

# BLURRY

**BRINGING CLARITY TO THE BIBLE**

RYAN LOKKESMOE



*Blurry*

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## PRAISE FOR *BLURRY*

“Very few introductions to biblical interpretation are at a basic enough level that you can hand them to virtually any adult Christian, including those brand new to the faith and to Bible reading, and have them be both helpful and understandable. Lokkesmoe has created precisely such an introduction. Plus it is short enough that interested readers should have no difficulty reading it in its entirety. Highly recommended.”

—Craig L. Blomberg, Distinguished Professor of New Testament,  
Denver Seminary

“I knew this book had promise when Ryan compared the Bible to a Beatles anthology! His metaphors and analogies bring crystal clarity to an ancient text that is infused with Life. We are going to use this book in both our adult and student ministries, and I encourage you to do the same! This is simply a great book!”

—Pete Briscoe, Senior Pastor, Bent Tree Bible Fellowship

“Bible engagement is the single greatest catalyst to spiritual growth. Problem is, most people today do not know how to engage it. Just lying there on the table it is overwhelming and intimidating. Read *Blurry* and you will be equipped to see the Bible more clearly for yourself. And when you see truth clearly, watch out!”

—Randy Frazee, Senior Minister, Oak Hills Church,  
Author of *The Heart of the Story*

“What a helpful little book! If you're looking for a quick intro to the Bible that's both clear and interesting, this is it. You get the big picture of God's Word, as well as some memorable tips on how to read it. The discussion questions for each chapter also make this a fantastic choice for a small group curriculum. Highly recommend it!”

—Steve Gladen, Pastor of Small Groups, Saddleback Church,  
Author of *Small Groups with Purpose* and *Leading Small Groups with Purpose*

“Being a Kids' Pastor, I frequently interact with parents who desire to teach their children the Bible but struggle doing so because they themselves don't have

a solid grasp on it. *Blurry* is a great resource for parents who want to understand the Bible and impart God's truth in the lives of their children. I highly recommend any parent to read it and then teach their children to use the techniques Ryan outlines in the book. *Blurry* has the potential to change the spiritual makeup of your entire family!"

—Jenny Jones, Kids' Pastor, Parkway Fellowship, JennyDayJones.com

"Nearly 75% of the people in our church are new Christ-followers or have been out of church for more than 5 years. For people who are new to the faith, *Blurry* clears up many of the confusing aspects of the Bible. Finally, a concise, easy to use, and clearly-written tool is available for those who need it most!"

—Mike McGown, Senior Pastor, Parkway Fellowship

"Whether you're a long-time Christian or just starting out on your journey, Ryan Lokkesmoe has put together a helpful and straightforward introduction to the Bible. I encourage you to read it for yourself and then pass it on to a friend."

—Larry Osborne, Author and Pastor, North Coast Church, Vista, CA

"We all know that reading the Bible is an important priority when it comes to feeding our souls. But the challenge for many of us is that it often seems a little 'blurry' and difficult to understand. But before you give up, let Ryan help you to turn the lens and bring scripture back into focus. Count on it, you'll be thankful you've read *Blurry*. It will empower you to open up scripture to both your head and your heart."

—Dr. Joseph M. Stowell, President, Cornerstone University  
Grand Rapids, MI

"The Bible is the most amazing story of a God on the most daring rescue mission of history. In it, we find the story we have been swept into and the Author who started it all. Yet many of the people who sit in our churches don't turn to the Bible because they find it boring, irrelevant, or confusing. In *Blurry*, Ryan Lokkesmoe unlocks the beauty, mystery, hope, and redemption of the Story of God, and he makes it accessible and practical. If you want to ignite a passion for the Bible and give people tools for discovering it for themselves, *Blurry* will provide the corrective lenses we so desperately need.

—Heather Zempel, Discipleship Pastor at National Community Church  
And Author of *Community is Messy* and *Amazed and Confused*

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# WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

*The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know what it is—what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used.*  
—C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*<sup>2</sup>

It's a simple question. The Bible—what is it? Some would say it's a book about Jesus. A book about Charlton Heston and those stone tablets. A manual for life. The basis of western civilization. The B.I.B.L.E.—Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth. Don't you just love manufactured acronyms? Oh, and it's God's Word. The best-selling book of all time.

Surprisingly enough, the Bible is *not* a book. It might look like a book, and it might feel like a book. You can buy it in a bookstore. It sits on a bookshelf, maybe next to a bunch of other books. It has a table of contents and maps in the back. It looks an awful lot like a book—but it's not.

From a literary standpoint, the Bible is like an *anthology*. That's a word that we sometimes hear in the context of music. For instance, The Beatles are my favorite band of all time. My

mom got me hooked on the *Fab Four* when I was young, and I never get tired of listening to them. I absolutely love their rich melodies and the musical range they showed throughout their career. If you listen to The Beatles' music from the early 1960's and compare it to something on their 1969 album, *Abbey Road*, it sounds like the music of two completely different bands!

Some of the most interesting Beatles albums are the *Anthology* records. They are compilations of famous Beatles recordings from different periods in their career, collected after the band had long broken up. Some of the tracks are live recordings, while some of them are studio tracks. Some of the selections are famous radio interviews or television appearances, like their performance on the Ed Sullivan Show in February 1964.<sup>3</sup> The *Anthology* albums span the career of The Beatles and showcase the evolution of their music as the most popular act in the world.

These albums are a great illustration of an anthology, a collection of previously unrelated things that are deliberately brought together at a later date to form a coherent whole. The word *anthology* has its roots in the Greek word *anthos*, which means *flower*.<sup>4</sup> It is the idea behind flower picking—going around and choosing what to include in a bouquet.

In the case of *The Beatles' Anthology* albums, all the recordings were done at different times and in different places throughout their career. They were not originally recorded with the intention of being collected together at a later date, but that's what happened. That's pretty close to what we find in the Bible, though we are certain God orchestrated the whole thing from the very beginning.

So even though the Bible looks like a book, it's not. It's an anthology—many books collected and bound together. It's like a miniature library on your shelf. This explains why it takes so long to read the Bible. It's not just a book, it's a whole library!

This is an important concept to grasp because, on a fundamental level, it changes the way we approach the Bible. It influences our expectations and the way we read it. The Bible is not one book written by one person at one time. It is a collection of books written by many different people at many different times in lots of different places. It's not just any anthology, it's a very *diverse* one.

Likewise, calling the books of the Bible "books" doesn't really do them justice either. They're not just books but various types of literature. Some of the Bible is poetry, some of it is history. Some of the books of the Bible are ancient letters written from one person to another or to a group. Portions of the Bible are made up of short, pithy sayings that help us to gain a bit of wisdom, and other books of the Bible are compilations of prophecies spoken by God's prophets. There is a rich variety of literature found within the Bible and calling them all "books" makes them sound pretty generic.

Add in the diversity among the authors, and we really start to see how incredible the Bible is. Some of the writings of the Bible were composed by poor prophets, others by wealthy kings. Some were written by spiritual leaders and traveling evangelists, while others were written by working-class people. The writings spanned hundreds of years and were written in places such as Rome, Greece, modern Turkey, Israel, and modern Iraq.

To acknowledge that the Bible is like an anthology is to acknowledge that God used variety to communicate His truth: a variety of people, in a variety of places and circumstances, through a variety of literary genres. This is the starting point for bringing the Bible into focus. When we understand that, we understand that not everything in the Bible can be read in the same way or with the same expectations.

This is also true for other content we read today. We read all kinds of literature in our lives and have completely different sets of expectations for each one. We actually read them differently because of those expectations, but we don't even realize we're doing it because it's so instinctive.

For example, if a book started out with "*Once upon a time...*" you would know you were starting to read a fairy tale. You would know that what you were about to read would be fictional, and would have fantastical elements to it. That type of story tends to be shorter, so you would probably read it in one sitting.

If you were reading a piece of literature that began with "*Today marks the end of a tumultuous week on Capitol Hill, with both Democrats and Republicans...*" you would know that you were reading the beginning of a news story. You would expect it to be primarily facts and would most likely read the article in one sitting.

If you started to read a book and the opening line read, "*In late 1941, the United States had yet to enter the war...*" you would know you were about to read a work of history. You would expect lots of dates and facts mixed with some analysis of the events. You probably wouldn't read the whole thing at once, but would stop at natural breaks in the story.

We read all kinds of literature in our lives and instinctively we know how to read each type and what to expect from it. The situation is the same with the Bible. Sometimes it feels disorienting to read one part of it and then go to another. We don't realize we've switched genres.

For example, you might be reading Psalms one minute, poetry, and then switch over to Galatians, a letter in which Paul is making a detailed argument and trying to convince his readers to follow his teaching on a subject. Those are two completely different types

of literature! You wouldn't read a novel in the same way and with the same expectations as an email.

We're not going to cover every single variation of literature found in the Bible, but there are seven basic types: Historical Narrative, Poetry/Songs, Law, Prophecy, Wisdom Literature, Gospels and Letters.

*Historical Narrative* is just what you may think: a retelling of historical events in an orderly way. The book of Acts is an excellent example. It's a historical account of the first thirty years or so of the church. It's a pretty straightforward read.

*Poetry and songs* appear throughout the Bible, sometimes as whole books or pieces of other books. The Psalms are the best-known works of poetry in the Bible, but we also find songs embedded in historical narratives like the *Song of Moses* in Exodus 15. The Apostle Paul was even known to break out in song in the middle of his letters, like the early-Christian hymn found in Philippians 2:5-11. These passages use imagery, metaphor, and all the other types of artistic touches you would expect in a poem or song.

*Law* is found especially in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy and in portions of Exodus and Numbers. The Law was given to Israel so they would know how God wanted them to live as His people. It contains rules about many areas of life, as well as technical sections on temple procedures, sacrifices and purity regulations. Many people find the Law genre to be especially *blurry*, but there are incredibly valuable insights in these sections if you're up for the challenge!

*Prophecy* represents God speaking to His people through an intermediary, a prophet like Isaiah or Zechariah. Often prophetic literature is an indictment of the current state of affairs, and speaks about what will come in the future. There are entire books of prophecy, and just like Poetry/Songs, there are brief

sections of prophecy embedded in historical narratives. A related type of literature is the *Apocalyptic* genre, which uses dream-like imagery and symbols to speak about the future. This is found most famously in the book of the Revelation, as well as in parts of Daniel and a few other books of the Bible.

*Wisdom Literature* is made up of teachings that offer practical life guidance. The book of Proverbs is the most well-known example of this type of literature, though much of Jesus' teaching would also be considered a form of wisdom literature.

*The Gospels* (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) stand alone. Scholars actually debate how to categorize them because they don't fit neatly into any single literary category. The four Gospels, which describe Jesus' life and ministry, seem to be some combination of history and biography, with a generous amount of teaching and prophecy sprinkled throughout. They are unique.

*Letters* are precisely what you would think they are—letters. They are often written from one person, like Paul or John, to a church for the purpose of teaching and encouragement. But sometimes they are written from one person to another like Paul's letter to Philemon. The key thing to know is that these are real, ancient letters.

As far as the four writings we will cover in this book, Genesis is a mixture of historical narrative, prophecy and poetry. Luke is a Gospel, while Ephesians is a letter from an individual to a church. James is a letter full of wisdom literature.

The *Resources* section at the back of this book lists every book of the Bible categorized by genre. The main takeaway right now is that the Bible is rich and diverse. God used variety to communicate his Word to us. We shouldn't be confused by the diversity of what we find in Scripture. It was meant to be that way, and it's awesome.

### DID YOU KNOW?

*The early Christians pioneered a new technology in the first century: the book. You might not think of the book as “technology,” but back then it was a major technological innovation. Before that time, ancient texts were written on scrolls. It took a long time for the reader to find the place in the text that he or she wished to read, and it was not easy to transport or store multiple scrolls without damaging them.*

*When the New Testament documents were being carried around the Roman empire, it was much easier to group them together in book format. The four Gospels tended to circulate as a group, and Paul’s letters were often bound together. Being able to flip back and forth between pages provided several advantages, including quick referencing and ease of comparison. For example, the reader could easily flip from a passage in the Gospel of Mark over to a similar section in the Gospel of Luke. It would be a much longer process if they were written on separate scrolls.<sup>5</sup>*

### Group Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe the Bible in one sentence?
2. What does it mean to know that the Bible is not a “book”? How does this affect your view of God’s Word?
3. What types of literature do you regularly read in your life? What expectations do you have about those types of literature?

4. Which type of biblical literature do you find the most interesting or challenging? (Historical Narrative, Poetry/Songs, Law, Prophecy, Wisdom Literature, Gospels, Letters)
5. What did you find the most interesting or challenging in this chapter?