



Following Jesus: First Steps on the Way

Session #1 – Scripture

<u>Food</u>	<u>Exercise</u>
Scripture	Prayer
Community	Ministry
Worship	Stewardship

The Bible

As we set out on our exciting new adventure of learning to live as followers of Jesus, the Bible will be our indispensable companion and guide. As we seek to grow towards Christian maturity, Scripture will be the staple of our spiritual diet - it will provide deep and lasting satisfaction and nourishment. The Bible will also provide light for our pathway (Psalm 119:105) and protection from danger as we follow in the steps of Jesus (see the three-fold renunciation of evil in the baptismal vows). But reading the Bible is often a mystery at first. It was written a long time ago in ancient languages and cultures by people and for people whose thought patterns, values and perspectives on the world were vastly different from our own. To read the Bible with understanding and enjoyment, we must be able to approach it without feeling overwhelmed or intimidated. A bit of background information should help to remove some of the mystery and enable us to approach it with a little more confidence.

One Book/Many Books

The first thing you need to know is that the Bible is not a single book; it is a collection of 66 books written by multiple authors over centuries. Thus it is more appropriate to think of the Bible as a library with different types of literature, including instruction, history, poetry, wisdom, prophesy, biographies and correspondence. However, taken together, these books tell a unified story of God’s creation and loving redemption of the world.

Think of the Bible as a library with two floors, which correspond to the two major divisions of the Bible: the first floor and foundation is the **Old Testament** (39 books); the second floor is the **New Testament** (27 books). The dividing line between them is the birth of Jesus. All of the books in the New Testament were written after death and resurrection of Jesus, but the New Testament begins with accounts of Christ’s ancestry and birth (Matthew ch. 1-2; Luke ch. 1-2).



The New Testament tells the story and reveals the significance of Christ's life, death and resurrection and the early Church He founded.

The books of the Old Testament were written before the birth of Jesus and anticipate His life and ministry. The Old Testament begins with the story of creation and goes on to tell the story of Israel: the descendants of Abraham and God's chosen people. God promised Abraham that his descendants would grow into a great nation through whom the whole world, in all its brokenness and division, would be blessed and reconciled to God (Genesis 12:1-3). Jesus is the offspring of Abraham through whom this promise is fulfilled (Galatians 3:29). This blessing is extended to all nations of the world through the ministry and mission of the Church, Christ's body. As we read the Bible we discover that we, as members of the Church, have been invited to participate in this great mission to bless all peoples and reconcile the world to God in Christ.

As you come to the Bible as one who has recently made or renewed a decision to live intentionally as a follower of Jesus, go directly to the second floor of this great library and begin reading the New Testament. The Old Testament books on the first floor are the indispensable source and foundation of the New and we hate to pass them by, but there will plenty of time for them later. In fact, the more time you spend reading the 27 books on the second floor, the more you'll see how they constantly make reference to the 39 books below. That's because for the New Testament authors, the books we now call the Old Testament were their Scriptures. In the Biblical library, it is best for us to read from top to bottom, or backwards from New to Old. Over time you will increasingly see how 'the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old is unveiled in the New' (St. Augustine).

In the New Testament, we find two main categories of books: the Gospels and the Epistles.

The Gospels

The first four books of the New Testament – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – are the Gospels, meaning the 'good news' about Jesus. From four perspectives, they tell the story of His life, teaching and ministry (including miracles of healing), His suffering, death and resurrection, His ascension into heaven and His commissioning of the **Apostles** (meaning those who were 'sent out') to share the good news about Him and continue His ministry. These Gospel accounts are based on the eyewitness testimony of the Apostles and earliest Christians. In some respects these books are like biographies, but they are a unique form of literature in that they focus on Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. In the words of one scholar, the Gospels are 'Passion narratives with extended introductions.'



The purpose of the **Evangelists** (the four authors of the Gospels) is not just to report, but to convince readers of the truth and saving significance of the events they narrate, so as to lead us to faith in Jesus Christ.

You will never tire of reading the Gospels. The stories of Christ's life are immediately relevant to your own life. So immerse yourself in these stories. Imagine that you are amongst the crowds, or one of the individuals with whom Jesus interacts. Locate yourself in these stories. As you read, ask yourself the following questions:

- Personal encounters: Why do people come to Jesus? How does He treat them? How do they respond to Him?
- Stories & parables: These were a key element of Jesus' teaching. 2000 years later, they still have a magnetic appeal, fascinating our imaginations. **Parables** are simple stories with scenarios from everyday life in which the characters, plot, etc. stand for deeper spiritual truths. Why does Jesus tell each story in its particular setting? Who is the intended audience? What is the theme or point of the story? How is it received by the audience and why?
- Themes: What topics does Jesus talk about and with whom? What does He say about these things? What does He most want to emphasize?
- Points of contact with your own life: This is a particularly important area. Ask yourself: How do I respond to what I am reading? Does this passage speak to some particular circumstance in my own life? Is there a word of encouragement or challenge for me?

The Epistles

The word Epistle means 'sent news.' These are letters of correspondence from early Christian writers to various churches to encourage them to grow in their faith. The majority of these Epistles were written by the Apostle Paul to churches which he founded or visited on his missionary travels around the Mediterranean world. The Epistles address the following major topics, issues and questions faced by the early churches:

- Teaching on the significance of what Jesus accomplished through His death, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Spirit.
- The relation between Jewish and Gentile Christians. In particular, was it necessary for Gentile converts to observe Old Testament laws and customs, or was it sufficient for them simply to put their faith in Jesus?



- Christian ethics, often in contrast to the paganism from which many of the new converts had come.
- Encouragement in facing persecution and suffering.
- Instruction on Christian leadership and church oversight.

As you read through an Epistle for the first time, read the whole letter fairly quickly, without getting bogged down in the parts that puzzle you. Get a sense for it as a whole. Then read it through a second time more slowly. Read it in small units and try to isolate one thought or idea for reflection. Remember that you are reading a letter. Try to imagine the first situation to which this letter was addressed. Ask yourself what the author is trying to communicate and how the readers might have responded. Always try to make connections between what is being said in the Epistle and your own life. Is there something that speaks to your present circumstance? What new insight do you see about God? Is there something for you to learn, avoid, claim, strive for, or begin? Is there something in the passage that will help you grow as a Christian?

Additional tips for Bible reading

- Don't try to do too much at first: It's more realistic to set a goal of reading for ten minutes per day, as opposed to one hour. As with most ventures in life, it's better to start small and think big, rather than to start big and burn out or lose heart. As you develop a pattern of regular Bible reading, you will know when to increase your time.
- Pray first: Before you begin reading, take a moment to pray quietly. Ask God, through the Holy Spirit, to help you understand and apply what you read. Pray that these scriptures would indeed be the living Word of God for you. Pray that they will feed you, enlighten you and guide you.
- Get started: Don't put it off. Begin with the Gospel of Mark. Next, read the Epistle of Paul to the Philippians. Be prepared to be amazed, but also puzzled from time to time. All of this is part of the life of faith and necessary for growth to Christian maturity. Remember that you are on a journey that will last a lifetime.
- Choose a translation of the Bible that you find readable. The King James Version (KJV), though majestic and beautiful, is archaic and thus not recommended. Refer to the accompanying chart entitled 'Types of Bible Translations.'
- Invest in a good quality hard copy of the Bible. Make sure the print is large enough to be legible. You may want to consider a study Bible with helpful explanatory notes and background information. YouVersion and ESV Bible are excellent apps for devices.