

Where should I start reading my Bible?

I hope you are picking up on the encouragement to engage more closely with the contents of the Bible. If so, where might we begin?

As I respond to this, there are a few ideas to chase away: “If I read the Bible, I’ve got to start at the beginning”; this turns quickly into “if I read the Bible, I’ve got to start at the beginning and go all through to the end”; that is probably allied to a deeply held pre-judgement “When I read the Bible, I should be able to understand it”. Though I want to challenge that thought, I do so gently because the Reformation was partly fought over this notion: that the Bible can be read and understood by everyone, and does not need the Church (or special scholars) to tell you what it means. I fully endorse this: the Bible belongs to all believers, and is not to be mediated by the authorities within the Church. But we do not have to go further to the belief that every single verse will make immediate sense to anyone who reads it. All this is about turning the Bible, from a threat, into a treasury. Go into a treasure house and you will have sometimes patiently to work out how to unlock some of the caskets in order to find the jewels. The treasure may be yours; but diligence and perseverance may also be required to reach it.

That said, here are a few practical suggestions about where to begin:

- 1 Genesis: I do not want to say too much about this marvellous book as both Joy Todd and Rod Pierce indicated to me that they wanted to explore it as they contribute to this Bible Journal. Suffice it to say, Genesis is not the oldest book, nor the first to be written, and should not be seen as a foundation for what comes later. In fact, it was written quite late in the history of the Jewish people, and intentionally composed so that some of the themes that were important to later Jews would be seen to be rooted in the beginning of the relationship between Yahweh and the tribes of Israel. If you do start by reading Genesis, allow it to be what it is. It is not a science text book, so try to read it without the voice of Richard Dawkins in your ear. I personally feel that Genesis stutters and stumbles after the opening two chapters, only really getting into its stride in Chapter 12 with the calling of Abraham. Then the familiar stories with Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Leah, Rachel and lots of sons follow. This will be familiar territory for you and is very enjoyable, underlining the truth that God calls rotters, adulterers, liars, misfits and thieves. So you should feel at home with this book. If you enjoy it, you will enjoy Exodus also. But don’t get too carried away, for Leviticus and Numbers (which come next in the Old Testament) are best avoided for now.
- 2 Psalms: it’s hard not to enjoy the Psalms. Many are familiar, recognisable and memorable. I hope that some of you will write about particular Psalms (or certain verses from the Psalms) for this Journal during the year. Your personal contributions and reflections will be appreciated. Many of the Psalms begin as songs or hymns addressed to God; yet we now often use them as words addressed by God to us. Both ways are valid. That may be a personal experience you recognise: you say something tentatively, reaching towards what is wise and true; but others hear your words as “right”, and (possibly) from God. Please remember that the Book of Psalms is like an anthology of poetry: there is no need to read from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150 in order; dot around; perhaps you will be drawn to unfamiliar words on just the day you need to hear them. As you use this book, be

aware that there are some grisly passages (including bits about bashing children's heads in). I'll deal with such troubling verses later.

- 3 One of the four Gospels: later in the year I will be encouraging you to read one of the Gospels all the way through in one sitting. Moreover we will try to do something similar in worship all together so that corporately we can experience the dynamics and trajectory of a complete gospel. Perhaps we have become too familiar with only having a few verses read to us on a Sunday, and so miss out on how the individual stories illuminate and contrast with each other. How about now reading two or three chapters of the gospels continuously? It will demand your attention because the words are so familiar.
- 4 Other accessible parts of the New Testament: I recommend any of the major epistles: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians. Although they were written for a particular context, the meanings and emphases are relevant and interesting for today. Of the shorter epistles, I find 1 Peter, 1 Timothy and James contain practical wisdom and some evocative passages. Beware of Hebrews (bizarre), Revelation (best taken after three large glasses of port), and Romans (only when you have completed a Times crossword). The Acts of the Apostles, much like some members of General Synod, I find dull and triumphalist.
- 5 To explore the Old Testament, I recommend Joshua/Judges (if read as stories – not to be taken too literally – the oldest parts were composed 3000 years ago), Ruth, 1 Samuel and 1 Kings (the second book of each becomes repetitive; 1 and 2 Chronicles are best avoided)

If my recommendations seem rather simplistic, let me make clear what I am saying:

- start somewhere but remember the Bible is a library, a book of books. You don't read the collected works of Shakespeare by starting with the Tempest and finishing with Pericles. You probably don't read a whole Shakespearean play: so pick and choose. After all, most people don't read the Times from page 1 to page 100. Have confidence in handling the Bible as a treasure-trove.
- the implication of this is that the context of each book is important. Of course, there are wonderful parts of Jeremiah, but it may be easier to appreciate them if you have some understanding of when and how the book was composed. Let me say again that I accept the Reformation *cri-de-coeur*: allow the Bible to be read by the people, unmediated by the Church. As well as that, through this Journal as well as through, the teaching offered in the New Start course, I intend to offer some guidance so that the light will shine from, and on, all the Bible.