

Session 2

Starting to read the Bible

In this chapter, we introduce a Bible reading plan to help you read systematically through the Bible, and we provide some tips to successful Bible reading. We also look at two common problems new Bible readers have: strange words and strange customs. Finally we consider the use of cross references and footnotes to help you understand the Bible better.

A Bible reading plan

We recommend regular intake of God's Word. Just as we have regular meals of physical food, we need regular meals of spiritual food to be in good health. If you are serious about Bible reading, aim to have a *steady, consistent diet of the Word of God*. For example, God said that the king of Israel was to have God's word

... with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees.

(Deuteronomy 17:19)

Because your Bible is a big book, and because it is so important, it pays to be systematic in reading it. After all, it is a textbook, your textbook for life, and if it is worth reading at all, it is worth reading well. In other words, don't just open your Bible at random each day and read a little; you wouldn't do that to a textbook on an unfamiliar topic.

However, you are not advised to open the Bible to page one, start, and keep reading day by day until it's finished. Some people have

successfully read the Bible that way. But some of the difficulties experienced by people when they first read the Bible lead us to recommend a step by step approach which gives important and useful ideas quite early in your reading, and then progressively builds on them.

There are several ways of achieving this, but we have chosen a reading course that has been widely used and well tested. The reading planner we are using (see page 15) gives daily readings for one year, each day's reading consisting of one chapter. Through the year, you will read from many different parts of the Bible. We will also provide an accompanying booklet which will help fill you in on some of that Bible background you may need as you read each chapter. If you keep up your Bible readings for a year, you will cover many different parts of the Bible and develop a good grasp of the overall plan of God.

Preparing to read the Bible

There are a number of things that need to be considered when reading the Bible.

1. *Pray*

It is important to ask God's blessing on your reading. It is his book and he can help us understand it.

2. *Be comfortable*

To properly concentrate on the Bible, you will need to find a comfortable, quiet place in which to read. Try to avoid places where there is a lot of background noise from the television or other people talking. In the Bible, God speaks to us. It is worth listening carefully.

3. *Allow time*

Bible reading is most effective if you are not rushed. Set aside 20–30 minutes each day to read the passage and think about what it means. It also takes time to become familiar with the Bible message and the background in which it is set. Be patient, and over time it will all start to fit together like a beautiful jigsaw.

Week	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	Psalm 19	Genesis 1	Luke 2	1 Corinth 13	Mark 4	Eccles 3	2 Timothy 3
2	Genesis 2	Genesis 3	Genesis 4	Genesis 5	Genesis 6	Genesis 7	Genesis 8
3	Matthew 1	Matthew 2	Matthew 3	Matthew 4	Matthew 5	Matthew 6	Matthew 7
4	Genesis 11	Genesis 12	Genesis 13	Genesis 14	Genesis 15	Genesis 17	Genesis 19
5	Matthew 8	Matthew 9	Matthew 10	Matthew 11	Matthew 12	Matthew 13	Matthew 14
6	Genesis 22	Genesis 26	Genesis 27	Genesis 28	Genesis 29	Genesis 30	Genesis 31
7	Matthew 15	Matthew 16	Matthew 17	Matthew 18	Matthew 19	Matthew 20	Matthew 21
8	Genesis 32	Genesis 33	Genesis 37	Genesis 39	Genesis 40	Genesis 41	Genesis 42
9	Matthew 22	Matthew 23	Matthew 24	Matthew 25	Matthew 26	Matthew 27	Matthew 28
10	Genesis 43	Genesis 44	Genesis 45	Genesis 46	Genesis 47	Genesis 49	Genesis 50
11	Mark 1	Mark 2	Mark 3	Mark 6	Mark 7	Mark 8	Mark 9
12	Exodus 1	Exodus 2	Exodus 3	Exodus 4	Exodus 5	Exodus 6	Exodus 7
13	Mark 10	Mark 11	Mark 12	Mark 13	Mark 14	Mark 15	Mark 16
14	Exodus 8	Exodus 9	Exodus 10	Exodus 11	Exodus 12	Exodus 13	Exodus 14
15	Luke 1	Luke 2	Luke 4	Luke 5	Luke 7	Luke 9	Luke 10
16	Exodus 16	Exodus 17	Exodus 19	Exodus 20	Exodus 24	Exodus 25	Exodus 32
17	Luke 11	Luke 12	Luke 13	Luke 14	Luke 15	Luke 16	Luke 17
18	Lev 8	Lev 10	Lev 16	Lev 17	Lev 23	Lev 25	Lev 26
19	Luke 18	Luke 19	Luke 20	Luke 21	Luke 22	Luke 23	Luke 24
20	Num 14	Num 17	Num 20	Num 21	Num 22	Num 23	Num 24
21	John 1	John 3	John 4	John 10	John 11	John 15	John 17
22	Deut 1	Deut 2	Deut 3	Deut 6	Deut 8	Deut 18	Deut 28
23	Acts 1	Acts 2	Acts 3	Acts 4	Acts 5	Acts 6	Acts 7
24	Joshua 1	Joshua 2	Joshua 3	Joshua 4	Joshua 6	Joshua 20	Joshua 24
25	Acts 8	Acts 9	Acts 10	Acts 11	Acts 12	Acts 13	Acts 14
26	Judges 4	Judges 7	Judges 14	Ruth 1	Ruth 2	Ruth 3	Ruth 4
27	Acts 15	Acts 16	Acts 17	Acts 18	Acts 19	Acts 20	Acts 21
28	1 Samuel 1	1 Samuel 2	1 Samuel 3	1 Samuel 8	1 Samuel 9	1 Samuel 10	1 Samuel 15
29	Acts 22	Acts 23	Acts 24	Acts 25	Acts 26	Acts 27	Acts 28
30	1 Samuel 16	1 Samuel 17	2 Samuel 1	2 Samuel 2	2 Samuel 5	2 Samuel 7	2 Samuel 24
31	Romans 5	Romans 6	Romans 8	Romans 9	Romans 10	Romans 12	Romans 13
32	1 Kings 3	1 Kings 5	1 Kings 12	1 Kings 17	1 Kings 18	2 Kings 5	2 Chron 36
33	1 Corinth 1	1 Corinth 2	1 Corinth 3	1 Corinth 10	1 Corinth 11	1 Corinth 13	1 Corinth 15
34	Psalm 1	Psalm 2	Psalm 6	Psalm 16	Psalm 19	Psalm 22	Psalm 23
35	2 Corinth 11	Galatians 1	Galatians 2	Galatians 3	Galatians 4	Galatians 5	Galatians 6
36	Psalm 32	Psalm 37	Psalm 45	Psalm 46	Psalm 48	Psalm 49	Psalm 51
37	Ephesians 4	Ephesians 5	Ephesians 6	Philip 1	Philip 2	Philip 3	Philip 4
38	Psalm 67	Psalm 72	Psalm 88	Psalm 90	Psalm 91	Psalm 95	Psalm 96
39	1 Thess 1	1 Thess 2	1 Thess 3	1 Thess 4	1 Thess 5	2 Thess 1	2 Thess 2
40	Psalm 103	Psalm 104	Psalm 110	Psalm 122	Psalm 146	Psalm 149	Psalm 150
41	1 Timothy 1	1 Timothy 2	1 Timothy 6	2 Timothy 1	2 Timothy 2	2 Timothy 3	2 Timothy 4
42	Isaiah 1	Isaiah 2	Isaiah 9	Isaiah 11	Isaiah 25	Isaiah 26	Isaiah 32
43	Hebrews 1	Hebrews 2	Hebrews 3	Hebrews 4	Hebrews 5	Hebrews 10	Hebrews 11
44	Isaiah 40	Isaiah 42	Isaiah 52	Isaiah 53	Isaiah 55	Isaiah 60	Isaiah 61
45	Hebrews 12	Hebrews 13	James 1	James 2	James 3	James 4	James 5
46	Jeremiah 1	Jeremiah 17	Jeremiah 30	Jeremiah 31	Jeremiah 33	Jeremiah 36	Jeremiah 38
47	1 Peter 1	1 Peter 2	1 Peter 3	1 Peter 5	2 Peter 1	2 Peter 2	2 Peter 3
48	Ezekiel 2	Ezekiel 3	Ezekiel 18	Ezekiel 36	Ezekiel 37	Ezekiel 38	Ezekiel 39
49	1 John 1	1 John 2	1 John 3	1 John 4	2 John	3 John	Jude
50	Daniel 2	Daniel 3	Daniel 5	Daniel 6	Daniel 7	Daniel 9	Daniel 12
51	Hosea 13	Joel 3	Micah 5	Zec 8	Zec 12	Malachi 3	Malachi 4
52	Rev 1	Rev 2	Rev 3	Rev 5	Rev 19	Rev 21	Rev 22

Table 2.1: *Table of readings from the Bible Reading Planner.*

4. *Be open to new ideas*

If we are to gain as much as we can from Bible reading, we need to approach the Bible with the right attitude. The people from Berea (in Greece) are described as being

of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

(Acts 17:11)

We need an openness to new ideas. If we approach all ideas thinking that our main job is to defend our existing beliefs, then we have very little room for growth.

The Bible is a book of strength that has withstood all kinds of attacks during its history. As in all other areas of study, scholars build upon and re-evaluate the work of earlier scholars. We need not fear examining new ideas and evaluating them carefully in the light of all the teachings of the Bible.

5. *Think about it*

God told Joshua

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

(Joshua 1:8)

To successfully understand the message of the Bible, we must spend time thinking about it carefully. So important is this that God said to the nation of Israel:

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth.

(Deuteronomy 11:18–21)

6. *Ask questions*

You will inevitably have questions about what you read. Write them down. You might discover the answers through further reading. Or you can take your questions to a more experienced Bible reader to see if he or she can help. Bring your

questions along to this course and see if anyone can answer them.

7. *Share your ideas*

We need an attitude of willingness to meditate on what we are learning and to think through for ourselves how our learning should be applied in our own lives. To do this, it is usually helpful to share our ideas and interpretations with other Bible students for discussion and evaluation. We can learn from each other.

Bible study can be difficult work. It is also exciting and life-changing. Study of the Bible can enrich us as no other study can. You will experience a new energy as you learn to make your own judgements based on firm principles, and the Bible will become more alive and powerful in your life. Remember, you are intended to understand this remarkable book and to meet God in its pages.

Psalm 19

Let's start using the Bible Reading Planner by reading Psalm 19.

1. According to this Psalm, what two things speak to us about God?
2. What different words are used to describe God's instructions?
3. Are there any words, or verses, that you don't understand?
4. What questions do you have after reading this Psalm?
5. What verse do you find particularly helpful to you? Why?

Strange language

The King James Version (or KJV, also called the Authorised Version) is the most quoted version of the Bible. It was produced in 1611 and is famous for its majestic language. However, these days it is becoming increasingly difficult to understand because of changes in the English language.

Consider the following passage (Psalm 23:1–3).

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Compare the New International Version (NIV):

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Note the archaic form of verbs used in the KJV. Notice, also, that punctuation has changed—the colon (:) is used differently today. However, in this passage, none of the words in the KJV is particularly difficult to understand and the meaning of the passage is clear.

This is not true everywhere. The KJV can sometimes be difficult to understand because of the archaic language. Consider the following two examples.

Psalm 119:147–148	
KJV	NIV
¹⁴⁷ I prevented the dawning of the morning, and cried: I hoped in thy word.	¹⁴⁷ I rise before dawn and cry for help; I have put my hope in your word.
¹⁴⁸ Mine eyes prevent the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word.	¹⁴⁸ My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises.
What does the word “prevent” mean in the KJV?	

“Conversation”

Read Philippians 1:27 in the KJV. Turn to a more recent version for comparison. What does the word “conversation” mean in the KJV?

As these two examples show, some words have a different meaning now from the meaning they had in 1611 when the KJV first appeared. In fact, it contains over 500 words which have changed their meaning or become obsolete. Some are shown in the table below.

Language is dynamic—it is always changing. New words are created, old words die out, some words change their meaning. Therefore, if you wish to read an older version such as the KJV, you need to learn the old words.

Even with a modern version, you will come across words that are not in common use. There are things mentioned in the Bible which are not part of everyday conversation, and so the words used may not be familiar. When you come across these words, check the definitions listed in *The Bible Readers’ Handbook*.

Some archaic words from the King James Version

Old word	Modern equivalent	Example
prevent	1 Thessalonians 4:15
bowels	Genesis 43:30
bewitch	Acts 8:9
allow	Luke 11:48
conversation	Philippians 1:27
bruit	Jeremiah 10:22
maketh collops	Job 15:27
trow	Luke 17:9

Strange customs

The people in the Bible lived thousands of years ago in a different culture and a different land. When reading the Bible, you will soon learn some of their ancient customs. For example:

When David arrived at the summit, where people used to worship God, Hushai the Arkite was there to meet him, his robe torn and dust on his head. (2 Samuel 15:32)

Tearing your clothes and covering your head with dust seems strange behaviour to us, but in the context it is clear that this was a sign of mourning. The same custom is found many times throughout the Old Testament. It doesn't take long to recognize most of these ancient customs and learn what they meant.

What was the purpose of these ancient customs?

- tearing your clothes
- putting dust on your head
- wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes
- professional wailing women
- walls around cities
- sitting in the gate of a city
- giving someone your sandal

Do you know any other ancient customs mentioned in the Bible?

Footnotes

Footnotes are provided by the translators to explain some words, give alternative translations, or explain some aspect of the text. They are often helpful in understanding a passage. Consider the example below from the Revised Standard Version.

Matthew 5:21–22

Consider the following passage from Matthew 5:21–22 which is part of Jesus' famous "Sermon on the mount". This excerpt is from the RSV.

21 "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.'²² But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brotherⁱ shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults^j his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell^k of fire.

ⁱ Other ancient authorities insert *without cause* ^j Greek says *Raca* to (an obscure term of abuse)
^k Greek *Gehenna*

The basic message of Jesus is quite clear: "in the past you were told not to kill—I am telling you not even to be angry or abusive." He was taking the Old Testament commandment to a new level. However, we can understand the passage better using the footnotes.

The small letters *i*, *j* and *k* after the words "brother", "insults" and "hell" indicate there is a footnote with more explanation.

The first one shows that some of the ancient manuscripts of the New Testament give a slightly different form of words, which alters the meaning. Obviously the translators felt the form of words they used in the main text was the most likely but there was sufficient doubt to include the alternative as a footnote.

The second footnote explains that the original Greek actually refers to a particular abusive expression. Because this has little meaning for us, they have translated it.

The third footnote shows that the word "hell" has been used for the Greek word *Gehenna*. *Gehenna* was a valley south of Jerusalem; it is also known as the valley of Hinnom. It was used as a rubbish dump and always had a fire burning to destroy the rubbish. Previously it had been the site of child sacrifice to an Ammonite god called Molech (Jeremiah 32:35). Jesus uses it as a symbol of complete destruction.

Most footnotes are for the following purposes:

- source of quotations
- explanation of textual variations
- meaning of non-English words
- gives Hebrew or Greek word
- alternative translations

Cross-references

There is no better commentary on the Bible than the Bible itself. No source is more appropriate for interpreting God’s Word than God himself. It is in this area that the use of cross-references can be so valuable. They are verse ‘references’ supplied by the publishers which direct the reader to other locations in the Bible where the same phrase or event may be found, or one very similar.

Example: Matthew 5:21–22

The following example from the NIV Study Bible shows the use of both footnotes and cross-references. The bold superscripts are footnotes. The italic superscripts are for cross-references (given to the side of the text).

²¹“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder,^{t e} and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²²But I tell you that anyone who is angry^f with his brother^u will be subject to judgment.^g Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,^v’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin.^h But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.ⁱ

5:21 ^eEx 20:13; 21:12; Dt 5:17
5:22 ^fEcc 7:9; 1Co 13:5; Eph 4:26; Jas 1:19,20
^g1Jn 3:15
^hMt 26:59; Jn 11:47; Ac 5:21,27,34,41; 6:12 ⁱMt 18:9; Mk 9:43,48; Lk 16:24; Jas 3:6

^t21 Exodus 20:13 ^u22 Some manuscripts *brother without cause* ^v22 An Aramaic term of contempt

Look up the following cross-references.

Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17; 1 John 3:15; Ephesians 4:26; James 1:19–20.

Do they help us better understand what Jesus said?

Not all Bibles have cross-references. Bibles which do have cross-references will usually place them in a centre column, after the foot-notes, or at the end of each verse.

Most cross-references take one of the following forms:

1. Quotations of the Old Testament in the New Testament, or vice versa;
2. Parallel passage of the same or similar events;
3. More detail about a person, place or subject.

Further reading

- *Bible beginnings* by Richard Purkis and Ian Doveton.
- *On reading the Bible* by A.D. Norris.

Ask the presenter if you wish to borrow a copy of either of these books.

Exercise: Genesis 1

The second reading in the Bible Reading Planner is Genesis 1. Read the chapter and discuss the following questions.

1. Were the sun, moon and stars created before or after the earth?
2. How could there be “evening and morning” before the sun was created?
3. What food was assigned to man? There is a cross-reference to Genesis 9:3. What does this tell us?
4. Over what part of creation did man have dominion? How does this affect our care for the environment?
5. Human beings are described as being created “in God’s image”. Look at the following cross-references: Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10; James 3:9. How do these help us understand what Genesis means?
6. Are there any words, or verses, that you don’t understand?
7. What questions do you have after reading this chapter?
8. What verse do you find particularly helpful to you? Why?

Homework

1. Follow the *Bible Reading Planner* every day this week.
2. Start a notebook with questions that arise when you read your Bible. Then you can discuss your questions with the class next week.
3. Read tonight's reading (Luke 2). Several words are used that you may not have come across before. Find out what they mean. (Hint: some of the words are listed in the *The Bible Readers' Handbook*.)
 - Saviour
 - Christ
 - manger
 - circumcise
 - Law of Moses
 - Holy Spirit
 - Gentiles
 - Passover
4. Here are some examples of cross references. Use them to answer the questions.
 - (a) Luke 9:7–9
Why was John the Baptist beheaded?
Cross reference to Matthew 14:1–11; Mark 6:14–18.
 - (b) Matthew 12:38–42
Who was the "Queen of the South"?
Cross reference to 1 Kings 10:1.