
Getting to grips with the Bible

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Is the Bible too complicated for ordinary people to use as a handbook for living?

Not if you're prepared to follow some basic guidelines which the Bible itself provides, as, for example, in the *Letter to the Hebrews*. More sermon than letter (13.22), *Hebrews* was written by an unknown author to an unidentified congregation located somewhere in the Roman Empire during the second half of the first century. Its original recipients - first generation Christian converts (2.3-4) - have been publicly persecuted early in their Christian discipleship (10.32-34), and are still exposed to verbal attack and even imprisonment (13.3,13). The aim of the writer is to encourage his readers to 'hold fast' their confession of faith (3.6; 4.14; 10.23, 35) by living their lives out of the Scriptures.

The writer suggests six ways of engaging with the Scriptures (from which he quotes thirty-five distinct passages). These are outlined below as headlines and illustrated from the text of *Hebrews*.

1. Recognise Scripture as God's master Story.

This story begins with the creation of the world (1.10) and then traces the drama of God's redemptive activity in putting the world to rights through the times of Abraham, Moses, David and Christ before anticipating a great climax in the new creation – the kingdom that cannot be shaken (12.28), the eternal city of God (13.14).

2. Discover where your personal story intersects with the Bible's Story.

The writer invites us to enter the biblical story in our imagination. He takes us back to the wilderness generation of ancient Israelites. First, he warns us that, if we allow our Christian commitment to drift, we too are in danger of failing to enter God's rest (3.7-4.13). Second, he urges us to imagine the Tabernacle ritual of the Day of Atonement as a model that will help us appropriate the redemptive work of Jesus as our high priest (9.1-28). Having taken us back into the biblical Story, the writer then brings the Story forward to his own day by contextualising it in terms of common images from Greco-Roman society, such as city life and athletics (chapters 11 and 12). Thus he challenges us to discover the places where God's Story intersects with ours as we live our daily lives in a contemporary hi-tech, globalised, consumerist society.

3. Become participants in the Bible's Story.

Hebrews challenges us to follow in the long succession of the heroes of faith by receiving the baton from them and running strongly for Christ in the race of life (chapters 11 and 12). As we read our Bibles we are to move from being spectators to participants. The canon of Scripture is

closed, but the Story it tells continues and will not end until Jesus appears a second time (9.28). In the meantime we are called to action (12.12-17; cf James 1.22).

4. See Jesus as the key to the plot in the Bible's Story.

The same God who spoke through the prophets has spoken through his Son (1.1-2), so the Scriptures and Jesus stand in a unique relation to each other. The Old Testament foreshadows what has been revealed in Christ (8.5; 10.1). The Holy Spirit who is the divine author of Scripture (10.15-17) discloses to us the connection between the Scriptures and Christ (9.8). We can expect the Spirit to do the same with the New Testament, for he glorifies Jesus in the ministry of those who are its human authors (John 16.12-15).

5. Allow the Bible to interpret itself and reveal to you the broad perspective of God's Story.

Hebrews interprets the Scriptures by exploring interconnections between different passages. For example, Psalm 110.4 becomes the lens through which the Genesis story of Melchizedek is read (chapter 7). Also, Habakkuk 2.4 (in Heb. 10.37-38) is the key that interprets the narrative of Old Testament from Cain and Abel to the kingdom and beyond (Heb. 11). Allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture is key to gaining a comprehensive view of what the Bible teaches and demands.

6. Listen to God's voice addressing you personally in the Scriptures.

For the writer to the Hebrews, Scripture is not only written in the past; it also speaks today. When quoting ancient texts, the writer tells us that these words are what God (1.5,7,8,13; 7.21; 8.8), Christ (2.12-13; 10.5), or the Holy Spirit (3.7; 10.15) 'says.' Thus Scripture is not simply a record of the past; it is the direct speech of the living God today. How we 'hear' is crucially important (2.1; cf 3.7,15,16; 4.2,7)

Hebrews has a message for us today as much as for the first addressees. Secularisation and consumerism continually tempt us to abandon – or, at least, to compromise – our faith. The antidote to this spiritual malaise is to live our lives out of the Scriptures by engaging with them imaginatively and faithfully.