

Sunday 12th October 2025 - How To Read The Bible: Better Ways To Read The Bible

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[0 : 00] So we're continuing, as Ian says, our series on how to read the Bible, spending a couple of months of Sundays thinking about how to understand what we read and perhaps most of how to read the Bible.

I say the Bible, this one here is one of my Bibles. I'll stick it on the screen for you there. It's a bit of a tatty copy now. It's got a big bit of gaffer tape down the spine because it's broken up a few times.

I remember buying it maybe just under 30 years ago now, back in my early 20s, because I wanted a pocket-sized Bible to take with me on the Tube in London when I was commuting to and from work each day.

And back then, reading this Bible every morning on the Tube, I guess it's part of my attempt to start a day with God. It was also, I guess, my little way of perhaps learning how to be comfortable in being seen as a person of faith in public as well.

But it also helped me to be aware that I was, in reading it, I was kind of representing God publicly as well. So it's hard to read the Bible on the Tube and not give up your seat for someone who needs it, that kind of thing.

[1 : 23] You've got to be consistent, I guess. If you're going to be overt about reading your Bible, you've got to try and live it out as well. Didn't always get it right on the Tube. Sometimes the elbows came out a little bit, but the intent was there at least.

And I'm grateful, when I think about this Bible, I'm grateful for the journeys that me and this particular little book have been on. The trouble is, though, when I pick up this Bible now, after some 30 or so years of engaging with it, I'm increasingly finding that I just can't read it anymore.

And why is that? Well, it's because the print is too small. My eyes aren't what they used to be. You wondered where I was going then, didn't you? It was okay.

The print is too small. I need these glasses all the time, but I also got my pair of reading glasses as well that I swap things between. In fact, I need my reading glasses these days if I'm ever going to understand anything that this particular Bible says.

And unless I read the Bible through those lenses, it's not going to make much sense to me. That's true for me in a very practical way, the older I get.

[2 : 43] But I think more to the point, and what I'd like us to think about today, are the more general lenses through which we can read the Bible. And actually, I'd say the crucial difference that they can make to the way we understand it.

You see, when we talk about lens or lenses through which we read the Bible, just as a pair of reading glasses will help magnify things for us, or a pair of sunglasses will make everything seem darker.

So, too, I think things in our lives will filter or impact the way we see and read the Bible. So, this could be things like our age or our gender, our ethnicity, could be our upbringing, our experiences, our culture, maybe.

Or more often, perhaps, one of the things that can influence the way we read the Bible is simply the way that we've been told to read the Bible. All of these factors and more can be lenses through which we read the Bible.

Lenses which can affect the way that we see it and understand it. So, one particular kind of lens could be holding to the view that everything we read in the Bible is literally, historically true.

[4 : 04] This way of reading the Bible may have been something that we've been raised with, could have been something we've been taught. Could be something that we assume to be necessary. It might even be something that we've sometimes felt pressurized into following.

Even when we might sometimes have had this nagging thought that a very literal reading of all the events in the Bible may not always be the best or most accurate or perhaps the most helpful approach to take.

For example, that's what I was suggesting the other week when, if you were here or you've caught up online, we looked at the story of Jonah. In that while many people will read the story as being literally true, that Jonah was literally swallowed by a big fish and so on, there is perhaps, as I was suggesting, a better, more helpful way to read the story so that its deepest truths can emerge.

I appreciate, for some though, perhaps challenging this literal lens that we can read the Bible through. That can sometimes be an unsettling challenge to offer.

As choosing to not always take the Bible literally, that can feel sometimes like perhaps we're lacking faith in God's ability to do some miraculous things.

[5 : 25] And whilst I understand that hesitancy, I think I'd want to suggest it's more nuanced than that. So, while I personally, for example, believe that the story of Jonah isn't literally true, but is instead a parable of truth, I do believe in the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus.

And this varied approach between taking some things literally and some things perhaps a bit more metaphorically, that's an indication perhaps of the need for us to take each individual story in the Bible on its own merits and not simply read everything through the same lens each time.

Indeed, what I'd like to share this morning, what, for me, are four different, but I think particularly helpful lenses through which we can read the Bible and therefore hopefully bring us closer to God through its pages.

And these four were drawn from a really good book that I've just been reading that came out just last month called this, Better Ways to Read the Bible by a guy called Zach Lambert.

And if you want to borrow it, you'd be most welcome. This Zach guy here, the old man with the beard, he's a pastor in Texas. But in reading his book, I'd say he's someone who approaches the Bible in a very wise and helpful and open way.

[7 : 03] And it's a way of thinking about it that I'd like to offer it to us this morning. So as we go through these four ways that he says, these four lenses perhaps, through which we can read the Bible, see what you think.

See what you think about these lenses and how they might inform and inspire your own way of hearing, hopefully from God, through the pages of the Bible. So I might say the first lens that suggested that we do well to read the Bible through is this one, the lens of Jesus.

Now what's meant by this? Well, I think if you've been with us here at St. John's for any length of time, you'll hopefully be aware that this is a bit of an ongoing theme for us in how we might best read the Bible.

But just to unpack what we mean by the lens of Jesus a bit, because reading the Bible through the lens of Jesus, putting your Jesus glasses on, if you like, means interpreting all of the scripture through the life, the teachings and the character of Jesus.

In other words, we use Jesus as the way to tell whether the way God is described by different writers in the Bible is accurate, or whether the writers are sometimes mistaken in their views of who God is, what God says and what God is like.

[8 : 34] So we can use Jesus as the ultimate measure, the benchmark, that the lens through which we read the Bible, because Jesus and Jesus alone is described in the Bible as the word of God.

God didn't come to us primarily through the words of a book. Now instead, we're told that the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

The word didn't become a book. The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. It's through Jesus that we can know God. And therefore, through the lens of Jesus' life, that we're to read the Bible, I would say, and hopefully understand what is and what isn't of God.

And this is important, I think, because if we simply read the Bible at face value, we can sometimes find that its writers appear to be endorsing all sorts of troubling behavior.

And sadly, history is littered with people who have used the Bible to justify the most terrible of actions, because if it's written in the Bible, it's therefore seen as being biblical, and it must be okay if it's biblical.

[9 : 55] And yet reading the Bible instead through the lens of Jesus, I'd say offers us a crucial corrective to this kind of thinking. If you see what I mean by this, there's a writer called Jordan Harrell, who puts it like this in describing some things that the Bible seems to endorse versus who Jesus is.

So he says this, he says, genocide is biblical. Loving your neighbor is biblical, but only one is Christ-like. Slavery is biblical.

Chainbreaking is biblical, but only one is Christ-like. Patriarchy is biblical. Countercultural elevation of women is biblical, but only one is Christ-like.

Retributive violence is biblical. Grace-filled restoration is biblical, but only one is Christ-like. Segregation is biblical. Unity is biblical, but only one is Christ-like.

And the conclusion is that it's Christ who transforms us ultimately, not the Bible. As Jesus himself said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

[11 : 13] And to those who looked to the Bible rather than to him primarily for the truth, when he had this to say, he said, you search the scriptures because you think they give you eternal life, but the scriptures point to me.

You refuse to come to me to receive this life. You know, as important as the Bible is, my faith is not ultimately in the Bible, not instead.

My faith is in Jesus. And the Bible is a key way in which I can find out more about Jesus. That makes the Bible a precious gift, one that I want to keep in my pocket or on my phone all the time.

But, it's a means to an end though, and the end of reading the Bible is knowing Jesus. And I suggest we therefore read the Bible in light of and through the lens of that knowledge.

So, that's the first one. We do well, I think, to read the Bible through the lens of Jesus. What else? Well, the second lens that's suggested as being crucial is this one.

[12 : 23] To read the Bible through the lens of context. Now, again, if you've been with us for any length of time, I hope this won't be an unfamiliar idea because for a good while now, we tried to underline the importance of understanding the stories and events of the Bible in their own cultural context.

Why does this matter? Well, because the Bible was written and the events it describes took place not only thousands of years ago, but thousands of miles away.

That means, I think, we do well to try and understand, say, the historical, the social, the cultural context of what was going on in its time and place. Yes, because it's 2,000, 3,000 years ago and 2,000, 3,000 miles away, we won't always be sure what was going on in a particular writer's mind, but through research, through study, through archaeology, through other sources and so on, we can usually see how the context in which a book was written might shape and affect what's trying to be communicated.

So, for example, I'm going to give you my all-time favorite example of the importance of context, which is found in Revelation chapter 3, where the writer of the book of Revelation, John, he describes Jesus as saying some words to a church in the city of Laodicea, which is located in modern-day Turkey.

There's the ruins of what's left of Laodicea today. But Jesus is recorded in Revelation as saying this to the church there. He says, I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot.

[14 : 07] I wish you were either one or the other. So because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth.

Now, if we take these verses on face value without context, we might think Jesus is effectively saying, look, either be hot in your faith, really go for it with me, or be cold.

Don't even bother. Don't even try in your faith at all. But whatever you choose, don't be in the middle. Don't be lukewarm. Either be for me or against me, but don't be half-hearted about me.

And I've heard this passage explained and even preached about in that way. But that never really makes much sense to me. Because surely it would be better to be flawed in our faith, but at least try and follow Jesus some of the time than be deliberately against him all the time.

Surely it would be better, we'd think, to be lukewarm than cold. Hmm. So how might knowing the context of this passage help us to read it and perhaps understand it in a better way?

[15 : 20] Well, the context that here is key for our understanding is to know about the water situation in Laodicea and the surrounding area at the time that this was written.

So Laodicea, this place in Turkey, was located very near two other cities, one called Heropolis and one called Colossae. Now Heropolis, it's about six miles north of Laodicea and at the time of the Bible, it was the home of some ancient, beautiful, hot springs, a proper health spa kind of setting and you can still go there to this day and have a warm dip in the pools there.

People travelled from far and wide to go to Heropolis and visit the hot springs because they were so relaxing, so restorative for them.

However, alongside Heropolis, the other ancient city local to Laodicea, some 11 miles to the west of it, was Colossae.

Now in contrast to Heropolis, Colossae was known not for hot but for cold water, pure streams of fresh water which flowed down from the top of the snow-capped mountain which towered over Colossae.

[16 : 44] Colossae's cold water was therefore perfect for drinking crystal clear, proper Evian stuff, you know, incredibly refreshing. So Heropolis, with the H, had hot water, Colossae, with the C, had cold water.

water. What did Laodicea have? Well, unfortunately, it didn't have an easy water supply of its own which meant that it needed to pipe water in from miles away in pipes which are still around to this day.

But that was the problem because by the time the water reached Laodicea, the water was tepid. The water was lukewarm. It wasn't restorative like the hot springs of Heropolis.

It wasn't refreshing like the cold water of Colossae. In fact, it was the kind of water that if you drank it, you just want to spit it straight out. And so when Revelation, chapter 3, when we read it through the, we might say, the historical and geographical context lens, it makes much more sense that Jesus would say to the church in Laodicea, I wish you were either hot or cold because he wanted them to either offer restoration of people like a hot spring or refreshment of people like an ice cold drink of water.

Be one or the other, says Jesus, but don't be lukewarm and good for nothing. And as we can hopefully see, in this particular passage, really it's only through the lens of context that it makes any sense and therefore becomes something worth reflecting on and applying to our own lives.

[18 : 31] The question being, how might we be hot or cold? How might we offer restoration or refreshment to those we live alongside? Now, there are literally hundreds of other examples in the Bible along these lines where I'd suggest context is key.

Everything from passages describing the birth of Jesus to same-sex relationships to the role of women in church leadership. Good news is that some 2,000 years later, there's a wealth of scholarship and understanding that can be explored to help us make sense and read the Bible through the lens of context.

context. And as a church, I hope you know by now, we'll do our best to keep context as a crucial part of the way that we explore the Bible together. That's context, though.

What else? Well, another lens through which I think we do well to read the Bible is described as this, the lens of flourishing. What's meant by this?

Well, I think if you look at the life and the teaching of Jesus, one of his key themes was that he'd come to bring good news. He'd come to help people to flourish.

[19 : 48] Indeed, in one of his first recorded public statements that kind of set the tone for the rest of his ministry, Jesus quoted from a passage in Isaiah and claimed that it was about him saying this.

He says, the Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind to set the oppressed free to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

In other words, the way of Jesus, what Jesus came for, and I therefore say the way we're meant to read the Bible is that it's intended to promote flourishing, the flourishing of all people, but especially those who can feel pushed to the margins.

You know, Jesus backs this up more concisely when he says a little bit later on, I have come that they, that we, might have life and have it to the full.

And that desire for flourishing, there's no exceptions to that. Since that's the case, I think it therefore follows that if the way we read the Bible doesn't lead to us or others flourishing in life and faith, then it probably means that we're not reading it correctly.

[21 : 13] For example, let's pick a traditionally tricky topic to look at in terms of what it means to flourish. Let's look at the whole area of divorce.

So, in Malachi chapter 2 verse 16, we read in some translations this, where it says, I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel.

Pretty clear, we might think. And on one level, that can be a devastating verse to read, especially if we've gone through divorce because it simply heaps guilt upon us.

We read that God hates divorce, and if I'm a divorcee, then it follows in some way that God must hate me. And so, reading the Bible in that way leads to the opposite of flourishing.

It's very hard to flourish when you think God hates you. Traps us in a spiral of guilt and it distances us from God. However, with this verse in mind, I think the good news is that we can read it actually in a totally different way by sticking on a different pair of lenses.

[22 : 31] A way that does indeed allow God to help us flourish even through the experience of divorce. Once again, context is key here.

Because when we read the rest of the passage in Malachi and we understand the culture in which it was written, things become a lot clearer and less condemning. You see, God hates divorce because it was part of an incredibly abusive, sexist system of marriage in which men at the time of the Bible were the only ones who could initiate a divorce.

The husband could therefore effectively do what he liked while being able to choose to divorce his wife for the measliest of reasons. Apparently, you could divorce your wife even if she burnt the toast.

That's one of the lowest reasons possible. Yeah. The woman had no rights at all, no right of reply, no opportunity to put her aside, and often she'd simply find herself divorced because the man had said that was the case.

Again, it's reckoned if the man said three times, I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you, that was enough and the deal was done. You know, divorce, therefore, in biblical times reflected a terrible patriarchal system.

[23 : 59] And that's why nearly every directive in the Bible against divorce is addressed to men, because it was usually their neglectful treatment of their wife that was the problem.

Indeed, following divorce, women were usually left to fend for themselves, they were often penniless, often homeless, and were therefore sometimes forced to resort to prostitution as their only hope of shelter and income.

And so knowing that context, given all this, no wonder God says he hates divorce, because it completely hindered a woman's ability to flourish, just as we could say it hindered any man's ability to flourish, who indulged in such a dreadful way to treat women.

Now, taking this Malachi passage and other passages as a basis, including Jesus, when he taught on divorce himself, which is similarly rooted in seeking to defend a woman's right not to simply be divorced for what was known as any cause, I'd suggest that reading the Bible through the lens of flourishing means that in our day and age, whenever marriage is characterized by abuse or unfaithfulness or neglect, then divorce may well be the best and the most God-ordained option available.

Yes, I'm sure God would long for divorce to never be necessary, and in that way we could say still that God hates divorce, he hates that it has to happen sometimes, but the lens of flourishing means that God's ultimate desire for each of us is to know life in all its fullness, and sometimes that will mean ending or escaping from a neglectful, an abusive, or an unfaithful marriage.

[26 : 06] That's where the lens of flourishing helps us make sense, I would suggest, of the Bible. But in a final and connected lens, which I think we do well to read the Bible through that Zach Lambert calls, is this, the lens of fruitfulness.

And what does this mean? Well, it's all about asking the question, does the way I'm reading the Bible lead me to live a more fruitful life?

What does a fruitful life look like? Again, hopefully the Bible tells us, since the fruit of God's spirit in our lives means that we'll increasingly display these famous qualities, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, these fruit of the spirit.

it. And so, if the way we interpret and read the Bible is helping us to live in ways that are more loving and kind and patient and so on, then we're probably reading the Bible in the right kind of way.

However, if our reading of the Bible pushes us away from these qualities and is making us meaner or more judgmental or less compassionate people, then I'd suggest we're reading the Bible in the wrong way.

[27 : 30] Equally, that means if, for example, the way we read the Bible, if it instills in us or others a view of God that reckons him to be a God of wrath or violence or anger or exclusion, then we're probably reading the Bible through a lens of fear, not of fruitfulness.

Now, that lens will shape the way we see ourselves and it will be a way in which I think will only serve to push us further away from God if we think God is primarily angry with us.

However, if we read the Bible in a way which reveals a God of love and peace and mercy and inclusion, then I suggest this is a far more fruitful and more faithful way to read the Bible and one which will ultimately draw us nearer to God.

God, you know, as Jesus says in Matthew's gospel, by their fruit, by our fruit, you will recognize them.

And I'd say that's the case with how we're to read the Bible. Indeed, in this church, where I know not everyone agrees with how I or many of us perhaps interpret and read the Bible, I think one of the key questions I'd simply want to ask is this.

[28 : 52] Is the way we read the Bible helping us to become a kinder, more generous, more humble, more open, and more inclusive community?

That's a question I'll leave you to ponder and others perhaps to answer, but that's certainly the hope and that's certainly my prayer, that by learning to read the Bible together and through these four lenses of Jesus, of context, of flourishing, and of fruitfulness, we'll be able to grow in love for God and for each other.

Amen. Amen. Amen.