

The Bible: 28 Questions People Ask

“In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them.” [Catechism of the Catholic Church, 104]

The Bible is more than an ancient collection of sacred writings. Through its pages, God continues to speak to us today. Whether you’re opening the Bible for the first time or returning to it after many years, these questions and answers can help you discover the riches of Scripture and how Catholics understand it.

Getting to Know the Bible

1. What exactly is the Bible?

The Bible is a collection of sacred books that Catholics believe were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Rather than one book written by one person, it is more like a library containing many kinds of writing, composed over many centuries. Through its stories, prayers, teachings, and accounts of God’s relationship with humanity, the Bible reveals God’s love and his plan for our salvation. Catholics receive Scripture as God’s word expressed through human words.

2. Who wrote the Bible?

The Bible has many human authors, writing in different times, places, and circumstances. Some are known by name, while others remain unknown. Catholics believe that God inspired these human authors without taking away their personalities, abilities, or ways of expressing themselves. God worked through real people, using their language, culture, and experiences, to communicate what he wanted us to know for our salvation.

3. How did the Bible come together?

The Bible didn’t appear all at once. Its books were written and collected over many centuries. The early Christians received the sacred writings of Israel and gradually recognized which apostolic writings belonged in the New Testament. Through prayer, worship, teaching, and discernment, the Church came to recognize the books that make up the Christian Bible. Catholics believe the Holy Spirit guided the Church in recognizing these inspired writings.

4. Why are there Old and New Testaments?

The Old Testament tells of God’s relationship with Israel, including creation, the covenant, the Law, the prophets, and the wisdom of God’s people. The New Testament proclaims Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of God’s promises, and the beginnings of the Church. Catholics read both Testaments together

because they tell one unfolding story of salvation. The New Testament does not make the Old Testament unnecessary; rather, each helps us understand the other.

5. What kinds of writing are found in the Bible?

The Bible contains many literary forms: historical narratives, laws, poetry, prayers, wise sayings, prophetic writings, parables, letters, and accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. These writings communicate truth in different ways. We wouldn't read a poem as though it were a newspaper report, nor a parable as though it were a scientific explanation. Recognizing the kind of writing we're reading helps us understand what its inspired author intended because God chose to communicate through them.

6. What does it mean to say that the Bible is inspired by God?

Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit guided the human authors of Scripture so that they wrote what God wanted communicated for our salvation. Inspiration doesn't mean God dictated every sentence while the authors simply took notes. The writers used their own abilities, vocabulary, and literary styles. Scripture is therefore both genuinely human writing and truly God's word. This is one reason Catholics study the historical and cultural circumstances in which the biblical books were written.

Understanding What We Read

7. Is the Bible true?

Yes. Catholics believe the Bible teaches the truth God wanted communicated to us for our salvation. But the Bible isn't one book written in one style. It's more like a library containing history, poetry, prayers, parables, letters, wise sayings, and more. Asking whether the Bible is true is a little like asking whether everything in a library is true. A poem communicates truth differently from a history book, and a parable teaches truth without necessarily describing something that actually happened. To understand a biblical passage, we first need to recognize what kind of writing we're reading.

8. Do Catholics believe everything in the Bible is literally true?

Catholics believe Scripture teaches truth, but not every passage is intended to be understood literally. Jesus' parables, for example, teach profound truths without requiring us to believe that every character was an actual historical person. Poetry often uses images and figures of speech. Other passages describe events that happened in history. Understanding what the biblical author intended is essential. Reading Scripture faithfully doesn't mean treating every sentence as a literal description of events.

9. Is everything in the Bible historically accurate?

The Bible includes historical accounts, but it wasn't written according to the standards of modern historical scholarship. Biblical authors sometimes arranged events, emphasized particular details, or used literary techniques to communicate their message. Catholics take the historical foundations of their faith seriously, especially the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. At the same time, they recognize that the Bible's purpose is to reveal God's saving work, not to provide a modern history textbook.

10. How do we know what a Bible passage means?

We begin by asking what the human author intended to communicate to the original audience. That means paying attention to the kind of writing, its historical setting, and the surrounding passages. Catholics also read Scripture in light of the whole Bible, the living Tradition of the Church, and the unity of our faith. A good Catholic study Bible or commentary can help us explore these dimensions. Understanding Scripture is both an intellectual and spiritual journey.

11. Can Catholics read and interpret the Bible for themselves?

Absolutely. The Church encourages Catholics to read Scripture personally and prayerfully. You don't need to be a biblical scholar or a member of the clergy to open the Bible and discover its message. At the same time, Catholics understand Scripture as a gift entrusted to the whole Church, so we seek to read it with the Church. Our personal interpretations benefit from the wisdom of other believers, the Church's teaching, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Personal reading and the Church's understanding of Scripture belong together.

12. Why is it important to understand when and why a biblical book was written?

Knowing something about a biblical book's historical setting can help us understand its message. A letter from St. Paul, for example, often addresses particular problems or questions facing an early Christian community. Understanding those circumstances helps us appreciate what Paul was saying and how his teaching applies to us. We don't need to become historians, but a little background knowledge can prevent misunderstandings and reveal insights we might otherwise miss.

13. What should I do when a Bible passage is confusing or difficult to believe?

Don't be discouraged. Even experienced Bible readers sometimes wrestle with difficult passages. Begin by reading the surrounding verses and asking what the author is trying to communicate. A Catholic study Bible, commentary, or knowledgeable fellow Catholic may help. Sometimes the

best response is to set the question aside temporarily and return to it later. Scripture invites us into a lifelong relationship with God's word. We don't have to understand everything immediately.

14. Does the Bible ever contradict itself?

Some biblical passages appear to disagree about details, chronology, or how an event is described. The four Gospels, for example, sometimes recount the same event differently. Catholics recognize these differences and seek to understand the purposes and perspectives of the individual authors. We needn't pretend every difficulty has an easy explanation. The Church teaches that Scripture faithfully communicates the truth God wished to entrust to us for our salvation, even when particular passages raise challenging questions.

Discovering Jesus and God's Word

15. What is the difference between the Bible and the Word of God?

Catholics call the Bible the word of God because it is inspired Scripture. But the expression Word of God has a richer meaning. Above all, Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of God made flesh (John 1:14). God's word was also proclaimed by the prophets and preached by the apostles before the New Testament was written. St. Paul, for example, spoke of the Gospel he preached as God's word (1 Thessalonians 2:13). The Bible is a privileged, inspired witness to God's revelation, whose fullness is Jesus Christ.

16. How are the Old and New Testaments connected?

Catholics understand the Old and New Testaments as parts of one story of God's saving love. The Old Testament prepares for Christ through God's covenants, promises, worship, wisdom, and prophetic teachings. The New Testament reveals how God's promises find their fulfillment in Jesus. Reading them together helps us recognize connections we might otherwise overlook. The Old Testament also has enduring value in its own right and remains an essential part of Christian Scripture.

*The New Testament lies hidden in the Old,
and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.*

~ Saint Augustine of Hippo, 354 - 430 ~

17. Why are there four Gospels instead of just one?

Think of a diamond. As you turn it in the light, its different facets reveal something new, yet it remains one diamond. The four Gospels are something like that. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each tell us about Jesus, but from different perspectives, emphasizing different events,

teachings, and insights. Together, they give us a richer picture of the one Jesus Christ. Each Gospel has its own distinctive beauty, and together they reveal more than any one could alone.

18. What does the Bible tell us about Jesus?

The Bible reveals Jesus as the Son of God who became human to bring us into communion with the Father. The Gospels tell of his life, teachings, miracles, death, and Resurrection. The rest of the New Testament helps us understand what his life and saving work mean for the Church and the world. The Old Testament prepares for his coming. For Catholics, Jesus isn't simply one important figure among many in the Bible. He is the center of God's saving plan.

19. How does the Bible reveal God's love for us?

Throughout Scripture, God reaches out to humanity, even when people turn away from him. We see his love in the creation of the world, his covenant with Israel, the words of the prophets, and his mercy toward those who struggle or fail. Above all, Catholics recognize God's love in Jesus Christ, who gave his life for us. The Bible reminds us that God's love isn't merely an idea to understand, but a gift to receive and share with others.

The Bible in Catholic Life

20. Why is the Bible so important to Catholic faith?

Scripture nourishes the Church's faith, prayer, teaching, and worship. Through the Bible, Catholics encounter the story of God's saving love and learn what it means to follow Jesus Christ. The Church doesn't regard Scripture as merely a record of religious ideas from the distant past. It is God's living word, continually inviting believers to deeper faith. As the *Catechism* teaches, the Church finds her nourishment and strength in Sacred Scripture (CCC 104).

21. Why do we hear so much Scripture at Mass?

The Bible is woven throughout the Mass. We hear readings from the Old and New Testaments, sing or recite a psalm, and listen to the Gospel. Many of the prayers and responses of the Mass also come from Scripture. The Gospel holds a special place: we stand for its proclamation because Christ speaks directly to his people through it. The homily helps us understand and respond to God's word. The Church nourishes us at both the table of God's word and the table of the Eucharist.

22. What is the relationship between Scripture and Sacred Tradition?

Catholics believe God's revelation has been handed on through Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. Scripture is God's word committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Sacred Tradition is the living transmission of the Gospel entrusted by Christ to the apostles and handed on in the Church. They aren't competing sources of faith. Together, they communicate the one revelation of God, which the Church's teaching office serves and faithfully interprets.

23. How can reading the Bible help me grow closer to God?

Reading Scripture gives us an opportunity to listen to God and reflect on his presence in our lives. We encounter Jesus' teachings, the struggles and faith of biblical people, and God's promises of mercy and hope. Sometimes a passage comforts us; at other times it challenges us to change. Prayerful reading invites us not simply to learn about God, but to respond to him. Even a few minutes spent regularly with Scripture can deepen our relationship with Christ.

24. Can God still speak to us through Scripture today?

Yes. Catholics believe that Scripture is not merely a record of what God said long ago. Through the Holy Spirit, God's word continues to speak to the Church and to individual believers. A passage we've heard many times may suddenly touch our lives in a new way. This doesn't mean every personal impression is a message from God. Prayer, reflection, and the Church's wisdom help us discern how Scripture is inviting us to respond.

*It was the first time I had read the Bible and
I understood the phrase [Matthew 6:27]. It spoke to me.*

~ Stephen Colbert, comedian ~

Questions Worth Asking

25. How should Catholics understand troubling passages about violence, punishment, or slavery?

Some passages describe actions and attitudes that rightly trouble modern readers. We shouldn't ignore these difficulties or assume that everything described in Scripture has God's approval. Biblical books reflect the historical circumstances and limited understanding of the people through whom God worked. Catholics read these passages in light of the whole Bible and the fullness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Difficult texts deserve patient study, honest questions, and attention to the Church's teaching about human dignity.

26. Is the Bible still relevant to our lives today?

The Bible was written long ago, but the questions it addresses remain deeply human. How should we treat others? What gives life meaning? How do we face suffering, forgive those who hurt us, or find hope when life is difficult? Scripture doesn't provide an instant answer to every modern problem. Instead, it helps form our hearts and minds so that we can approach life's challenges with faith, wisdom, and love.

27. Why does God sometimes seem different in the Old and New Testaments?

Some Old Testament passages portray God in ways that may seem harsh, especially when compared with Jesus' teachings about mercy and forgiveness. Catholics believe, however, that the same God reveals himself throughout Scripture. God's revelation unfolded gradually, within the history and understanding of his people. Jesus Christ reveals the fullness of God's love and helps us understand the Scriptures that came before him. We should read difficult passages carefully rather than assume that God has changed.

28. Why are the Psalms so important in Catholic prayer?

The Psalms are a collection of ancient prayers and songs that express nearly every human emotion: joy, gratitude, sorrow, anger, fear, repentance, and hope. They remind us that we can bring our whole lives before God, not just our happiest or holiest moments. Jesus himself prayed the Psalms. Today, Catholics pray them at Mass and in the Liturgy of the Hours. They offer us words for prayer when we may struggle to find our own.

They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?"

~ Gospel according to Luke 24:32 ~
