

The Story of the Bible in 7 Episodes

A Beginner's Guide to Understanding the Story of the Bible

[An adaptation of Brian McLaren's "How to Study the Bible" featuring the Bible in Seven Episodes and the Discovery Bible Study method.]

Welcome!

This is a big step in your spiritual journey. Reading and studying the Bible, especially with others, is a rewarding experience. As you walk this journey, our prayer is that you will grow in four understandings:

1. Understanding of who God is, how God works, and the story God is writing for the world
2. Understanding of being made in the image of God and who you become in Christ
3. Understanding of what it means to love God, love your neighbor, and love yourself
4. Understanding of how to live your life for God's glory and for the sake of others.

Start Here

Write a prayer that answers some or all of the questions below. Assume God is asking you these questions, and let your prayer simply be your answer to God. Share your prayer thoughts with a friend who is supporting your journey or on the journey with you.

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

Ways to Use This Guide

- One-Day: Perhaps you are so eager to learn you want to cover the seven episodes as quickly as you can. Here's how to do that. For each episode, read the description and pick one passage to read. Write down any questions, comments, observations, surprises, etc., that catch your attention. Then write a prayer of response to God, based on what you are reading.
- One-Week: Follow the One-Day method except just do one episode a day. Because Episode IV comes in two parts, you will need to double up on one of the days.
- Slowing it Down: Whether you choose this first or after doing the one-day or one-week method, this option gives the opportunity to soak in the experience at a slower pace. There are a couple of ways to slow it down. One way is to go through the seven episodes

following the one-day or one-week and repeat until you go through all the passages. The preferred way is this: Start with Episode I and read the description. Soak it in. Next, read the first passage listed. Reflect on the message. Grow your understanding of the passage using the five steps below. Repeat this process at least once a week or as often as you would like.

1. Read the passage carefully.
2. Write down any questions, comments, observations, surprises, etc., that catch your attention. Return to these notes as you continue your journey of learning.
3. Summarize the passage in your own words. Write it out as if you sharing it with a friend.
4. Write down 2-3 “I will” statements based on what you read. How will you respond to the story? How is God moving in you to act on what you read? If what you read is true, what in your life needs to change? Ask God to show how to respond.
5. Write a prayer of response to God, based on what you have discovered.
6. What do you want to share with others? Write down something to share and someone with whom you can share.

Bible Reading Helps

- Different translations: First, find a translation that works for you. You might use the one you are most familiar with or you might find one that is easy to read. Second, as you become more comfortable with reading the Bible, try using a different translation. The Bible was written in the old languages of Hebrew and Greek. Translating the Bible from these old languages to the English we use is an ongoing task. If you have some questions about this, ask the person who shared this guide with you.
- Prayerful mindset: Reading the Bible is not about being right or getting it right. Rather, it is about transformation—a change of heart, mind, and behavior. Transformation is a journey that takes time. As you read the Bible, open yourself to God and listen for God’s voice. Welcome the work the Spirit of God is doing in you.
- Taking notes: This guide provides an opportunity to write down observations and insights as well as lessons you are learning and things you want to change. Review your notes from time to time to see how you are growing and what you remember.
- Highlighting important words and phrases: As you read the Bible, words and phrases have a way of grabbing your attention. Notice them. Reflect on them. Remember them. Grow into a greater understanding of them.

Episode I: Creation

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

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

Many passages of the Bible celebrate the grandeur of God’s creation and the grandeur of God as Creator.

- Genesis 1
- Genesis 2
- Psalm 8
- Psalm 19
- Psalm 104
- Isaiah 40

Episode II: Crisis

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

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

Many passages of the Bible face people with the reality of our moral and spiritual crisis.

- Genesis 3
- Genesis 4
- Genesis 6
- Genesis 11:1-9
- Psalm 32
- Psalm 51
- Isaiah 58
- Matthew 23
- Galatians 5

Episode III: Calling

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Many passages in the Bible echo God's call to Abraham, giving us a sense of purpose and identity. Choose one of the following passages:

- Ephesians 4
- Philippians 2:1-18
- Colossians 3:1-4:6
- Matthew 5:1-16

Episode IV: Conversation, Part 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Episode IV: Conversation, Part 2

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

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

□ Leviticus 1, □ Exodus 28, □ Nehemiah 8

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

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

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

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

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

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

Episode V: Christ

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

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

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

- Jesus performs many "signs and wonders" – actions that have significance (meaning) and make people think (wonder): Mark 5, Luke 8:22-56, John 2
- Jesus teaches his message most often through parables: Matthew 13:1-52, Matthew 5-7, Luke 15
- Jesus chooses 12 and calls them disciples (called together to learn) and apostles (sent out to teach what they have learned): Luke 5:1-6:16, Matthew 16:13 – 17:13, John 13
- Jesus also has many personal encounters with individuals: Mark 10:17-31, John 3:1-21, John 4:1-42
- Jesus' death and resurrection are full of mystery and meaning: Matthew 27-28, Luke 23-24, John 19-21, Romans 3, Romans 6
- Jesus promises to send his Spirit to be in and with his followers: John 14:15-31, John 16:5-16, Acts 1:1-11, 2:1-47

Episode VI: Church

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

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

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

Read one of these short letters to churches:

- Philippians
- James
- I John

Read one of these short letters to individuals:

- 1 Timothy
- Titus
- Philemon

Episode VII: Consummation

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

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

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

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

Three passages about judgment and reward.

- Matthew 25
- 1 Corinthians 3:10-15
- 1 Corinthians 15:1-58

Saturation:

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

- Matthew 5 – 7
- Romans 8
- Romans 12
- 1 Corinthians 13
- Galatians 5
- Philippians 2:1-11
- Colossians 3

Other Information

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

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

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

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