

Lesson 1 Introduction to the Bible Study

Format of the Study:

This study surveys the Bible from Genesis to Revelation in sixty lessons which, if studied with a class, are planned for two terms of thirty lessons each. Each term consists of 1 ½ hours of class time weekly from September to May, allowing for about five recess weeks for holidays or other schedule interferences. Each week, chapters of the Bible are assigned with a question sheet guide for the student to follow. The questions are meant to stimulate thinking about the reading assignment, and written answers are encouraged. However, the answers may not be apparent, and will become clearer when covered during class time. Students will not be called, nor the assignment checked. If the material is not covered, then the student is encouraged to ask. Questions and comments are welcome.

The first lesson is just three chapters, but later lessons require more reading - sometimes as many as twenty-four chapters are assigned, so good habits of studying and reading will be rewarded, not leaving the lesson till the night before. The more study the more gain. A fifteen minute time in the morning, used regularly, will establish a Bible reading time that will fruitful when the course is finished.

What kind of Bible is suitable for this study? There are a great many translations of the Bible. The three that are suitable for this course are the standard English (not inclusive) Revised Standard Catholic Version, the standard English New American Bible, or the Jerusalem Bible (hard to find in standard English, although it is the only one Vatican approved). The Living Word, and The Good News Bible which are good for reading are for study because they are not translations of the original languages but merely paraphrases of thoughts of a passage. The Hammond Bible Atlas references to maps are keyed to this study - found on the internet.

What is this book? The news is full of the word “fundamentalism” these days, TIME magazine has devoted a full issue to it. The American Bishops have written a pastoral warning Catholics about fundamentalism. What is meant by “fundamentalism?” Unquestionably, the Bible is fundamental to our Catholic faith, but fundamentalists claim to believe and live by it alone; each word is considered inspired as it comes from the page. The book thought to be directly God’s, almost as though received through automatic writing, and must be accepted

exactly as it reads. There is no other authority for truth in this world, believes the fundamentalist, than the Bible. If any other truth is proposed and it is not to be found specifically mentioned in the Bible, then the fundamentalist cannot accept it. The Bible is the one and only sure guide to truth, even though the Bible itself does not say this, but requires that traditions from Christ be maintained and “handed on” which is what the Church calls Holy Tradition(II Thes.2:15).

As Catholics, therefore, we are not fundamentalists. We believe the Bible wholly, but consider it the inspired word of God in a different way. We take the Bible very seriously, but we have sure authority to say that the fundamentalists are in error. The Bible cannot be the sole authority, for it is evident that interpretation of the Bible has been the root of the thousands of sects and cults that confound the Word of God. Each of these groups believes that they have the whole truth, yet not one agrees with the interpretation of another. The Holy Spirit of Unity cannot be the spirit that inspires these diverse, often antagonistic interpretations.

If the Bible could be the sole authority then we would be doomed to disunity, for those of us who gather to study will each come to his own conclusions, and be left without a common faith. Jesus did not leave us subject to confusion. He who is the Truth and whose fervent prayer is the unity of his followers (John 17) made provision for the Truth to be handed on without error or false interpretation. He deliberately left us Apostolic authority and a Tradition alongside of the Bible to be the check of interpretations that would lead away from Truth. This study will stay within that Authority and Tradition, and will advise use of the Catholic Catechism.

As Catholics we have a three fold base for knowing and being confident of the Truth - the Bible is an important part of that base; Tradition (not human but Spirit-inspired Tradition that has come down to us along side of the Bible - the creed, the Eucharist, the Sacraments, the Trinity, the place of the Blessed Mother) is another. The Third is the Teaching Magisterium, the Bishops with the Bishop of Rome, who guard and protect the first two from false interpretations, making unity in belief possible, continuing through the ages the authentic teaching work of Christ. The document on Revelation of Vatican II, *Del Verbum*, states, “. . . sacred tradition, sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church. . . are so linked and joined together that one cannot

stand without the others, and... all together each in its own way under the action of the Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls." The Holy Scriptures are those canonical books that the Church has declared inspired. The Holy Tradition passes on the whole body of revealed truth, and the teaching Magisterium exercises oversight of the Truth of Christ given by Christ to the apostles and their successors through time.

Vatican II Document : *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* tells us some important things about the Bible. It echoes St. Jerome by stating that "ignorance of the Bible is ignorance of Christ." It states without equivocation that the Sacred Scriptures are wholly inspired and really are the Word of God. The document urges Catholics to immerse themselves in God's Word by frequent reading of Sacred Scripture. And we are reminded that prayer should accompany our reading, for "We speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine word." Twenty-three times in ten pages the document refers to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We need to understand and believe that the Spirit of God is behind the writings of the Bible. What is the Bible, why is the Bible, how is the Bible.

C.S. Lewis (1896-1963), religious author and professor of English Literature at Cambridge and Oxford Universities, was blessed with an active imagination. He described our planet in the title of one of his books, "The Silent Planet." Open lines of communication with God and His creation have been broken on this earth, and it and its inhabitants are cut off from Him by sin. While the universe proclaims the glory of God and sings His praises, we earthlings no longer speak back and forth freely with God in the way that Adam and Eve walked and talked with Him in the cool of the evening in the Garden of Eden. Our planet is cut off and silent.

We might also call earth "the dark planet." For this wonder-filled world, so full of the beauty and love of God that is visible in the glorious created things around us, has been penetrated by evil. Something has happened here, a planet that God intended to be Eden (meaning pleasure or delight), finds all life stricken with misery, pain and death. This evil has separated the planet from the rest of God's sinless universe as though it were shut off by a celestial iron-curtain. Whereas the rest of the universe may be obedient to God's command and live in open communication with Him singing harmoniously the

songs of the spheres, planet earth has forgotten how to sing that song.

In the beginning, earth's perfect inhabitants somehow chose, under the influence of an Enemy, to turn their backs on God and go their own way, willfully making their own choices. They chose no longer to obey God, or think His thoughts after Him, but put themselves under the rule of the Enemy. Disobedience to their Creator destroyed, for the time being, their capability to live the life of Perfection, and this grave flaw, Original Sin, is passed from generation to generation.

Now within the compass of earth's beauty, the ugliest things happen. Murder, rape, incest, infanticide, abortion, greed, war - the list goes on and on. Statistics of crime, catastrophe, and death, tick by second by second at an astounding rate. So much on the Silent Planet seems radically awry; especially smitten with evil was the Twentieth Century now spilling over into the Twenty-first. But God still loves His Creation. He loves every one of its inhabitants and He, though forsaken by them, has not forsaken them. From the moment they turned away and became silent, He has not ceased to slip his Love through their barriers to reach them and to win them back to the happiness of life with Him. He has insinuated His Word through the barricades, always seeking individuals who upon hearing will respond.

Before time began He prepared His plan of restoration, and over the centuries furthered it, finally bringing it to pass in Christ Jesus who is Salvation for all who live in silence and darkness. We will study the Bible to see how evil intruded itself on earth, and how the fatal wound suffered by God's creature, Man, has been healed. God is the Teacher of teachers. He brings His word, His truth, to bear on earth not by twisting minds, or by mechanically reprogramming human beings in the manner of opening up a VCR and slipping in a cassette.

He respects us, He has given us mind and psyche; He empowers His Word to bring us back to Him as it works within Man's faculties. He plants his Word around us, but He lets us discover it, and entices us to work with it in order to become again the men and women He first planned. He asks for the response of love; love demands that He never manipulate us. We have free will and it is with our will that God works, not to overpower, but to woo us. This wooing, this winning us to

respond to Him, is done patiently and within the context of life as we understand it.

God's work of redeeming Man culminated in the sending of the Living Word, God's only Son, Jesus Christ. He worked through men and women over the ages in their own situation in preparation for the gift of His Complete Word to them. This Word, it's earliest foreshadowing going far back into pre-history, was heard and responded to by a few, and was handed on verbally until finally through a long and complex development, it became a compiled, written record covering two thousand years of history. It later included a new record, that of the story of the Son of God, the *Word-made-flesh*, come to earth to reclaim Man as His own, freeing him from the evil one. That written record of the interaction of God's love affair with Man, we call the Bible. It records God's work in reestablishing communication between Himself and the Silent Planet.

The Bible is then in a special way an instrument of God's communication to the world- a love letter to win and save the inhabitants of the planet from the drastically mistaken way they have chosen which shuts them off from Him. It is saving Truth - God takes the Initiative to reach His Beloved. He makes initial contact with Man. The Bible has a dual nature. It is both human and divine, even as Jesus has both a human and divine nature. The Church also has both a human and divine nature. When we look at the human side of the Church we are apt to say it is appalling, who needs it? But when we keep our eyes on the Divine, chiefly the mystery of the Real Presence of Christ in His Body and Blood, we know it goes far beyond anything merely human. In the same way the Bible has come to us through human authors, through their human ways of looking at things, and their own peculiar understanding of the "Word." They heard messages from God concerning their own situations and they understood that Word according to their very human experience. When people first come to the Bible they may be shocked at its specific references to the shadier activities of human beings. But the Bible "tells it like it is" as no other writing. There is no pretense in the Bible, no "saving face" or "putting the best foot forward." It speaks directly and plainly, but more importantly wholly truthfully.

A woman in an earlier scripture study group brought a book she had purchased while a visitor in Rome. If you stood on a particular

corner of the present Roman street and looked across, you would see the scene pictured in the book. There below street level is the old Roman forum, a few pillars, some hunks of foundation stone, a piece of statuary, broken bits of masonry, and a pavement. But then pull down over this page the plastic overlay sheet upon which the artist has painted the original scene as it was in the heyday of the Roman Empire.

These few columns that still stand are now part of a great colonnade. These bits of statuary were part of the facade of a tremendous building. The courtyards with their white expanses of marble are decorated with fountains and statues, pavements and stairs. The marble gleams with richness of material and form. It is a glorious sight. Then flip away the overlay and there are the plain rudiments that actually now exist.

The Bible is like that. The human contribution, the history upon which the meaning is laid, are the blocks, bricks and broken pillars. Upon this God puts an overlay of meaning which far transcends the merely human. The Bible has not just one overlay but many, for the final meaning of God's word, though fully revealed in Christ, has not yet been assimilated. Besides infallibly guiding the Church in conjunction with Tradition and Magisterium teaching, the Bible also speaks individually and personally to each person who comes to it in prayer.

The Bible is simple: not meaning simple in depth, but simple in that it speaks to Everyman, not just the educated. A person does not need an education in order to understand the Bible, though an education will enrich his understanding. When read it can be understood and appropriated by everyone because of the Holy Spirit who lives in each Christian, but also because the Bible comes out of human experience and is not a theological treatise. The Bible has come to us through people as they experienced life, mostly in a small land about one fourth of the size of Minnesota - a land encompassing all kinds of terrain from snowy mountains to hottest desert, from fruitful orchards to saltiest of barren seas. In these surroundings at the cross roads of history, individual men and women met life, a life given meaning by their encounter with God, and a life interpreted for them by God. Because they met God in the circumstances of daily life the meaning was not theoretical, it was real, woven into the very stuff of living.

The goal of this study is to make us all comfortable with the Bible. We want to be able to move around in it with assurance, recognizing the important names and knowing something of the background. We also want to increase our knowledge of the great Scriptural themes, the principles for real life that God gives through His Word to those who would return to Him.

Yet, an overview such as this can best be described as an airlines flight 30,000 feet up on a clear day when looking down on earth. One can make out only the great geographic divisions - the Mississippi, the plains, the mountains, the California vegetation, and then the ocean. When someone mentions Denver, we would say, "Oh, yes, I flew over Denver, it is in the mountains." Though we would have a good grasp of its location in relationship to the Mississippi and California, real acquaintance with Denver would take much, much more. We would need to get down on the ground in Denver, and spend weeks there, even months.

This study is like that. We will fly over, far above, gaining only that general, but important configuration of the Bible and how the books relate, and how the salvation story is continued, but to really know the books will take much more, weeks even months and years of further study. So do not be disappointed if only the large scene remains in the student's memory, and few details. The first flight over the Bible cannot give the details, but only the larger picture against which, with further study, the details gain their meaning.

What does the Bible have to say about God's word, which is itself? At this point it is necessary to be sure we know how to use the notation system of the Bible. The first number in a notation is the chapter of the book which is followed by a colon, the second number is the verse where the reading starts followed by a dash, and the third number is the verse where the reading ends. Never hesitate to use your Table of Contents: most class members don't know where to find these books, so there is no embarrassment.

The following is a little blackboard quiz to help students see the span of books in the Bible. The references are put on the board, and one reference for each student they are assigned After the selection is read the class is asked these questions:

- 1) What does the selection say God's word does?
- 2) Is the selection in the Old or New Testament?

3) What kind of literature would you call this?

4) What reading has the most ancient roots? Which is written last? The answers are put on the board in an abbreviated form, something like the following:

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| 1. Genesis 1:1-3 | God's Word creates | OT | inspired myth |
| 2.11 Tim 3:16-17 | it completes a man and equips him | NT | a letter from an apostle to a young bishop |
| 3. Hebrews 4:12 | the Word is active and alive; it divides soul and spirit | NT | treatise of faith |
| 4. Mark 4:14-20 | the Word is like live seed which is fruitful; we are the soil | NT | a gospel |
| 5. Isaiah 55:10-11 | the Word will go forth to accomplish what it says - it is never void | OT | a prophetic book |
| 6. I Peter 1:23-25 | the Word brings us into eternal life - it is utterly dependable | NT | an apostolic letter |
| 7. Psalm 119:129-130 | the Word is understandable by everyone. It is light for our path | OT | a song/poem |
| 8. Ezekiel 12:25 | the Word is authoritative and what it says will happen. It is not optional. | OT | apocalyptic prophecy |

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| 9. | John 9:1 | the Word is God Jesus is God. He does what He says. | NT | a Gospel |
| 10. | Deut, 30:11-14 | The Word is near us | OT | The Law |

deepest questions and give us sure Truth about them. Jesus used parables in the same way never intending that we should ask, “Just what woman lost the coin?” “Just what father had a son who left home?” The historic, actual circumstances are not the point, the Truth of God is the point - the Spirit-filled story or myth is the carrier of that Truth.

Note these things:

1) the centuries of time - from I Peter written ca 70 AD (not the latest book of the NT) to the stories of Genesis which have oral roots before 2000 BC;

2) all of these different authors writing in different cultures and for different reasons agree on what the Word of God is and what it does - a mark of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God;

3) different kinds of literature comprise the Bible - it is not all presented as merely historical fact, because historical facts alone do not necessarily reveal Truth.

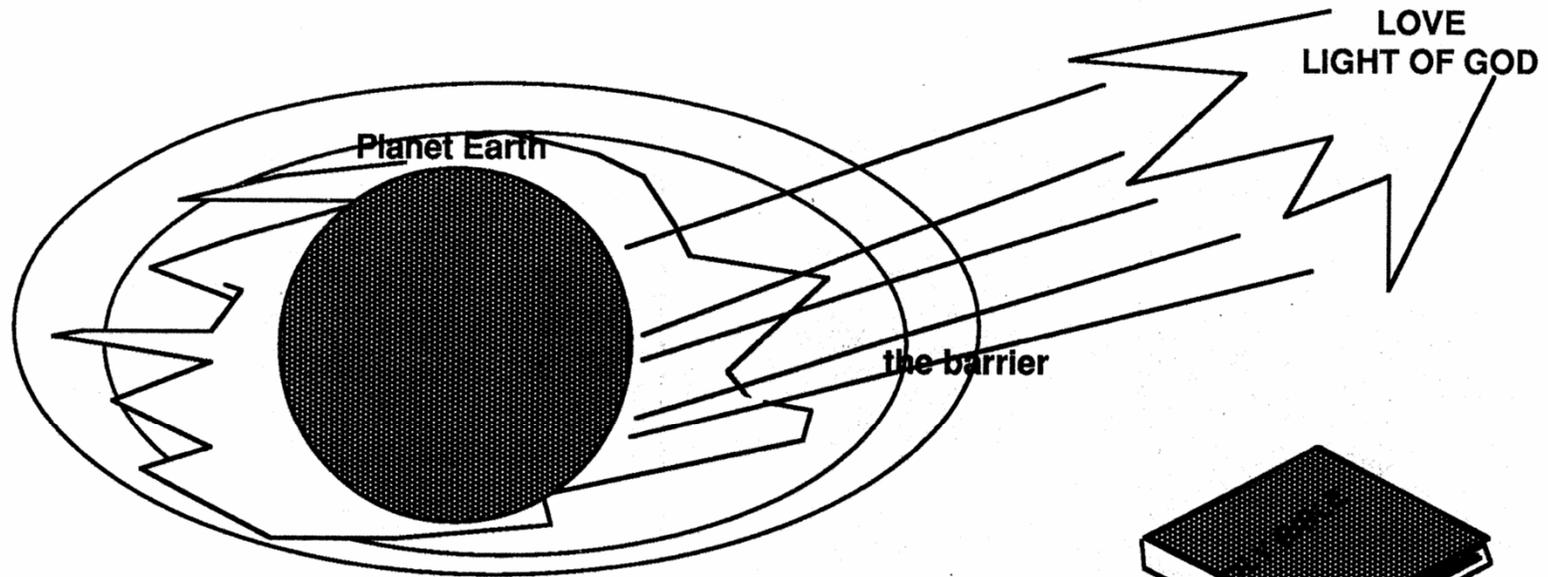
At the same time, it must be understood that of all religions, the Jewish and the Christian faiths are rooted in *historic fact*. In certain places at certain times, to real people, God spoke and acted.

Jesus was a living man, whose actions are based in history. He was born in the time of Augustus Caesar, and died under Pontius Pilate - authentic people in a real time of history. It is vitally important to accept the concrete reality of our faith. Yet, non-historic writing may be inspired, and may also carry Truth when it is in relation to the Incarnate, historical Word. The inspired Word may be a parable, or a story, and though not historical it carries an aspect of Truth that God willed be conveyed in that form. The Bible has both kinds of inspired writing.

Which leads us to “myth” and what it means in the scriptural context. The Bible has inspired stories, even myth, but this does not mean mere legend, it means *truth beyond and above historic truth*. The Bible myths come to us out of the prehistoric past. All the writers of the Bible are concerned with Reality and its meaning, not with battles and who won them, or other historic events for the sake of fact alone. Sometimes that meaning is carried better in a story than any other way. The Bible has ancient stories, inspired myths, which grapple with the

What does “testament” mean? We speak of the “new” and the “old” testaments. A testament is an agreement between two persons that is binding. A covenant is another word for such a binding agreement. Marriage is a covenant. The Old Covenant by which the Israelites related to God is the agreement between God and the nation of Israel sealed in the blood of a sacrificial animal. The New Covenant replaced the Old Israel with the New Israel, those who are the believers in Jesus as the Christ, and is the agreement between God and man sealed in the blood of the new sacrificial victim, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. In the Catholic Bible the Old Covenant or Testament consists of forty-six books; the New Testament of twenty-seven.

The Bible is not a Book, it is a collection, or a library of books. As we have seen, these books come from different times and conditions and are written with different purposes; they have different human authors, but they do not waver on what the Word of God is. Said in different contexts they all agree. Like an orchestra with its members coming from all kinds of national backgrounds, playing different instruments and even different notes, but following the score of the composer/conductor (the Holy Spirit) the Bible books taken together are harmonious, the various parts like instruments, and their authors like players, complement each other in a glorious whole.



The Bible

what?
 why?
 how?
 where?
 when?

Genesis 1:1-3
 II Timothy 3:16-17
 Hebrews 4:12
 Mark 4:14-20
 Isaiah 55:10-11
 I Peter 1:23-25
 Psalm 119:129-130
 Ezekiel 12:25
 John 1:1-3
 Deuteronomy 30:12