

How to read the Bible

'Scripture is intended to speak to today's believers, to touch their present lives with their problems, to enlighten the steps to be taken and the decisions to be made. This becomes possible only when believers read and interpret the sacred texts under the guidance of the same Spirit who inspired them.'

Pope Leo XIV. (General Audience, Vatican, February 2026).

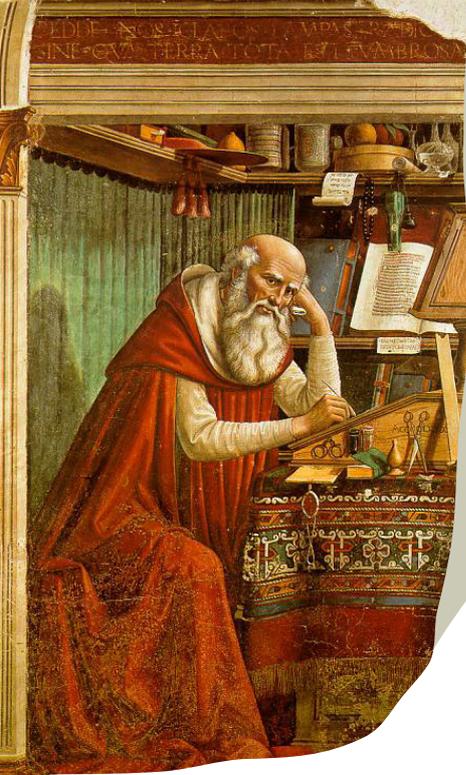
We know that the Bible isn't always the easiest book to get your head around but it's definitely worth it! So we've put a short guide together to help you on your way.

The Bible was written for you. By reading it, you can let God's Word enter into your life. You don't need to read lots of the Bible for it to have an impact. Sometimes, just a few words or one sentence can transform your life. So it is better to read small amounts regularly. The more often you read a bit of the Bible, the more the Word fills your heart and soul.

Top 10 Key Points:

1. Pray before you start reading the Bible.
2. Learn how to find your way around.
3. Appreciate the variety of what's in the Bible.
4. Don't skip the 'first series' – the Old Testament.
5. Understand how truth is expressed in the Bible.
6. Explore the different senses of Scripture.
7. Interpret the Bible using the three Golden Rules.
8. Listen to what the Bible has to say about itself.
9. Recognise the Bible as food for your soul.
10. Read the Bible with other people and share ideas.

Here are 10 key points to help you enjoy Scripture.



1 Begin with prayer

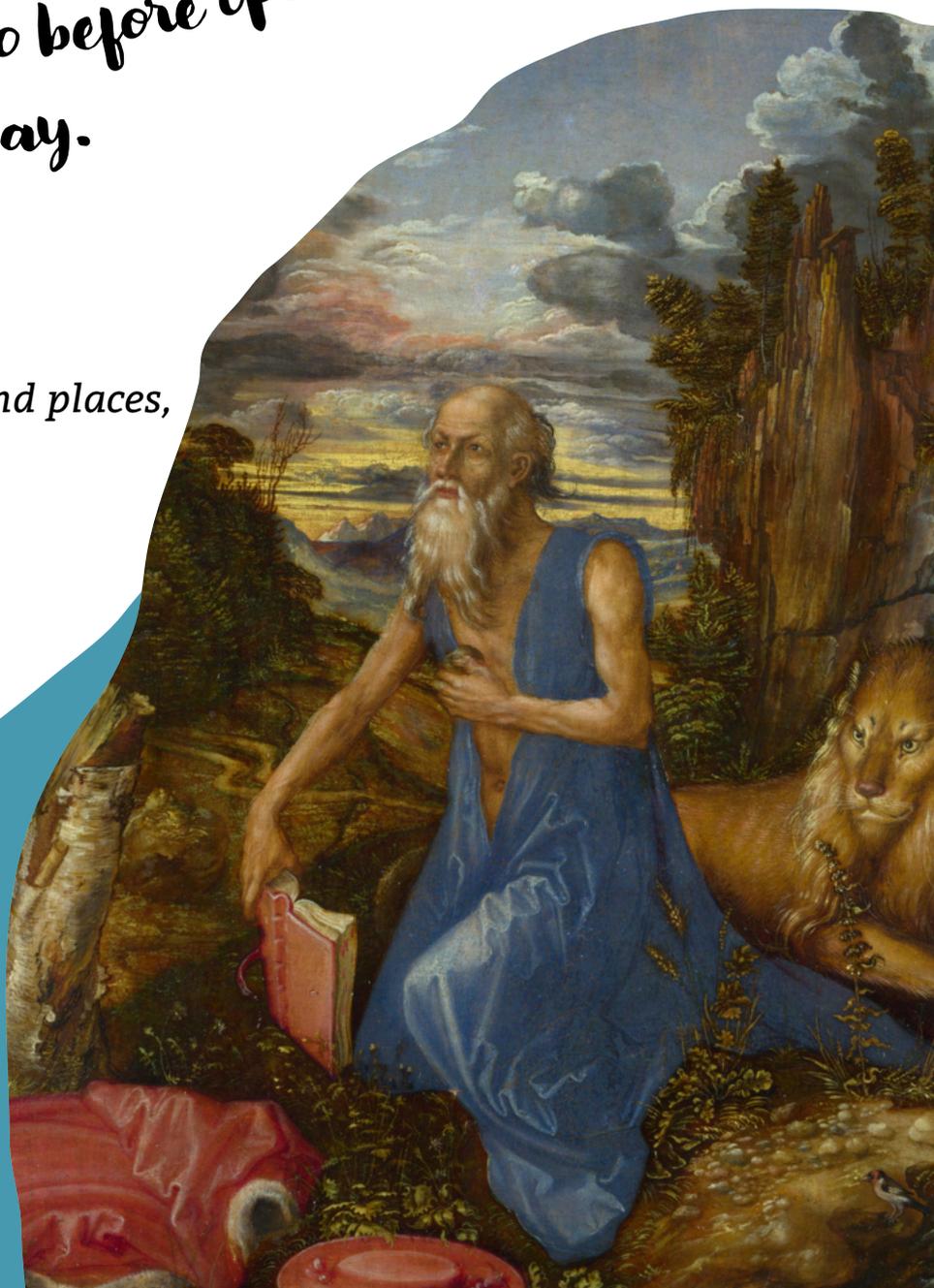
'We cannot come to an understanding of Scripture without the help of the Holy Spirit who inspired it.'
St Jerome. (Commentary on Micah).

One of the most important things you can do before opening the Bible is to pray.

For example:
*God of all times, peoples and places,
guide me today,
and every step of the way -
as I read your Scriptures,
and reflect on your love.
Amen.*

St Jerome c.347 - 420 AD.

*St Jerome by Albrecht Dürer. c.1496.
The National Gallery, London.*



2 Learn how to find your way around

'Scripture is deep enough for elephants to swim in, shallow enough for lambs to paddle in.'

Pope Gregory the Great. (Exposition on the Book of Job).

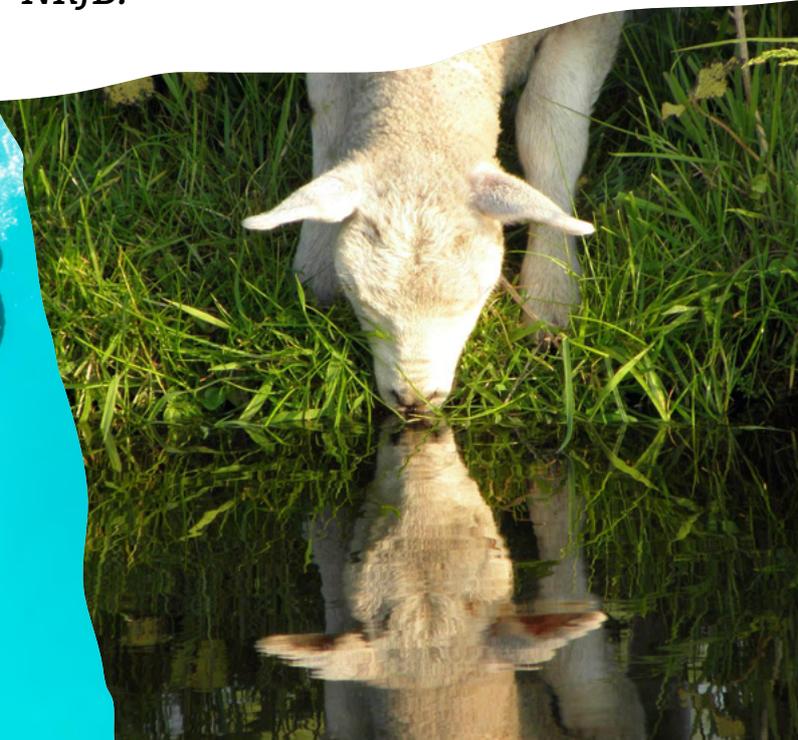
The Bible can seem like a difficult book to navigate but it doesn't have to be. If you have a hard copy of the Bible, using some biblical index tabs will help you to find your way around this big book. Sticking tabs on the first page of each book helps you get a sense of the overall structure of Scriptures as you flip through.

If you read the Bible online, you may want to highlight certain texts or passages to save for later on your device. Or you might prefer to write them down in a notebook.

One way to get familiar with the key people and stories of the Scriptures, is to read the series of summaries found throughout the Bible. In every Catholic Bible you will find an introduction to each of the books which gives you a way into the content and style of writing you are about to read.

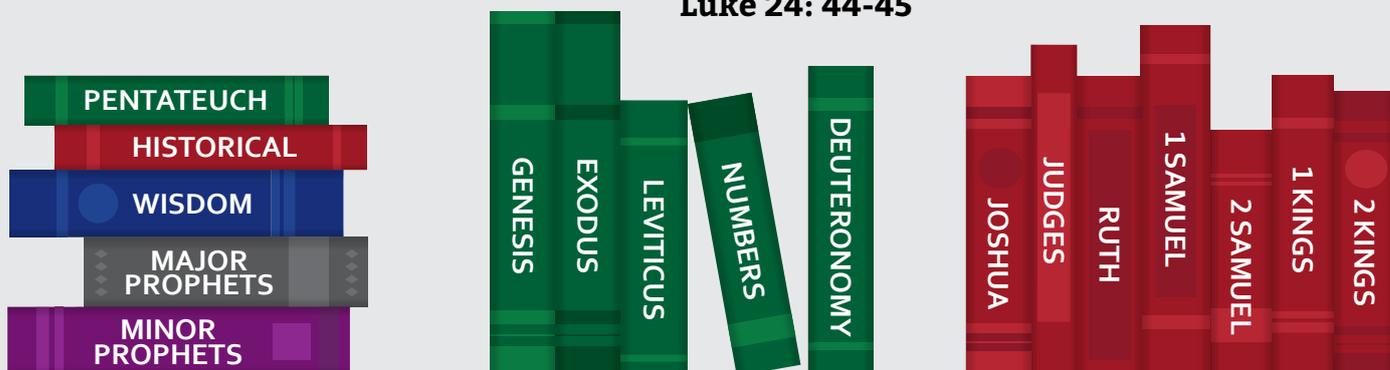
If your copy does not include these, then don't worry. The following Bibles all present the texts in a readable format.

The English Standard Version – *ESV-Catholic Edition,*
The New Revised Standard Version – *NRSV-Catholic Edition,*
The Good News Bible – *GNB-Catholic Edition,*
The Christian Community Bible – *CCB (and found online),*
The New Jerusalem Bible – *NJB,*
The New Revised Jerusalem Bible – *NRJB.*



The Catholic Bible

THE OLD TESTAMENT



Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures...

Luke 24: 44-45



THE NEW TESTAMENT



3 Appreciate the variety of what's in the Bible

'The Bible is the great story of the marvels of God's mercy. Every one of its pages is steeped in the love of the Father who, from the moment of creation, wished to impress the signs of his love on the universe. Through the words of the prophets and the wisdom writings, the Holy Spirit shaped the history of Israel as a recognition of God's tenderness and closeness, despite the people's infidelity. Jesus' life and preaching decisively marked the history of the Christian community, which has viewed its mission in terms of Christ's command to be a permanent instrument of his mercy and forgiveness.

Pope Francis. (Apostolic Letter, Misericordia et misera. 2016).



**Although today the Bible is conveniently bound together in one volume, it's important to remember that it isn't just one book. The Bible Catholics use is a collection of 73 books:
46 in the Old Testament.
27 in the New Testament.**

These books were written in various parts of the world by multiple authors, and in three different languages (Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic) over some 1,500 to 1,600 years. Although there is definitely an overall thread, there is also a real mix of material.

Since in its current form it's broken down into chapters and verses, it's easy to make the mistake of thinking of the Bible as a kind of instruction manual. And Scripture does contain lots of life advice, as well as many 'dos and don'ts' in the form of laws and teachings. However, most of the Bible is actually made up of other kinds of literature – stories, songs, poetry, personal reflections, histories, and family trees. And there's a huge amount of chatting in the Bible, because everyone has different experiences and opinions about life and death.

In the main, Scripture tells us stories of how God has intervened in the lives of individuals, families, towns and nations. Throughout the Bible, you'll find tales of single mums and dying dads, corrupt politicians and brave soldiers, welcome births and painful bereavements, sick kids and squabbling siblings, soulful singers and famous artists, rich landowners and penniless farmers. All of human life is here. It is their story, it is our story.



4 Don't skip the 'first series' – the Old Testament

*The New is in the old concealed,
the Old is in the New revealed.*

St Augustine. (On the Spirit and the Letter).

The Bible is made up of two major sections – the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The Old Testament was mostly written in Hebrew and covers the life and history of the Jewish people up until the time of Christ. The New Testament, written mostly in Greek, with a few Aramaic words speaks of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and how those in the early Church were empowered to spread his teaching across the world.

Sometimes, the Old Testament a bit of a struggle. It can feel very unfamiliar, even off-putting. However, skipping straight to the New Testament is like missing the whole first series of a TV programme. The New Testament helps us to understand the Old better, and vice versa. As the Church tells us: 'God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New.' (Dei Verbum 16 – Vatican document on Revelation).

Quite often, you'll find that the New Testament provides added meaning to the stories and sayings of the Old Testament. For example, consider the following passage from the Old Testament: 'The young woman is with child and will give birth to a son, whom she will call Immanuel.' (Isaiah 7:14) While this verse may have had a particular meaning at the time of writing, the New Testament sees it as a prophecy about the birth of Jesus. (Matthew 1:20-23). So if you're a bit lost when reading the Old Testament, a good rule is to see if the New Testament can shine any light on those passages. This way of reading will help you find the threads of meaning that run right through the whole Bible.



To help you further as you explore the Bible, we've put together this quick summary of the sub-sections of both the Old and New Testaments:

The Old Testament

A. The Pentateuch (or 'The Law') –

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

These contain some of the classic stories of Scripture, about the creation of the world, the Fall of Adam and Eve, the call of Abraham and Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt.

B. The Histories –

Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, 1 and 2 Maccabees.

These books tell the story of the history of Israel, including the entry into the Promised Land, the reigns of various kings, the exile to Babylon and eventual return, as well as struggles against foreign empires.

C. The Wisdom books –

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus (also known as Sirach).

This collection of songs and proverbs contains both practical and religious wisdom.

D. The Prophets –

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel and Daniel as well as the Twelve Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi).

The role of the prophets was to remind the people and their leaders of their part in the covenant with God. Their challenging words were rarely welcomed by the leaders but they were treasured by the people.



The New Testament

A. The Gospels –

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The Acts of the Apostles is also included here as it's considered to be a 'part two' of Luke's gospel.

Since they reveal the life and words of Jesus most directly, the Gospels are regarded by Christians as the most important part of Scripture.

B. The Epistles of St. Paul –

Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews.

St. Paul wrote these letters to Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire (in cities such as Ephesus and regions such as Thessalonica), as well as to some individuals such as Timothy, Titus and Philemon.

C. The Catholic Epistles –

James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude and Revelation (the Apocalypse).

They are known as the 'Catholic' Epistles because they were written to the wider Church rather than primarily meant for specific emerging church communities.



5 Understand how truth is expressed in the Bible

'A correct interpretation of the sacred texts cannot dispense with the historic environment in which they developed and the literary forms that were used... On the contrary, to renounce the study of the human words that God used risks leading to fundamentalist or spiritualist readings of Scripture, which betray its meaning... In every age, the Church is called to repropose the Word of God in a language capable of being embodied in history and reaching hearts.'

Pope Leo XIV. (General Audience, Vatican, February 2026).

Are we meant to take the whole Bible literally? How does it fit with science? What are we supposed to do with 'dark passages' that describe violence or other kinds of disturbing behaviour? These types of questions are important if we are to understand how the Bible relates to us today.

The Church tells us that the Bible, because God is its author, is true. Its truth, however, is expressed in a variety of ways. Some of it can be taken at face value. Other parts, need to be understood differently. For example, Psalm 98:8 says: 'Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together with joy'. The Psalmist didn't literally mean that the rivers would break into applause. He was using symbolic language, just as we might say that it is 'raining cats and dogs.' This kind of language communicates the truth, but it would be a mistake to interpret it literally.



This is especially important when we are considering questions about the relationship between science and the Bible. For example, the Church tells us that while the first chapters of Genesis (which includes the story of creation and of Adam and Eve) describe real events, they do so in symbolic language. It's not necessary, therefore, to worry about how to 'reconcile' scientific findings about the origins of the universe, or evolution, with the Bible. Science helps us to understand the complexities of the world as new discoveries unfold but it is still the world that God created that we are seeking to understand.

We approach the Bible from different angles.

It's worth remembering - especially when it comes to 'dark passages' in the Old Testament - that the Bible records the good, the bad and the ugly. St Paul tells us that some of the grim reading in the Old Testament is included to show us what not to do (1 Corinthians 10:6-11). Tales of murder, rape and exploitation that you may come across show us what harm and damage these actions do and their wider impacts. In this context, they are as relevant today in showing us right and wrong ways to behave with each other.

When violence and destruction appear to be condoned by God - such as in only saving Noah's family in the Great Flood; in several wars between tribes or between the Israelites and other nations; or when Judith decapitates Holofernes to save her town - it is hard to justify these brutal acts for the salvation of some. However, it shows us that God's purposes are not fully transparent to us - that the full meaning and purpose of these events can take time to emerge; and can depend on our own maturing understanding.

So there are many different kinds of literature in the Bible such as poems, songs, historical accounts, symbolic stories, fictional stories (e.g. the parables), letters, proverbs, genealogies and so on. To arrive at the truth, we need to appreciate what kind of literature we are reading - and interpret it appropriately.

We have to approach the interpretation of the Bible from different angles. Scripture itself tells us that some of its symbols have several meanings (Revelation 17:9-10). And St. Paul tells us that some of the stories in the Old Testament have their meaning hidden beneath the surface, in that they also tell us something about Christ or about the moral life. (1 Corinthians 9:8-10; 10:1-3).

This is why the Church talks about the two 'senses' of Scripture - the ability to understand it both literally and spiritually. (The Catechism, 115-118).



6 Explore the different senses of Scripture

'The literal teaches history, the allegorical, what you should believe, the moral, what you should do, the anagogical, where you are going.'
Mediaeval couplet summarising the significance of the four senses.

Catholics believe that there are these different senses to our understanding of the Bible:

The literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation.

*When was the text written?
What is the main theme, plot, event that is happening?
What is the basic meaning and style of writing?*

All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal sense.

The spiritual sense.

In light of the unity of God's plan for the world, not just the text of Scripture but also the realities and events about which it speaks, can be signs for every generation to understand. These are divided into three areas:

The allegorical sense.

We can find a more profound understanding of events by seeing their significance in Christ; so the crossing of the Red Sea is both a sign of Christ's victory and of Christian baptism.

The moral sense.

The events we read about should lead us to act justly to all people and to the created world.

The anagogical sense.

(Greek: anagoge, 'leading'). We can see the realities and events in the Bible in terms of their eternal significance, leading us home to God. So the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem.

By reading in this way, and through using these senses, we can ask questions such as:

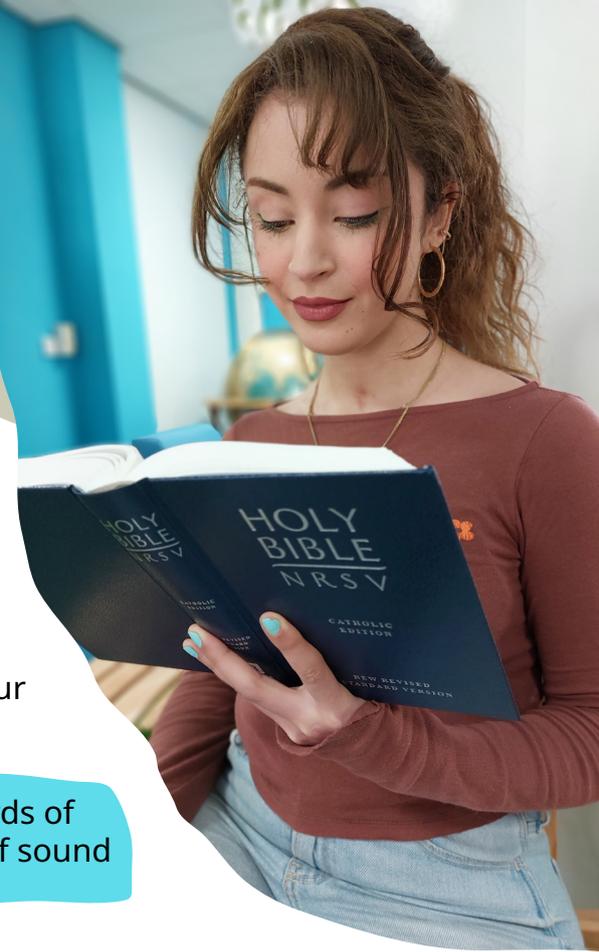
Where is Jesus in this text?

Who does God show himself to be?

Where am I in this text?

How am I called to respond to God's grace?

Where is the Church (on earth and in heaven) in this text?



7 Interpret the Bible using the three golden rules

The Christian faith is not a 'religion of the book'. Christianity is the religion of the 'Word of God', a word which is 'not a written and mute word, but the Word is incarnate and living.'

St Bernard of Clairvaux (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #108).

To help us read and interpret the Bible, the Church offers three golden rules to guide us.

1. Pay attention to the unifying theme of the Bible, which is God's self-revelation to us.

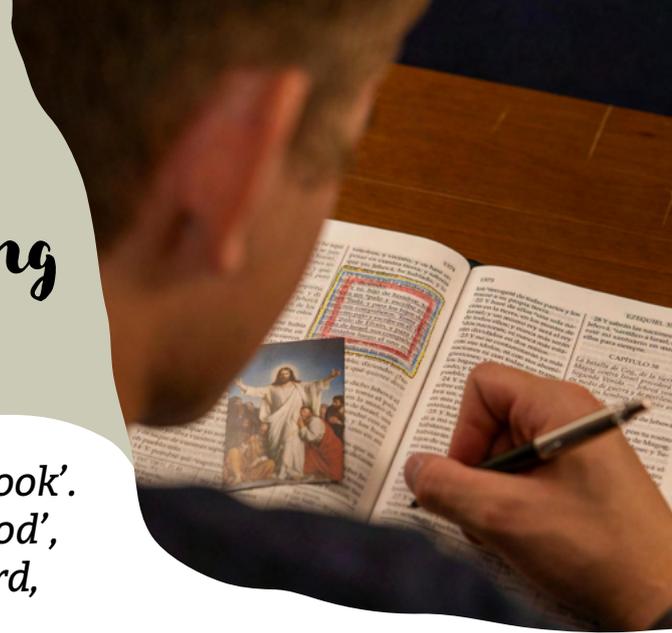
As the Church puts it, 'all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ.' (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 134) The whole point of reading the Bible is to get to know God personally. Understanding more about what God says and does – as well as how God was awaited, listened to and followed, can help us all to build a closer relationship with God in Christ.

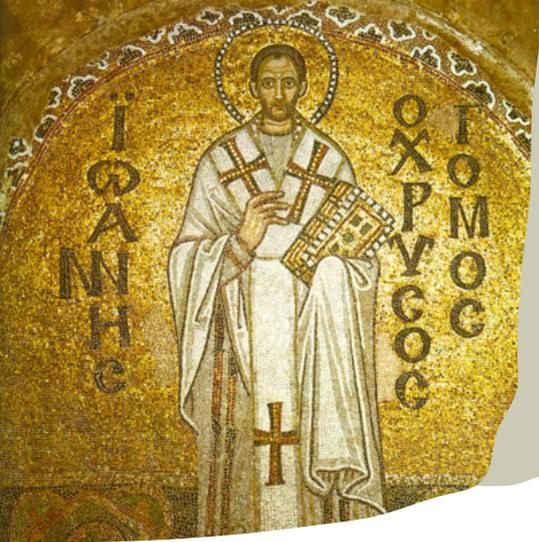
2. Read Scripture within the context of the living tradition of the Church.

Scripture and Tradition go hand in hand. The traditions of the Church, which go back to the apostles, are not just dusty old ideas. They are timeless truths that can shine a light on our lives today. The Holy Spirit guides the Church so that we can appreciate how the Church's traditions – including Scripture – apply to new learning and developments in the world.

3. Compare any passage with what other parts of the Bible have to say on the subject.

It's important to consider how a verse or passage relates to other parts of the Bible. Often, themes, ideas or stories are repeated elsewhere. In some versions of the Bible, you will find 'cross -references' in the margin. These are references to other parts of the Bible that are similar in content, or which refer to the text. Cross-references are always worth reading. They will help you to get the big picture. The online tool www.biblehub.com can help you with this if your bible doesn't contain them.





Listen to what the Bible has to say about itself

'The Holy Scriptures were not given to us that we should enclose them in books, but that we should engrave them upon our hearts.'

St. John Chrysostom.
(Homilies on the Statues, no.36)

Regular reflection on the words of the Bible is good for us:

'Engrave on your heart the commandments that I pass on to you today. Repeat them over and over to your children, speak of them when you are at home and when you travel, when you lie down and when you rise. Brand them on your hand as a sign, and keep them always before your eyes. Engrave them on your doorposts and on your city gates.'

Deuteronomy 6:6-9.

The Word of God is a real source of strength: *Jesus pointed out: 'Scripture says: One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*

Matthew 4:4.

Scripture provides direction for our lives: *'Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light for my path.'*

Psalms 119:105.

The Bible was written to have a positive impact on us:

And we know, that whatever was written in the past, was written for our instruction, for both perseverance and comfort, given us by the Scripture, to sustain our hope.'

Romans 15:4.

Christ is mentioned throughout Scripture: Jesus said to two of the disciples:

'Everything written about me in the Law of Moses, in the prophets and in the psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.'

Luke 24:44-45.

Scripture is inspired by God and useful for our Christian life:

'Besides, you have known the Scriptures from childhood; they will give you the wisdom that leads to salvation, through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God, and is useful for teaching, refuting error, for correcting and training in Christian life.'

2 Timothy 3:15-16.





9 Recognise the Bible as food for your soul

'The Word of God is a living bread, the food of the soul. Let it sink into your inmost heart and pass into your affections and way of life. Eat plentifully of it and your soul will rejoice.'

St Bernard of Clairvaux. (Sermon 5 for Advent).



Reading the Bible isn't like picking up any old book. In its pages are personal messages from God for each of us. Scripture is a means by which God can speak to us today. When we prayerfully read Scripture, it speaks into our lives.

So powerfully did St Dominic hear God speak to him that he used to nod, whisper, laugh and cry while meditating on Scripture. After reading Luke 4:16-19, St Vincent de Paul felt God call him to start a religious order focused on helping those in need. And St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, a Jewish Catholic who was murdered at Auschwitz, felt God speak to her through the story of Queen Esther in the Old Testament.

By spending time with the Bible, we too can allow God to speak to us. Over time, the words we read will shape our outlook on life – for the better.



10 Read the Bible with other people and share ideas

'I express my heartfelt hope for the flowering of a new season of greater love for sacred Scripture on the part of every member of the People of God, so that their prayerful and faith-filled reading of the Bible will, with time, deepen their personal relationship with Jesus.'
Pope Benedict XVI. (Verbum Domini, #72).

The Bible is a book full of wisdom and love, but some parts can seem puzzling and strange. We do not understand it all straight away - we need to read it slowly, and to understand it over time. Then we will have lightbulb moments when stories or sentences will suddenly make sense or speak to us directly. They will stir our hearts.

To help us understand the Bible it's good to read it with other people. We can explore what the Bible says to each other, to share in both its easy parts and in its challenging sections. We can help each other to understand what it is saying to us and to our world. When we hear from each other, and what other people throughout history have said about the Bible, all these opinions and experiences can help us in our own thoughts and feelings. They show us that people have always enjoyed the Bible, have always wrestled with its stories and sayings, and that people will always find value in its depths.

When we open our hearts to the Bible, the Bible opens its truth to us.
Let us share this truth throughout our life.

