starting up new churches
- Paul writes many letters to teach and encourage the churches
- John has a revelation about the end of the world

Focus of the Bible

As you study these timelines, you should notice a recurring theme—man sins, God rescues them from the consequences of their sin, and then He provides a way for them going forward.

You should also notice the focus on Israel. You might be surprised at this given their relatively small size compared to other nations. But, if we are to understand the Bible, we need to find out why God treats Israel so importantly.

God's plan to raise up a holy people

After the great flood, the whole of mankind quickly went their own way and followed after other gods. At this point, God could have given up on man and let them go their own way to their own destruction. He could have also destroyed the whole world again and started over. But thankfully, God had in mind something better.

God decided to raise up a nation and teach them how to live righteously. He planned to concentrate on a small group of people, help them to become righteous, and then use them to minister to the world and to be an example of how everyone should live. In time, this nation would become known as Israel.

Essential requirements of this plan

For this plan to work, certain things needed to happen:

- The people had to agree to this plan
- Successive generations also needed to agree
- They had to be taught the right ways to behave
- They had to obey God as best as they could
- They needed to be kept separate from other nations, so they would not learn their ways or serve their gods
- God had to watch over them closely, and correct them when they went astray
- They needed a way for God to forgive them when they did wrong

In return, God would give them somewhere to live, look after them and protect them from their enemies.

God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

Genesis 12:1–3 Now the LORD had said to Abram: Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (NKJV)

God chose Abraham to be the father of this holy nation. He promised Abraham that his descendants would be numerous and become a great people. He would give them a land and everyone in the earth would be blessed through him.

This promise is based on Abraham's faith and affects his descendants even after his death. Because it is a promise to Abraham, it will happen regardless of the behaviour of his descendants.

Later on, God ratified His covenant with Abraham's son, Isaac (Genesis 26:24), and his grandson, Jacob (Genesis 28:13ff). He then changed Jacob's name to Israel, which means one who struggles

with God. Israel had twelve sons and over time they multiplied in numbers.

God's covenant with Moses

Four hundred and thirty years later, God raised up Moses to take the children of Israel out of Egypt and into their promised land. While they were in the wilderness, God made a covenant with them that He will be their God and they will be His people. He also told them what He required from them.

Exodus 19:5–6 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation... (NKJV)

This covenant is different from the one God made with Abraham (Galatians 3:15–18). This one requires obedience from the Israelites.

The Law of Moses

In order to become a holy nation, God needed to show Israel how to behave.

Initially, God gave Moses a summary of His commandments to Israel written on two stone tablets. The Bible calls these the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17; 34:27–28).

But He also gave Moses many other instructions, which are referred to as the Law of Moses, or more simply, the Law. These instructions are recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Some of the commandments teach them how to behave righteously; for example, they should honour their father and mother (Exodus 20:12).

Some are to help Israel remain separate from the other nations around them (Deuteronomy 14:2); for example, they could not wear clothes made with a mixture of wool and linen (Leviticus 19:19).

Some are for their own well being; for example, they could not work on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10; Mark 2:27).

Other commandments showed Israel how to prepare a home for God to live among them and how they could have their sins forgiven.

God comes to live with Israel

As part of God's covenant with Israel, He told them to prepare a place for Him to live among them (Exodus 25:8). He gave detailed instructions on how they should build a Tabernacle (Exodus 26), which was like a tent.

The primary purpose of the Tabernacle is to help keep the Israelites a safe distance away from God. Anyone coming near God had to cleanse themselves from their sins or risk losing their lives (Exodus 28:35).

He also told them to build many items to be stored in the Tabernacle. The most important of which is the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:10), which was like a chest. This was stored in the Holy of Holies, where God manifested His presence (Exodus 40:34–38).

Animal sacrifices

In chapters eight and nine, we saw that God can only forgive sin because His Son died for us. If Jesus had not died on the cross, then no one could ever be saved—regardless of what covenant they lived under. God planned this way of salvation before the world existed (1 Peter 1:18–21).

Revelation 13:8 All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world. (NIV)

God could not reveal this until after Jesus was crucified. If Satan or mankind knew the gospel in advance, they would not have crucified Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 2:8). It is called a mystery several times in the New Testament because it was hidden from those who lived before Christ (Romans 16:25–26; Ephesians 6:19).

Since the gospel was hidden, God needed a way for those people who lived before Christ to receive forgiveness for their sins. When Adam and Eve sinned, God clothed them with animal skins which suggests that He sacrificed an animal for them (Genesis 3:21). Animal sacrifices continued from this point forward (Genesis 8:20; 12:6–7; Exodus 12:1–14). The shedding of blood in these sacrifices was a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ's future death.

The Law formally set out animal sacrifices as a means of atonement for sin (Leviticus 4:13ff; 5:6ff; 17:11). God forgave their sin when they sacrificed, but it is important to note that although these sacrifices enabled the nation of Israel to continue to live in God's presence, they were not what He ultimately desired.

Hosea 6:6 For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings. (KJV)

(See also Psalm 40:6 and Proverbs 21:3.)

Salvation is not achieved through animal sacrifices (Hebrews 10:4) or through obeying the Law (Galatians 2:16). It can only come by faith and it can never be earned by what we do (Ephesians 2:8–9).

God's covenant with David

About four hundred to four hundred and fifty years after Moses, God made another covenant, this time with David.

2 Samuel 7:12–16 When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men. But My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever.

This covenant, like the one given to Abraham, is unconditional and permanent.

It has an application to David's son, Solomon, who built the first Temple. But its main application is Jesus Christ, who will have an everlasting throne.

Prediction of a new covenant

The covenant God made with Moses was only ever going to be a temporary one. It allowed God to live among the Israelites, but they still had to keep distant from Him. The closest anyone could get to Him was once a year, when the High Priest entered the Holy Place where God dwelt.

All along, God had in mind a better covenant with Israel which would allow Him to live in their hearts.

Jeremiah 31:31–33 “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people...” (NKJV)

The new covenant

About six hundred years after this prophecy, Jesus came to the earth to establish this new covenant.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus stayed in Israel and engaged with the Jews and did not travel to the other nations. He offered the new covenant to the Jews before anyone else.

On the evening before His crucifixion, Jesus made this new covenant with His disciples.

Luke 22:19–20 And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you...” (NKJV)

When Jesus died on the cross, the veil in the temple was torn in two. This signified it was no longer necessary to keep distant from God as through Jesus people can come directly into God’s presence (Matthew 27:51). The old covenant is no longer needed (Hebrews 8:13).

Israel rejects the new covenant

As a nation, Israel emphatically rejected the new covenant by repeatedly rejecting Jesus’ teachings and by finally crucifying Him. They wanted to hold on to the old covenant which they continually broke.

Romans 10:3 For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.

As a consequence of this, they now find the gospel difficult to believe.

Romans 11:8 ...God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day.

See also 2 Corinthians 3:14–15.

In AD70 Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans and the Temple broken up (see Matthew 24:1–2).

A remnant in Israel believes

A small group of Jews (including the apostles) continued to follow Jesus and embraced the new covenant. This continues to today (Romans 11:5) and these people are often referred to as Messianic Jews.

The new covenant is offered to the Gentiles

God intended that He would have a people who would serve Him and who could minister to the world. Because the Jewish nation rejected the new covenant, God offered it to the Gentiles (non-Jews). The Bible shows us that the Gentiles are second choice and that the Jews will be readily accepted should they believe.

Romans 11:24 For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?

The gospel is for everyone, but God intended the Jew to receive it first then the Gentiles (Romans 1:16).

Once they learned about the new covenant, the early church leaders recognised it superseded the old covenant and they decided they no longer had to keep the Law (Acts 15:1ff; Ephesians 2:15; Colossians 2:14). They also recognised the new covenant was for everyone and not just for the Jews (Acts 11:1–18).

Israel today

Religious Jews today still observe the Law as best as they can. They dress in a distinctive way, avoid working on Saturdays and eat 'kosher' food. However, because the Temple was destroyed, they cannot offer any sacrifices.

They still oppose the preaching of the gospel and so do not follow God. They couldn't fulfil the requirements of the Law and have not

fulfilled God's aim to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. In God's sight they are not a righteous nation.

However, God has not forgotten them and still intends fulfilling the promises He gave Abraham (Genesis 17:7; Leviticus 26:44) and David (Jeremiah 23:5–8; 33:20–21).

Romans 11:28 Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

The future of Israel

God has a future purpose for Israel (Ezekiel 37:26–28). We currently live in the time when God works through the Gentiles. But there will follow a time when He will work through Israel (Romans 11:25–26).

The devil knows God has a future work for Israel and he therefore raises up people and nations to try to destroy them. This was particularly evident in World War Two when Adolf Hitler instigated the Holocaust causing approximately six million Jews to lose their lives.

The Bible prophesies there is coming a time when all nations will seek to destroy Israel and Jerusalem (Zechariah 12). At this time they will look to Jesus and turn to Him with all their heart (Zechariah 12:10).

In all likelihood, Israel will do something to cause all the nations to utterly abhor them and seek their destruction. The temptation to go against Israel will get stronger as we near this time.

Our attitude towards Israel

Israel is constantly involved in bitter wars and this generates a lot of hatred between them and their enemies. Through the media, this hatred can spread to anyone keeping updated with events. Churches

and individual Christians are not immune to getting drawn into the arguments.

We must avoid hating either the Jews or the nations fighting against them.

1 John 2:11 But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes (NKJV)

Matthew 5:44 But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you (NKJV)

We must also avoid stirring up division in our churches over Israel.

Matthew 5:9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God (NKJV)

We need to be particularly careful not to be caught up in the world's hatred of Israel and side against Israel and against God.

Zechariah 12:9 It shall be in that day that I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem (NKJV)

God defends Israel, not because of how good they are, but because of the promise He made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Psalms 122:6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: May they prosper who love you (NKJV)

Questions to consider

1. How should we balance reading the Bible ourselves with having it taught to us?
2. What ways are open to us to resolve any questions we have about the Bible?
3. How do we know when we are not reading the Bible enough? Is it possible to read it too much?

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