What's in the Bible?

How to Listen to a Sermon

Whether you're new to the Bible or have been reading it for a long time, it's always helpful to think about what the Bible is and what it contains. We can come at that through the back door. Let's think about what the Bible *isn't*.

- The Bible isn't a self-help book written to help you improve your life (although delving into it *can* improve your life).
- The Bible isn't a history book with all the facts of what went down in ancient times (although it does include historical writing about God's interaction with his people).
- The Bible isn't a *single* book but is, instead, a *library* of books — with different authors, written at different times, and with different purposes, which means there's *always* something in there that speaks to you.

Those kinds of things are important, because it's easy to only find things in the Bible that we *expect* to find. But, if the Bible is truly God's Word, then what you'll find there is bigger than your expectations. The best place to begin is with what's in the Scriptures. The Bible is 66 different books containing all kinds of writing: histories, songs, proverbs, fables, letters, and more. It took about fifteen-hundred years for it all to come together.

The Bible gives us a window into the lives of an ancient people, the Israelites and their descendants, who encountered God and wrote about it, sang about it, and prayed about it. It's not always a cheerful story. There are dysfunctional families, warring armies, deaths of innocents, and prophetic warnings. But, even more, there are people trying hard to figure out how to live well, how to make a future, and understand what it all means. Most important, in the Bible you can expect to find a God who stays faithful, gracious, and protective every step of the way.

There are two distinct parts of the Bible. The first is the writings that Jewish people have as their holy scriptures, the Hebrew Bible that Christians call the Old Testament. It contains writings that take you from the dawn of creation, through the ancient matriarchs and

patriarchs, to a time when God's people lived as a kingdom, to the fall of the kingdom, and its eventual restoration.

The second part of the Bible is the New Testament. It includes four books about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. We call those the gospels. The New Testament also includes a book that describes how Jesus' followers gave witness to Jesus and how that news spread. It also includes letters shared among the earliest Christians, along with other writings, including Revelation, which tells the whole story — from beginning to end, from alpha to omega — in metaphors.

If you want to find something in the Bible, you'll need to know what book you're looking for. A biblical reference always begins there, with the book's name: Exodus, Ezekiel, or Ephesians. But no one wants to leaf through a Bible page-by-page to try to spot what they're looking for. Thankfully, some medieval monk thought it would help to divide everything up into smaller chunks. We call those "chapters." When you see something like Ruth 2 or Romans 8, that refers to a section of those books. Bibles usually include those numbers in larger or bolder typeface as part of their formatting.

But those divisions sometimes aren't specific enough. Fortunately, a French printer in the sixteenth century named Robert Estienne and who was exiled in Geneva had the idea of numbering sentences or groups of sentences within the chapters. We call those "verses," and they're usually the small superscript numbers within the text. In a biblical reference, they're the numbers that come *after* the colon. Now you know what it means when someone provides detailed information and it's described as giving "chapter and verse."

All that information is put together in a biblical reference or citation that looks like this: the biblical book, the chapter number, a colon, and the verse number. A reference can include a number of chapters like Genesis 1-2 or a number of verses like Galatians 2:15-16. Sometimes you'll see a letter with a verse number. That simply points to which part of a multi-part verse we're talking about.

Now that you know how to open your Bible for a jump into a world where God comes to us, there's one last thing to think about. Remember that God — especially in the person of Jesus Christ — is the main character. The God of the Bible wants to be *your* God, and, in the Bible, God wants to be discovered as the One who is faithful and merciful, strong and alive. It's there on every page. And it's where all gospel preaching begins.