

The Bible: An introduction

The word *Bible* comes from the Greek word *biblia*, which means "books." The Bible contains sixty-six books, written by at least forty different authors over a period of at least 1,500 years. The oldest book was written about 1400 B.C. or earlier. The last book was written about A.D. 100. When we read the Bible in English, we are reading a translation of material originally written in Hebrew (the Old Testament or first part of the Bible) or Greek (the New Testament or second part of the Bible). The events described in the Bible take place in the lands north and west of the Persian Gulf and surrounding the Mediterranean Sea.

There is great variety in the different books of the Bible. There are different types of literature such as history, law, poetry, prophecy, teaching, biography and letters. They were written by people from different cultural backgrounds over a long period of time yet there is a remarkable unity in their message, as we shall discover.

The Two Testaments

The first thirty-nine books of the Bible, from Genesis through to Malachi, are grouped in a section called *the Old Testament*. The last twenty-seven books, from Matthew through to Revelation, are called *the New Testament*. *Testament* is another word for a will or covenant, a legally binding promise. The Old Testament describes God's covenants with the Jewish people and his promise to bless all nations of the earth through them. The New Testament shows how this promise was fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Despite covering over 2,000 years of human history, the Bible has a theme that unifies all of its sixty-six books. The Bible tells us what God has been doing in human history and the purposes for which he created us. The Bible's story can be viewed as a drama in five acts. God is always the main character.

Act 1: Creation and Crisis (Genesis 1-11)

The Bible opens with the statement, "In the beginning God created the universe." The point of the Bible's teaching is not to prove that God exists, but to teach us what God is like. The story of our creation is one of beauty and harmony; everything God made was good. The first human couple, Adam and Eve, were created for relationship with God, to obey him and enjoy him as his children. The harmony God intended is seen in the picture of a garden beautifully described in Genesis 2.

The picture was ruined when Adam and Eve chose to disobey God. Their life of harmony was shattered - not only with God but inside their hearts, with each other and with the earth. The Bible calls this refusal to trust and obey God *sin*.

In choosing to disobey God, Adam and Eve chose to turn from God and live apart from him, acting according to their own wishes. Not only did this dishonour God, but it also separated them from the source of all life, and so they experienced spiritual death and eventually physical death as well. Ever since, all people have acted just as their original parents did, and so death, physical and spiritual, has become part of all human experience.

God's earth was afflicted by sin like a disease. But God's love for his creation did not change; he promised a cure for sin. A child would eventually be born to a descendent of Eve. This child would take the punishment for sin on himself (see Genesis 3:15). The rest of the stories in this first part of the Bible show how God protected the earth from total pollution by sin.

Act 2: God's Solution Unfolds (Genesis 12 – Malachi)

This section contains the beginning stage of God's plan to repair the damage done by human disobedience. Around 2000 B.C., God chose one person, Abraham, and promised that through his son and grandson God would form a nation: Israel. The Jews, Abraham's descendants through his son Isaac and grandson Jacob, would be God's special people to keep alive knowledge about him on the earth.

The stories of how God cared for Israel point ahead toward God's solution for the human problem. God dramatically rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt around 1500 B.C. This rescue was a picture of what he intended to do for all humans through Jesus ~ the Messiah, or deliverer, whom he would send. God also communicated his laws to their leader Moses so that they would know how to live healthy and harmonious lives.

Despite all God did, Israel's history reflects the human problem of distrust and rebellion toward God. When God first gave them their own land, they frequently turned from God's laws and did what was right in their own eyes. They were not content to live under God's rule. They asked for a human king in order to be like other nations. When their kings listened to God and followed his ways, they had peace and well-being, especially during the reigns of David and Solomon, around 1000-930 B.C.

God placed Israel among various world powers so that they could be an example to all people on earth. God's intention was that Israel would model the peace and wholeness that come when people obey God's words. When Israel's great King Solomon built a temple where people could worship God, he knew people from other countries would pray to God there. The great queen of Sheba visited Solomon and praised his God (1 Kings 10:9).

But Solomon himself, who was supposed to be the wisest man in the world, began to worship other gods at the end of his life. As a result, after he died his kingdom was divided into two nations, Israel and Judah. Both nations were conquered and taken into captivity-Israel in 722 B.C. and Judah in 586 B.C.

God did not give up on the people; he sent special messengers (prophets) to teach them how to live and remind them that the Messiah would come. To one of these prophets, Isaiah, who lived around 700 B.C., God gave amazing pictures of this Messiah.

Act 3: The Solution (Matthew – John)

The New Testament continues the story of God's plan for His world four hundred years after the last book in the Old Testament. The first four books, or Gospels, announce the arrival of the Messiah. Each Gospel is named after its writer and describes the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *Christ* is the Greek word meaning "Messiah," the one first announced to Eve in Genesis and then to the Jewish people through the prophets.

Jesus taught that people could be born into God's family by believing in Him. He also said that God's children should live in an attitude of love, serving others and forgiving even their enemies. Jesus called twelve special men, the disciples or apostles, to be with Him and tell others about Him. But most of the religious leaders, including the leading priests and teachers of the Jewish law, did not listen to Jesus; they worked together to have him killed.

God's solution to the human problem of sin now became clear. Jesus, who never sinned, willingly died on a cross for the sins of all people who will look to him in faith. The punishment for sin is death, but God allowed Jesus to die for us as a substitute. Then Jesus was raised to life on the third day as a sign that He really is God's Son. Death was conquered and the power of sin was broken.

Jesus offers to give a new heart and a new spirit to anyone who will accept his gift of life. God forgives our sins, gives us his Holy Spirit to live inside us and promises us that we will be raised to new life with him after we die, not because of our own goodness but because of the goodness of Jesus. People may now once again live in harmony with God. (Jesus' death and resurrection occurred around A.D. 30.)

Act 4: God's New Multicultural Community (Acts – Jude)

Beginning with Acts we read the story of God's new community. They are people from all nations equipped to carry on the work of Jesus. They tell everyone that the King has come and that he invites them to join his new community. The books that follow are letters from leaders of the early Christian church.

The most famous of these leaders is Paul. Although he was a Jew, he obeyed Jesus' command to tell the good news to people who were not Jews. Paul saw himself as an ambassador of God, and he wanted people to be reconciled to God through Jesus (see 2 Corinthians 5:20). Paul was beaten, imprisoned and

eventually killed because of his faith in Jesus in AD. 67 or 68.

Act 5: A Look into the Future (Revelation)

The prophets or messengers of God in the Old Testament looked forward with hope to the return of the Messiah as King over everything. They thought it would all happen at one time when Jesus first came. Jesus taught that there are two comings. The first was God's coming to earth in the mission of Jesus to defeat sin and death. His second coming to rule the earth is still future. At that time God will judge everyone who has ever lived. There will be the reward of being with God forever for those He accepts and separation from Him for those He rejects. Everything will then be restored to the beauty and harmony pictured in the Genesis garden. People of every nation, tribe and language will worship God together (Revelation 7:9-10).

Why do we need the Bible?

There are different ways that human societies decide what is true. These include majority opinion, expert opinion, and tradition. All of these can be wrong. The only way to really know the truth about God is if He tells us Himself. This is called *revelation* God revealing Himself to us in a way we can understand. That is what the Bible claims to be- a message from God for everyone in the world. He has not left us to ourselves to guess what He is like and what He wants from us, He has shown us clearly in the Bible. That is why Christians often refer to the Bible as 'God's Word'.

The message of the Bible

"You remember that ever since you were a child, you have known the Holy Scriptures, *which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation in Jesus Christ.*" (2 Timothy 3:15.)

The Bible has one main theme. It is about God's rescue plan for humanity. The term that is used for this is called *salvation*. This is a broad term including forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, wholeness, putting things right, and being admitted into heaven. As the quotation above from one of the books in the New Testament indicates the Bible (or the 'Holy Scriptures') is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is like a map showing the route, but it is not the destination. The destination is a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, which is what God wants everyone to have.

The Authority of the Bible

"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, correcting error and giving instruction for living in the right way."

(2 Timothy 3:16.)

The Bible is God speaking through human authors. What they wrote was what God wanted to communicate to people. This process is called *inspiration*. It means literally 'God-breathed'. This is what gives the Bible its authority – it is God's book, not just a work of ancient literature. Our response to the Bible must therefore involve our whole person:

mind - we need to study it

spirit - we need to ask God to help us understand it

will - we need to obey what it says.