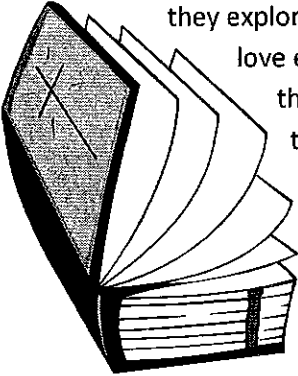


“Reading the Bible Together”

General Introduction and Outline to the Old Testament.

Why read the Bible?

For me there is a great and lasting joy in reading the Bible. Even its writing spans two thousand years in history of God in relationship with His people, through their highs and lows, good times and bad, as they wrestle, and as they explore every aspect of what it means to be human. And throughout God’s commitment to love, love even beyond life itself, never falters, never wanes, if anything it intensifies culminating in the sending of His Son, Jesus the Christ to do for us and for people, all creation, for all time, that which we could not and cannot do for ourselves; redeem, heal and save.



There is no greater story that has ever, or can ever be told for ultimately this is a story which includes me; my story, your story, and the story of our whole world.

And yet, all too sadly, the Bible continues to be one the least read books of all time.

There is such goodness, such richness, such treasure, that as one writer commented, “all else in comparison is but dung” (in fact the Greek word St Paul actually uses is far stronger!)

So what stops us?

Often we’re put off by its size, we find it difficult to understand the language sometimes even in English (although we do have modern translations which try hard to help relate the original meaning in contemporary language – with more or less success), sometimes I’ve even heard quoted that a person doesn’t read the Bible because it lacks pictures.

My personal view is that the principle reason however happens to be that for years the Bible has been reduced in our Churches and in our Schools simply to a “reference manual” designed to communicate arbitrary religious or moral truths we did not necessarily ask for or want on a Sunday morning or for an Assembly. In every other aspect of our lives we claim that’s not how we are stimulated or how we learn anymore, which only goes to show our ignorance because neither was it the way our forebears learnt or shared what was important to them in Biblical times – they and we tell stories!!

What we have in the Bible is a whole library of stories covering a period of literature everything in style and period from Chaucer to the present day. We have history, we have dreams. We have poetry, we have drama. We have wisdom, we have words, we meet and discover “the Word” that which gives life and light, goodness and wholeness to every human heart.

So how can we get into reading this Bible?

Break it down: read it a little bit at a time, read it often, and read it together. Bring your heart, bring your intellect, most importantly bring yourself. Ask questions, imagine yourself there, work out what’s going on; allow God to captivate you, and allow God to be captivated by you.

But quite literally all we need are three things:

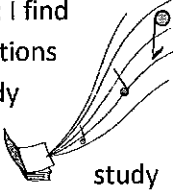
- **Resources:** we need a Bible (often one we find easiest to read is the best), a Notebook (to jot down any thoughts or feelings as we journey along the way), and our Reading Scheme Sheet each month.
- **Time:** we plan that the readings should take no more than 5-10minutes each day, although I hope the chewing it over and the enjoyment as the Bible comes more and more to be part of us will far exceed this.

- **Will:** undertaking any adventure, great or small without commitment and determination is unlikely to prove fruitful. Reading the Bible cover to cover is no different, it can be tough. Not everything is palatable, not everything is easy to understand. But it is above all tremendously rewarding and gives an insight to God's relationship with His people and His world that inspires and encourages like no other.

(For further details regarding what's involved pick up the first **Reading Scheme Sheet on Genesis**, or visit the Church Website www.standrewscongresbury.org. Available as from 14th January)

How to approach the text.

We can become confused sometimes between 'reading' and 'studying' the Bible, and we each will have a natural tendency towards one or the other. But the following analogy I found in a book certainly helped me to see the importance of BOTH.

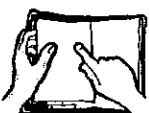
"I am listening to a record with a friend – say it is a Mozart symphony. Each of us hears it differently; I find it joyful while my friend finds it sad: we each project our own feelings onto the work. Our interpretations are so different that we decide to study the symphony to try and come to some agreement. We study the score and we read a book about Mozart and what he was trying to say. But a symphony wasn't meant to be studied, it is meant to be listened to. We listen to the symphony again. Our study informs and helps us to see the piece with new meaning and a new delight. Substitute read for listen and book for record and we have the essentials of what it means to fully engage both with the Bible and with God."  study
(Abbreviated from "How to read the Old Testament" by Etienne Charpentier.)

Outline to the Old Testament

Here are just a few key pointers, broad brush strokes, to help give us a handle on the Old Testament.

- Compared to the New Testament the Old Testament covers a huge range of literary history, upwards of a thousand years. It records the life and times of a small nation itself caught up in the rise and fall of many other dynasties and powers. *(Just see the map with the arrows and/or the top half of main diagram.)* Either way we find a people whose faith in God is born out of and lived through history like no other.
- The Old Testament also has many forms of writing (literary genres), some are historical, others are poetic, others liturgical, some are legal, and still others instruct and not least there are prophecies, visions and dreams. Each in their own way make a unique contribution to be valued in their own right, but taken together these rich and diverse genres of writing provide an incredibly powerful testimony and expression to a living, real, powerful relationship of love; love for God and love by God.

A Note about the attached diagrams and maps: Do not be phased; they are there to help. The diagram provides an overview of known history of the Middle East above the time line and believed composition of the Books of the Old Testament, and their characters, below the line. The large map (the one with the arrows) does the same just in a slightly different way. The small map shows the lie of the land and the geography of Israel both of which significantly shape the context and the story. For further study material see introductory notes and maps which often are part of newer Bibles, see the Reading Scheme Sheet for each of the Books as we journey through together, see specialist books such as "How to read the Old Testament" by Etienne Charpentier, and see Bible computer programmes on the web such as "Bible Gateway," amongst others.



Please Note: We begin our reading and study of the Bible together with the **Book of Genesis**, notes for which will be out **by Wednesday 14th January**. Please see the Church Magazine, the Website or pick up copies on the back table of Church. Reading together begins on **Monday 2nd February**.