

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU'LL EVER STUDY

A SURVEY OF THE BIBLE

VOLUME 1:
THE OLD TESTAMENT

starr meade

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The Most Important Thing You'll Ever Study: A Survey of the Bible, vol. 1: The Old Testament

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To all parents who are diligent in giving their children
a thorough knowledge of God's Word.

Quick Start

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

You can use this book in one of two ways:

1. As a supplement, as you read through the entire Bible.
To do this, read the Bible passage this book gives inside the shaded icons in the margins, and then work through the portion of this book that discusses some highlights and themes from that section. After finishing one section, go on to the next Bible passage this book gives in the next shaded icon. Little by little, you will read the whole Bible, and as you do, this book will give you some pointers and help you keep the big picture in view.
2. As a workbook that guides you through an overview of the Bible.
To do this, read just the Bible passages required for answering the questions. These are in **bold letters**, and are indicated by the book symbol in the margins. This will give you an overview of the Bible, so that you can then return to it later and read the entire Bible on your own.



Bible
Passage



For a more detailed explanation of this book, turn to Getting Started on the next page.

Getting Started

If you are a typical student, you have a number of different subjects to study. Every now and then, you just have to ask about one or another of them, “Why do I have to study *this*? When am I ever going to need to know *this*?” Most teachers will give you all kinds of reasons for valuing their particular subjects. If you are a typical student, however, you don’t always find those reasons convincing.

For some mysterious reason, with all the studying that goes on of all the different subjects, one subject usually remains neglected. That subject is Bible. Even in the homes of Christians who believe the most important thing in life is their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, Bible is seldom taught and studied with the seriousness that other subjects—math, for instance—receive. People may read their Bibles sometimes (at least, parts of them). They may take them to church and follow along when the pastor reads Scripture before the sermon. They may even memorize little bits and pieces of their Bibles. But they seldom study them. They don’t work through the Bible, from beginning to end, to understand its “big picture.” They don’t study its sixty-six different books the way they might study a science textbook or a work of classical literature.

This is puzzling if we understand that the only way to know what God is like with any precision is to pay attention to what he has revealed about himself. Although we can see that there is a God when we look around us at what he has made, we learn very little *about* him in that way. To know what God is like, what he requires of us, and how we can be in a right relationship with him, we depend on him to tell us. He is so far above us that we would never figure these things out on our own. God, being God, can do whatever he pleases in whatever way he chooses. He could have revealed himself to us by causing sudden thoughts or feelings about himself in each of our individual brains—like the little light bulbs that go on in characters’ minds in

cartoons. He could have chosen to reveal himself by regular announcements from heaven that everyone could hear. He could have waited for the invention of video technology that would enable him to reveal himself through a series of images flashing by on movie or television screens.

But God chose none of those means. When God chose to reveal himself to human beings, he chose to do it by means of a book—sixty-six books, to be exact, all of which would form a unified whole with a beginning and an end, to which nothing else needs to be added. So if we want to know what God has revealed—if we want to know *God*—we will have to do that by means of the book he gave.

What do we do with a book? We read it—from beginning to end, straight through, more than once if it's good and has a lot to say. But few people read their Bibles that way. If a teacher assigned *Moby Dick* for you to read, you would be foolish to open at random to a page and read it, then find another page two hundred pages later and read it, then close the book, confident that you had understood *Moby Dick*. Although we all recognize the foolishness of that approach with any other book, we fail to see that this is how most of us read the Bible—a passage here, and a passage there, confident that we have understood the meaning. We need to read the whole Bible, each book straight through and all of them together, to see God's overall message in it.

Of course, if a book has any substance and complexity to it (and the Bible certainly does), then we need to do more than just breeze through it once—or even several times—if we wish to gather all its meaning. A book with important things to say needs to be studied, analyzed, and thought about. Each of the sixty-six books in the Bible has at least one main argument and one important point to make—usually more. We should want to be sure we have followed the arguments and understood the points for each of those books. That will require study, probably with a pencil in hand, and certainly with our minds turned on!

Sometimes people worry that studying the Bible in the way I'm describing will fill the student's head with facts that he will be proud of knowing. They worry that such a student will not go on to love the truths he finds in Scripture and will fail to live by them. People sometimes refer to this as "head knowledge instead of heart knowledge." Certainly the Bible is not just any book, and our goal is never *just* to know the information it holds. God requires us to let his Word affect our hearts; he requires us to change our attitudes and our lifestyles so that we think and do what the Bible tells us to. But surely we must *begin* by *knowing* what it says.

So resist the common approach to the Bible that treats it like a box of fortune cookies. With a box of fortune cookies, you reach in, grab a handful at random, break them open, and read the short writings inside. Instead, treat your Bible like the *book* it is—a book to be loved and obeyed, but a book nonetheless, to be read and studied.

Let me encourage you to begin now a lifetime of Bible *study*. I have no hesitation in assuring you that this is a subject you need to know! It offers benefits not only for your entire life, but for eternity as well.

This particular study guide is an introduction to the whole Bible. It will give you an overview of God's Word, and is meant to be the very beginning of your studies in the Bible. You may have learned a number of Bible stories when you were a child. This study guide will give you the big picture of the whole Bible, showing you how those individual stories relate to each other and, together, comprise the whole message God reveals in his Word. You can read this book in one of two ways (we've already reviewed this briefly in the *Quick Start* section):

1. You can use it as a supplement as you read through the entire Bible. In that case, you would read the Bible passage this book gives inside the shaded icons in the margins, and then work through the portion of this book that discusses some highlights and themes from that section. You would then go on to the next Bible passage this book gives in shaded letters. Little by little, you would read the whole Bible, with some pointers from this book and some help in keeping the big picture in view.
2. Or you could work through this book first, reading just the Bible passages required for answering the questions. (These are **in bold letters**, and are marked "**Read.**") This would give you an overview of the Bible, so you could then return to it later and read the entire Bible on your own.

Either way, this book will require Bible reading and study on your part.

However you choose to use this book, there are four things to keep in mind as you study the Bible. First, because it is a book like any other book, it has a main character. We sometimes make the mistake of thinking the *humans* in Bible stories are the main characters: Noah, Abraham, David, Esther, etc. In that case, we usually look for how they provide us with a good example to imitate, or a bad example to avoid. God's primary purpose in Scripture, however, is not to give us human models to admire and imitate, but to reveal to us who *he* is and what *he* is like. God himself is the main character of Scripture. That means that in every story we read, we should be looking for *God*. What does *he* do in the story? What do we learn about him from what he does?

Secondly, because the Bible is a book like any other book, one of the most important things to know in order to understand it is the author's intention—and by that, I mean the human author's intention. Each of the sixty-six books in the Bible had a human author. That author had a reason for writing his particular portion of

Scripture. Perhaps he was recounting the history of a certain time. If so, he had a reason for telling it. His reason for writing determined which events he included and which ones he left out. Or perhaps the author was writing a letter. In that case, he had a particular person or group to whom he was writing, and he wrote what he wrote with a particular purpose. Maybe his readers had sent him a letter with questions his letter was answering. Or maybe he had heard about some problems they were having and he wanted to help them. Although all Scripture was given by God, it was given through ordinary human authors who, like ordinary authors everywhere, had a reason for writing what they wrote. Knowing *why* they wrote will go a long way in helping a student understand *what* they wrote.

That brings us to the third thing to keep in mind about Bible study. The Bible is a book, like any other book—in most ways. There is, of course, a major difference. Although ordinary human authors wrote the Bible, each one carefully choosing his own words in order to say what he wanted to say, Scripture is also the Word of God and all of it comes to us from God. The Bible itself says that “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (some translations) or “inspired by God” (other translations; 2 Tim. 3:16). The Bible is not *just* a book by human writers, each using his own words and expressing his thoughts and concerns to a specific audience. The Bible is also *God’s* Word to people in all times and all places. Because humans wrote the Bible’s books, we should use the same methods to study it that we would use to study any book. At the same time, since the whole Bible is the Word of God, there are some ways in which we must *not* treat it like any other book. We may not pick and choose what we will believe from the Bible, or what we will agree with. If we find the Bible contradicts something we always thought was true, we must give up our idea and accept the Bible’s. All our beliefs, opinions, and preferences must bow before the truth God reveals in Scripture. And because it is the Word of the Ruler of the universe, the Bible is to be obeyed. God does not give us the option of learning what he wants and then choosing whether or not we will do it. He reveals his will to us in order that we may obey him. “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29). “You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently” (Ps. 119:4). “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22).

The fourth thing to remember in Bible study is one other way in which Scripture is unique. Although it is not difficult to understand and anyone who reads it can grasp its ideas, at the same time, because of sin’s effect on us, we must have the help of the Holy Spirit to truly grasp and to love what God wants us to know from his Word. A person could read the Bible and understand its ideas well enough to explain them to someone else, and yet not be moved by those ideas to love, worship, and obey

God. In that case, although the reader grasped the Bible's concepts, he did not truly understand it, as God wants it to be understood. That kind of understanding requires the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. When we read the Bible for ourselves, we need to depend on God the Holy Spirit to shine his light in our sin-darkened minds so that we truly see what it says. When we share God's Word with others, we need to pray that God will help them to understand it, because apart from him, they never will. "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law" (Ps. 119:18).

One more thing: don't expect Bible study to be easy. Studying *anything*, no matter how much we love it, requires diligence and work. And don't expect it to always be fun or exciting. There are places in Scripture where you will probably get bogged down and will even wonder, "Why in the world did God include this in his Word?" Remember that you have a lifetime to study. Eventually, you will come to a place where you will appreciate even those parts of the Bible that seem most uninteresting now. Meanwhile, trust God to have had a good reason for including those portions, and work at becoming acquainted with all of Scripture, even the hard parts. Remember that the Bible is God's revelation of himself to us. It is well worth the diligence and the hard work required to get to know it well.

The Books of the Bible and General Information

We divide the books of the Bible into a number of different categories. As we work through our Bible overview, work on memorizing the books of the Bible in their divisions, if you do not already have them memorized. If you have already memorized the books of the Bible and their divisions, take this opportunity to review them. The sad fact is, you will eventually forget whatever you memorize but fail to use or review!

Old Testament Books

Law

Genesis	Leviticus	Deuteronomy
Exodus	Numbers	

The first division of books is the Law. It contains the first five books, written by Moses when he led the Israelites from slavery in Egypt up to the edge of the land God had promised to give them. These books provide many stories from Israel's early history. All but Genesis also contain large portions of nothing but laws for the nation of Israel to live by in the land God would give them.

History

Joshua	1–2 Samuel	Ezra
Judges	1–2 Kings	Nehemiah
Ruth	1–2 Chronicles	Esther

The history books take up Israel's story where the Law books leave off. At the end of Deuteronomy, Moses had reminded God's people of all he had done for them and of the covenant they had with him. They were poised to enter the Promised Land as Deuteronomy ended. In Joshua, the people conquered Canaan and began to live in it. The books of Judges through 2 Chronicles provide an account of the Israelites' life in the land, from early struggles to a peak of glory under David and Solomon, through a decline into idolatry and immorality. At the ends of Kings and Chronicles, we have the sad tale of Israel's defeat by its enemies, at which time the people were taken away as captives to live in foreign countries. Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the captives' later return to the land. Esther gives us a story of God's intervention on behalf of his people while foreign kings ruled over them. The history books are not intended to just give facts and names, but they show the Bible's main character, God, at work to keep his promises, carry out his threats, and work out the plans and purposes he has for his people.

Poetry

Job	Proverbs	Song of Solomon
Psalms	Ecclesiastes	

The five books of poetry are grouped together because all are written in the form of Hebrew poetry. While Hebrew poetry does not rhyme like English poetry often does, there is a specific form to Hebrew poetry that makes it poetry. We will look at this when we get to these books in our study.

Major Prophets

Isaiah	Lamentations	Daniel
Jeremiah	Ezekiel	

Minor Prophets

Hosea	Jonah	Zephaniah
Joel	Micah	Haggai
Amos	Nahum	Zechariah
Obadiah	Habakkuk	Malachi

Prophets wrote all of the books found in these last two divisions of the Old Testament. These books share specific characteristics always found in prophetic books. In modern English, "major" most often means more important or better somehow

than a similar thing that is “minor.” In the case of the prophets, however, the terms refer back to their Latin meanings of “large” (major) and “small” (minor). The Major Prophets are the larger books written by prophets, and the Minor Prophets are the smaller ones.

New Testament Books

Gospels

Matthew	Luke
Mark	John

The Gospels all tell of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are not, however, simple biographies. Rather than telling of Jesus’ whole life, the Gospels focus on details and teaching from his three-year ministry. They use far more space to recount his death than an ordinary biography would. Also unlike biographies, the Gospels do not end with the story of Jesus’ death; they all go on to tell of his resurrection and of things he did and said after rising from the dead.

History

Acts

The only New Testament history book shows us the good news about Jesus, or the gospel, going from Jerusalem, where Jesus had died and risen again, out into the rest of the world. As the gospel travels, we see the growth of the early church as well.

Epistles

Paul’s epistles

Romans	Philippians	Titus
1–2 Corinthians	Colossians	Philemon
Galatians	1–2 Thessalonians	
Ephesians	1–2 Timothy	

General epistles

Hebrews	1–2 Peter	Jude
James	1–3 John	

Epistles are letters. As the gospel advanced, churches sprang up all over. All the people in those churches—pastors, elders, and deacons included—were new Christians, since Christianity itself was brand new. These new Christians had many struggles and questions. The epistles are letters from the apostles (or people who worked with the apostles) to these churches. Some of the letters are meant simply to encourage, some are meant to answer specific questions, some are meant to correct, and some are meant to scold severely. All have the ultimate goal of helping Christians in these churches grow in their faith.

New Testament Prophecy

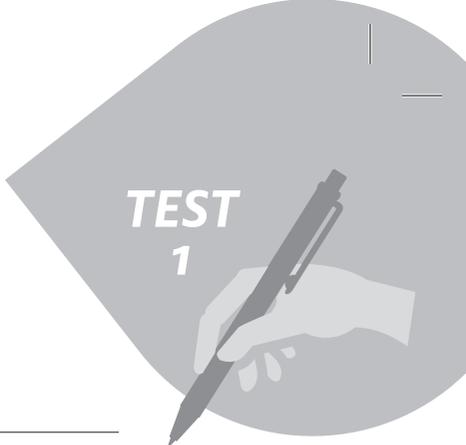
Revelation

The Bible's last book was written to encourage persecuted Christians.



Test Time! Even though you have not yet covered very many pages in this book, you've covered a great deal of information! As soon as you have the books of the Bible with their divisions memorized, take Test #1 on the following page.

Books of the Bible and General Information



Short answer: Write the correct answer in the space provided.

1. Besides showing us, through creation, that he exists and that he is wise and powerful, what is the main way God has chosen to reveal himself to people? In a

_____.

2. What two things do we do with books that we should also do with God's word?

a. _____

b. _____

3. Who is the main character of every Bible story and of every Bible passage? _____

4. Because the books in the Bible were written by human authors with specific audiences in mind, it is important to know the author's

_____.

5. Because the Bible is God's word ("God-breathed"), there are some ways we relate to the Bible that we don't relate to any other book. What are two responses to God's word that we should have because it is not just any book, but God's word?

We should _____

We should _____

6. What problem prevents us from understanding the Bible spiritually?

7. What has God given to believers to help with this problem?

8. What is the first division of the Bible?

9. Who wrote the books in this first division?

10. Stories in these books give the history of Israel up until the time when

25. Who wrote the New Testament epistles, and to whom were they written?

26. What was a main purpose of the last book of the Bible?
