

## LESSON 4

### Getting Started With a Bible

To read the Bible, what you need is...a Bible. But even that is not so straightforward. In our modern world, the Bible is not only the Word of God, and a collection of ancient writings as we have already seen – it is also a published document. This means that human beings and publishing houses are responsible for transmitting God’s Word to us in the final form that we have it. And obviously, not all Bibles are the same – the texts of Scripture come in different versions, and published Bibles come with different features for the benefit of the reader. In this lesson we look at what our Bibles contain and the beginning steps for starting to read it.

### CHOOSING A BIBLE

What Bible should you read? That’s a relevant question and one that people coming to Christianity for the first time often ask. The truth is that most versions of the Bible are helpful in their unique ways. Of course, the best option, is to own or access multiple versions so you can compare/contrast them. Here are some things to consider about your Bible:

- Translations – The various texts of Scripture were not written in English, but in Hebrew and Greek. The ancient manuscript copies of the biblical writings have been collected and translated into English. No translation can perfectly encapsulate the meaning of the text in its original language, but scholars can use a couple of methods to accurately convey the text to us. A ‘word for word’ rendering, like that used in the New King James, New American Standard and English Standard Version among others, are formal attempts to translate the text literally so that the English text is a verbal parallel to the Hebrew/Greek. Another method is ‘thought for thought’ translation, like the Living Bible or New Living Translation, which attempt to paraphrase the meaning of the Hebrew/Greek in order to accommodate easier modern language. Both of these are helpful methods in rendering the text, but accomplish different purposes, and so understanding how a Bible translation works is worth knowing once you start reading.
- Introductory & Concluding Materials – Almost all Bibles contain some amount of introductory material. This may include articles on who the translators were, a discussion of the manuscripts from which the original text of Scripture was derived, how to use the reference apparatus, or other contextual notes, etc. You should read this material to give you some context into the translation process. In addition, most Bibles have some kind of concordance or index in the back, and some maps to provide the reader with a few study tools.
- Marginal Notes – Most Bibles contain a section on each page of the text that is separated off to contain footnotes, parallel references, etc. Often times, these occur in the margins of the page. Being able to use this to identify parallel passages, passages with similar words or ideas, and references to scriptural citations can be very useful in study of the Bible. Additionally, the margins can give notes about textual variations and alternate translations.

## HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

- Section Headings / Paragraph Breaks – The Bible was not written with chapter and verse breaks. Nevertheless, all Bibles follow traditional pattern of dividing the text into chapter and verse breaks. For example, no matter what Bible you look at, Genesis has 50 chapters and Matthew has 28. However, some Bibles go beyond these and shape the text with paragraph breaks and section headings. While these can be very useful, you should keep in mind that these divisions are at the discretion of the translators and publishers, and could also be misleading.
- ‘Red-Letter’ Editions – These versions of the Bible print the words of Jesus during his earthly ministry in distinctive red ink. This is done as a way of emphasizing the importance of Jesus’ words and teachings. A person must consider the potential benefit of having these emphasized against the potential for seeing these words as more important or more authoritative than the rest of Scripture, which is not the case.
- Study Bibles – Study Bibles have more features than ordinary Bibles, including introductions to each book of the Bible, book/chapter outlines, specialized contextual notes, and often a small-scale commentary alongside the biblical text. The advantage of study Bibles is that they put a wealth of information at your fingertips without reference to separate reference materials. The drawback is that these materials are not inspired, and their proximity to the Scriptural text makes it easy to conflate them together so that you always read the Bible in light of the study materials. These can help or hinder independent personal study.

### TAKING NOTES

Next to your Bible, the most important study tool for Bible study is a notebook. A notebook can be used to record all of your observations from your studies. Writing down your thoughts helps to sharpen your mind, and focus your efforts, giving it more purpose and direction. It can also be a place to record your conclusions and devotional reflections. There are no rules on what notes to take, but some of the exercises to be done in future lessons will provide suggestions in this regard.

One decision you might have to make is whether to write in your Bible or not. In fact, some Bibles are made for that very purpose, giving enough room in the margins to allow all of your observational note-taking to occur there. There are many people who find this the most efficient way to record their thoughts and conclusions about the Bible. On the other hand, many prefer to keep the text clean to allow them to look at a text with fresh eyes upon each reading, or in case their change their mind about a previous conclusion made.

### THE RIGHT SETTING

When preparing to read, it is really important to find a setting that is conducive to the task at hand. Because we are so prone to distraction in today’s world, there needs to be a time and place that we can set to avoid interruption. This is one benefit of reading Scripture as worship, wherein we can be attentive to the words as they are read aloud to the church.

For personal Bible reading, there are no rules to when and where this could be. It is a matter of personal preference. For some it might be a coffee shop, for others a favorite

## HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

chair at home. However, some consideration might be made to disengage from personal technology to avoid distraction. Also, a setting where others are not around is often the best choice. And while this setting might change from time to time, establishing a fixed time and place will help develop a routine which will make for a more disciplined practice of study. Think of this as a metaphorical 'sanctified' space where you can focus in on the reading of God's Word. Many of these suggestions work well for prayer too, and we should not forget that prayer and reading are Christians disciplines that go hand in hand.

### **CLASS ACTIVITY (A)**

- A. Read Mark 1:1-8 in a 'word for word' translation (e.g. NKJV, NASB, ESV, NRSV), and contrast that reading to a paraphrased 'thought for thought' version of that same passage (e.g. The Living Bible or Phillips' *NT in Modern English* – both can be found through [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)).
1. Share with the class your impression of the paraphrased version. How is it different? Is it easier to read? What value do you see in it?
  2. Look for any textual footnotes in your own Bible for Mark 1:1-8. Share with the class at least one piece of information gained from those notes.
  3. Look up any cross-references cited in your Bible's marginal notes. Share with the class whatever you found interesting or helpful.
- B. Read through your own Bible's introductory material. Share with the class two pieces of information you learned from reading over this material.