

A Short Guide to the Bible

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(Note for first time Bible readers: To make things easier to find in the Bible, Biblical books are divided into chapters, and chapters are divided into verses. In the Bible, large numbers on the pages indicate chapters and smaller numbers indicate verses. The standard way to refer to a passage in the Bible is to list the Biblical book's name, then the chapter number, then a colon, then the verse number(s). For example, Genesis 1 is Genesis chapter 1, Genesis 12:15 is Genesis chapter 12, verse 15, and Genesis 16:1-18:15 is Genesis chapter sixteen, verse one, through chapter 18, verse 15.)

A Brief Survey of Biblical History

The Bible is a collection of 66 books. It is divided into the Old Testament (OT), written hundreds of years before Christ, and the New Testament (NT), written about Christ and his first followers. Each testament has three main sections:

OT Historical Books: Genesis to Esther

OT Poetic Books: Job to Song of Songs (Solomon)

OT Prophetic Books: Isaiah to Malachi

NT Historical Books: Matthew to Acts

NT Epistles (Letters): Romans to Jude

NT Prophetic Book: Revelation

This is a brief overview of Biblical history by surveying its historical books. This should help one read the Bible with a sense of context and understand it better. ("Testament" means the same thing as covenant--an agreement of commitment and promises.)

I. GENESIS: IN HIS CREATED, REBELLIOUS WORLD, GOD ESTABLISHES A COVENANT OF BLESSINGS

- Major events of the book: creation of the world, humanity's fall into sin, a worldwide flood, forming of nations / ethnic groups, and God's covenant with Abraham.
- God's covenant is with Abraham and descendants of his, and concerns promises of greatness, the land of Canaan (current "Israel"), many descendants, a special relationship with God, and blessing coming to all peoples of earth.
- After Abraham, most importantly comes Isaac, then Jacob (renamed Israel), and then Israel's twelve sons, particularly Joseph.
- The book ends with all twelve sons of Israel in Egypt in positions of privilege.
- The poetic book Job is probably set during the time period of Genesis.
- Time period covered: thousands of years, ancient days to ~1800 BC. (Abraham is born ~ 2000 BC.)

II. EXODUS, LEVITICUS, NUMBERS, & DEUTERONOMY: WITH ABRAHAM'S DESCENDANTS, GOD STARTS TO FORM A NATION FOR HIMSELF

- Time lapse since the end of Genesis: hundreds of years.
- Exodus opens with thousands of descendants from the twelve sons of Israel in Egypt in slavery.
- Moses leads these Israelites out of Egypt and God makes a covenant with them as a people group which requires them to obey comprehensive laws that God gives them. (This is what is usually called "the Old Covenant".)
- But the people rebel and none of the original generation that came out of Egypt (with two exceptions) are permitted to enter into the land God promised to give to descendants of Abraham.

- Deuteronomy ends with the next generation of Israelites preparing to enter the promised land of Canaan and to remove the current inhabitants (who are judged by God because of their long-lasting wickedness).
- Time span covered: ~120 years, Moses' life span. (Their departing Egypt was probably around 1450 BC.)

III. JOSHUA: GOD'S NEWBORN NATION STARTS TO VICTORIOUSLY POSSESS ITS PROMISED LAND

- Joshua succeeds Moses and leads the new generation into the land of Canaan.
- The Israelites conquer all the main cities of the land and each of their twelve tribes (who descended from Israel's twelve sons) is apportioned an area to live within.
- Time span covered: 20 to 30 years. (The main conquest of the land takes under 7 years.)

IV. JUDGES AND RUTH: GOD'S NATION SOON LAPSES INTO LONG LASTING DISOBEDIENCE AND TROUBLES

- After Joshua dies, the Israelites start worshiping other gods and become morally and spiritually corrupt.
- The nation of Israel fails to take complete possession of its promised land and faces repeated oppression by neighboring tribes / nations.
- The judges were leaders who delivered the people of Israel from the threat of an enemy nation / tribe when the Israelites finally called out to God for deliverance from oppression.
- The judges' personal lives usually reflect Israel's spiritual condition, and they often act selfishly and foolishly.
- The book of Ruth is an account of a devoted and trusting woman during this generally dark period of the judges.
- Time span of Judges: over 300 years.

V. I & II SAMUEL: AFTER ESTABLISHING A "POPULAR" KING, GOD CHOOSES A KING OVER ISRAEL WHO IS DEVOTED TO GOD AND MAKES A COVENANT WITH HIM

- In response to the people's pleading for a king, God authorizes the prophet Samuel to anoint (appoint) Saul as Israel's first king.
- Although a strong and imposing looking leader, Saul soon seeks his own way more than God's; so God instructs Samuel to anoint the shepherd boy David as the new king.
- David does not take over as king until years later at Saul's death, but once he does he establishes Jerusalem as the capitol, he unifies the nation, and he leads Israel to finally take possession of all of the promised land.
- David's character and behaviors are inconsistent throughout his life, but he is devoted to God and God makes a covenant promising David a descendant who will have a throne and a kingdom that lasts forever.
- Much of the poetic book of Psalms (a collection of lyrics) comes from David during this time.
- Time span of I & II Samuel: over 100 years. (David likely starts ruling shortly before 1000 BC.)

VI. I & II KINGS: AFTER SUCCEEDING GENERATIONS CONTINUALLY DISOBEY HIM, GOD PUNISHES AND EVENTUALLY SCATTERS ISRAEL

- Solomon succeeds his father David, builds a temple in Jerusalem and leads Israel with wisdom--but he marries many foreign women and eventually starts worshiping other gods.
- Upon his death, Israel splits into two kingdoms:
The Southern Kingdom, "Judah", contains Jerusalem and the temple and consists of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. It is continually ruled by a descendant of David.
The Northern Kingdom, "Israel", consists of the remaining ten tribes. There are many bloody coups resulting in numerous dynasties over this kingdom.
- The Northern Kingdom ignores the prophetic warnings of Elijah, Elisha and others and finally ends up being taken captive by the Assyrians, a captivity from which these tribes never return.
- Judah has brief periods of turning back to God, but it keeps relapsing and about 100 years after the Northern Kingdom falls, Jerusalem is conquered and the Judeans are taken captive by Babylonians and moved to Babylon.
- The prophet Jeremiah predicts that Judah's captivity will be temporary for God will return a faithful remnant to the promised land (and he gives a prophecy that a new and better covenant is coming).
- The poetic books Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs (Solomon) are set during Solomon's reign; and all the but six of the Old Testament prophetic books concern prophets who lived and ministered during the several hundred years after Solomon's reign until Judah's subsequent captivity in Babylon.
- Time span of I & II Kings: hundreds of years. (Jerusalem is devastated by the Babylonians around 600 BC.)

VII. I & II CHRONICLES: A RETELLING OF THE EVENTS OF II SAMUEL AND I & II KINGS

VIII. EZRA, NEHEMIAH, AND ESTHER: GOD RETURNS A REMNANT OF FAITHFUL JUDEANS TO THE PROMISED LAND

- Time lapse: Ezra takes up 70 years after the fall of Jerusalem, a time period predicted by Jeremiah. (The prophetic books Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel take place during the captivity in Babylon.)
- Babylon is conquered by Persia, and its king, Cyrus, allows the Judeans (i.e., Jews) to start to return to Judah.
- During a hundred year period, Jews return mainly in three groups, led successively by Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah.
- Ezra describes how the Jerusalem temple was rebuilt, Nehemiah describes the rebuilding of the protective walls around Jerusalem, and Esther describes how Esther became a queen of Persia and used her influence to save her fellow Jews.
- The Jews who return to the land show a significant concern with being obedient to God.
- The last three prophetic books, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, are set during this time period.
- Time span: ~100 years. (The last events in the Old Testament occur before 400 BC.)

IX. PERIOD BETWEEN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS:

Jewish historical books, usually referred to as the Apocrypha, describe some events during the 400+ year gap between the end of the Old Testament and the start of the New. They relate that the Jews never again returned to the worship of idols and other gods, yet they continued to remain in need of deliverance, both politically and spiritually.

X. MATTHEW, MARK, LUKE, AND JOHN: GOD SENDS JESUS TO BE THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD

- From slightly differing perspectives, these four gospel ("good news") authors collectively describe Jesus' earthly life . . . his birth, accomplishments, claims, new covenant of forgiveness, and his suffering, death and resurrection.
- An earthly descendant of Abraham and David, Jesus claims to be the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies of God sending a divine savior to Israel and then to the world, one who establishes God's kingdom throughout the world.
- He ministers publicly for only about 3 years, and only within the Jewish nation of Israel; but he instructs his followers to spread his message and make followers throughout earth until the end of the world as we know it.
- Time span: over 33 years, the length of Jesus' earthly life. (Jesus was born around 4 BC.)

XI. ACTS: GOD'S SALVATION STARTS SPREADING THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

- The Holy Spirit comes on Jesus' disciples. Despite severe opposition, they spread the message of Jesus and rapidly gain more followers starting in Jerusalem, then in the surrounding area of Judea, then in nearby Samaria, and then throughout the rest of the world, penetrating Asia, Europe and Africa.
- As people believe in Jesus, people experience God and his power and lives dramatically change, resulting in churches springing up all over the Roman Empire.
- The story mainly follows Peter, one of Jesus' original 12 disciples and an early church leader, and Paul, a Jewish oppressor of Christians who has an experience with Jesus, converts, and spreads the faith to many non-Jews.
- All of the Epistles take place during this time, or shortly afterwards, and they are instructions to followers of Christ by early Christian leaders. (The New Testament prophetic book, Revelation, was written a few decades later and describes a vision of a coming world judgment and Christ's return to earth.)
- Time span of Acts: from about 30 AD to 62 AD. (The book ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome and with much action still taking place.)

Note: If you come upon sections in this Bible guide, or in your Bible readings, that you do not understand, or do not make sense to you, see if you can talk with someone who knows the Bible well to find help. To go more in depth, you may also want to join in a Bible study group of some sort (if you are not already in one).

A Key Selections Bible Reading Plan--Introduction

A lot of people want to read and understand the Bible. However, typically what happens is that a person starts at the first page, reads until the third or fourth book, then gives up--feeling lost, confused or bewildered. The problem is that the Bible is a collection of 66 books of various literary types and often the significance of each section is not easily seen apart from careful study. Also parts are like textbooks that contain important information, but are not very interesting reading. Fortunately, many parts of the Bible are very readable.

This plan is a guide to the parts which (according to the author's understanding and opinion) are:

- Important
- Fairly understandable (when read in order)
- Interesting reading
- Give an overview of the whole Bible

How are the readings organized?

The Old Testament readings and the New Testament readings are arranged in chronological order and are grouped according to major occurrences. For sections that are very long (e.g., Old Testament Laws), only a sampling has been included. Even though all of the Old Testament events happened and were written hundreds of years before the New Testament, Old and New Testament readings are alternated to get you into the New Testament sooner and to help you compare and contrast the two testaments.

The individual selections are around four chapters long and deal (usually) with one main topic. Understanding them, however, often depends on the previous selections. So it is highly recommended you read them in order.

How long will it take?

Depending on your reading speed and depth of attention, each individual selection should take about 15 to 30 minutes to read. There are about 60 selections. If you read one new selection a day, you will finish in about two months. If you read one a week, you will take a little over a year.

How can I get the most out of my readings?

To help keep straight with what is going on in your readings, regularly consult the timelines and "A Brief Survey of Bible History" in this booklet, or use some other short Bible guide.

However, the Bible is not just a record of events. The Bible claims to give knowledge of God and understanding of our selves, as well as direction into how to have a relationship with God and experience fulfilling life. For each selection, ask yourself three questions:

- 1) **What is this saying about God (and Christ)?** (What he is like, cares about, and what his intentions are)
- 2) **What is this saying about people?** (What we are like, care about, and what our intentions are)
- 3) **What is this saying about my life?** (What my life is like, what I care about, and what my intentions are)

A Key Selections Bible Reading Plan: A Guided Tour of Major Parts of the Bible

Old Testament: From Creation to Corruption to God's Promises to Abraham

- Genesis 1-4. Creation and rebellion
- Genesis 6-9. Destruction by flood
- Genesis 11:1-9; 11:27-13:18; 15. Ethnic groups origins and covenant with Abra(ha)m
- Genesis 16:1-18:15; 21:1-7; 22. Abraham and tests of his faith

New Testament: Jesus' Earthly Life As Told by Matthew

- Matthew 1-4. Beginnings in Jesus' earthly life
- Matthew 5-7. The sermon on the mount
- Matthew 8-11. Miracles and disciples
- Matthew 12-15. Parables and other teachings
- Matthew 16-19. More teachings and events
- Matthew 20-23. Teachings and actions in Jerusalem
- Matthew 26-28. Suffering, death and resurrection

Old Testament: The Generation of Israel that Departed Egypt

- Genesis 25:19-26; 35:9-12; Exodus 1-4. Moses and the descendants of Abraham in Egypt
- Exodus 5:1-6:13; 7-8. Moses, Pharaoh and plagues
- Exodus 11:1-12:40; 14; 15:22-27; Psalm 105. Passover and departure from Egypt
- Exodus 19-21; 22:16-23:9; Leviticus 4:27-35. Ten Commandments and other covenant laws
- Leviticus 26; Psalm 1; 19:7-14; 119:1-32. Results of disregarding vs. treasuring God's laws
- Numbers 10:11-16; 10:33-11:35; 13-14. Grumbling, rebelling and consequences

New Testament: Jesus' Earthly Life as Told by John

- John 1-3. Beginnings
- John 4-6. Interactions with others
- John 7-10. Controversy about Jesus' identity
- John 11:1-14:14. Lazarus, reactions, and final meeting with disciples
- John 14:15-17:26. Final words
- John 18-21. Arrest, crucifixion, and appearances

Old Testament: The Next Generation of Israel and the Following Generations without Kings

- Deuteronomy 1: 4:32-40; 5-7; 10:12-22. Moses' words to the next generation
- Joshua 1; 3; 5:1-6:21; 7. Joshua leads obedient Israelites into the promised land
- Joshua 23:1-24:31; Judges 2:6-23; Psalm 106. The Israelites return to disobedience

New Testament: Beginning Years of Christianity

- Acts 1:1-5:16. The church's beginnings in Jerusalem
- Acts 5:17-8:40. Persecution and the start of Christianity's spreading
- James 1-5. Practical encouragement to early Christians
- I Peter 1-5. Exhortations to holy living
- I John 1-5. Instructions on living in fellowship with God

Old Testament: The First Three Kings of Israel

- I Samuel 1; 3; 7:15-8:22; 10:17-11:15. Samuel and Israel's first king--Saul
- I Samuel 13:1-14; 15:16-23; 16:1-13; 17:1-18:9; 31. David and Saul
- Psalm 8; 14:1-3; 16; 23; 25; 139. Poetic writings of David
- II Samuel 5:1-5; 7; 11:1-17; 11:26-12:15; Psalm 51; 53:1-3. King David's covenant, and sin

- I Kings 1:1-14; 1:28-53; 2:10-12; 3; 4:29-34, Proverbs 1; 2. King Solomon and wisdom
- Proverbs 3-6. Wisdom of Solomon
- Proverbs 11; 12; 28; 29. More wisdom of Solomon
- I Kings 5:1-5; 6:37-38; 8:1-30; 8:41-43; 8:54-9:9; 10:23-11:13. The temple and Solomon's sin
- Ecclesiastes 1-3; 12. Wisdom from an aged, regretful Solomon

New Testament: Paul and His Explanations of Christianity

- Acts 9-11. Saul's conversion and Christianity's spread to non-Jews
- Acts 13:1-15:35. Saul (Paul) travels to distant cities and the Jerusalem council
- Galatians 1:1-2:10; 3:1-4:7; 5:1-6:10. Paul stresses righteousness comes through faith not law
- Romans 1:1-3:20. All earn God's judgment
- Romans 3:21-5:21. Acceptance by God through faith in Christ
- Romans 6-8. Living free from sin's control
- Romans 12:1-15:13. Living to please God

Old Testament: The Northern and Southern Kingdoms, their Ends, Exile, and Return

- I Kings 11:26-12:33; 14:21-15:34; Isaiah 1. Corruption in the divided kingdoms
- Isaiah 40:6-31; 66:1-4; Jeremiah 1; 2; 4:1-4; 5. Selections from the prophets
- II Kings 17:1-23; 18:1-8; 23:36-24:16; 25:8-12; Lamentations 1. The kingdoms conquered
- Daniel 1-3; 6. Daniel and friends in exile in Babylon
- Jeremiah 29:1-14; Ezra 1; 7:11-28; Nehemiah 1:1-2:8; 6:15-16; 9. The exiles who return to Judah

New Testament: Paul and Lessons Learned Through Difficulties

- Acts 15:36-16:34; 17:16-18:11; 20:17-38; 21:27-36; 25:1-12; 28:16; 28:30-31; II Corinthians 11:24-29. Paul's activities and hardships across the Roman empire
- Philippians 1-4. Joyful living in all circumstances
- Colossians 1-4. Christ's supremacy
- I Corinthians 1; 3; 13; 15. Correcting mistakes a church has made
- II Timothy 1-4. Instructions to a leader Paul taught

Old and New Testaments: Prophecies about Christ

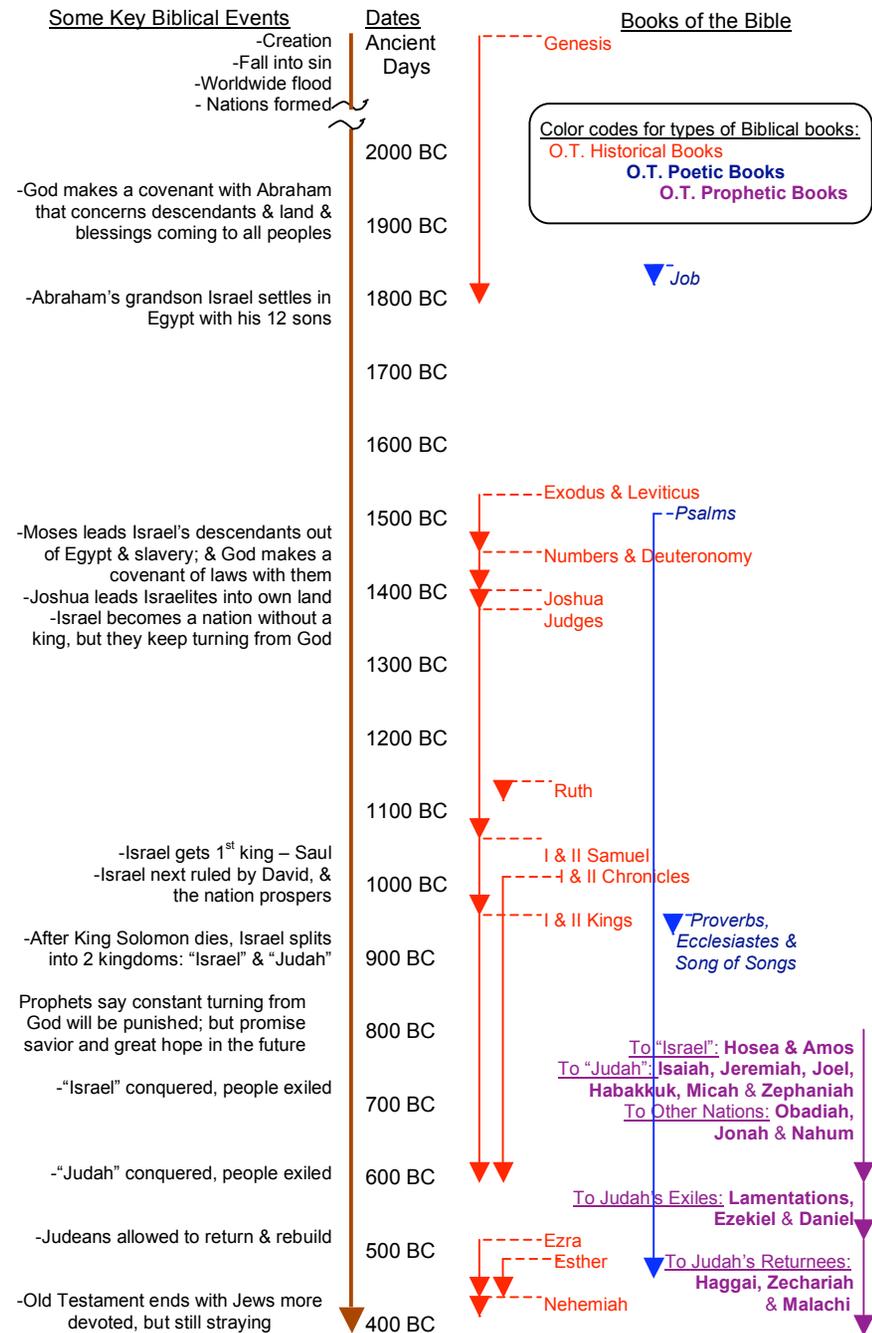
- Isaiah 9:1-7; 11:1-5; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Daniel 7:13-14; 9:20-27; Micah 5:2-4; Malachi 3:1-2. Prophecies about Messiah's (Christ's) coming and a new covenant
- Psalm 22:1-24; Matthew 27:27-46; Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Luke 24:33-49; Acts 2:22-39. Christ's death, and its meaning
- Matthew 24; 25:31-46; Acts 1:6-11; I Thessalonians 4:13-5:11; Revelation 21:1-8; 21:22-22:21. Christ's return to earth to judge and rule, and the results

What do I do after I finish the readings?

After you finish this overview, you can go back into parts of the Bible you skipped over. A book that can help you in understanding and reading each of the different Biblical books is, [Talk Through the Bible](#) by Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa. Also recommended for knowing the Bible better is, [30 Days to Understanding the Bible in 15 Minutes a Day](#) by Dr. Max Anders. You also can go back and reread sections in this reading plan. You will most certainly see things you did not see on your first reading.

A Timeline for the Old Testament

(Events & books are arranged by the time periods in which they are set. Many dates are very approximate.)



A Timeline for the New Testament

(Events & books are arranged by the time periods in which they are set. Many dates are very approximate.)

