

“QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS”

Session Seven – “Why and how should I read the Bible?”

A good summary / survey of the Bible is difficult to achieve. The Bible is comprised of 2 testaments, 66 different books, 1189 chapters, 31173 verses, and 773692 words. The different books of the Bible cover different topics and were addressed to different audiences. The books of the Bible were written by approximately 40 different people over a period of approximately 1300 years. A summary / survey of the entire Bible is therefore a major undertaking.

Nevertheless, there is a consistent thread of narrative running through it all, and bringing it all together: the love of God for his creation, and his desire to be in relationship with all his (rebellious!) people. So, what is in the Bible?

Old Testament Overview

The Old Testament is divided into five sections: the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy), the historical books (Joshua through Esther), the poetic books (Job through Song of Solomon), the Major Prophets (Isaiah through Daniel), and the Minor Prophets (Hosea through Malachi). The Old Testament was written from approximately 1400 B.C. to approximately 400 B.C. The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew, with a few small sections written in Aramaic (essentially a variation of Hebrew).

The Old Testament deals primarily with the relationship between God and the nation of Israel. The Pentateuch deals with the creation of Israel and God establishing a covenant relationship with the Hebrew People. The historical books record Israel's history, its victories and successes along with its defeats and failures. The poetic books give us a more intimate look at God's relationship with Israel and His passion for Israel to worship and obey Him. The prophetic books are God's call to Israel to repent from its idolatry and unfaithfulness and to return to a relationship of obedience and spiritual fidelity.

Perhaps a better title would be the First Testament. The word "old" tends to give the idea of "outdated" or "not-relevant." That could not be further from the truth!

Quick Summaries of the Books of the Old Testament (from “Overview Bible”)

1. Genesis - Genesis answers two big questions: “How did God’s relationship with the world begin?” and “Where did the nation of Israel – the Hebrew people - come from?”
2. Exodus - God saves the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt through Moses, and reveals who God is, and how to be in proper relationship with God and one another.
3. Leviticus - God gives the Hebrew people instructions for how to worship Him.
4. Numbers – The Hebrew people fail to trust and obey God, and wander in the wilderness for 40 years.
5. Deuteronomy - Moses gives the Hebrews (now called “Israel”) instructions (a recap of the laws in Exodus–Numbers) for how to love and obey God in the Promised Land.

6. Joshua - Joshua (Israel's new leader) leads Israel to conquer the Promised land, then parcels out territories to the twelve tribes of Israel.
7. Judges - Israel enters a cycle of turning from God, falling captive to oppressive nations, calling out to God, and being rescued by leaders God sends their way (called "judges").
8. Ruth - Two widows lose everything, and find hope in Israel—which leads to the birth of the future King David.
9. 1 Samuel - Israel demands a king, Saul, who turns out to be quite a disappointment.
10. 2 Samuel - David, a man after God's own heart, becomes king of Israel.
11. 1 Kings - The kingdom of Israel has a time of peace and prosperity under David's son Solomon, but afterward splits, and the two lines of kings turn away from God.
12. 2 Kings - Both kingdoms – Israel (Northern) and Judah (Southern) - ignore God and his prophets, until they both fall captive to other world empires.
13. 1 Chronicles - This is a brief history of Israel from Adam to David, culminating with David commissioning the temple of God in Jerusalem.
14. 2 Chronicles - David's son Solomon builds the temple, but after centuries of rejecting God, the southern Israelites are taken captive by the Babylonians who destroy the temple.
15. Ezra - The Israelites rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, and a scribe named Ezra teaches the people to once again obey God's laws.
16. Nehemiah - The city of Jerusalem is in bad shape, so Nehemiah rebuilds the wall around the city.
17. Esther - Someone hatches a genocidal plot to bring about Israel's extinction, and Esther must face the emperor to ask for help.
18. Job - Job and his friends argue about why terrible things are happening to him.
19. Psalms - A collection of 150 songs that Israel sang to God (and to each other) – a sort of prayer book, worship manual and hymnal for the ancient Israelites.
20. Proverbs - A collection of sayings written to help people make wise decisions that bring about justice.
21. Ecclesiastes - A philosophical exploration of the meaning of life—with a surprisingly pessimistic tone for the Bible.
22. Song of Solomon (Song of Songs) - A love song celebrating love, desire, and marriage.
23. Isaiah - God sends the prophet Isaiah to warn Israel of future judgment—but also to tell them about a coming king and servant who will "bear the sins of many."
24. Jeremiah - God sends a prophet to warn Israel about the coming Babylonian captivity, but the people don't take the news very well.
25. Lamentations - A collection of dirges lamenting the fall of Jerusalem after the Babylonian attacks.
26. Ezekiel - God chooses a man to speak for Him to Israel, to tell them the error of their ways and teach them justice: Ezekiel.
27. Daniel - Daniel becomes a high-ranking wise man in the Babylonian and Persian empires, and has prophetic visions concerning Israel's future.
28. Hosea - Hosea is told to marry a prostitute who leaves him, and he must bring her back: a picture of God's relationship with unfaithful Israel.

29. Joel - God sends a plague of locusts to Judge Israel, but his judgment on the surrounding nations is coming, too.
30. Amos – Shepherd Amos preaches against the injustice of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.
31. Obadiah - Obadiah warns the neighboring nation of Edom that they will be judged for plundering Jerusalem.
32. Jonah - A disobedient prophet runs from God, is swallowed by a great fish, and then preaches God’s message to the city of Nineveh.
33. Micah - Micah confronts the leaders of Israel and Judah regarding their injustice, and prophecies that one day the Lord himself will rule in perfect justice.
34. Nahum - Nahum foretells of God’s judgment on Nineveh, the capital of Assyria.
35. Habakkuk - Habakkuk pleads with God to stop the injustice and violence in Judah, but is surprised to find that God will use the even more violent Babylonians to do so.
36. Zephaniah - God warns that he will judge Israel and the surrounding nations, but also that he will restore them in peace and justice.
37. Haggai - The people have abandoned the work of restoring God’s temple in Jerusalem, and so Haggai takes them to task.
38. Zechariah - The prophet Zechariah calls Israel to return to God, and records prophetic visions that show what’s happening behind the scenes.
39. Malachi - God has been faithful to Israel, but they continue to live disconnected from him—so God sends Malachi to call them out.

New Testament Overview

The New Testament is divided into five sections: the Gospels (Matthew through John), history (the book of Acts), the Pauline Epistles (Romans through Philemon), the General Epistles (Hebrews through Jude), and prophesy (the book of Revelation). The New Testament was written from approximately 45 A.D. to approximately 95 A.D. The New Testament was written in Koine Greek (common Greek, the everyday form of the Greek language in the first century A.D.)

The Gospels give us four different, yet not conflicting, accounts of the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Gospels demonstrate how Jesus was the promised Messiah of the Old Testament and lay the foundation for the teaching of the rest of the New Testament. The book of Acts records the deeds of Jesus’ apostles, whom Jesus sent out into the world to proclaim the Gospel of salvation. Acts tells us of the beginning of the church and its rapid growth in the years following the Resurrection. The Pauline Epistles, written by the Apostle Paul, are letters to specific churches - giving official Christian doctrine and the practice that should follow that doctrine. The General Epistles compliment the Pauline Epistles with additional teaching and application. The book of Revelation gives comfort to persecuted Christians and foresees the events that will occur in the end times.

Quick Summaries of the Books of the New Testament (from “Overview Bible”)

40. The Gospel of Matthew - An account of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, focusing on Jesus’ role as the true king of the Jews. The Sermon on the Mount is in Matthew.
41. The Gospel of Mark - This brief account of Jesus’ earthly ministry highlights Jesus’ authority and servanthood. Mark is Peter’s secretary, and recorded Peter’s Gospel accounts.
42. The Gospel of Luke – Luke, not an eyewitness himself, writes the most thorough account of Jesus’ life, pulling together eyewitness testimonies to tell the full story of Jesus.
43. The Gospel of John – the Apostle John lists stories of signs and miracles with the hope that readers will believe in Jesus.
44. Acts - Jesus returns to the Father, the Holy Spirit comes to the church, and the gospel of Jesus spreads throughout the world.
45. Romans - Paul summarizes how the gospel of Jesus works in a letter to the churches at Rome, where he plans to visit.
46. 1 Corinthians - Paul writes a disciplinary letter to a fractured church in Corinth, and answers some questions that they’ve had about how Christians should behave.
47. 2 Corinthians - Paul writes a letter of reconciliation to the church at Corinth, and clears up some concerns that they have.
48. Galatians - Paul hears that the Galatian churches have been lead to think that salvation comes from the law of Moses, and writes a (rather heated) letter telling them where the false teachers have it wrong.
49. Ephesians - Paul writes to the church at Ephesus about living in grace, peace, and love.
50. Philippians - An encouraging letter to the church of Philippi from Paul, telling them how to have joy in Christ.
51. Colossians - Paul writes the church at Colossae a letter about who they are in Christ, and how to walk in Christ.
52. 1 Thessalonians - Paul has heard a good report on the church at Thessalonica, and encourages them to “excel still more” in faith, hope, and love.
53. 2 Thessalonians - Paul instructs the church on how to stand firm until the coming of Jesus.
54. 1 Timothy - Paul gives his protégé Timothy instruction on how to lead a church with sound teaching and a godly example.
55. 2 Timothy - Paul is nearing the end of his life, and encourages Timothy to continue preaching the word.
56. Titus - Paul advises Titus on how to lead orderly, counter-cultural churches on Crete.
57. Philemon - Paul strongly recommends that Philemon accept his runaway slave as a brother, not a slave.
58. Hebrews - A letter encouraging Christians to cling to remain faithful despite persecution.
59. James - A letter telling Christians to live in ways that demonstrate their faith in action.
60. 1 Peter - Peter writes to Christians who are being persecuted, encouraging them to testify to the truth and live accordingly.
61. 2 Peter - Peter writes a letter reminding Christians about the truth of Jesus, and warning them that false teachers will come.

62. 1 John - John writes a letter to Christians about keeping Jesus' commands, loving one another, and important things they should know.
63. 2 John - A very brief letter about walking in truth, love, and obedience.
64. 3 John - An even shorter letter about Christian fellowship.
65. Jude - A letter encouraging Christians to content for the faith, even though ungodly persons have crept in unnoticed.
66. Revelation - John sees visions of things that have been, things that are, and things that are yet to come. His vision of heaven now, and the coming reign of God on earth, is foundational to Christian hope.

A Brief Summary of the Bible Story (New Zealand Bible Society)

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Creation imposed order from chaos, and established the relationship between creation and humanity, and between humanity and God. Creation was declared by God as "Good." Humanity was represented by Adam and Eve.

One day, the serpent convinced Eve and Adam to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In doing so, they disobeyed God's command and sin entered the world. God evicted them from the garden; humanity was now subject to the hardships of the damaged world.

Adam and Eve had children and as the population grew, God saw that human hearts and thoughts were constantly filled with evil. God was sorry he had made humans. To deal with the problem of sin, he chose Noah and told him to build an ark. Noah filled the ark with every kind of animal and God flooded the world, destroying all living things except those in the ark.

After the flood, the population grew again, but sinful desires led people to build a tower to the heavens at Babel. After destroying the tower, God decided to deal with the problem of sin once and for all. He chose one couple, Abraham and Sarah, to start an entire nation of special people from whom a Saviour of the world would come. God promised them a special land to live in. One of their sons, Jacob, had twelve sons who became the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel. One of the 12 sons, Joseph, was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers.

Joseph served Pharaoh well and was put in charge over all of Egypt. At Joseph's advice, Pharaoh stored up food for a coming famine. When the famine came, Jacob's sons had to go to Egypt to buy food. Joseph forgave his brothers and they moved to Egypt to live with Joseph.

The Hebrews grew in number in Egypt and were forced into slavery. After 430 years of exile in Egypt, God chose Moses to lead them to freedom. After Pharaoh let them go, they crossed the Red Sea and travelled to Mount Sinai where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. After a year at Mount Sinai and a rebellion of those wanting to return to Egypt, God sentenced his people to wandering in the desert until an entire generation of unbelieving adults had died.

After 40 years in the desert, Moses died and Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land. Following many battles, the land was divided among the 12 tribes. They had no leadership except for "Judges" that God called on as the need arose. They were generally ineffective and

the Israelites eventually asked God for a king. Saul became the first king of Israel. After Saul, David became king followed by his son Solomon.

After Solomon died, the kingdom of Israel erupted into civil war and divided into two parts: Judah in the south and Israel in the north. Israel lasted 200 years before being destroyed forever by the Assyrians. Judah lasted 350 years before the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and God's temple that Solomon had built. Many citizens of Judah were exiled to Babylon.

After Persia defeated Babylon, the exiled Israelites (often called Jews), were allowed return to their homeland and rebuild the temple. This marks the end of the Old Testament period.

During the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament, the region where the Jews lived was controlled first by the Greeks and then the Romans. The Romans appointed King Herod to rule over the province of Judea where the Jews were living.

Jesus Christ was born under Herod's rule to a poor couple, Mary and Joseph. Mary's conception was miraculous, and was still a virgin when Jesus was born. At about the age of 30 Jesus was baptized by John and began his ministry by announcing that he was the Saviour sent by God to be a sacrifice for the sins of the world. He gathered many followers, both men and women, choosing 12 men to be his apostles. He taught people about how to have a right relationship with God and one another. However, religious leaders arrested him, tried him before Pilate and Herod and crucified him.

Three days later he rose from the dead. Jesus Christ was God's sacrifice, once and for all, for the sins of all humanity. After he rose from the dead, Jesus appeared to more than 500 people before ascending to heaven. Ten days later, the Holy Spirit was given by God to the apostles and the church began to grow rapidly.

One of the church's main persecutors, Saul, encountered Jesus and was converted. After this, Saul became known as Paul and began preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ all over the region, to Jews and non-Jews, writing numerous letters of instruction. The Apostles spread the message of Jesus far and wide. Their stories of Jesus were soon written down as "Gospels."

The church grew rapidly throughout the Middle East, and began to spread into Asia Minor and Europe. The Bible ends with a prophecy about events that will lead to the return of Jesus and the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth.

Reading the Bible – A Quick Plan to get you started

Begin with a Bible in a modern translation (NIV, NLT) with large, clear print. Start with the New Testament – the Gospel of Luke, for the life and teaching of Jesus, and the Book of Acts, for what happened right after the Resurrection. Next read Paul's letters to the Ephesians and the Philippians, for solid Christian teaching. If you want to tackle the whole Bible, there are many "Through the Bible in a Year" programs available online. The International Bible Society "Bible in a Year: 365-Day Reading Plan" is a good one. You can't go wrong! I can also recommend "The Story" format, available on the provided handout.