
An Overview of the Bible Using *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*

by William M. Ramsay

Foreword

What follows is a series of suggestions for surveying the Bible, using the Bible itself and *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*, by William M. Ramsay. It is divided for thirteen sessions of at least sixty minutes each, or a three-month study. There is a suggestion for dividing each session, so that you might use this guide for twenty-six sessions (six months). The longer time frame is strongly recommended. Indeed there are enough suggestions here that a group wanting to dig in and discuss the implications for today of various passages could profitably spend nine months in this study.

These suggestions are intended to help a leader guide a study group do two things:

1. Get an overview of the major sections of the Bible, and
2. Using some passages selected as helpful for getting the larger picture, experience some practice in using the helps in Bible study suggested in *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*.

At every session each participant should have a copy of *The Westminster Guide* and a Bible. The Bible is a very long book. *The Westminster Guide* itself contains 575 pages. In a course of study of only thirteen or even twenty-six one-hour sessions, it is necessary to be highly selective. In fact you will probably need to pick and choose from among the suggestions that follow. Each session dips into the

Bible and *The Westminster Guide* at only a few places, noting how these passages are typical of whole books and even whole sections of the scripture. For each session the leader should read all the suggested pages in *The Westminster Guide*. Ideally the whole group should do so, too, but shorter assignments are given for those who do not have time to read several books of the Bible plus fifty or sixty pages of the *Guide* each week. The assignments always include two or three passages of the scripture itself. Remember that *The Westminster Guide* is intended only as a tool for Bible study, not as a substitute for Bible study. Note, too, that it is designed for gaining information about the Bible itself rather than for helping the group to the equally important task of relating the Bible to their lives today.

My suggestions are only suggestions. I hope they will be helpful, but most leaders will have their own ways of guiding study, and your ideas may be better suited for you and your group.

Though I have not noted this with each session, it goes without saying that you will probably want to begin each lesson with prayer.

Beginning at the Beginning (Genesis)

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(If you want to make this into two sessions, you might for the second session try the methods suggested, studying Genesis 2–3, Genesis 17:1–14, and Genesis 28.)

Prior to this session the leader should have read pages 1–39 and studied especially the principles and guidelines for interpreting the Bible proposed on pages 1–10. This session will introduce the whole course, using those principles with the first story in the Bible. Don't worry if you don't have time in sixty minutes for full discussion of everything suggested in the following ten steps.

1. Have the whole group review briefly the three questions on pages 6–10. As you go through the Bible passage to be studied in this session, you should check from time to time to make sure you have used as many of the guidelines listed on pages 8–9 as possible.
2. Following the outline on page 23, review briefly the story Genesis tells, thus getting a glimpse of the whole book before looking at one part, Genesis 1:1–2:4.
3. To see what Genesis 1:1–2:4 actually says, take time for someone to read it as the whole group follows in their Bibles.
4. To help determine what the passage meant when it was written, look at the historical background as proposed on page 24. Imagine you are a slave under pagans who deride you and your (apparently) defeated God. How would the words of Genesis 1:1–2:4 make you feel as, while worshiping with other Hebrew slaves some Friday night, you hear them chanted?
5. Look for repeated words and ideas. List them on the chalkboard or newsprint. Who do they suggest is the principal character in the Bible? What can you tell about this person from this chapter? What else can you tell from the repeated words and ideas? What things seem important to the writer?
6. What kind of literature does this passage seem to be? Does the writer seem to be attempting a scientific report? If not, how, where, and for what purpose might this kind of literature be used?

7. As time allows, compare this story with the somewhat different account in Genesis 2. Pages 26–27 may help here.
8. Perhaps some have had a chance to review pages 24–27. See if they can add anything to what has already been discovered.
9. Do the same kind of study with Genesis 17:1–14, or, if there is too little time left, simply note that the passage’s repeated word “covenant” points to a concept so basic that the two parts of the Bible are called the Old Testament (or Covenant) and the New Testament.
10. *The Westminster Guide* is not intended to give direct help with the third question proposed on page 9, “What does this passage mean to us now, today?” One way to get a bit of its contemporary message, however, might be to sing or read together the words to one of the hymns about creation listed in your hymnal’s topical index or its index of scriptural allusions.

The Assignment: Exodus–Deuteronomy, pages 39–66. All should study at least the outlines on pages 40, 50, 56, and 62, and pages 46–47. In the Bible all should study at least Leviticus 19:9–18 and Deuteronomy 6:4–25.

The Pentateuch after Genesis (Exodus–Deuteronomy)

(If you want to make this two sessions, do the suggestions for Exodus and Leviticus in the first. Then sample Numbers by using the methods of biblical interpretation suggested in the last lesson, reviewing the chart on page 56, the story in Numbers 14:1–35, and the chart on page 62. Then study the passages in Deuteronomy suggested below.)

We have looked briefly at Genesis. This session gives a quick survey of the rest of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) and suggests some ways of examining a few important passages in some of these books. Be sure to allow some time for Deuteronomy.

1. Summarizing the brief discussion of the Pentateuch on pages 15–16 of *The Westminster Guide* would be one way to introduce the study and get an overview of these books.
2. Review briefly the story Exodus tells. One way to do this would be to go over the outline on page 40. See how familiar the group is to the stories of the baby Moses, Moses's confrontation with pharaoh, and Moses leading the Hebrews across the sea.
3. Review the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1–17). In all the "Law of Moses" these ten commandments are the ones most familiar to the majority of people. The group might enjoy recalling when and where they first were taught these commandments. Read together their brief summary on page 47. What is not so familiar, however, but important for understanding them, is their setting. For that context the group should read together Exodus 19:1–6. God makes a "covenant" with Israel. (The word "covenant" occurs in scripture more than 250 times.) They are to be God's "kingdom." That idea, also, will be crucial for understanding much of the rest of the Bible. Review together the setting and the light history sheds on the covenant idea as described on page 46.
4. Briefly survey Leviticus. One way to do that would be to look together at the outline on page 50. With its details about otherwise long forgotten ceremonies, to most Christians Leviticus

seems as dry and barren as the desert in which those laws are said to have been given. The author of Hebrews, however, saw its priesthood and sacrifices as symbols made real for us in Christ, the Great High Priest, who offered himself as the true sacrifice for our sins.

5. Sample Leviticus using 19:9–22. This is part of what has been called the “Holiness Code.” To the Hebrews “holiness” required purity, separateness, integrity, thought to forbid even mixing cloth in one’s clothes or seeds in a field (19:19). What ethical guidelines still applying to us can the group find in these verses? Verses 20–22 condone abuse of slaves but place one bit of restriction on it. The Golden rule goes far beyond that ethic! Set in the midst of this curious mixture of rules and regulations is verse 18b. To see how important that verse is when interpreted in the light of the New Testament, have someone read to the group Matthew 22:34–40.
6. Briefly survey Numbers. One way to do this would be to review the outline on page 56.
7. The four books of the Old Testament most quoted in the New Testament are Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah, and Deuteronomy. Review together Deuteronomy’s outline, its context in scripture, and its background in history, as described in pages 61–63.
8. Focus on one chapter, Deuteronomy 6. Page 64 speaks of its importance to Jews, and Matthew 22:34–40, noted above, points out how important verse 4 is for Christians. Ask in what ways does Deuteronomy 6 itself testify to the importance of this law. Ask what ideas are repeated for emphasis in this chapter. Why, according to this chapter, is its great commandment to be obeyed? Note the prophecy concerning what may happen to Israel in the promised land.
9. As time allows, study also Deuteronomy 30:15–30, the climax of the book.

The Assignment: “The Former Prophets”—Joshua–2 Kings, pages 67–116. All should at least read the introduction to these books on page 67 and their outlines on pages 68, 76, 86, 94, 101, and 110. Study 2 Kings 17:1–23, a summary of the story these books tell, and come prepared to say how it is related to Deuteronomy 30:15–30.

The Former Prophets (Joshua–2 Kings)

(If you want to make this two sessions, lengthen these suggestions by adding, as time allows, the following: Compare the stories in Judges 3:7–21 with the pattern described on page 78. Examine Ruth in the light of pages 82–85. And compare Samuel’s warning in 1 Samuel 8:4–18 with that of Deuteronomy 17:14–20 and 1 Kings 10:26–11.)

This session reviews the history of the rise and fall of the Hebrew Kingdom. The Lord had wanted Israel to be the unique, covenant Kingdom of God (Ex. 19:6), but, though Israel prospered for a while, it became unfaithful and fell. Our lesson surveys the books from Joshua through 2 Kings, as discussed in *The Westminster Guide* in pages 67–116. It emphasizes the message the final editors of this history wished to proclaim to God’s people as they retold this tragic story.

1. One way to introduce “the Former Prophets” would be to review together page 67 of *The Westminster Guide*. Inevitably all historians interpret history as they write, though modern historians often attempt to be as objective as possible. The writers of these books, by contrast, are not trying to be objective. They write history to teach an inspired lesson: that faithfulness brings reward but that unfaithfulness leads to disaster.
2. The passage 2 Kings 17:1–23 summarizes the story. Let one person read these verses as the others follow in their own Bibles. List on chalkboard or newsprint the repeated words and especially the ideas emphasized in this story. What is the plot and who are the major characters? On the chalkboard or newsprint list what messages the writers want their readers to see.
3. For helpful historical background, ask someone in advance to report what can be learned on the Internet by searching for a phrase such as “Ancient Assyria,” “Ancient history, Iraq,” and/or “Ancient Babylon.” Page 113 quotes the Assyrian emperor’s own account of the conquest of Israel. The “poles” mentioned in 17:16 were religious symbols of male sexual vigor. Archaeologists have found bull calf idols in ancient ruins in Israel.

4. For a brief summary of Joshua see page 68. For Judges see page 76 and “The Cyclic Pattern in the Book of Judges,” pages 77–78. Historians note three attractions of Baal worship, described on page 77. First Samuel is outlined on page 86, and 2 Samuel on page 94.
5. The story told in 2 Samuel, focusing especially on Israel’s greatest king, David, is summarized on page 94. If there is time, look together at the difficult passage in 2 Samuel 7:1–17. Be sure to note that its concept of “the Son of David” becomes important as New Testament writers recall David’s story, seeing its hope fulfilled in Jesus.
6. After looking together at the summary of 1 Kings (page 101), see the writer’s picture of the Hebrew kingdom’s “golden age” (1 Kgs. 10:14–23). Historians warn against taking literally the report that in the days of Solomon Israel had so much gold that silver “was not considered as anything.”
7. The rest of 1 Kings and 2 Kings, summarized on page 110, tells the tragic story of civil war and division, the fall of the northern kingdom (Israel), which we examined in 2 Kings 17, and finally the fall of the southern kingdom (Judah). Israel’s collapse came about in spite of God’s warnings by the prophets. The deeds of the prophets Elijah and Elisha are most fully described.
8. Compare the story we have reviewed with the prophetic challenge attributed to Moses in Deuteronomy 30:15–18.
9. Though the question “What does this mean to us today?” is outside the scope of our discussion, let the group name more recent examples of the pattern of history the Bible describes, such as the fall of Hitler or the price America paid for enslaving people from Africa.

The Assignment: “The Writings,” pages 117–81. Ask the group to read at least pages 117 and 155–61, and to bring to class two favorite psalms and two favorite verses from Proverbs.

The Writings (Ruth and 1 Chronicles–Song of Solomon)

(To make this two sessions, study the Psalms first and then the others as time allows.)

So far we have been looking at stories. Books like the Psalms and Proverbs, however, are a different kind of literature, so we will approach them in a somewhat different way. In preparation for this session the leader—and, ideally, the whole group—should have reviewed pages 82–85 (Ruth) and 117–81 (1 Chronicles through Song of Solomon). For this session each person should have not only a Bible and *The Westminster Guide* but also a hymn book.

1. To introduce “the Writings” review the information on page 117.
2. Interpreting the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament we find that of the Writings the most important is Psalms—at least that is the one the New Testament writers quoted most often. This session might focus first, then, on the Psalms, even if little time is left for the others.

Look together at psalms that are the group’s favorites. The Psalms have been called “the hymn book of the second temple.” To get a sense of how some may have been sung or chanted responsively, let someone in the group read the first lines of verses in Psalm 136:1–9, with the whole group responding to each with “For his steadfast love endures forever.” Look together at how some hymns paraphrase psalms. See, for example, “The Lord’s My Shepherd” (Ps. 23), “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past” (90:1–5), and “All People That on Earth Do Dwell” (100). Many others are based on psalms. For example, compare “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” with Psalm 46 and “Jesus Shall Reign” with Psalm 72. The scriptural index of your hymnal will show many other references to psalms. Psalms are for singing, so sing some psalms together.

To see how the ancient Hebrews rhymed ideas rather than sounds, let the group find some couplets like those described on pages 154–55. The book of Psalms cannot be outlined, but

the classification on page 153 shows their varied subjects and styles. The largest class is laments, prayers in times of trouble. See pages 159–60 for a brief discussion of these. But note that the last psalms are joyful hymns, many beginning and ending with “Hallelujah” (“praise the Lord”).

3. Review briefly the characteristics of “Wisdom Literature” as described on pages 162–64. The best loved of these books is Proverbs. Let group members read their favorite quotations from Proverbs. Note that the theme verse of Proverbs is 1:7 (compare 9:10). Review the examples of different subjects found on pages 166–67. A basic teaching of Proverbs is that honest, industrious living brings rewards. It pays to be good. Two books of Wisdom Literature question that idea. To see the contrast between Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, review the quotations on pages 170–71. Ecclesiastes’s more positive message is summarized on pages 174–75. Job is a long, puzzling poem in which its afflicted protagonist, knowing himself innocent, pleads for a chance to present his case before God. Pages 150–51 describe two interpretations of the book’s mysterious climax.
4. Jews regard the delightful story of Ruth as one of the Writings. Because it takes place in the time of the Judges and tells of David’s ancestry, Christians include it among books of history. It is discussed on pages 82–85. Esther (pages 138–42) tells how a heroic Jewish queen in Persia (Iran) saved her people and how the merry feast of Purim celebrates their deliverance. The Song of Solomon is a collection of poems celebrating sexual love.
5. First and Second Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah were originally one book. First and Second Chronicles retell, sometimes word for word, the story in 1 and 2 Samuel and Kings, but with the emphases noted on pages 120–21. See page 130 for a brief review of Ezra and Nehemiah. They tell how at last the Jews were allowed to return from Babylon and rebuild the temple, how Ezra reestablished the law, and how Nehemiah led in rebuilding the city. For historical background see page 129.

The Assignment: The Major Prophets—Isaiah—Daniel, pages 182–224. All should at least review their outlines (185, 194, 213, and 220) and sample these books by studying Isaiah 1; 40; Jeremiah 7:1–7; 31:31–34; Ezekiel 37:1–7; and Daniel 7:13–18.

The Major Prophets (Isaiah–Daniel)

(To make this two sessions you might study Isaiah in the first and Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel in the second.)

First and Second Kings tell us about the *deeds* of prophets, especially Elijah and Elisha. Pages 182–273 give a brief review of the “literary prophets,” those whose words have been preserved for us. These books, in turn, are often divided into two groups, the major (longer) prophets (182–224) and the minor (shorter) prophets. This session will review the major prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

1. Introduce the prophets, briefly summarizing pages 182–84. The literary prophets were the inspired preacher-commentators as the historic events of 2 Kings and later were taking place.
2. Explain that due to limited time we will focus first and in most detail on the book of the prophets the New Testament writers loved best, Isaiah. Pages 184 and 186 show why, if we are to use the historical background to help us understand Isaiah, most scholars today say it is helpful to think of this book in two parts.
3. Review the contents of the first part, Isaiah 1–39 (sometimes called 1 Isaiah), looking together at the outline on page 185.

Have someone read Isaiah 1:1–17. These verses are typical of the message of many of the prophets. List on the chalkboard or newsprint the group’s answer to such questions as these: According to verses 1 and 7, what is the historical situation of this prophet? (Page 109 quotes Sargon’s boast of his invasion of Israel, and we have carvings from the palace of the king of Assyria showing his armies laying siege to a city in Judah.) Why, according to the prophet, has this trouble come? What does God really want Judah to do? What particular groups have been neglected? Note that this call for justice for the oppressed is a repeated idea among the prophets. (Is concern for people in need really more important for national security than is military might?)

The prophets warned of coming judgment, but, knowing the grace of God, they also held out hope. Isaiah 2:4 is inscribed on the wall of the United Nations building. Let someone read Isaiah 9:2–7. It was probably written to celebrate a birth in the palace, but Judah’s kings were disappointing. Even after there were no more kings in Jerusalem, however, God’s people still sang that song. Christians see Jesus as the Prince it describes.

4. Review the second part of Isaiah (2 and, perhaps, 3 Isaiah) as introduced and outlined on 193–95. Look together at Isaiah 40:1–7. Someone in the group may be able to bring a recording of these verses as sung in Handel’s beloved *Messiah*. Carefully review with the group pages 197–99 on “the Servant Mission.” This concept, especially as found in Isaiah 53:4–6, is perhaps the most important idea in all the Old Testament for Christians’ understanding of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.
5. For an overview of Jeremiah and its historical background see pages 200–202. Compare his “Temple Sermon” (7:1–7) with Isaiah 1:10–17. Look together at what Christians consider to be an especially important passage, 31:31–34. Jesus announced that “new covenant” at the Last Supper (1 Cor. 11:25). We divide our whole Bible into Old Testament (or Covenant) and New Testament.
6. Introduce Ezekiel with a brief review of pages 212–14. Perhaps the best-known passage in the book is his promise to the exiles of the restoration of Israel, the “dry bones” of enslaved Israel coming “alive” again (37:1–14). Chapters 38–39 include puzzling apocalyptic prophecies of the final victory of good over evil. (Revelation builds on that idea.) As a priest, Ezekiel had a vision of a glorious future, of an ideal, rebuilt temple and a new Jerusalem (40–48).
7. Pages 219–21 provide an introduction and outline for Daniel. Note the repeated point of its stories of visions and heroism: Daniel 2:44; 4:3; 4:34; 6:26; 7:18; compare Mark 1:15. Two passages are especially important in understanding the New Testament. Daniel 7:12–18 describes how the beast-like kingdoms of this world finally give way to the kingdom of “one like a human being” or, more literally, “Son of Man” (compare Mark 2:10; 2:28). Read in Daniel 12:1–3 the Old Testament’s clearest promise of a resurrection and eternal life.

The Assignment: The Minor Prophets—Hosea–Malachi, pages 225–73. All should at least study pages 225–31 with Hosea 6:1–6; 234–40 with Amos 5:21–24; and 263–69 with Zechariah 9:9–10. Also as sample passages read Micah 6:8 and Malachi 4:1–5.

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The Minor Prophets (Hosea–Malachi)

(If two sessions are desired, you might focus on Amos and Hosea and perhaps Jonah for the first and the others for the second.)

1. The first of the prophets whose words were preserved for us is Amos. Review with the group pages 234–40. Note that, as with many of the prophets, we are given the historic setting (Amos 1:1). Jeroboam II was a sinful king in a time (c. 750 B.C.) when Israel was militarily and economically successful (2 Kgs. 14:23–29). Amos 6:4–6 gives us a glimpse of the life of the rich. (Compare Isa. 3:18–23.) Yet the wealthy trample on the poor (Amos 2:6; 4:12). Note the repetitious phrase in 1:1–2:8. The same fate that would befall Israel’s neighbors is going to come upon Israel. What does God really want? Compare Amos 5:21–24 with Isaiah 1:10–17. As time allows look at the five symbolic visions of 7:1–9:6. Twenty or thirty years later, Amos’s warnings would be fulfilled, as Assyria starved Samaria into submission and carried its people into slavery (2 Kgs. 17).
2. Review the outline and discussion of Hosea on pages 225–28. A contemporary of Amos, Hosea compared the relationship between himself and his unfaithful wife to that of God and God’s covenant people (1:2; 2:1–2; 3:1–5). Over and over other biblical books echo Hosea’s idea that the covenant between God and God’s people is like a marriage. (Compare Isa. 1:1; Jer. 31:32; Eph. 5:25; Rev. 21:2.) The “motherhood” of God is beautifully expressed in 11:1–11. Oversimplifying, one could say that Amos expresses the judgment of God and Hosea God’s mercy.
3. Jonah and the “whale” may be familiar to the group, but the background, outline, and discussion of the book’s message (pages 241–45) may present some ideas not as well known. Help the group to see Jonah as a delightful book but one calling us to repentance.

4. The first chapter of Micah is best understood against the historical background briefly described on pages 245 and 247. Yet even in tragic times the prophet could sing with Isaiah the song of hope (Micah 4:3). In the light of the brief comment on page 249 note Micah 6:8, a single verse that summarizes one of the repeated themes of the prophets.
5. Habakkuk's bewilderment about God's apparent injustice brings him at last to a message that would become basic to Paul. (Compare 2:4 with Rom. 1:16–17.) See pages 252–56.
6. To modern readers Zechariah is one of the most obscure books among the prophets. Clearly Zechariah 9:9–10 contrasts the coming King with military conquerors, a promise the New Testament sees fulfilled in Jesus. Scholars are still uncertain, however, about the original meaning of chapter 11. The New Testament quotes this difficult book so often, using it to describe Christ, that you might want to go over pages 263–69 with the group.
7. Christians place the minor prophets, and thus Malachi, last in the Old Testament. See how Christians can interpret it as providing a link to the New Testament, anticipating John the Baptist's ministry (4:1–5). Pages 269–73 give a brief commentary on Malachi.
8. As time allows, look at the other prophets, using the appropriate pages in *The Westminster Guide*.

The Assignment: The Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke, pages 289–365. All of the group should at least study pages 310–321, and note some distinctive emphases of Mark and Luke as indicated in the subheadings on pages 344–59. They should review also some key passages in Matthew: 5:21–48; 16:13–26; and 17:1–54.

7

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke)

(To make this two sessions you might focus on Matthew and pages 289–321 for the first and 321–365 for the second.)

Almost all Christians are familiar with many individual stories and sayings in the Gospels. Instead of looking together at selected, well-known passages in the first three Gospels, this session will focus more on some things students of the New Testament have found that help us in understanding its first three books. Specifically, we will look at an overview of the first three Gospels' story, the historical setting of Jesus' life, how the Synoptics came to be written, and their relationship to each other.

1. For an overview of the Gospels' story, look together at the outline of Matthew on pages 318–19. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell essentially the same story. All begin Jesus' ministry with an account of his Baptism by John the Baptist, then tell of his announcing the coming kingdom, calling disciples, teaching, and healing. Let the group recall some of their favorite stories and sayings of Jesus. Each of the Synoptics reaches a turning point with Peter's "Great Confession": "You are the Christ" (Matt. 16:13–26). All three report that after that critical event Jesus began his journey directly into the heart of his opposition, Jerusalem. The Gospels' most detailed account is of the last week of Jesus' earthly life, from his entrance into Jerusalem on "Palm Sunday," through the Last Supper and his arrest on Thursday night, his crucifixion on Friday (Matt. 27:1–54), and the resurrection on Easter.
2. Knowing something of the historical situation in which Jesus lived, reviewed in pages 289–303, helps greatly in our understanding of the Gospels' story. Note the two-point summary on page 292. As time allows, review the political situation (292–96), looking together at the italicized subheads. Ask the group to recall movies that have shown us the power of Rome. Review the religious situation of the time (296–303), again

- noting the subheadings. Let the group recall stories and information they remember about the Pharisees and the Sadducees.
3. The classic passage for seeing how the Gospels came to be written is Luke's own account of his research and purpose, Luke 1:1–4. List on the chalkboard or newsprint the things the group can discover as they look together at those verses. Ask them to compare this passage with John 20:30–31, John's account of his selection of stories and his purpose. Something of what Luke would have heard from "eye witnesses and servants of the word" is summarized in seven elements on pages 305–6. We do not have all that other writers "set down" to give "orderly account" of Jesus' life, but we do have one book that Luke surely read, Mark. Reasons for believing Mark to be the first of our four Gospels are given on 310–11. The reasons we can surmise that Luke and Matthew had another account of Jesus' teachings, commonly called "Q," are given on pages 311–12. Help the group to understand the chart on page 314.
 4. Finally, let the group compare these three Gospels. What similarities and what differences can they find in the passages quoted on pages 314–15? Pages 317–21 describe some special emphases of Matthew. As time allows, see how many references to the Old Testament the group can find in Matthew 1–2. For some of Mark's emphases note at least the three headings in pages 346–54. Similarly, with Luke note the headings in pages 356–58. If there is time you might ask the group to compare Mark 8:27–38 with Matthew 16:13–28 and Luke 9:18–27 or Luke 6:20–25 with Matthew 5:1–11 and the puzzling differences in Matthew 28, Mark 16:1–8, and Luke 24. See pages 363–65 for discussion of the resurrection.

The Assignment: Acts and the letters to the Thessalonians and the Corinthians, pages 366–422. The group should study at least the outline, purpose, and one key passage of four books: Acts 9:1–9 and pages 367 and 373–74; 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10 and pages 399 and 400; 1 Corinthians 12:2–23 and pages 408 and 410; and 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:4, and pages 417, 418, and 420.

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Acts and 1 and 2 Thessalonians

(To make this two sessions go through Acts, or as much as you have time for, and in the second session, when you have finished Acts, study 1 and 2 Thessalonians.)

Luke's Gospel telling how Jesus led the disciples leads directly into Acts, his story of how the Holy Spirit empowered and led the early church. Acts introduces us to Paul, whose letters make up so much of the New Testament. What makes 1 and 2 Thessalonians uniquely important is that they may be the earliest of books of all the New Testament.

1. Introduce Acts by reviewing pages 366–74. At least look together at the outline on page 367 and the purpose of Acts, 373–74.
2. The first part of Acts gives us scenes from the earliest days of the church. Of these the church has especially celebrated Pentecost as the day the Spirit came upon the church. Though we call this book the Acts of the Apostles it might well be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Review the interpretations of Pentecost given on 375–76. As time allows look at the Scripture itself (Acts 2:1–47). Note how the New Testament builds on the Old Testament. Pages 382–83 summarize the growth of the church, stimulated in part by persecution.
3. Paul is Luke's hero. Often one way to tell what is important to a writer is by noting repeated words and ideas. More than half of Acts is devoted to Paul's ministry. Three times Acts tells the story of his conversion (9:1–18; 22:1–2; 26:2–18)! Pages 383–84 review briefly something of Paul's nature, conversion, and importance in the Bible.
4. Page 386 builds on the familiar description of Paul's ministry as three "missionary journeys." Review with the group Acts 13:13–52, briefly summarized on page 386, as typical of Paul's experience in many places on these journeys.
5. Though there are problems about "The Jerusalem Council" (Acts 15:1–35, pages 387–88), Romans and Galatians make

- clear that its issue, the place of uncircumcised Gentiles in the church, was indeed divisive.
6. One reason Luke devotes so much of Acts, including much of the last quarter of the book, to the stories of arrests of Christians and trials before various judges is probably that, when Luke wrote, his Christian readers were frequently facing judges themselves. Ask what would Luke's stories suggest to them about how they should act when on trial.
 7. First and Second Thessalonians are not the favorite books of most Christians, but 1 Thessalonians has the distinction of being probably the first written book of our New Testament. Introducing it gives you a chance to introduce a whole genre of New Testament books, the epistles. More than three quarters of the books of the New Testament are letters. Ask the class to compare 1 Thessalonians 1:1–3; 5:26–28 with the form described on page 396 and with similar introductions and conclusions in some other epistles of Paul.
 8. Survey 1 Thessalonians by reviewing its outline, occasion, and purpose, pages 398–400.
 9. One way to see some of the meaning of the letter for us would be to look together at its first chapter. Ask the group to find all the reasons Paul, who has been forced to flee Thessalonica, nevertheless can write the church there with joy.
 10. Because 1 Thessalonians 4:9–18 has been so subject to a misinterpretation spread by the *Left Behind* series of novels, it might be good to ask the class to look at that passage in the light of pages 401–3. Note that Paul says nothing about people “left behind” and that here there is no hint that Christ does not continue his descent but instead returns to heaven for seven years. The passage is intended simply to reassure us that our loved ones who have died will still share in the great day to come. Any effort to schedule events of the last days is eliminated by 4:1–2.
 11. For a similar review of 2 Thessalonians, see pages 403–7. What does the group find in Paul's prayer of thanksgiving (2:12–15) and in his beautiful benediction (2:16–17)?

The Assignment: First and Second Corinthians, pages 407–22. The group should at least read those pages and such important passages in 1 Corinthians as chapters 13–15 and in 2 Corinthians 4:7–5:10, and Paul's delightful figures in 2 Corinthians 2:15; 3:3; and 4:7.

1 and 2 Corinthians

(To make this two sessions you might take 1 Corinthians first, then 2 Corinthians.)

Acts gives us a picture of the early church as an ideal community. It is written to inspire the church of a later generation to become a similar sharing, witnessing, Spirit-filled fellowship. The Corinthian letters, however, give us our most realistic insight into what may have been typical of churches Paul founded, torn by factions, often clinging to their former ways of living as pagans, and yet heroically bearing witness to their Lord.

1. For an overview of 1 Corinthians review with the group the outline on page 408.
2. For the occasion and purpose of 1 Corinthians read together 1:10–13. Compare this with its “Occasion” and “Purpose” as described on pages 409–10. Note the Corinthian church’s diverse problems as listed on page 410. Ask someone to read, as boastfully as possible, the imaginary quotation from some of Paul’s typical opponents, as found on page 410.
3. One cause of schism in the church is that some boasted of special knowledge. One repeated theme of 1 Corinthians is humility, in contrast to those who boasted of being in-the-know. See how this is repeated in 1:26–27; 2:2; 8:1–2; 13:2. (Compare page 411.) Another cause of dissension is the allegiance of some to one preacher and some to another (3:4–5; 4:6). Some feel free to eat food offered to idols, while others do not (chapter 8; 10:27–28). (Page 412 helps explain this concern.) Some believed that they were Spirit-filled, “charismatic,” and that others were not (12:1). There were other causes of controversy.
4. The great repeated theme of 1 Corinthians, first voiced clearly with 1:10, is Paul’s plea for unity. It reaches its climax in chapter 12. Look together for a repeated idea in 12:4–13. Pages 413–14 summarize three answers Paul gives to any divisive

- boasting of spiritual superiority. Read together, in unison, 1 Corinthians 13, as found on pages 415–16, noting its repeated idea.
5. For Christian doctrine 1 Corinthians 15, our oldest account of the resurrection, is one of the most important passages in all scripture. As time allows, look at it in the light of page 414.
 6. Second Corinthians is outlined and summarized on page 417. It clearly falls into at least two parts. For reasons suggested on pages 416 and 418 we will look at the last four chapters first.
 7. To dramatize Paul's problem, have a group member read charges leveled against Paul as summarized on pages 416 and 418.
 8. There is a summary of Paul's defense on page 419. As time allows look at the suggested references for each point he makes.
 9. The story behind the first nine chapters is reconstructed on pages 419–20, together with a brief summary of the purpose of these chapters. Compare what is said there with what can be seen of its purpose by looking for a repeated idea in 2 Corinthians 1:3–7.
 10. Page 421 calls attention to three of Paul's delightful figures of speech about the church, which he regards as partners with him in ministry. As time allows, you might look at each of these three passages and discuss what Paul means by these figures.
 11. Be sure to look together at 4:13–5:1, which offers Christian hope even in the face of death.
 12. Chapters 8–9 are devoted to a favorite project of Paul, raising money for the poor. If time allows, let the group see how many reasons for giving they can find in these chapters. Pages 421–22 summarize them more briefly. Second Corinthians 9:15 is the great reason!

The Assignment: Galatians and Romans, pages 422–38. In addition to those pages, the group should read at least Galatians 1–2; 5–6 and Romans 1:1–17; 3:21–26; 8; and 12.

(To divide into two sessions you might study Galatians in one and Romans in the other.)

For Protestants, at least, Galatians and Romans have been the most influential works of the New Testament's most prolific writer, Paul.

1. Introduce a basic idea of these two epistles by having two people read from pages 422 and 424, the dialogue between a disciple of Paul and a legalist, as Martin Luther imagined it. Living freely by God's grace rather than as slaves to the punishing law is a basic theme of both letters.
2. For an overview of Galatians look together at its outline on page 423.
3. To understand why Paul wrote Galatians, compare Luther's imagined quotation from Paul's enemies (pages 424–25) with Galatians 1:6–9.
4. Together compare the purpose of Galatians as expressed in 2:19–21 and 5:1 with the statement of its purpose on 425–26.
5. Retelling the story of how Nicaea was freed from slavery (page 426) might help the group understand Paul's idea: new life of freedom through slavery, but slavery only to Christ and his Spirit of love.
6. The life of freedom is described in Galatians 5:13–26. Record on the chalkboard the repeated words and ideas of this passage and help the group summarize what Paul is saying.
7. Ask the group how they reconcile the seeming conflicts of Galatians 6:2 with 6:5 and also how they think Paul would reconcile the paradoxical statements of Luther with which the brief commentary on Galatians ends (page 429).
8. Page 430 gives an overview of Romans. There are of course other good ways to see the book as a whole, but the theme of "the righteousness of God" is one repeated idea around which this complex letter can be understood. Do note that Paul seems to have organized this epistle systematically, with a clear

- outline. He is introducing his thought to a church he has never visited.
9. Paul announces his theme in Romans 1:16–17. Read together those verses and compare them with the discussion of Paul’s purpose on 432–34.
 10. Paul has good news and bad news, and he presents the bad news first. Look together at his summaries of it in Romans 1:18; 3:9–12. We are in trouble, and we deserve it!
 11. But now read together the good news and how Paul announces it in 3:21–24.
 12. To see the contrast between the old and what Christ has brought, let the group scan Romans 5:12–6:23 and make two lists of words in opposition to each other. Compare their lists with the one on page 436. Something of Paul’s argument in chapters 5–7 is summarized in four headings on page 436.
 13. To see the dramatic difference Christ makes, compare the wretchedness of 7:21–24 with the joy of 8:1–2; 31–39. The second paragraph on page 436 begins a brief exposition of this contrast, ending with the second paragraph on page 437. Some in the class will have sung that they, too, are “wretches” who have been saved by “Amazing Grace.”
 14. The last chapters of Romans describe the righteousness of God as it is expressed in the response of righteous living by God’s children. Let the group look for repeated ideas in Romans 12. The group might profitably discuss what 12:14–21 means for us in a time of war.

The Assignment: The Prison Epistles—Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, pages 439–58—and The Pastoral Epistles—1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, pages 459–74. Group members should study at least Philippians and 1 Timothy and pages 441–45 and 463–67.

The Prison Epistles and the Pastoral Epistles

(For two sessions, study the Prison Epistles in one and the Pastoral Epistles in the other.)

1. For centuries Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon have been grouped together because they come to us as letters of Paul written from prison. They might be introduced by a summary of page 439. (There may not be time to get into the controversy described on page 440, since which prison does not really change the meaning of the letters for us.)
2. Introduce Philippians as Paul's letter of "joy in a jail," a happy thank-you note written in prison. An overview is on page 442.
3. To see why Paul sent this letter, look together at Philippians 1:12–14 and 4:10–20. Compare the group's answers to that question with the letter's "Occasion" and "Purpose" as summarized on pages 441 and 443.
4. How does Christian faith face hardship and the approach of death? For an answer, ask the group to look for repeated words and ideas in 1:3–2:2 and compare 2:28–29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10.
5. One passage in Philippians especially beloved is 2:6–11. Note the commentary on it on page 444. The group might then join in affirming this ancient faith by reading it in unison.
6. Another beloved passage is Paul's humble statement of his goal in 3:7–16, with its figure from a track meet.
7. Ephesians was Calvin's favorite epistle, perhaps because of its emphasis on God's plan, as noted on page 457. The letter is outlined and summarized on page 453. And for a brief summary of why it was written see its "Purpose," page 456.
8. Ask the group to list the basic doctrines of our faith as found in 2:3–10. For a one-sentence summary of how Christian ethics grows out of this Christian theology see 4:32.
9. As time allows, survey Colossians (pages 447–52) and Philemon (pages 445–47).

10. Introduce the Pastoral Epistles, noting their value as described on pages 459–60 and their purpose, page 463.
11. The Pastorals are best interpreted as coming from near the end of the first century rather than directly from Paul. If this is a matter of concern, you might in advance ask two members of the group to stage a debate, using the contrasting views summarized on pages 460–62.
12. First Timothy is summarized on page 464.
13. First Timothy 2:5–6a quotes an early creed or hymn. See what it suggests were fundamentals for the first Christians. The group might reaffirm its own faith by reading that passage together.
14. A controversial passage is 1 Timothy 2:8–15. It should be interpreted in the light of three guidelines for understanding scripture: (1) Recall its historical setting, a time when women were almost never granted equal rights. (2) Interpret scripture by scripture. Thus the group might note some of the other statements by Paul concerning women noted on page 466. (3) Always understand scripture in the light of Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God's love for all equally.
15. Second Timothy is outlined on page 468.
16. Probably its best loved passage is 4:6–8, Paul's humble statement of his goal.
17. Titus and 1 Timothy are especially valued because of their picture of the characteristics of a true church officer. Page 473 gives a comparative list.

The Assignment: Five “Open Letters”—Hebrews, James, 1–2 Peter, and Jude, pages 475–502. The group should at least read in *The Westminster Guide* the “Outline,” “Occasion,” and “Purpose” of each, and key passages Hebrews 4:14–16; James 2:24–26; 1 Peter 4:12–13; and 2 Peter 3:8–13.

“Five Open Letters”

(Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and Jude)

(For two sessions study Hebrews and James in one and 1 and 2 Peter and Jude in the other.)

Most of Paul’s letters are addressed to a particular church or individual. These letters, by contrast, seem meant for the church at large, so one scholar calls them “Open Letters.”

1. Review the outline and content of Hebrews, page 476.
2. We don’t really know much about who wrote Hebrews or when, but we do note why it was written, as summarized under “Purpose,” page 479.
3. One way to see what a writer wants to emphasize is to look for repeated words and ideas. The title “high priest” occurs some seventeen times in Hebrews. Look together at 4:14–18. How is Jesus able to represent us to God and God to us? What is the sacrifice this “priest” offered God? Does the group agree that Jesus was like us in every way, even having to wrestle with sexual temptation? What ideas are repeated from 2:17–18, and what are added? The paragraph about priests on pages 480–81 may be helpful in understanding the function of a priest.
4. Note how Jeremiah’s promise of a new covenant is now fulfilled (Jer. 31:31; Heb. 8:8–12; 10:15–17).
5. The best loved passage in Hebrews is “the roll call of the heroes of the faith,” Hebrews 11:1–12:2. In what sense are we to think of Jesus as our “pioneer” (12:2)?
6. James cannot really be outlined, nor are we sure who wrote it or when. There is a kind of summary on page 483.
7. Review with the class why James was written (see “Purpose,” page 485).
8. James, like other writers of “wisdom literature,” sometimes uses funny figures of speech. Enjoy those noted on page 486, but remember that the joke may be on us!
9. Contrast James 2:24 with Ephesians 2:8–9. How does the group react to the reconciliation of this conflict proposed on page 487?

10. As time allows compare sayings of James with those of Jesus (see page 487).
11. Knowing about the persecution of the church by Rome is important for understanding 1 Peter (and Revelation). Look together at it is described under “Occasion,” pages 490–91.
12. With that situation in mind review the outline on page 489 and the “Purpose,” pages 491–92.
13. Compare this sermon to new members of the church as found in 2:1–10 with the original call of the people of God in Exodus 19:6.
14. If faced with the persecution described under “Occasion,” how would the group respond to 1 Peter 4:12–19?
15. As time allows examine specific responses to God’s grace in difficult times, as prescribed in 1 Peter 2:11–3:8. At least ask if 2:21 is a valid guide for all occasions of life.
16. Review the outline, “Occasion,” and “Purpose” of 2 Peter (pages 496–97).
17. Compare 2 Peter with Jude, page 499.
18. Sample 2 Peter by looking together at 1:19–2:3.
19. As time allows, review the little epistle of Jude (pages 499–502).

The Assignment: The Johannine Literature—1, 2, and 3 John, Revelation, and the Gospel according to John, pages 503–39. For Revelation the group should at least read 504–9, its purpose as stated in 13:10 and 14:12, and its glorious conclusion, 21:1–7. For John’s Gospel read at least pages 524–27 and sample it with John 6:11–14, 47–51; 14:1–17; and 20:24–31. Sample 1 John by reading 4:7–21.

The Johannine Literature— Revelation, and the Epistles and Gospel of John

(You might study Revelation and John's epistles in one session and his gospel in the other.)

The “Johannine Literature” has been placed last in *The Westminster Guide* because the promises of Revelation and the beauty and depth of John's Gospel seem to make these books an appropriate climax for a survey of the Bible.

1. One reason interpreters of Revelation often go astray is that they overlook the historical situation in which its first readers read it. Recall that fearful time of persecution by reviewing the “Occasion” of 1 Peter (page 490) and of Revelation itself (508–9).
2. Another mistake often made is failure to recognize that Revelation gives its message in a particular form, beloved in the first century but strange to us, the pattern of apocalyptic literature. Review this style as described on page 507. Sometimes John makes his imagery clear. The “dragon” is Satan (12:9), and John's readers could readily identify the royal “woman” persecuting the church, since like Rome she is seated on seven hills (17:9). Typical of apocalypses, John groups things in sevens. Revelation uses that number more than forty times!
3. To see why John wrote this book, read Revelation 13:10 and 14:12 and then compare those verses with its “Purpose” as described on page 509.
4. To see how John achieves that purpose through apocalyptic imagery, survey the book using page 505. Note how the close of each section assures its readers of their final salvation. See how the book builds up to Christ's final victory and the new heavens and the new earth.
5. As one example of Revelation's three groups of catastrophes, look together at 6:1–8:1 with help from page 511. Note that Christians are not “raptured” up to escape all troubles. (Contrast the Left Behind fantasy novels!) Many are martyred; all go

- through “great ordeal.” But they will be safe at last in heaven. That hope enables them to endure even persecution patiently.
6. Read together the glorious end, at least 21:1–7.
 7. As time allows, survey the epistles of John (pages 514–20). At least read a typical passage, 1 John 4:7–21.
 8. For millions the Gospel according to John is the best-loved book of the Bible. See John’s explanation of why he wrote it (John 20:30–31) and compare it with “Purpose,” pages 524–27. Note especially how the “I am” sayings carry out this purpose.
 9. Look at the summary of John on page 521 to see something of how the whole book is to fulfill that purpose. Note the parallels between the “signs” Jesus does and the truths about Christ to which they point.
 10. For one example of how John interprets a miracle Jesus does as a “sign” pointing to who Jesus is, study John 6:11–14, 47–51.
 11. How important the promise of the Holy Spirit is to John is shown by its repetition in 14:15–17, 26; 15:26–27; 16:7–11.
 12. It is hard to pick one favorite passage, but many would suggest 14:1–21 for study.
 13. See one repeated theme: people questioning about Jesus (5:12; 6:42, 52; 7:25–26, 36; 8:19, etc.). Review the climactic answer to which John is building, the confession of “Doubting Thomas” (20:24–29). That leads, in turn, to John’s statement of his purpose (20:30–31).
 14. As time allows, review the principles for understanding the Bible we have used in this study (pages 6–10). How helpful have they been, and how might you use them in future study?