

Chapter 30

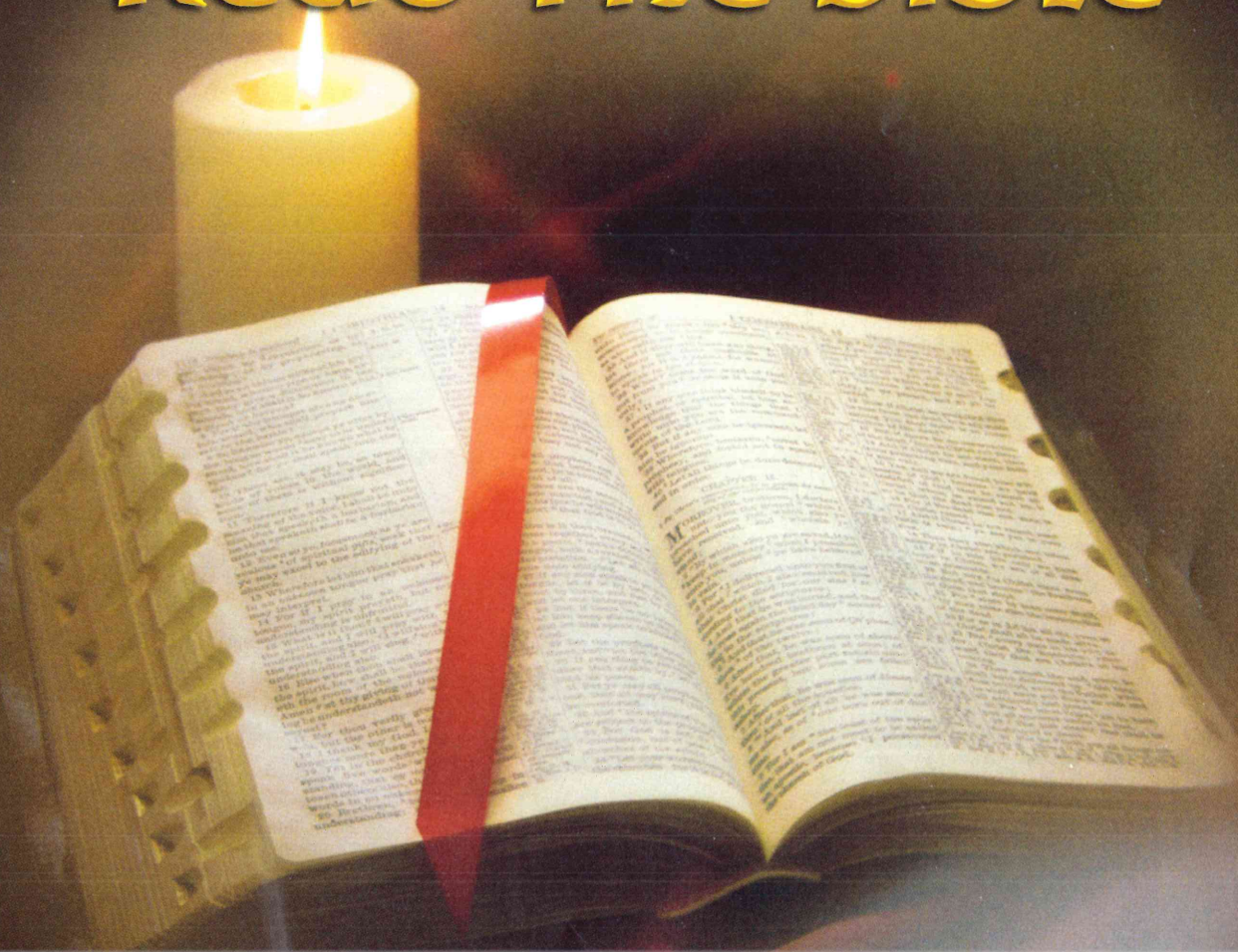
How To Read The Bible



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To understand what they meant to say, we need to understand the way they saw the world.*

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We must remember that God, the ultimate author of the whole Bible, knew the plan of salvation from the beginning. The Holy Spirit intended even the oldest parts of the Old Testament to be read in the light of the Incarnation, the coming of Jesus Christ.

The Bible Is Literature

- The sacred authors used literary techniques to express their meaning.
- We must understand those literary techniques to understand the whole meaning of Scripture.

According to an ancient tradition, one can distinguish between two *senses* of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral and anagogical senses. The profound concordance of the four senses guarantees all its richness to the living reading of Scripture in the Church. (CCC 115)

In Chapter 1, when we first began our walk through the Bible, we learned one essential thing that we must remember: the Bible is *literature*. It uses literary forms and techniques to convey its meaning. We have to understand how those forms and techniques work, or we cannot understand the meaning the inspired authors wanted us to get out of their books.

We also need to remember that the Bible is *ancient* literature. Even the most recent books of the New Testament were written almost two thousand years ago. The authors of the sacred texts did not write the same way modern authors write. To understand what they meant to say, we need to understand the way they saw the world.

When we read any literature, including the Bible, one rule is most important: **Understand the literal sense first.** The *literal sense* is what the sacred writer, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wanted to express. It is usually interpreted to be the immediate and direct meaning of the text.

Literal is different from *literalistic*. Scripture often speaks in a symbolic or metaphorical way. Often the original readers would have understood the symbol or metaphor right away. It may be more difficult for us, because thousands of years have gone by since the books of the Bible were written; but to understand the literal sense of Scripture it is necessary to understand when the writer is speaking symbolically or metaphorically.

For example, the book of Revelation—as we saw—describes heaven in symbolic terms. Are there really golden lampstands and bowls of incense in heaven? Probably not. Until we reach it, heaven is far beyond our comprehension. The sacred author, therefore, describes heaven in terms that would have been familiar to a first-century reader—so we can have some understanding of it. The *literal sense* of Revelation, then, is not just the symbols, but also the *meanings* of the symbols.

We also have to remember that the sacred authors used different literary techniques to make their point, and understanding those literary techniques is part of understanding the literal sense.

When we analyzed the creation story in Genesis, we saw that the author has very carefully built it up to show us that God created the universe as a temple:

SABBATH COVENANT WITH CREATION		
Sun and Moon <i>rule over</i>	Birds and Fish <i>rule over</i>	Humans and Animals <i>rule over</i>
Day and Night	Sky and Sea	Land and Vegetation

Because the author conveyed so much meaning by the literary construction of the book, the *literal sense* of Genesis is in that careful *literary analysis*. Without understanding how it works as literature, we don't get the real message intended by the sacred author: that all creation is a temple for the worship of God.

Spiritual Senses

The Church also teaches us to interpret Sacred Scripture in *spiritual* senses. The Holy Spirit often puts more meaning into a passage than the sacred authors knew they were writing.

For example, Jesus Christ quoted the first line of Psalm 22 as he died on the cross. The psalm is attributed to David, who probably described his own feelings in one of his many times of trouble. Yet it describes so well the sufferings of Christ on the cross that no Christian can read it without thinking of the Son of David, the Messiah:

Yea, dogs are round about me;
a company of evildoers encircle me;
they have pierced my hands and feet —
I can count all my bones —
they stare and gloat over me;
they divide my garments among them,
and for my raiment they cast lots.
(Ps 22: 16-18)

The tradition of the Church tells us that there are three spiritual senses to look for in Scripture.

1. The **allegorical** or **typical** sense shows us how people and events in salvation history point forward to other times. For example, when we read the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, we say that Isaac is a “type” of Christ, because the sacrifice of Isaac shows God at work in a way that would reach its ultimate fulfillment in the sacrifice of Christ.

2. The **moral** sense (or “tropological” sense) shows us how we can use the things the heroes of Scripture did as a pattern for our own lives. By seeing the moral content of their actions, we learn to turn toward good and away from evil.

3. The **anagogical** sense shows us how the events we see in Scripture point upward to what we will know in heaven. Through the things that are seen, we come to understand the things we cannot see yet. With those glimpses of the reality of the Kingdom of God, we build up our own hope.

A medieval couplet summarizes the significance of the four senses:

The Letter speaks of deeds;
Allegory to faith;
The Moral how to act;
Anagogy our destiny.¹ (CCC 118)

When we look for the spiritual senses of a passage in Scripture, we must be careful not to forget the literal sense, since “all other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal,” as St. Thomas Aquinas pointed out. But the literal sense is not the only sense. We must remember that God, the ultimate author of the whole Bible, knew the plan of salvation from the beginning. The Holy Spirit intended even the oldest parts of the Old Testament to be read in the light of the Incarnation, the coming of Jesus Christ.





Look To The Church For Guidance

Many things in Sacred Scripture are hard to understand. Often different people interpret the same verse of Scripture in exactly opposite ways. How can we know which way is right?

As Catholics, we have the Church to guide us. Jesus Christ left his apostles his authority to teach; the bishops, the apostles of today, still carry on that teaching tradition.

The teaching authority of the Church keeps us from making serious mistakes in the interpretation of the Bible. Because the teaching tradition of the Church goes back to the time when the Bible was written, we know what the books of the Bible were really intended to tell us. Because the Holy Spirit dwells in the Church and guides it, and because Christ himself gave to the apostles his teaching authority, which has been passed down through the Church, the Church's teaching on matters of faith and morals is infallible.

One of the best places to find the teaching of the Church is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. All the doctrines of the Church are explained there, with references to the Scripture passages they come from. Whenever you have doubt about what a Scripture passage means, you can often find the answer in the Catechism.

Your priest is also a good person to talk to. Most priests will be delighted to see you sincerely trying to understand the Scriptures, and will give you as much help as they can.

What To Read First

Every book in the Bible is important, but not every chapter of every book is meant to be read through as though it were a novel. Your telephone directory is important, and so is your dictionary; but you don't read them through front to back. Instead, you take the information you need from them when you need it.

Every part of the Bible has to be understood in the context of the rest of the Bible. The New Testament makes no sense without the Old Testament, and the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament.

Christians therefore read the Old Testament in the light of Christ crucified and risen. Such typological reading discloses the inexhaustible content of the Old Testament; but it must not make us forget that the Old Testament retains its own intrinsic value as Revelation reaffirmed by our Lord himself (cf. Mk 12: 29-31). Besides, the New Testament has to be read in the light of the Old. Early Christian catechesis made constant use of the Old Testament (cf. 1 Cor 5: 6-8; 10: 1-11). As an old saying put it, the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New (cf. St. Augustine, *Quaest. in Hept.* 2, 73: PL 34, 623; cf. DV 16). (CCC 129)

Still, we have to start somewhere. The best place to start is with one of the Gospels. Many Christians like to start with St. Luke. Luke is a great storyteller, and his Gospel was written especially for people who knew little about Jewish customs and traditions.

Genesis and Exodus are rightly placed at the beginning of our Bible, because they prepare the way for everything that follows. Genesis tells how God created the world, how sin entered the world, and how God chose one particular family to be his particular people. Exodus tells how that family became a nation, how God gave that nation the mission of bringing his word to the rest of the world, and how that nation failed in its mission. The rest of salvation history depends on this background.

The best place to start reading the Bible is with one of the Gospels. Many Christians like to start with St. Luke. Luke is a great storyteller.





"Every sincere act of worship or devotion revives the spirit of conversion and repentance within us and contributes to the forgiveness of our sins."

Pray

All these suggestions are useless, though, unless you approach the Bible with the right spirit.

The Bible is the Word of God. As the Word came to us in the flesh in the Eucharist, it comes to us in the words of Scripture. We need to remember that we are approaching the Word of God, and treat it with the reverence it deserves.

A good way to start is by praying for guidance before you read any part of Scripture. But that is only a beginning. You need to be living a life of prayer. Make time for praying at the beginning and the end of every day. Make prayer a part of your life, not an occasional indulgence.

Go to Mass regularly. Soon you will be able to see Scripture come to life in front of you whenever the Mass is celebrated. The more familiar you are with the Mass, the more you will feel at home in Scripture. You will recognize passages in Scripture from hearing them at Mass. The Mass is salvation history alive and present today.

Prayer, the Mass, and Scripture all go together. We need all of them to receive the Word of God in its fullness. If this book has helped you see how God's plan is still working through the Church today, then act on what you know. Go to Mass. Set aside time to pray. And spend more time with the Scriptures.

Reading Sacred Scripture, praying the Liturgy of the Hours and the Our Father—every sincere act of worship or devotion revives the spirit of conversion and repentance within us and contributes to the forgiveness of our sins. (CCC 1437)

SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* 21-22, 25

The Church has always venerated the Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's Word and of Christ's Body. She has always maintained them, and continues to do so, together with sacred tradition, as the supreme rule of faith, since, as inspired by God and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the Word of God Himself without change, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and Apostles. Therefore, like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. Consequently, these words are perfectly applicable to sacred Scripture: "For the word of God is living and active" (Heb 4:12) and "it has power to build you up and give you your heritage among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32; see 1 Thes 2:13).

Easy access to sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful. That is why the Church from the very beginning accepted as her own that very ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament which is called the Septuagint; and she has always given a place of honor to other Eastern translations and Latin ones, especially the Latin translation known as the Vulgate. But since the Word of God should be accessible at all times, the Church by her authority and with maternal concern sees to it that suitable and correct translations are made into different languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books. And should the opportunity arise and the Church authorities approve, if these translations are produced in cooperation with the separated brethren as well, all Christians will be able to use them.

Therefore, all the clergy must hold fast to the sacred Scriptures through diligent sacred reading and careful study, especially the priests of Christ and others, such as deacons and catechists who are legitimately active in the ministry of the Word. This is to be done so that none of them will become "an empty preacher of the Word of God outwardly, who is not a listener to it inwardly" since they must share the abundant wealth of the divine Word with the faithful committed to them, especially in the sacred liturgy.



*"...the Church...has always given a place of honor to...the Latin translation known as the Vulgate."
(Dei Verbum 22)*

VOCABULARY

ALLEGORICAL SENSE

The spiritual interpretation of Scripture that shows how people and events in salvation history point forward to other times. The allegorical sense of Abraham sacrificing Isaac is God's sacrifice of his own son, Jesus.

ANAGOGICAL SENSE

The spiritual interpretation of Scripture that shows how events in Scripture point to what will be in heaven.

CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

A book containing a summary of Catholic teaching.

LITERAL SENSE

The meaning of Scripture based on the meaning of words in the literary and historical context.

MORAL SENSE

The spiritual interpretation of Scripture that shows us how the heroes of Scripture portray a pattern for our own lives.

SPIRITUAL SENSE

The interpretation of Scripture that sees not only the words of the text but also the people, things, and events they describe as signs. The spiritual senses flow out of the literal meaning of the words. The three kinds of spiritual sense in Scripture are the allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the Literal sense?
2. List and define the three spiritual senses of the Bible.
3. What three sources should be read in preparation for reading the Bible?
4. What prayer does the Church recommend to lay people?

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. A concordance is a book which lists all the words in the Bible and their location by chapter and page. Do you think the use of the concordance would make reading the Bible easier?
2. What is the best method to guarantee you would set time aside to read the Bible every day? Make a list of "to do's" which will assist you to read the Bible.
3. As preparation for a lifetime of reading Sacred Scripture, see if you can find these well-known passages:
 - a. The "Our Father" or Lord's Prayer.
 - b. The parable of the Prodigal Son.
 - c. "I am the bread of life."
 - d. Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal.
 - e. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac.
 - f. The prophecy that Israel's ruler would come from Bethlehem.

FROM THE CATECHISM

112 Be especially attentive “to the content and unity of the whole Scripture.” Different as the books which compose it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God’s plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart, open since his Passover (cf. Lk 24: 25-27, 44-46).

113 2. Read the Scripture within “the living Tradition of the whole Church.” According to a saying of the Fathers, Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church’s heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God’s Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture

(“according to the spiritual meaning which the Spirit grants to the Church” (Origen, *Hom. in Lev.* 5, 5: PG 12, 454D).

125 The Gospels are the heart of all the Scriptures “because they are our principal source for the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word, our Savior” (DV 18).

133 The Church “forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful...to learn the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ, by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. ‘Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ’” (DV 25; cf. Phil 3: 8 and St. Jerome, *Commentariorum in Isaiam libri xviii prol.*: PL 24, 17b).



Endnote

1. *Lettera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia*; Augustine of Dacia, *Rotulus pugillaris*, I: ed. A. Walz: *Angelicum* 6 (1929) 256.