

**CHAD BIRD**

1517 Scholar-In-Residence



READING & INTERPRETING  
**The Bible**

OFFICIAL COURSE GUIDEBOOK



READING & INTERPRETING  
The Bible





# Table of Contents



**06** What Is That You're Reading?

**09** Reading Small

**13** Reading Big

**17** Reading Old Testament Narratives and Law

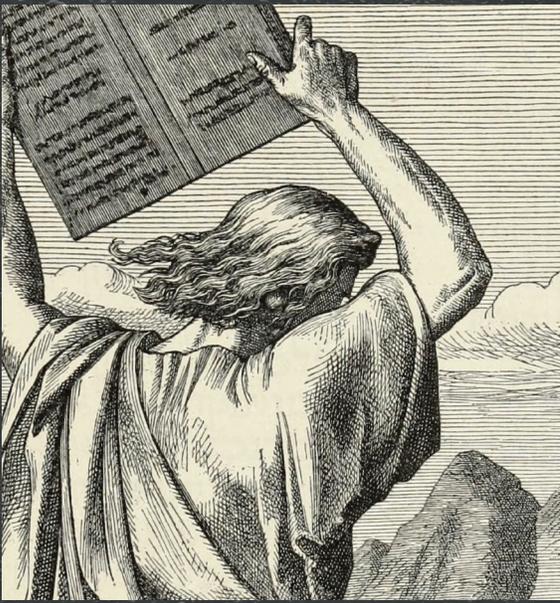
**21** Reading OT Prophecy, Psalms, and Wisdom

**25** Reading the Gospels and Acts

**29** Reading the Epistles and Revelation

# Introduction





## WELCOME TO THE COURSE

---

Welcome to **Reading and Interpreting the Bible!** In this course, we will journey through the grand library of Scripture – learning what the Bible is, how its many books form one unified story, and how we can better understand its message. You will discover practical tools and approaches for studying the Bible’s different genres, from Old Testament narratives and laws to poetry, prophecy, Gospels, epistles, and the book of Revelation. By the end, the goal is that you will be equipped to read the Bible *contextually*, *canonically*, and *Christologically* – that is, always mindful of context, in harmony with the whole of Scripture, and with an eye toward how all Scripture points to Jesus Christ. We are excited to have you on this journey to grow in confidence and delight in God’s Word.

---

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

---

Each chapter contains discussion questions taken from the lecture material. Discussion questions are designed to think through the material and to apply it to our reading and study of the Bible. Individuals or groups engaging with the questions should not feel pressured to complete all of them. Sometimes, one or two questions will be enough to provoke an engaging conversation.

CHAPTER ONE

# What Is That You're Reading?



...ince." 5  
the earth;  
...all the nation

...may  
whose name is the LORD,  
are the Most High over all the

**84** *My Soul Longs for the Courts of the LORD*  
TO THE CHOIRMASTER: ACCORDING TO  
THE GITTITH. 2 A PSALM OF THE SONS OF  
KORAH

1 How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O LORD of hosts!  
My soul longs, and faints  
for the courts of the LORD;  
my heart yearns to see  
the LORD my God.

5 Will you be angry with  
Will you prolong  
generations  
6 Will you not revive  
that your pe  
7 Show us your  
and gr  
8 Let ne

## SUMMARY

---

Chapter 1 introduces the Bible itself as the foundation for all our study. The goal of this lesson is to understand *what* the Bible is and why we need guidance in interpreting it. We learn that the Bible is both *many books* and *one book* – a collection of 66 diverse writings yet sharing one unified message. We discuss how the Scriptures came to us (written in three ancient languages, preserved and translated through history) and why simply reading on our own can still leave us with misunderstandings. This chapter emphasizes that interpretation is always happening and that context and guidance are crucial for truly understanding the “good news about Jesus” that all of Scripture proclaims. By recognizing the Bible’s unity and central focus on Christ, we set the stage for all the interpretive principles to come.

## OUTLINE OF MAIN TOPICS COVERED

---

- The Bible as *many books yet one book*: diverse writings (narratives, poetry, prophecies, letters, etc.) with a unified story and a single divine Author behind human authors.
- How we got the Bible: the process of oral tradition, writing, compilation, and transmission through manuscripts; the role of translation (e.g. Hebrew/Greek original texts, the Septuagint, modern translations).
- Everyday examples of interpretation show that context matters in understanding any communication.
- The importance of genre: understanding that different parts of the Bible (law, history, poetry, prophecy, etc.) have different “rules of the game” for reading. Not reading all parts of Scripture the same way (e.g. a ritual law vs. a psalm vs. a parable).
- **Goals of the Course – The Three C’s**: A preview that by the end of the course, students should be able to read the Bible **Contextually**, **Canonically**, and **Christologically**. (These three key approaches are introduced here and will be emphasized throughout the course.)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *When asked "What is the Bible?", how would you describe the unique nature of the Bible's composition and message in your own words? Consider its many human authors and books yet one overarching divine story and divine author.*
2. *In Acts 8, Philip asks the Ethiopian eunuch if he understands what he's reading. Why do you think guidance is sometimes needed to understand Scripture, even for experienced readers?*
3. *Have you ever encountered a situation where a Bible verse was misunderstood because it was read out of context? What does this teach about the importance of reading passages in their proper context?*
4. *The chapter mentions different genres in the Bible (history, law, poetry, prophecy, etc.). Why is it important to recognize the genre of a biblical passage before interpreting it? Can you think of an example of a genre rule that affects meaning?*
5. *How do you reconcile the idea that Scripture is clear enough for ordinary people to understand, with the fact that we still need interpretation skills and sometimes help from teachers or resources?*
6. *The lesson states that "interpretation is always happening" whenever we read. In what ways do our own assumptions or cultural backgrounds act as filters when we read the Bible, and how can we become more aware of them?*
7. *Chapter 1 emphasizes the unity of the Bible's message. In your view, what is the common thread or meta-narrative that ties the whole Bible together from Genesis to Revelation? Reflect on the statement that every story and teaching in Scripture finds its fulfillment or answer in Christ. How might this perspective change the way you read an Old Testament narrative, psalm, proverb, law, or prophecy?*
8. *If a friend said, "Why do we need special methods to read the Bible? Can't we just read it like any other book?", how would you respond based on what you learned in this chapter?*

## CHAPTER TWO

# Reading Small



## SUMMARY

---

Chapter 2 shifts focus to the micro level of Scripture, teaching us how to “read small,” i.e. to pay close attention to the details of the biblical text. The goal of this lesson is to help us slow down and *see what is actually there* in Scripture rather than what we assume is there. We learn that it’s easy to overlook important details – an idea illustrated by a famous experiment where observers miss a man in a gorilla suit because they’re not looking for it! Similarly, we might miss key words or themes in a Bible passage if we rush. This chapter introduces practical techniques: asking careful **who/what/when/where/how/why** questions, comparing translations, noting textual variations, doing word studies responsibly, and even writing out verses by hand and praying through them. By developing these habits, we train ourselves to notice the richness and nuance of Scripture, “reading slowly, carefully, and repeatedly” so that we truly *see what is there* in God’s Word.

## OUTLINE OF MAIN TOPICS COVERED

---

- *The “Gorilla” illustration:* An experiment demonstrates how we can miss obvious things when focused elsewhere. The analogy shows why we must be intentional to notice details in Bible reading.
- **Hermeneutics as “seeing what is there”:** Interpretation begins with careful observation. We are encouraged to read what the text actually says, not just what we *think* it says or have heard before. This involves slowing down and sometimes reading the same passage multiple times.
- **The S.O.C. Rule (Slowly, Often, Carefully):** Practical advice that every word matters. Reading slowly and repeatedly helps catch details. Writing out a verse or passage can enforce slow reading and reveal details you might skip otherwise.

- **Asking the right questions:** Use journalistic questions for observation. Identify *Who* is speaking or acting, *What* type of literature this is, *When* it was written or the timing of events, *Where* it takes place, *How* the author communicates (literary devices), and *Why* (what purpose or lesson). Cultivating a “holy curiosity” about every detail in the text leads to deeper understanding.
- **Translation comparisons:** Understanding that different Bible translations (from more formal word-for-word to more dynamic thought-for-thought) might phrase verses differently. Comparing translations can act as a built-in commentary and highlight things you might otherwise miss.
- **Word studies:** Investigating the original Greek or Hebrew terms can shed light on meaning (for example, noticing where the same original word is used in multiple places).
- **Final tips for “reading small”:** Two practical habits – *Copy Scripture by hand* to slow down, and *turn verses into prayer*. These practices help internalize the text and engage not just the mind but the heart. By praying the words of Scripture, we not only observe carefully but also let the text search us, revealing personal applications and deeper insight.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *The "Did You See the Gorilla?" experiment shows how focus can cause us to miss the obvious. In your own Bible reading, what kinds of "gorillas" (important elements) might you be overlooking, and how can you adjust your approach to notice them?*
2. *Think of a time you read a familiar Bible passage and later discovered a detail you had never noticed before. What helped you finally see that detail, and how did it change your understanding of the passage?*
3. *How might intentionally reading a passage "slowly, often, and carefully" differ from the way most of us typically read the Bible? What practical steps could you take to slow yourself down when reading Scripture?*
4. *Why do you think asking questions (Who? What? When? Where? How? Why?) is a useful strategy when studying a Bible text? Can you pick one of these questions and apply it to a verse or story you're reading now?*
5. *Compare two different Bible translations (for example, ESV vs. NLT) of the same verse. What differences do you notice in wording, and what insights (or new questions) do those differences give you about the verse's meaning?*
6. *This chapter encourages writing out verses by hand. How do you think manually writing a Scripture passage might deepen your observation or help you notice things you missed when just reading? Try it with a short psalm or paragraph and share your experience.*
7. *"Pray the verses" was a tip given in this lesson. Choose a verse or short passage and try turning it into a personal prayer. What effect does praying the Scripture have on your understanding or emotional connection to the text?*
8. *Imagine you are leading a small group Bible study. How would you help the group members practice "reading small" with a passage? What exercises or questions would you pose to get everyone to slow down and examine the text closely?*

CHAPTER THREE

# Reading Big



## SUMMARY

---

Chapter 3 zooms out to the macro level. It emphasizes the importance of “reading big”—engaging with large portions of Scripture to understand the full message, context, and flow of thought. Just as a soldier wouldn’t read a love letter one page per week, biblical books—especially letters—were meant to be read in full. Many books of the Bible can be read or listened to in under an hour, making this approach very practical. Reading big helps guard against “verse-itis,” the misinterpretation that comes from isolating verses from their context. The lesson outlines various strategies: reading big in a single book, to see structure and recurring themes; in a single author, to grasp their voice and theological focus; across a testament, to see interconnections; and across the entire Bible, to trace the grand narrative of redemption. Themes such as servanthood, head-crushing, water, and mountains reveal how interconnected Scripture is. Like a favorite movie, the more you return to the Bible, the more you see how its parts fit together. Reading big complements reading small—both are essential for interpreting Scripture faithfully and seeing the gospel throughout. Ultimately, the goal is to be immersed in God’s Word and grow in understanding of his grace revealed in Christ.

## OUTLINE OF MAIN TOPICS COVERED

---

- **Introduction to Reading Big:** Building on the previous lesson about reading small (focusing on details), this session introduces the complementary practice of reading big—taking in large sections of Scripture to grasp the broader message and narrative.
- **The Letter Analogy:** Using the example of a WWII soldier receiving a heartfelt letter, the lesson explains that biblical letters, like Paul’s epistles, were intended to be read in full to understand their complete argument and emotional tone.
- **Feasibility of Reading Big:** Emphasizes that 41 books of the Bible (20 Old Testament, 21 New Testament) can be read or listened to in under an hour, making it highly doable even with a busy schedule.

- **Dangers of “Verse-itis”:** Warns against isolating verses from their context, which can lead to misinterpretation—illustrated with Ecclesiastes 9:5 and its surrounding meaning within the book’s themes.
- **Reading Big in One Book:** Encourages reading entire books repeatedly to understand genre, structure, authorial intent, and recurring themes (e.g., God’s preference for the second-born in Genesis).
- **Reading Big in One Author:** Suggests reading all the writings of a single biblical author to become familiar with their style, vocabulary, theological focus, and literary devices.
- **Reading Big Across a Testament:** Recommends studying how books within the Old or New Testament interrelate—for example, comparing Paul’s journeys in Acts with his epistles to those churches.
- **Reading Big Across the Whole Bible:** Stresses the importance of seeing Scripture as one interconnected narrative. Using the image of a spiderweb, the lesson shows how every part of the Bible is linked by recurring themes like servanthood, victory over enemies, God’s use of water and mountains, and progressive revelation.
- **Practical Application and Encouragement:** Advises picking one or more books or authors to focus on throughout the year and using reading plans to cover the Bible annually, which deepens understanding and reveals the gospel throughout all of Scripture.
- **Conclusion:** Reinforces the dual approach—read small for detail, and read big for context. The more you engage the Bible as a whole, the more clearly you’ll see its unified message of God’s grace in Christ.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Discuss the analogy of the soldier's love letter. What point was this making about how we should approach reading New Testament letters or any Bible book?*
2. *Have you ever read an entire book of the Bible in one sitting? If so, how did that experience differ from reading just a few verses? If not, what book might you start with to try this approach, and why?*
3. *Chapter 3 talks about "Versitis" – focusing on isolated verses without context. Can you think of an example where knowing the whole chapter or book changed how you understood a single verse or story?*
4. *Consider the idea of recurring patterns in the Bible (like younger siblings chosen over older, or barren women given children). Why do you think God might have designed these patterns into the biblical story? How do they enhance our understanding of Jesus and the Gospel?*
5. *How does knowing the broad sweep of the Bible's story (creation, fall, redemption, new creation) help you make sense of difficult smaller passages? Can you connect a specific passage to one of these big "movements" of the salvation story?*
6. *Can you think of a story (biblical or otherwise) where the ending completely changed your understanding of the beginning? How might this apply to biblical books like Job or even the whole Bible?*
7. *How might reading related passages (like a prophecy and its Gospel fulfillment, or two accounts of the same event) enrich your study? Can you share an example of where this has been helpful or might be helpful?*
8. *After learning about reading big, what is one practical change you plan to make in your Bible reading habits? (For instance, scheduling time to read whole books, keeping track of repeated themes, etc.) How do you hope this will improve your understanding of God's Word?*

CHAPTER FOUR

# Reading Old Testament Narratives and Law



## SUMMARY

---

In this session, we shift from big-picture Bible reading to examining specific genres—starting with Old Testament narrative and law. Recognizing genre is crucial for interpretation, as each literary form reveals God’s truth in distinct ways.

Narrative comprises about 40% of the Old Testament and is a primary way God communicates. These stories are not isolated moral tales but part of a unified salvation narrative that begins in Genesis and culminates in Christ. Readers are encouraged to move beyond moralistic interpretations of characters and instead focus on what these stories reveal about God’s redemptive work. The overarching narrative unfolds in five stages: Creation to Patriarchs, Exodus and Wilderness, Conquest and Judges, Kings and Decline, and Exile and Return. Understanding where each book fits within this story enhances comprehension.

Key elements to observe in narratives include setting, characters, and themes—especially the recurring motif of “God’s people in God’s place.” Typology also plays a key role, as early figures and events “rhyme” with later ones, ultimately pointing to Christ.

The session also covers Old Testament law, highlighting its purpose in shaping Israel’s identity under the Old Covenant. Though Christians are no longer bound by most Old Covenant laws, these passages still reveal God’s character and deepen our understanding of the New Testament. Readers are encouraged to read both small (details) and big (context), always asking how the passage points to Christ.

## OUTLINE OF MAIN TOPICS COVERED

---

- **Introduction and Transition:** The session marks a shift from broad reading strategies to examining specific genres, starting with Old Testament narrative and law. Understanding these genres is foundational for interpreting Scripture accurately.

- **The Importance of Genre:** Recognizing the literary form of a biblical passage is essential. Narrative and law each function differently in communicating God’s truth and must be approached with that in mind.
- **Old Testament Narrative as Salvation Story:** Narrative is a natural human form of communication, making it an effective vehicle for divine revelation. These stories are part of a larger, unified salvation narrative that begins in Genesis and culminates in Christ.
- **Moving Beyond Moralism:** The session challenges the common habit of reading Old Testament stories as moral examples. Instead, it calls readers to focus on what the narrative reveals about God’s saving work through broken people.
- **Big Picture of Biblical History:** The salvation story is outlined in five stages: (1) Creation to Patriarchs, (2) Exodus and Wilderness, (3) Conquest and Judges, (4) Kings and Decline, and (5) Exile and Return. Understanding this timeline helps situate each book historically and theologically.
- **Reading Narratives Closely:** Readers are encouraged to pay attention to setting, characters, and recurring themes. The central theme of “God’s people in God’s place” runs throughout the Old Testament, pointing ultimately to Jesus and the new creation.
- **Typology and Narrative Patterns:** The concept of typology is introduced—how earlier events and people (like Adam, Noah, or Melchizedek) prefigure Christ and later redemption events.
- **Understanding the Law:** The session explains the purpose of Old Testament law within the context of the Old Covenant. These laws shaped Israel’s distinct identity and illustrated their relationship with a holy God.
- **Law’s Relevance for Christians:** Though Christians are no longer under the Old Covenant, the law still reveals God’s character and enriches our understanding of Jesus and the New Testament.
- **Practical Application:** Whether reading narratives or laws, the key is to read both “small” (attending to detail) and “big” (tracing the context and redemptive arc), always **asking how the text leads us to Christ.**

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does understanding where a story fits in the overall salvation narrative change the way you interpret it? What's an example of a story you now see differently because of its place in the broader biblical timeline?
2. What are the dangers of reading Old Testament narratives only as moral lessons or character studies? How might this limit our understanding of God's role in the story?
3. Why do you think God chose to communicate so much of his truth through narrative instead of straightforward teaching? How does storytelling help shape your understanding of who God is?
4. The theme of "God's people in God's place" runs throughout the Old Testament. How have you seen this theme develop in the biblical story, and what does it teach us about God's desires for his people?
5. How does typology (biblical "rhyming") help connect Old Testament stories to the life and work of Jesus? Can you think of a type or pattern that has stood out to you?
6. What makes certain Old Testament characters relatable or significant, even when their actions are clearly flawed? How do their failures point us to the need for Christ?
7. How do cultural and historical contexts, like geography or political circumstances, shape the meaning of Old Testament stories? Why is it important to consider these details when interpreting Scripture?
8. In what ways do the Old Testament laws reflect God's character, even if they no longer directly apply to Christians? How can reading these laws enrich our view of God's holiness and justice?
9. Why might Christians be tempted to skip or overlook the Law sections in books like Leviticus or Deuteronomy? What have you learned in this session that might help you approach these books differently?
10. How does reading both small (details) and big (context) affect your personal engagement with Scripture? Can you think of a time when doing both helped you see something new in the Bible?



## SUMMARY

---

In this session, we explore how to read and interpret three key sections of the Old Testament: the Prophets, the Psalms, and Wisdom Literature. These genres are deeply poetic and rich with theological depth, requiring attention to their unique literary forms. Hebrew poetry, which undergirds much of this material, is characterized by brevity, vivid imagery, and various forms of parallelism (antithetical, synonymous, and synthetic).

The Prophets were not primarily predictors of the distant future but forth-tellers, preaching God’s Word to their contemporaries. Their message focused on two main failures—faithlessness (idolatry) and lovelessness (injustice)—while also offering profound hope in God’s promises, including the coming of the Messiah. Prophetic vision often blends Christ’s first and second comings, portraying them through a “telescopic” lens.

The Psalms serve as a “little Bible,” containing the full range of biblical themes in poetic form. Divided into five books, they follow the arc of Israel’s story and express the inner life of faith. Christians are invited not just to read but also to pray the Psalms, viewing them as the prayers of Christ and his Church.

Wisdom Literature—Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs—offers insight into living wisely in God’s world. Each book addresses different aspects of life: practical wisdom, suffering, meaning, and love. These writings must be read canonically and Christologically, recognizing that Christ is the embodiment of divine wisdom. Together, these texts shape a holistic view of faithful living in relationship with God.

## OUTLINE OF MAIN TOPICS COVERED

---

- **Introduction to Genres:** The session opens by identifying the focus—Old Testament prophets, Psalms, and wisdom literature—and emphasizes the importance of understanding genre for proper interpretation.

- **Hebrew Poetry Basics:** Much of the content in these sections is written in poetic form. Hebrew poetry is marked by brevity, metaphor, and parallelism (antithetical, synonymous, and synthetic). Unlike English poetry, it doesn't rhyme in sound but in thought.
- **The Prophets as Forth-Tellers:** Prophets primarily spoke to their own generation, calling people to repent and return to God. Their main concerns were **idolatry** (failure of faith) and **injustice** (failure of love), yet they also offered **hopeful visions** of restoration through a coming Messiah.
- **Reading Prophets Theologically:** Prophetic books often blend near and far future events into a unified picture, sometimes collapsing Christ's first and second comings into a single vision—a "telescopic" view.
- **The Psalms as a Little Bible:** The Psalms capture the entire biblical story. They are organized into five books reflecting Israel's history and faith journey. They are intended to be prayed, with Psalms 1 and 2 serving as a Christ-centered entry point.
- **Praying and Interpreting the Psalms:** Each Psalm can be understood as expressing the voice of **Christ (the head)** or the **Church (his body)**. They become our words back to God, rooted in the person and work of Jesus.
- **Wisdom Literature Overview:** Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs offer varied perspectives on wise living. They are not to be read as promises but as theological reflections. Each speaks to life's complexities—Proverbs offers general wisdom, Job wrestles with suffering, Ecclesiastes critiques worldly pursuits, and Song of Songs celebrates divine love.
- **Christological Focus:** All wisdom literature points to **Christ as the embodiment of wisdom**, our true guide, comforter, and lover. These texts call us to live faithfully in the world while rooting our hope and identity in God.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does understanding Hebrew poetry as “thought rhyme” shape the way you interpret the Psalms, prophets, or wisdom books? What examples of poetic structure have helped you see new meaning in the text?
2. In what ways does viewing the prophets as “forth-tellers” rather than “foretellers” change your approach to reading their books? How does this reframe your expectations when you read them?
3. Why is it important to recognize the two main failures addressed by the prophets—faithlessness and lovelessness? How do we recognize these in the text?
4. What does it mean that the prophets often present Christ’s first and second comings as one unified vision—a “telescopic view”? How might this affect how we interpret prophetic promises or warnings?
5. Why are Psalms referred to as a “little Bible”? What does this tell us about their role in both personal devotion and the broader canon of Scripture?
6. What does it look like to pray the Psalms “in, with, and through Christ”? How might this practice deepen your spiritual life or change your prayer habits?
7. How can we avoid reading Proverbs as promises rather than general truths? What are the risks of misinterpreting wisdom sayings in this way?
8. In what ways does the Book of Job challenge the idea of simple cause and effect in the spiritual life? How should we respond when God doesn’t give us clear answers to our suffering?
9. What message does Ecclesiastes offer for people seeking meaning in worldly pleasures or achievements? How does this message still resonate in a modern, success-driven culture?
10. How does interpreting Song of Songs both literally and theologically enrich our understanding of God’s love for his people? What does this tell us about the nature of our relationship with Christ?

## CHAPTER SIX

# Reading the Gospels and Acts



## SUMMARY

---

In Chapter 6, we transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament, exploring how the two are deeply interconnected. The New Testament cannot be fully understood without the Old; together, they tell one unified story of God’s redemptive work. Jesus fulfills the Old Testament promises, and both testaments point to him. Significant cultural and linguistic shifts occurred between Malachi and Matthew, such as the rise of synagogues, Greek-speaking Jews, and the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament—often quoted by New Testament writers.

The four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—each portray Jesus uniquely. Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel’s story and prophecy. Mark is fast-paced and influenced by Isaiah’s imagery of a new exodus. Luke emphasizes prayer, inclusion of the marginalized, and Jesus’ journey toward Jerusalem. John is theological, highlighting Jesus’ divine identity and using rich symbolism. All four Gospels lead to Jesus’ death and resurrection in Jerusalem, the climax of salvation history.

The book of Acts continues the story, showing how Jesus works through his apostles by the power of the Holy Spirit. It traces the gospel’s expansion from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, including Pentecost and the inclusion of Gentiles. The church grows in number and diversity, and Paul emerges as a central figure, planting churches across the Roman world. Acts portrays the spread of God’s people and place, setting the stage for the letters of the New Testament, which will be the focus of the final session.

## OUTLINE OF MAIN TOPICS COVERED

---

- **Continuity Between Testaments:** The New Testament cannot be fully understood without the Old. They form one cohesive narrative of salvation, beginning in Eden and culminating in the New Jerusalem.

- **Historical and Cultural Shifts:** Between Malachi and Matthew, synagogues emerge, Jews disperse across the Roman world, and many speak Greek. The Hebrew Scriptures are translated into Greek (the Septuagint), often used in New Testament quotations.

### **Overview of the Gospels:**

*Matthew:* Emphasizes Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and models his Gospel with echoes of Moses.

*Mark:* Fast-paced and urgent, shaped by Isaiah's vision of a new exodus.

*Luke:* Focuses on prayer, ministry to the marginalized, and the journey to Jerusalem. It continues in the book of Acts.

*John:* Highly theological, focusing on Jesus' divinity, Israel's festivals, and light/dark symbolism.

- **The Role of the Old Testament in the Gospels:** Gospel writers assume familiarity with Old Testament themes and imagery (e.g., Jesus' baptism in the Jordan as a symbolic crossing into new creation).
- **Parables and Miracles:** Jesus uses parables to subvert expectations about the Kingdom of God, while his miracles prefigure the resurrection and new creation.
- **The Cross as Climax:** All Gospels direct the reader to Jerusalem, where Jesus fulfills his mission through death and resurrection, exchanging our sin for his righteousness.

### **The Book of Acts:**

*Describes the continued work of Jesus through his apostles and the Holy Spirit.*

*Documents the gospel's spread from Jerusalem to Rome.*

*Highlights the inclusivity of the kingdom (Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles).*

*Chronicles Paul's missionary journeys and the church's expansion.*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did cultural shifts, such as the rise of synagogues or the spread of Greek language and culture, prepare the world for the New Testament's events and writings? Reflect on how these historical changes influence your interpretation of Scripture and its relevance to God's redemptive plan.
2. How do the distinct portrayals of Jesus in the four Gospels (e.g., Matthew's Messiah-King, Mark's suffering Son of God, Luke's Savior of all, John's divine Word) deepen your understanding of his identity and mission? Choose one Gospel's perspective that resonates with you and explain why, considering how its unique emphasis (e.g., Mark's urgent pacing toward the cross or John's focus on Jesus' divinity) strengthens your faith.
3. Why is it valuable to have four Gospel accounts rather than one, and how does this diversity enhance your reading of Jesus' life? Reflect on a specific event or teaching highlighted uniquely in one Gospel (e.g., Luke's emphasis on prayer or the marginalized) and discuss what this adds to your understanding of Jesus' ministry and the kingdom of God.
4. How would you approach interpreting one of Jesus' parables, such as the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), to uncover its main point? Consider the context (e.g., who Jesus is speaking to, what prompted the parable) and explain how focusing on the central message, rather than minor details, reveals the "scandalous" nature of God's kingdom compared to human expectations.
5. How do Jesus' miracles point to deeper truths about his identity and the kingdom of God? Choose one miracle (e.g., feeding the 5,000 or healing a blind man) and discuss how it reflects themes like resurrection or new creation.
6. How does the spread of the Gospel in Acts 1:8, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, reflect God's plan for his people and place? How does this relate to the divine promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3?
7. How does viewing the Old and New Testaments as a single, continuous salvation story shape your understanding of the Bible's message? Provide an example of an Old Testament reference in the Gospels (e.g., Matthew's genealogy) and explain how it enhances your reading of Jesus' identity and mission.
8. Why is the Old Testament background essential for understanding the Gospels, and how does it change your reading of specific stories? For example, how does knowing Old Testament laws about ritual uncleanness (e.g., for lepers or a hemorrhaging woman) deepen your understanding of Jesus' miracles and interactions?

CHAPTER SEVEN

# Reading the Epistles and Apocalyptic Literature (Revelation)





## SUMMARY

---

Lesson 7 explores how to read and interpret the New Testament letters and the book of Revelation. The epistles—both Paul’s and the general letters—are situational correspondence addressing particular communities, individuals, or issues. Students are encouraged to read each letter in context by considering its author, recipients, historical background, and the occasion prompting its writing. These letters are not systematic theology books but occasional writings that, together, provide a full picture of Christian teaching. Interpretation challenges include cultural distance, incomplete background knowledge, and discerning between time-bound instructions and timeless truths.

The session then shifts to Revelation, highlighting its genre—apocalyptic literature—which relies on symbols and visions to unveil spiritual truths. Revelation is rooted in Old Testament imagery and is best read with a focus on Jesus, its central figure. Rather than a strict timeline of end-times events, Revelation offers a series of overlapping visions that depict Christ’s victory over evil. Students are encouraged to read Revelation symbolically, understanding it as a book of hope for persecuted believers.

Practical guidance is given throughout: read letters in one sitting to grasp their argument, research the Greco-Roman context, trace Old Testament references, and approach Revelation with genre awareness. The session concludes by celebrating the joy of Scripture as a unified testimony to Jesus Christ—from Genesis to Revelation—and encourages continued, prayerful engagement with the Bible.

## OUTLINE OF MAIN TOPICS COVERED

---

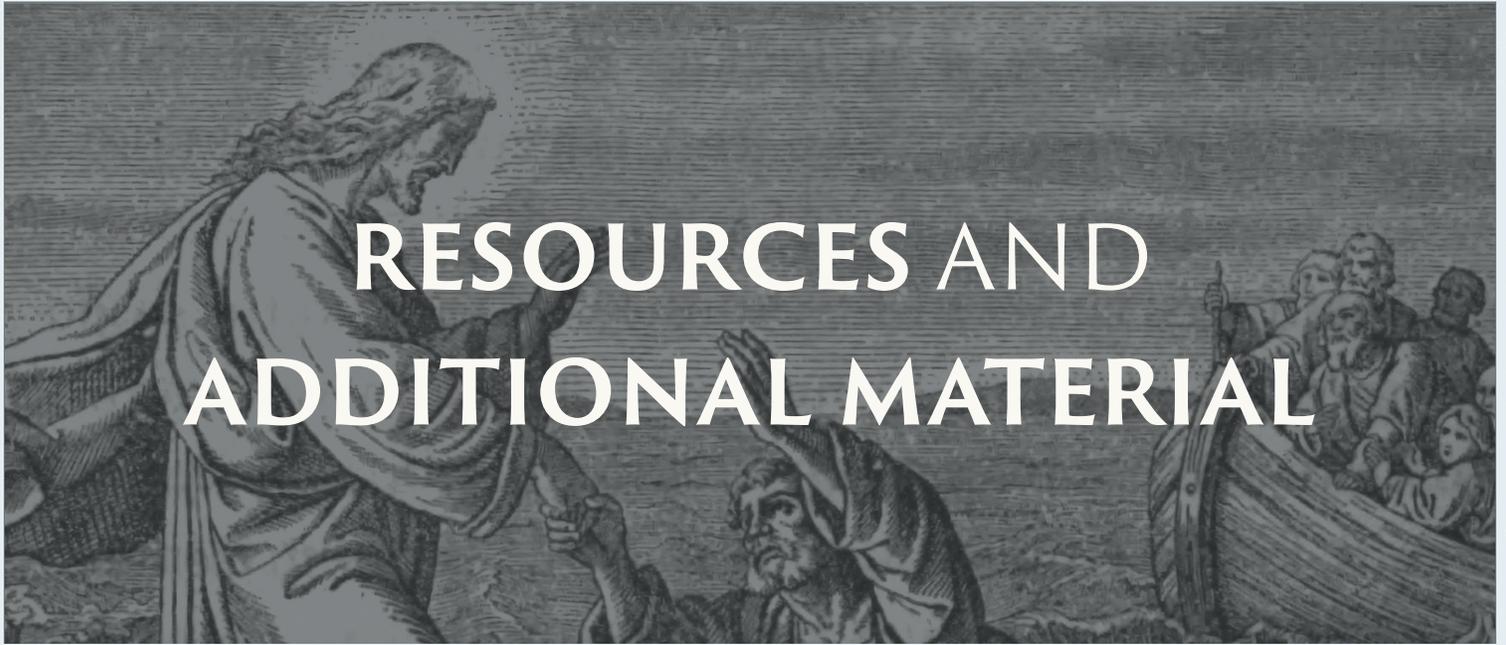
- **Overview of New Testament Letters:** The session introduces the epistles, distinguishing between Paul’s letters—written to churches and individuals—and the general epistles, which address the broader church. Special attention is given to their occasional nature and the diversity of topics they address, like church conflict or doctrinal clarity.

- **Letters as Occasional Writings:** Unlike doctrinal textbooks, these letters respond to real-life issues in early Christian communities. Understanding the specific circumstances, such as cultural conflicts in Corinth or false teachings in Galatia, helps clarify their meaning.
- **Reading Letters in Context:**
  - Consider the author and audience, such as Paul’s relationship to a church or the cultural setting of the city (e.g., Ephesus).
  - Recognize cultural background, like the Greco-Roman polytheistic context.
  - Understand the occasion for writing to appreciate tone and focus, as in Galatians’ defense of grace.
- **Interpretive Challenges:**
  - Letters are one-sided, requiring careful inference.
  - Distinguish cultural-specific practices from universal commands.
  - Bridge the gap of historical distance by studying ancient contexts.
- **Reading Practices:**
  - Read entire letters to follow their logic.
  - Use tools like Bible dictionaries to explore context.
  - Trace Old Testament references to enrich understanding.
- **Interpreting Revelation:**
  - Revelation is apocalyptic and prophetic literature full of vivid symbolism.
  - It unveils Jesus and his victory, not a linear timeline of end times.
  - Understand it as cyclical visions (seals, trumpets, bowls), each retelling the story of Christ’s triumph from different angles.
- **Reading Revelation Well:**
  - Keep the focus on Jesus’ victory.
  - Study the Old Testament to unpack symbols.
  - Embrace the genre and read Revelation symbolically, not literally.
  - View the structure cyclically, not chronologically.
- **Conclusion:**

Scripture is God’s living word that always points to Jesus. Students are encouraged to continue reading and loving the Bible, seeing it as a unified story that brings hope and transformation.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is it important to recognize that New Testament letters are occasional writings, not theological textbooks, and how does this shape our interpretation? Reflect on a specific issue in a letter (e.g., Paul addressing meat sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8) and explain how understanding the context (e.g., Corinth's pagan temple culture) clarifies the passage and guides our expectations as readers.
2. How does the cultural context of a first-century city like Ephesus or Corinth deepen your understanding of Paul's letters? Consider how the Greco-Roman polytheistic world (e.g., Ephesus's Temple of Artemis) contrasts with modern monotheistic assumptions and discuss how this background helps you interpret a specific passage, such as Paul's temple imagery in Ephesians.
3. What challenges arise from the one-sided nature of New Testament letters, and how can we responsibly infer the issues faced by their original recipients? For example, how does knowing the Corinthians wrote to Paul (e.g., 1 Corinthians 7:1) help you piece together their concerns and better understand his response?
4. How can we discern whether a biblical instruction is culturally specific or universally applicable? Use a letter like 1 Corinthians (e.g., head coverings vs. the call to love in chapter 13) and propose criteria (e.g., repetition across Scripture, connection to the gospel, or creation-based principles) to distinguish between cultural practices and timeless commands.
5. How does the Old Testament shape the theology of the epistles and Revelation? Provide an example where an Old Testament reference clarifies a passage (e.g., Hebrews citing Melchizedek from Genesis 14 or Revelation's plagues echoing Exodus) and explain how this connection deepens your understanding of Christ's work.
6. What are the strengths and weaknesses of reading Revelation as a chronological video-like timeline versus a cyclical vision? Reflect on how viewing Revelation as cyclical visions (e.g., seals, trumpets, bowls covering the same period) shifts its impact, emphasizing Jesus' victory as a source of hope rather than a chronological calendar of future events.
7. How can we stay anchored in Christ when interpreting symbolic passages like those in Revelation? Choose a symbol (e.g., the dragon in Revelation 12 or the Lamb) and explore its meaning, using clues from the text or Old Testament, and suggest practical strategies for keeping Christ central while navigating complex imagery.
8. What are some takeaways from the course as a whole? What new strategies have you learned that you can incorporate in your reading and studying of the Scriptures?



## **1517 PODCASTS:**

For further learning and engagement, you may explore the following podcasts which offer biblical insights in accessible formats:

- *40 Minutes in the Old Testament*
- *30 Minutes in the New Testament*
- *Tough Texts*
- *Hidden Streams*
- *Field Guide to the Bible*

## **BIBLE SOFTWARE AND APPS:**

Utilizing digital tools can enhance your study of Scripture:

- *Logos Bible Software* – a comprehensive library and study platform for deep biblical research, including original language tools, commentaries, and cross-references.
- Bible apps like *YouVersion* or *Blue Letter Bible* – YouVersion offers various translations and reading plans; Blue Letter Bible provides study features like interlinear text and concordances.
- *The STEP Bible* (Scripture Tools for Every Person) – a free, user-friendly online tool from Tyndale House with original language helps, multiple translations, and search functions. Visit [stepbible.org](http://stepbible.org)

These resources can aid in digging deeper into Scripture, providing historical context, original language insights, and theological commentary to supplement what you've learned in this course.

## RECOMMENDED READING

To further enrich your understanding of biblical interpretation and to provide multiple perspectives and tools, here is a list of recommended books. These works come from respected authors and cover various aspects of reading and understanding the Bible. Consider consulting them as you continue your journey:

**Alter, Robert.** *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. 2nd ed. New York: Basic Books, 2011.

**Alter, Robert.** *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. Revised ed. New York: Basic Books, 2011.

**Beale, G. K.** *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012.

**Bird, Chad.** *Hitchhiking with Prophets: A Ride Through the Salvation Story of the Old Testament*. Irvine, CA: 1517 Publishing, 2024.

**Bird, Chad.** *The Christ Key: Unlocking the Centrality of Christ in the Old Testament*. Irvine, CA: 1517 Publishing, 2021.

**Carter, Craig A.** *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Pre-modern Exegesis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.

**Doriani, Daniel M.** *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996.

**Duvall, J. Scott, and J. Daniel Hays.** *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*. 4th ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020.

**Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart.** *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. 4th ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014.

**Ferguson, Everett.** *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987.

**Fuhr, Richard Alan Jr., and Andreas J. Köstenberger.** *Inductive Bible Study: Observation, Interpretation, and Application through the Lenses of History, Literature, and Theology*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016.

**Jones, Andrew R.** *Ten Questions to Ask Every Time You Read the Bible*. Woodinville, WA: Apprehending Truth Publishers, 2022.

**Klein, William W., Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr.** *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2017.



**Kleinig, John W.** *God's Word: A Guide to Holy Scripture*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2021.

**Lubeck, Ray.** *Reading the Bible for a Change: Understanding and Responding to God's Word*. 2nd ed. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013.

**Pickowicz, Nate.** *How to Eat Your Bible: A Simple Approach to Learning and Loving the Word of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Moody Publishers, 2021.

**Plummer, Robert L.** *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2021.

**Oskar, Skarsaune.** *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early*. InterVarsity Press, 2002.

**Stein, Robert H.** *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011.

