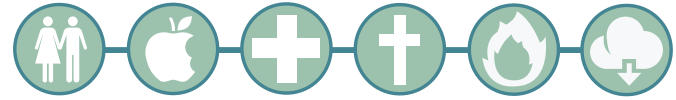


# Relevant

A STUDY  
GUIDE TO  
THE BIBLE



# PREFACE

It can be easy, in the midst of trying to understand the Bible, to find yourself stuck. There are complicated passages and a variety of genres written by different people in different times to different audiences for different reasons. Even reading that sentence might make you queasy.

While you wrestle with understanding the Bible—and it is worth the struggle—it's helpful to know a few key things. First, the Bible is not chiefly a collection of stories or guidelines. It is not primarily a book of good advice, leadership insights or rules to obey. It is, at its heart, a book about who God is and what He has done. All of the different parts of the Bible tell us about God by giving us pieces of His **One Big Story**. So, whether you open up to Proverbs, Genesis or Matthew, you see a piece of this huge, all-important story.

The second thing to know is that this big story not only tells us about God (though that's the main thing), but it also tells us about who we are. The more we find out about who God is, the more we realize how perfect and good and holy and loving and patient and kind He is. The more we find out about who we are, the more we realize how insufficient and weak and sinful and broken we are. These are the two threads that weave together each part of the Bible.

It can be easy to see ourselves as the hero of the stories. For example, we read about David defeating Goliath and see ourselves as David—defeating whatever “Goliath” life throws at us. That's a wrong understanding of the Bible. It's not primarily about who we are and it's definitely not about how great we are.

That said, these two threads (God is perfect and we are most definitely not) come together in a few big pieces that make up the **One Big Story**. They are:

- **CREATION**
- **FALL**
- **PROMISE**
- **REDEMPTION**
- **RESTORATION**
- **CONSUMMATION**

God created humanity to be with Him and give Him glory (**CREATION**). We didn't do so great, because we wanted the story to be about us (**FALL**). Because God is gracious, He promises to fix the brokenness we created (**PROMISE**). He begins this process in Jesus Christ (**REDEMPTION**). Then He continues to make things right in us through the Holy Spirit (**RESTORATION**). Finally, He'll make all things new and perfect (**CONSUMMATION**).

As you open your Bible, you'll have to fight to avoid making the story about you and how cool you are. It also means you'll want to think about where the passage fits into the **One Big Story** and what it tells you about God. The following pages provide some tools for understanding this.

That's our hope for you and the reason we wrote this guidebook. We want you to know the story and the one it's about.

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# INTRO

This guide offers tools to help you read with confidence as you navigate God's Word. You'll find:

- A genre-by-genre guide, including tools and opportunities for practice.
- A breakdown of how each of the books of the Bible fits into genres that help identify which tools to use.
- A list of resources for further study.

These tools provide in-depth information on background, audience, context and content from trusted scholars and theologians.

## EXEGESIS

As you read, understand and apply the Bible, your first task is exegesis—"the careful, systematic study of God's Word to discover the original, intended meaning."<sup>1</sup> Exegesis helps determine how the original audience would have understood the text. Only after determining this, can we move to applying the text for ourselves.

Use this booklet as often as needed to engage with the whole Word of God.



# THE 4 QUESTIONS

If you find yourself "stuck" or unsure how to read a certain passage of scripture, ask these four questions. Ultimately, our goal is to know more of God, what He has done (ultimately in His Son, Jesus) and who we are as a result. Only then do we see and understand what our response should be. See the below table for examples.

## 01 WHO IS GOD?

## 02 WHAT HAS HE DONE?

## 03 WHO AM I?

## 04 WHAT DO I DO?

EXAMPLES	WHO IS GOD?	WHAT HAS HE DONE?	WHO AM I?	WHAT DO I DO?
<b>Genesis 22</b>	Promise-keeper Provider Trustworthy	Kept His promise by providing a sacrifice—ultimately through Christ	A result of the promise Blessed	Stop striving to make myself clean/perfect to earn my salvation—Christ has already made me right before God! Rest in His work!
<b>Psalms 121</b>	Creator Powerful Keeper Protector	Made the World Cares for and helps His people—ultimately through the provision of Jesus as our Savior Sustains life for His people	A created being One who is kept, seen, cared for, safe One who belongs to Him	Worship Him Trust His authority Rest in His provision Live confidently in His care
<b>John 1</b>	Creator Light	Made all things Makes Himself known through Jesus	Created by God Given ability to see and believe Given grace upon grace	Create! Believe in Him and share with others Extend grace to others
<b>Ephesians 1</b>	Father	Adopted, chose His people Redeemed His people Gives every spiritual blessing	God's chosen child Forgiven Blessed	Reflect Jesus by doing His work Forgive those who hurt/wrong me It's not what I do—Thank Him for what He's done

# BOOKS BY GENRE

## OLD TESTAMENT

### NARRATIVE

Genesis  
Exodus  
Numbers  
Joshua  
Judges  
Ruth  
1 & 2 Samuel  
1 & 2 Kings  
1 & 2 Chronicles  
Ezra  
Nehemiah  
Esther

### LAW

Leviticus  
Deuteronomy

### WISDOM

Job  
Proverbs  
Ecclesiastes

### POETIC

Psalms  
Song of Solomon  
Lamentations

## PROPHETIC

Isaiah  
Jeremiah  
Ezekiel  
Daniel  
Hosea  
Joel  
Amos  
Obadiah  
Jonah  
Micah  
Nahum  
Habakkuk  
Zephaniah  
Haggai  
Zechariah  
Malachi

## GOSPELS/ACTS

Matthew  
Mark  
Luke  
John  
Acts

## PARABLES

Gospels

## EPISTLES

Romans  
1 & 2 Corinthians  
Galatians  
Ephesians  
Philippians  
Colossians  
1 & 2 Thessalonians  
1 & 2 Timothy  
Titus  
Philemon  
Hebrews  
James  
1 & 2 Peter  
1, 2 & 3 John  
Jude

## REVELATION

Revelation

# POINTS TO JESUS

We don't read passages or chapters of the Bible as isolated events, but instead as part of a larger narrative (see Intro). Each genre and, specifically, each book points to Jesus—our ultimate Healer, Hero, Rescuer, Rest, Provision, Substitute, Priest, King, Prophet, Savior. Jesus' life, death and resurrection fulfill all of the promises in the Old Testament and are the climax of the story of the Bible. See each individual genre page for specific ways those books point to Jesus.



Keep in mind that this is only a guide. Many books of the Bible contain passages that fit into one or more genre. For example, Exodus 20 is a crucial passage of Law within a Narrative context.

# OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE

**DEFINITION** Narratives are stories that retell historical events from the past. They are written for the purpose of giving meaning and direction to people in the present.<sup>1</sup>

**GUIDELINES** **What the Old Testament narrative is not:**

- It's not primarily about you and your good behavior. Not every story is about figuring out what you should or shouldn't do. You may find good moral teaching in the narratives, but the primary meaning is focused on who God is, what He has done (particularly regarding the people of Israel), what He is doing and what He will do. Moralizing is the easiest and most common mistake made when reading Old Testament narrative.<sup>2</sup>
- It is not full of stories with hidden meanings. The passages were written with specific meaning for their intended audience, but are still to be used for our encouragement.<sup>3</sup> See Romans 15:4.

**Questions to help interpret narrative.**

**Narrator: What perspective are we given?**

- What is God's point of view in what's happening?
- What is the perspective of the people? How do they respond?

**Scene: Where are we?**

- Describe the location.
- What's the importance of being here? *Is it punishment? God's provision?*
- What else happened here or will happen? *The wilderness in Matthew 4:4*
- What's the story behind this location? How did people get here? *The Israelites left Egypt and are now in the desert.*

**Characters: Who is involved?**

- What are they like? *Courageous? Faithful? Sinful?*
- What is their position? *King? Peasant?*
- How are the main characters similar or different from each other?
- Is there a New Testament comparison? *Elijah/John the Baptist, Hannah/Mary, Melchizedek/Jesus*



**Dialogue: What is said?**

- What clues do the words give about the character of the speaker?
- Is anything repeated? Pay attention. This can give insight into the point-of-view.

**Plot: What happens?**

- What is the beginning? Middle? End?
- Is there conflict? Resolution? A happy or sad ending?
- Where do we see that this story is not primarily about what we need to do, but instead about what God has done?

**God: The Main Character**

- What does God do in the story?
- Where does this fit in the whole story of the Bible?
- Is there a difference between how humans act and how God acts?
- What characteristics of God are shown?
- Since we know the next part of the story (Jesus in the Gospel), how does the New Testament help us understand this story?
- How does this story relate to or point to the gospel?

**PRACTICE** **Read 1 Kings 18:16–46**

1. Identify the major pieces of the story.
2. Try to answer as many questions as possible focusing on the last section of questions about God. They are the most important! Ultimately, the Bible isn't a book about us. It's a book for us that's about God. He's the main point of every story.
3. Then ask, "If God is \_\_\_\_\_ (powerful/faithful/true) then what does that mean for me?"
4. Sometimes this results in action—to obey or trust God. Sometimes it results in worship—praise God that He is powerful, true, forgiving.



## LAW

**DEFINITION** The Law makes up a portion of scripture detailing the covenant stipulations made by God for the Israelites. This covenant displays His requirements of holiness from His people. In return for a right relationship with the Lord, bringing many blessings and protection, Israel was expected to keep the many commandments contained in the Law as we find it in Exodus 20–Deuteronomy 33.

**GUIDELINES** **The Old Covenant Is Not Our Covenant.**<sup>1</sup>

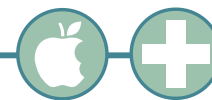
- The Old Testament represents “God’s previous covenant with Israel made on Mount Sinai, which is one we are no longer obligated to keep.”<sup>2</sup> We shouldn’t begin reading the law with the assumption that all the laws stated are automatically applied to us today. That said, we can assume that none of the laws are for us unless they are renewed in the new covenant.
- It may be helpful to refer to Romans 6:14–15 where Paul says that we are no longer under the law but under grace. Additionally, it may be helpful to refer to Mark 7:14–23 where Jesus refers to all foods as clean, but also renews a number of commands from the old covenant. He refers to these as matters of the heart.

**Civil Laws & Sacrificial/Clean Laws:** Two types of laws that have been fulfilled with the coming of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

- **Civil Laws** These laws worked to shape Israelite culture. In the old covenant, the people of God comprised one nation-state—Israel. When Jesus came, the gospel went out to all nations (Matthew 28:16–20) and the new covenant then welcomed gentiles (Romans 11:11–24).
- **Sacrificial/Clean Laws** Jesus’ sacrifice means that the ceremonial/sacrificial clean laws are fulfilled forever. It would be wrong to continue following the clean laws (Leviticus 20:25). Jesus has made clean those who were unclean, an everlasting sacrifice “once for all.” Read Hebrews 10.

**Moral Law—The Law That Remains:** Moral law helps us see the difference between good and evil. It still continues on for us today.

- Moral laws guide how we should live in relation to God and one another. They are summed up by Jesus in Matthew 22: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is

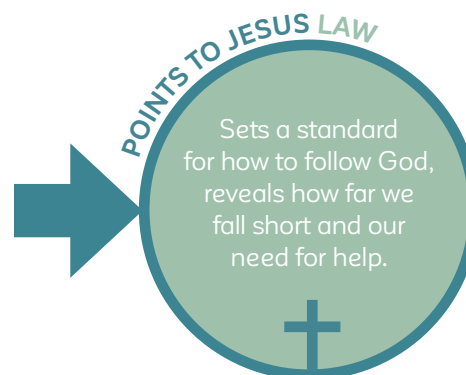


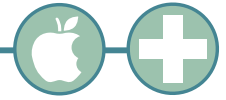
like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The laws that are affirmed and renewed in the New Testament should be followed. Examples can be found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5). Only that which is explicitly renewed from the Old Testament law can be considered part of the New Testament law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).<sup>4</sup>

- While the law guides how we live, it also shows us how we fail to meet God’s standards (Romans 2–3). It points to our deep need for Jesus and shows us why Jesus had to die—to take the punishment we deserved.

**PRACTICE** Take a look at the following passages and determine if the passage falls under the civil, moral or sacrificial/clean categories. Ask yourself if the command is renewed in the new covenant.

- Leviticus 11:2–3 (Also Mark 7:14–23, Acts 10:13–15)
- Leviticus 19:4 (Also Acts 17:24–25, John 4:21–24)
- Leviticus 19:5 (Also Hebrews 10:8–10, Matthew 26:26–28)
- Deuteronomy 24:10–11, Deuteronomy 6:5 (Also Matthew 22:26–40)





# WISDOM LITERATURE

**DEFINITION** Wisdom literature aids in making godly decisions. A proverb is a short, wise saying intended to point us toward Christ (the ultimate source of wisdom) and the Holy Spirit (who enables us to make right decisions).

**GUIDELINES** **Proverbs are:**

- Often figurative. They use word pictures to convey ideas.
- Practical, not always theological.
- Worded to be memorable instead of precise.<sup>2</sup>
- Meant to be read together, not in bits and pieces.<sup>3</sup>
- Frequently reflective of ancient culture, so they need to be translated in a way that relates to our culture.
- For God's glory and our good. They don't exist to make us really great people, but to show people a really great God.

**Proverbs are NOT:**

- Guarantees from God, but rather poetic guidelines for good behavior.<sup>5</sup>
- Designed to promote selfish or foolish behavior.

**A Note on the Book of Job**

The book of Job offers seemingly good wisdom in the form of advice from Job's friends. However, we see that by the end of the book this human wisdom is pretty foolish in the eyes of God. To correctly read and understand these sections of advice about life and suffering, you need to filter them through the truth of God's Word clearly communicated elsewhere. This is yet another example of the paradigm in which the more we read all of scripture, the better we understand.

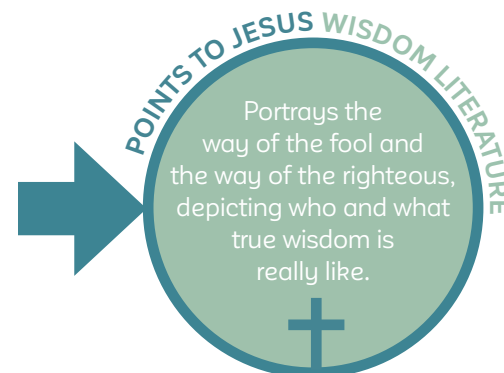
**A Few Tips:**

- Read a whole chapter at a time and try to summarize the main idea. This helps avoid misinterpretations that occur when you read just bits and pieces.
- Ask yourself: "Will my understanding of the passage line up with the rest of the Bible and help me make godly decisions?" If not, then you have misunderstood the text. For example, if you read Proverbs 21:22, "A wise man attacks the city of the mighty and pulls down the stronghold in which they trust," and then you try to attack Minneapolis, you'll run into trouble. You should have first asked, "Will my understanding of this passage help me make godly decisions?"

- Keep in mind that wisdom points to Jesus who spoke and lived a perfectly wise life.

**PRACTICE** **Read Proverbs 16:1–9**

1. In your own words, explain this piece of wisdom in one sentence.
2. In what situations can this passage help you make godly decisions?
3. What does this passage teach you about God?



# POETIC LITERATURE

**DEFINITION** Poetry is intended to target our heart and affection for God. We find it mainly throughout the Old Testament, but the most common place is the Psalms.<sup>1</sup>

## GUIDELINES Types of Poetry:

- **Laments.** This is the largest group of psalms. There are more than 60 in the Bible. A lament comes from someone who desires a deeper trust in God during a struggle, time of suffering or disappointment.  
*"But you, Lord, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me." Psalm 22:19*
- **Thanksgiving Psalms.** These describe thankful hearts because of a blessing from God or realization of God's character.  
*"You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds, God our Savior, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas." Psalm 65:5*
- **Hymns of Praise.** These psalms center on giving God praise for who He is and His greatness. He might be praised for being a creator, protector or being loving, gracious and merciful.  
*"Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, my soul. I will praise the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live." Psalm 146*
- **Salvation/History Psalms.** These reflect on the past. They often provide a history of God's saving works for the people of Israel.  
*I see God working in my life in this way.  
I remember that He delivered me in this situation.  
I recall how God saved us from this.  
"He remembers His covenant forever, the promise He made, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath He swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant." Psalm 105:8–10*
- **Wisdom Psalms.** These poems point to the importance of wisdom and making godly decisions.  
*"Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil." Psalm 37:8*



- **Songs of Trust.** These are centered on the fact that in good times or bad, God can and should be trusted.  
*"The Lord will keep you from all harm—He will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore." Psalm 121:7–8*

## Understand the Content/Structure

Ask the following questions to help understand the structure of the poem.

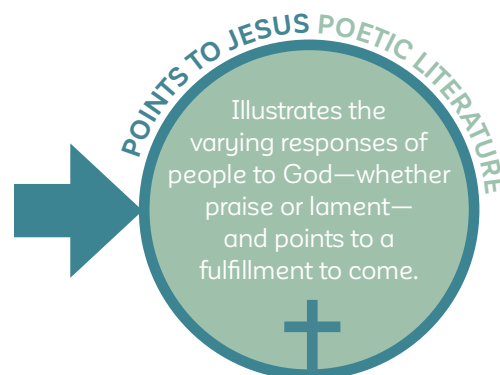
- What stands out?
- Were there repeated words or phrases? Any ideas that were restated in different ways?
- Was anything compared or contrasted?
- Were there figures of speech? If so, what were they trying to communicate?
- What seems to be the main point/theme that the author is trying to communicate?

## Understanding Their Relevance

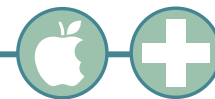
- The psalms can help us worship.
- The psalms can help us relate honestly to God.
- The psalms show us the importance of remembering who God is and what He has done for us.
- They do not guarantee a pleasant life. In fact, they give us examples of how to trust God despite life being messy and hard.

## PRACTICE Go through the following steps with Psalm 3, 8, 16, 36, 78 & 138

1. Identify the type.
2. Write down observations about the structure and content.
3. In one sentence, write down the main theme of the poem.







# PROPHETIC

**DEFINITION** Prophecy primarily involves prophets who assume the role of speaking for God to the people.<sup>1</sup> Although many associate prophecy with predicting the future, it deals with much more. Prophets wrote to a specific group of people in specific circumstances and their words have a meaning for that original audience. Most of these prophecies were spoken in poetry, so pay attention to the Poetic section as well.

## **GUIDELINES** Examine the Historical Context

Taking a look at the history of when the book was written and who it was written to can be helpful for understanding the world in which the prophet spoke. An ESV Study Bible can be a good place to start.

### **Examine the Specific Context**

Ask a series of questions:

- Who wrote this book?
- Why did he write it?
- Who is the audience?
- What would this have sounded like to the original audience? Is it for encouragement? Instruction? Correction?
- What is the author trying to communicate throughout his prophetic book?
- What happens before and after this passage?

### **Prophetic Categories**

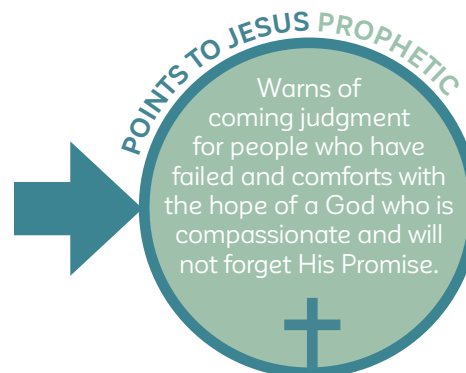
- **The Lawsuit.** In a lawsuit, the prophet talks as if Israel were on trial before God (who acts as the judge, jury and/or plaintiff).<sup>2</sup>
- **The Woe.** Usually happens in three parts:<sup>3</sup>
  1. Something bad is happening.
  2. The reason the bad thing is happening.
  3. A prediction of doom if the bad thing (sin) continues to happen.
- **The Promise.** These tend to be the more encouraging parts of prophetic books. They contain writings where the prophet talks about restoration, future change and blessing in line with the covenant God made to Israel.<sup>4</sup>
- **The Messenger Speech.** The prophet is the spokesperson for God and, in these common sections, the prophet often says, "The Lord says" or "Thus sayeth the Lord." Then they'll proceed by telling everyone what God wants them to know.<sup>5</sup>

## **Keep in Mind**

Because the prophet speaks for God to people, we can learn a lot about the character of humankind and of God throughout the prophetic books. Look for clues about God's character and man's character as you determine the main function and theme of the passage.

## **PRACTICE** Read Isaiah 14:1-27

The prior chapters provide background and context. Ask yourself what categories the prophecy is functioning within and identify if there's any relevancy for your own context. Record any information about the character of man and of God. How would you describe this prophecy to a friend? What are the main points?





# GOSPELS/ACTS

**DEFINITION** The Gospels contain four accounts of the life, death, resurrection and ministry of Jesus Christ. Acts provides an account of the early church and the mission of the Apostles. Together they display the realization of the Old Testament's long-awaited hope for a Savior.

**GUIDELINES** **ABC Tool** This is a valuable tool for any section of the Bible, but extremely important here.

## Audience

- Who is this written to? *The book of Matthew was written with the intention of reaching a Jewish readership.*
- Who is Jesus interacting with? *Pharisees? Samaritans? The poor? Children?*

## Background

- Where is this taking place?
- Is this similar to anything that happened in the Old Testament?

## Context

Just as it is difficult to understand and appreciate a single scene in a movie without watching what comes before and after, it's difficult to understand a passage from the Gospels or Acts without seeing the larger story.

- What came before? *If you read Mark 4, be sure to also read Mark 3.*
- What came after?

## Different Types of Literature

- This section, especially in the Gospels, contains many types of writing (prophecy, narrative, law). Identifying these types as you read and referencing the tools for that genre can aid in understanding.
- The text can also be divided into "narratives" and "sayings."<sup>1</sup> Determine which parts of the passage fit into each group. The narrative often gives context for the saying.

**Narrative** = The actions of Jesus (stories of movement or ministry).

**Sayings** = The teachings and conversations of Jesus. The sayings themselves function differently too. For example, parables are quite different from the Sermon on the Mount. And both of these are different from His dialogue with His disciples. Don't be overwhelmed though. It's usually pretty easy to make this distinction.

## A Note on the Gospels

The Gospels are written like four spectators in different seats around a sports stadium. Though they are all watching the same game, they offer unique viewing angles of the action. Context within a Gospel account is crucial to understanding the passage. There are reasons each of the writers chose to include the stories they did. They intentionally wrote them in the order they did as the Holy Spirit inspired. This becomes important as you read the Gospels and identify emerging themes.

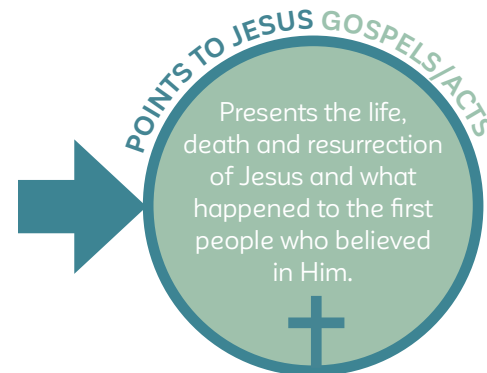
## A Note on Acts

An important aspect of understanding and applying Acts correctly is the distinction between prescriptive writing and descriptive writing.

- **Prescriptive Writing** contains commands and stories that illustrate actions that the church should imitate, replicate or obey. It prescribes a way of life. (See the Epistles or the Sermon on the Mount.)
- **Descriptive Writing** simply describes or narrates historical events. These may be passages where the apostles are planting churches in Acts or where Jesus heals a deaf man.
- Be cautious about identifying the type of passage you are reading. What is described as happening in the book of Acts is not necessarily setting a biblical precedent for your own life. Rather, it simply describes the acts of the Apostles and the formation of the early church. That said, what is descriptive is still valuable. It allows us to derive truth and standards for belief and behavior rather than extract the experiences and practices that the text portrays as normative for the church today.

## PRACTICE Read Mark 1–4

How do the passages work together to display the characteristics of Jesus? How do they describe mankind? What do they say about Jesus' mission? What is one big theme that you notice?



# PARABLES

**DEFINITION** Contained within the Gospel accounts, the frequently misunderstood parables provide a unique genre pointing to truths about Jesus and the kingdom of God. Reading the entire Bible helps us understand the parables better and reading the parables helps us better understand the rest of the Bible.

## GUIDELINES **Characteristics of Parables:**<sup>1</sup>

- Parables are brief.
- Parables are marked by simplicity and symmetry. For example, there are never more than two people or groups together in the same scene.
- Parables focus mostly on humans. (Exception: Mark 4:30–32)
- Parables are fictional descriptions taken from everyday life, but do not always portray everyday events. Some are realistic and some are not.
- Parables are meant to engage the mind and create interest. Surprise elements, dialogue and exaggeration are often used.
- Parables often contain elements of reversal or twists in the story.  
*The Samaritan is the neighbor, not the Jewish elite.*
- The end stress is key. Parables usually focus on the crucial matter at the end of the story, like a punch line to a joke.
- Parables are told in context and to an audience.
- Parables are theocentric. They center on God, God's kingdom and His expectations for humans.
- Parables frequently allude or point to Old Testament texts.
- Parables often appear in large collections together.

## Interpreting Parables

- Use the ABC Tool:
  - Audience:** Who is Jesus telling the parable to?
  - Background:** How would the hearers have understood/reacted to the story?
  - Context:** What takes place before the parable? What takes place after? How do those things help us understand the parable?
- Figure out the type: Story, Illustration or Metaphor/Simile.
- Analyze the parable (subject, characters, plot).
- Figure out the function. Does the parable encourage, convict, teach?
- Remember the end stress.
- Check to see if Jesus talks about this subject in other places.
- Check Old Testament references. Does any part of the Old Testament refer to similar subjects, ideas or themes?



- Avoid allegorizing—don't make the characters, figures or events in the parable represent abstract ideas or principles.

## PRACTICE **Read Luke 15:1–10**

Referring to the two lists (Characteristics & Interpreting), write down your observations of the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin.

1. What is the main point of each parable?
2. What does each of the stories tell us about God and how He feels about us?
3. Why do you think Jesus tells these parables back-to-back? Is there a connection between them?
4. In what ways can you apply the truth of this passage to your life?

## POINTS TO JESUS PARABLES

Illustrates truths that Jesus reveals about who He is, what He is about and what He has come to do.



# EPISTLES

**DEFINITION** Epistles are generally seen as the most straightforward (and easiest) genre in the Bible to read. In many ways that's true. At the same time, the epistles offer unique challenges. Many readers come to the wrong conclusion about how an epistle is instructing them. Normally, this is the result of taking the epistle out of context and interpreting something that the author never intended to communicate to the original audience.

## GUIDELINES Prescriptive vs Descriptive

While Acts is descriptive (describing the early church), the epistles are prescriptive. **Commands found in these passages are the same for us today.** Just as a doctor prescribes medicine, these passages prescribe how we should live in light of who God is.

### Read it as a Letter

Before working through the epistles section by section, read through the entire letter in one sitting. This gives you a better idea of the heart of the letter and the tone it takes toward the audience.<sup>1</sup>

### ABC Tool

#### Audience:

- The author is writing the letter about the audience. **Note the tone Paul takes.** Is he happy? Is he disappointed? Is he frustrated?
- What seems to be happening among the people Paul is talking to? Are they following God or straying from Him?

**Background:** The background for many of the epistles can be found in the book of Acts (a great place to start). Look for clues within the letters to the situations that frustrate or encourage the author.

#### Context:

- Reading the letter as a whole before you begin studying section by section offers contextual clues.
- The epistles are meant to instruct us, so identify the reason the letter was written for historical context. Read the surrounding text in the letter for literary context.

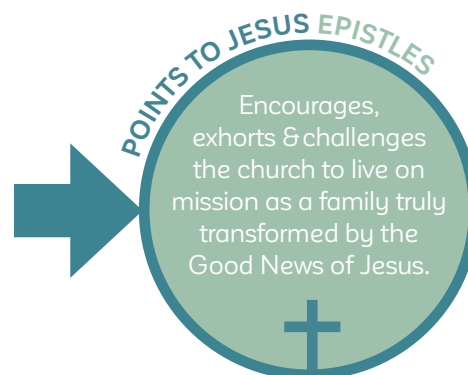


## Is it Relevant?

- Once you have a grasp of the audience, background and context, contemplate the source of what's going on. Is it good or bad? Are they fighting with each other because of their selfishness (James 4)? Are they confused about the gospel because of false teaching (Galatians)? Are they generous with each other because their lives have been changed by Jesus (Philippians 4)?
- Now that you have identified the source, how do you relate? Do you struggle with selfishness too? What lies are you tempted to believe for the sake of winning someone's approval? How can reminding yourself of what Jesus has done change how you treat others?

## PRACTICE Read Galatians in one sitting.

1. Focus on 1:1–5 & 6:11–18. Based on what you read in the introduction and closing of the letter, describe Paul's reason for writing the letter and the tone he takes.
2. What do you think his main point is to the original audience? List details you find about the recipients. How would you describe them?
3. Make a list of key words and repeated phrases that indicate what Paul was concerned about.
4. Summarize the theme of the book in one or two sentences. How can you apply this to your life?



# REVELATION

**DEFINITION** Revelation is a book about hope and judgment. It's about God's sovereignty, holiness and power. Ultimately, Revelation offers insight into the character of a God who redeems a people for Himself. Determining the correct understanding of the text can be difficult, but hopefully these guidelines help you see the incredible encouragement inside this unique part of the Bible.

## GUIDELINES

### Tools to Understand Revelation

Sometimes we can best understand the content of Revelation by taking a step back and seeing the major themes playing out in the future events. The truth contained in how and why these events take place can guide us to better exegesis (discovering the original, intended meaning). Here are some big-picture guidelines to remember as you read Revelation:

- **Revelation's primary focus is about the God of the future.** Its core message shows God's sovereignty and holiness. It reveals the hearts of men against the backdrop of the plan of God.
- **Revelation is an illustrative picture book to be imagined.** John offers a description of his visions so that his audience can picture what he sees.
- **Revelation makes sense only in light of the Old Testament and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.** This includes not only the visions of such prophets as Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah, but historical events such as creation, the fall and the exodus. These all provide an understanding of the symbols and vocabulary in Revelation.<sup>1</sup>
- **Numbers matter.** One commentator writes, "Since numbers are used symbolically in Revelation, we must discern the meaning that they convey rather than trying to pull them as numbers directly into our experience, measured by calendars and odometers."<sup>2</sup> Even though it seems like there is a lot of chaos in Revelation, the exactness of the numbers shows that God is in perfect control. If He wasn't, He would have given a range of numbers. God's saying these are His intentions and He has the power to see them through.
- **Revelation is for a persecuted church.** This book awakens hearts to the reality that there is darkness in the world and our enemy will attack us. Yet, there is confidence that believers will not be defeated because Jesus assured our victory on Calvary. Revelation prompts the persecuted church to live in faithful obedience despite the raging war of good and evil.<sup>3</sup>



- **Ultimately, Revelation depicts the great victory of God.** It is full of worship songs and scenes because its main theme is the triumph of God through the Lamb.<sup>4</sup>
- **The ABCs still matter.** Audience, background and context are still valuable tools to the reader. As John recorded these visions, he intended for them to have meaning to a specific audience. The truth is revealed by proper exegesis.

### A Note on Revelation

If we live in point A and Revelation tells us about the future point B, then the purpose of Revelation is to tell us how we should live in point A as a result of what we know about point B. This provides an eternal perspective for following Christ. Though it's a book about future events, Revelation makes an enormous impact on how to live in the present age. Allow the function of this book to stir you to love Jesus and glorify the God who controls the future. Ultimately, this book of the Bible compels us toward joyful thankfulness.

## PRACTICE Read Revelation 1

1. Examine the reasons the book was written and how it took place. How does that inform your understanding of this book?
2. What did you observe about the characters and plot in this passage?
3. How does it change your view of God? How does it change your view of Christ?
4. How do the truths found in this passage impact your life today?



# RESOURCES

This is just a sampling of the multitude of helpful reference works that can be used to gain insight to the Bible. This list supplies a well-rounded supplement to your own study. These materials and this guidebook are far from exhaustive. Contact your ministry leader if you have questions.

*An Introduction to the New Testament* D.A. Carson & Douglas J. Moo  
*An Introduction to the Old Testament* Tremper Longman & Raymond Dillard  
*Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Historical Books* Gordon J. Wenham  
*Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Historical Books* Philip E. Satterthwaite  
*Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Prophets* J.G. McConville  
*Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Psalms & Wisdom Literature* Gordon J. Wenham  
*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour* Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart  
*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart  
*Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* Klyne Snodgrass

## A Note on Commentaries

Commentaries can be some of the most helpful tools in understanding the Bible correctly. However, don't get stuck wading through the myriad available. It can be difficult to discern which commentaries offer the best evangelical scholarship. A quick resource to finding the best commentaries on any given book can be found at [bestcommentaries.com](http://bestcommentaries.com). Three series of commentaries that consistently provide excellent work on the books of the Bible are *The Pillar New Testament Commentaries*, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* and *The NIV Application Commentary Series*.

## A Note on Study Bibles

The value of a study Bible is undeniable. A good one can add depth and background information to many passages. Avoid relying too heavily on the notes though. Even if they're helpful, they can be a distraction in your times with the Lord if you end up reading the notes instead of the Bible itself. With that caution, here are three recommended study Bibles: *The ESV Study Bible*, *The ESV Student Study Bible* and *The NIV Study Bible*. These Bibles offer insight from some of the best evangelical scholars.

# FOOTNOTES

## Introduction

1. Gordon D. Fee & Douglas K. Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 23

## Old Testament Narrative

1. Gordon D. Fee & Douglas K. Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 90
2. Fee & Stuart, 92
3. Fee & Stuart, 92

## Law

1. Gordon D. Fee & Douglas K. Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 167
2. Fee & Stuart, 167
3. Whole section: Fee & Stuart, 167–169
4. Fee & Stuart, 169

## Wisdom Literature

1. Gordon D. Fee & Douglas K. Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 231
2. Fee & Stuart, 238
3. Fee & Stuart, 237
4. Fee & Stuart, 239
5. Fee & Stuart, 235

## Poetic Literature

1. Gordon D. Fee & Douglas K. Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 207
2. Whole section: Fee & Stuart, 212–215
3. Whole section: Fee & Stuart, 222–223

## Prophetic

1. Gordon D. Fee & Douglas K. Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 182.
2. Fee & Stuart, 194
3. Fee & Stuart, 195
4. Fee & Stuart, 195
5. Fee & Stuart, 197

## Gospel/Acts

1. Gordon D. Fee & Douglas K. Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 128

## Parables

1. Whole section: Klyne Snodgrass. *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub.), 17–29

## Epistles

1. Gordon D. Fee & Douglas K. Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 59

## Revelation

1. Justin Taylor, *The Book of Revelation: Strategies for Seeing*: [thegospelcoalition.org/mobile/article/justintaylor/book-of-revelation-strategies-for](http://thegospelcoalition.org/mobile/article/justintaylor/book-of-revelation-strategies-for)
2. Taylor
3. Taylor
4. Taylor



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