

STUDYING THE BIBLE

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WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

The word “Bible” is derived from a plural Greek word, *ta biblia*, “the little scrolls” or “the books”. While many think of the Bible as a single book, it is actually a collection of books—a collection of many diverse writings from our ancestors in the faith who tell the story of God and God’s love. Like an ancestral scrapbook, the Bible is the witness of God’s people of God’s commitment to Israel—and through Israel to the world—and God’s decisive activity on behalf of the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a book that gathers the testimonies and confessions of the ancient Israelites and early Christians regarding the nature and will of God—revealing who God is and what God is like.

The Bible is separated into two sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The term “Old Testament” is used by Christians to refer to those books of the Christian Bible which are regarded as sacred scripture by Judaism. It consists of thirty-nine books and is written almost entirely in Hebrew, the language of Israel. It sets forth the call of a special people to enter

into covenant relation with the God of justice and steadfast love and to bring God’s way and blessings to the nations. The New Testament is considerably shorter than the Old Testament. It consists of twenty-seven books written entirely in Greek. It records the life, work and significance of Jesus Christ (including the practical and ethical implications of following him) and it describes the spread of the early Christian church as well as a vision of God’s ultimate desires for God’s people and creation.

THE PURPOSE OF BIBLE STUDY

Our goal in studying the Bible is not primarily to learn information—to learn the history or story of God’s people. And our goal is not simply to learn *about* God. Instead, our goal is always, first and foremost, to *know* God—to enter into an ever-deepening relationship with God through Christ. We study to understand, to grow, and to respond. Scripture is a place where God meets us as the living, loving, saving God who is active in the world. Through Scripture, God draws us in and transforms us in ways beyond our imagination.

INFORMATIONAL READING VERSUS FORMATIONAL READING*

There is a difference between informational reading and formational reading. Both are necessary, helpful and needed when studying scripture. Informational reading seeks to understand the details and content of a passage of scripture. We read the Bible informationally to hear the biblical story, to familiarize ourselves with the plot, to understand the actions and the teachings, and to become acquainted with the characters.

In formational reading, we approach the text in a spirit of prayer. We acknowledge that we are seeking the living, active presence of God in and through God’s Word. We come to the text with an openness to hear, to receive and to respond. We make listening for God’s voice a priority. We keep asking “*God, what are you seeking to say to me through this?*” There is an openness and humility and sense of mystery in formational reading. It facilitates genuine spiritual formation—the process of being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

*adapted from ch. 5 of *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Upper Room Books, 1985) by M. Robert Mulholland Jr.