



Steve Levy has an itch for the Bible and he's itching to get the Bible into your blood. Sometimes you will feel like he's dragging you – but it's for your good. He holds that the Bible delights in Jesus – and he can't wait for you to share that delight. Steve has a fever for the Bible and is desperate to infect you! Let him.

Dale Ralph Davis

Pastor, Woodland Presbyterian Church, Hattiesburg, Mississippi

My prayer is that the Holy Spirit will use this lively and stimulating book by Steve Levy to remove the veil from many minds. How different (and how thankful!) they will be when they see that Christ is in *all* the Scriptures!

Stuart Olyott

Pastoral Director of the Evangelical Movement of Wales

That it is well-written and easy to read is good for starters; but the heart of the situation is the sheer happiness of meeting someone who is so in love with the Bible, so sensible in his approach, so clear that the Bible is all about Jesus, and so sure every believing reader will be led to a true understanding of what God himself has written for our learning.

Alec Motyer

The glory of Christ is *the* goal of all time and eternity. The purpose of the *Bible*, from beginning to end, is to reveal that glory to us, that we too might worship him. Jesus tells us that plainly, and Steve Levy wants to show us, just as plainly, how this is so. With an evident love for the task, and with a delightfully light touch, he'll give you a lot of help in that direction, and plenty of fun along the way!

William J U Philip

Minister, St George's-Tron Church, Glasgow

Some years ago the Marcions landed, turning the world of the Bible into a howling wasteland of disconnected irrelevances. In this book Steve Levy fights back to reclaim a thrilling Bible that from beginning to end speaks of Jesus. If you want more joy in your Bible reading, if you want to love Christ more, read it!

Michael Reeves

Theological Adviser, UCCF

Although there are plenty of Bible overview books and resources available today, many of them overlook Old Testament passages that





show that saving faith has always looked to God's Son. Steve's book will not only leave you with a much clearer understanding about what the whole Bible is about, it will also ignite your passion for God's Word.

Martin Downes

Pastor, Christ Church, Deeside, North Wales





Bible Overview

Steve Levy

Foreword by Richard Bewes



CHRISTIAN
FOCUS



In memory of the eternal life of Simon James.

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Foreword

The eighteenth - century evangelist George Whitefield was once preaching on Blackheath. A man and his wife saw the crowd of thirty thousand, and went up to investigate. Then the man said, 'Come on Mary, we won't stop any longer; he's talking about something that happened eighteen hundred years ago. What's that to us?'

However, in spite of themselves, the two stayed on, and were so fascinated by what they heard that they went home and dusted down the Bible that was lying on a shelf, and said, 'Is it possible that these old truths have been here so long, and we've not known it?'

I confidently predict that *Bible Overview* is going to have a similar effect upon thousands of readers. This is a page-turner of a book! I truly cannot think of a better way of introducing someone to the Bible than through these wonderfully luminous chapters that you have before you.

Steve Levy writes in crisp, short sentences, with an infectious love for the Scriptures – and for the pivotal figure of all history about whom they are concerned. The Bible is about to come *alive*, as you turn now to the very first page!

Richard Bewes O.B.E.
West London





Acknowledgements

Nearly five years ago Paul Blackham suggested I write this book. I must confess on many occasions the project was nearly shelved – but here it is.

I owe Paul an enormous debt for editing and advising and quite often correcting. I also have to say how gracious he has been because when we have disagreed, it is my opinion that has remained in the book. That means if there are parts that are wrong it my fault and mine alone.

The second great influence is my wife Clare. Thank you for your patience in taking a book written with the skill of a junior school child and turning it into the finished product – even if at times I can't recognise what I've written – that simply gives credit to your abilities.

There is no way this would have been written without you both enduring my stubbornness.

Paul Tucker, my pastor, laid the foundation of what the Bible teaches long before I was able to appreciate his help. Both Paul Blackham and I owe an enormous debt to DN Jones, whose teaching clarified so much of the Bible to us.

Thanks also to Disco Stu, Matt and all the apprentices for their research and questioning. I do find it stimulating when you disagree even if I don't always show it.

Lastly, I want to thank God for Simon. One of his last comments to me punctured my pride when he told me the book had to be published when I was about to give up. He also told me to get rid of the diagrams – I have!

This and his great friendship are the reasons I am dedicating this book to him. I will see you soon.

In memory of the eternal life of Simon James.



Preface

When I first became a Christian at the age of eleven I knew I had to read the Bible. I bought myself a big black leather King James Version and every night I read a chapter at a time, hoping against all hope that it would be one of those shortish ones. Reading Psalms with its small chapters was fine, but I still remember the shock of seeing Psalm 119 for the first time!

It did me good, but often I couldn't remember what I'd read the night before. In fact often I couldn't remember what I'd read five minutes before. I was very grateful for the string that marked my place.

Wading through the Old Testament I would think, 'If I'd been to Israel, I might understand, or at least know how to pronounce, "Pi-hahiroth" or "Baal-zephon" or 'Migdol'. 'If I was good at maths I might be able to understand what the ark or the temple looked like. After all, what on earth is a cubit?! If only I could speak Hebrew or Greek like the preachers I heard. But they seemed to complicate matters in my mind and anyway I couldn't even cope with French in school. What hope could there be for me?

All this made me despair of understanding all of the Bible, so I started to have favourite bits, and distinctly un-favourite bits – most of it.

I persevered without grasping much at all because I knew from my parents that all of the Bible was God's Word but it was

not until years later, listening to the preaching of Paul Tucker, that I discovered the key to understanding it all.

Once I saw this, and the light was switched on, I saw the whole Bible could be understood and enjoyed.

By the way, when I say 'all', I don't mean when my father made me eat 'all' of a slightly off-looking cheese sandwich at an old lady's house – not wanting to cause offence but struggling to force down each mouthful. The Bible is not like that. I mean the 'all' of a huge chocolate sundae at Joe's ice-cream parlour, where only a fool would leave even a melted drop left – hardly a duty!

If you don't believe me, read what the Bible says about itself, 'How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!' (Ps. 119:103).

The Bible promises to give great experiences.

It makes me understand myself.

It makes me understand the world.

It is my light, my life, my hope, my guide, my joy.

It shows me how to clean up the mess I make of my life at times.

It gives advice in all circumstances.

It gives me strength when I feel weak.

It gives comfort.

It makes sense of my suffering.

It gives purpose to my existence.

It saves my life.

It makes me wise.

It saves from my enemies.

It makes me cry, and it is my delight.

It makes me solid as a Christian.

And it teaches me to praise.

The purpose of this book is not to kick-start daily Bible reading, or to get you to read commentaries or other Christian books, as useful as they might be. I want to be far more daring than that.



Preface

I want you to delight in the Bible, so that when someone asks you how your daily reading is going, you'll answer, 'I wouldn't miss it for the world, it's delicious.' I want you to hunger to devour it, not in bite-size chapters, but setting time aside to read each book of the Bible through from beginning to end, as in fact they were originally meant to be read.

My hope is that whatever your upbringing, intelligence or church background, you will thirst after reading God's Word, all of it, and delight in every single bit.





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Introduction:

Who will show me what the Bible says?

It explains itself

I had been invited to speak at a Christian Union house party and unusually for me I had turned up early. As I entered the room I heard an animated discussion taking place about the impending visiting preacher and his somewhat controversial views:

‘Steve Levy said this...’

‘He didn’t...’

‘Well I think that’s outrageous.’

‘Well I think he’s got a point.’

‘Maybe he meant this...’

The discussion was becoming increasingly heated. Eventually one of the students, sweet but a little over-smiley, noticed me looking bemused and assumed I was a mature student. He asked me who I was and what did I think of everything that had been said. I took great delight with my reply.

‘My name’s Steve Levy. By the way, I’m pretty sure I know what I said and meant on this issue.’

After the slightly embarrassed silence, we had a laugh over the incident but it still stands out in my mind. To find out what I thought, they only had to ask me.

There are a lot of conflicting views about the Bible but I don’t care to know what *you think* the meaning of a particular book or verse is. I want to know what the Bible says about itself.



Who better to ask than the author?

There are times when I forget things. There are times when I change my mind. God is not like that. He is altogether different to us. He never forgets. He created the universe and he will be there long after history has ended. Every fact is always before Him. He has numbered every hair of our heads.

He appoints the day of my birth and the day of my death. He knows where I am sitting as I am reading this book and He knows when I will stop.

Being the infinite God, when He inspired the Scriptures, He had you, the reader, in mind and your church. This is a book by God.¹ He cannot lie. He knows what He means and He always means what He says.

So how do we interpret the Bible? When you read it you realize you don't have to, that *it interprets itself*. This is true throughout the Bible but is startlingly clear in the New Testament, where verses from the Old Testament are quoted with an explanation following.

The best interpreter of the Bible is the Bible itself and the job of the preacher and Bible teacher is simply to proclaim the explanation.

Over and again the Bible says our contempt for God is the problem. We try to replace God or to ignore Him, preferring the opinions of human beings, instead of simply trusting and obeying the words of the living God.

‘Why do you say, O Jacob,
and complain, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the Lord;
my cause is disregarded by my God”?
Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no-one can fathom.

He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint' (Isa. 40:27-31).

God never disregards you. He knows you better than you know yourself. Come to him weak. Come to him when you are tired, and He will lift you up.

Making sense of all the books

As a boy my earliest introduction to the Bible as a whole came through a particularly long song:

*Sixty-six books in God's holy word,
telling the story of Jesus my Lord.
The books of the Bible I love to tell,
the books of the Bible, I know so well.
Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus...*

We were made to sing it over and over until we had learnt it by heart. Needless to say it was quite traumatic! However when the preacher announced his text from Zephaniah and people were hastily fumbling through their Bibles trying to find it, I would just burst into song, quietly and under my breath of course. The only disadvantage being that by the time I got to Zephaniah the reading had finished!

Most of us have been there I'm sure. When faced with this long list of Bible books, how do we make sense of them? How did Jesus and the apostles make sense of them? How did they fit them together? How does the Bible fit them together?

The contents page

Let's start with the contents page. You might be thinking, 'that's the one page I do understand', but trust me on this one. What do you see – two books, the Old and New Testaments or 66 individual books all saying different things by different authors?

In Ephesians, Paul says that the Bible is one book, the 'foundation' laid through the 'apostles and prophets' (Eph. 2:20). Apostles were men 'sent' by Jesus Christ and given his special authority to preach and write. Prophets spoke and wrote God's Word. Both sets of men were chosen by God to speak His words (Eph. 4:11).

The Bible, he stresses, is one book with one author – God Himself.

What's all this about 'the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms'?

Look at the contents page of the Bible again. Our Old Testament starts with the historical books (Genesis to Esther), goes on to the wisdom books (Job to Song of Solomon) and finishes with the prophetic books (Isaiah to Malachi).

But the order of the original Hebrew Bible was different. The Bible Jesus knew started with the law, went on to the prophets and concluded with the writings (Psalms), 'Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms' (Luke 24:44).

Sometimes the New Testament writers refer to 'the Prophets', sometimes to 'the Law and the Prophets'. Other times they refer to 'Moses and the Prophets' or to 'the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms'. All very confusing you might think. But look at the chart. When you see these phrases being used you should know exactly which books are being referred to.²

At this point though I still wish I could get that dreadful 'Sixty six books' tune out of my head!

The Contents of the Bible

<p>The Law (Torah - meaning instruction)</p> <p>Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy</p>	<p>The first five books of the Bible were written or at least edited by Moses who was the greatest of all the prophets (Deut. 34:10).</p>
<p>The Former Prophets</p> <p>Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings</p>	<p>We often think of these books as history books but that is not their main purpose. They are preaching a message to us. They tell of the conquest of the land, the kingship of God's people and the decline to exile.</p>
<p>The Latter Prophets</p> <p>Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi</p>	<p>These prophets all write either before, during or after the exile. They speak of God's judgment against sin and of the great hope that can be had in Jesus.</p>
<p>The Writings (Psalms)</p> <p>Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles</p>	<p>This section (named after its biggest book) has many different books, but all of the writings seem to take a step back from what is going on and show us the wise way to live.</p>
<p>Gospels (Good News)</p> <p>Matthew, Mark, Luke, John</p>	<p>All of these books focus on the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.</p>
<p>Apostolic Writings</p> <p>Acts to Revelation</p>	<p>Acts tells of the work of Jesus through the Holy Spirit and the letters explain the implications of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus for the church. Revelation focuses on the glorified Lord, showing how life and history ought to be seen in the light of His return.</p>

(ENDNOTES)

¹ 'The God of the Old Testament is not God the Father awaiting the revelation of his Son. Is it not the case that the God of the OT is the Holy Trinity working incognito. One Gospel, one people, one way of salvation, one God.' (Alec Motyer)



Bible Overview ~ Introduction

² 'Jesus uses "the law" as the formal title of Genesis to Deuteronomy, the books of Moses, eg Luke 24:44. In Matthew 17 Jesus mentions the law and the prophets separately but in 5:18, he uses "law" as a comprehensive description of the Scriptures – and can do this because "law" translates Torah, which means "teaching" – God's truth revealed to his redeemed.' (Alec Motyer). The law is the fundamental revelation of God through Moses and is basic to the whole Old Testament.





Part One
What the Bible says about itself





1:1

The Bible's about Jesus

Ever felt you're missing the point?

Somebody decided to buy the Levy family Monopoly. (I cannot think of a more inappropriate present for a family with three boys who only ever played football!) But my sister insisted we should play it with her and so we did.

After an argument, over who would be the dog and the sports car, we started. The rules seemed pretty obvious so we ignored them. Three days later we were still playing. Nobody knew how to win or lose and by now rules were being invented as we argued through each lap of the board.

If only someone could have explained the purpose of the game, it might have been bearable.

I didn't understand what I was playing, or why, and I hated every minute.

What does Jesus say the Bible is about?

Jesus says this, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them' (Matt. 5:17).

The word 'fulfil' is not referring to a handful of Old Testament references – a verse predicting where Jesus would be born, a few verses hidden away in Isaiah about the suffering servant.



Jesus is very clear. He didn't come to destroy the Law and the Prophets. He is what they are all about. If we take Jesus out of the Old Testament it is little wonder it confuses us.

Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:27).

Not just some, not just bits to be read at Christmas – all. **All** of the Bible is about Jesus. You might be thinking, 'I can't see that'. Then something is wrong with the way you read it. Listen to Jesus again:

'This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. And repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations' (Luke 24:44-47).

When our eyes are opened, we see that the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms have one message – Jesus' suffering, His death, His resurrection and the offer of the gospel for everyone.

Moses explains Jesus

My eyes were opened to this truth, one humid June afternoon in a London Starbucks. I was deep in conversation with a well-known Bible scholar.

'Jesus explains Moses,' I said with great confidence and feeling very profound (it is amazing how pompous I can be). 'Of course that's true,' he replied, 'but the Bible's emphasis is that Moses explains Jesus.'

Normally I would have started arguing straight away, but two things stopped me. First, as I thought of every text to prove he was wrong, I realized in fact that I was wrong. The second was he had just bought me a huge strawberry and cream

something or other and if I were too aggressive he might not buy me another one!

It took me five minutes and a lot of slurping to admit that he was right. I left with considerably better theology.

When you listen to Jesus, Moses and the Prophets have already explained who He is and what He does.

‘If you believed Moses, you would believe me, **for he wrote about me**’ (John 5:46).

Hold on. Isn’t the New Testament about Jesus and the Old – well who knows? Listen to this verse:

‘I am saying **nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen** – that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles’ (Acts 26:22-23).

Do you see: ‘nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen.’ When you are reading any of the Old Testament books, whether Numbers, Leviticus, Kings or Chronicles, you are reading about the gospel of Jesus Christ. You are not reading an illustration of the gospel, you are not reading stories that can be reinterpreted in the light of the gospel. You are reading God’s clear word about Jesus. That is how the Bible sees itself.

The Old Testament is not a riddle that no one can make head or tail of until Jesus comes along and unravels it all. If you believe that, it doesn’t take long to draw the conclusion (even subconsciously) that there’s little point reading the Old, you might as well go straight to the explanation in the New. The Bible simply won’t let you do that.

Still confused? Listen to Jesus as He tells the story of the rich man who wants his five brothers saved from hell:

‘Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead’(Luke 16:28b-31).

Moses and the Prophets tell us enough about Jesus to save us from hell. They are more impressive than seeing someone raised from the dead – that makes for pretty essential reading! The glory of the resurrection is seen not only in the gospels, but in all the Scriptures. Jesus Himself tells us that the Old Testament prophecies about Him (and His resurrection) are the most convincing evidence.

Both Peter and Paul use the same argument. If you’ve read Moses you should understand Jesus and His work:

‘But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through **all the prophets**, saying that his Christ would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you – even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he **promised long ago through his holy prophets**. For Moses said, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people.’

Indeed, **all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days**’ (Acts 3:18-24).

They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day... he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and **tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets** (Acts 28:23).

Paul was able to perform great miracles. He spoke tongues more than any man. He was inspired by the Spirit to write most of the New Testament. He has an opportunity to evangelize a large number of people – so where does he start? Which Bible

passage does he use to explain the good news about Jesus? With his Old Testament in one hand, he preaches about the wonderful salvation they can know in Jesus from the 'Law of Moses and from the Prophets'.

An overview of main themes

We have seen that the best interpreter of the Bible is the Bible. We have seen that **all** of the Bible is about Jesus and that the Old Testament explains truths about Jesus. So let's conclude with some of the great truths that are revealed to us about Jesus throughout the Bible:

› **Through Jesus the world is made**

(Gen. 1:1-3; John 1:1-3).

› **The gospel of Jesus Christ is preached to Abraham**

(Gen. 15:1-4; Gal. 3:8).

› **Jesus is the 'I am' who redeems Israel**

(Exod. 3:13-14; John 8:58).

› **Jesus gives the inheritance of the land**

(Judg. 2:1-4; Heb. 9:15).

› **Jesus is the Son of David who brings a kingdom that will not end**

(Ps. 2:2-7; Luke 1:32-33).

› **Jesus is the servant who explains the exile and brings its end**

(Isa. 42:1-9; Matt. 1:17).¹

› **The Spirit of Christ testifies to the prophets about Jesus' suffering and the glories that will follow**

(Isa. 53; 1 Pet. 1:11).²

(ENDNOTES)

¹ The Old Testament Scriptures, as Jesus and the apostles knew them, ended with 2 Chronicles, and that book ends with the people still in exile waiting for the Christ.

² There is so much more! As the rest of this book will show!



1:2

It's always been about Jesus

I had an interesting conversation once with a man who held quite a position of authority in a Bible-believing church. After the service he took me to one side and said the most remarkable thing.

‘There are many ways to come to God. You don’t have to come through Jesus. In fact I didn’t know anything about Jesus when I became a Christian.’

A little taken aback, I explained that there has only ever been one way to God – through Jesus. Sadly he simply shrugged his shoulders

The Bible is explicitly clear. You cannot know God without Jesus.

Many people get confused with the Old Testament believers. They came to God somehow but not as we come now, not directly through Jesus. But look at the texts:

Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me’ (John 14:6).

‘All things have been committed to me by my Father. No-one knows the Son except the Father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him’ (Matt. 11:27).



To know the Father you need Jesus. If you don't know Jesus you don't know the Father. Jesus does not say that this truth applies from now on. This truth is universal, for all time and eternity. Either we come to God through Jesus or it's not God that we're coming to. And that applies to every single believer in the Old Testament – they came to the Father as we come – through Jesus. John expands on this:

No-one has ever seen God, but God the one and only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known (John 1:18).

Hang on a minute. No one has ever see God? Hasn't John read the Old Testament? The Lord appears to people all the time. He appears first to Adam in the garden, then to Noah and Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses.

But of course he hasn't got it wrong. The Lord who appears is Jesus. They didn't see the Father – they saw Jesus who made the Father known to them.

What did Jesus do for the Old Testament believers?

The result of knowing Jesus is always the same – as we come to God through Jesus we receive his righteousness and we are put right with God. When the Law and the Prophets speak about righteousness and salvation there is only one place that it can be found.

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify (Rom. 3:21).

'But my righteousness will last for ever, my salvation through all generations' (Isa. 51:8b).

Salvation has not changed and cannot change. To quote the famous verse:

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb. 13:8).

Did all of the Old Testament believers know the Jesus we know?
The book of Romans is written to explain the gospel. After giving one of the most detailed explanations of how the gospel of God works in chapter 3, in chapter 4, Paul looks for some genuine examples of saving faith. Where does he turn but to Abraham and David?

These men are examples of how to believe in Jesus – example Christians if you like. On top of Paul's argument in Romans, there are many other instances of the New Testament going back to these Old Testament believers.

Abraham

Jesus knew exactly what Abraham thought about Him:

'Your Father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; **he saw it** and was glad' (John 8:56).

David

Peter explains exactly what David thought about Jesus. David always saw Jesus. David knew and spoke of the resurrection in great detail. David called Jesus 'Lord'.

David said about him: "I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken" (Acts 2:25).

'**Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ**, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay' (Acts 2:31).

Jesus knew exactly what David thought about him:

'How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him "Lord"?' (Matt. 22:43).

Mark and Luke emphasize the same point in their gospels, it is so important.

Moses

Moses as the writer of the first five books of the Bible towers over the Old Testament. What made him great?

He regarded disgrace **for the sake of Christ** as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward (Heb. 11:26).

Moses left everything for Christ. You can't have the kind of impact Moses had without knowing Jesus.

The Israelites

Jesus was with the Israelites in the wilderness day by day as he is with us.

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ (1 Cor. 10:1-4).

Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterwards destroyed those who did not believe (Jude 5 ESV).

Isaiah and the prophets who followed him

Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him (John 12: 41).

The gallery of faith

This is why in Hebrews 11 there are so many examples of Christian faith (as if there was any other kind of faith). Believers in the Old Testament had the same relationship with God that you and I have. They are as much our examples of how to live for Jesus as New Testament believers.

So how does that work?

When I was starting out as a preacher (I had preached the sum total of one sermon on a Sunday to a church congregation) I was asked to preach at a communion service. What on earth was I to say? I rang my pastor Paul Tucker for advice.

‘Summarize communion as it summarizes our faith.’

‘Exactly how would I do that?’

Silence. I could sense his disappointment at one of his many protégées, as he once called us. And then came a sermon well worth stealing.

‘We look *back* at the cross of Jesus, we look *up* to the ascended Jesus. We look *forward* to Christ’s return.’

I added we look *around* at Jesus’ church, so I could feel at least part of it was mine!

The Old Testament believer looked up to the pre-incarnate Christ and on occasions (as we shall see) met with Him. He looked forward to the cross of Jesus and he looked further forward to His return. And he looked around at His gathered church.

Hardly a huge difference!

What did they call Him?

I have been called many names in my lifetime – ‘Rabs’ (short for Rabbi – the downside of a Jewish surname), ‘milkman’, ‘fat boy’, ‘Bible-basher’, ‘vicar’, ‘Levy’ and a few others not repeatable in a Christian book. Some of them describe who I am, others how I look and others, what I do. But if I am with someone who really knows me, they call me by my name, Steve.

In the New Testament Jesus is called many names – ‘Immanuel’, ‘Master’, ‘Good teacher’, ‘Son of Man’. All of these names sum up an aspect of His character or person. But His best name, the name we know Him by is the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament Jesus also has many names – the ‘Angel of the Lord’, the ‘Commander of the Lord’s army’, ‘Son of Man’ and sometimes simply the ‘Lord’.

So when reading the Old Testament, should we say it is Jesus speaking and call Him by the name we are most familiar with? God inspired the writer to the Hebrews to do just that (Heb. 2:11-12). Should we say Jesus appeared in the Old Testament? John does just that (John 12:41). Should we refer to the Old Testament people of God as the church? God inspired Stephen to do just that (Acts 7:38).

So let’s follow the Bible’s example and use names that help us to apply the Bible to our own lives.¹

There are over 300 titles given to Jesus in the Bible.² He doesn’t have a different name in the Old Testament. David calls Him ‘Lord’ and speaks of the resurrection of ‘Christ’. Isaiah sees ‘Jesus’ glory’ and Moses gives up everything for his ‘Christ’.

The Jesus who saved us from our sins, the Jesus who is the author and finisher of our faith is the same Jesus who spoke in the Old Testament. He wants us to see Him and find Him in all the Scriptures. This is how the Bible talks and God knows best!

If we find studying the Bible hard work at times, it might be because we’re missing the point.

‘You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life’ (John 5:39-40).

(ENDNOTES)

¹ In the New Testament we translate the Greek word *ekklesia* with the English word ‘church’. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures from 300 BC, the word *ekklesia* is often used to refer to the assembly of Israel. This means that the people of Jesus’ day used the word *ekklesia* to speak about the people of God in the Old Testament. *Ekklesia* (‘church’) is an Old Testament word! You will find that many older Christian writers often speak of the church in the Old Testament in this way.

² See ‘Names of Christ’ by: T.C. Horton & Charles Hurlburt, published by Moody Press.



1:3

Who is the Bible from and who is it to?

When we first got married we bought a rocking chair which I had to assemble. The packaging was removed and everything including the instructions was dispatched to the bin – after all how hard can it be to assemble a rocking chair?

It was a good three days before I was rummaging through the large bins outside our flat trying to find the stupid instructions (quite why I thought the instructions were stupid when I hadn't even read them is beyond my abilities or memory). But eventually I found them – slightly damp.

I did come to realize that the instructions, even in their smelling state, were of some importance. Without them the chair was never going to be put together. Young men never want advice.

I've now passed that stage and just ask my father to do everything!

The instructions were written by the people who designed and manufactured the chair for people who hadn't the first idea how to assemble it – me. Once I knew their purpose it changed the way I looked at them.

The Bible is not just a book about Jesus. It is written *by* someone *for* someone.

God speaks

How do I know what to believe and how to behave? Is it by doing what feels right? Is it by doing what has always been



done? Is it not wanting to offend anyone or at least doing what offends the least number of people? Is it by trying to always find the middle ground? In a world where there are so many different voices claiming authority, is there a right or wrong way at all?

The Bible gives a clear and resounding answer. God speaks. In fact God speaks a lot.

You only have to read the beginning of the Bible and you see this phrase, 'God said'. As you read on you hear it again and again. In Leviticus you hear it 36 times. Sometimes He just speaks, other times He speaks through men. But it is God speaking.

This is remarkable. The God who knows all things, made all things, made me and knows my end, this God talks and He talks a lot. The God who stands above time and space, who finds the future no problem because He sees all history from the Egyptian empire until the twenty-first century – this God speaks. The God who cannot lie speaks. The God of love speaks.

This must change the way we read the Bible. Family, friends, the media, the opinions of others must fall silent because God speaks. There's one person God wants to speak with authority about and that person is Jesus.

God speaks clearly about Jesus

When I eventually found the instructions for the rocking chair, I found they were written in at least six other languages. All of them showed how to assemble the chair but the only instructions of any use were the ones in English.

Is the Bible only useful in parts – we are to ignore the hard bits because they are beyond our understanding?

There is no doubt there are parts of the Bible that are hard to understand. Look at what Peter says when he is talking about the Scriptures that the apostle Paul wrote:

His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction (2 Pet. 3:16).

But none of it is impossible. Those who don't understand are not described as slow learners but as 'ignorant and unstable' and will be judged accordingly. So how do you understand the hard bits of the Bible?

The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, **making wise the simple** (Ps. 19:7b).

It makes the simple wise, not the wise wiser. What an enormous relief. If you are simple like me, there's hope!

Too simple to understand?

When I took art in school a teacher looked over my shoulder and asked with contempt, 'What is it?' In my panic as I looked down at this terrible mess, not even I could remember – and I'd just been drawing it! He held up the picture and said to the class, 'There really is no hope of Steve ever becoming an artist.' (I was hardly heartbroken!)

But God cannot hold us up if we're believers and say, 'This person is too simple to understand all I have to say about Jesus.' Look at the people He came to save. Look at the church. You'll see there is real hope. He makes simple people wise.

Are you a single mum who didn't finish school? God can make you wiser than Einstein. Are you a Christian who can hardly read? God can make you wiser than the Prime Minister. Come to the Bible like a child and learn about Jesus – the very wisdom of God.

It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God (1 Cor. 1:30).

The letters in the New Testament were written to churches made up of ordinary people, including children (Eph. 6:1-3), slaves (Eph. 6:5-8) and even ministers (1 Tim. 1:2)! These were read out loud to everyone and were meant to be understood and put into practice.

Why can't everyone see it?

So why doesn't everyone understand that the Bible is explaining Jesus? Is it because we live in a different era, or we haven't been to Israel, or we don't understand the languages?

Well no. The time span of the Old and New Testaments is over two thousand years, the political changes are many and dramatic and the language changes radical. And yet when Jesus and the apostles quote the Old Testament, not once do they assume their hearers can't understand because they haven't been to that particular spot in the Middle East. Not once do they say to their listeners that if they spoke Hebrew things would make more sense.

It is not intellectual ignorance that blindfolds us and stops understanding.¹

There is something we are warned about that is far more important if we are to understand the Bible.

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).

But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away (2 Cor. 3:14-16).

The problem of understanding the Bible has nothing to do with languages or geography or archaeology – it is spiritual. If you're not born again you've got problems. If you refuse to see Jesus you've got problems. Look how strong Jesus' language is in condemning those who don't see Him in Scripture. Even to Christians he says:

'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with

Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:25-27).

Not seeing Jesus when reading Moses really is the definition of spiritual blindness. Something I'm sure we all want to avoid (John 9:28-41).

'You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life' (John 5:39-40).

We need help

We need our eyes open, even though the truth is staring us in the face. Jesus says if we can't see it we're dull, slow, hard-hearted and blind – to shock us into repentance and turn us to Him.

Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones once gave this illustration:

If a man says he doesn't like Beethoven he tells me nothing about Beethoven but he tells me a great deal about himself.

(This illustration always worries me because I can't stand Beethoven. But you get the point.) So if you can't see Jesus, his death and resurrection, then you tell me nothing about the theme of the Bible but you tell me a great deal about you.

In fact the people who think they are wise or clever are the ones in most danger of misunderstanding God's Word (1 Cor. 1:27). In fact many theologians have come up with some of the most bizarre interpretations imaginable.

To tell the truth about that rocking chair, even though it had all the appearances of looking right it had a tendency to creak. People over a certain weight were always encouraged to sit somewhere else.

Several years later a friend who worked in a furniture store took it apart and put it together again. Now it doesn't creak and can take a weight of up to twenty stone – my wife has some large relatives!

The help of the author

The point is I needed help with the instructions. So it is with the Bible.

... they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).

Jesus left his Spirit to help us. If you are a Christian you need to pray and ask for the help of the author, whom Jesus has left with believers. It is just 'foolish' to read the Bible without asking for help.

Ask God, accept His authority over your life and you will receive help. He has given his Word. He will help you to understand and give you the power you need to obey.

'If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' (Luke 11:13).

This help is available for every believer. God is not playing hide-and-seek with you. He longs for you to understand. So we must pray as we read the Bible and be willing to turn to the Lord.

(ENDNOTES)

¹ We are not saying that translators are unimportant. We thank God for the language skills he has given to different members of his church. However, we should not pretend that every member of the body must all possess the same gifts.



1:4

How to know you're reading it properly

God tells me all I need to know

Every Christmas my older brother organizes a football and rugby game after lunch at my parents' house. As he is considerably bigger than me I always use the same line:

'I don't mind watching but don't expect me to join in.'

Many people read the Bible in that way – it has no effect because they're not reading it properly – they're not joining in.

Jesus replied: "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 neighbour as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments' (Matt. 22:37-40).

The Bible tells us about Jesus so we can love God and love like God. We are meant to join in with all our heart and soul and mind. The Bible is like dynamite – it explodes our old ways of living and thinking.

Not only does the Bible have authority. Not only can it be understood by any believer. It also tells us all we need to know – to live for God, love God and love like God.

Jesus is the answer

A Pentecostal minister I knew who counselled drug addicts had this statement on the wall behind his desk, in the direct eye line of the person being counselled:



Jesus is the answer – now what is your question?

Is this true? Look at the following texts:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with **every spiritual blessing in Christ** (Eph. 1:3).

Every spiritual blessing is found in Christ, not in a meeting, or a conference or through another individual. All spiritual blessings are found in Christ.

My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:2-3).

Notice the ‘mystery of God’. What would people pay to find that out? Imagine the take-up in a university or adult education centre if the answer was guaranteed? Yet in Christ we have it all. In Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are known.

...you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the Head over every power and authority (Col. 2:10).

Everything we need

There’s a line in the film *Jerry Maguire* where Tom Cruise says to his girl, ‘You complete me’. A bit sentimental perhaps. But look at Jesus. He does make us complete. He gives us fullness through His suffering, death and resurrection.

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness (2 Pet. 1:2-3).

Jesus gives everything we need to live a godly life. But I've failed before? His reply is – in me is everything you need. But you don't know where I live? His reply is – in me is everything you need. But others have written me off? His reply is – in me is everything you need.

Whatever your excuse for not being godly, His reply is always the same:

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness (2 Pet. 1:3).

Learn about Jesus. This is the reason God has spoken clearly about Him.

The Bible makes a difference

▷ **The Bible equips us for every good work because it's God's book about Jesus**
(2 Tim. 3:16-17)

▷ **The Bible's truth about Jesus helps us to live a life separate from the world**
(2 Pet. 1:2-4)

▷ **The truth about Jesus makes us contented, happy and free**
(Luke 11:28 and James 1:25)

The Bible builds the perfect church

Not new ideas, changing the way things are done or even freshening up the services (Eph. 4:11-26). The Bible not only applies to our individual lives but to our church life. People say, 'You'll never find the perfect church.' But I'm going to it one day and I want my church on earth to reflect it. The Bible tells us how we can make the church attain to the full measure of Christ.

Written for the situation we're in

If you are accused by your conscience, the Bible says He is your Advocate.

If you don't understand life, the Bible says he is your Prophet.

If you are guilty of sin, the Bible says he is your High Priest.

If you feel hated and out of control, the Bible says he is your King, the King of Kings.

If you are confused about the purpose of your life, the Bible says he is the Way.

If you feel unsatisfied, the Bible says he is your bread and water.

It doesn't matter what mess we are in, there is a promise in the Bible about Jesus that will help. In fact the Bible will turn me into a person who will love God and love like God. Read how men have had faith in Christ and found this to be true. Be warned by men who have rejected Him and see the consequences.

Does He understand me? Sometimes I can hardly understand myself, yet I know that He knows all about me. After all isn't He God?

The Puritan, Thomas Brooks once wrote:

Christ has come from the eternal heart of his Father to a region of sorrow and death;

*that God should be manifested in the flesh, the Creator made a creature;
that he that was clothed with glory should be wrapped with rags of
flesh;*

*he that filled heaven and earth with his glory should be cradled in a
manger;*

that the God of the law should be subject to the law;

the God of the circumcision circumcised;

the God that made the heavens working as a carpenter for Joseph;

that he that binds the devils in chains should be tempted;

that he, who owns the world and everything in it should hunger and thirst;

that the God of strength should be weary;

*the Judge of all flesh should be condemned;
the God of life put to death;
that he that is one with the Father should cry out of misery, 'My God, My
God why have you forsaken me?';
that he that had the keys of death and hell should lie in another man's
tomb;
that his head, before whom the angels cast their crowns, should be
crowned with thorns;
that his eyes, purer than the sun, should be shut by the darkness of death;
those ears, which heard nothing but the hallelujahs of angels and saints,
should hear the blasphemies of the crowd;
that mouth and tongue, that spoke as never any man spoke, should be
accused of blasphemy;
those hands, that held the sceptre of heaven itself, should be nailed to the
cross for human sin;
his every sense irritated,
with the spear and the nails,
the smell of death,
the taste of vinegar and gall,
the sound of curses,
the sight of his mother and disciples mourning for him;
his soul was without comfort and forsaken...¹*

He understands you and me.

He has taken such huge steps to get rid of our sin. Now He commands and empowers us to love God and love like God.

Each time we read the Bible we must ask, how does understanding Jesus teach me to love God and love like God?

Only when we understand this, have we really understood properly.

(ENDNOTES)

¹ Thomas Brooks, Volume 1, pages 17-18.