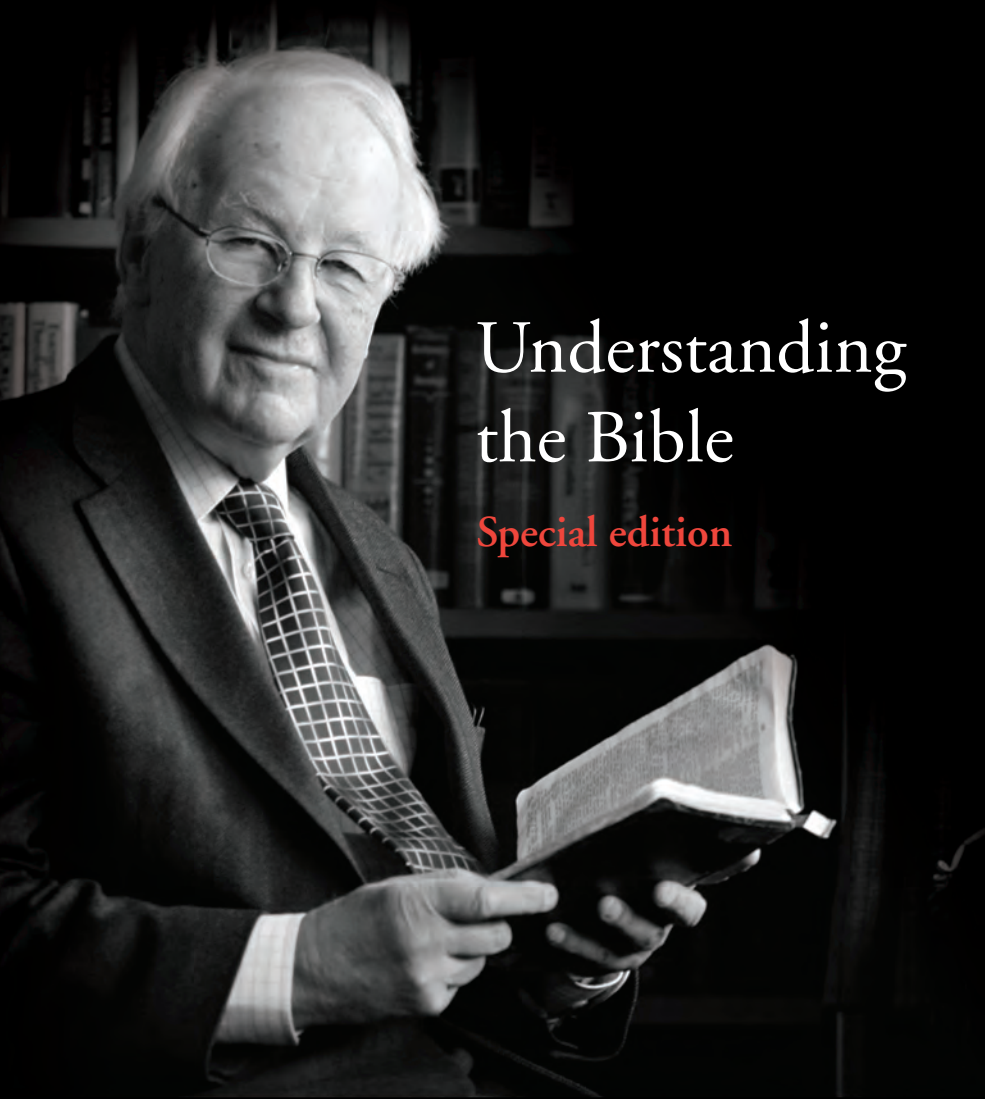




John Stott



Understanding
the Bible

Special edition

John Stott

Understanding the Bible

Special edition

Many of John Stott's sermons began with this prayer:

*'We pray that ... your written word of Scripture may
now and always be our rule, your Holy Spirit our
teacher and your greater glory our supreme concern,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'*



Text © 1972, revised 1984, John Stott.

Published in a revised edition in 2003 by Scripture Union, reprinted 2004, 2007.

Published as this special edition 2011.

Scripture Union, 207-209 Queensway, Bletchley, Milton Keynes, MK2 2EB, United Kingdom.

Email: info@scriptureunion.org.uk

Website: www.scriptureunion.org.uk

ISBN 978 1 85999 640 9

Scripture Union Australia, Locked Bag 2, Central Coast Business Centre, NSW 2252, Australia

Website: www.su.org.au

Scripture Union USA, P.O. Box 987, Valley Forge, PA 19482, USA

Website: www.scriptureunion.org

All the royalties from this book have been irrevocably assigned to Langham Literature, a programme of the Langham Partnership International. Langham Literature distributes books to pastors, theological teachers and students, and seminary libraries, in the developing world. Further information may be obtained from, and donations sent to: Langham Literature, 4 Thornton Road, Carlisle CA3 9HZ.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission of Scripture Union.

The right of John Stott to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data: a catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.


All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Anglicisation © 1979, 1984, 1989. Used by permission of Hodder and Stoughton Limited. All rights reserved.

Maps used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

Cover design by Heather Knight.

Cover photo by Kieran Dodds.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Bell & Bain, Glasgow.

 Scripture Union is an international Christian charity working with churches in more than 130 countries providing resources to bring the good news about Jesus Christ to children, young people and families – and to encourage them to develop spiritually through the Bible and prayer.

As well as our network of volunteers, staff and associates who run holidays, church-based events and school Christian groups, we produce a wide range of publications and support those who use our resources through training programmes.

CONTENTS

Preface	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Abbreviations	ix
1. The Purpose of the Bible	1
2. The Land of the Bible	17
3. The Story of the Bible (Old Testament)	39
4. The Story of the Bible (New Testament)	87
5. The Message of the Bible	125
6. The Authority of the Bible	143
7. The Interpretation of the Bible	165
8. The Use of the Bible	197
Index	207

PREFACE

The secrets of Christian maturity are ready to be found in Scripture by all who seek them. There is a breadth to God's Word which few of us ever encompass, a depth which we seldom plumb.

In particular, our Christianity is superficial because our image of Christ is superficial. We impoverish ourselves by our poor and unsatisfying views of him. Some speak of him today as if he were a kind of hypodermic syringe to be carried about in our pocket, so that when we are feeling depressed we can give ourselves a fix and take a trip into fantasy. But Christ cannot be used or manipulated like that. The contemporary church seems to have little understanding of the greatness of Jesus Christ as Lord of creation and Lord of the church, before whom our place is on our faces in the dust. Nor do we seem to see his victory as the New Testament portrays it, with all things under his feet, so that if we are joined to Christ, all things are under our feet as well.

It seems to me that our greatest need today is an enlarged vision of Jesus Christ. We need to see him as the one in whom alone the fullness of God dwells and in whom alone we can come to fullness of life (Colossians 1:19; 2:9,10).

There is only one way to gain clear, true, fresh, lofty views of Christ, and that is through the Bible. The Bible is the prism by which the light of Jesus Christ is broken into its many and beautiful colours. The Bible is the portrait of Jesus Christ. We need to gaze upon him with such intensity of desire that (by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit) he comes alive to us, meets with us, and fills us with himself.

In order to apprehend Jesus Christ in his fullness, it is essential to understand the setting within which God offers him to us. God gave Christ to the world in a specific geographical, historical and

theological context. More simply, he sent him to a particular place (Palestine), at a particular time (the climax of centuries of Jewish history) and within a particular framework of truth (progressively revealed and permanently recorded in the Bible). So the following chapters are concerned with the geography, history, theology, authority and interpretation of the Bible. Their object is to present the setting within which God once revealed and now offers Christ, so that we may the better grasp for ourselves and share with others the glorious fullness of Jesus Christ himself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For about twenty years I have lectured on the authority and interpretation of the Bible to our students at the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity. I am grateful to them for their penetrating questions, which have helped to clarify some of the material in this book. I am even more grateful to two of my most recent Study Assistants, namely John Yates (1996–1999) and Corey Widmer (1999–2002). Both of them have read the whole book through the eyes of the younger generation and have suggested some improvements, which I have mostly – and gratefully – adopted.

John Stott
2003

ABBREVIATIONS

AV:	Authorised Version/King James Version
NEB:	New English Bible
RSV:	Revised Standard Version
REB:	Revised English Bible
NRSV:	New Revised Standard Version

chapter one

THE PURPOSE OF THE BIBLE

- *What does it mean to say that the Bible is primarily a book of salvation?*
 - *In what ways do we see Jesus Christ in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament?*
 - *How does Scripture draw from us a response of faith?*
-

The choice of a book to read and the way in which we read it are determined largely by the author's purpose in writing it. Is it a textbook of science or history intended to inform, or a novel meant purely to entertain? Is it a piece of serious prose or poetry in which the writer reflects on life and stimulates the reader to think about it too? Does it speak in any meaningful way to the contemporary world? Or is it perhaps a controversial work in which he deliberately sets out to argue his point of view? Moreover, is the author qualified to write on the subject? Questions like these are often in our minds when we ask, 'Is it worth reading?'

Most books supply prospective readers with the information they want about who wrote them and why. Either the author tells us candidly in a preface about himself and his object in writing, or the publisher does so in the 'blurb' on the cover. Most readers spend time examining these before committing themselves to buy, borrow or read the book.

It is a great pity that readers of the Bible do not always ask the same questions. Many appear to pick it up and begin their reading at random. Some start at Genesis and get stuck in Leviticus. Others may doggedly persevere from a sense of duty, even setting (and achieving) a target of reading the whole Bible through section by section in five years, but without deriving much benefit from their study because they lack understanding of the book's overall purpose. Or indeed

many give up Bible reading altogether, or never start it, because they cannot see how the tale of a faraway people in a faraway age could have any relevance for them today.

In any case, how can the Bible, which in fact is not a book but a library of sixty-six books, possibly be said to have a ‘purpose’? Was it not compiled by different authors at different times with different objectives? Yes and no. There is indeed a wide variety of human author and theme. Yet behind these, Christians believe, there lies a single divine Author with a single unifying theme.

The Bible itself declares what this theme is. It is stated several times in several places, but perhaps nowhere more succinctly than by the apostle Paul to Timothy:

. . . from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:15–17)

Here the apostle brings together both the origin and the object of Scripture, where it comes from and what it is intended for. Its origin: ‘God-breathed’. Its object: ‘useful’ for human beings. Indeed, it is useful for us only *because* it is God-breathed – inspired by God. The subject of biblical inspiration I must leave to a later chapter; in this chapter I want to investigate the nature of the Bible’s usefulness. For this I will take up three words which Paul used – ‘salvation’, ‘Christ’ and ‘faith’.

A book of salvation

Perhaps no biblical word has suffered more from misuse and misunderstanding than the word ‘salvation’. Some of us Christians are to blame for the caricature of it which we have presented to the world. As a result, the word ‘salvation’ has become for many a source of embarrassment, even an object of ridicule. We need to rescue it from the narrow concept to which we have often debased it. For ‘salvation’ is a big and noble word, as I shall soon elaborate. Salvation is freedom. Yes, and renewal too; ultimately the renewal of the whole cosmos.

Now the supreme purpose of the Bible, Paul writes to Timothy, is to instruct its readers 'for salvation'. This immediately indicates that Scripture has a practical purpose, and that this purpose is moral rather than intellectual. Or rather its intellectual instruction (its 'wisdom', as the Greek word implies) is given with a view to the moral experience called 'salvation'.

In order to grasp more firmly this positive purpose of Scripture, it may be helpful to contrast it with some purposes it does not have.

Firstly, the purpose of the Bible is not scientific. This is not to say that the teaching of Scripture and of science are in conflict with one another for, when we keep each to its proper sphere and discern what each is affirming, they are not. Indeed, if the God of truth is the author of both, they could not be. Nor is it to say that the two spheres never overlap and that nothing in the Bible has any scientific relevance, for the Bible does contain statements of fact which can be (and in many cases have been) scientifically verified. For example, a number of historical facts are recorded, such as that Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon besieged, took and virtually destroyed Jerusalem, and that Jesus of Nazareth was born when Augustus was Emperor of Rome. What I am asserting rather is that, though the Bible may contain some science, the purpose of the Bible is not scientific.

Science (or at least natural science) is a body of knowledge painstakingly acquired by observation, experiment and induction. The purpose of God through Scripture, however, has been to disclose truths which could not be discovered by this method (called by scientists the 'empirical' method), but would have remained unknown and undiscovered if he had not revealed them. For instance, science may be able to tell us something about our physical origins (even this is an open question); only the Bible reveals our nature, both our unique nobility as creatures made in the Creator's image and our degradation as self-centred sinners in revolt against our Creator.

Next, the purpose of the Bible is not literary. Some years ago a book was published entitled *The Bible Designed to Be Read as Literature*. It was beautifully produced. The traditional verse-arrangement was abandoned. And the layout indicated plainly what was poetry and what was prose. All this was helpful. Further, no one

can deny, whatever his or her beliefs or disbeliefs, that the Bible does contain noble literature. It deals with the great themes of human life and destiny, and handles them with simplicity, insight and imagination. So fine was its original translation in some countries, such as England and Germany, that the Bible has become part of the nation's literary heritage. Nevertheless, God did not design the Bible as great literature. It contains some glaring stylistic weaknesses. The New Testament was written largely in *koiné* Greek, the everyday language of market and office, and much of it lacks literary polish, even grammatical accuracy. The purpose of the Bible is to be found in its message, not in its style.

Thirdly, the purpose of the Bible is not philosophical. Of course Scripture contains profound wisdom, in fact the wisdom of God. But some of the great themes with which philosophers have always wrestled are not given a thorough treatment in Scripture. Take the great problems of suffering and evil. As phenomena of human experience they figure prominently throughout the Bible. On almost every page men and women sin, and men and women suffer. And some light is thrown – supremely by the cross – on both problems. But no ultimate explanation of either is offered, nor are the ways of God justified in relation to them, in terms acceptable to human philosophy. Even in the Book of Job, which concentrates on the problem of suffering, Job in the end humbles himself before God without understanding God's providence. I think the reason is simply that the Bible is more a practical than a theoretical book. It is more concerned to tell us how to bear suffering and overcome evil than it is to philosophise about their origin and purpose.

So the Bible is primarily a book neither of science, nor of literature, nor of philosophy, but of salvation.

In saying this we must give the word 'salvation' its broadest possible meaning. Salvation is far more than merely the forgiveness of sins. It includes the whole sweep of God's purpose to redeem and restore humankind, and indeed all creation. What we claim for the Bible is that it unfolds God's total plan.

It begins with the creation, so that we may know the divine likeness in which we were made, the obligations which we have repudiated and the heights from which we have fallen. We can

understand neither what we are in sin nor what we may be by grace until we know what we once were by creation.

The Bible goes on to tell us how sin entered into the world, and death as a result of sin. It emphasises the gravity of sin as a revolt against the authority of God our Creator and Lord, and the justice of his judgement upon it. There are many salutary warnings in Scripture about the perils of disobedience.

But the main thrust of the biblical message, as will be elaborated in chapter 5, is that God loves the very rebels who deserve nothing at his hand but judgement. Before time began, Scripture says, his plan of salvation took shape. It originated in his grace, his free and unmerited mercy. He made with Abraham a covenant of grace, promising through his posterity to bless all the families of the earth. The rest of the Old Testament is devoted to an account of his gracious dealings with Abraham's posterity, the people of Israel. In spite of their obstinate rejection of his word, as it came to them through law and prophets, he never cast them off. *They* broke the covenant, not he.

The historical coming of Jesus Christ was in fulfilment of his covenant:

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come and has redeemed his people.
He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us –
to show mercy to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
(Luke 1:68–75)

It is important to observe that the promised 'salvation' from 'our enemies' is understood in terms of 'holiness and righteousness' and

– later in the same passage – of ‘the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God’.

So the New Testament concentrates on the outworking of this salvation, on the way of ‘forgiveness’ and of ‘holiness’ through Jesus Christ’s death, resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit. The apostles emphasise that forgiveness is possible only through the sin-bearing death of Christ, and a new birth leading to a new life only through the Spirit of Christ. Then the letters are full of practical ethical instruction. As the New English Bible translates 2 Timothy 3:16, Scripture is profitable not only ‘for teaching the truth and refuting error’ but ‘for reformation of manners and discipline in right living.’ It also portrays Christ’s church as the society of the saved, who are called to a life of sacrificial service and witness in the world.

Finally, the New Testament authors insist that although God’s people have already in one sense been saved, in another their salvation lies still in the future. We are given the promise that one day our bodies will be redeemed. ‘In this hope we were saved’ (Romans 8:24). And in this final redemption the whole creation will somehow be involved. If we are to be clothed with new bodies, there is also going to be a new heaven and a new earth pervaded by righteousness alone. Then and only then, with no sin either in our nature or in our society, will God’s salvation be complete. The glorious liberty of God’s children will be the freedom to serve. God will be everything to everybody (Romans 8:21; 1 Corinthians 15:28).

Such is the comprehensive salvation set forth in Scripture. Conceived in a past eternity, achieved at a point in time and historically worked out in human experience, it will reach its consummation in the eternity of the future. The Bible is unique in its claim to instruct us for ‘such a great salvation’ (Hebrews 2:3).

Christ in the Law

The salvation for which the Bible instructs us is available ‘through faith in Christ Jesus’. Therefore, since Scripture concerns salvation and salvation is through Christ, Scripture is full of Christ.

Jesus himself understood the nature and function of the Bible in this way. ‘The Scriptures,’ he said, ‘testify about me’ (John 5:39). Again, walking with two disciples after the resurrection, from

Jerusalem to Emmaus, he rebuked them for their folly and unbelief due to their ignorance of Scripture. Luke who tells the story adds:

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:27)

A little while later the risen Lord said to a wider group of his followers:

‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’ (Luke 24:44)

Christ’s assertion was, then, not only that the Scriptures bore witness to him in a general way, but that in each of the three divisions of the Old Testament Scripture – the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms (or ‘Writings’) – there were things concerning him, and that all these things must be fulfilled.

The fundamental relation between the Old Testament and the New Testament, according to Christ, is that between promise and fulfilment. The very first word Jesus uttered in his public ministry (in the Greek text of the Gospel of Mark) indicates this. It was the word ‘fulfilled’:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come here; repent, and believe in the good news. (Mark 1:15 NRSV)

Jesus Christ was deeply convinced that the long centuries of expectation were over, and that he himself had ushered in the days of fulfilment. So he could say to his apostles:

‘Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.’ (Matthew 13:16,17)

In the light of this claim, we shall look first at the Old Testament in its three divisions, then at the New Testament, and try to see how

our Saviour Jesus Christ himself (in terms of promise and fulfilment) is Scripture's uniting theme.

By the 'Law' was meant the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. Can we really find Christ in them? Yes indeed.

To begin with, they contain some foundation prophecies of God's salvation through Christ, which underlie the rest of the Bible. God promised first that the seed of Eve would bruise the serpent's head, next that through Abraham's posterity he would bless all the families of the earth, and later that 'the sceptre will not depart from Judah . . . until he comes to whom it belongs,' whom the people will obey (Genesis 3:15; 12:3; 49:10). Thus it was revealed – already in the first book of the Bible – that the Messiah would be human (descended from Eve) and Jewish (descended from Abraham and of the tribe of Judah), and that he would crush Satan, bless the world and rule as king forever.

Another important prophecy of Christ in the Law represents him as being himself the perfect Prophet. Moses said to the people:

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. . . . 'I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.'

(Deuteronomy 18:15,18)

It was not only by direct prophecies that the Law pointed forward to Christ, however, but also by more indirect pictures. In it the Messiah was foreshadowed as well as foretold. Indeed, God's dealings with Israel in choosing them, redeeming them, establishing his covenant with them, making atonement for their sins through sacrifice, and causing them to inherit the land of Canaan all set forth in limited and national terms what would one day be available to all people through Christ. Christians can say today: God has chosen us in Christ and made us a people for his own possession. Christ shed his blood to atone for our sins and ratify the new covenant. He has redeemed us not from Egyptian bondage but from the bondage of sin. He is our great high priest who offered himself on the cross, as one sacrifice for sins forever, and all priesthood and sacrifice are fulfilled in him. Further, by his resurrection we have been born again

to a living hope, 'into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade,' and is reserved in heaven for us (1 Peter 1:3,4). These great Christian words, which portray various aspects of our salvation through Christ – election, atonement, covenant, redemption, sacrifice, inheritance – all began to be used in the Old Testament in relation to God's grace towards Israel.

There is yet a third way in which the Law bears witness to Christ. It is elaborated by the apostle Paul in his Galatian letter:

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. (Galatians 3:23,24)

The law is vividly portrayed by the Greek words Paul used as a military garrison hemming us in ('held prisoners'), a jailer keeping us under lock and key ('locked up') and a tutor charged with the discipline of minors ('put in charge'). All this is because the moral law condemned the lawbreaker without in itself offering any remedy. In this way it pointed to Christ. Its very condemnation made Christ necessary. It held us in bondage in order 'to lead us to Christ,' who alone could set us free. We are condemned by the law, but justified through faith in Christ.

Christ in the Prophets

As we turn now from the Law to the Prophets, we need to remember that the Old Testament division known as 'the Prophets' included the history books (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) as 'the former prophets' because the authors were judged to have written prophetic or sacred history, as well as 'the latter prophets' whom we call the major and minor prophets.

Many readers of the Bible have found the history of Israel extremely tedious and cannot imagine how all those dreary kings could have anything to do with Christ! When we remember, however, that Christ's first words about 'the time is fulfilled' immediately led on to 'the kingdom of God has drawn near', we have in the word 'kingdom' the clue we need. Israel began as a 'theocracy', a nation under the direct rule of God. Even when the

people rejected the divine rule by demanding a king like the other nations and God granted their request, they knew that ultimately he continued to be their King, for they continued to be his people, and that their kings reigned, as it were, as his governors.

Nevertheless, the rule of the kings, of both the northern kingdom Israel and the southern kingdom Judah, left much to be desired. The monarchy was spoiled externally by foreign wars, and internally by injustice and oppression. Both kingdoms also had the instability of all human institutions, as king after king acceded to the throne and reigned and died. And sometimes they shrank to tiny territories, as their land was overrun by invading armies, until in the end both capitals were taken and both nations suffered a humiliating exile. It is not surprising that God used their experience of the limitations of human government to clarify their understanding of the perfections of the future Messianic kingdom and to strengthen their longing for it.

Already God had made a covenant with King David to build him a house and through his posterity to establish his throne forever (2 Samuel 7:8–17). Now the prophets began to describe what would embody the ideals of kingship which the kings of Israel and Judah, and even David himself, so imperfectly foreshadowed. In his kingdom, oppression would give place to justice, and war to peace. Further, there would be no limit to either its extent or its duration. For his dominion would stretch from sea to sea, even to the ends of the earth, and would last forever. These four characteristics of the kingdom of the Messiah – peace, justice, universality and eternity – are brought together in one of Isaiah’s most famous prophecies:

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David’s throne
and over his kingdom,

establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and for ever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.
(Isaiah 9:6,7)

If the prophets foretold the glory of the Messiah, they foretold his sufferings also. The best-known such prophecy, obviously definitive for our Lord's own understanding of his ministry, is that of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. He would be 'despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering' (v 3). Above all, he would bear his people's sins:

He was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
(Isaiah 53:5,6)

Christ in the Writings

The third division of the Old Testament was 'the Writings', sometimes called 'the Psalms', because the Psalter (our book of Psalms) was the chief book of this section. Several psalms are applied to Jesus Christ in the New Testament, psalms which include references to his deity, humanity, sufferings and exaltation. Thus the words 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father' were used (at least in part) by God the Father in direct address to his Son at both his baptism and his transfiguration. The allusions in Psalm 8 to man as 'made . . . a little lower than the heavenly beings' and 'crowned . . . with glory and honour' are applied to Christ by the author of the letter to the Hebrews. Jesus himself quoted Psalm 22:1 from the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' claiming that he had personally experienced and fulfilled the terrible God-forsakenness which the

psalmist expressed. He also quoted David's saying in Psalm 110:1, 'The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet,"' and asked his critics how the Messiah could be both David's Lord and David's son.

'The Writings' contain, in addition, what is often called the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The 'wise men' appear to have become a distinct group in Israel during the later period of the monarchy, alongside the prophets and the priests. They knew that the beginning of wisdom was to fear God and depart from evil. Often they extolled wisdom in glowing terms, as more precious than gold, silver and jewels, and occasionally they appeared even to personify wisdom as the agent of God's creation:

I was there when he set the heavens in place,
 when he marked out the horizon on the face of the
 deep,
 when he established the clouds above
 and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
 when he gave the sea its boundary
 so the waters would not overstep his command,
 and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
 Then I was the craftsman at his side.
 I was filled with delight day after day,
 rejoicing always in his presence,
 rejoicing in his whole world
 and delighting in mankind.
 (Proverbs 8:27–31)

Christians have no difficulty in recognising that this wisdom of God is uniquely incorporated in Jesus Christ, the personal 'Word' who was in the beginning with God and through whom all things were made (see John 1:1–3; Colossians 2:3).

The Old Testament expectation of Christ – in the Law, the Prophets and the Writings – is seen to have been extremely diverse. Jesus himself summed it up in the comprehensive question: 'Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' (Luke 24:26). The apostle Peter took up the phrase, conceding that the prophets did not fully understand 'the time and circumstances to

which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow' (1 Peter 1:11). But this double strand of prophecy was there, representing him as the priest who would offer himself as a sacrifice for sin and the king whose glorious reign would know no end.

In fact, another way of summing up the Old Testament witness to Christ is to say that it depicts him as a greater prophet than Moses, a greater priest than Aaron and a greater king than David. That is to say, he will perfectly reveal God to man, reconcile man to God and rule over man for God. In him, the Old Testament ideals of prophecy, priesthood and kingship will find their final fulfilment.

Christ in the New Testament

If the idea of discovering Christ in the Old Testament seems at first sight strange, there is no similar difficulty about finding him in the New. In the Gospels – each with its own viewpoint, as we shall see in chapter 4 – we find the story of his birth, life, death and resurrection, together with a sample of what he said and what he did.

These 'memories of the apostles', as they used to be called in the early church, came rightly to be known as 'Gospels', for each evangelist tells his story as 'gospel' or good news of Christ and his salvation. They do not present him as a biographer might. They are essentially witnesses, directing their readers' attention to one they believed to be the God-man, born to save his people from their sins, whose words were words of eternal life, whose works dramatised the glory of his kingdom, who died as a ransom for sinners, and who rose in triumph to be Lord of all.

You might suppose that the Acts of the Apostles, which tells the story of the early days of Christianity, is more about the church than about Christ. Yet this would misrepresent its nature. Luke, its author, has a different emphasis. In introducing his work to Theophilus (for whom he is writing) he describes his first book (the Gospel of Luke) as containing 'all that Jesus began to do and to teach'. The implication is that the Acts story will contain all that Jesus continued to do and teach through his apostles. So in the Acts we listen to Christ as he was still speaking to men, though now through the great sermons of the apostles Peter and Paul which Luke records. We also

see the miracles which he did through them, for 'many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles' in the name and with the power of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:43). And we watch Christ building his own church by adding converts to it:

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:47)

The epistles extend the New Testament's witness to Christ by unfolding further the glory of his divine-human person and saving work, and by relating the life of the Christian and of the church to him. The apostles exalt Christ as the one in whom 'God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell' and through whom we ourselves have 'fullness in Christ' (Colossians 1:19; 2:9,10). In Christ, God has 'blessed us . . . with every spiritual blessing,' they say (Ephesians 1:3), so that we can do all things through him who inwardly strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). The Christ the apostles present is an all-sufficient Christ, who is able to save to the uttermost and for all time 'those who come to God through him' (Hebrews 7:25).

The Bible's showing-forth of Christ reaches its climax in the Revelation of John. He is portrayed in the vivid imagery which characterises this book. First he appears as a glorified man 'among the lampstands'. These represent the churches, which the risen Christ is seen to patrol and superintend, so that he is able to say to each, 'I know your deeds' (Revelation 2,3). Then the scene changes from earth to heaven, and Jesus Christ appears as 'a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain'. The countless international crowd of the redeemed are even said to have 'washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb,' by which John means that they owe their righteousness to Christ crucified alone (Revelation 5:6; 7:14). Then towards the end of the book Christ is seen as a majestic rider on a white horse, going forth to judgement, with his name inscribed upon him: 'KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS' (Revelation 19:11-16). Finally we are introduced to him as the Heavenly Bridegroom for, we are told, 'the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready'. His bride is the glorified church which is then seen 'coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband' (Revelation 19:7-9; 21:2). Almost the last words of the

Revelation are ‘The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” . . . Come, Lord Jesus’ (Revelation 22:17,20).

There is great diversity of content, style and purpose among the books of the Bible, and in some of them the witness to Christ is indirect, even oblique. But this brief survey of the Old and New Testaments should be enough to demonstrate that ‘the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy’ (Revelation 19:10). If we want to know Christ and his salvation, it is to the Bible we must turn. For the Bible is God’s own portrait of Christ. We can never know him otherwise. As Jerome put it in the fourth century AD, ‘Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.’

Just as in a children’s treasure hunt, one is sometimes fortunate enough to stumble immediately upon the treasure but, more usually, has to follow laboriously from clue to clue until at last the treasure is found, so it is with Bible reading. Some verses point one directly to Christ. Others are remote clues. But a painstaking pursuit of the clues will ultimately lead every reader to that treasure whose worth is beyond price.

Through faith

The Scriptures are ‘able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus’, wrote Paul (2 Timothy 3:15). Since their purpose (or the purpose of the divine author who spoke and speaks through them) is to bring us to salvation, and since salvation is in Christ, they point us to Christ, as we have seen. But their object in pointing us to Christ is not simply that we should know about him and understand him, nor even that we should admire him, but that we should put our trust in him. Scripture bears witness to Christ not in order to satisfy our curiosity but in order to draw from us a response of faith.

There is much misunderstanding about faith. It is commonly supposed to be a leap in the dark, totally incompatible with reason. This is not so. True faith is never unreasonable, because its object is always trustworthy. When we human beings trust one another, the reasonableness of our trust depends on the relative trustworthiness of the people concerned. But the Bible bears witness to Jesus Christ as absolutely trustworthy. It tells us who he is and what he has done, and the evidence it supplies for his unique person and work is extremely compelling. As we expose ourselves to the biblical witness to this

Christ, and as we feel its impact – profound yet simple, varied yet unanimous – God creates faith within us. We receive the testimony. We believe.

That is what Paul meant when he wrote:

Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17)

We have seen that God's purpose in and through the Bible is severely practical. He has ordained it as his chief instrument for bringing people to 'salvation', understood in its widest and fullest sense. The whole Bible is a gospel of salvation, and the gospel is 'the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes' (Romans 1:16). So it points its many fingers unerringly to Christ, so that its readers will see him, believe in him and be saved.

The apostle John writes something very similar at the end of his Gospel. He has recorded only a selection of the signs of Jesus, he says, for Jesus performed many others. He goes on:

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)

John sees the ultimate purpose of Scripture ('what is written') just as Paul sees it. John calls it 'life', Paul 'salvation', but the words are virtually synonymous. Both apostles are further agreed that this life or salvation is in Christ, and that to receive it we must believe in him. Both present exactly the same sequence of steps: Scripture – Christ – faith – salvation. Scripture testifies to Christ in order to evoke faith in Christ, in order to bring life to the believer.

The conclusion is simple. Whenever we read the Bible, we must look for Christ. And we must go on looking until we see and so believe. Only as we continue to appropriate by faith the riches of Christ which are disclosed to us in Scripture shall we grow into spiritual maturity, and become men and women of God who are 'thoroughly equipped for every good work' (2 Timothy 3:17).

John Stott

Understanding the Bible



What is the Bible really all about?
Why was it written?
Can it be trusted?
Why should we read it?

These questions and more are tackled in this classic work by acclaimed Bible teacher John Stott. With clarity and authority he spells out the Bible's purpose, outlines the story and examines relevant social, historical and geographical contexts. But this book is far more than an examination of content – it gives us principles for relating the Bible directly and powerfully to our daily lives.

'... such clarity, relevance and simple usefulness ... one of the very best in its genre.' **Christopher JH Wright**, International Director, Langham Partnership International

'John Stott didn't just try to understand the Bible, he committed himself to living it out in all of life ... those twin concerns are at the heart of this liberating guide.' **Mark Greene**, Executive Director, The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity

'... a wonderful book for unlocking the treasures of God's Word.'
Hugh Palmer, Rector, All Souls, Langham Place, London

'... passionate love for the Bible seeps through every page alongside his unique ability to explain even the most difficult parts of the Bible...'
Krish Kandiah, Executive Director Churches in Mission, Evangelical Alliance

Cover photo: Kieran Dodds



www.scriptureunion.org.uk

ISBN 978 1 85999 640 9



9 781859 996409

£7.99


Scripture
union