

How do I read the bible?

This is not a book one should read once and put on a shelf. It is God's word to us. Jesus is referred to as the living Word.

It makes sense to read the Bible from cover to cover. This helps us later when we have a need to research scripture relating to a current issue.

The most important word to keep in mind when applying scripture to our lives is CONTEXT. Failure to be mindful of this can lead to action based on only a portion of the whole story God gives us for living our lives for Him.

Each of us has our own way of learning and gathering information. The good news is that regardless of this when the Bible is the ultimate source, all paths lead to the same place. God has a unique plan for each of us. Because of this each one of us will put emphasis on the scripture that directs us toward cooperating with God to carry out that plan.

Some things to consider when reading the Bible are:

It is not a textbook written by one author, or collaborating authors. It was instead written by multiple authors over hundreds of years, many of whom did not know the other writers.

The scripture is, however, inspired by the Holy Spirit. In this way we could say there is one author who used numerous people to write it down. The ultimate ghost writer.

So the Bible is actually a collection of separately written scripture inspired by the Holy Spirit. It was gathered into what we know as the Bible, containing scriptures making up the Old Testament and New Testament. This is referred to as the Canon of the Scriptures.

Over time there have been volumes of writings for the purpose of interpreting from one language to another, commenting on meaning, organizing by topic, defining each word, etc.

This is helpful because the Old Testament was originally written mostly in Hebrew (later also translated to Greek), and The New Testament mostly in Greek. Because most of us have difficulty with Hebrew and Greek, this is very necessary.

The one thing to keep in mind is that not all writings that reference the Bible carry the actual meaning of the scripture and can lead us astray. Fortunately we have help from the Holy Spirit and others among us anointed to teach and lead us.

We each should sort through this ourselves. The Bible tells us to do that.

Acts 17:11 Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

Also: Watch out for false teachers.

Matthew 7:15-20 Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

This clearly indicates that we are to accept help from other sources, but also need to verify what we hear for ourselves in order to develop a personal relationship with God based on His word.

Keeping in mind that the Bible is the source of authority for all written materials, we do have access to other writings that are extremely useful, and may even be essential in some cases, to help us come closer to God and cooperate with him to fulfill what he has planned for us to do for Him in this life. This is all readily available in bookstores and the Internet. Pastors and fellow church members are an excellent starting point for specific information. It is always better to narrow our search at first, especially if we are just beginning our quest.

Some of these are:

Concordance. These books help us find things in scripture. This is done by listing words and the book, chapter, and verse(s) where they occur. This is useful when trying to look back for a specific reference because most of us do not have photographic memories.

Topical, Chronological, and study Bibles. I list them as other than the Bible because although they contain scripture they are reformatted from the original version of the Bible they were drawn from.

Dictionaries. These books will cross-reference Greek and Hebrew with words we recognize in our language. We can get a fuller meaning of scripture by using these.

Commentaries. These writings usually attempt to explain “what” the scripture is saying in the context of the time and culture in which they were written.

Articles on the Internet. By using a search engine there is a vast amount of information available. In fact there has never before been such access to so much information. This is one area where we need to carefully verify what is being said, but that does not take away from the great benefit.

The Bible basically contains a roadmap for us giving information necessary for us to gain eternal life, and for every aspect of our lives on Earth. This obviously means it does not lend itself to being simple and brief, even though it does not contain unnecessary words. It serves as the guideline for living in multiple cultures and over centuries of time while still being relevant in each culture and time frame.

If it seems that making sense of this is an impossible task, the word of encouragement here would be that with God all things are possible. We have his promise of the Holy Spirit to guide us along the way. When we rely on Him and spend the time, the way to the understanding necessary for us to secure eternal life and live for Him in this one will come.

Thoughts by John Oliver
a grateful and unworthy servant