



# START

Understanding the Message of the Bible

## START WITH THE BIBLE

Confused? You are not alone! Many people, even those who are religious and have gone to church for years, struggle with understanding the Bible. If you are like most people, you do not have a good grasp on how the Bible fits together. It is like having a ten thousand piece jigsaw puzzle, but no lid to know what the picture looks like. But there is good news! The Bible is not difficult. This study will help you understand the scriptures, giving you the confidence to study and understand the Bible for the rest of your life. So let's get started!

The Bible is not one book, but is a collection of 66 books written in a span of over 1500 years by various people in various places. What binds these 66 books together is that they contain the very words of God (2 Timothy 3:16). God put the words that are in these books in the minds of the authors (inspiration) who wrote those words down for people to read (2 Peter 1:20-21; Ephesians 3:3-5). The fact that these books have no contradiction concerning a controversial topic like God and sin is another piece of evidence that these books contain the very words of God. The books of the Bible were copied by scribes for generations. Thousands of manuscripts containing the books of the Bible have been found archaeologically over the centuries, dating all the way back to the first century. These manuscripts show that the Bible you hold in your hands is an accurate copy of the words spoken by God to his apostles and prophets thousands of years ago.

You will notice in your Bible that the 66 books are divided by two sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament (Genesis — Malachi) records how God planned to save the world by creating a nation called Israel through which Jesus would come. The regulations given to Israel (Law of Moses, the Ten Commandments) were a picture for how God would save people through Jesus in the future. The New Testament (Matthew — Revelation) records the life of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus, and directions for how to live with Jesus as our Savior and Lord. The Bible from beginning to end reveals God's plan to save people from their sins through Jesus.

## START WITH SIN

Since the Bible is revealing God's plan to save people from their sins, we need to understand what sin is. Sin is any action, thought, or attitude that does not show or conform to the character of God. Through God's law we learn the character of God. This is why reading and learning the Bible is so important.

### **Everyone who commits sin also breaks the law; sin is the breaking of law. (1 John 3:4 HCSB)**

Sin is breaking God's law. Why does sin matter? There are always penalties for breaking laws in any country. Breaking traffic laws means you will be ticketed or arrested. The penalty for committing murder is life in prison or death. The Bible tells us that penalty for sin is death (Romans 6:23). God does not mean that you are going to die physically because that is going to happen to us no matter if we are righteous or not. God is telling us that our sin causes us to be separated from the presence of God and unable to have a relationship with him. To communicate the seriousness of this condition, God describes the consequence of sin as death. Essentially, because God is good, holy and perfect, he cannot be with us who are wicked and sinful. Our sins cause us to be eternally separated from God.

Further, there is nothing we can do to reverse this situation. Being sorry for our sins or trying to be good does not solve the problem created by our sins. For example, just because you are sorry for speeding does not mean that you will not receive a ticket for your violation. Just because you try to obey the traffic laws does not mean that you will not be ticketed for running a red light. You deserve the ticket. Perfect driving for the rest of your life will not take away your traffic violation. In the same way, we have no solution to our sin problem. God says that there is no one who is righteous. All have turned away from God and have sinned (Romans 3:10-18, 23). Everyone has broken the laws of God.

### **For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23 HCSB)**

Therefore, every person deserves the just penalty of death, separated from the presence of the Lord in eternal punishment (cf. Matthew 25:31-46).

## START WITH ATONEMENT

Thankfully, God did not simply require the punishment due to us because of our sins. Otherwise, every person who has ever lived would die in their sins, separating that person from God in eternal punishment (cf. Romans 6:23; Matthew 25:31-46). God created a way for sins to be covered so that people would not be eternally separated from God. This covering of sins is called "atonement." God could not ignore people's sins because then God would not be just. We do not want a judge to ignore the violations of criminals. Justice must be served. For God to be righteous and good, he cannot overlook sins. To show the seriousness of sins, God commanded in the Old Testament that an animal needed to be sacrificed in order to atone for a person's sin. Every sin committed required a sacrifice for atonement (Leviticus 4-5). However, there was a problem.

### **For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Hebrews 10:4 ESV)**

Animals are insufficient to pay the penalty for our sins. Even the death of an innocent animal does not match the price required to atone for a person's sin. God commanded the sacrifice of animals to show people that a blood sacrifice was needed to atone for sins. God wanted to teach the severity of sin so the people would learn to seek the Lord. David understood this about sin.

### **You do not want a sacrifice, or I would give it; You are not pleased with a burnt offering. 17 The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. God, You will not despise a broken and humbled heart. (Psalm 51:16-17 HCSB)**

God was not pleased with sins so long as animal sacrifices were offered. God wanted people to love and desire him. Therefore God accepted these sacrifices that were offered for sins for generations until the time when a permanent sacrifice could be offered that would fully atone for the sins of the whole world. What the world was waiting for and needing was Jesus.

## START WITH REDEMPTION

God's answer for making a sacrifice of atonement that pays the price for our sins is the death of Jesus. Listen to how the scriptures describe what God did for us through Jesus.

**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— 26 he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:23–26 NIV)**

Verse 24 tell us “redemption” came by Jesus. Redemption refers to a purchase to buy something back. For example, you may notice that certain glass bottles have a redemption value in certain states. In those states, the company redeems the bottle, that is, buys the bottle back for the price stated on the bottle. This is what God did through Jesus for us. We are dead in our sins. Everyone has broken God's law and are destined for eternal punishment. Rather than letting us suffer eternal punishment for our sins as we deserve, God bought us (“redeemed”) with the blood of Jesus, that is, through his death. Jesus is the sacrifice of atonement (Romans 3:25) that pays the price for our sins.

God did this to demonstrate his righteousness. By giving Jesus to die for our sins, God shows himself faithful to his promise to bless the world and rescue them from their sins. God shows his graciousness and goodness by giving his Son to buy us back from our sins. Notice in verse 25 that we learn that God was also being gracious by not punishing the sins previously committed. Rather than casting people to eternal punishment the moment they sinned or striking them dead as soon as they violated God's law, God showed grace. God showed grace in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve and continued to show grace to every human after them. God does not want any person to suffer eternally for their sins.

**The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:9 ESV)**

Rather than giving people the punishment they deserved, God showed grace from Genesis to Malachi, knowing that he would send Jesus as a means of payment for our sins. Faith would be the means for which all people could access the grace of God and find forgiveness.

## START WITH GRACE

To understand how gracious God has been toward us, we must first understand our condition before God. Listen to how the apostle Paul describes our sinful condition before the Lord.

**And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Ephesians 2:1–3 ESV)**

Notice that there is nothing we contribute to our salvation except sinfulness. We are dead in our sins and trespasses against the Lord. We did not follow God, but followed the paths of Satan. We did not live our lives according to the commands and designs of God, but according to our own desires and passions. We deserve the wrath of God for our actions just like everyone else in the world. What is God going to do because all we have done is rebelled against God and broken his laws?

**But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:4–9 ESV)**

God acted on our behalf because he is rich in mercy and has great love for every human. Even when we were dead in our sins, God sent Jesus to save us. Notice that Paul emphasizes a glorious truth: we are saved by grace. We cannot earn what God has done for us. God determined to save us to show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us. God's gift is that salvation would be offered to the world despite the fact that we deserve judgment and wrath. Our salvation is not our own doing. Our salvation is God's doing and his doing alone. No one can boast because no one should be saved. Salvation only comes to the world because of God's gracious desire to save humans even though their actions deserve wrath. As in Romans 3:25, Paul declares that we are saved through faith in Jesus (Ephesians 2:8). What does it mean to be saved by faith?

## START WITH FAITH

We have observed that we are saved by faith in Jesus. We do not deserve to be saved. There is nothing that we have done that caused God to act for us except our sins. Unfortunately, many read that we are saved by faith and assume that all the Bible means is to acknowledge that there is a God or say the words, "I believe in Jesus." While this is an excellent starting point, faith is only credited to us when that faith trusts in the Lord so that we change our lives to listen and do what God says.

**Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. (James 2:20–24 ESV)**

James teaches that faith is not real faith if it does not have the corresponding works with it. People can say they have faith, but if there are not actions with that faith, then that faith is dead and useless. Notice the apostle Paul makes the same point concerning Abraham in Romans 4.

**He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. 20 No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22 That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." 23 But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, 25 who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (Romans 4:19–25 ESV)**

Abraham was fully convinced in the promises of God and grew strong in the faith. It is that faith that lead Abraham to leave for a new land as God commanded.

**By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. (Hebrews 11:8 ESV)**

This faith caused Abraham to obey the Lord's command to take Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice to God, and God stopped Abraham at the last moment.

**By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, 18 of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." 19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. (Hebrews 11:17–19 ESV)**

Faith is not merely acknowledging the existence of God and Jesus. Faith causes action. Truly believing in something or someone causes you to do certain things. The faith of Abraham shows us that true faith means listening to what God says and doing what he says because we completely trust our lives to God.

## START WITH FAITH IN JESUS — (1)

The scriptures tell us that we need to have our faith in Jesus to be saved from our sins and the punishment that we deserve. **"God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith" (Romans 3:25).** To access the grace of God we need to have faith in Jesus. What does this faith look like? One aspect of faith in Jesus is to repent.

**From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 4:17 ESV)**

**And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38 ESV)**

**Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out. (Acts 3:19 ESV)**

**The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. (Acts 17:30 ESV)**

Repenting is not a word we typically use in our conversations today. The word "repent" in the scriptures means to undergo a change of mind in principle and practice. The call of Jesus and the apostles was for people to change their minds and hearts away from sinful living. Instead of living for self and living for our desires, we will change our minds to live for Jesus. We will listen to what Jesus wants us to do and try to go his way in our lives. Since our problem is sin, faith means that we will recognize our sin problem and make a decision to follow God's will.

Before we come to Jesus, we do not care about what God thinks. We live how we want to live and do what we want to do. We do not have any regard for the commands and designs of God. Faith in Jesus means that we will determine in our mind to pay attention to God's commands and make decisions that conform to God's ways.



## START WITH FAITH IN JESUS (2)

The scriptures also tell us that people who put their faith in Jesus will also confess Jesus. Confessing Jesus is not simply a personal response between you and God. The scriptures tell us that we will declare to people that we believe in Jesus, are followers of Jesus, and try to live according to the teachings of Jesus.

**But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9 because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. 11 For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." (Romans 10:8–11 ESV)**

**So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:32–33 ESV)**

Faith in Jesus means that we will tell other people about what God has done for us through Jesus. We will be willing to tell people about the extraordinary grace of God because without God we would be suffering for our sins. Confession is not a one time act. Confession is something faith does every day. Our words and our lives will be a confession to the world that we love and follow Jesus.

The scriptures warn us against saying that we are followers of God but having actions that do not show that we are followers of God.

**They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work. (Titus 1:16 ESV)**

This was the point Paul and James were making. Faith that saves has works with it. Faith is dead and useless if that faith does not change the way we think and the way we act. Our actions must show the faith we have in Jesus.

## START WITH FAITH IN JESUS — (3)

The scriptures also tell us that people who have put their faith in Jesus will be baptized (immersed in water).

**And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:18–20 ESV)**

**And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38 ESV)**

**And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.' (Acts 22:16 ESV)**

Many do not understand the purpose of baptism. But baptism is an important response of faith in Jesus just like repentance and confession. So why does God want us to be baptized?

**In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:11–12 ESV)**

Notice that Paul says being buried in the waters of baptism shows our faith in the powerful working of God to cut off sins and be raised with Christ to a new life. The apostle Paul also said it this way in Romans.

**Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. (Romans 6:3–6 ESV)**

Faith in Jesus will lead us to be baptized to symbolize our connection to Jesus. We are buried in water to symbolize being dead to sins and we are raised from the water to symbolize the new life given to us in Jesus. Baptism is the act of faith we make as we appeal to God for a clean conscience (1 Peter 3:21). Being baptized does not mean you think you have earned your salvation. We have already seen that we are saved by grace through Jesus. There is nothing we can do to be worthy of God's grace. We are saved by faith. But faith acts. If we truly have faith in Jesus then we will desire to do the things that he has called us to do.

## START WITH FAITH IN JESUS — (4)

Faith in Jesus also means that we recognize that God has given us a new purpose for living in this world. We have not been put on this earth to live how we want to live or do what we want to do. We have been placed on earth to give glory to God and live for him. So many want to know the meaning of life. God tells us why we are here and what we are supposed to do.

**For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8–10 ESV)**

We were created in Christ Jesus for good works. Each of us belongs to God because he created us and because he purchased us with the death of Jesus. God saved us so that we would live our lives doing good works. This is the transformation that occurs when we put our faith in Jesus.

Now it is important to keep in mind that the good works we have been created to do are not defined by the world. It does not matter what the world defines as good works. What matters is what God defines to be good works. We show our faith in Jesus by recognizing that we have been created to do the good works God has given to us. The scriptures are filled with descriptions how we are to live our lives. As you read the scriptures be sure to note and write down the works God has called us to do. But here are a handful of texts to get us started in our walk in good works.

**Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

**22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:19–24 ESV)**

**Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. 26 Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and give no opportunity to the devil. 28 Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. 29 Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:25–32 ESV)**

## START WITH COMMUNITY

God has not called us to be alone in our faith. The scriptures show the need for Christians to gather to worship the Lord. The book of Acts shows the Christians in various cities coming together to worship the Lord. When Paul came to Jerusalem he looked to join himself to the other disciples in Jerusalem, to work and worship with them (Acts 9:26). Some of the commands God has given are to be done together and not alone. Here are just a few of the things those Christians did when they came together on Sundays.

**Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. (Acts 20:7 NKJV)**

**Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3:16 ESV)**

**Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:22–25 ESV)**

As Christians, we want to join ourselves to other Christians who are doing what the Bible has to say. Since God has purchased us through the blood of Jesus, it is important that we do not find a church that is failing to do what the scriptures teach. There are many, many different churches. The goal is not to find a church that is entertaining to you. The goal is to find a church where the people are doing what the scriptures tell them to do as individuals and as a church. Look to join yourself to a group of Christians who are loving the Lord with all their heart (Matthew 22:37), loving their neighbors as themselves (Matthew 22:39), teaching from the scriptures alone (Colossians 3:16), singing spiritual songs to one another (Colossians 3:16), remembering the death and resurrection of Jesus every Sunday (Acts 20:7), and encouraging one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24).

God gave us other Christians in a city to become a community of believers to encourage each other to do the good works that God has created us to do. There are many more activities we are called to do for each other as believers in Jesus. As you read the scriptures be sure to note the teachings that tell us what we are to do together with other Christians.

This is a start to understanding how to walk with God. Do you have questions? Would you like to learn more? The Christians in West Palm Beach would be happy to help you on your spiritual journey. Contact us today!

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