

## GETTING STARTED

There are many different translations of the Bible. You may need to try different versions to find the one you're most comfortable with.

- **King James Version:** 400 years old. Beautiful and resonant. An acquired taste for modern readers.
- **New International Version (NIV):** Evangelical origin. Well trusted.
- **New Revised Standard Version (NRSV):** Widely used in churches. Reliable. More inclusive in language.
- **The Message:** A lively paraphrase.

## REMEMBER

The Bible is:

- **A long term project** – written over more than a thousand years.
- **A book of many authors** – it's a library of 66 books (39 Old Testament; 27 New Testament).
- **A book of many genres** – law, history, poetry, wisdom, dreams and visions, gospel, letters, apocalyptic. Don't read it as if it's all the same sort of literature.
- **A book of complex simplicity** – it's a glorious love story telling how God pursues his wayward people to give them back their birthright: 'life in all its fullness'.
- **An emerging book** – reflecting the writers' developing understanding of God, but containing shafts of 'gospel love' throughout.
- **An authoritative book** – God's word for us and our word about God. It's not 'dictated' but inspired ('God-breathed'). The authority of the Bible rests on the authority of God. Moreover, in the New Testament, the writers are the earliest and most authentic witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Bible is not:

- **Magic** – you can't open it randomly and stick a finger on a text.
- **A code book** – neither the Book of Revelation nor the Da Vinci Code.
- **Omniscient** – because only God knows everything.
- **A book of even texture** – some passages (such as the cruelty and the legal codes in the Old Testament) are of their own time.

## THEY SAID THIS

'The Bible isn't a book to be read and put down. It's God's invitation to join the conversation between heaven and earth.' **Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks**

'Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture which they cannot understand. But as for me, I always notice that the passages of Scripture which trouble me most, are those I do understand.' **Mark Twain**

'We present you with this book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is wisdom; this is the royal law. These are the lively oracles of God.'

**Words used at the coronation when the new Sovereign is presented with a Bible**

'The Bible is food for wrestlers.' **Theologian D.T. Niles**

Voltaire said, 'One hundred years from my death, the Bible will be a museum piece.' A hundred years later the French Bible Society set up its headquarters in Voltaire's old home in Paris. **Anon**

'The Bible... is to be befriended as the companion to faith that it is. Friends are loved, debated with, sometimes disagreed with, and are the ones we enjoy spending time with because of what we learn about ourselves, and them, in this dialogue of trustful exchange.'

**Priest-writer Mark Oakley**

'Read the Bible – it'll scare the hell out of you.'

**On the T-shirt of a hairy biker at Greenbelt**



# READING THE BIBLE A SIMPLE GUIDE



A key theme of Living Faith is the joyful task of Making Disciples. Disciples are people who try to follow Jesus Christ in every aspect of their daily lives. To help them do this Christians have always turned to the Bible as the core text through which they encounter God's wisdom and guidance. It has to be said, however, that the Bible is the most popular, un-read book in the world! Here are some ideas to help bring this great book alive.

## PRAYER FOR 'BIBLE SUNDAY'

*Blessed Lord,  
who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:  
help us so to hear them,  
to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them  
that, through patience and the comfort of your holy word,  
we may embrace and for ever hold fast  
the hope of eternal life  
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.  
Amen*

**John Pritchard**  
**Bishop of Oxford**



## APPROACHING THE TEXT OF THE BIBLE

To help make sense of what you read, ask yourself:

### WHAT, WHY, HOW?

- **What?** What is this passage actually about? Who is saying what to whom? Who else is around and what are they doing? Where is this happening?
- **Why?** Why is this passage saying what it does? What's going on behind the scenes? Why has the author written this and what would the first readers have made of it?
- **How?** How does this passage apply to the world I know? How would the wisdom of this story work out in my context? What are the links here between the Word and the world?

### OR

### TEXT AND CONTEXT

- **The text itself** What is the *text* saying? What kind of material is this?
- **The context** What is the *world behind the text*, the customs, politics, economic relationships, religious rituals behind the story?
- **The subtext** What is the *author's intent* in writing this, in this way? What is the writer's main theme? e.g. Mark – the mystery and power of Jesus; Matthew – the giver of the new Law; Luke – the man for others; John – the cosmic Christ.
- **The pretext** What is *in front of the text*, i.e. our own context as we read and encounter this passage? How might it work out in our own lives? What has it said and what does it say *now*?

### RESOURCES

- **The Lion Handbook to the Bible**, Pat and David Alexander, Lion, 2009. *Well established, beautifully illustrated, accessible, good background material.*
- **The Complete Bible Handbook**, John Bowker, Dorling-Kindersley, 1998. *As above, less conservative.*
- **The Oxford Bible Commentary**, John Barton and John Muddiman, Oxford, 2001. *Extraordinarily comprehensive, more scholarly.*
- **New Testament Guides for Everyone** (Tom Wright) and **Old Testament Guides for Everyone** (John Goldingay), SPCK. *A superb series of accessible guidebooks.*

## FIVE WAYS OF REGULAR BIBLE READING

### 1. READ A GOSPEL, THEN A LETTER

Don't try and read the Bible like a normal book, starting at Genesis. You'll grind to a halt somewhere in Leviticus! Start with Mark's gospel and read it straight through. Get the whole picture. Then read the Acts of the Apostles (perhaps one or two chapters a day). Then read Paul's letter to the Philippians at one sitting (it only has four chapters). And so on. In other words, get into the drama and the meaning instead of the short difficult-to-make-sense-of passages you hear in church. After each reading, think: what have I learned from this? What could I do differently?

### 2. BIBLE READING NOTES

From **Bible Reading Fellowship** ([www.brf.org.uk](http://www.brf.org.uk))

- *New Daylight* (mainstream)
- *Guidelines* (in-depth)
- *Day by Day with God* (for women)
- *Foundations21* is a free online discipleship resource.

From **Scripture Union** ([www.scriptureunion.org.uk](http://www.scriptureunion.org.uk))

- *Daily Bread*
- *Encounter with God*.

Both available electronically.

- **Pray** for the guidance of the Holy Spirit
- **Read the passage** slowly and carefully
- **Read the notes** for wisdom or insight
- **Think** what this passage means for you now
- **Pray again** out of the above.

Don't be legalistic about reading every day if that's not you. Don't let guilt creep in!

You could catch up at the weekend or treat the readings as undated.

### 3. BIBLE READING WITHOUT NOTES

- Use the lectionary ([www.chpublishing.co.uk](http://www.chpublishing.co.uk))
- Use one of the sets of questions in 'Approaching the Text of the Bible' (see left) when the time comes to **think**.

### 4. HOLY READING (LECTIO DIVINA)

This is a Benedictine way of feeding and meditating on the Bible so that we read it not so much for *information* as for *transformation*.

- **Read** Take a passage and start to read slowly until a word or phrase captures your attention.
- **Reflect** Chew the phrase carefully, drawing the goodness out of it. Repeat it, roll it around your mind, suck it slowly for its meaning.
- **Respond** Pray about the thoughts and feelings that have emerged.
- **Rest** You may just want to stay in silence for a while.
- **Repeat** Carry on with the passage for as long as you want.

This approach works well with the letters (epistles) and with the teaching of Jesus.

### 5. IGNATIAN MEDITATION

This is a way of entering a gospel event through the imagination, employing the senses of sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing. It may feel strange at first, and it may not be something for every day, but it's worth persevering because it enables us to encounter Christ in a more vivid way than almost any other.

- **Read the passage** slowly and attentively. Put the Bible down.
- **Close your eyes and re-run the story**, using the senses to enter it imaginatively (see the people, smell the sea air, listen to the voices, feel the stones underfoot...). Watch the story unfold. Don't rush.
- **Move closer to Jesus**, get into conversation with him about what has just happened. Let that conversation (prayer) go on as long as necessary.
- **Move away, return to the present, and reflect** on what you've learned. And give thanks.

This approach works well with the stories of Jesus in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

You could start at Mark 1.16.

