

100 READINGS THROUGH
THE WORLD'S MOST IMPORTANT BOOK

THE ESSENTIAL BIBLE GUIDE



“Many who have struggled to find their way around in the Bible
will be greatly helped by this book.” —CHUCK COLSON

WHITNEY T. KUNIHOLM



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THE
ESSENTIAL
BIBLE
GUIDE

WHITNEY T. KUNIHOLM



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The Essential Bible Guide

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For Anna, Matthew, and Stephanie



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Introduction

THE ESSENTIAL BIBLE GUIDE

*“I’ve tried to read the Bible,
but I’ve never made it all the way through.”*

*“I’ve read bits and pieces of the Bible,
but I don’t really know how they all fit together.”*

*“I’ve never read the Bible,
but I’d be interested to find out what’s in it.”*

*“I love the Bible. I just need a little
help understanding how it applies to my life today.”*

—COMMENTS ABOUT THE BIBLE

The Bible is the world’s most important book. It has sold more copies than any other volume in history. It is the reference point for both the Jewish and Christian religions. And it has affected the culture, law, art, morality, and behavior of nearly every society on earth.

But the Bible is more than just an influential book. It is the historical record of the most important story of all time: God’s interaction with humankind. Although the Bible contains many different styles of writing and introduces us to a wide variety of characters, everything in it combines to tell one main story: God created the world, humans rebelled against God, and God initiated a plan to save the world—a plan that culminated in Jesus Christ. That’s the “Big Story” that makes sense of the Bible and all of life.

The Essential Bible Guide is your tool for discovering the Big Story for yourself. It leads you through one hundred easy-to-read passages—The Essential 100—and organizes them into twenty sections so you'll see how all the pieces fit together. Along the way it gives you many opportunities to record your insights and come to your own conclusions about how the Bible's message applies to you today—how your story connects to the Big Story.

FOLLOW THE BIG STORY

Before you get started on your journey through the Bible, it may help to have a road map. So here's a brief description of how the twenty sections in your study fit into the Big Story, God's plan of salvation.

The Old Testament

In the Beginning. The Bible introduces us to its main character—God—in the very first sentence of Genesis. God's first action is to create a beautiful and intricate world into which he places human beings made “in his own image.” Unfortunately, it doesn't take long for the first humans, Adam and Eve, to sin and become separated from God. That sets up life's greatest dilemma: How can sinful men and women be reconciled to a holy God?

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Fortunately, God takes the initiative for solving the dilemma. His first step is to form a group of people with whom he could begin a relationship. The three men in this section, sometimes called the patriarchs, are the ones God used to give birth to this special group of people, the Israelites.

The Story of Joseph. The Bible spends a long time on the story of this one man and his family. At first it appears as though God's plan to create a special nation has been derailed when Joseph is sold as a slave and taken away to Egypt. But it is in Egypt that “the Chosen People” grow from a small family into a great nation.

Moses and the Exodus. Eventually the Egyptians begin to oppress the Israelites, so God raises up Moses to lead his people to freedom. Throughout

this process God demonstrates his awesome power and teaches the people some important lessons about trusting and obeying him. The Exodus also becomes a symbol of a greater freedom God would offer to all people—freedom from the bondage of sin.

The Law and the Land. Moses leads the people out of Egypt through the desert and brings them to the very edge of the Promised Land—a land God had promised years earlier to give Abraham’s descendents. But it is Joshua who finally leads the people across the Jordan River into the land of Canaan. Along the way God reveals how he wants his people to live by giving them the Ten Commandments.

The Judges. The Israelites have now become a nation and have entered the Promised Land, but they have no king. Instead, God raises up interim leaders called judges, whose main responsibility was to save the people from the enemies surrounding them. As we read these exciting accounts, we see the consequences of disobedience as well as God’s response when his people cry out and return to him.

The Rise of Israel. God eventually gives Israel a king, Saul, who starts well but in the end is rejected by God for being disobedient. Saul is succeeded by David, the shepherd boy who defeated a giant and became a national hero. As a result of David’s military victories and spiritual passion, Israel reaches a high point in its history, and King David becomes a symbol of a much greater King to come, Jesus Christ.

The Fall of Israel. Although King Solomon is remembered for his wisdom and his incredible achievements, he also opened the door—just a little—to idolatry at the end of his reign. Over time this small compromise causes the people of Israel to wander far away from God and worship the false gods of the surrounding nations. Israel’s idolatry leads to a devastating punishment—the destruction of Jerusalem and exile of the people to a foreign land.

Psalms and Proverbs. Psalms is a book of prayer and praise written mostly by David. As such, it provides a window into the inner life of a person whom the Bible describes as “a man after God’s own heart.” Proverbs is a collection

of sayings, primarily of Solomon, that contain practical wisdom for living a godly life.

The Prophets. Throughout the history of Israel, God sends prophets who have the difficult task of pronouncing judgment on the idolatry and sin of the people. The prophets also predict the coming of a Messiah. As the Old Testament comes to a close, we are still waiting for the most wonderful part of God's plan to unfold.

The New Testament

The Living Word. What God had been saying through the history of Israel, through signs and wonders and through the Law and the Prophets, he now says in person. As the apostle John said, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). Jesus Christ is a living, breathing statement of God's love for the world.

The Teachings of Jesus. Jesus communicates his message to the crowds using sermons and stories (parables). In his most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus builds on the Law of Moses and explains with incredible insight how God intends for us to live. And in the parables, Jesus memorably explains one of the central themes of his teaching: the kingdom of God.

The Miracles of Jesus. The four gospels record many of Jesus' miracles. During his public ministry, he heals the sick, overrules the laws of nature, casts out demons, and raises the dead. His miracles not only demonstrate his compassion and power, but they also prove that he is who he claims to be: the Son of God.

The Cross of Christ. Jesus' main reason for coming to earth is to pay the penalty for sin and to offer salvation to all who believe in him. He accomplishes this by his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. The Cross of Christ is at the heart of God's plan of salvation. It is the way he resolves "the great dilemma" and enables any person to have a relationship with him. That's the Good News!

The Church Is Born. After Jesus' resurrection, he returns to heaven but

sends a “greater gift,” the Holy Spirit. This event marks the birth of the church. In addition, it initiates a dramatic expansion in God’s plan of salvation. Ever since the time of Abraham, God has been relating to one group of people, the Israelites. But now the door of salvation is open to everyone.

The Travels of Paul. The most energetic ambassador of the early church is the apostle Paul. Originally, Paul was a bitter enemy of the church, but God dramatically turns him around on the Damascus road and transforms him into a fearless witness for Christ. Paul’s missionary journeys, recorded in the book of Acts, are a major reason why the gospel begins to spread throughout the world.

Paul to the Churches. Paul writes many letters to the new believers in the churches he has started. In them he explains the gospel, encourages believers to grow in their relationship with God, and offers practical help for living the Christian life.

Paul to the Leaders. Paul knows that if the church is to grow, it will need capable leaders to carry on after him. Therefore, he writes some of his letters to instruct church leaders and to warn against false teachers. Since the church is the way God will continue expanding his plan of salvation in the world until Jesus returns, faithful leadership in these new churches is vitally important.

The Apostles’ Teaching. In addition to Paul, other apostles such as Peter, James, and John write letters to encourage and instruct the early followers of Jesus. Each of these letters helps us understand new facets of the gospel and the Christian life. They also provide us with some of the most memorable passages in the Bible.

The Revelation. Near the end of his life (around A.D. 95), the apostle John has a spectacular vision. Through it, God reveals specific messages to seven first-century churches. These messages are still highly applicable to churches in the twenty-first century. In John’s vision, God also foretells and describes Christ’s return, when God’s plan of salvation—the Big Story—will reach its ultimate fulfillment.

HOW TO USE *The Essential Bible Guide*

The Essential Bible Guide takes you through the Bible in one hundred readings, with five readings per section. The readings are not dated, so you can complete them at any pace, although completing one reading a day or five each week would be the best way to get a meaningful overview of the Bible.

This guide is designed to be used with a Bible. I recommend that before you begin your study, you find a Bible that is easy for you to read. Although the *King James Version* is a beautiful and widely available translation, it is often difficult for modern readers to understand since it was translated into seventeenth-century English. For this reason, I recommend that you use one of the many excellent modern translations such as the *New International Version* (NIV), the *New Living Translation* (NLT), or the *Contemporary English Version* (CEV). If you are still unsure about which Bible translation to use, you might want to check with a minister or priest.

You will notice that each study follows a five-step format—Pray, Read, Reflect, Apply, Pray—that you can use anytime you read the Bible. In the Bible God speaks to you. In prayer you can respond to him. So by integrating the two, you can have a regular dialogue with God.

Here's what to do in each of the five steps:

1. **PRAY** before you read the Scripture passage, asking God to help you understand his Word. The written prayer will get you started, but feel free to add thanksgiving, confession, praise, or whatever you'd like to express to God. Remember, you're beginning a conversation.
2. **READ** the Bible passage carefully. If you have time you may want to read the passage more than once or review the surrounding passages for context. Keep a pencil or highlighter handy so you can make notes or underline key phrases or verses.
3. **REFLECT** on what you've read. First, summarize your own observations of the passage in the space provided. It may help to ask yourself, What was the main point of this passage? Which verses relate

to my life now? Then think further about the passage by reading the commentary.

4. **APPLY** to your life what God teaches you from his Word. Take some time to think this through. Did the passage contain an example to follow, a warning to heed, a promise to claim? How should this affect your thoughts, words, and actions? In the space provided, jot down how you'd like to apply these things in your life.
5. **PRAY** again, asking God to help you live out his Word. This time turn the things you've learned into prayers. Also pray about your own needs and the needs of others. And be sure to thank God for any answers to prayer.

At the back of the book, you'll find a **Review Journal**. This is your opportunity to summarize your most significant insights from the five readings and to prioritize the main ways you'd like to apply what you learned from the Bible. Before you begin a new review, take time to read what you've written in the previous reviews. By doing this you'll get a clearer picture of what God is saying to you on your journey through his Word.

A GROUP CHALLENGE

Some people find it more encouraging to read the Bible in a group. Your church may want to make *The Essential Bible Guide* a congregation-wide challenge, led by the pastor and other church leaders. Or, if you are part of a Bible study or home group, you might suggest that your group read through this study together. Whatever method you use, reading *The Essential Bible Guide* as a group will enable you to compare your experiences and encourage one another. You may even want to read through this study with your family or with colleagues at work, where you can compare your insights via e-mail.*

* For more ideas on using *The Essential 100* as a group event, see page 267.

YOUR HIGHER GOAL: MEETING GOD

The thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were written by many authors over a fifteen-hundred-year time span. Yet each author was uniquely inspired by God. As the apostle Paul said, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true” (2 Timothy 3:16, NLT). The apostle Peter said, “For prophecy [the Bible] never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). And Jesus emphasized this truth when he quoted from Deuteronomy, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4, RSV).

What distinguishes the Bible from any other book is its divine origin. That’s why people often refer to it as God’s Word; it records what he’s said, what he’s done, and what he wants from us.

So as you begin your journey through the one hundred essential passages from the Bible, remember that your goal is not just to read the world’s greatest book or to gain more Bible knowledge or even to develop greater spiritual discipline. All those things are important, but your higher goal is to meet the Author. The secret to making Bible reading more than just a good habit is to think of it as an opportunity to meet God every day, to have a daily encounter with the God who made you, who loves you, and who desires to have a living relationship with you.*

My prayer is that over the next few months, the Bible and its timeless message will come alive for you as never before. But don’t let these readings be the end of your journey in the Bible. Let this study become the beginning of a lifetime adventure of meeting God daily in the Bible and through prayer.

* If you’d like to know more about how you can discover a lifetime relationship with God, see page 264.

Part I

OLD
TESTAMENT



IN THE BEGINNING

If you really want to understand something, you need to go back to the beginning. For example, if you want to develop a serious relationship with another person, you want to find out where he came from, how he grew up, and what he did before you met. Or if you want to buy a house, you first find out when it was built, what special features were part of the original design, and how the property has been maintained over the years.

But if you want to understand where the world came from or, for that matter, where human beings came from, where can you go? That's where our first five readings can help. They describe the creation of the world, the "birth" of humankind, and the beginning of civilization. It makes for some interesting reading.

The Bible begins with arguably the most famous opening sentence ever written: "In the beginning God..." It makes no apology for this fundamental assertion: *God exists*. That's the truth upon which the entire book and all of life are based. You can read the Bible as history, or you can read it as literature. Certainly, it is both. But ultimately, the Bible is a book about God, and that's what makes it unique.

Another feature of these five readings is that they introduce us to a number of "firsts." We read about the first humans, the first sin, the first guilty conscience, and the first case of pride. Because we are reading about the beginning of time and human history, everything is a first. But even though it all happened many years ago, the themes have a very contemporary ring.

It's worth considering one other first from these readings, God's first recorded words: "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3). As you work through this book, you'll discover that God's intention has always been to shine his light into the darkness. He did this in the most incredible way by sending his own

son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross and break the power of darkness once and for all.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. There are some important things we need to learn about God, the world, and ourselves first. So our journey through the Bible needs to start at the beginning. And that's where we're about to go.

Date: _____

IN THE BEGINNING

Reading 1

MEET THE AUTHOR

PRAY

Heavenly Father, thank you for this opportunity to spend time with you. Please “open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” (Psalm 119:18).

READ GENESIS 1–2.

REFLECT

Right from the start the Bible introduces us to its main character: “In the beginning God...” (1:1). The rest of this wonderful book is all about him. Theologians describe the Bible as God’s “self-revelation.” This means it’s not only a book *about* God, it’s also a book *by* God. He inspired the human writers (2 Peter 1:21; 2 Timothy 3:16). So if you want to meet God, read his Book.

Next, the Bible tackles one of life’s biggest questions: How do we explain the origins of the universe? Some scientists look in the dirt for answers. But the Bible looks to the heavens (1:1). Of course, science does have its place in helping us explore the natural world. But to truly explain it, we must accept that God made it, and today’s reading gives us two perspectives on how he did it.

1. *The big picture* (1:1–2:3). As we read this overview of the seven days of Creation, we notice that God took the initiative. He didn’t just sit back and wait for life to emerge from the ooze. He had a plan and a design for his world. Experiences such as holding a newborn

baby or looking at the stars on a clear night are evidence for what an incredible design it was.

2. *The human interest story* (2:4-25). Genesis 2:4 is like a hyperlink to more information on a key part of the story—the creation of humankind. We've already learned that God chose to make men and women and that both reflected his image (1:27). Now we learn that human beings possess at least two other distinctives: God's life (2:7) and God's standards (2:16-17). We have a God-given conscience, an innate sense that there is such a thing as right and wrong. To live as if it were not so is inhuman.

APPLY

In what ways do you see evidence for God in the world around you? When do you feel closest to God?

PRAY

Thank you, Lord God, for the incredible design and beauty of your creation. Help me do a better job of caring for it...

Date: _____

IN THE BEGINNING

Reading 2

EYES WIDE OPEN

PRAY

Lord, I'm grateful that you've given us the Bible and that I have the freedom to read it. Help me understand your word to me today...

READ GENESIS 3.

REFLECT

Popular culture sometimes portrays sex as “the original sin.” But that’s not what the Bible says. The joy of sexual intimacy between a husband and wife is part of God’s design for creation (Genesis 2:23-25). Rather, the original sin was to question (3:1), challenge (3:4), and then disobey (3:6) God’s definition of right and wrong (Genesis 2:16-17). Both Adam and Eve made that tragic mistake, and it has affected all of creation ever since. We only have to read history or, if we are honest, look at our own lives to see this is true.

Sin brought immediate consequences. For Eve it meant increased pain in childbirth and a new strain in her relationship with her husband (3:16). For Adam, sin meant pain in his work and futility in his life (3:17-19). Can you imagine what it would be like if our relationships were always satisfying and our work was always meaningful?

But the biggest consequence of sin was not just that it warped God’s perfect creation. It broke our relationship with God. Adam and Eve had enjoyed a unique and close fellowship with God (3:8-9), but now they became afraid

of him and tried to hide (3:10). As we read about how they began to rationalize their behavior, we witness the introduction of *guilt* into the world (3:11-13). Finally, Adam and Eve were banished from God's presence with no way to get back (3:23-24).

Pain, sorrow, futility, guilt, difficulty in relating to others, separation from God. What a horrible predicament sin has placed us in. But the Good News is that God had a plan to solve that problem—a plan that would culminate in Jesus Christ. And that's what the rest of the Bible is all about.

APPLY

What makes you feel guilty? Have you done anything recently that you regret? If so, how could you make things right with others and with God?

PRAY

Dear Lord, it's hard for me to admit it, but I have a problem with sin. Please forgive me and help me live in a way that pleases you...

Date: _____

IN THE BEGINNING

Reading 3

WIPE OUT!

PRAY

Heavenly Father, I have so many things on my mind and heart today. Help me set them aside so that I can spend focused time with you...

READ GENESIS 6:5–7:24.

REFLECT

In our last reading we saw how human beings decided to leave God's path and go their own way. The Bible calls that decision *sin*, and in this passage we see how far from God sin will take us (6:5). It's the nature of sin that it always gets worse. It grows like cancer. Left unchecked, it will destroy us. So we can understand why God is so upset when we sin. It's hard to let someone you love make bad choices.

Some people think that God is just waiting to catch them doing something wrong, as if he enjoys punishing people. But it's interesting that his first emotion here is not satisfaction or even anger. Rather, it is pain and grief (6:6-7). That's what our sin does to the heart of God. And as we've learned, sin brings horrible consequences that eventually force God to act—like a potter who is working with a lump of flawed clay and decides to start over.

We again hyperlink to the story of Noah (6:9–7:24), a man who lived in contrast to the sin and violence all around him. Why was God so pleased with Noah? Because Noah was willing to listen to and obey God's word

(6:22; 7:5). That's the definition of righteousness. And think about the phrase, "after the seven days" (7:10). We can only imagine how Noah felt during that week. Even so, he obeyed God when it made no sense and there were no visible results. God is still pleased with that kind of faith.

The flood temporarily wiped out the sin-prone culture of that day (7:22-23), but it was not to be the end of the world. Even as God unleashed this overwhelming judgment of sin (7:17-24), he promised a new beginning (6:18). In spite of the dark clouds, we get another hint that God has a plan for the salvation of the world.

APPLY

Do you find yourself in situations where you are surrounded by sin? How could you respond in ways that are pleasing to God?

PRAY

Lord God, I want to follow your way for my life. Please help me keep my eyes on you and your path, no matter what those around me are doing...

Date: _____

IN THE BEGINNING

Reading 4

NEVER AGAIN

PRAY

Heavenly Father, I worship and praise you. Please give me a greater sense of your presence as I read your Word today...

READ GENESIS 8:1–9:17.

REFLECT

We used to have a beagle named Rascal. He was pretty high-strung, and whenever I'd open the door to take him for a walk, he'd go berserk and bolt for the open lawn, scraping my knuckles and the leash against the screen door. So I can easily imagine the joyous eruption that is captured in Genesis 8:18-19. Free at last!

But were they? Yes, Noah, his family, and the animals were free from that smelly ark, but were they really free from the stench of sin? Had the flood wiped that slate clean? As we will quickly see in our readings through the Bible, the answer is a very definite and sad no.

Noah seems to understand this underlying dilemma. That's why his first act was not to party; it was to worship (8:20). God is pleased when we humbly seek him (8:21-22). Noah's response to God also hints at one of the great themes in the Bible: sacrifice as a way of seeking forgiveness for sin. We'll see this theme developed throughout the Old Testament, and when we

get to the New Testament, we'll discover it's the key for understanding the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Of course, God understands the reality of sin all too well, but that's what makes his promise to Noah all the more poignant (9:8-17). "Even though" God knows human beings are hopeless sinners (8:21), "never again" will he consider completely destroying them (8:21; 9:11,15). In fact, he would go to great lengths to assure them that his intent was to do just the opposite. At this point in history, a rainbow became the symbol of his love. But before long he would come down to earth and say it in Person.

APPLY

What things remind you most powerfully that God loves you? What's one creative thing you could do today to show God you are grateful for his love?

PRAY

Dear Lord, thank you for loving me even though you know all the secrets of my heart..

Date: _____

IN THE BEGINNING

Reading 5

CAN WE TALK?

PRAY

What a joy it is to meet with you, Lord. Help me quiet my heart and mind so I can hear your still, small voice today...

READ GENESIS 11:1-9.

REFLECT

What was so bad about the Tower of Babel? After all, jobs were being created, people were working together for a common purpose, technological progress was being made, and society seemed to be on the verge of a lasting achievement. A track record like that would get any politician elected today. So what was the problem?

Perhaps we get a clue in verse 4. The driving motivation for all this seemingly good work was to gain *human* glory rather than God's glory. And here we confront what C. S. Lewis called "the worst of all vices"—pride. Ever since Adam and Even committed the first sin, humans had increasingly chosen to go their own way instead of God's. This fantastic tower became a defiant human statement: "We're in charge here." But they weren't; God was still the Creator and Lord of all. That's why he confused and scattered the people of Babel (11:7-9). God won't let our unbridled pride continue forever (Proverbs 16:18).

At the same time God affirmed the power of good communication in the

most incredible way (11:6). Imagine what could be accomplished in our political arenas, our workplaces, our churches, and especially our families if we were able to effectively communicate with one another while avoiding the power games of pride. Nothing would be impossible! But the sad truth is, pride is here to stay. And it's not just a problem for "them." Pride has infected us all.

In the end the tower didn't come crashing down. It was left standing on a deserted plain, a monument to the futility of trying to live without God. This story would have come to a much different conclusion if the people had followed Noah's example (Genesis 8:20-22). When we acknowledge and worship God, he can accomplish incredible things through us.

APPLY

Is there someone in your life with whom you have difficult or even broken communication? How has pride been a factor in that struggle? How could you change the situation?

PRAY

*O Lord, no matter how hard I try, pride seems to sneak into my heart. Please forgive me and help me honor you in all that I do...**

* Now turn to the Review Journal beginning on page 253 to record your key insights from the last five readings. You'll see that space has been provided for you to journal after each section.

ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND JACOB

The miracle of Creation and the beauty of the Garden of Eden were filled with promise. But as we've seen, once sin entered the world, everything took a turn for the worse. After less than a dozen chapters in Genesis, God has already had to punish all humankind by nearly wiping them out with a flood and then scattering them—like dropping a pebble on an anthill—for their pride at the Tower of Babel.

The world was unraveling, and the biggest problem was that humans couldn't do anything about it. Their only hope was that God would do something—and quick! That's why our next five readings are so important. They show us what God did—how he took the first step to save us. His plan was to create a great nation—Israel—and then through it to bless the whole world with a Savior. But only he could make the first move, and he did that by choosing one man, Abram—who he later named Abraham.

Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob are sometimes referred to as the patriarchs. They were the first building blocks in this great family of God. But as you'll see, they weren't perfect. They had weaknesses; they resisted God; they sinned. But God still used them. That should be an encouragement to us. God's plan isn't thwarted by our mistakes.

We may also wonder why God went to the trouble of reconciling us to himself. Why not just have another huge flood and be done with it? God decided not to because, as C. S. Lewis wrote in *The Screwtape Letters*, “He *really* loves the hairless bipeds He has created.”

There's one more theme you'll want to keep an eye on in these readings: faith. That's the main thing Abraham did right. He didn't know why God

had picked him, he didn't know where God was sending him, and he certainly didn't know what God's plan was. All he knew was that God said, "Leave," and so he did.

Trusting God with your life is what faith is all about. In the New Testament the apostle Paul explained that Abraham's example pointed to a bigger step of faith—to believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord (Romans 4:16-25).