



# Unlocking the Mystery of the Bible

A **Quick Journey** Through Salvation History

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West Chester, Pennsylvania

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# Welcome to *The Great Adventure*



*“To fall in love with God is the greatest of all romances; to seek him, the greatest adventure.”*

*– St. Augustine of Hippo*

The Bible is at the heart of our faith and our relationship with God. Much more than just another book, it is a “place” where our heavenly Father comes down to meet us and speaks to us with love.<sup>1</sup> Millions of people have found it to be a rich source of wisdom, encouragement, instruction, and solace.

Reading the Bible should bring us closer to Christ, but many people find it hard to even begin. *The Great Adventure* Catholic Bible Study Program and *The Bible Timeline* Learning System aim to make the complex simple—to give people a way to read the Bible and understand it ... and so experience its life-changing power.

Since 2002, I have worked with Jeff Cavins in bringing *The Bible Timeline* Learning System to Catholics through various Bible studies and seminars. We are excited to offer this new *Great Adventure* study, *Unlocking the Mystery of the Bible*. Like its predecessor, *A Quick Journey Through the Bible*, this study seeks to draw you into God’s marvelous plan of salvation as it unfolds throughout Sacred Scripture. It is my prayer that Jeff’s dynamic teaching, in conjunction with the thought-provoking discussion questions and home Bible reading, will open the door to a newfound understanding of God’s Word and his plan for your life.

**Jeff Cavins**, creator and president, *The Great Adventure*  
**Sarah Christmyer**, co-developer and author, *The Great Adventure*

<sup>1</sup> See Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (DV) 21.

## About *The Great Adventure*

At the core of *The Great Adventure* Catholic Bible Study Program is *The Bible Timeline* Learning System. *The Bible Timeline* presents a simple way of focusing on the story that runs throughout Scripture so that we can see the “big picture” of the Bible. This story is God’s plan as it has unfolded in history and continues to unfold today. When we grasp this story, the Mass readings begin to make more sense, our Scripture reading and study come to life, and we see how our lives fit into God’s loving plan.

**Every *Great Adventure* study is designed to foster:**

- Familiarity with the Bible and ease of reading it
- Bible study habits consistent with the guidelines of the Catholic Church
- Personal engagement in the Word of God
- Faith-sharing based on the Word of God
- Growth in knowledge about Scripture and the Catholic Faith

Not for duplication

# About *Unlocking the Mystery of the Bible*



*Unlocking the Mystery of the Bible* is the starting point of *The Great Adventure Catholic Bible Study Program*. In eight compelling videos, Jeff Cavins presents the story of salvation history from Creation and the Fall through the coming of Christ and the establishment of the Church. In this study, you will learn the story with the aid of an easy-to-use, color-coded *Bible Timeline Chart* and small-group discussion questions, which reinforce the video presentations and help you apply the message to your life.

Building on the basic understanding gained from this study is a series of Bible studies that explore the biblical narrative in light of Catholic teaching. Studies of individual books are supplemented by a growing number of studies on various themes and studies tailored for life application.

*Unlocking the Mystery of the Bible* replaces *A Quick Journey Through the Bible*. Because the content has been revised substantially, the workbooks and videos for *A Quick Journey Through the Bible* study are not compatible with *Unlocking the Mystery of the Bible*.

## Materials

Materials for *Unlocking the Mystery of the Bible* include:

- **Workbook:** contains engaging discussion questions and responses, home preparation material, Talk Notes, and *The Bible Timeline Chart* and Bookmark. (You will need one workbook for every participant, study leader, and small-group facilitator.)
- **Video Presentations** (eight 30-minute sessions): presented by Jeff Cavins, these eight video presentations provide an overview and explanation of the twelve time periods of biblical history.

In addition, every participant, leader, and small-group facilitator should have a Catholic Bible and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. We recommend *The Great Adventure Catholic Bible*. It incorporates the same color-coded *Bible Timeline Learning System* that you will use throughout this program.

## How the Study Works

Each session of *Unlocking the Mystery of the Bible* study includes three steps:



**NOTE:** A general explanation of each step follows. Because the first session is slightly different from the others, it is described separately.

### Step 1 – Session One: Video Presentation (30–35 minutes)

After your leader welcomes you and introduces you to the study, you will watch a video presentation in which Jeff Cavins explains why we often find it hard to read the Bible and describes how *The Bible Timeline* Learning System will “make the complex simple.”

### Step 2 – Session One: Small-Group Discussion (30–40 minutes)

During the first small-group discussion, you will first review the “Ten Commandments of Small-Group Discussion.” Next, you will go through the discussion questions, which review the main points covered in the video presentation and will help you get acquainted with *The Bible Timeline* Chart. Finally, facilitators will introduce the home preparation required for the next session.

### Step 3 – Session One: Home Preparation: Looking Ahead

The workbook provides simple exercises for you to complete at home in preparation for the next session. The exercises for Session One will help you practice using *The Bible Timeline* Chart, guide you as you begin reading the biblical narrative on your own, and provide a preview of Session Two.



### Step 1 – Sessions Two through Eight: Video Presentation (30–35 minutes)

Each session begins with the leader’s welcome and opening review followed by a video presentation. In Sessions Two through Eight, the mystery of the Bible is unpacked as Jeff Cavins tells the story of the Bible, connects it to the Catholic Faith, and reveals how it relates to our lives. Session Eight concludes the program with ways to continue the journey of getting to know God through Scripture.

### Step 2 – Sessions Two through Eight: Small-Group Discussion (30–40 minutes)

You will break into small groups to discuss the video presentation using the discussion questions. In Sessions Two through Eight, these questions draw upon key points made in the video presentations or on Scripture

passages covered in that session. The small-group discussion gives participants a chance to share what they have learned and consider how the Scripture applies to their lives. This life-application focus makes the small-group discussion one of the richest parts of the study.

### Step 3 – Sessions Two through Eight: Home Preparation

For Sessions Two through Eight, your workbook provides simple exercises for you to do at home in preparation for the following session. These exercises provide practice using *The Bible Timeline* Chart, guide you as you begin reading the biblical narrative on your own, and look ahead to the next time period using *The Bible Timeline* Chart. Several passages from the Bible that tell the story of the next time period are offered for those who would like to read ahead.

**NOTE:** Session Eight does not include a “Looking Ahead” component. Instead, ideas are offered to help you “Continue The Great Adventure” of getting to know Jesus in the Bible (see page 64).

## Session Outline and Reading Guide

| Session<br>(Video Times)      | Title                                                                 | Narrative Book(s)*                                         |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Session One (30:21)<br>(3:24) | Introduction<br><i>The Bible Timeline</i> Chart                       |                                                            |
| Session Two (33:01)           | Early World                                                           | Genesis 1–11                                               |
| Session Three (36:42)         | Patriarchs                                                            | Genesis 12–50                                              |
| Session Four (34:06)          | Egypt and Exodus, Desert Wanderings                                   | Exodus; Numbers                                            |
| Session Five (31:03)          | Conquest and Judges<br>Royal Kingdom                                  | Joshua; Judges<br>1 and 2 Samuel; 1 Kings 1–11             |
| Session Six (30:49)           | Divided Kingdom<br>Exile<br>Return                                    | 1 Kings 12–22; 2 Kings<br>2 Kings 17, 25<br>Ezra; Nehemiah |
| Session Seven (33:51)         | Maccabean Revolt<br>Messianic Fulfillment: Part 1                     | 1 Maccabees<br>Luke 1–21                                   |
| Session Eight (34:20)         | Messianic Fulfillment: Part 2<br>The Church<br>Continuing the Journey | Luke 22–24<br>Acts                                         |

\* In *The Bible Timeline*, the term “narrative books” refers to fourteen books of the Bible that tell the story of salvation history from Creation through the establishment of the Church.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. Which Bible should I use?

For this study, you will want to use a Catholic edition of the Bible, such as:

- Revised Standard Version–Second Catholic Edition (RSV-2CE): a literal translation recommended for serious Bible study. The verses in this study are consistent with the wording in the RSV-2CE. We recommend *The Great Adventure* Catholic Bible, an RSV-2CE Bible that incorporates the same color-coded *Bible Timeline* Learning System that you will use throughout this program.
- New American Bible (NAB): a less literal, more “dynamic” translation that strives for readability; used in the lectionary at Mass.
- New Jerusalem Bible (NJB): a “dynamic equivalent” translation that is less literal yet strives to be faithful to the original meaning.

### 2. How do I find a Scripture reference in my Bible?

Each book of the Bible is divided into chapters, and each chapter is made up of a series of numbered verses. To aid readers in finding a particular biblical verse, each Scripture passage has an “address,” a location reference made up of the name of the Bible book, followed by the chapter and verse numbers. For example:

- 1 Samuel 7 refers to the entire seventh chapter of the book of 1 Samuel (pronounced “fi st Samuel” because there also is a 2 Samuel, or “second Samuel”)
- Genesis 1:1 refers to the book of Genesis, chapter 1, verse 1
- Numbers 5:2-6 refers to the book of Numbers, chapter 5, verses 2 through 6
- 1 Corinthians 3:2-6, 7-10 refers to the book of 1 Corinthians (“fi st Corinthians”), chapter 3, verses 2 through 6 and verses 7 through 10

Abbreviations are often used in Scripture references. For example, “Jn 3:16” means “John, Chapter 3, verse 16.” A list of abbreviations is found in the front of your Bible. To locate a particular book, use your Bible’s contents page. As a general rule, *Great Adventure* Bible studies do not use Bible book abbreviations.

### 3. What is the Bible?

The Bible is the written expression of the Word of God. Although it contains seventy-three books written over many centuries by many different human authors in several languages, it is also a unified whole because all its books are inspired by the Holy Spirit, and together, they reveal God’s plan of salvation.

Because God inspired the Bible’s human authors, he is the principal Author of Scripture. As such, the Bible is inerrant (“without error”).<sup>1</sup> As the Second Vatican Council’s document on Sacred Scripture, *Dei Verbum* (“Word of God”), states:

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of our salvation. (11)

<sup>1</sup> For more on canonicity, inspiration, and inerrancy, see the resources listed on page xii.

#### 4. What are the Old and New Testaments?

The books of the Bible are grouped under two headings—the Old Testament and the New Testament. The word *testament* can also be translated “covenant,” which clarifies the meaning of these titles. The Old Testament tells how God made a series of “covenants” (i.e., binding agreements) with his people Israel in which he promised blessing in return for loving obedience. The New Testament tells how God fulfilled this promise of blessing by means of a new and everlasting covenant in his Son, Jesus Christ.

#### 5. Why are Catholic and Protestant Bibles different?

Both Catholic and Protestant versions of the Bible contain the same twenty-seven books of the New Testament. It is the Old Testament that differs. The books of the New Testament are arranged in the following order:

- Four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) and the Acts of the Apostles
- St. Paul’s letters (or “epistles”) to the early Christian churches – Romans; 1 and 2 Corinthians; Galatians; Ephesians; Philippians; Colossians; 1 and 2 Thessalonians
- “Pastoral letters” – 1 and 2 Timothy; Titus; Philemon; Hebrews
- “Catholic letters” (James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; Jude) and the book of Revelation

In the early days of the Church, two versions of the Old Testament were used by the Jewish people. One, written entirely in Hebrew, contained thirty-nine books. The other, a Greek translation known as the Septuagint, contained forty-six books—the same thirty-nine as the Hebrew version plus another seven.

In ad 393, the bishops of the Church, with the authority given them by Christ, determined the list of inspired books of Scripture. This list contained the forty-six books of the Septuagint, which had been used by Christians since the first century. So the Old Testament of the Church had forty-six books for more than a thousand years.

During the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the reformers chose to follow the shorter Hebrew collection of thirty-nine books. At the Council of Trent in 1546, the Septuagint’s list of forty-six books was declared by the Catholic Church to be the “canon” (or “authoritative list of inspired books”) of Scripture.

Here are the books of the Old Testament as found in Catholic versions of the Bible, listed by type of literature. The seven “deuterocanonical” books (which Protestants refer to as the “apocryphal books” or “the Apocrypha”) are listed in italics:

- Pentateuch – Genesis; Exodus; Leviticus; Numbers; Deuteronomy
- Historical books – Joshua; Judges; Ruth; 1 and 2 Samuel; 1 and 2 Kings; 1 and 2 Chronicles; Ezra; Nehemiah; *Tobit*; *Judith*; Esther; *1 and 2 Maccabees*
- Wisdom books – Job; Psalms; Proverbs; Ecclesiastes; Song of Solomon (Song of Songs), *Wisdom of Solomon*; *Sirach*
- Prophets – Isaiah; Jeremiah; Lamentations; *Baruch*; Ezekiel; Daniel; Hosea; Joel; Amos; Obadiah; Jonah; Micah; Nahum; Habakkuk; Zephaniah; Haggai; Zechariah; Malachi

Some deuterocanonical portions of Esther and Daniel are not included in Protestant versions.

## 6. What are the notes that appear in some Bibles?

The explanatory notes that appear in many versions of the Bible reflect the theological stance of their editors and the scholarship at the time of publication. All notes published in Catholic Bibles have received the *imprimatur* of a bishop, which is an official permission to publish that carries with it the assurance that nothing in the book is contrary to the faith or morality of the Church. (An *imprimatur* does not imply that the bishop who granted it agrees with the notes' content or that they are official Church teaching, however.) The notes are not considered part of Sacred Scripture and therefore are not divinely inspired.

## 7. Where can I find answers to my other questions about the Bible?

We recommend the following books and resources:

- *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. For information about Sacred Scripture, its relationship to Sacred Tradition, and its inspiration and interpretation, see paragraphs 50 through 141. (The *Catechism* is available online and in published editions.)
- *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, Scott Hahn, general editor
- *The Bible Compass: A Catholic's Guide to Navigating the Scriptures*, by Edward Sri
- *Praying Scripture for a Change: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*, by Tim Gray
- *Walking with God: A Journey Through the Bible*, by Tim Gray and Jeff Ravins

### Ten Commandments of Small-Group Discussion<sup>1</sup>

1. Enjoy yourself!
2. Speak with respect and charity.
3. Do not ridicule or dismiss what others say. Keep comments positive.
4. Come prepared.
5. If you were not able to prepare, let others speak first.
6. Stick to the topic and questions at hand.
7. Start and end on time.
8. Allow silence. Give people a chance to think.
9. Listen to others without interrupting.
10. Keep personal matters within the group.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Thomas Smith's original "10 Commandments of a Small Group."

## Staying Focused

As you progress through *Unlocking the Mystery of the Bible*, you will probably come across things you want to know more about. It is exciting to learn how to read the Bible and explore its riches, but if you try to understand it all at once, you will become frustrated. The Bible is too big to understand all at once.

*Unlocking the Mystery of the Bible* makes the complex simple by initially setting aside many of the details to focus on the overall story—the “big picture”—of the Bible. Once you have this “big picture,” you will have a framework to help you understand the entire Bible in its proper context.

The Bible is not a subject to master; it is a place to meet the living Word of God! Approach it with the goal of meeting God, and prepare to be transformed.

## Planning for the Future

When the mystery of the Bible has been “unlocked” and people learn how to read it, they usually find they have more questions. You can feed this new hunger for Scripture by planning your next study now. Consider continuing with *The Great Adventure* foundational study series: *The Bible Timeline: The Story of Salvation*, *Matthew: The King and His Kingdom*, and *Acts: The Spread of the Kingdom*. These studies are designed to take participants deeper into the Bible while teaching them how to read the Bible as Catholics. Additional studies are offered on various books of the Bible, as well as on biblical themes and people.

For more information about how to plan and promote a Bible study and how to facilitate a small-group discussion, visit **ascensionpress.com** or call 1-800-376-0520

# Unlocking the Mystery of the Bible

A Quick Journey Through Salvation History

# Session One – INTRODUCTION



*Still Life with Bible* by Vincent Van Gogh

**Facilitators:** Welcome participants to your small group and ask them to introduce themselves.

- Explain your role as facilitator.
- Watch the video presentation.
- Review the “Ten Commandments of Small-Group Discussion” and “Staying Focused.”
- Discuss the questions for Session One.

## Introduction Talk Notes

### I. Welcome

**A.** About *Unlocking the Mystery of the Bible*

**B.** Catholics and the Bible

1. “In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets his children with great love and speaks with them.”<sup>1</sup>
2. Two keys: knowing God’s heart and knowing his ways
3. The Church “exhorts” us to read the Bible (CCC 133)

### II. The Problem ...

**A.** The problem of the “heap”: Catholicism can seem “big”

1. Four “pillars,” or parts, of the *Catechism* help to organize the “heap”
  - a. The Creed

<sup>1</sup> DV 21.

**b.** Sacraments and Liturgy

**c.** Life in Christ

**d.** Prayer

**2.** The Creed (story) comes first

**B.** The Bible is not a book but a library

**C.** Other disciplines

### **III. ... And the Plan**

**A.** Our need for a story

**B.** The key to reading the Bible: discovering the story

**C.** Making the complex simple

**1.** Sorting the “pile”: twelve periods

**2.** Keeping it simple: fourteen narrative books

**3.** Making it memorable: *The Bible Timeline Chart*

## **T • A • K • E • A • W • A • Y • S**

**1. The Bible tells a love story of God reaching out to you.**

**2. Get a Bible. Get away. Get together with God.**

## Discussion Questions

1. The Church tells us, “In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets his children with great love and speaks with them.”<sup>2</sup> Have you experienced this? In the video presentation, Jeff mentioned common difficulties people have when they start to read the Bible. What has been your experience with Scripture?
2. Many Catholics today feel as though they have received a “heap of Catholicism,” a random pile of separate Bible stories and facts about the Church’s teachings. What solution to this problem do the four “pillars” of the *Catechism* offer?
3. Why is it important to get the “big picture” of salvation history before reading or studying the Bible?

---

<sup>2</sup> DV 21.

4. The “narrative books” section of *The Bible Timeline Chart* gives you the names of fourteen books of the Bible that tell the story of salvation history from beginning to end. They are arranged across the top of the chart immediately below the period names, so you can see the historical time periods they describe. List the narrative books here.

5. Fifty-nine “supplemental books” make up the rest of the Bible. These books are not designated “supplemental” because they are less important than the narrative books, but in this study, we will set them aside to focus on the “big picture.” Once you have learned the chronological story told in these narrative books, you will be better equipped to read the remaining books of the Bible in their historical context.

Look at the top of the purple Royal Kingdom period on your Chart. The books of 1 Samuel 9–31, 2 Samuel, and 1 Kings 1–11 tell the story of this time period, during which God established a kingdom under David and Solomon. What are the “supplemental books” for this time period? (You can find these listed in the Royal Kingdom period on your *Bible Timeline Chart*.)

6. God’s formation of his family through covenants with various people is central to the story of the Bible. These covenants are listed in the Chart in a section called “God’s Family Plan.” You will learn more about these later, but notice the type of family group name with each (“One Holy Couple,” for example). What do you notice about the change in this family group as you move from left to right across the Chart?
7. Key people and events in salvation history are arranged in chronological order along the center of the *Timeline Chart*. This section is divided into three horizontal bands representing different aspects of the Middle East. The central area represents the land of Canaan, where most of the events in the story take place. When the action moves out of Canaan—to the northern countries like Babylon, for example, or to the south and Egypt—the events appear above or below the center area. Look at your Chart: What examples of geographic movement do you see?
8. Check out the events in secular history that are arranged across the bottom of the Chart. Find one you are familiar with. What is going on in the development of God’s plan during this period?

## Overview of Salvation History

The stories in the Old and New Testaments are not disconnected, random events in the history of a people. Rather, each story presents a crucial part of God’s plan. By the end of this study, you will see the “narrative thread” that runs throughout Scripture and continues in your life today.

*The Bible Timeline* Chart groups the stories into twelve consecutive historical periods that are color-coded to help you remember them. Look at each period on *The Bible Timeline* Chart while someone reads the story in outline form as follows:

In the **EARLY WORLD**, God created the heavens and earth and tested Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This period is represented by the color turquoise, which is the color of the earth as seen from space.

In the time of the **PATRIARCHS**, God called Abraham and promised his children land, a royal kingdom, and worldwide blessing. The color burgundy helps us remember the blood covenant God made with him.

In **EGYPT AND EXODUS**, God freed his people from slavery so they could worship him. Red reminds us of the crossing of the Red Sea.

God taught Israel to trust him through forty years of **DESERT WANDERINGS**. What better way to remember those miles of sand than by the color tan?

In **CONQUEST AND JUDGES**, God led Israel triumphantly in the Promised Land, which is represented by green for the lush hills of Canaan.

In Canaan, God established Israel as a **ROYAL KINGDOM** under David and promised him an eternal throne. The color purple represents the royal throne.

Israel soon split into rival kingdoms and fell into idolatry. Black represents the darkness of this **DIVIDED KINGDOM**.

God punished both kingdoms with **EXILE**. Baby blue recalls the people of Judah “singing the blues” in Babylon.

The brighter days of **RETURN** are shown by yellow. God brought the exiles home to make a fresh start.

Years later, the Maccabees stood up against the threats of hellenization in the **MACCABEAN REVOLT**. The color orange calls to mind the oil lamps lit in the purified Temple.

Gold represents the first New Testament period—**MESSIANIC FULFILLMENT**—when at last God sent his only Son, the Messiah, to fulfill his promises. Remember this period’s color by the gold brought by the Magi at Jesus’ birth.

Finally, the **CHURCH** carries on God’s work in the world. Its color is white, for the spotless bride of Christ.

## Closing Prayer

God's plan unfolded through history and gives us the  
"story" for our lives. Let us pray in the name of Jesus:

*R: Speak to us as we read your Word!*

## Home Preparation: Looking Ahead

Every story has a beginning, middle, and end. The story of salvation history begins at the dawn of time. In the **EARLY WORLD** period, you will learn how the world began, what went terribly wrong, and how God promised to provide a solution.

Use your Chart to fill in the following information:

Period name: **EARLY WORLD** Approximate dates: \_\_\_\_\_

Period color: \_\_\_\_\_ Color meaning: \_\_\_\_\_

List four key people from Jesus' genealogy:

1) \_\_\_\_\_ 3) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_ 4) \_\_\_\_\_

List five key events:

1) \_\_\_\_\_ 4) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_ 5) \_\_\_\_\_

3) \_\_\_\_\_

Name one concurrent event in secular history: \_\_\_\_\_

The story of the **EARLY WORLD** is found in Genesis 1–11. You probably know these stories already, although you may not know how they are connected. We will explain that in the next session. In the meantime, read one or more of them ahead of time, in preparation.

**EARLY WORLD:**

|                |                                  |
|----------------|----------------------------------|
| Genesis 1–3    | Creation, Adam and Eve, the Fall |
| Genesis 4      | Cain and Abel                    |
| Genesis 6, 9   | Noah and the Flood               |
| Genesis 11:1-9 | The Tower of Babel               |

## Understanding *The Bible Timeline Chart*

- Take a few moments to familiarize yourself with the parts of the Chart by reading the “Key to Understanding *The Bible Timeline Chart*” on the inside front cover of your Chart, and following along with *The Bible Timeline Chart* video in *Unlocking the Mystery of the Bible* video series.
- Review the twelve historic periods by filling in their names and the meanings of their associated colors in the chart below.

| Period Name | Color | Color Meaning |
|-------------|-------|---------------|
| 1.          |       |               |
| 2.          |       |               |
| 3.          |       |               |
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- Find the Contents page in your Bible. Using your *Bible Timeline Chart* or *Bookmark* as a reference, highlight the fourteen narrative books. If you are not accustomed to finding books in your Bible, take time to locate each narrative book before you continue.