

BIBLE STUDY TOOLS

With all of the translations and paraphrases available, it is not too difficult to read and to understand what you read in the Bible. We can understand even better when we use the Bible study tools that are available. The resources listed below are all available to help us better understand all that we read in Scripture. Don't be discouraged if you do not immediately understand something you read. It is important, however, for you to know where you can look for help in understanding.

The concordance is an alphabetical listing of important words in the Bible. If you know a word from a passage, you can look up that word and find all of the passages in which that word would be found.

The Bible Dictionary is an alphabetical listing of words and proper names found in the Bible with a definition of their meaning. It is similar to other dictionaries, but containing only words and names from the Bible.

The Bible Handbook has many different kinds of helps. It will usually include a brief description of each book of the Bible, archaeological discoveries, notes on hard to understand passages or historical background, some miscellaneous Bible information, and much more.

The Bible Atlas is an atlas that contains the maps and other information about Bible lands and cities.

Cross References in a Bible refer us to other passages in which the same word or a similar thought is found. These are usually indicated by a letter or number that is then referenced elsewhere on the page.

The Commentary on the Bible is a much more detailed discussion about a passage or verse in the Bible. Commentaries on the Bible range from one book to fifty or more books.

Bible translations or versions are what we get as different people or groups of people translate the Bible from its original languages to English (or any other language). Bible translations vary quite a bit in the words used, however there is generally very little change in meaning. This is because a translation is intended to put into our language as accurately as possible what was written in either Hebrew or Greek. We will primarily be using three common translations: the NIV (New International Version), the TEV (Today's English Version), and the CEV (Contemporary English Version). Two older translations that you may have heard of before are the RSV (Revised Standard Version) and the KJV (King James Version).

A paraphrased Bible is generally easier to read, with passages reworded in ways that are meant to clarify the meaning. A paraphrase will use more modern terminology and situations that make the reading easier to understand. Because of these attempts at clarifying the meaning, a paraphrase is more of an interpretation than a translation and is then more open to error. The Living Bible is a commonly used paraphrase. A paraphrase is a great Bible for most reading. If a particular thought or passage is difficult or controversial, then a translation is more dependable.

Other people can also be a great source for help with understanding Scriptures. There is much to learn as we share with one another our understanding of Scripture. As we discuss the Word with others, and as we live out with others the words that we read, lights go on for us in our own understanding. As with all of the resources available to help us better understand this book we call The Bible, we must remember to let the Bible be the ultimate authority. Look for help elsewhere, then try to verify what you learn in that most holy of books itself.

THE PURPOSE OF THE BIBLE

By now you are probably thinking, “O.K. – so I know what the Bible is and how we got it, but why bother to read it?” You have to understand that the Bible is a book to be read in faith. If a person doesn’t have faith in God, if he doesn’t believe that God exists, he probably isn’t going to understand or accept what the Bible says. As Christians, we do believe that the Bible has a message for each of us. That message is the Gospel, the Good News that God loves us and has sent Jesus Christ to be our Savior.

Even though we should read the Bible in faith, it is also true that we may not have faith until we read the words of God in Scripture. Those words themselves can bring us to a point where we truly believe. As Paul writes to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:15, “you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Or, as written in Romans 10:17 “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ”. So we see that the Bible can give faith, and should then be read believing that God Himself will speak to you again and again.

The Old Testament in particular can be difficult to understand. There are numerous laws and festivals that seem to have no meaning for us today. The key to understanding these things, as well as to understanding the events and teachings of the New Testament, is in knowing Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. It is through Christ, through the grace and forgiveness that He brings to us, that our eyes are opened to understanding all that God has spoken to us in the Scriptures. Much of what we read in the Old Testament points us to Jesus and can only be understood after we know Jesus and truly understand who He is. For instance in Isaiah 9:6, written hundreds of years before Jesus was born, we read “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.” We often read these words at Christmas time because we now understand them to be written about Jesus.

The Bible contains some questions for each of us, and provides us with the answers as well. It deals with questions like: “What happens after death?” (John 11:25-26); or “Who was Jesus?” (Matthew 16:15-16); or “How should I live?” (Galatians 5:22-23). **Look up each of these three passages and on the bottom of this page write the answers you find to these three questions.**

As we read the Bible we don’t simply want to read it in the same way we would read another book, or as if we were looking for mistakes. Instead, through this book, we find out more about who we are, who God is, and what message He has for us.

In a way, the Bible is like a two-act play. In the introduction to the play, God creates man, but man fouls up His creation (this is called sin). The first act of the play is about a people (Israel) and a promise. This act contains stories of Exodus, the covenant, the Kingdom of Israel, the exile. The second act begins with Christ, who fulfills the promise of the first act and who gathers around Him another group of people called the Church.

The Bible tells us that God has loved us and that He continues to love us – and because of His love, we are to love God in return with our whole heart, soul, and mind. It is my prayer that you will find much rich treasure and help in the scriptures as you carry out the reading in the scriptures as part of the plan you have (or will have) developed by the time you complete this unit.

HOW WE GOT OUR BIBLE

How did we get this wonderful book? It was not handed down from heaven, beautifully printed and bound as you see it now. Its own statement is, “Men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” (2 Peter 1:21) We call that **divine inspiration** – “**God breathed**”.

In the beginning people did not have books, but relied on their memories. A father would tell his son what God had said and mother would tell her daughters. In this way such exciting stories as that of the Garden of Eden, the flood, and the slavery of the Hebrews in Egypt, became deeply impressed on their minds. These stories were handed down by word of mouth, from generation to generation.

As time passed, people learned to write. Their earliest efforts were scratched on stones and tablets of clay. Later there were writings by hand on papyrus, a material made from a plant growing along the Nile River or on animal skins.

The writing of the Bible took many centuries. As we have it, the Bible was put together over a long period of time. This is different from books that other world religions consider as their sacred writings. For instance, Mohammedans believe that the Book of Koran, and Mormons believe the Book of Mormon, were given to people in a finished form. Though not as large as the Bible, both the Koran and the Book of Mormon are quite large, consisting of several “books” and “chapters”.

We also need to remember that the books of the Bible were not originally written in English. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and the New Testament in Greek. Biblical scholars have worked hard to find the right words to carry the same idea and meaning as the original Hebrew and Greek words. The Bibles from which you and I read are either translations or paraphrases of the original texts. Paraphrases, such as The Living Bible, are generally easier to read. However, in trying to make things clearer, the writer is also including some of their own thoughts and interpretations. Translations such as the Revised Standard Version (RSV), Today’s English Version (the Good News Bible), the New International Version, and others stay much closer to the original text and therefore provide a greater degree of accuracy.

The Old Testament was written between 1200 BC and 165 BC. That means the process of writing and gathering it all together lasted for over 1000 years. What we call the “Old Testament” is also called “The Hebrew Bible” because it is still today the Bible for all who are members of the Jewish religion. They do not accept the message of the New Testament about Jesus Christ.

Listed below are some of the major historical events in the life of Israel over these 1000 years and should be added to the time line in your packet. Other dates will be found in the last part of this article.

1300 BC - Exodus. This is the story of Moses and the children of Israel leaving the land of Egypt.

1250 BC - Joshua. This story tells you about the entering of the land of Canaan.

1200 to 1020 BC (one of the brackets) – Judges.

1020 – 922 BC - Kings. About this time the kingdom of Israel divided into two parts.

922-721 BC - Northern Kingdom.

922 to 586 BC - Southern Kingdom.

586 to 539 BC - Exile. This is the period when the children of Israel were taken from their homes and carried away into captivity in a foreign country.

0 - Jesus’ Birth.

90 AD - Council of Jamnia.

During this entire time, the Old Testament books of the Bible were being written. The last of all the sacred writings were probably written 400 years before the birth of Christ. Gradually the Jewish leaders began to accept certain of the sacred writings as those that they considered to be the Word of God. In the year 90 AD at a council of Jewish leaders ... the Council of Jamnia ... the Scriptures were limited to 24 books, the Hebrew order. No books could be added from that time on. These 24 books contain the same material as our 39 books of the Old Testament.

You may notice sometime, if you ever have a chance to read from a Catholic friend's Bible, that it will contain some books which our Bible does not contain. The reason for that difference goes far back in history to about the year 280 BC. At that time, Greek was spreading around the world as the official language, so a Greek translation was made of the Hebrew Bible. This is called the "Septuagint" which means "seventy", because there were seventy translators who worked on the translation. At this time, there were some extra books added to the Greek Bible, which were not accepted in the Hebrew Bible. As the Christian church grew, this Greek version was used as the basis for the Latin Vulgate Bible until the days of the Reformation in the 1500's. At the time of the reformation, Martin Luther and other reformers returned to the Hebrew Bible, saying that the extra books of the Greek Bible were "good to read, but not as God's Word." Today there is still the difference in the number of books between a Catholic and a non-Catholic Bible. As Protestants we believe that these books can give us valuable information about the time in which they were written. However, we do not look at them as being the equivalent of God's word, and so we do not include them in our Bible.

Finally, remember that the order in which the books are found in the Bible is not the order in which they were written. In the New Testament, the letters of Paul (and other church leaders) were written first, between 50 and 65 AD. They were canonized (recognized as being equal to the Old Testament writings) right away. The Gospels were written between 65-90 AD, and by 100 AD virtually everything had been written down. By the year 367 AD we know that the Bible was exactly as we have it today.

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

The Bible is one of the world's most precious gifts. In it we learn about God and His plans and desires for us, making it the most important book in the world. It is so widely read and recognized, even its title sets it apart. Bible comes from the Greek word "biblion" which simply means "book." Thus, the Bible is quite simply "The Book". No other books can compare. It has often been called the Scriptures, which is another big word that simply means "writings".

Even though it stands alone, the Bible has many similarities to other books we might read. It is a great work of literature that includes beautiful poetry, excellent short stories, and accurate historical accounts. However, one thing that separates the Bible from all other books is our belief that the Bible is the Word of God. In 2 Peter 1:21 God tells us "men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." "Inspiration" is a special word we use for this. Because this book is God's Word to us we call the Bible the "Holy Scriptures". Two other verses you will be looking at, 2 Timothy 3:16 and 1 Corinthians 2:13, tell us the same thing. As the Word of God, it makes all the difference in the world how we react when we read and study it. It is the very Word of the Lord and King of our life!

Another word we often use in describing the Bible is "revelation". Revelation is the process by which God made Himself known to the writers of Scriptures, to the people about whom the Scripture is written, and to us as we read and study the Bible today.

The Bible is really not just one book but a collection of 66 books. These individual books were written by many authors, all of whom received their revelation and inspiration from God. The Old Testament contains thirty-nine books that tell about God and His work in the years and centuries before Jesus. The New Testament contains twenty-seven books telling about Jesus and the beginning of the Church. The Old Testament was written in the Hebrew language and the New Testament was written in Greek. You can recall the number of books in the Bible is by playing some number games with the letters from OLD TESTAMENT and NEW TESTAMENT. For the Old Testament, simply count the number of letters in each word (OLD=3, TESTAMENT=9) and put the two numbers together, giving you 39. There are 39 books in the Old Testament. For the New Testament, do the same thing with the letters (NEW=3, TESTAMENT=9), but since the cross is the overriding theme of the New Testament, we multiply the numbers instead. $3 \times 9 = 27$. There are 27 books in the New Testament.

The Old Testament story begins with the creation of the world, and then tells of God's dealing with the Hebrew people as they developed into a nation. It tells of their victories and of their defeats. It tells about a sinful people who continually turned from God, and how God continued to pursue them and bring them back. It tells of them being taken as prisoners to a foreign land, and of their returning and trying to rebuild their nation and their faith. The rest of the Old Testament is composed of sermons, short stories, hymns, and other writings by great Old Testament writers. As we read these books, we meet a God who wanted His people us to know Him much more intimately than they did. This is one of the reasons Jesus came into the world – to give us a more complete revelation or picture of God.

The New Testament begins with four books we call the Gospels. The word "gospel" means "good news". Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell the good news about God's Son, Jesus Christ. Following the Gospels is a book called the Acts of the Apostles, which tells us about how the Christian faith grew and the church began. Most of the rest of the New Testament is made up of letters, or epistles, which were written by great leaders whom God inspired to tell the good news about Jesus Christ and to help people be faithful to Christ and to His way. The book of Revelation is also a

message, but one which was written in order to give us hope and encouragement in our problems and persecutions. In the book of Revelation we see pictures of Jesus as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

From the very beginning, the people of God have sensed the presence of God's Word in these writings or Scriptures. As Lutherans we say in our Formula of Concord (one of the reformation documents on which our church is based) that these Scriptures are the "source" and the "norm", or standard for answers to our questions about "faith" and "conduct".

If you have any questions about the content of the Bible, write those down as you work through your packet. You may write down a question that many have but are not thinking to ask. At a future time we will try to address each of the questions that come up.

My God Speaks To Me

The record of God's speaking to people has taken many different forms. In Eden, Adam and Eve heard God's voice. In fact God walked in the garden with them. To Moses God spoke as a voice out of a burning bush. To the Egyptian Pharaoh He spoke through the voices and words of Moses and Aaron. He also spoke to the Egyptians through the ten plagues. To some He spoke in visions and to others in dreams. To Mary, Joseph, and the women at the tomb of Jesus, He spoke through angels.

At times God spoke clearly through natural events and through the actions of other men. He used the flood to speak to Noah and the people of his day. He used other nations, such as the Babylonians, to speak to his people about following Him rather than following idols and pursuing their own pleasures.

In the writings of the Holy Bible God spoke and continues to speak to men. God chose men called prophets in the Old Testament and apostles and evangelists in the New Testament to write the various parts of the Bible. No one can explain exactly how God did it, but somehow He guided these men as they wrote. We say that God inspired them to write, and so the Bible is God's Word. This is how Peter tells about God speaking: *No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. 2 Peter 1:21*

The most important way in which God has spoken and continues to speak to men is through His Son, Jesus Christ. The book of Hebrews starts out with these words: *In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son.*

All that Jesus did and said is God's Word for us. His words and actions tell us what God is like. He tells us what God wants. He explains what men are like and what God does for them. His words and actions spell out God's hatred of evil as well as His amazing patience and mercy. Especially as He died on a cross, God spoke and underlined every word. In His actions he said "Look how evil you are, and see what you deserve," yet at the same time he said "See how much I love you. I do this to rescue you." Jesus' life communicated God's message to us so clearly that He is actually referred to as God's Word (John 1:1-14).

Given the history of God speaking to His people, we can be confident that He still speaks today. He can do that in a number of ways, including any of those He has used in the past. However, the primary way that God speaks to us today is through His written Word, the Bible. In it we have the words that Jesus lived by and fulfilled (the Old Testament), historical accounts of Jesus' ministry and words (the Gospels), as well as the words of some of Jesus' early followers and eyewitnesses to his life, death, and resurrection (other New Testament books). God has preserved for us in this book all that we need in order to know about His goodness and grace, and how it is that we should then live. As you read this book, do so expecting and desiring to hear God speak directly to you, then be prepared to be changed.

The Bible is God's a gift to me. God speaks to me when I read and study what He has said and done, and how God has worked through those who have followed Him in the past. God also speaks when the pastor preaches about Him. He speaks through music, family devotions and Christian books. He speaks when I see a cross and remember that Jesus died for me. He speaks when my friend talks about Him. In many ways God the Holy Spirit makes it possible for me to hear from God. As Jesus promised: *When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth. John 16:13* Your task, as well as mine, is to be listening for his voice. Then, when we hear, to follow.