

# Understanding the Bible

## OLD TESTAMENT



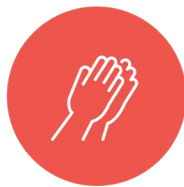
### PENTATEUCH



### HISTORICAL



### WISDOM



### PROPHETIC

Genesis	Exodus	Leviticus	Numbers	Deuteronomy
Joshua	Judges	Ruth	1 Samuel	2 Samuel
1 Kings	2 Kings	1 Chronicles	2 Chronicles	Ezra
Nehemiah	Esther	Job	Psalms	Proverbs
Ecclesiastes	Song of Solomon	Isaiah	Jeremiah	Lamentations
Ezekiel	Daniel	Hosea	Joel	Amos
Obadiah	Jonah	Micah	Nahum	Habakkuk
Zephaniah	Haggai	Zechariah	Malachi	

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## NEW TESTAMENT



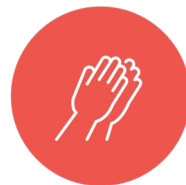
### GOSPELS



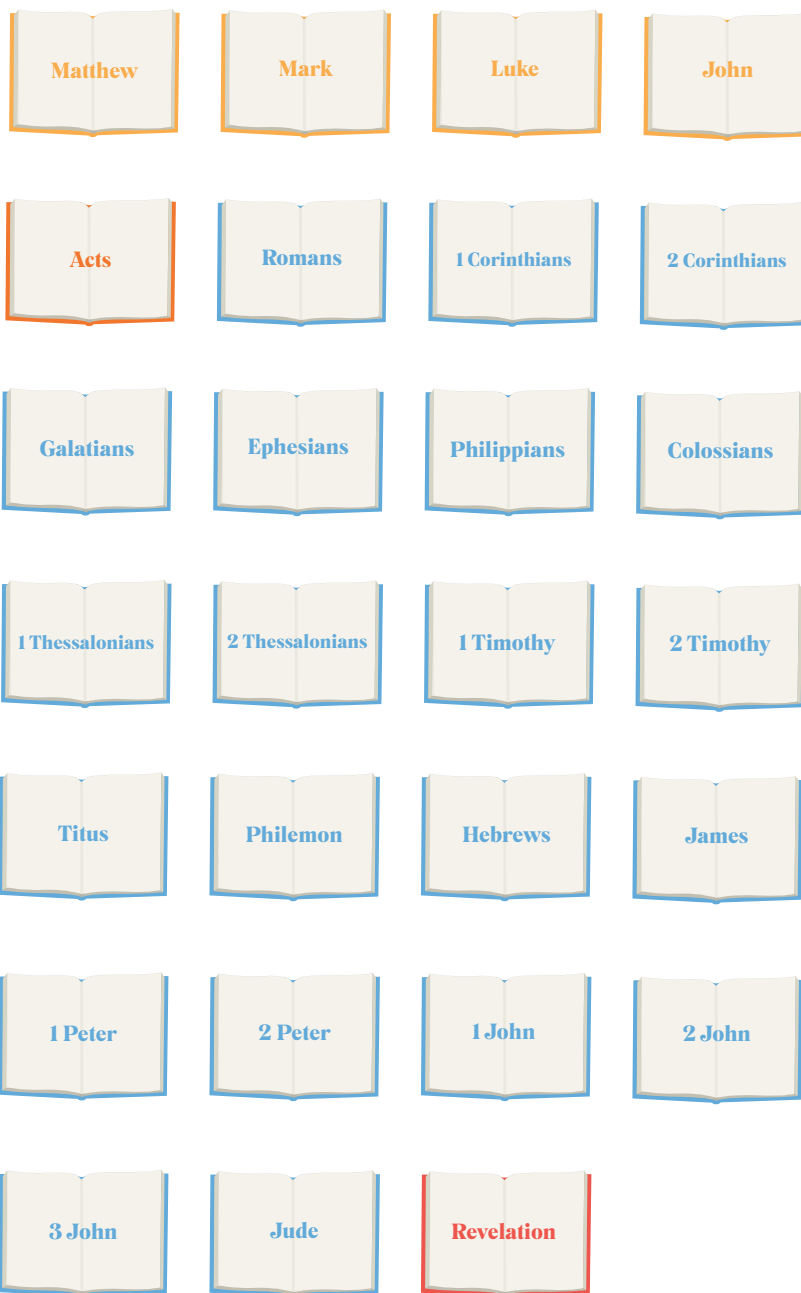
### HISTORICAL



### LETTERS



### PROPHETIC



# The Gospels and Acts

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT



**MATTHEW**

**Written to a  
Jewish audience**



**MARK**

**Earliest and shortest  
Gospel written**



**LUKE**

**Written by a  
medical doctor**



**JOHN**

**Written by Jesus's  
best friend**



**ACTS**

**About the Holy Spirit  
and the early church**

**The Gospel and Acts  
came **400 Years**  
after the Old  
Testament**

# The Gospels

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**SCRIPTURE: LUKE 1:1–3A**

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## **Bible Readings:**

*John 1:9–13*

There were four hundred years of silence after God spoke through the prophet Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament. Four hundred years! Can you imagine that period of waiting, doubting, hoping? But this week we don't have to wait for the rest of the story. We get to keep reading and discover the good news as we begin the New Testament.

The very first book of the New Testament, Matthew, opens with a genealogy. As subjects go, reading through a catalog of names that go back some four thousand years hardly seems appealing. Who wants to trudge through a list of hard-to-pronounce names? The genealogies trace God's hand in the lives of his people, they demonstrate how he uses ordinary people to be a part of his extraordinary story, and they ground the story in history. These were real people—real moms and dads and sons and nephews—many of them familiar to the original audience. Once we understand how the different parts of the New Testament play a role in God's story of redemption, we can come to appreciate every part of the Scriptures.

## **MATTHEW, MARK, LUKE, & JOHN**

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John make up what are known as the Gospels. The word “gospel” means “good news,” and that's exactly what we find in these books—the good news that God has initiated his kingdom through the coming of his son, Jesus. Each Gospel bears the name of its author. Matthew, Mark, and Luke's Gospels tell Jesus's story from the bottom up, focusing on Jesus's humanity and slowly revealing he is the Son of God. The Gospel of John tells the story of Jesus from the top down, beginning with the Word of God coming down from heaven to become a man (John 1:1, 14).

## ONE JESUS, ONE STORY, FOUR GOSPELS

Each Gospel points to Jesus by narrating the most significant aspects of his life and ministry on Earth in its own way. Some Gospels recount the same events, but each is expertly crafted to reveal a particular aspect of the good news of Jesus.

Matthew's gospel is written with a Jewish audience in mind. When we read it, we find it replete with references to Jewish customs. The particular truth this Gospel emphasizes about Jesus is summed up in Matthew 5:17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but fulfill them."

The Gospel of Mark is the "action-packed" Gospel. Mark moves his story along quickly in order to teach us that "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45).

Luke's Gospel is the only Gospel written by a non-Jewish man. It emphasizes that the good news of Jesus is for all—Jews and Gentiles. It is addressed to Theophilus, that he "may have certainty concerning the things [he has] been taught" (Luke 1:3-4). What Luke wants to show us through his gospel is that Jesus "came to seek and to save the lost" (19:10).

Lastly, we might think of John's Gospel as the Gospel of love. Love is such an important part of John's understanding of Jesus that he can't help but use the word a total of fifty-seven times! It is here that we find the often-quoted verse that begins, "For God so loved the world . . ." (3:16). John tells us his purpose in writing: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:30-31).

Whether we're studying Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, it will help us to remember that each book is ultimately about Jesus. He is the main character, and we can be sure we've understood the Gospels correctly only when they've led us to him.

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**The Gospels tell us Jesus's story, revealing not only *what* he did but also *who* he is. In what ways does your life reflect what Jesus has done and who he is?**

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**The word gospel means \_\_\_\_\_ .**

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# The Book of Acts

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**“When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.**

**ACTS 2:1-4**

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After he died to pay for the sin of all of humanity and was resurrected, Jesus commanded his disciples to stay in Jerusalem. The disciples could hardly contain themselves. And who could blame them? Not many days had passed since their beloved teacher had suffered the humiliation of dying a criminal’s death. Not many days had passed since his lifeless body had laid undisturbed in a guarded tomb that belonged to a man named Joseph, a follower of Jesus from the town of Arimathea. And not many days had passed since he had done what no one ever expected him to do—raise to life again! So, when Jesus ordered the disciples to wait in Jerusalem, they couldn’t help but wonder, *could this be the time?*

## **Bible Readings:**

*Acts 1:6–9*

## **THE GREATEST STORY CONTINUED**

Written as the sequel to the Gospel of Luke, the book of Acts picks up where the Gospels left off: Jesus had risen from the dead, and his followers were looking to the future with hopeful

anticipation. As they waited in Jerusalem, the disciples expected Jesus to finally fulfill God’s promise to restore the kingdom of Israel. God had chosen Israel out of all the peoples of the Earth to be his representatives, his ambassadors of grace to the world. But because of their stubborn disobedience, he had humbled them by stripping them of their political power and subjecting them to foreign rule for almost one thousand years. The disciples were waiting for the restoration of a kingdom. Whatever they might have expected as they saw Jesus lifted up to heaven (1:9), nothing could have prepared them for what would come with the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

#### THE UNSTOPPABLE HOLY SPIRIT

Just as Jesus is the main character in the Gospels, the Holy Spirit takes center stage in the book of Acts. As the Holy Spirit moves, the people of God move. Acts 1:8 serves as a helpful summary of the entire book. With the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the disciples began sharing the good news about Jesus, beginning in Jerusalem (chapter 2) then on to Judea and Samaria (chapter 8), and ultimately to “the end of the earth” as Christians fled persecution and Paul began his missionary journeys (chapter 11 on).

As we study the book of Acts, we discover a God who, through his Holy Spirit, moves heaven and Earth to gather to himself people from every nation, ethnicity, race, tongue, sex, age, and socio-economic status to be a part of his family. It is in this book that we see the birth of what today we call the church—the people of God, separated across time and space, but united together by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and a devotion to the apostles’ teaching, the communion of believers, and the Lord’s Supper (2:42). As we study this book, may we be reminded that the same Holy Spirit who moved on the day of Pentecost continues to move today in our lives and the lives of his people scattered all around the world.

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**Where can you catch glimpses of the Holy Spirit's presence in your life?**

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**\_\_\_\_\_ takes center stage in the book of Acts.**

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# Why These Books Matter to the Whole Story of the Bible

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**SCRIPTURE:**  
**JOHN 20:30–31**

**Bible Readings:**  
*Acts 2:38–42*

## BREAKING THE SILENCE: THE GOSPELS

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, announcing the coming of Jesus the Messiah—Israel’s promised savior—it had been four hundred years since the people of Israel had received a prophecy from God. They waited not knowing when he would come, surely wondering if he would come at all. So when Gabriel, echoing the words of the prophet Malachi, declared that in a few months’ time Zechariah would have a son and that his son would be the one to prepare the way for Messiah, it was almost more than Zachariah’s faith could handle (Luke 1:17; cf. Malachi 4:6). After all, he was an old man, and his wife was barren (Luke 1:18). It seemed impossible. But as the Gospels teach us, “Nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37 cf. Matthew 19:26).

The Gospels continue the story recorded in the Old Testament. Every book, from Genesis to Malachi, foreshadowed the coming of God’s Messiah. In the Gospels, we finally get to meet him in Jesus. And this is the good news the Gospels proclaim, that God loved the world—humanity and all of creation—so deeply that he sent his Son to rescue us and set right every broken thing in this world.

From his birth, to his life, his teachings, his death, and finally to his resurrection, the Gospels bear witness to a God who is gracious and merciful, who is slow to anger and whose unwavering love and faithfulness has no end. He is true to his promises, and the good news—the best news—is that, because of Jesus, we can have a relationship with him.

## GOD’S CONTINUING SAGA: ACTS

But it doesn’t stop there. Where the Gospels show us what happened when God stepped into our world, the book of Acts gives us a front row seat to experience what happens when people transformed by Jesus are empowered by the Holy Spirit. It may be helpful as we study the New Testament to think of Acts as a bridge between the Gospels and the letters. It’s in Acts where we see the apostles—who we first meet in the Gospels—be transformed into teachers and

leaders. And it's in Acts where we see, for the very first time, the Holy Spirit take up permanent residence in the lives of believers.

Up until this point, God's Holy Spirit only came to believers for a time. After he completed his work he would depart (see 1 Samuel 16:14). But in Acts, everything changed. Luke tells us that when the Spirit indwelt the believers, they were compelled to go to the streets and preach the good news about Jesus. Because it was Pentecost, Jerusalem was filled with people from every nation. As the disciples began to preach, the people heard them, each in their own language (Acts 2:6). It is here that we see the very crux of the entire book of Acts: the birth of the church—one new, multi-ethnic community.

In the Gospels, we see God's fulfillment of his promises to his people Israel. In the book of Acts, we come to understand that those promises were always meant to bless all the peoples of the world. We are the recipients of the work of the Spirit through the apostles. Just as the Spirit guided the believers in the first century, he guides us now in the twenty-first.

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**As members of God's family, our lives are meant to be instruments of God's blessing for the world. What are you doing to bless your neighbors?**

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**In the gospels, we see God's fulfillment of his \_\_\_\_\_ to his people Israel.**

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# What Do You Observe?

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**For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.**

**JOHN 3:16**

**But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**

**ACTS 1:8**

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We've talked about their authors, their contexts, and their roles in the overall story of the Bible. Now it's time to open our Bibles and start studying! We're going to practice making observations using John 3:16 and Acts 1:8.

Just as we would never open up the latest *New York Times* bestseller to a random page and start reading, the books we find in the New Testament are no different. When studying the Gospels or Acts, we should always start at the beginning. Before we move on to observation and interpretation, it can be tempting to skip past genealogies or jump to our favorite verses. But to truly understand the message and power of each book, we have to take the journey as it has been set before us.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

### ***John 3:16***

Read John 1–3. Reading these chapters shows us that the immediate context of John 3:16 begins with John 3:1.

**Where does this section end?**

The major characters in our section are Jesus and a man named Nicodemus. John gives us some important information about this man. For example, he writes that Nicodemus “was a man of the Pharisees” (3:1). What do you know about Pharisees? (If you’ve never heard of a Pharisee, take a minute to look it up. A simple Google search will suffice.) **What else can we observe about him? How does he address Jesus?**

By reading the sections that come immediately before our focus verse, we come to understand that John 3:16 is part of Jesus’s response to Nicodemus’s questions. **What were those questions?**

John 3:16 begins with the word “for.” This may be a little word, but it packs a lot of meaning. Here, it indicates that what comes after it provides an explanation for whatever came before it. **What does Jesus tell Nicodemus in the verses immediately before verse 16?**

**What does John 3:16 explain?**

***Acts 1:8***

Read Acts 1:1–11. The first three verses of Acts 1 provide an introduction for the book. It is here that we learn that there is a “first book” that precedes the book of Acts. **Which is the first book?** (Hint: The mention of “Theophilus” gives us a clue.)

Beginning with the introduction, Luke shares some details that help set the scene for our focus verse. In verse 3, we learn that Jesus presented himself “alive to them after his suffering.” **Who are the “them” Luke is referring to? What are Jesus’s instructions to them? And why does he give them these instructions?**

As we continue reading, we discover that Acts 1:8—much like John 3:16—is part of Jesus’s response that begins earlier in the passage. In this case, it follows a question found in verse 6. **What do the disciples ask Jesus?**

Acts 1:8 begins with the word “but.” This little word is our clue to pay attention to what’s coming next. It is a signal that what follows after it is the most important part of our verse. **What does Jesus say before the “but”?**

**Who will be the source of the disciples’ power? What will happen as a result of the Holy Spirit’s coming?**

# What Does It Mean for You?

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**Bible Readings:** *John 3:16, Acts: 1:8*

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## THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

As Jesus was teaching the crowds, some Pharisees came to ask him a question. “Teacher,” they said, “which is the great commandment in the Law?” (Matthew 22:36). The Pharisees weren’t just religious leaders. They were also experts in the Law. When they asked Jesus this question, their intent was not to learn from him, but to humiliate him. To prove their own superiority. After all, who could possibly choose one commandment among hundreds? No matter how Jesus answered, the Pharisees were confident they’d set the perfect trap.

Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37–40). The Pharisees didn’t see this coming. Not only had Jesus answered their question, but he had also summarized the entire Pentateuch in two commandments: love God and love your neighbor.

## SO WHAT?

The Pharisees often get a bad rap, and not without reason. Almost every time they show up in the New Testament they’re either testing Jesus, accusing Jesus, or missing the point of Jesus altogether. But when it came to studying God’s Word, they got at least one thing right: they didn’t stop at learning what it said. They wanted to know how to apply it to their lives and the lives of God’s people.

The same should be true of us. Perhaps the most important question we can ask of the Gospels and the book of Acts is “So what?” Or, to put it another way: What do these books, written almost two thousand years ago, have to do with us today? But since these are God’s books, inspired by him for the purpose of making him known



to us, we might think of application in still another way. As Jesus taught in Matthew 22, when we study God's Word, the question of application really comes down to this: *How should what we're studying impact the way we love God and the way we love others?* Let's apply this principle to the passages we've been studying.

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**How do the observations we made about John 3:16–17 challenge the way we love God?**

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**How does it call us to love others?**

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**Look over our observations of Acts 1:8.  
What does this verse imply about how God loves his people?**

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**What does it imply about how God loves the people who are far from him?**

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**How does what this verse reveals about God's love challenge the way I am loving God?**

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**How does it impact the way I love others?**

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These seemingly simple questions, when considered prayerfully and humbly, have the ability to make a world of difference in our lives. They have the power to convert our study from an academic exercise into an affection-shaping, holy discipline. As we allow these questions to permeate our hearts, with God's help and through the power of the Holy Spirit, they will not only change the way we love God and the way we love others, they will ultimately change us, slowly transforming us more into the image and likeness of God's own son, Jesus.

*May we always dare to ask, so what?*

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