

Bible genres

MOBILE
HANDBOOK



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Narrative

ILLUSTRATED TRUTH

e.g. Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jonah, Acts



DESCRIPTION

This is history, not fiction. That means it records things as they were, not as they should be. It implicitly teaches.



LOOK FOR

Characters: God is always the main one
Setting: geography, culture, time period
Plot: beginning, climax, conflict, resolution



WARNING

Characters are not always heroes. Don't allegorize these stories; it's history, remember. It's not talking about you.



TIPS

Judge each character's actions by the rest of the Bible. Did they fail or succeed in keeping God's commands?

Gospel

WHO IS JESUS

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John



DESCRIPTION

The four Gospels “record facts about Jesus, recall the teaching of Jesus, and each bears witness to Jesus.” Each one is written to a different audience.



LOOK FOR

The theme of the Kingdom of God. Old Testament quotes. Characters: Who is Jesus talking to in each story?
Setting: geography, culture, time period
Plot: beginning, climax, conflict, resolution



WARNING

Jesus’ sayings are hard to hear sometimes. Ask yourself, “What did I most need to read that I least wanted to hear?”



TIPS

John is the unique Gospel because it’s more reflective, includes different content, and openly reveals Jesus’ deity. The main themes are eternal life and belief.

Law

LIVE LIKE YOU KNOW GOD

Exodus (Starting in Chapter 20),
Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy



DESCRIPTION

The law is about God establishing his relationship with Israel in a covenant. He commits himself to Israel with promises. He also tells Israel how to relate to God and how to represent him to the world.



LOOK FOR

Repeated themes. There are do/don't laws and case-by-case laws. Ask, what does this tell me about God? And, how would this law have helped an Israelite love their neighbor?



WARNING

The law shows us how it's impossible to please God on our own. The 600+ laws are examples of God's expectations, they're not exhaustive.



TIPS

This isn't how God relates to Christians anymore, but it's still God's Word. Only the laws that Jesus renews are binding on Christians, like the Ten Commandments.

Wisdom

TRUTH APPLIED TO LIFE

e.g. Job, Psalms, Proverbs,
Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs



DESCRIPTION

Wisdom literature gives practical advice for navigating life, and teaches universal truth. Each wisdom book addresses a different area of life.



LOOK FOR

Contrasts between foolish and wise people, questions the author raises, and where this literature is quoted in the New Testament.



WARNING

These books have an overall message, so reading them in bits and pieces may obscure that message.



TIPS

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," so understanding these things ultimately comes from your relationship with the Lord. Ask him for help and wisdom.

Poetry

EXPRESSIONS OF WORSHIP

e.g. Psalms, Song of Solomon, Lamentations

Note: Poetry shows up all throughout the Bible, especially in the prophets.



DESCRIPTION

Biblical poetry is practical, not informational. It helps us express our hearts to God in worship and think about what he's done or what he will do. It's a record of man's words to God. But, it's still God's Word.



LOOK FOR

Parallelism, comparisons, figures of speech, literary devices (metaphor, hyperbole, repetition, etc.), human emotions



WARNING

This is Hebrew poetry, not English poetry. It's styled by parallelism - saying the same thing twice or more, but with variation.



TIPS

Ask, what's the occasion of the poem? Lament, thanksgiving, praising God, celebration, learning wisdom, trusting God, cursing enemies, or telling the future?

Epistles

EARLY CHURCH MAIL

e.g. Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, Jude



DESCRIPTION

These are letters written by early church leaders to people or churches. They are written in response to specific circumstances to specific people.



LOOK FOR

Context: what comes before and after the specific verses you are reading? Words like “for, therefore, so,” that indicate where you are in the author’s argument. Who wrote the letter and who is receiving it? What are the logical divisions in the letter?



WARNING

The letter can’t mean to you what it never meant to the first people to receive it.



TIPS

Read the letter in one sitting. Take note of the topics that the author addresses in the letter: What questions does the author raise?

Prophecy

FORTHTELLING AND FORETELLING

e.g. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel,
Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah,
Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai,
Zachariah, Malachi



DESCRIPTION

Prophets spoke for God to his people, often about the future (foretelling), but sometimes reminding them of the covenant they made with him (forthtelling).



LOOK FOR

Context: has the oracle already been fulfilled? Themes of judgment and restoration. When, to which audience, and to what situation, was this oracle spoken?



WARNING

A prophet's perspective is like a mountain range: they saw a lot of the future, but could not see how far in the distant future each message would take place



TIPS

Reference the laws, because the prophetic messages often enforced God's covenant, like God's police.

Parables

JESUS' WAY OF STORYTELLING

e.g. Matthew, Mark, and Luke



DESCRIPTION

An illustration in the form of a brief, fictional story meant to teach truth, usually related to the Kingdom of God and its citizens.



LOOK FOR

The context of the parable in the surrounding Gospel narrative, the Jesus' main point of the parable, and the decision Jesus' hearers must make.



WARNING

Don't allegorize every detail. Most parables represent the same characters: God, Jesus, people in God's kingdom, and people outside God's kingdom.



TIPS

Look for the "shock" of the parable, the point upon which everything else hinges. This is usually Jesus' main point for the parable.

Proverbs

HOW TO LIVE WISELY

e.g., Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, some parts
of the Four Gospels



DESCRIPTION

Proverbs are short truths applicable in specific situations, usually worded in a memorable way. They aren't universal truths. Rather, it takes wisdom to know when they should be applied.



LOOK FOR

Figurative language, common themes like relationships or work, and for similar thoughts elsewhere in the Bible.



WARNING

Proverbs are collected wisdom, meant to be read as a whole. Isolating individual proverbs and treating them as if they are universal truths can lead to wrong interpretation and application.



TIPS

Read proverbs in context, follow the line of argument, pay attention to ancient cultural images or analogies that need investigation.

Apocalyptic

THE END OF ALL THINGS

e.g. parts of Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation



DESCRIPTION

These books use images like beasts, angels, and special signs and numbers, to talk about future events. They speak with urgency; the things written are certain to occur, but we aren't given the time of fulfillment.



LOOK FOR

Symbols, characters, numbers with special significance, big picture themes



WARNING

Stick to the main point, don't get caught up trying to solve the puzzles (e.g., in Revelation, the point is Jesus wins over evil and death). God's Kingdom will triumph forever, and it begs the question, are we part of his Kingdom?



TIPS

Research the background of images you read about - they have a history. For example, does the book mention "cherubim?" Where else are these mentioned in the Bible?

Sources

Quotes and content were extracted from the following sources:

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982.

Feinberg, Margaret, “This Simple Method Will Revolutionize the Way You Read the Bible.” Margaret Feinberg, October 24, 2018, <https://margaretfeinberg.com/simple-method-will-revolutionize-way-read-gospels/>.



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