

THE BIBLE

Rev. Fr. Yeghia Hairabedian

Key Concepts:

- A. The Bible is different from all other books in that it is the written revelation of God to us -- it is a gift from heaven to us.
- B. The central theme of the Bible is our need of God's salvation which is made possible through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Objectives:

- A. To explain the significance of the Bible (Holy Scriptures) to the Armenian Church Fathers.
- B. To demonstrate how the Bible is used in the Armenian Church worship.
- C. To familiarize the student with the Bible and its various divisions.
- D. To give specific examples of Biblical content.
- E. To encourage the students to use the Bible in their daily lives for spiritual growth.

Material needed:

Pencils, Bible and crossword puzzel.

Welcome the students and pray (this or some other prayer): "Dear Heavenly Father, we praise your Holy Name. We thank you for giving us eternal life through your Son. Fill our hearts with joy and happiness, that we may be satisfied and abound in good deeds, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom is due glory, dominion, and honor, now and forever, world without end. Amen."

INTRODUCTION

A. **WHAT IS THE BIBLE?** The Bible is also referred to as *Holy Scripture*, which means, sacred writings. *Bible* refers to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments which are recognized and used by the Christian Churches. It comes from the Greek word *biblia* which literally means "books". The various books of the Bible were written in a time period of over 1,500 years, extending from the time of the prophet Moses to the time of the Apostles. The Bible is unique in comparison to all other sacred writings because:

1. **First of all, it is inspired by God - that is, God directed the authors of the various books.** One of our Armenian Church leaders explains it this way: "The Bible is not a precious book in the sense that it contains intellectual truths found and formulated by highly trained people; it is the Holy Book because the Holy God has revealed Himself in words and deeds recorded in the Bible through His divine guidance (inspiration). His power is there in the Book" (Karekin Catholicos).

In the 2nd book of Timothy (3:16) we are told that the Bible is "God-breathed", which means that although many people participated in the writings of the Bible,

known in the Armenian Church as *Asdvadsashoonch*, which is translated "The Breath of God".

2. **Secondly, it is the revelation of God.** The Bible contains everything God wants us to know about Himself, about ourselves and His plans for us. The main theme of the Bible is Jesus Christ and the salvation He came to deliver to us because of God's great love for us. If the entire Bible were to be summarized in one verse, it would be John 3:16. Instructor, read John 3:16.

B. THE BIBLE IN THE ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH WORSHIP:

Discussion question: How is the Bible used in our worship?

Answer (after students' response): There are many ways in which the Bible is used in the Armenian Church worship, but the following are the three most obvious: **First**, at every service, whether it is the Badarak or one of the other services such as the Morning Service, psalms are used frequently. The use of psalms in the worship service is a very ancient practice going back many hundreds of years. Even when Jesus and His disciples worshiped, they used psalms. Psalms are prayers which express our inner-most thoughts to God. For example there are psalms which express joy and happiness for God's goodness; there are psalms which express deep despair and plead for God's help; there are psalms which are joyous expressions of appreciation to God and praises to Him.

Let us look at one Psalm which is used at every Badarak service. Turn your Bible to Psalms 100. (Have a volunteer read the passage) Question: When is this used in the Badarak? Answer: during beginning of the Badarak (Preparation) this Psalm is recited by the deacons in order to show what a wonderful thing it is to worship in the House of the Lord (the Church).

It is interesting to realize that originally in the Armenian Church, as well as in many Eastern Churches, the words of the Liturgy were comprised entirely of the words of the Bible. This was so because our Church Fathers believed that worship is such a holy and sacred act that human words are inadequate for worship. The early Badarak consisted mainly of the Lord's Prayer, recitation of Psalms and Bible readings.

Secondly, during the Badarak, just before reciting the Creed (Havadamk) various portions of the Bible are read: a selection from the Old Testament, from one of the Epistles, and finally, the Gospel is read. This all takes place during the portion of the Badarak known as *The Preparation of the Gifts*. The *Gifts* refer to the wine and the bread (nushghar) which is ceremonially prepared by the priest and used for the distribution of Holy Communion (the Blood and Body of Christ). The climax and the most significant part of the Badarak is the offering of and acceptance (by the worshiper) of God's wonderful gift of eternal life through the Blood and Body of His Son Jesus Christ. This is the basis of Communion. The Bible readings which precede Communion stress this: the Old Testament readings generally point to the need of God's salvation through His

Son; the Gospel readings center on Jesus Christ as our Salvation; and the Epistle readings further illuminate our understanding of the Gospel message.

And **third**, the Badarak itself is the summery of the entire Gospel - the life and message of Jesus Christ. It begins with the sharagan *Deep Mystery* which has to do with the Incarnation of Christ and on to the message of Christ, His death on the cross and His resurrection. In other words, the Badarak is like an illustrated Bible, depicting the life and message of our Lord.

INTRODUCTION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old and New Testaments are used to designate to two great divisions of the Bible.. The term "testament" is closely related to, and has to do with "agreement" and "contract". To put it simply, **the Old Testament agreement and contract is this: God will accept as His children, all those who are holy as He is.** The level of holiness required by God are exemplified by the 10 Commandments (found in Exodus chapter 20). However, the writings of the Old Testament and human history demonstrate the fact that there is no one other than Jesus Christ, who was able to live a life free of sin and perfectly pleasing to God. Let us turn our Bibles to the Book of Psalms chapter 14, verses 1, 2 and 3, and read God's assessment of our condition (read passage). Therefore, our need of God's help (in the form of the Savior) to be made acceptable to Him, is the greatest message of the Old Testament.

A. DIVISIONS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT: The O.T. consists of 39 books and is divided into three main divisions: **There is the division which consists of HISTORICAL BOOKS which are the first 17 books.** The very first book of the Bible, Genesis, fits into this category. Holy Tradition informs us that Moses was the author of the first five Bible books which includes Genesis. This means that these early books were written approximately 1,400 years before Jesus was born. The title "Genesis" means the beginning, and has to do with origins. In the first five books of the Bible we learn about the origin of life on earth, the origin of the first man and woman, the origin of sin and evil into the world, we learn about the new origin of civilization in ancient Armenia after the flood of Noah's time and so on.

A good sample reading from this division is to be found in chapter one of Genesis. Let us look at verses 1 and verse 27. (have someone read those two verses). These two verses present us with two fundamental Christian teachings: First, that God is the Creator of all life - life had to have a designer and did not originate by "accident"; and second, that God created people in a special way - unlike the animals, we were created in the image and likeness of God. This means that in certain respects we resemble God.

The other historical books such as the books of Kings and the books of Samuel contain information of the beginning of the Jewish nation, about the first king Saul, David and Goliath and so on. The underlying purpose of these books is to show that when people obey the will of God, they will prosper in life, but when

people disobey God and turn away from Him, there are consequences to pay. These books also show us the human family line of Jesus from the time of creation to His birth in Bethlehem.

The second division of the Old Testament consists of the 5 POETICAL BOOKS. These books are the Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, the Book of Job and Ecclesiastes. Contained in this set are magnificent prayers, insights into the character of God, loads and loads of good advice on successful living and how to stay away from trouble. And for anyone who wants to feel closer to God and learn how to pray, the Book of Psalms is an excellent book to read and study. We have already read the 100th Psalm as a good sample of the poetical books. Among the authors of these books is King David and his son, King Solomon.

The third division of the Old Testament consists of the PROPHETICAL BOOKS. The Prophetical Books comprise the last 17 books of the Old Testament. Among the most well known from this group are the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, Jeremiah and especially, Isaiah. These books also contain history and poetic literature, but everything is prophetic in nature. Specifically, these books are designated as “prophetic” because they contain many of the direct messages of God to His people. God spoke directly to the prophets who in turn delivered God’s message to the appropriate person or people. **The basic message of the prophets** was twofold: first, they were warnings and encouragements from God to people to prepare for the coming of their King and Savior; and second, the prophets gave much information about future events concerning the first coming of the Christ and also His second coming which has yet to take place.

A good example of God’s warning to prepare for the coming of the King (Jesus Christ) is found in the Book of Malachi, chapter 2, verses 1 and 2. Through the prophet Malachi, God warns the priests of Israel to behave with proper conduct and to set a good example to their people. God says, “And now this admonition is for you, O priests. If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name, I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings”. Another good example of prophetic writing in from Isaiah, who wrote about the Savior who was to come and suffer for the sins of His people. For example, in Isaiah chapter 53, verse 7, we read about Christ, that “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth”.

THE APOCRYPHA: There was a time gap of about 400 years between the last book of the Old Testament and the New Testament writings. However, during that time a set of writings appeared which we refer to as the Books of the Apocrypha. These books were not regarded as Holy Scripture by the Jews, but the certain churches, including the Armenian Church accept them as part of the Bible. However, the Armenian Church does not regard these books on as high a level as the rest of the Bible.

One of the more interesting of the books is Bel and the Dragon. This book is an addition to the Old Testament book of Daniel and it consists of legendary tales involving the prophet Daniel and his fight against idol worship. Two of the other books, I and II Maccabees, contain historical accounts of battles between the Roman soldiers and the courageous Jews who rebelled against their Roman oppressors. Portions of these books were read by St. Vartan to his troops in order to encourage them just before the Armenians were to engage in the battle against the Persians in the defense of our faith.

INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

The term New Testament can correctly be understood as "the new agreement". This is so, because the books of the New Testament reveal to us the new agreement between God and us which was made possible with the coming of Jesus Christ. **Simply put, the new agreement is that anyone who believes that Jesus Christ died for his sins, and commits his life to God through Jesus, will receive eternal life.**

The terms of this new agreement, or contract, is found in the Gospel of St. John chapter 3, verses 16, 17 and 18. Let us all turn to that passage and read for ourselves the conditions of the new agreement. (*Have a volunteer read the passage*). "For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." Incidentally, if anyone asks you to summarize the contents of the entire Bible in just a few sentences, these verses would be the summery. This is quite different from the old agreement as found in the Old Testament, which required obedience to God Law for eternal life. Before Christ came, people knew what God expected of them, but they could not meet God's requirements as we read in Psalms 14:1-3. We are given the details of the new agreement through the books of the New Testament by means of the following writings:

A. THE FOUR GOSPELS: The first four books are four different accounts of the life of Jesus Christ. They are called Gospels because they contain the Gospel message.

Question: What does the word "Gospel" mean? Answer (after students' response): The word Gospel literally means "The Good News". And the Good News is exactly what we just read in the Gospel of St. John - that God sent His Son Jesus Christ to give the gift of eternal life to all believers by dying for us, and by coming back to life from the grave.

The first Gospel is called MATTHEW and was written by the Apostle Matthew. Matthew wanted to prove to his fellow Jews that Jesus was the Ruler they were waiting for as promised by the prophets. This Gospel portrays Jesus as the KING the oppressed Jews were waiting for.

The second Gospel is MARK. From the holy tradition of the church, we believe that this gospel was written by John Mark, the son of a woman named Mary of Jerusalem. This gospel is shows Jesus more in action rather than speaking. It was written to the people of the Roman empire and emphasized the power of the Son of God to a world which respected power. That is why Mark does not bother to write about the birth of Jesus -- he just wanted to emphasize Jesus as God in the flesh.

The third Gospel, that of LUKE, is a very beautiful portrayal of Jesus as the Son of Man - God as one of us. Many people think that St. Luke was one of the Disciples, but he was not. Luke was a physician who wrote this account of the life of Christ to a person named Theophilus, who was either a Greek or Roman of high rank, since his title was "most excellent" (1:3). Interestingly enough, the name Theophilus means "God lover". It is in this Gospel that we have the most well-known and touching account of the birth of Christ. St. Luke has presented us with a genuinely human Jesus:

And the fourth Gospel is St. JOHN'S Gospel, written by the "beloved disciple" John. John's brother was James, who also was a disciple of Jesus. Both John and James were tough fishermen with fiery personalities, and so they had the nickname, "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17). John's Gospel is unique and quite a bit different in nature and intent from the first three. It was written a number of years after the other Gospels and contains much information not found in the first three. The main emphasis was to portray Jesus as Divine, as the Son of God Almighty and was written for the Christian Churches throughout the world.

John tells us the purpose for writing this Gospel. Let us turn to John chapter 20, verses 30 and 31. *Have someone read the verses.*

THE BOOK OF ACTS: This book is one of a kind and was also written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke. The Book of Acts records the miraculous birth of the Church and records the history of the early church. It begins with the account of the ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon those early Christians. *Question: How does the Church remember these two events?*

Answer (after Students' response): The Church celebrates the memory of these two events as two great holy days in the Church calendar. The Feast of Ascension commemorates Jesus Christ's going to heaven in great glory, and we celebrate the day the Holy Spirit came upon the believers as the day of Pentecost.

Let us turn to Acts and read from chapter 2, verses 38 through verse 43. These verses tell of the birth of the first church. *Discussion question: What are the special messages of these verses?*

Answer (after students' response): First of all, we see St. Peter courageously preaching about Jesus Christ to a great crowd of people, some of whom had asked for the crucifixion of Jesus shortly before that event. This is amazing because of

the fact that not too long before, Peter was too afraid to admit that he was a disciple of Jesus after He was arrested. As a matter of fact, we read in the Gospels that Peter denied knowing Jesus three times because he did not want to be arrested also. But now that the great power of God came upon him, St. Peter preached the very first sermon and three thousand people believed in Christ, they were baptized and were the first members of the new-born Church. This just goes to show that God can do great works with any Christian who is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and is willing to have God use him or her. Secondly, in verses 42 and 43, we learn from the example of these first Christians that the members of the Church are to enjoy Christian fellowship together, to spend adequate time in teaching and learning about our Faith, and also to worship together on a regular basis - that is the sign of a healthy church and the way to grow as Christians and as a church.

The rest of the Book of Acts, tells the story of St. Paul, St. Peter and many other early Christians who traveled around the world and organized new churches.

EPISTLES: The Epistles are actually letters which were written by certain persons to the different churches. These letters consist especially of teachings about our faith and Jesus Christ. In them, we find many details and explanations of teachings found in the Gospels including much information of how to live and act as Christians. And naturally, the central topic of all the epistles is about Jesus Christ and His message. Most of the epistles were written by St. Paul who was the greatest founder of churches and the greatest teacher.

A good example of an epistle is St. Paul's letter to the Christians of Galatia. In the opening chapter, St Paul writes to them and expresses his astonishment and disappointment that some members of that church are "throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the Gospel of Christ" (1:7). He warns them not to believe a counterfeit Gospel "even if an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one" they received in the beginning (1:8). Evidently, false teachings about the Gospel message were being circulated at that time, and as even now.

THE REVELATION OF ST. JOHN: The last book in the Bible is called the Revelation (of St. John), and it was also the last book of the Bible to be written. St. John, who also wrote the Gospel of John, is the author and he wrote this book in the last years of his life on an island called Patmos. John was the only disciple who died a natural death - all the others were martyred, but John was exiled to the Island of Patmos by the authorities. It was there that Jesus Christ showed John a vision of events which would take place just before His return. Some of the things and events described in this most unusual vision are difficult to understand, but nevertheless, at Jesus' command, John wrote everything he saw. This book ends with the vision of the great judgment of those who chose not to accept God through Christ. It is the judgment of all those who were not accepted by Christ into heaven, and they were into the lake of fire (Rev. 19:17-21). But also, and more importantly, the last great vision is of the New Jerusalem, of God's heaven. The final two chapters are a magnificent description of heaven.

Christ's words fill the ending of this marvelous book. He says, "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done... I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches..." (Rev. 22:12 & 16).

Revelation also contains great details of the splendor of heaven and we are given much information regarding the majesty of God and Jesus Christ - more than in any other book in the Bible. This last book brings everything in the Bible to a climax and is the conclusion to the whole Bible - it is like the frosting on a cake.

CONCLUSION: So then, we just had a brief description of the books of the Bible. *Question: Why is it very important to read the Bible every day?*

Answer (after students' response): We should read from the Bible every day because it was specially prepared by God in order to fill us with knowledge about Himself, about His destiny for us, His will for us and His great love for us. We should also read the Bible because our Church Fathers preached the truths found in the Bible, and even died for their faith. And we should also read the Bible because the teachings of our Lord and also the basis of all Christian doctrine come from the Bible.

Instructor end the session with a prayer and have the students use the remaining class time for the crossword puzzel (which will be provided to you and the students)