

how to read the bible if i have never read the bible

DUNWOODY BAPTIST CHURCH

Dear Frank,

I have been blessed to have a front row seat as you have begun to explore your faith. It is Saturday morning before we will worship and study together tomorrow. I have a Bible to give you, but I have also promised to give you a road map.

Because you are well-read and a researcher at heart, I wanted to give you a bit of a scholarly overview—hopefully not too much, because I love this stuff, but enough to let you know that you are not committing intellectual suicide by reading the Bible.

The word “Bible” comes from Byblos, a town in Phoenicia. A papyrus plant was located there and the Greek translation for the Egyptian word gives us our English word “Bible.” Back translated into English, it means, “little papyrus books.” More than you want to know. For us, it refers to the collection of Jewish and Christian writings generally accepted as sacred Scriptures.

The word “Canon” deals with how it was decided that the books we have in our Bible are the right ones. The New Testament writers assumed that God inspired the writing of the Old Testament—in other words, God actually enlightened the writers as to what to write. 2 Timothy 3:16 is a good summary of this belief.

Many religions assume the authenticity of the Old Testament, but it is the New Testament which is a source of contention because of its narrow view of salvation. Christianity is a historical religion, concerned with what God in Christ has actually done (Luke 1:1-4 and John 1:1-14). The New Testament is the written account of what the eyewitnesses saw and heard—God continues to speak, but the New Testament must be the benchmark or for future revelation.

The English word testament normally refers to a person’s will, the document which bequeaths property to those who will inherit it after the owner’s death. But the meaning of testament from both the Hebrew and the Greek languages is “settlement,” “treaty,” or “covenant.” Of these three English words, “covenant” best captures the meaning of the word testament. Thus, the two collections that make up the Bible can best be described as the books of the old covenant and the books of the new covenant.

Why was the Bible written? It is basically the story of what God has done in Jesus Christ for man’s salvation. There is a difference between believing that the Bible contains the Word of God and that it is the Word of God. When we accept that it is the Word of God, we understand that it is God’s written revelation of “his-story” The fact that the Bible has endured over all these years, almost perfectly preserved—indicates that God wants us to have. To affirm the uniqueness of the New Testament is to affirm its authority for Christians. It is important to see this authority in terms of its nature and purpose. Without an affirmation of the Bible as a book with singular authority, believers do not have a firm foundation. We can make an intelligent defense for our faith, but ultimately the faith part embraces the truth of the Bible.

The Bible is about 1) Proclamation of the good news (kerugma); and 2) Teaching (didache). It is violation of biblical authority to make the New Testament say too much or too little. The Bible speaks clearly to some issues and does not speak at all to others. Principles of interpretation (hermenutics) help us to navigate the uncertain areas. You have undoubtedly heard people say that the reason they do not give the Bible a chance is that it is a myth, full of errors and even contradicts itself. Two statements can differ from one another without contradicting each other. (I met the mayor and the police chief for lunch. A person later asks, “Did you see the mayor today?” and I answer “yes.” One could conclude that I did not see the police chief)

Sometimes an understanding of the original language can clear up the difficulty—there are things that we do not yet know (archeology reveals more daily). Though old, the Bible has survived multiple translations, languages, and cultural interpretations. No original autographs exist. The Bible was written over a period of 1500 years.

Though the Bible itself is free from all errors, printers occasionally make mistakes. Five hundred years of printed

Bibles have had these gems:

1. In 1832, an edition had Rebekah leaving her tent to meet Isaac with a group of – not damsels, but camels.
2. An 1810 version read, "If any man come to me, and hate not. . .his own wife (instead of "life"), he cannot be my disciple."
3. The first English-language Bible to be printed in Ireland, in 1716, encouraged its readers to "sin on more" rather than to "sin no more"
4. A version in 1631 reported the seventh commandment as "Thou shall commit adultery," a mistake that so infuriated King Charles that he ordered all copies destroyed and fined all printers whose hands had touched the edition.
5. A nineteenth-century Bible had Mark 7:27 as "Let the children be killed instead of filled.

So how does a thinking man reconcile the man-made tension? A few suggestions:

1. Understand the difference between literal reading and error-less reading. Jesus said, "I am the vine and you are the branches." He was not literally a vine, nor are we branches. It is obvious from the text that Jesus was talking symbolically. Ditto with gouging out your eyes and hating your mother and father.
2. Admit that there are parts of the Bible that puzzle us. Most persons who would have a real conversation about it appreciate the honesty.
3. Avoid speculation and instead focus on the mission. The Bible teaches that women should be silent in church. The missional meaning, however concerns how Paul was attempting to reach his audience in Corinth
4. Focus on the big picture, not the minute details
5. Look at the Bible as a question book, not an answer book

Mostly, the Bible is a book about a person—Jesus Christ. It is what to do with Him that you must decide. The ultimate authority test is whether or not we do what the Bible says. There is a story of a preacher who preached John 3:16 for six weeks in a row. When someone finally asked him, he answered, "When you start putting this one into practice, I will move on to something else."

The Bible is not a typical book--it is a collection of sixty-six books written during various times and by different authors. With an ordinary book, you begin on page one and read to the end. But because the Bible is a collection of books, you may approach it differently. Imagine that Bible reading is like taking a bus tour of a large city. On a bus tour, you cover a lot of ground without spending too much time in any one place, and that's what scheduled reading should be. The idea is to become familiar with the major themes, stories, and chronology of Scripture. Then, if you want to study a particular passage, you can "get off the bus" and spend focused time in that specific place.

Many people follow a Bible-reading schedule. The organization, Radio Bible Class is one of my favorites. They publish a devotional guide called, Our Daily Bread which is the standard for daily devotions. The devotion has a "through the Bible in a year" schedule each day. Our Daily Bread is also available as an app for your phone. Each day the book includes a meditation on a verse or two to guide your devotion in addition to the "through the Bible" schedule.

You can also select a certain book of the Bible to study. If you've never read the Bible before, you may want to look in the table of contents and find the book of Mark. Mark is a fast-moving account of Jesus's life and is perhaps the easiest of the four gospels to understand. As you read a selection every day, ask yourself, "What is the author trying to tell me about Jesus in this passage?" Dig for the timeless principles that the Bible is teaching, and apply those principles to your life. For example, in Mark 1:21-28 when Jesus is casting out the evil spirit, He demonstrates His authority over demons. The author is teaching the truth that Jesus is the greatest authority in the physical and the spiritual realms, and you can feel confident in His power.

Some people want to know what the Bible says on certain topics like discouragement, hope, or eternal life, you can go online and find any number of topical indexes. A topical index contains verses on various topics and you can pick a few verses to read as a devotional study for the day. Write down the verses on cards to carry with you,

or look up and underline the verses in your Bible. You'll be able to remember the verses more clearly when you know where they are found in your Bible. You can also look in the back of the Bible and find the "concordance" which is an index of words that are found in particular verses.

However, be careful not to use the Bible like a crystal ball. Some Christians try to find a message from God by closing their eyes, flipping open their Bibles, and pointing their fingers at a verse. The flip-and-point method often leads to frustration, because the verse might not mean much to you. Or worse, it leads to error, because you may take the verse out of context and interpret it to mean something that the author never intended.

I am a big fan of systematic and intentional study. You may want to jot down the Biblical principles you discover in a notebook or journal. As you examine the verses, ask yourself a few application-type questions.

1. Are there any promises that I can claim in these verses?
2. Is there a command that I need to obey?
3. Are there any sins that I need to avoid?
4. Is there an example to follow?
5. What encouragement or comfort may I gain?
6. What new perspective is God showing me?
7. What new questions do I have?

Sorry if I got carried away. My personal Bible study has been some of the richest time of my life. I do not want to be perceived as a deluded cult-follower, prone to superstition and in need of the religion that Marx described as "the opiate of the people." I have chosen to investigate and embrace what it means to be a man of faith and I celebrate that you are pondering that journey as well.