



Understanding the Bible as a Whole

An Accessible
Book-by-Book Guide
through the Scriptures

Sam Rainer

THOM S. RAINER, SERIES EDITOR

Understanding the Bible as a Whole

Understanding the Bible as a Whole

An Accessible
Book-by-Book Guide
through the Scriptures

Sam Rainer

THOM S. RAINER, SERIES EDITOR



A Tyndale nonfiction imprint

Visit Tyndale online at tyndale.com.

Visit Tyndale Momentum online at tyndalemomentum.com.

Tyndale, Tyndale's quill logo, *Tyndale Momentum*, and the Tyndale Momentum logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Ministries. Tyndale Momentum is a nonfiction imprint of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois.

Understanding the Bible as a Whole: An Accessible Book-by-Book Guide through the Scriptures

Copyright © 2022 by Church Answers. All rights reserved.

Cover image of abstract art copyright © Veris Studio/Creative Market. All rights reserved.

Designed by Ron C. Kaufmann

All the examples and stories in this book are true. Names and some specific details have been modified to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the (NASB®) New American Standard Bible,® copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. www.lockman.org.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® *NIV*,® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version,® copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4964-6188-9

Printed in the United States of America

28 27 26 25 24 23 22
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Introduction

The Whole Bible for Your Whole Life 1

1. Understanding the Beginning

The Origins of the Bible 13

PART I: The Old Testament

2. God's Law

The Five Scrolls and Instructions for Life 28

3. Israel's History

A Story of Promise and Exile 42

4. The Post-exilic Period

A Remnant Returns to Jerusalem 56

5. Poetry and Wisdom

Humanity's Vital Connection to God 66

6. Psalms

Expressing Every Human Emotion 77

7. The Major Prophets

Foretellers and Forthtellers 83

8. The Minor Prophets

Tough Reminders of God's Loving Covenant 95

PART II: The New Testament

9. The Gospels and Acts	
<i>Good News Arrives</i>	110
10. Paul's Letters to Churches	
<i>Encouragement, Correction, and Direction</i>	128
11. Paul's Pastoral Letters	
<i>Leading God's People Closer to Him</i>	144
12. General Letters	
<i>The Church Matures</i>	151
13. Revelation	
<i>The Perfect Ending to God's Story</i>	162
Conclusion	
<i>Your Commitment to God's Word</i>	173
Notes	181
About the Author	185

INTRODUCTION

The Whole Bible for Your Whole Life

WHEN THE SUITCASES were opened in a crowded but secluded room in a Chinese village, everyone responded with excitement. They quickly reached for the contents. One by one, each person picked up one of the new books. Some kissed the cover. Others wept. Their joy was palpable. One young woman, her voice laden with emotion, spoke for everyone in the room: “This is what we needed most.”

Then a hushed silence as—for the first time ever—they opened their own Bibles.

A missionary captured this scene on video in the 1980s, and a YouTube version of it went viral in 2014.¹ It inspired people around the world to cherish their Bibles.

As you read this book, my hope is that learning more about the Bible as a whole will stir a similar kind of awe in you, one that will make you eager to read your Bible each day. Because let’s be honest—if someone brought a suitcase of Bibles to your church or small group, it probably wouldn’t inspire a similar reaction.

Why is that?

Part of the challenge for many of us is that we struggle to

connect the dots between the whole of Scripture and the details of our own lives. We might cling to favorite verses when we're walking through valleys of defeat and death, but we've never experienced the big picture—the mountain peak of perspective and purpose. Which means we don't understand how the Bible as a whole connects to our lives—that we are part of an epic story as ancient as creation and as limitless as eternity. And yet it's my belief that we cannot understand our lives without understanding the Bible. “*All* Scripture is inspired by God,” writes the apostle Paul, “and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do *every* good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17, italics added).

Every single word in the Bible is powerful, purposeful, and prescient. *All* of Scripture is for *every* part of our lives. But we sometimes fail to see the proverbial forest for the trees. We search the Bible thinking the details of God's plan for us must be buried in obscurity somewhere in the vastness of its pages. We might even fear we're missing God because we missed a tiny iota of nuance from the original Hebrew or Greek. But what if the opposite is actually the case? What if what we're missing is not the details but the big picture? What if our daily purpose, our next step, our discernment in the moment is plainly visible in a broader understanding of God's revelation in the Bible? What if our lives begin to make sense only when we grasp God's Word holistically—when we see the forest as well as the trees?

When the Chinese woman said, “This is what we needed the most,” she spoke of the Bible as a whole. The people in the room wept together as they reverently held the entirety of God's Word. As we explore the grand themes of the Old and New Testaments,

my prayer is that your excitement for the whole of God's Word will grow and you will begin to reach eagerly for your Bible each day. As you catch a larger vision of God's epic story, I hope you, too, will say with a full heart, "This is what I needed most."

Understanding the Bible Is Essential for Life

As you read each chapter, my hope is that you will gain more than just knowledge or information about the Bible. My aim is to inspire you to find God's purpose for your life as you understand the Bible as a whole. A life full of Scripture is always a full life.

The Bible is how we understand God's true character. Without God's Word, we wouldn't know how to interact with him. When we know God's character through the Bible, we are able to honor him by how we live our lives.

Our next steps in life are illuminated through Scripture. God's Word is "a lamp to guide [your] feet and a light for [your] path" (Psalm 119:105). As such, God's Word will assure you that you are living according to God's will. When you understand God's Word, you learn how to glorify your Creator and avoid sin. Not only will the Bible give you joy in living, but it will also protect you from the destructive nature of bad decisions. You can live a God-honoring life by diligently applying his Word (2 Timothy 2:15).

Understanding the Bible as a whole is worth the effort. Every word matters because every minute of your life matters. In Luke's Gospel, we're told that God numbers the hairs on our heads (Luke 12:7). God is always involved in every area of our lives.

The lesson is simple: God is active, caring, and present in your life at all times. He wants you to joyfully interact with him by reading, studying, and understanding the Bible. Your life matters, especially in the context of God's greater story. In the next section, I'll explain why.

God's Story of Redemption

The Bible is God's story of redemption—how he bought back his creation and the people who had fallen away from him. The first step in understanding the Bible as a whole is realizing that the biblical story is not so much *about* you as it is *for* you. The opening words of Genesis are “In the beginning *God* . . .,” not “In the beginning *you* . . .”

God creates. God speaks. God saves. He is not just *part* of creation or just a *power* in creation; he is *sovereign* over all creation. The story of the Bible is about God and his desire to redeem us. The apostle Paul tells us that God gave us the Bible for our “hope and encouragement” (Romans 15:4). The Bible is God's road map to hope.

The Bible reveals God's plan for redeeming his people. The story has ups and downs, failures and successes. It's not G-rated, and all the characters are flawed, with one exception—Jesus. God is holy and just, and his perfection demands judgment of sin. God is also love, and his mercy reaches out to us through grace. He desires to rescue us from ourselves. Paul emphasizes this when he writes that God is *for* us and not *against* us (Romans 8:31).

Throughout the Old Testament, a discernible pattern of sin and redemption emerges in the relationship between God and his people. God initiates a relationship with his wayward people, offering reconciliation. His people accept mercy and forgiveness but inevitably fall back into sin. God gives his people warnings. They do not listen. God gets their attention with judgment but also offers redemption. Once again, his people accept, only to fall away again. And the pattern repeats itself in generation after generation. The books of the Old Testament reveal this pattern through the law, through the historical works, through poetry, and through the prophets. By the time we get to the New

Testament, the sentiment is “We need the Messiah! We need a Savior!”

And that is the point. The Old Testament demonstrates our need for salvation, and the New Testament reveals the Savior—Jesus. The author of all things enters the story. Why? To redeem the people he loves. Through Christ, God saves and frees his people. And he then sends them out into the world as an army of gospel storytellers. The Bible is a true story of God’s redemption of humanity, and the world needs to hear it. We have the Bible so we can share this remarkable story.

Salvation through Jesus Christ is the central theme of the Bible. Only Jesus can save us from our sins. The Bible contains the wonderful story of how Jesus’ death and resurrection made redemption possible. At the center of human history stands a rugged wooden cross. What we believe about what happened on that cross determines our eternity. If we believe Jesus died for our sins, and that he offers us forgiveness by his grace and mercy, then we will spend eternity with God. Rejecting God’s free offer of salvation separates us from him forever in hell. Accepting God’s grace means repenting of (or turning from) our sins and accepting Jesus’ sacrifice and resurrection as the means of our salvation. The theme of redemption is the unifying thread that runs throughout the entire Bible.

In fact, we cannot understand the story of redemption apart from the Bible. Some people try to understand God simply through nature and science. And God has certainly revealed himself in both. In Psalm 19:1, David writes, “The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship.” Similarly, the intricacies of science reveal the presence of a designer. Galileo, the great astronomer and father of the scientific method, believed God employed mathematics as

the language of what Galileo called “the book of nature.”²² But although we can learn something about God *generally* through nature and science, it is only through the Bible that we gain insight into what God wants us to know about him *personally*. Only through God’s Word can we learn how to have a relationship with him.

When we see things in the world that are complex and intricate, we can point to the presence of a designer. Motor vehicles are engineered and built. Sculptures are planned and chiseled. Restaurant meals are prepped and plated. We see evidence of the designer in any of these items, but we cannot claim to know the designer as a result. It’s different with God. The divine Designer not only created the entire world for us to enjoy, but he also wanted us to know him and to have a relationship with him. God made that relationship possible by sending his Son, Jesus. And the Bible tells us the story of how Jesus is the hope of salvation. The Bible is the how-to book of hope.

God’s Truth Is Eternal

How do we know the Bible is true? This question is fundamentally important. The Bible makes this claim of itself: “Every word of God proves true” (Proverbs 30:5). If the Bible were false, then God himself would be false. If we take the position that God is false, we are placing ourselves in authority over him by picking and choosing our own truth. But if we’re picking and choosing, how do we know we’re right, especially given that we’re obviously not perfect or infallible? In order for there to be truth, there must be something absolute that establishes truth. The Bible is God’s absolute truth revealed to us.

Another way to affirm the truth of the Bible is to consider what Jesus believed and taught about Scripture. One example is recorded

in John 10, where Jesus is in the middle of a tense situation near the end of his public ministry. It is winter in Jerusalem—cold and rainy. He is walking through a section of the Jewish Temple known as Solomon’s Colonnade when a group of people surrounds him and asks, “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” In other words, “Are you God?”

Jesus responds, “I have already told you, and you don’t believe me.” He goes on to explain, “The proof is the work I do in my Father’s name,” and then he summarizes by declaring, “The Father and I are one.”

At this point, the crowd picks up rocks to stone him. When Jesus asks them why, they say they will stone him for blasphemy because, “You, a mere man, claim to be God.”

Jesus responds by pointing to the infallibility of Scripture:

It is written in your own Scriptures that God said to certain leaders of the people, “I say, you are gods!” And you know that the Scriptures cannot be altered. So if those people who received God’s message were called “gods,” why do you call it blasphemy when I say, “I am the Son of God”? After all, the Father set me apart and sent me into the world.

JOHN 10:34-36

Jesus stated plainly, “The Scriptures cannot be altered.” The New King James translation reads, “The Scripture cannot be broken.” A broken word is an untrue word. Nothing can break God’s Word. We can throw our questions at Scripture, but we can’t break it. God’s Word is eternal, and therefore unbreakable. It is perfect, and therefore incorruptible. It is complete, and therefore indestructible. God’s Word cannot be altered.

Three Reasons You Can Trust the Entire Bible

“The Word of God” refers to two things. First, “the Word” is a name given to Jesus:

In the beginning the Word already existed.

The Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

JOHN 1:1

He wore a robe dipped in blood, and his title was the
Word of God.

REVELATION 19:13

Second, “the Word” is Scripture, God’s message to humanity in written form. The Word of God (the Bible) points us to the Word who *is* God (Jesus Christ).

Just as Christ the Word came and dwelt among us in physical form, so too we have the written Word of God to help us live as Christ lived. And there’s an interesting parallel here. Just as Jesus is fully human and fully God, so too is the Bible fully human (written by human hands) and fully divine (inspired by God).

What does that mean?

It means that, though the pages of Scripture were inked by human hands, the Bible is nevertheless fully God’s Word. The Bible is not simply a collection of words *about* God; it is divinely inspired words *from* God. Though these words were written at specific times and places, they are nevertheless eternal. The Bible transcends time and place to speak to all humanity in every generation and culture. That’s why the writer of Hebrews could say, “The word of God is alive and powerful” (Hebrews 4:12).

Just as Jesus is eternally alive, so too the Bible is eternally alive

(Psalm 119:89; Isaiah 40:8). Grasping the power of the written Word is one thing, but believing the written Word is *alive* is entirely different. The Bible is God's own words, given to us for the purpose of drawing people to himself.

Because the Bible is from God, it is personal communication from him. We can trust that the Bible is true because it is authoritative, inspired, infallible, and sufficient.

1. The Bible Is Authoritative

Understanding the Bible as a whole requires us to submit to the authority of God's Word. Often, our problem is that we want to know God on our own terms, not his. But we can't get into someone's heart any way we want. We can't love someone exclusively on our own terms. The same dynamic exists with God and his Word.

The Bible is full of God's love, but you cannot approach this love any way you want. You are not the authority over the Bible. Rather, the Bible is the authority over you. Do not read the Bible like you're going through junk-mail envelopes, looking for a deal and then tossing the rest aside without even opening it. Do not read the Bible like you might read the opinion section of the newspaper, looking for an angle that supports a viewpoint you already have. Instead, read the Bible like a love letter. Devour every word and feel each phrase. The Bible is the most profound message of love ever written. Indeed, the Bible's words define love. So don't just search the Scriptures. Let the Scriptures search you.

2. The Bible Is Inspired and Infallible

When you read the Bible, you are hearing directly from God. The Bible is inspired by God, which means it is "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16, *NIV*). As such, the Bible is infallible; it will not lead you astray. You can trust the Bible.

To say the Bible is *inspired* by God means that the Holy Spirit prompted and guided the authors. Every word was God's intention. Luke records many details in his Gospel, but those details were revealed by God. Paul's letter to the Philippians conveys the joy Paul had for the church, but God gave Paul the words to express his joy. The Psalms give voice to the highs and lows of David's emotions, but God directed the words of poetry.

To say the Bible is *infallible* means it is incapable of error. When Jesus prayed for his disciples, he said, "Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth" (John 17:17). All truth is derived from God, which means the Bible is the gold standard of truth. It will not deceive us or prove unreliable. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God says of his Word, "I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it" (Isaiah 55:11). Because God's Word is infallible, it is wholly reliable—always and everywhere.

3. The Bible Is Sufficient

God's Word is all you need for living in a way that honors him. Nothing else is needed to understand the Good News of Jesus. No other books are required to know God and follow the Holy Spirit. When David wrote Psalm 19, he recorded several aspects of the Bible's sufficiency.

The instructions of the LORD are perfect,
reviving the soul.

The decrees of the LORD are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.

The commandments of the LORD are right,
bringing joy to the heart.

The commands of the LORD are clear,
giving insight for living.
Reverence for the LORD is pure,
lasting forever.
The laws of the LORD are true;
each one is fair.
They are more desirable than gold,
even the finest gold.
They are sweeter than honey,
even honey dripping from the comb.
They are a warning to your servant,
a great reward for those who obey them.

PSALM 119:7-11

What we have in the Bible is perfect, trustworthy, right, clear, pure, and true. No other written word can make such a claim. The Bible alone is all-sufficient.

An Invitation to Read the Bestselling Book of All Time

Not only is the Bible the bestselling book of all time, but I've heard it is also the most shoplifted book. For more than two thousand years, debates have raged over the Bible. Leaders have taken oaths with a hand placed on the Bible. Governments have banned the Bible. Many people seem to have an opinion about the Bible, even if they've never read it. The Bible is as popular as it is notorious. Yes, the Bible is the bestselling book of all time, but it is so much more.³

If you don't have your Bible near you, take a minute to go get it. Prayerfully ask God to give you a passion for reading his Word. In the next chapter, you'll learn more about how to read your

Bible. But don't wait. Open your Bible now and read it, even if only for a few minutes. Then come back and we'll continue our discussion.

Understanding the Beginning

The Origins of the Bible

THE BIBLE YOU READ was printed or downloaded at a specific point in time. Ink went to paper and pages were bound together, or computer programming sent data from a server to your device. Maybe your Bible is on your phone. Maybe you have a sentimental family heirloom Bible you read. Or perhaps you've started using new technology such as the Filament Bible to dive deep into God's Word. There is nothing sacred about the form your Bible takes, whether printed or digital. What makes the Bible sacred is the origin of the words it contains. They come from God.

How the Bible Came to Be

The Bible consists of sixty-six books—thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New Testament. It is not a list of propositions or orders from on high, dictated to a reluctantly

subservient people. Though every word is inspired by the Holy Spirit, the words themselves were written by human beings—people with their own personalities and life experiences, writing in their own time and context. In this chapter, we will explore how all these writings came together to form what we now know as the Bible.

Who Wrote the Books of the Bible?

Ultimately, it is God who determines his own Word. But from a human perspective, there was a way in which God revealed Scripture to humanity. Approximately forty authors wrote the books of the Bible over the course of about 1,600 years. The authorship of some of the books is unattributed or the subject of debate. Some authors chose not to include their name on the books they wrote. For example, we are unsure who wrote Esther in the Old Testament and Hebrews in the New Testament. Other books, like the Psalms, have multiple contributors.

The writers of the Bible came from various backgrounds. Moses was an adopted prince who became a shepherd. David was a shepherd who became a king. Matthew was a tax collector. Peter and John were fishermen. And Luke was a physician.

Even though the Bible was written by a diverse group of authors spanning multiple centuries, it is a coherent and cohesive whole. Scripture does not contradict itself, nor does it contain errors. The authors of the Bible write from many perspectives, but all converge in one place. Consistently, the Bible tells God's story of redeeming the people he loves through the salvation of Jesus Christ.

Where Did the First Manuscripts Originate?

In the ancient world, writing was a specialized skill. Everything was done by hand. Few people owned anything written. The Old

Testament was written mainly in Hebrew and some Aramaic (parts of Daniel and Ezra). The earliest copies of the books of the Hebrew Bible would have existed on papyrus or vellum. Papyrus was made of plant fibers. Vellum was made of animal skins.

During the time of Alexander the Great, Greek became one of the world's most widely spoken languages. It was during this time that Jewish scholars in Egypt began to translate the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek. Seventy scribes worked on the translation and produced what is known as the Septuagint (meaning *seventy*). The writers of the New Testament wrote in Greek and would have been familiar with the Septuagint.

Until the printing press was invented around 1440, the books of the Bible were copied by hand. Thousands of these handwritten texts still exist, including the Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus, two ancient Greek manuscripts containing most of the Old and New Testaments.

In 1947, a Bedouin shepherd looking for a lost goat made a fascinating discovery. In the caves of Qumran, he found scrolls and papyrus fragments containing portions of the Old Testament and other Hebrew and Greek manuscripts dating to the Alexandrian era. These documents and others demonstrated the careful precision with which the scribes had copied the texts.

As Christianity spread from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth, the New Testament was translated into Ethiopic, Coptic, Slavonic, Armenian, Syriac, and many other languages.¹ In the fourth century, Pope Damasus commissioned what became the Vulgate, a Latin version of the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament.

One of the oldest fragments of the Hebrew Bible dates to the seventh century BC, during the time of Jeremiah the prophet. This fragment contains the priestly blessing from Numbers 6. The

oldest fragments of the New Testament are from John's Gospel and date to about AD 125.

Did God's message get lost among the variety of authors and translators over the course of time? It's a reasonable question. But with the Bible handed down through history and all the various manuscripts discovered over the past few centuries, the accuracy from one to the next is nothing short of miraculous. In one example, comparing a portion of Isaiah found on a Qumran scroll with the Codex Leningradensis, the text is virtually identical, even though a thousand years separate these two manuscripts.² You can be confident that the Bible you have today is an accurate representation of God's Word.

Who Decided Which Books to Include in the Old and New Testaments?

The word *canon* is often used to describe the books of the Bible considered authoritative by Christians. As previously mentioned, the Christian canon includes sixty-six books—thirty-nine books in the Old Testament and twenty-seven books in the New Testament.

By the time of Christ, the Jewish community had generally agreed upon the Hebrew canon, which Christians refer to as the Old Testament. For the most part, the New Testament canon took shape by the second century and was considered officially settled by the fourth century. The canonicity of New Testament books was largely determined by their connection to one of the apostles, consistent doctrine, and their overall acceptance by the early church.³

How Did We Get the English Language Versions of the Bible We Read Today?

Though portions of the Bible had been translated from Latin to Old English as early as the seventh century, it was English

theologian and priest John Wycliffe who first translated the entire Bible into Middle English in the 1300s. At the time, the Bible used in worship services was written in Latin, which meant that only the privileged classes and religious hierarchy, who had access to the necessary education and training, were able to read and understand Scripture. As a result, the common people were not able to access and learn from Scripture directly. Wycliffe believed every person had the right to read and interpret the Bible, and he began work with his colleague Nicholas of Hereford to translate the Latin Bible into English. Their versions were later revised by John Purvey. After completion of the project, and following his death, Wycliffe was labeled a heretic because his ideas and criticism of corruption threatened the power structure of the religious system at the time.

The next significant figure in the development of the English Bible was William Tyndale, who used a printing press to publish his version of the Bible. Where Wycliffe had translated the Bible from Latin, Tyndale used copies of the original Hebrew and Greek texts.

Tyndale's dedication to distributing God's Word came with consequences, however. Both the English monarchy and the religious authorities were threatened by the idea of people reading the Bible for themselves. In 1536, ten years after publishing his Bible, Tyndale was strangled to death at the stake and his body burned.

Before the execution, Tyndale spoke his final words: "Lord, open the eyes of the king of England!"⁴ He gave his life to open the eyes of people through the reading of God's Word. Wycliffe and Tyndale had begun an ongoing movement of translating the Bible into common languages. They knew the power of reading Scripture and wanted everyone to experience this joy. Today,

translators are working to bring the Bible to many more languages, even lesser known and obscure ones.

In 1560, William Whittingham produced the Geneva Bible, which was used by John Bunyan and the Puritans and was the first version of the Bible to use verse numbers. In 1611, King James authorized the version of the Bible that bears his name to this day, and it became the most widely read version of the Bible in history. About 250 years later, the church recognized the need to modernize the language of the King James Version, and the English Revised Version went to press in 1885. The American Standard Version followed in 1901.

Today, many modern translations of the Bible are available, including the New International Version, the New Living Translation, and the English Standard Version, among many others. Amazingly, the Bible has now been translated into more than seven hundred languages!

Which English Language Version of the Bible Is Best?

The fact that there are differences among the various translations is attributable in part to the translation philosophy or approach used by each group of translators. Scholars use two primary approaches when translating the Bible: *formal equivalence* and *dynamic equivalence*.

Formal equivalence prioritizes the best word-for-word translation of the original languages. As a result, these translations sometimes have stiff or awkward phrasing when the Hebrew and Greek texts don't translate directly into English. The New American Standard Bible and the King James Version are examples of formal equivalence translations.

In contrast to the word-for-word approach of formal equivalence, dynamic equivalence (or functional equivalence) uses a

thought-for-thought approach and prioritizes the readability of the text. The New International Version and the New Living Translation are examples of dynamic equivalence.

Which translation approach is the best? In most cases, both translation philosophies produce highly accurate translations of the text. But it's important to note that neither approach provides a purely literal translation. Why not? In some cases, literal translation is impossible because there is no English equivalent for a Hebrew or Greek word or phrase. Or there may be multiple words in the original language and only one equivalent word in English. For example, while English has just one word for *love*, Greek has four (*agape*, *eros*, *philia*, and *storge*.) Hebrew and Greek also make use of euphemisms for sex and matters of the toilet that would make no sense if translated literally. Systems of weights and measures, and other culturally bound artifacts have changed since the time of the Bible, and some ideas and words are notoriously difficult to translate. The better English translations typically include margin notes to explain difficult texts.

When reading your Bible, it is a good practice to use one main translation. Having a go-to version helps with retention and Scripture memory. For example, I prefer to use the New Living Translation (NLT) for most of my personal reading and preaching. The NLT is both highly accurate and easy to read. I also use the New American Standard Bible (NASB) for theological study. Because most of the Scripture I memorized as a child is from the New King James Version (NKJV), I tend to quote the NKJV when relying on memory. When I want to read the Bible poetically, I might dig into the King James Version, which is famous and valued for its use of colorful Early Modern English. In short, different translations can be used in different ways. Pick one that suits your purpose, and you may be more inclined to enjoy reading Scripture.

TOP TEN BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

According to the Evangelical Christian Publishing Association (ECPA), these are the top ten bestselling Bible translations in the US:⁵

1. New International Version (dynamic)
2. King James Version (formal)
3. New Living Translation (dynamic)
4. English Standard Version (formal)
5. New King James Version (formal)
6. Christian Standard Bible (formal)
7. Reina Valera (formal Spanish)
8. New International Reader's Version (dynamic)
9. *The Message* (dynamic)⁶
10. New American Standard Bible (formal)

Bible translators are committed to accurately representing the wording of the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. One major issue in translating the Bible from the original languages is that the original autographs written by the original authors no longer exist. But this should not cause despair. Frankly, I believe God sovereignly intended for us not to have the originals. The temptation would be too great to worship them as icons instead of using them to point us to Jesus. Nevertheless, we have thousands of copies, some dating close to the time of the originals, which means that translators can sift through the ancient texts to check for variants and remove potential errors.

Through the process of textual criticism, translators weigh the internal evidence of manuscripts (e.g., how many and what kind of mistakes did a specific scribe make?) and external evidence of manuscripts (e.g., what is the quality and age of the document?) to arrive at the best available translation. New manuscript discoveries help refine this process and give us a high level of confidence that

our modern English Bibles accurately convey what God wants us to know.

Connecting the Two Testaments

Central to both the Old Testament and the New Testament is the concept of *covenant*. In fact, *testament* means *covenant* in the original languages of the Bible. Thus the Old and New Testaments are sometimes referred to as the Old and New Covenants.

The division between old and new doesn't mean that one replaced the other or that one is more important than the other. Rather, the Old Testament and the New Testament both reveal God's story of redeeming us, first through a promise and then through the fulfillment of that promise.

The Old Testament reveals a *promise* from God. That promise is referred to as the old covenant.⁷ A covenant is an agreement or contract between two parties. After the fall into sin of Adam and Eve, which broke the relationship between God and humanity, God made a series of covenants to reconcile with his people. Though God's people repeatedly failed to uphold their part of the covenants, God remained faithful. The Old Testament depicts God as intensely seeking a relationship with humanity, motivated by unconditional love.

The New Testament reveals the *fulfillment* of God's promise. Where the old covenant contains a promise of redemption, the new covenant contains the fulfillment of that promise of redemption in Christ Jesus. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God offers salvation to those who repent of their sins and believe in Jesus. The promise of salvation revealed in the Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ and made eternally secure by the Holy Spirit. Both the Old and the New Testaments affirm Jesus as the only way to salvation.

God's story in the Bible is continuous. While the Bible is arranged in two testaments written by more than forty human authors, the thread woven throughout the entire story is God's plan of redemption for humanity. The Old Testament is about the covenant of God's law. The New Testament is about the covenant of God's grace. What begins with God and his chosen people in Genesis, ends with Christ and the church in Revelation.

Three Key Principles for Understanding God's Word

Many people know the power of God's Word but are perplexed once they begin reading it. It's hard to admit we don't get it! Some of this confusion stems from spiritual warfare and a lack of discipline to obey God. But many will try to read God's Word only to stop because they think they don't understand. The next few sections will help you recognize what you are reading.

1. Interpretation: Understanding the Plain Meaning

As you read the Bible, one key to understanding is to ask the question, "What is the plain meaning of the text?" Most passages of Scripture have a clear story line with identifiable characters and themes. Though this question may seem simple enough, the best theologians throughout church history have often differed on the "plain meaning" of various Bible passages. This includes verses about such issues as mode of baptism, roles of men and women in the church, and whether or not one can lose one's salvation. What seems plain to me may not seem plain to you! In fact, as a pastor, I've made it clear to my congregation that I do not expect them to come to the same conclusions I do with every text. Well-meaning people can read parts of Scripture and come to different conclusions. A rule of thumb for navigating such differences is the maxim, "In essentials, unity. In nonessentials, liberty. In all things, love."

When your interpretation leads you to a completely novel view of Scripture, one that contradicts other biblical teaching or traditionally held views, be cautious. Countless theologians across two thousand years of church history have worked to interpret the Bible. Though there are differing views of Scripture, these views are well-documented and common. Views that contradict traditional interpretations are in danger of being heretical. A view of Scripture becomes heretical when it departs from accepted or orthodox beliefs and warps the meaning of the gospel. Some of the sternest warnings in Scripture are reserved for those who abuse God's Word by shifting away from the gospel message of Jesus.

As you read God's Word, ask the simple question, "What is the plain meaning of the text?" If you are still stumped, a good next step is to consult a respected reference book such as a study Bible, a commentary, a Bible encyclopedia, or a Bible dictionary.

2. Genres and Exegesis: Understanding the Original Intent

When reading Scripture, it's important to understand the authors' original intent. This requires understanding what genre of literature each book of the Bible belongs to, and also how to exegete or analyze it to discern the text's original context and meaning.

A literary *genre* is a kind or category of writing. One of the things that makes the Bible fun to read is that it contains many different genres, including law, poetry, history, letters, prophecy, wisdom literature, and apocalyptic literature. Each genre has a unique purpose that provides a context for understanding its original intent, which is why we read legal documents differently than we read poetry or a personal letter.

When we don't know the genre of biblical literature, it's easier to get lost. For example, those who try to read through the Bible from beginning to end often joke about giving up in despair when

they hit the book of Leviticus. Why? Because it's a collection of civil, ceremonial, and moral laws, which isn't exactly scintillating reading. But when we know up front that we are reading a collection of legal writings, then we're better prepared for the content. The Psalms are another example of how it helps to understand genre. Some of David's psalms include disturbing expressions of anger and violence, which can make them difficult to read. However, when we understand he is wrestling with raw emotions through poetry, rather than acting in anger and violence, it's easier to connect to the evocative nature of his poems.

Exegesis is the process of analyzing a text to understand not only the literary context but also the historical context. Every part of the Bible was written in a specific place and time. David agonizes about his sin in some of the psalms. Habakkuk cries out to God because of injustice. Paul writes with joy to the Philippian church. The imagery in the book of Revelation is viewed through John's first-century eyes as he tries to explain God's vision to him. God sovereignly wanted us to receive this revelation through John's perspective, but it is helpful to know his descriptions are based upon his perspective. When we exegete Scripture, we are attempting to draw the original meaning *out of* the text. We should never read our opinions *into* the text. The historical and literary contexts are crucial to getting exegesis correct. When someone takes a single verse out of context to prove a point, that person is reading his or her opinions into the text rather than drawing the original meaning out of the text.

3. Hermeneutics: Understanding the Application

Broadly speaking, hermeneutics, as a field of study within theology, involves the entire process of understanding Scripture. More specifically, hermeneutics is about uncovering the contemporary

relevance of specific text. Hermeneutics asks the question, “What does this text mean for me right now?” Interpretation and exegesis help you understand Scripture in its past context. Hermeneutics helps you apply Scripture in the present.

The Bible contains some of the world’s greatest stories, teaching, and wisdom. To absorb the truth of the Bible, you must reflect on it devotionally and apply it personally. Frankly, the Bible should change your life! While there is value in retaining the information in the Bible, the greater purpose of Scripture is to transform you from the inside out and to help you live a different kind of life. If the Bible does not change the way you live, then you’re not reading it correctly.

Bible scholar George Guthrie refers to meditation as “mentally chewing” on a part of God’s Word.⁸ As you read, notice the words, phrases, or sentences that catch your attention. Reread those passages several times. Reflect prayerfully on those words and phrases, asking God for insights on how you are to live out the verse or passage you are reading. Make notes in a journal. The process of writing by hand helps imprint the content on your mind and in your heart. Prayerful and consistent devotion to God’s Word helps fill your tank to give you the gas to live. Reading God’s Word for information or out of duty can quickly become drudgery, but reading God’s Word for personal growth and change leads to delight.

Where Are You in Scripture?

Though the Bible is first of all a story about God, the Bible is also a story of God’s holy and gracious effort to reconcile with his people—with you and me. Our names may not be written on the pages of the Bible, but we are nevertheless part of God’s epic story.

When you read Scripture, don’t view God as the missing piece of your life. You will find no satisfaction in believing that a little

bit of God will fill in the gaps. You don't need God to complete *your* story. Rather, you are part of *God's* story. As the history of the world unfolds, every person fits into God's sovereign plan. When you realize that God is not the missing piece for *you*, but that *you* are a piece to *his* master work, you will begin to grasp the true meaning of Scripture. You will find God when you *immerse* yourself in his Word.