

# HOW TO READ YOUR BIBLE

Simple steps for spending time with God

## **James 4:8**

*Come close to God, and God will come close to you.*



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**We are with you on this journey and want to help you succeed.**

Please contact us if you have questions, want more ideas,  
or need some people to talk to about your relationship with God.

 **THANKSGIVING**

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# HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

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***The Bible is...the record of God's dealing with His people over thousands of years and within different cultures.***

*Mark Strom, The Symphony of Scripture:  
Making Sense of the Bible's Many Themes*

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The Bible has been a source of comfort, challenge, and inspiration to people for thousands of years. Its size can be daunting, and its content is often confusing to those reading it for the first time. Many people set out to read the Bible from front to back, but get stuck somewhere along the way. If you've ever tried to read through the Bible by starting in Genesis, but found yourself frustrated, lost, or asleep by the book of Leviticus...you're not alone! With a basic understanding of how the Bible is structured and some advice on getting started you can use the Bible to engage with God.

God used the writing in the Bible to communicate specific messages to specific groups of people for specific purposes. And with a growing understanding of the Bible's genres, storyline, and people, we can hear God's voice communicating with us today.

## BEFORE YOU GET STARTED

### Some basic information about the Bible

Though we refer to the Bible as a book, it's actually a library of 66 smaller books written by various God-inspired human authors throughout the span of over a thousand years. It's through these writings that the God of the universe began revealing Himself to humanity, and it's through the life of Jesus -- to whom all Scripture points -- that God revealed Himself most completely.

### What's the difference between the Old and New Testaments?

A "testament" is a covenant, or a promise-based relationship. So the "Old Testament" (comprising the first three-fourths of your Bible) is the collection of books relating to God's covenant relationship with people before Jesus. The "New Testament," which begins with stories about Jesus, is the collection of books and letters relating to God's relationship with people since Jesus' life and ministry.

The Bible contains different genres, or literary styles, employed by its writers to convey its divinely inspired message. Knowing the type of literature we're reading helps us to understand how to read it.

If you do not have a Bible in a translation you can easily understand, we would love to give you one. Email [office@thanksgiving.church](mailto:office@thanksgiving.church) to let us know.

# THE BIBLE'S BOOKS & GENRES <sup>1</sup>

- Genesis
- Exodus
- Leviticus
- Numbers
- Deuteronomy
- Joshua
- Judges
- Ruth
- 1 Samuel
- 2 Samuel
- 1 Kings
- 2 Kings
- 1 Chronicles
- 2 Chronicles
- Ezra
- Nehemiah
- Esther
- Job
- Psalms
- Proverbs
- Ecclesiastes
- Song of Songs
- Isaiah
- Jeremiah
- Lamentations
- Ezekiel
- Daniel
- Hosea
- Joel
- Amos
- Obadiah
- Jonah
- Micah
- Nahum
- Habakkuk
- Zephaniah
- Haggai
- Zechariah
- Malachi

## LAW

These books introduce and present the many laws God gave to Israel, comprising the standard by which God's people were to live and worship under the Old Covenant. Although we are under the New Covenant today, the "Law" is not obsolete. Rather, it has been fulfilled in Jesus.

## HISTORY

These books present the account of Israel from their settlement in the promised land, through Israel's destruction and exile, to their re-settlement back in their land. Understand these as stories of imperfect people with imperfect actions, collectively pointing us to the greater story of Jesus.

## WISDOM & POETRY

The books of Wisdom present commonsense sayings and philosophical reflections. Understand these not only as collections of individual proverbial statements, but also as containing broader, more unified messages. The books of Poetry are lyrical writings of prayer and worship. Read these as expressions to and about God that were inspired by God.

## PROPHECY

These books present messages from God to His people through the voice of a specific, human prophet, calling his people back into obedience. Understand the historical context in which these were written, keeping in mind the big picture of God's faithfulness to an unfaithful people.

## GOSPELS

These books present the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, containing narratives (stories), parables (illustrations), and exhortations (sayings). They aim to express the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

## CHURCH HISTORY

Acts gives the history of the early church and its remarkable growth from Jewish communities in Jerusalem to Gentile communities in Jerusalem to Gentile communities in Rome. Pay attention to the work of Peter, Paul, and more centrally, the Holy Spirit, as they spread the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

## LETTERS

These letters, or epistles, were written to first-century church communities in response to their specific needs, questions, and circumstances. Understand the historical and cultural context in which these were written, reading each letter as a whole for the most complete understanding.

## PROPHECY

Revelation combines prophecy, apocalyptic literature, and letters to communicate the apostle John's God-given visions to first-century Christians. His visions draw from Old Testament imagery in the past to paint multiple symbolic pictures of Jesus' coming in the future in order to call God's people to faithful obedience in the present.

- Matthew
- Mark
- Luke
- John

Acts

- Romans
- 1 Corinthians
- 2 Corinthians
- Galatians
- Ephesians
- Philippians
- Colossians
- 1 Thessalonians
- 2 Thessalonians
- 1 Timothy
- 2 Timothy
- Titus
- Philemon
- Hebrews
- James
- 1 Peter
- 2 Peter
- 1 John
- 2 John
- 3 John
- Jude

Revelation

## Why so many translations?

The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic, and the New Testament, in Greek. Fortunately for the many who are unfamiliar with these ancient languages, the Bible has been translated into modern day languages. Translation always requires some interpretation, so there is no single “correct” translation. English readers are extremely fortunate to have a wide and diverse range of translations of the Bible, ranging from more literal, word-for-word translations to more meaning-based.

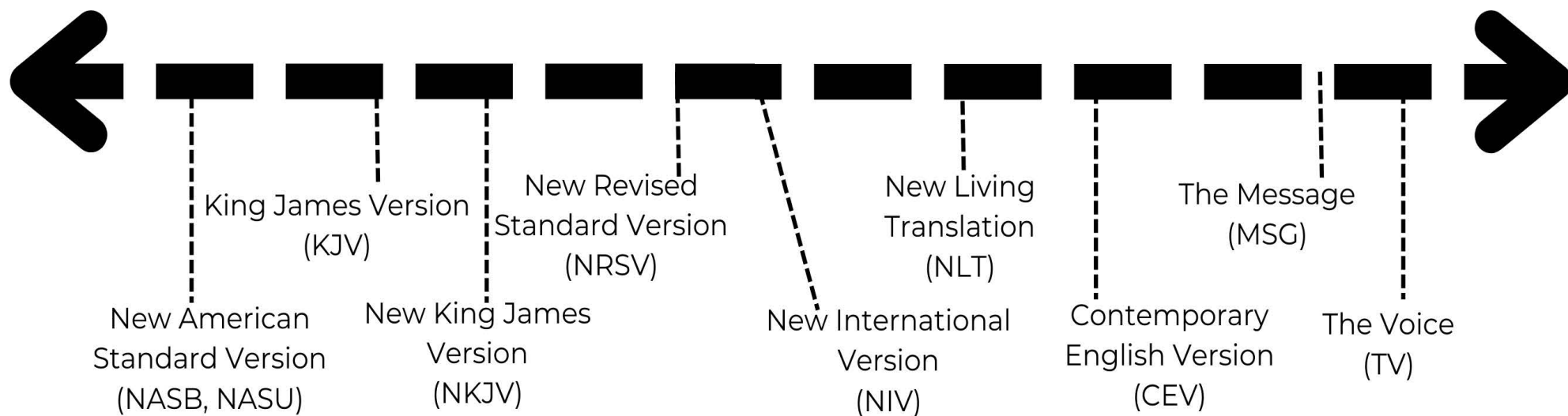
One helpful strategy for studying a Biblical passage is to read it in several different translations, paying attention to the subtle differences. Digital Bibles, such as those available at [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com) and [youversion.com](http://youversion.com), offer a wide range of English translations. Download one of their apps to your phone today.

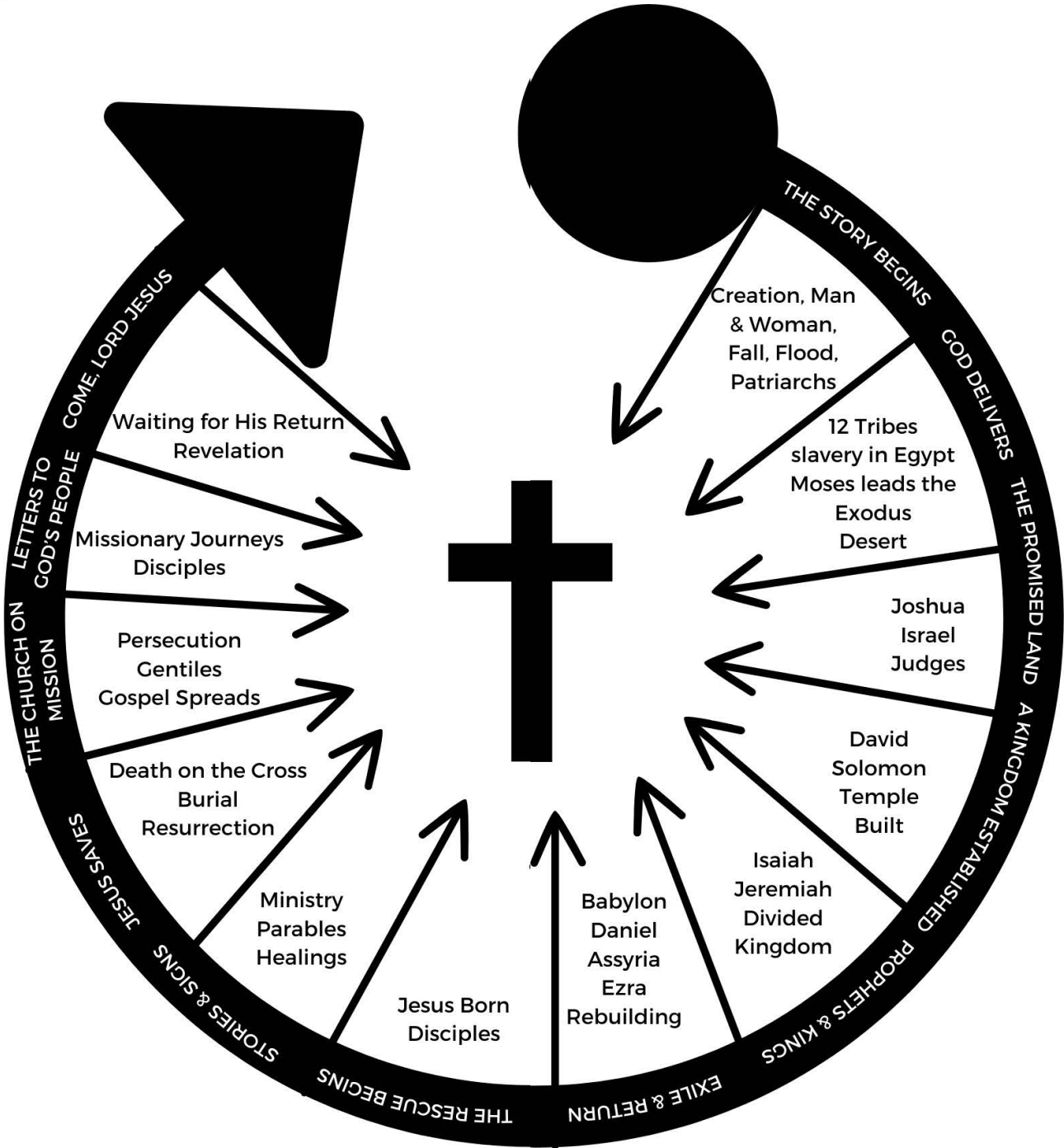
### WORD-FOR-WORD

Prioritizing accuracy to the original words used

### PARAPHRASE

Prioritizing clarity to the modern-day reader





## GETTING STARTED

### Start with Humility

It can be tempting to read the Bible with an agenda to confirm your prior-held beliefs and behaviors, but that approach interferes with God's agenda. Instead, approach Scripture with a humble and open posture toward God, inviting Him to surprise, challenge, and change you from the inside out.

### Start with a Gospel<sup>iii</sup>

If you're new to the Bible, you might be wondering where you should begin. Rather than reading the Bible through like a novel or picking a page at random, we recommend beginners start by reading one of the Gospel books that tell the story of Jesus, such as Matthew or Mark. Read one section or chapter a day. Write down what stands out to you from the chapter, what questions you have, and talk to God about it. Try to discover all you can about Jesus as you read. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What seems important to Jesus?
- What sort of questions does He ask people?
- What sort of questions do people ask Him?
- What is Jesus inviting me to be and do?

### Start with a Bible Reading Plan

Another helpful tool for getting started is to use a Bible reading plan. These plans break the Bible down into daily readings, making it easier to get into the rhythm of connecting with God each day. The Bible App ([youversion.com](http://youversion.com)) organizes hundreds of different plans by topic. Find one that seems to fit your interest and purposes, commit to it, and start reading.

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**“The goal of Scripture is that we would know God better - not that we would know Scripture better.”**

--Robert Mulholland

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# WAYS TO READ THE BIBLE

As with prayer, there are many ways to engage with the Bible. Below is a list of various approaches.<sup>iv</sup> As you look through them, circle one you'd like to try. Perhaps you already have a usual way of studying the Bible but want to add some new methods

## Devotional

Prayerfully meditate on a passage, reading it several times slowly. Spend time in silence before and after each time you read it. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you understanding and ways to apply it to your own life.

## Book Survey

Read an entire book of the Bible through several times. Study the book's background and make notes on its content.

## Chapter Analysis and Summary

Read one chapter of the Bible repeatedly. Pour over it verse by verse, word by word, observing every detail. Write a summary of the central message of the chapter and how it connects with the chapters that precede and follow it.

## Verse-by-Verse Analysis

Choose one passage of Scripture. Examine it in detail by asking questions, finding cross-references to other scriptures, and paraphrase each verse. (You can pull up and compare several versions of the Bible at one time on **biblegateway.com**).

## Word Study

Study important words of the Bible. How many times does a word occur in Scripture? In what context is it used? Explore the original meaning of the word. Tools such as **biblehub.com** and **bibleproject.com** can be helpful.

## Biographical

Choose a person in the Bible and read all the passages associated with him or her. Take notes about what is known about the person's life and character. Note his or her attitudes, strengths, weaknesses, and ways of interacting with God.

## Topical

Collect and compare all the verses you can find on a particular topic, using an online search tool (e.g. **biblegateway.com**) to find each instance a particular word or theme appears in the Bible.

Which of these ways of reading the Bible will you try first?

When, where, and how? Jot down your plan here:

## Remembering the Goal

Our goal in reading the Bible is not simply to gain more information--it's to be transformed. Listening to God's Word, studying it, and putting it into practice is a life-long pursuit. As you grow as a Bible reader, stretch yourself, put into practice the things God makes clear, and allow God's Spirit to change you into someone who's more like Jesus every day.

## UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING

You may know how counterproductive it can be to take a person's statement out of context. Whenever we disconnect what someone said from what they meant, we completely miss the other person's perspective, mind, and heart. Understanding people's intended meaning is essential to effective, relationship-building communication with them.

Likewise, when we try to understand Scripture, we're seeking to understand the intended meaning of the author--both the human author and God. The closer we get to grasping the human author's intended meaning of a written passage, the closer we get to knowing the perspective, mind, and heart of God, who inspired the human author to write it.

What God intends for a Biblical passage to mean in your life today is strongly connected to what the original author meant and how the original readers would have understood it in the past. Here are some ways to get back to the intended meaning of a passage:

- Read the full chapter or section surrounding the passage you're reading. Get into the author's flow of thought. How does your passage connect to the passages immediately before and after it?
- Read your passage in multiple translations. How does your interpretation align with multiple translations?
- Consider the author. Look for clues throughout the book that suggest what the author was experiencing and, most importantly, why he was writing. What can you know about the author from what's included in the book?
- Consider the original readers. Look for clues throughout the book that suggest what the original readers were curious about, struggling with, or experiencing. What can you know about the original readers from the book itself?

## TRY IT OUT

First, take a moment to read Philippians 4:13, summarizing what you think it means. Write out your summary here:

Next, read the entire section, Philippians 4:10-19. How did reading the surrounding context affect your initial summary of verse 13?

How is the meaning of verse 13 affected when you consider that the author, Paul, is writing this line from imprisonment (Philippians 1:13)? How about when you consider that the church originally reading this was experiencing some division (Philippians 4:2)?



# RECOMMENDED RESOURCES FOR BIBLE STUDY

There's no shortage of helpful, accessible Bible-reading resources. Here are several of our favorite recommendations. Remember that each author has his or her own perspectives and theology. Ask God to guide your mind and heart as you seek him through prayer and Scripture.

## ***The Bible App* | [youversion.com](https://youversion.com)**

If you're new to the Bible, this is the place to start. This most-downloaded Bible App not only gives your phone or tablet quick access to several versions of the Bible, but it also has a growing number of resources to help you: Bible reading plans, daily guided reflections, prayer tools, and ways to connect with your friends about what you're reading. You can even use the Bible App to listen to an audio version of Scripture.

## ***The Bible Project* | [bibleproject.com](https://bibleproject.com)**

If you're a visual learner, you may find the illustrative videos at the Bible Project to be an engaging way to understand the themes and books of the Bible. Start by watching their "Intro to the Bible" series or watch one of their Bible Book Overview videos.

## ***Lectio365* | [24-7prayer.com/resource/lectio-365](https://24-7prayer.com/resource/lectio-365)**

Want to listen to a spoken reflection with prayer and Scripture prompts? Lectio 365 is a free daily devotional resource that helps you slow down and pray with the Bible every day. You can use their app to access morning and evening prayers.

## **One-Year Bible Plans**

Some people love the challenge and accountability of reading through the entire Bible in one year. Here are two such plans with insightful commentary, helping you make sense of the harder-to-understand portions you're sure to encounter.

- **The Bible in One Year | [bibleinoneyear.org](https://bibleinoneyear.org) | Nicky & Pippa Gumbel**

Each day includes passages from a Psalm or Proverb, the New Testament and the Old Testament, along with a daily commentary. It's available in an app or as a reading plan.

- **The Bible Recap | [thebiblerecap.com](https://thebiblerecap.com) | Tara Leigh Cobble**

This plan leads you through the Bible chronologically and includes a podcast episode for each day, giving background and commentary. A book version is also available.

## **RightNow Media Series**

Thanksgiving provides access to a digital library of Bible Study resources at RightNow Media. There are many practical video series available to help you learn and grow. Email [office@thanksgiving.church](mailto:office@thanksgiving.church) for an invitation to access.

## **Book Resources**

- *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* - Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart
- *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* - Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart
- *Core52: A Fifteen Minute Daily Guide to Build Your Bible IQ in a Year* and/or *Quest52: A Fifteen Minute-A-Day Year-long Pursuit of Jesus* - Mark Moore
- *Open Your Bible* - A Bible Study from *She Reads Truth*
- *How to Pray: A Simple Guide for Normal People* - Pete Grieg

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i Chart adapted from "Open Your Bibles" by She Reads Truth

ii Chart adapted from "Open Your Bibles" by She Reads Truth

iii Adapted from "Open Your Bibles" by She Reads Truth

iv Adapted from "Spiritual Disciplines Handbook" by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun