

BIBLE MAP #5

Philippians 2:5-11: Matthew 1:1-17

We've been talking about the Bible over the last few weeks. The goal has been to make the Bible more Meaningful: Accessible and Practical. You can find all the messages in this series on our church website. Today I simply want to give you some clues, that will help you better understand the Bible when you read it.

Let's start with the most obvious. We've already discovered that the Bible is not one book. It is a series of books that have a common theme. That theme is who God is and his relationship with humanity. The Bible is not history as much as it is HIS STORY.

That story is told in the Bible through different kinds of literature. There are books of law and history. There are songs, proverbs, and poetry. There is prophecy, biography, autobiography, and there are letters, lots of letters.

So guess what? You have to apply the same rules to reading the Bible that you do to the other books you read. You can't read every book of the Bible in exactly the same way.

You have to read the five law books – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – as law books.

They are books of rules, regulations and commandments. given to regulate the life of God's people. So apart from the Ten Commandments you also have rules for worship, instructions about what religious festivals to observe, laws about handling food, public health laws, laws about how to live in community with each other and even the sentences to be handed out for law breaking. Read the law books as law books.

You have to read the history books, like Joshua, Judges, the books of Kings and Chronicles as history books, as factual records of historical events dealing with real people in real life situations. You have to read them in their historical context, with an awareness not only of what was happening in Israel, but in the wider world as well.

You have to read the poetry and song books, like Psalms, Proverbs, and the Song of Solomon, as poetry and song, and you need to interpret the images they use just as you would interpret the images in other poems and songs you hear.

You have to read and understand Proverbs as a collection of wise sayings that emerge out of life experience.

You have to read prophecy, books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Revelation, as the forth telling of God's truth recognizing that this truth is grounded in historical events but also with elements that look beyond history.

You have to read biography type books like Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as a mixture of biography and auto-biography, realizing it is recording the life, times and the words of someone's life.

And you have to read the letters – and there are 21 of them in the New Testament- as you read your own mail, as letters written by someone to someone with a specific purpose.

The letters are all different. First and Second Corinthians, for example, are two separate letters written by the apostle Paul to the Christians in the city of Corinth, one of the ancient cities of Greece.

The two letters called First and Second Timothy were written to Timothy by the apostle Paul. Timothy was a fellow missionary who was being mentored by Paul.

The two letters written by Peter, the disciple of Jesus, and a leader in the early Church, were not written to a specific individual or congregation but to gatherings of persecuted Christians scattered throughout the northern part of Asia Minor.

So, clue #1, when it comes to reading the books of the Bible you have to be aware of what kind of literature you are reading, and what the context of that literature is.

Obviously, a letter written to an established congregation having internal problems, will have a different content and feel to it than a letter written to Christians who are scattered over a wide area because of persecution.

Now there are 21 major letters that make up the bulk of the New Testament. But you'll find seven more, very brief letters, in the Book of Revelation. These are called "The Letters to the Seven Churches."

Now let me say something about these seven churches in the Book of Revelation. They were called Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Although we call Revelation a book of prophecy, we have to understand that these seven churches were all real churches in real places, relatively close to each other geographically, and all within Asia Minor. It's possible that John, Jesus disciple and the author of Revelation, had ministered to these churches at some point in his life.

So, yes, the Book of Revelation is a book of prophecy, but remember what I said before. Prophecy is rooted in history and fact, as well as in looking ahead into what has yet to come. In fact, we should not think of Revelation as all new material. It's not. Revelation is better understood as the final chapter of a book which draws all of the other chapters together so the reader understands how all the threads gather together.

A second clue for understanding the Bible is to remember that the name of a particular book helps you understand the content.

The word Genesis means "*beginning*". Genesis is the "*book of beginnings*". The creation of the world, the creation of humanity, the origins of human sin, the beginning of God's plan of redemption, and the beginning of the history of the Hebrew people.

The name of the Book of Exodus hints at its content. Exodus means "exit" or "departure". So this book tells the story of how the Hebrew people, who had become slaves in Egypt, departed slavery with God's help, when God raised up Moses to be their leader.

Leviticus is named after the tribe of Levi. This was the tribe who were chosen to be the priests of Israel. So Leviticus has been defined as a "Manual for Holiness". As such it contains all kinds of priestly laws intended to keep the Hebrew people true to God.

The Book of Numbers is basically a record of the census that was taken to determine the names and numbers of those who escaped from slavery in Egypt. I'm told that Numbers is the favourite book of the Bible at Stats Canada because it uses the longer census form!

The word Deuteronomy means "repetition of the law". That's why it repeats a lot of the content found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.

Are you catching on now? You can probably work out what the other books of the Bible are all about for yourself but let me give you two New Testament examples.

The apostle Paul wrote two letters to the Thessalonians. The Thessalonians were Christians who lived in the city of Thessalonica, which was the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia in Greece.

The letter to the Philippians was written to the church in the city of Philippi. Philippi was named after Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great.

The clue is often in the name.

Clue #3. The timeline of the Bible. This is where it can get really, really confusing.

If you've ever read the Bible through from cover to cover, beginning in Genesis and ending in Revelation, you might have got confused a few times. The Bible wasn't really written to be read that way.

In our modern minds, we think that the chronology of the Bible is a straight line from God creating the world in Book of Genesis to God creating a new heaven and a new earth in the Book of Revelation and that all of the dates, and the books of the Bible, fall into sequence. No, they don't!

The Bible is a historical record but above all, it is a theological record. The Bible is controlled by our thinking about God, not by chronological order.

So here's the basic Bible timeline.

The first five books of the Bible – Genesis through Deuteronomy – covers the period from the Creation of the universe; that is from before recorded time, to about 1400 years before Christ.

The next major section of the Bible – the History Books – Joshua through Esther – cover the period from around 1400BC to 400BC – a period of some 1000 years. 400BC is when the voice of prophecy ended until John the Baptist appears to announce the coming of Jesus.

Now here's where things get complicated. The five poetical books – Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs and the 17 books of prophecy – from Isaiah to Malachi do not follow chronologically. In fact, all of those books do not relate to events that happen after the twelve books of history, but they relate to the events that are contained in those books of history!

Now just to complicate things a little more. During the history books, the great Kingdom of King David and his son King Solomon became divided into what was called the northern and the southern kingdoms. The northern Kingdom, representing 10 of the 12 tribes of the Hebrews, became known as Israel. Its capital was Samaria. The southern Kingdom, consisting of two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, centered on Jerusalem as their capital, and became known as Judah.

One Hebrew people but two Kingdoms with separate monarchies, histories and economic circumstances, although these sometimes intertwined.

That's why you often read something like this. First Kings 22:51:

In the seventeenth year of the reign of Jehoshaphat of Judah (that's the southern kingdom), Ahaziah son of Ahab became king of Israel (that's the northern kingdom) and he ruled in Samaria (the northern kingdom's capital) for two years.

Now in terms of clues, we have to understand that God sometimes sent a prophet to declare his Word to both of these separate kingdoms, after all they were both still part of God's chosen people. But sometimes he sent one prophet only to the northern Kingdom, and another prophet only to the southern kingdom. Why? Because the kingdoms were similar but also different and so God's message to them depended on what he needed each kingdom to hear.

Now with that clue in mind can look for more clues. For example, the book of the prophet Micah begins with these words:

1 The Lord gave this message to Micah . . . The visions he saw concerned BOTH Samaria and Jerusalem".

Now listen to how the prophecy of Isaiah (1:1) begins:

These are the visions that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. . . .

Which kingdom did God send Isaiah to minister to? To Judah, the southern Kingdom, which had Jerusalem as its capital.

Now you know this you can look for the clues, and those clues will help your understanding of the Bible.

Now I said earlier that the voice of the prophets ended around 400BC. In essence, God became silent until a new prophet, John the Baptist arose to announce the coming of Jesus the Messiah. During this 400 year period, God's people are now a conquered people living under a succession of empires – the Persians, then the Greeks under Alexander the Great, and finally the Roman Empire. God's timing in all this is explained in Galatians 4:4 in the New Testament:

But when the right time came, God sent his Son

No surprise then that the New Testament begins the Gospel of Matthew by linking the New to the Old:

This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of David and of Abraham.

Mark does the same thing (1:1):

This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It began² just as the prophet Isaiah had written.

And John goes back to the very act of creation itself.

In the beginning the Word already existed....He existed in the beginning with God...So the Word became human and made his home among us. And so with these words, we prepare to enter the season of Advent, and to hear again the good news of the coming of Jesus, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords!

PASTORAL PRAYER

God our Creator, You are the only true Time Lord, Lord of all time and space. Our history is your story, the story you created us to participate in as we live out your purpose for our lives.

We thank you for the men and women who recorded for us the record of your actions, words and promises, and who passed these on to us through your written Word.

We thank you for Jesus, who is forever Emmanuel, God with us, your Living Word, who came to redeem us and all of the creation and to save us from sin and death.

We thank you for your Holy Spirit, given to guide us into truth and to accompany us on our journey of faith.

We pray this day for your Church in every corner of the world. For Christians who meet in lofty cathedrals and in open air gatherings, in historic buildings and in places like storefronts and shopping malls.

We pray for congregations numbering thousands and for those who number just two or three. We know you are present with both.

We pray for those who worship with freedom of religious expression, and those who are sorely persecuted because they confess the name of Jesus.

We pray for people of faith who struggle with doubt and for irreligious folk who struggle to find faith.

We pray that all that we do as your Church brings glory and honour to your name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.