

The Bible

The Bible uses the phrase the “Word of God” in a number of places and it has a couple of different meanings. First, the Word of God refers to Jesus. In **Revelation 19**¹³, John refers to the risen Jesus as “The name by which he is called is The Word of God.” John also speaks about Jesus as being the Word of God who “became flesh and dwelt among us” (**John 1**¹⁴). Though these references are few and far between, it does indicate that Jesus is the person in the Trinity who has the role of communicating the character of God and his will to us.

The second meaning of the phrase “word of God” is when it describes God speaking. This can be further split into four different categories. When God speaks and causes something to happen this is often referred to as a *decree*. Such decrees can be seen in the Creation (**Genesis 1**), where God spoke and it came into being. In **Psalms 33**⁶ it says “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made” and in **Hebrews 1**³ we are told that Jesus is “upholding the universe by his word of power.” God also speaks *personally* to his people either audibly such as the giving of the Ten Commandments (**Exodus 20**) and when the Father endorsed the ministry of Jesus at his baptism (**Matthew 3**¹⁷) or in the hearts of individuals such as when the Lord spoke to Ananias after the conversion of Paul (**Acts 9**¹⁰).

The Canon (from the Greek word meaning “to rule”) is the list of books recognised by the church as being scripture. The New Testament Canon was finally settled at the Synod of Carthage in 419, though this was largely recognition of what had already been agreed, in some cases, several centuries before.

The 27 Books of the New Testament canon

Matthew
Mark
Luke
John
Acts
Romans
1 Corinthians
2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 Thessalonians
2 Thessalonians
1 Timothy
2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon
Hebrews
James
1 Peter
2 Peter
1 John
2 John
3 John
Jude
Revelation

The word of God also comes to us through human mouths, including *prophecy*. Frequently in the Bible, God inspires the hearts of the prophets in both the Old and the New Testaments to speak his word (for example **Deuteronomy 18**¹⁸⁻²⁰ and **Jeremiah 1**⁹). Finally, the Word of God is given to us in *written* form. The writings of God’s people from the Ten Commandments to the letters of the New Testament Apostles have been written down and collected together by divine providence to form what we now call the Bible. Though we still receive inspiration and words from God today, these are not received in the same light as the Bible. Indeed, one of the tests of whether a word is true or not is whether it is in accordance with the words of the Bible or not.

The Bible has four characteristics; they are authority, clarity, necessity and sufficiency. *Authority* means that all the Bible, both New and Old Testaments, is God’s word. This does not mean that all of the words or grammar are perfect or that translation is without small nuances, but the meaning and truthfulness are clear, In **1 Timothy 3**¹⁶ Paul says that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” regarding the Old Testament. Similarly, in **1 Timothy 5**¹⁸, Paul quotes Jesus words in **Luke 10**⁷ and calls them “scripture”. When the Holy Spirit works in our hearts we are convinced that the Bible is the word of God, as it speaks into the situations we find ourselves in.

The *clarity* of the Bible means that it is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by those who read it seeking God’s help and having the willingness to follow it.

The responsibility of believers to read and understand the Bible is often emphasised. (**Deuteronomy 6⁶⁻⁷** and **Revelation 1³**). Some parts of the Bible are more difficult to understand than others but most of it is straightforward and is to be understood correctly from a moral or spiritual standpoint rather than an intellectual one. Biblical scholars have devised guidelines (hermeneutics) for interpreting and understanding the Bible to assist in the process of interpreting scripture, sometimes called exegesis.

Most people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those that I do understand. **Mark Twain**

The Bible is *necessary* for a number of reasons, first it gives us knowledge of how to be saved, second it is necessary for maintaining the spiritual life (**Matthew 4⁴** and **1Peter 2²**) and finally, we need the Bible to give us a certain knowledge of God's will (**Jeremiah 17⁹** and **Hebrews 5¹¹⁻¹⁴**).

The traditional division of chapters in the Bible was made by Stephen Langton, a lecturer at the University of Paris and later Archbishop of Canterbury (d.1228). The method used for verses was originated by the printer Robert Estienne in Germany in 1551.

The *sufficiency* of the Bible means that it contains all that we need for salvation, trusting and obeying God (**1Timothy 3¹⁷**). What this means is that when we are facing a problem with particular importance to our Christian life, we can approach the Bible with confidence that God will provide guidance for us.

The Bible is different; it is inspired of God working through the hearts of men and women. It is written by people from different cultures, social standing and perspectives at different times throughout history and in different languages all woven together to form one coherent whole.

Understanding the Bible

Understand

- What does the passage actually say?
- When and where was the book or passage written?
- Why was it written?
- Who wrote it?
- What is the background and context?
- What is the book as a whole about?
- How or in what form was it written?

Explanation

- What does the passage mean?
- What did the passage mean to its original readers?
- What is the main point or teaching of the passage?
- How does it compare with other passages in the Bible?
- If it was written to meet some particular need at the time, what is the general principle?

Application

- What does the passage mean today?
- What is an equivalent situation today to that of the original reader?
- Does the passage have some specific teaching?
- Is there an example, a warning or a promise?
- Is there an action to be taken?
- Does it lead to prayer or worship?