

Introducing.....the Bible!

A Pilgrim's Guide to the Bible

No. 1



Why do we read the Bible?

In chapter eight of the Acts of the Apostles, we meet an Ethiopian eunuch, a senior official, who is reading from the Scriptures whilst travelling home in his chariot. Sadly, he fails to comprehend their message. *'How can I understand, unless someone explains it to me?'* he asks. Fortunately for him, he meets Philip, who is able to lead him through the Scriptures and explain them to him.

'Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus' (Acts 8:35).

Christians believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. It is *'God breathed'* - literally God's way of speaking to His people, not simply to teach us facts, but to lead us into a living relationship with God. At the heart of its message is Jesus Christ, (more properly: Jesus the Christ – the Hebrew word *Messiah* translates into the Greek word *'Christos'*, and into English as *'the Anointed One'*). Jesus is the central character of the Bible and the entire narrative hinges around him. The Old Testament points towards him. The New Testament introduces us to him and explores how we should live as his

followers. Jesus alone is the one who can bring humanity into a perfect relationship with God. The Bible tells us how he accomplished this, and how we should respond.

The Old Testament (*the Scriptures of the Hebrew nation*) points towards the coming of a Messiah: it begins by describing the work of God in creation, then explains how the human race rebelled against God and 'fell' from grace (*the story of Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit*). The entire story from that point onwards outlines God's method for restoring His relationship with His chosen people, despite the continuing sin of humanity, first through the call of one man (*Abraham*), one family and one nation (*the descendants of Abraham*). God gives the Law to Moses, and remains faithful to the Hebrew nation throughout its long and turbulent history, until we come to the writings of the Prophets which denounce the sin of the people, but also point forward to the day when the chosen Messiah will come and offer hope and redemption to all who believe in him.

The New Testament (*the writings of the early Christians in the first century after the time of Jesus*), tells the story of Jesus the Messiah on earth, (*literally he is Emmanuel – God with us*). It shows how His life, death and resurrection open up for all who believe in him the way to an eternal relationship with God. After the four Gospels, the remainder of the New Testament (*the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters or Epistles*) seeks to depict how the church grew in its early years and offers guidance on how we should live as Christians.

The word 'Bible' is derived from the Syrian coastal town of Byblos – which was an important venue for the export of papyrus. '*Biblia*' (*plural*) is a Greek word which simply means 'books', and is the same root from which we derive such English words as *bibliography*.

The Bible, then, literally means 'The Books' and is best thought of as a library of books. Each in its unique way adds to our total understanding of God's big picture. Here we have the ultimate collection of books that we need to deepen and develop our relationship with God. St Paul tells us that:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.' (2 Timothy 3:16)

Here we have the unique Word of God!

What makes the Bible different from other sacred writings is the way in which it is 'earthed' in the real story of living people. Sacred writings from other religions tend to focus upon the reality of a god, or gods, in another dimension or place. But the God of the Bible focuses upon God at work in this world – God dealing with the reality of the human condition, in good and bad circumstances. Here we meet a God who has come amongst us, and is intimately involved in our lives.

The Bible: A Manual for Life – God has spoken

God has spoken through his Son, Jesus Christ. All that we know about God is what He has revealed about Himself. This is what the Bible points to – how God has made Himself known to us.

Of course, evidence of God can be seen in other sources as well. We only have to marvel at the wonder of creation, or see evidence of God's Spirit at work in the lives of saintly people, to appreciate that God exists. But the Bible is the most direct and obvious way in which God speaks to us. But note: the Bible itself is not God. It is a book which points us towards God. It teaches about God's purposes for us and primarily points us to Jesus as being 'the way to God'. We must never forget that however much we may revere the Bible, it is God whom we worship, as revealed through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Spirit.

Scripture is God speaking. Of course, He used human agents, so different personalities and styles of writing come through. So, although it is the work of human beings, it is totally inspired by God.

Some people maintain that they don't want a rule book. They prefer to emphasize personal rights and freedoms. Does the Bible really take this freedom away?

Imagine buying a car, and ignoring the instruction manual. Small wonder if something goes wrong! If we believe that God has put us in the world, then it follows that we should follow His advice on how to live within it. As people, we need the security of boundaries. Through the Bible, God gives us the means to get the best out of life. It reveals God's will for His people. The more we discover how best to live under God's direction, so the more fulfilled we will become.

But the Bible is more than just a manual. God continues to speak through the Bible! His desire is that we should have a living relationship with Himself. He wants to speak to us, today.

The letter to the Hebrews describes the Bible thus:

'For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.' (Hebrews 4:12)

The main point of the Bible is to show us how to have a relationship with God, through Jesus Christ. Jesus said:

'I have come that you may have life – life in all its fullness.' (John 10:10)

Through the Bible, we must allow God to speak to us.

- It brings us to faith. *'Faith comes by hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ.'* (Romans 10:17)
- It strengthens us in our faith. We come into contact with Jesus Christ. We discover the power of the Holy Spirit. *'Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.'* (Ephesians 10:11)
- It is realistic about the state of the world we live in. It recognises the reality of sin and the pain and problems of the world, but it offers hope that God offers to us the solution to the problems of life and that ultimately He will intervene and restore all things in accordance with His perfect intentions.
- It gives us the assurance that life has meaning and purpose. It offers us eternal life!

How do we hear God speak through the Bible?

We must make time to read the Bible. There are no short cuts. We need to develop a regular habit of daily Bible reading. The more of a habit it becomes, so the easier it will be.

As you read, ask yourself:

What does it say?

What does it mean?

What did it mean when it was first written?

How does it apply to me?

Put into practice what we hear from God. As we read regularly, we must expect that God will speak to us. But Bible reading is more than just an academic exercise. It is a life-changing activity.

'Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.' (Matthew 7:24)

The great evangelist D.L. Moody wrote: *'The Bible was not given to increase our knowledge. It was given to change lives.'*

That is the challenge that we face – to see the Bible as God's word for us.

**The Lord bless you
and keep you;**

**the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;**

**the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace.**

(Numbers 6: 24 - 26)