

THE 30-MINUTE BIBLE



GOD'S STORY FOR EVERYONE

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INTRODUCTION

How *You* Can Read and Understand the Bible



THE BIBLE REMAINS the bestselling book of all time. You may well have one hidden away somewhere in your house yourself. But while the Bible continues to sell incredibly well, it is often not read.

In many cases, this is not for lack of trying. Begin at the beginning—which sounds perfectly logical—and you may soon become bogged down in the laws of Exodus and Leviticus, the second and third books of the Bible, wondering what on earth they have to do with your life today. And so the Bible returns to its shelf, leaving you discouraged and feeling like you could never understand this strange book, as much as you would like to.

Why then read the Bible? To some the Bible is the basis for the largest religion in the world, Christianity, while for others it has been

so influential historically that we need to be aware of it as literature if we are to understand our history. Still others seek to understand God and his relationship to the world. They wonder if God could possibly know or care about what is happening on earth and in our lives. To still others it is the book they meditate on to be instructed by and addressed by God, who has revealed himself particularly in Jesus Christ.

There are many good reasons for reading the Bible, and whatever your reason, the crucial question is *how* to go about reading it so that you can understand it. For many people, the experience of reading the Bible is like trying to force a big, bolted door open, and the million-dollar question is whether there's any key that can unlock the door and enable ordinary people like us to read and understand it.

The really good news of this book is that there is indeed such a key! We have found this key to work through years of teaching the Bible in home, church, and university settings. We have experienced again and again that this key really works. What, then, is this key?



Craig has a terrible sense of direction and can easily get lost. Thus, he is constantly grateful for GPS, with a voice telling him where to turn, which exit to take on the many roundabouts, etc., as he drives between his home in the town of March and Cambridge, UK, where he works. For navigating unknown roads, GPS is indispensable. But imagine if he is planning a lecture tour in America, a tour that includes speaking in several major cities. What would he need to plan his trip? The best tool to get him started is not GPS but a large-scale map so that he can connect the dots between all the different places

he needs to visit. Then he can see how his tour fits together as a whole. Only after that can he attend to the details.

OLD TESTAMENT		NEW TESTAMENT	
THE PENTATEUCH	THE PROPHETS	THE GOSPELS	THE LETTERS
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	<i>Major Prophets</i> Isaiah Jeremiah (Lamentations) Ezekiel Daniel	(The Life of Christ) Matthew Mark Luke John	<i>From Paul</i> Romans 1 & 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 & 2 Thessalonians 1 & 2 Timothy Titus Philemon
THE HISTORY	<i>Minor Prophets</i>	ACTS	<i>From Others</i>
Joshua Judges Ruth 1 & 2 Samuel 1 & 2 Kings 1 & 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther	Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi	(The Activities of the Apostles)	Hebrews James 1 & 2 Peter 1, 2, & 3 John Jude
POETRY & WISDOM			REVELATION
Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Solomon			(A book of apocalyptic writing)

Figure 1.1. The books and collections of the Bible

The same is true with the Bible. No matter how enthusiastic you may be to get into the Bible, it's easy to get lost in the myriad details. For example, look at the contents page of any Bible—we suggest you use one in a modern translation¹—or look through the contents page above and you will see straightaway that the Bible consists not of one book but of dozens of books! And, as you will see from the contents page, there are two major parts to the Bible: the Old Testament and the New Testament, which is like the distinction between the southern and the northern hemispheres on a map of the world.²

Right away we see from this table of contents that the Bible is broken into two parts—the Old and New Testaments, delineating the time before Christ and after Christ, respectively. The books in each of these two testaments take us on a chronological journey through time, from the creation of the world as told in Genesis to the prophesied end as told in Revelation. As if this were not confusing enough, browse through the headings of sections and you may come across strange words like “The Pentateuch,” “Gospels,” “Acts,” and “Revelation,” and you will also notice soon enough that there are different types of literature in the Bible: history, poetry, wisdom (what is “wisdom?”), and, in the New Testament, many letters (or “epistles”).

As helpful as the headings are in the Bible’s table of contents, they add confusion for a new reader and certainly do not provide us with the sort of large-scale map we need to understand the Bible. In our experience, even when familiar with a good number of Bible stories, many people don’t know how they fit together. Imagine having pieces of a jigsaw puzzle without the picture to guide you as you assemble them! Likewise, we need a big picture or a large-scale map to guide our reading of the Bible so that we can see how the pieces fit together.

Now, crucially, if a map of America is to help Craig plan his tour, it has to be accurate. It must fit with what is on the ground. And so it is with a large-scale map of the Bible; it must fit with the nature of the Bible. And what is the nature of the Bible? The overarching shape of the Bible is that of a grand, sprawling story. That’s right: *story*. This gets us close to the key that unlocks the Bible.

We humans resonate deeply with stories. If you want to get to know someone, sooner or later you find yourself saying, “Tell me about

yourself!”—or, in other words, “Tell me your story.” “Where were you born, what school did you go to, what is your family like, what do you do, etc., etc.?” To a greater extent than we may realize, we make sense of our own lives and enter into the lives of others through stories.

The key to understanding the Bible is to see that *it tells a story of the whole world*, beginning with the creation of the world and ending with the wrapping up of history. Its plot unfolds between these two bookends with Jesus at the heart of it all. Getting to know the story of the Bible enables us to read it while seeing how the many pieces fit into an overarching whole.

We probably all know that Jesus is central to the Bible. We can easily miss, however, that to understand Jesus, who we learn about mainly in the New Testament, we need to go all the way back to Adam and Eve and then trace the story forward to see how Jesus fits into it and fulfills it. The story of the Bible is the large-scale map that enables us to see how it all fits together.

The good news is that this small book is designed precisely to provide you with just such a large-scale map and with other cultural and historical information that will deepen your understanding of the Bible’s story. This overview can help you read the Bible with understanding and an awareness of how individual parts fit into the big picture. Paige has been teaching the content of this book to Christians and non-Christians for twelve years, and the result has been transformative. The same can happen to you.

The 30-Minute Bible leads you through the major landmarks of the storyline of the Bible. We want to take you on the journey from the beginning of the world to its end, with the amazing story in between. The book is arranged in bite-sized chunks so that if you set aside thirty minutes each day for thirty days, you’ll become familiar with the entire

story. At each stage we suggest readings from the Bible—as you read them, we think you’ll find that yes, you *can* understand the Bible. Do get hold of a Bible in modern English. Many are available. For example, in this book when we quote from the Bible, we are using the New International Version (NIV), a very accessible version.

The Bible is a bottomless well that we can continue to study—and gain fresh insights from—our whole life long. At the same time, its overarching story can be grasped quickly. Indeed, a good test of this book having achieved its goal is that by the end, you should be able to tell the story of the Bible in about thirty minutes.

We’re aware that you cannot engage with the Bible without having questions, just like the Bible study group Paige has been teaching for twelve years. These are important! We encourage you to keep a list of your questions and to seek answers to them, whether individually or in a group.

The British writer Margaret Silf tells the story of a luncheon at which each guest had brought a dish to share. She noted with sadness that a lovely rice salad was left untouched. And then she saw why this was the case: no spoon had been provided! A great feast awaits in the Bible, and we hope that this book will provide you with a spoon so that you can start eating!

Even as you plunge into the extraordinary story of the Bible, we want to provide you with two overarching frameworks that will be a great help to you as you navigate the sprawling story of the Bible. The Bible is a story, but it is a sprawling, detailed one with many, many smaller stories, plots, and twists and turns.

The first framework is this: imagine the whole biblical story as a *drama in six acts*.³ As we tell the story, we will situate the different parts within these six acts:

* Act One. God Establishes His Kingdom: Creation

The story of the Bible begins with God as the great King creating everything from nothing and pronouncing it “very good” (chapters two and three).

* Act Two. Rebellion in the Kingdom: The Fall

Answers the question “What is wrong with our world?” It diagnoses our condition in relation to the rebellion of the first couple, Adam and Eve, and our own rebellion against God (chapter four).

* Act Three. The King Chooses Israel: Salvation Initiated

Is all about God’s response to our rebellion. God chooses and forms a people, Israel, and lives among them. Israel is intended to live under God’s reign and to show to the world what life is meant to be (chapters five through nineteen).

* Act Four. The Coming of the King: Salvation Accomplished

God’s life with Israel climaxes in the coming of Jesus, the Savior of the world. Jesus lives the perfect life, dies by crucifixion, and then is raised from the dead. He ascends to the Father in heaven (chapters twenty through twenty-six).

* Act Five. Spreading the News of the King: The Mission of the Church

Begins with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit empowers the followers of Jesus to spread the good news of all that God has done in him. Many are converted and the church grows and spreads. Act five is the part of the drama in which we live (chapters twenty-seven through twenty-nine).

* Act Six. The Return of the King: Redemption Completed

Looks forward to the time when Jesus will come again in glory, bringing history to an end, ushering in the new heaven and earth, and establishing God's rule over everything (chapter thirty).

As you'll see, once we plunge into the story of the Bible, God is the central character, and he is consistently portrayed as the great King. Psalm 99:1 (NLT), for example, begins, "The LORD is king!" If you look at our six acts above, you will see that God's kingship or rule is the golden thread that holds the whole of the Bible together. Of course, unlike far too many kings in history, God rules, as we will see, with our best interests and those of his creation at heart.

The first three acts cover the Old Testament, the last three the New Testament. We will alert you throughout to which act you are in. We recommend that you memorize these six acts, even if you don't fully understand them at present. We will explain them as we go along but memorizing them now will provide you with useful hooks to hang the developing story on so that you'll be able to remember it.

The second framework is a timeline. Just as the six acts will keep you oriented on our journey, so too will the timeline. Much of the Bible is about God acting in history, and as you move through the story of the Bible, you'll find it helpful to refer back to the timeline to see just where you are in the great story of the Bible. The Bible is made up of two major parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament. As you can see, the Old Testament covers the story from the creation of the world to the time before Jesus. The New Testament tells the story of Jesus and all that happened as a result.

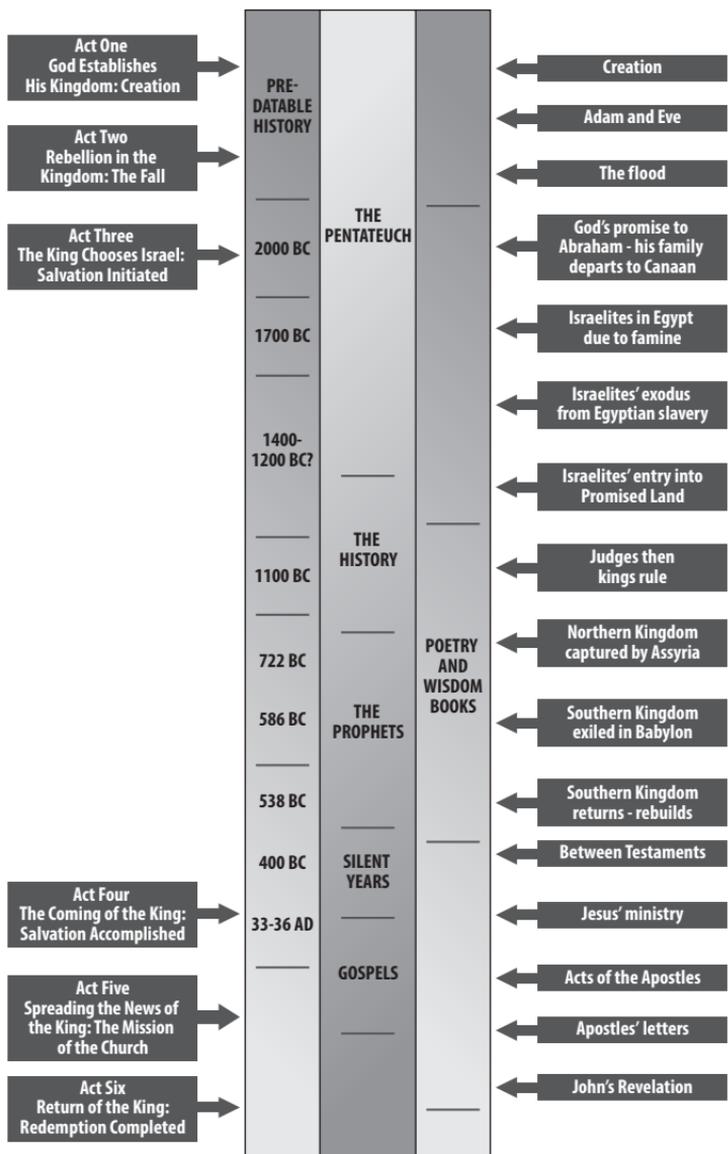


Figure 1.2. Bible history timeline

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