



Public
Reading
of Scripture

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTIONS

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OVERVIEW

The Bible is a story that unfolds in two sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament. It presents a vision of a flourishing life and world that God created, an account of what went wrong, and a hope for recovery through God's saving work. The Bible is set in the midst of ordinary life: families and generations, work and commerce, agricultural and urban life, migrations and the call to welcome the sojourner, politics and imperial follies, the challenges and callings of leadership, and the community in worship and prayer. Covering a wide swath of time and circumstances, we also find within the books of the Bible different types of literature including history, poetry, visions, dreams, stories of personal conversion, and letters. Written originally for the ancient people of Israel and the early Church, its message continues to cross cultural and geographical boundaries.

Depending on the texts that will be heard in your gathering, these introductions can be flexibly combined as needed. There are introductions to each book, as well as paragraphs on the story of the Bible, the Old and New Testaments, and each major section of the Bible.

OLD TESTAMENT

The major sections of the Old Testament include the foundational stories of creation and ancient Israel, the ways of wisdom and a flourishing life, and the prophetic life of faith. Whether as a community or an individual, the hoped-for response to God's faithfulness is a heart and mind offered in praise to God and a life extended in love to a neighbor.

The Beginning of the Story

The beginning of the Bible is a collection of five books — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Because they tell God's story of the world and are intended to shape the identity of Israel as the people of God, these five books are foundational for the entire story of the Bible.

- 7 Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus
- 8 Numbers, Deuteronomy

GENESIS

Genesis begins with a gift—the world as creation and human beings as creatures, all created in relationship to God. Genesis is also an account of how the world and human beings move from well-being and peace in a harmonious relationship with God to disorder and brokenness. Other beginnings are here too, including families, work, and migrations. Genesis introduces the story of Abraham and Sarah and their sojourn to a new land, along with the story of Jacob and Esau. In response to the promise of God, known as a covenant relationship, Abraham and the generations that follow are witnesses to God among all people. Genesis concludes with the dramatic life of Joseph, including a resolution to his broken family relationships.

EXODUS

The book of Exodus takes up life for Israel in the years following the death of Joseph. It provides an account of time and the rhythms of remembrance that are important for Israel as they are formed in faith in the one true God. In Exodus, we learn about the life of Moses and his rise as leader; Pharaoh, his oppressive ways and the plagues; the crossing of the Red Sea; bread from heaven; and the Tabernacle, and the gift of the Ten Commandments or Torah that is intended to shape their community and identity before God.

LEVITICUS

Leviticus is filled with specific laws governing areas of diet and food, what is clean and unclean, animals and blood, offerings and worship. There is also a special concern for the widow, the orphan, the stranger and refugee in their midst. These regulations support an understanding of God as a God of life and all of creation.

NUMBERS

In Numbers, we learn of Israel's life in the wilderness. Sinai, Kadesh and Moab are also geographic touchstones along this journey. We find a transition of faith and leadership from one generation to the next. There are two census accounts, one at the beginning and one near the end. These two census accounts show the transition from the first complaining generation to the second generation of hope. The latter will enter the promised land.

DEUTERONOMY

During his final words to Israel, addressing the second generation of hope, Moses reviews the entire history of Israel and how God has been in a relationship of loving commitment to them. In order to prepare them for the land God promised them, he urges they be faithful to the true, one and only God of Israel: do not have or follow false gods, be grounded in the Law or Torah.

The Story of the People of Israel

At the heart of the Old Testament is the story of Israel as a community and God's commitment to a wayward people. In this part of the Bible, the story of Israel continues through Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. Along the way, this one story becomes two, as Israel divides into Israel and Judah. Eventually Judah and Israel lose their land and place of worship, going into a traumatic time of exile and dislocation. Ezra and Nehemiah recount a return from exile, and Esther is the story of those who decide to make a faithful life in the lands of exile. Through each of these books, Israel seeks to understand their past, their future calling and where God was in the midst of it all.

- 10 Joshua, Judges, Ruth
- 11 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles
- 12 Ezra & Nehemiah, Esther

JOSHUA

After the death of Moses, which is where Deuteronomy leaves the story, Joshua becomes the leader of a new generation of Israelites. As they cross the Jordan river, we learn of how they possessed the land with God's help and distributed it among the 12 tribes of Israel.

JUDGES

The book of Judges covers the period from the death of Joshua to Israel's first king. It reflects a cycle of turning from blessing to idolatry, judgment, repentance and renewal. Because people do what is right in their own eyes rather than what God wants, they become prey to outside enemies. When they repent, God raises up a series of judges to lead Israel out of a continual spiral of crises and chaos, including horrific violence toward women. The role of a Judge is not judicial but rather that of a primary national leader or deliverer. The story of Samson captures this role, and with his failures, it points to the continual need for God to be the deliverer.

RUTH

Set during the time of Judges, the book of Ruth is a story of two widows, Naomi and Ruth, a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law. In recounting their commitment to God and one another and God's fidelity to them, it is a story of family, mutual respect, and restoration to life.

1 & 2 SAMUEL

Picking up where Judges ends, 1 and 2 Samuel begins with the birth of the prophet Samuel, introduces kingship in Israel, first with Saul, and then covers the rise of the great king David, who was once a shepherd. It is a story about families, loyalty, and the future of Israel, but it also encompasses a world of politics, violence, and morality.

1 & 2 KINGS

In a way, the sequence of the story of Israel that begins in Genesis concludes in 1 and 2 Kings. Covering a span of some 400 years, 1 and 2 Kings begins with King David and ends with a question hanging over the future of Israel. We learn that under Josiah there was a vital renewal movement around God's word, but the changes are not continued. Along the way we meet the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Looking back in history, 1 and 2 Kings help to answer the question of the cause of Israel's exile.

1 & 2 CHRONICLES

What's our connection to the past? How do we act now? 1 and 2 Chronicles is a retelling of the entire Biblical narrative from creation to its contemporary moment of conquest by the Babylonians and the decree of the Persian King Cyrus that they could return to their land. Beginning with genealogies, it provides a history of Israel under David, the reign of Solomon and the reigns of kings through Zedekiah. It covers when Israel was one, and then when divided and only Judah remained. By telling this story and inviting people to return to the ways of God, it brings to mind God's faithful presence and availability, even when it seems distant.

EZRA & NEHEMIAH

Ezra and Nehemiah tell us about the return from exile in Babylon. Ezra is the story of the restoration of the temple and the renewal of the people's spiritual life. Nehemiah is the story of rebuilding Jerusalem. Ezra is a priest; Nehemiah is a public official, cup bearer to the king in Persia and the Governor of Judah. Organizing the remnant together, against great odds and overcoming opponents, they rebuild the walls of the city, its strength and life. But they also need to continually rebuild their moral and spiritual commitment to God in all areas of life.

ESTHER

Esther is the story of the survival of the Jewish population in the diaspora. Taking place in the Persian empire, Mordecai persuades Esther to approach the king and reverse a plot by Haman to annihilate all Jews. After fasting, the plan goes forward, and God uses Esther to save her people. The feast that marks this event is called Purim. Along with the books Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, Esther completes a retelling of the story of Israel from creation to exile.

Life, Love & Death: The Wisdom Books

How do I live well in this world? What is the purpose of life, the meaning of love and death? Grounded in an understanding of God as Creator, the ancient people of Israel answer these questions through a diverse series of voices that spoke to them about a life well lived, and about love and death. From these poems, sayings, prayers and stories, Israel was formed in its daily relationship to God, neighbor and all of creation. Another word for this practical everyday know-how is wisdom. Wisdom is the skill of living, but its even deeper intentions are to make us more of who we are created to be, beginning with a proper relationship with God.

14 Job, Psalms, Proverbs

15 Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon

JOB

Who is God? How do human beings understand God?

The book of Job wrestles with these questions and much more. Job is a man who had everything and also lost everything — his family, his health and his wealth — even though he is a person of significant faith. Out of this life shattering experience, much of Job is a conversation he has with friends, but the heart of the book of Job is hearing from God.

PSALMS

Psalms is the prayer book of Israel. It was read, sang, and chanted as the community gathered in the temple. Doubts of faith, a cry for healing and deliverance, a confession of sin and plea for forgiveness, a celebration of God in history and life, a plea for deliverance – these are among the many themes that comprise the Psalms. Throughout there is communication with a living God, and a deep awareness of God's relationship with humanity and all of creation.

PROVERBS

How does a young person live wisely in the city? This is the guiding question of Proverbs, a series of pithy sayings of wisdom, which intends to guide youth on the pathway of a moral and good life. The choice is between Woman Wisdom, who represents God, and Woman Folly, who represents false gods.

ECCLESIASTES

A narrator frames the book of Ecclesiastes with the following question: what is the meaning of life? For the rest of the book, we hear of the disillusionments, possibilities, and seasons of life. Then in its final words, the narrator returns to answer the opening question: the only way to understand this life, and death, is through God, who is the Creator of all.

SONG OF SOLOMON

Song of Solomon, also known as Song of Songs, is a collection of love poems, frequently set within a city. While directly and frankly celebrating desire and love, some read it as a description of God's loving relationship with ancient Israel.

Voices & Visions: The Prophets

Prophets had to be attended to, whatever they had to say. As the history of biblical Israel unfolds, God's people often lose their way, falling into spiritual, social and civic sinfulness, not fully following God as outlined by Moses. To speak into their situation, to lead them to self-reflection and change, God calls upon a diverse group of men and women to be prophets. Some speak to Israel and the nations, some speak to Judah, others address Israel in exile. Commissioned and empowered by God, a prophet is to interpret the times, place and situation, and then point people back from sin to God and a life of flourishing. The prophets use drama, spoken word, intercessory prayer, poetry, and reports of their visions and dreams to help God's people experience God's love and patience afresh in a variety of historical settings.

- 17 Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel
- 18 Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos
- 19 Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum
- 20 Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

ISAIAH

Isaiah kindles the imagination to see the world in a new way. With a mix of sermons, announcements, and visions, the prophet Isaiah looks to a future renewed by the Spirit of God. What will come of sin and injustice? It will be replaced, Isaiah announces, by God's new world.

JEREMIAH

Jeremiah is a prophet of hope for the future and a new relationship with God. His prophetic ministry focuses on a time of exile in Babylon for God's people. Although there are prophecies of judgement, there is also a message to focus on seeking the good and well-being of the city where God has taken them, even with their enemies.

LAMENTATIONS

Closely related to Jeremiah, the book of Lamentations is a funeral dirge for the fall of Jerusalem. By highlighting the experience of lament, loss, and mourning in poetic form Lamentations opens up the possibility for new life.

EZEKIEL

Can dry bones come alive? Having faced the trauma of their loss of land, place of worship, the prophet Ezekiel reveals a vision of dry bones coming to life, an image of God raising up new life. The God of Ezekiel is the God of the wheel within the wheel, a God of glory. The prophet announces judgements on Jerusalem, messages to the nations, and a picture of the restoration of Israel.

DANIEL

The book of Daniel is a story of living faith and God, beginning with the account of Daniel and his three companions, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Set in a Babylonian court, they are placed in a furnace of fire, but live. And Daniel is also placed among lions, but lives. Later there are also dreams and interpretations, a picture of the future. The book of Daniel shows that in spite of the troubles Daniel and his friends face, God is really in control and will have the victory.

HOSEA

Hosea's mission as a prophet is to proclaim God's love through his marriage, a comparison to God's relationship with Israel who is not always faithful. In a highly poetic style throughout the remainder of the book, there is judgement for sin, yet there is also a promise of salvation and God's loving faithfulness.

JOEL

Fasting, prayer, the coming of the Spirit, and a locust plague — this brief book of the prophet Joel is about the God who answers in a moment of crisis for Israel, and ultimately responds in blessing.

AMOS

A shepherd from Tekoa, the prophet Amos warns the people of Israel and Judah that they are not going in the ways of God, and therefore on the verge of judgment. Having forgotten God who delivered them, they also fail in relationship to the poor and vulnerable. There are visions including a fire in the woods, a plumb line, and a basket of fruit. While Amos warns about coming destruction, he also holds forth a vision of harmony, salvation, and renewal.

OBADIAH

In a time after the fall of Jerusalem, the prophet Obadiah receives a vision report from God. In spite of appearances, God has a future for God's people. And God will reign over all.

JONAH

Jonah is about the proclamation of God's mercy and love to the nations. When God directs Jonah to go as a prophet to Nineveh, he turns away. As he travels by sea, a great storm comes upon the ship because he is fleeing God. Thrown overboard to save the crew, Jonah finds himself for three days and three nights in the stomach of a large fish. After being vomited by the fish, Jonah returns to Nineveh and speaks on behalf of God. To his disappointment, the great city repents.

MICAH

From Micah, a prophet of God in the days of the kings, we hear of God's judgment and salvation, of a future time of blessing. We also find a summary of Israel's faith. "He had told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

NAHUM

At the time of Nahum, Assyria is the dominant power and has God's people under its thumb. Nahum is able to see Nineveh and Assyria's fall.

HABAKKUK

Crying out to God in prayer, Habakkuk offers a lament to God about the violence and brokenness of Judah and Jerusalem. In the end, the prophet is called to live by trust and faith.

ZEPHANIAH

While the prophet Zephaniah opens with God's words of judgement, he closes with God's words of joy and salvation.

HAGGAI

Like other prophets, Haggai is able to proclaim that empires rise and fall, but that God reigns. He sees the future glory of God's worship.

ZECHARIAH

The book of the prophet Zechariah opens with a series of eight visions that include a measuring line and a flying scroll. It continues with words of judgment but also a future when God's people will call upon God's name. In doing so, it projects a picture of the city as a place of peace, safety and flourishing for young and old, and where God is fully acknowledged.

MALACHI

The final book of the Christian Old Testament, Malachi looks to a coming messenger. He is concerned with what is due to God in worship, relationships, and resources.

NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament tells of a living encounter with God in Christ, whose life, ministry, death and resurrection form the center of the Biblical story. To be read with and in light of the Old Testament, the major sections of the New Testament are accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus, a report about the early church movement, the letters of Paul, Peter and others to new communities of believers, and the Revelation of John, a word of hope in the midst of suffering. And through it all, the early Christian movement begins to grow in and toward Asia, Africa and Europe.

The Life of Jesus: The Gospels

The early Christians want to know more about the person of Jesus who was changing the direction and understanding of their lives. So the New Testament begins with telling the story of Jesus in four ways — Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Called Gospels, these four books each share the Good News that Jesus, through his life, death on the cross, and resurrection has come to restore humanity and all of creation to life as it should be. Not simply biographical information, each of the Gospels invite those who hear its words to meet, follow and worship Jesus every day.

23 Matthew, Mark

24 Luke, John

MATTHEW

The Gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy, connecting the life of Jesus to the Old Testament. Following his early life with Mary and Joseph, there are significant sections of teaching, including the Sermon on the Mount with its emphasis on loving one's enemies and neighbors. There are also parables, stories Jesus told that made people stop and think. Matthew ends with the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, his death, and resurrection, but also his ascending into heaven and an ongoing life and mission among his followers.

MARK

The Gospel of Mark is the story of Jesus, focusing with immediacy on his ministry and claims. In the power of God, he heals, teaches, and gathers a community of followers. The story does not end with a shift to Jerusalem and his public death on the cross but continues with his resurrection from the dead and ongoing life.

LUKE

Luke's Gospel is a witness to the life, ministry, death by crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. It emphasizes the journey of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, facing his death, raising up to life, and ascending to heaven. Jesus is not just the bearer of an upside-down message, where the most vulnerable and poor are lifted up, women are central in God's reign, and there is love and forgiveness for enemies but he is also the message of the kingdom. There is a great emphasis in Luke on the Spirit, which heals, empowers, and brings about salvation in the city.

JOHN

In the Gospel of John, Jesus comes to proclaim new life, to invite people to be born anew into this life, and to experience and share God's love. It is a gospel of community: of Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit abiding together, as well as believers in God sharing life with one another. John begins with an astounding proclamation: Jesus is the Word made flesh. The Gospel ends with Jesus' resurrection, a shared meal, and a sending out of his followers to share this new life.

The Story of the First Churches: Acts and The Letters

Following the Gospels is the book of Acts and a series of letters that together communicate the experience of the first Christian churches and its mission. Among them are the letters of the Apostle Paul, originally an opponent of Christianity before his conversion along a road to Damascus. As a passionate believer and evangelist of the Gospel, Paul helps to found new communities of believers in cities and writes letters to them encouraging their life and understanding of faith. These new communities, marked by a belief that the Spirit breaks down all social and cultural barriers between people. Along with Hebrews, the letters from Paul, John, Peter and others indicate how the early Christian movement of men and women depend upon networks of friendships, co-workers, and supporters to sustain and expand their work and mission. Whether in the workplace, in the market filled with shops, at home or in public matters, the early Christians are learning how to follow Christ in every area of life.

- 26 Acts, Romans
- 27 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians
- 28 Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians
- 29 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews
- 30 James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1 & 2 & 3 John, Jude

ACTS

The Acts of the Apostles frames and introduces the rest of the New Testament. Written by the evangelist Luke, the book of Acts tells the continuing story of the risen Christ through the Spirit and communities of believers committed to the worship and following of Jesus. In this way, Acts is part two of Luke's Gospel. It begins with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, the martyrdom of Stephen, and the scattering of the church from Jerusalem. As the Gospel enters new cultures, cities, and languages, there is a meeting in Jerusalem to understand how the Spirit is working and to discern the way forward. Acts also tells us about the preaching, healing and church planting ministries of Peter and Paul.

ROMANS

In this letter, Paul writes to the Christian congregation in the global city of Rome. The letter is likely read in a tenement setting where the community hears about power of the Gospel for salvation that is for all people, and how it established believers in faith. The Gospel is a gift rooted in history, and is to shape their understanding of who they are, how they should live as a community, the meaning of reconciliation, and the mission of God. Everything about the Gospel is to shape their daily interactions in the city. And at the end, we hear more about the women and men who are shaping the early Christian movement.

1 CORINTHIANS

Written to the Christian community in the city of Corinth, this first letter begins with a greeting. Paul appeals that there should be no divisions among them because they are in Christ. Instead, there should be a unity in diversity, expressed through their gifts and shared ministry in the power of the Spirit. This unity would come through the cross and a common meal. Paul also points to their life and hope as it stands in the resurrection of Christ.

2 CORINTHIANS

In follow-up correspondence to the Corinthians, Paul emphasizes the source and nature of his calling and authority as a Christian minister. He does so by a recognition of his utter vulnerability. Paul sees his past role and ongoing work on behalf of the Gospel as important to draw out the church's support and participation in the ministry of reconciliation.

GALATIANS

As if he was shouting at them, Paul teaches in Galatians that Jesus is Lord of all and that grace, a gift of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, should not be compromised. This belief and experience is the basis of a community that crosses boundaries of culture and social background. And it shapes a new life in Christ, marked by joy, freedom, gentleness and love — not hatred and discord. Their lives, community, and world were transformed by God's new creation.

EPHESIANS

Perhaps the best summary of Paul's convictions about Christ, the church, creation and salvation, Ephesians sees the riches of Christ's love spilling out over into boundary-breaking communities of believers. It is an invitation for the church to grow in maturity, in wisdom and insight, and in mutuality.

PHILIPPIANS

Written while he is in prison, Paul asks in his letter to the Philippians: what does it mean to live a life worthy of the Gospel? At the heart of Paul's answer is the self-giving life of Jesus, which provides the strength and a model for a life of faith. This way of life, putting on the mind of Christ, establishes a community of love that looks out for the needs of others.

COLOSSIANS

In Colossians, Paul proclaims that Christ is Lord, supreme over all, and that all things hold together in him. Therefore, by prayer, community, and the practices of faith, believers reject the powers that seek to thwart the reconciling work of God. Colossians is a comprehensive view of faith and life rooted in Christ.

1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

The letters to the Thessalonians are written to one of the first congregations that Paul helped to start. Having heard about their faith and love from Timothy, Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians about the Gospel, their growth, and the coming day of the Lord. 2 Thessalonians continues with further encouragement and the coming day of the Lord. As they turn their hearts to Christ, Paul encourages them not to neglect work and the responsibilities of everyday life.

1 & 2 TIMOTHY

Addressed to Timothy, Paul's co-worker in the ministry, 1 and 2 Timothy are letters concerned with the life, leadership and theological commitments of the church. They are also warnings against false teaching. Written from prison and near the end of his life, Paul wants to encourage Timothy to keep the faith, and offers his own life as an example of suffering in ministry. Most of all, the focus is on Christ.

TITUS

Written to Titus, who is one of Paul's co-workers, this book contains a clearly expressed presentation of the Christian message to a next generation leader. The book of Titus also finds Paul discussing leadership and disputing false teaching, which he believes will harm the church and hinder the advancement of the Gospel. It also stresses being formed in the grace of God and in the hope of eternal life, impacting how they live, work and converse in the city.

PHILEMON

A brief letter, it expresses, in both direct and indirect language, Paul's conviction that Philemon should free the slave Onesimus because of the Gospel and the new community God is establishing among them.

HEBREWS

Hebrews, written as a sermon to be shared with others, focuses on Christ. The writer of Hebrews answers specific questions about the relationship of Jesus to the Old Testament, presenting him in relationship to God's promise and as the mediator of a new covenant relationship. It stresses his significance for every person, context, language and culture, and the call to persevere in faith and discipleship.

JAMES

James is a letter urging the church to emphasize God's mercy, to promote unity between people of diverse backgrounds, and to trust in the healing power of God within the community. Drawing on the Old Testament, it emphasizes the role of wisdom, and God's concern for the poor. James is written by someone often considered to be the brother of Jesus.

1 & 2 PETER

1 Peter is a letter written to a people who are displaced or in exile, urging the community to hold onto their faith and hope in God. It emphasizes developing patterns of Christian life such as love that will be a witness to their neighbors, even as they are suffering. 2 Peter is written to a young church, urging them to be careful of false teachers.

1 & 2 & 3 JOHN

The three letters of John are written to congregations of believers that meet in homes. 1 John calls upon the community to walk in the light of Christ, to love one another, to test the spirits, and to keep themselves from idols. 2 John emphasizes the commandment to walk in love. It also warns against false teachings about Jesus. 3 John is written to Gaius, praising his practice of hospitality, and also warning against false teaching.

JUDE

Written by Jude, who is thought to have been one of the brothers of Jesus, this letter addresses the challenge of false teachings. In response, Jude emphasizes the importance of moral lives formed in Christ, and commends Christian faith to others.

The End of the Story

REVELATION

Revelation, and the full arc of the Biblical story, ends with the gift of a new heaven and a new earth, God's peaceable kingdom where Christ reigns as Lord. A vision of the Risen Christ given to John on the island of Patmos, Revelation invites the church to trust in and follow Jesus, even through suffering. Filled with symbolism and imagery often drawn from the Old Testament, it contains poems, hymns, and scenes of worship, including the hope of a new song. God has created the world, and through Christ has redeemed the world, across the often-surprising story of the Bible.

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