

How to Study the Bible

A Self-Study Resource by Brian McLaren (brianmclaren.net)

Write a prayer that answers some or all of these questions. Assume that God is asking you these questions, and let your prayer simply be your answer to God.

1. How are you today?
2. Why do you want to study the Bible?
3. What are you hoping to get from it?
4. What are the big concerns on your heart today?
5. What are the little concerns on your heart today?
6. What do you want God to do for you today?
7. What are you grateful for today?

The Biblical Story in 7 Episodes

1. Creation: Before anything is created, God exists – One, community of Father, Son, Spirit, in an eternal dance of giving and receiving honor, love, joy, and fullness. From the overflow of God’s jubilant goodness come the words, LET THERE BE! And everything we know – and more that we don’t – begins to spring into being. We are created “in God’s image” – capable of knowing, enjoying, obeying, and partnering with God in the unfolding story. We walk with God in the cool of the day, in harmony with our fellow creatures, stewards or caretakers of earth. Our story begins!

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.. (Genesis 1:1)

Many passages of the Bible celebrate the grandeur of God’s creation and the grandeur of God as Creator. Choose one of the following passages: ___ Genesis 1 – 2, ___ Psalm 8, ___ Psalm 19, ___ Psalm 104, ___ Isaiah 40.

1. Jot down any questions, comments, observations, surprises, etc., that catch your attention.

2. Write a prayer of response to God, based on what you are reading.

2. Crisis: Unsatisfied with the immeasurable gift of being created in God's image, unwilling to live within limits as God's creatures in creation, we humans want more – to be as gods ourselves, living without creaturely limits or responsibilities, setting our own rules. We reach for knowledge apart from God, and we taste its bitter fruit – alienation between man and woman, brother and sister, humanity and creation. We live on the edge of self-destruction, riding the rising tide of our own flood of evil, trying to build great and prosperous cities that mask our own spiritual poverty and lostness.

The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. (Genesis 6:5-6)

Many passages of the Bible face people with the reality of our moral and spiritual crisis. Choose one of the following passages: ___ Genesis 3, ___ Genesis 4, ___ Genesis 6, ___ Genesis 11:1-9, ___ Psalm 32, ___ Psalm 51, ___ Isaiah 58, ___ Matthew 23, ___ Galatians 5

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3. Calling: God doesn't abandon creation, but intervenes, establishing a special relationship with a man named Abram (Abraham) and a woman named Sara. Their descendents, beginning with Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, will bring blessing to all the peoples of the world. They will be God's people, pioneering a path of faith for all people to follow, in covenant with the Living God.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation/ and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,/ and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

So Abram left, as the LORD had told him... (Genesis 12:1-6)

Many passages in the Bible echo God's call to Abraham, giving us a sense of purpose and identity. Choose one of the following passages: ___ Ephesians 4, ___ Philippians 2:1-18, ___ Colossians 3:1-4:6, ___ Matthew 5:1-16

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4. Conversation, part 1: Abraham leaves his home in Ur and journeys west to Palestine and settles there. Isaac and Jacob live in the land, but a famine forces Jacob's sons to flee south to Egypt, where their rejected brother Joseph forgives them and provides for them. The Egyptians enslave them for 400 years, until Moses follows God's call to lead them to freedom. Because of unbelief and disobedience, they wander 40 years in the desert, until Joshua leads them to resettle Palestine. Even after being miraculously liberated, the people forget God and worship the little idols of the surrounding nations. Eventually they seek a kingdom with a king like the nations around them, but of their many kings, only a few are good like David. Although prophets call them back to faithful living, they lapse into civil war, and eventually, they are either destroyed by their powerful neighbors, or conquered and carried off as exiles to Babylon. After 70 years in exile, Nehemiah and others lead them back to Palestine to rebuild under the eye of their oppressors. The Scriptures record the story of the conversation of Abraham's descendents with and about God. The Scriptures are inspired by God to inspire and equip us to enter the conversation and continue it in our world today.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16)

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (Romans 15:4-5)

This timeline should help you with this part of the story:

2000 BC	1500 BC	1000 BC		+
Abraham	Moses	David	Nehemiah	Jesus
Isaac	Joshua	Solomon	Jerusalem rebuilt	
Jacob	Judges	Civil War	Oppression continues	
Joseph		North destroyed	under Greek &	
		South exiled	Roman Empires	

PART I: This part of the Biblical story contains episode after episode of people interacting with God. Here are a few samples:

___ Exodus 3-4, ___ Joshua 1, ___ Judges 6, ___ I Samuel 3, ___ I Kings 3, ___ Nehemiah 9

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4. Conversation, part 2

Four kinds of people play a key role in the ongoing conversation among and about God and humanity. There was often a dynamic tension among these different types of people.

1. Priests: These leaders attended to the regular religious lives of people, especially occasions of public worship. They oversaw things like religious festivals and rituals, holidays and feasts, religious instruction, the building and maintenance of worship facilities, etc. There were specific qualifications, privileges, and responsibilities for priests.

___ Leviticus 1, ___ Exodus 28, ___ Nehemiah 8

2. Prophets: These leaders, unlike priests, would arise without warning or credentials, claiming to have a message from God. Their messages generally focused on specific contemporary issues or problems. They quite frequently expressed themselves both artistically (through poetry, much of it very poignant, powerful, and beautiful) and dramatically (by acting out their message in some creative and arresting way).

___ Hosea 1-3, ___ Isaiah 1-2, ___ Daniel 1-2

3. Poets: These writers expressed both the hearts of the people toward God, and the heart of God toward the people. Their compositions would often be used by the priests in public worship. Their writings are often highly emotional, ranging from joy to despair to rage to elation, and their imagery and literary forms are striking.

___ Psalm 32, 51, ___ Psalm 42, 77, ___ 95, 150

4. Philosophers/Sages: These thinkers explore simple, practical daily wisdom (e.g. Proverbs), deep philosophical matters (e.g. Ecclesiastes), and profoundly agonizing mysteries of human experience (Job). As with the prophets, there is an overlap with poets because their writings are often in artistic forms. Unlike the prophets, the philosophers do not claim to speak for God; rather, they explore life's mysteries from the vantage point of human experience.

___ Proverbs 2-3, ___ Ecclesiastes 1-3, ___ Job 2-4

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5. Christ: The Messiah's coming surprises all expectations: born in a stable, not a royal court ... raised by a carpenter, not a priest ... preaching a message of God's kingdom "of the heavens," not a political kingdom of the earth ... emphasizing love and forgiveness, not force and revenge. He heals the sick, he teaches the crowds, he befriends the lonely, he accepts the rejected, he calls many into a new life as his disciples or apprentices ... until he is betrayed, arrested, tortured, crucified, killed, and buried. But he defeats death and returns to life, commissioning his followers to bring his good news to the whole world, inviting people of every nation to follow the Way, knowing God as their Father, with his own Spirit living in them.

Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. (Mark 1:14-18)

Jesus performs many "signs and wonders" – actions that have significance (meaning) and make people think (wonder): ___ Mark 5, ___ Luke 8:22-56, ___ John 2

Jesus teaches his message most often through parables: ___ Matthew 13:1-52, ___ Matthew 5-7, ___ Luke 15

Jesus chooses 12 and calls them disciples (called together to learn) and apostles (sent out to teach what they have learned): ___ Luke 5:1-6:16, ___ Matthew 16:13 – 17:13, ___ John 13

Jesus also has many personal encounters with individuals: ___ Mark 10:17-31, ___ John 3:1-21, ___ John 4:1-42

Jesus' death and resurrection are full of mystery and meaning: ___ Matthew 27-28, ___ Luke 23-24, ___ John 19-21. Also, ___ Romans 3, ___ Romans 6

Jesus promises to send his Spirit to be in and with his followers: ___ John 14:15-31, ___ John 16:5-16, ___ Acts 1:1-11, 2:1-47

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6. Church: After being empowered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus' disciples go into all the world, creating communities of faith, hope, love, and mission called churches. These disciple-making communities seek to let the light of their love and good deeds express Jesus' way of life to all, proclaiming and demonstrating the kingdom of God. They bring together rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, women and men, advantaged and disadvantaged, and they spread their message of truth and way of life across the world. They make many mistakes too, but God patiently forgives them and teaches them. The New Testament documents include letters sent by the early church leaders to various churches and individuals, providing a rich window into the life, problems, weaknesses, and vitality of the earliest communities of Jesus' disciples.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. (Acts 2:42-44)

Read one of these short letters to churches: ___Philippians, ___James, ___I John
Read one of these short letters to individuals: ___Timothy, ___Titus, ___Philemon

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7. Consummation: God's people today live in hope of a day when the knowledge of the glory of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea, a day when swords will be melted and recast as plowshares, when wars cease. All injustice, hatred, violence, selfishness, and evil will be exposed, named, and put to an end. As we look ahead, a more distant horizon beyond history as we know it fuses with the horizon of history in this world, instilling in us a confident hope that truth and justice, mercy and grace will prevail, and God's dreams and desires for creation will ultimately come fully true. God's kingdom will fully come, and God's desire will become realized on earth, as in heaven.

"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' (Matthew 25:21)

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (I Corinthians 15:58)

There are two sides to the vision of consummation: judgment and reward. For people who love good and are oppressed and saddened by evil, to have evil and oppression named and stopped is another way of having their reward come. To those who have worked against God and God's will, God's justice exposes the wrong choices they have made and the destructive path they have followed.

Choose one of these passages about judgment and reward: ___ Matthew 25, ___ I Corinthians 3:10-15, ___ I Corinthians 15:1-58

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Saturation:

Scripture saturation means choosing a passage of Scripture and re-reading it as often as possible. The more time you spend with a passage, the more you discover and can apply to your life. Here are some good beginning passages for Scripture saturation.

- ___ Romans 12
- ___ Matthew 5 – 7
- ___ I Corinthians 13
- ___ Colossians 3
- ___ Galatians 5

Other Information

1. How the Bible is organized (not chronologically!):
 - A. 5 Books of Moses (Torah, Pentateuch: Genesis - Deuteronomy)
 - B. Books of History (Joshua – 2 Chronicles)
 - C. Poetry & Wisdom (Job, Song of Songs)
 - D. Major (long) prophets (Isaiah – Lamentations)
 - E. Minor (short) prophets (Hosea – Malachi)
 - F. Gospels/History (Matthew – John, Acts)
 - G. Epistles/Letters (Romans – Jude)
 - I. Prophecy (Revelation)

2. Daily (or regular) Bible reading
 - A. The 6-paper-clip method (Put a paper clip or book mark on the first page of Genesis, Joshua, Job, Isaiah, Matthew, Romans. Read three chapters per day: Monday at Genesis, Tuesday at Joshua, and so on. You will complete the Hebrew Scriptures once and the Christian Scriptures twice in a year.)
 - B. One-year Bibles – several are available, organizing the Bible into daily readings.
 - C. Other reading plans – search on line for other plans.
 - D. Saturation – immerse yourself in one passage for a week or month or longer.
 - E. Memorization/meditation – Choose key passages to commit to memory.
 - F. Lectio divina – find resources online or at a retreat center to learn this method of Bible study.

3. Journaling as a spiritual practice
 - A. Prayer journaling – write a prayer each day expressing thanksgiving and concerns.
 - B. Reflection/Review journaling – review your day through prayer.
 - C. Use the Lord’s Prayer as a model for daily prayer.
 - D. Scripture journaling – write your reflections on Scripture.
 - E. Contemplative/Listening Journals – try to hear the whispers of God’s Spirit and write a dialogue with God.

4. Other kinds of Bible Study
 - A. Word or Theme study – trace one word or theme through the Bible.
 - B. Character study – follow one character through the Bible
 - C. Narrative study – explore the “big story” of the Bible
 - D. Book study – immerse yourself in one book of the Bible
 - E. Paraphrase study – rewrite a passage of the Bible in your own words.
 - F. Group study – read a passage together out loud (two or three times may be helpful) and then answer these questions: what did you notice? What questions do you have? What does this passage mean to you?