Bible Access List (BAL) – FAQ

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Frequently Asked Questions

0. Why Bible Access Matters

Question: Why is Bible access described as a "spiritual emergency"?
Answer: Because more than 100 million Christians remain without a Bible. This is not just a logistical or humanitarian gap, it is a crisis that affects discipleship, evangelism, and the spiritual health of the global Church. Without access to God's Word, believers cannot be fully equipped, and seekers may never encounter the transforming message of Scripture.

Question: What biblical examples show the importance of Scripture access?
Answer: Throughout history, revival and transformation have begun with access to God's Word: King Josiah's reforms after rediscovering the Law (2 Kings 22-23), Ezra's public reading to the people (Nehemiah 8), Philip explaining Isaiah to the Ethiopian official (Acts 8), and Jehoshaphat sending Levites to teach the Scriptures (2 Chronicles 17). Hosea 4:6 and Amos 8:11 warn of destruction and despair where God's Word is absent.

Question: How many Christians lack access to a Bible today?
Answer: Based on BAL research across 88 countries, it is estimated that over 100 million Christians do not have access to a personal copy of Scripture, due to restrictions, poverty, or lack of infrastructure.

Question: What are the main barriers preventing Bible access today?
Answer: Barriers fall into two categories: Restrictions (laws, censorship, persecution, extremist control), and Shortages (poverty, weak distribution, illiteracy, limited electricity or internet, or the absence of Scripture in a person's language).

Question: What can be done to end this "modern famine" of Scripture?
Answer: A blended approach is needed: physical printing and distribution, digital Bible access and training, audio Scripture for oral and low-literacy contexts, advocacy for unfettered access to the Bible for all, regardless of their faith background, and collaboration among Bible agencies and churches.

Question: How can churches and individuals be part of the solution?
Answer: By praying, giving, sharing digital Scripture tools, supporting Bible distribution projects, and advocating for unfettered access to the Bible for all. Every believer has a role to play.

1. About the BAL

Question: What is the Bible Access List (BAL)?
Answer: The Bible Access List identifies where access to the Bible is most difficult and where the shortage of Bibles among Christians is greatest. It combines surveys, data, and expert validation to provide evidence-based insights that help churches and agencies respond strategically, to inform and support the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Question: Why were the Bible Restrictions List and Bible Shortage List created?
Answer: They were created to draw attention to two major obstacles to Scripture engagement: Restrictions, where laws, extremist pressures, or political controls make access dangerous or impossible, and Shortages, where many Christians want a Bible but cannot obtain one. Together, the lists mobilize prayer, resources, and advocacy.

Question: Who produces the BAL? Who are the partners?
Answer: The BAL is published by the Bible Access Initiative (BAI), a collaborative of Bible agencies and mission partners. The initiative was founded by Open Doors International and Digital Bible Society, and for 2025 the steering partners include Digital Bible Society, Frontlines International, and Bible League International, with contributing partners such as Open Doors International, Biblica, Bible League Canada, and OneHope.

Question: How often will the BAL be updated?
Answer: A new edition is planned every year. Each cycle refines the methodology, expands coverage, and keeps the Church informed about global Bible access needs.

Question: How does the BAL connect to the Great Commission?
Answer: By highlighting where Scripture access is blocked or scarce, the BAL equips the global Church to prioritize prayer, resources, and action so that every nation, tribe, people, and language can access God's Word.

2. Scope & Coverage

Question: How many countries are included in the 2025 edition?
Answer: The 2025 edition covers 88 countries. This is the initial publication, with the goal of expanding coverage in future editions as more data becomes available and resources allow.

Question: Why does the Bible Restrictions List have 88 countries, but the Bible Shortage List only 76?
Answer: All 88 countries are assessed for restrictions. Shortage estimates are only published when the available information is strong enough to be reliable. In 12 countries the data was too limited or uncertain, so no shortage range is published this year.

Question: Why are some countries not yet included in the BAL?
Answer: BAL began with 88 countries as a strategic choice, based on available resources, research capacity, and access to reliable data. The initial selection was informed by trusted sources such as Open Doors' World Watch List and by ministry contexts where steering partners are active. Future editions will add more countries as the initiative expands.

Question: What are the selection criteria for countries to be included in the BAL?
Answer: Countries are selected based on a combination of factors: known or suspected restrictions on Bible access, socio-economic challenges that may significantly hinder access (for example, poverty, illiteracy, weak infrastructure), feasibility of collecting reliable data, and confidence ratings from BAL analysts and experts.

3. Definitions & Concepts

Question: What is the difference between "Bible Access" and "Bible Ownership"?
Answer: Bible Access means the ability to obtain or read a Bible, whether through a printed copy, a digital app, or a shared family or church Bible. Bible Ownership means personally possessing a copy. Access creates the opportunity, ownership reflects the ability and choice to hold one.

Question: What does "Bible Shortage" mean? Does it include seekers?
Answer: Bible Shortage refers to Christians who want a personal Bible but do not have one. It does not yet include seekers, meaning non-Christians interested in exploring the Bible, because reliable estimates for this group are not yet available.

Question: What are "issue-based clusters" and why are they important?
Answer: Clusters group countries that face similar Bible access challenges, for example, severe restrictions in a religiously hostile context, or poverty-driven shortages in a Christian-majority context. Clusters help practitioners compare contexts and design responses that address common barriers.

4. Data & Methodology

Question: How does the BAL gather its data?
Answer: Through a combination of surveys in over 100 countries, expert interviews with local and diaspora leaders, field observations where possible, and secondary sources such as the World Christian Database, Open Doors' World Watch List, Bible translation repositories, and World Bank indicators.

Question: Why does the BAL combine both primary and secondary data?
Answer: Primary data provides fresh ground-level insights. Secondary sources add breadth and comparability. Using both together makes findings more accurate, balanced, and reflective of lived realities.

Question: How does the BAL ensure its data sources are reliable?
Answer: Where possible, data from surveys and secondary sources is cross-checked through validation with local experts and plausibility reviews. This process helps confirm that the findings align with the lived realities of Christians in each country.

Question: How reliable is the BAL?
Answer: Every score and estimate is reviewed by analysts, global experts, and local country reviewers. When uncertainty remains, results are expressed as ranges rather than precise numbers. This keeps reporting responsible and transparent.

Question: Why are shortage estimates given as ranges instead of exact numbers?
Answer: Because population dynamics, denominational practices, and data quality vary. Ranges, for example 100,000 to 250,000, reflect uncertainty while still guiding planning and prayer.

Question: When there are multiple countries with the same shortage range, why is the rank on the Bible Shortage List not the same?
Answer: For each country we calculate a single internal shortage estimate using all available data. Because that point estimate is still soft, we publish a range for transparency. The ranking, however, uses the underlying estimate, not the range. So two countries in the same published band, for example 100,000 to 250,000, can have different ranks because their internal estimates differ, for example, 125,000 would be ranked lower than 135,000, even though both fall within the same band.

Question: Why is the weight for Block 1 restrictions higher than Block 2 socio-economic factors?
Answer: Block 1 restrictions, such as laws, persecution, and censorship, are harder to change and often put believers at personal risk. Socio-economic barriers are serious but can often be mitigated with resources. Therefore Block 1 carries 75 percent of the score, while Block 2 carries 25 percent.

Question: What are the main limitations of the data?
Answer: Limitations include challenges collecting data in highly restricted contexts, subjectivity in assessing severity of restrictions, non-random survey samples, and the use of ranges rather than fixed numbers. Even so, expert validation and safeguards help keep results credible and useful.

5. Country Profiles and the Translation Gap

Question: In the Country Profile, under "The Translation Gap," why does the number of languages spoken by Christians sometimes seem too high or too low compared to the national context?
Answer: The figure shows languages actively spoken by Christians, not all national languages. Guest worker and migrant languages can increase the count. Local languages without known Christian speakers are excluded, which lowers the count.

Question: What is the data source for the "Translation Gap" section in the Country Profile?
Answer: The primary source is the World Christian Database, which records Christian believers by mother tongue and notes whether a Bible is available in that language. Because translation status changes, BAL cross-checks this with the Digital Bible Library, Ethnologue, Find.Bible, Joshua Project, and Scripture Earth to reflect the most up to date picture.

Question: How do Country Profiles add value beyond the ranked lists?
Answer: Country Profiles are designed to bring the data alive. Instead of only showing a score or rank, they provide narrative context, visuals, and prayer points that help readers understand what it means to try to access a Bible in that specific country. The goal is to create a vivid picture of barriers and needs, and to inspire prayer and action.

Question: How can I pray for the countries on the list?
Answer: Each Country Profile includes a How Can I Pray section with specific requests drawn from the data. These are meant to inspire informed, focused prayer that is connected to the realities Christians face in each country.

6. Use and Application

Question: How can churches and mission organizations use the BAL?
Answer: By identifying priority countries for Bible distribution, advocacy, prayer, and resource mobilization. The BAL helps align strategy with real needs.

Question: Can I share BAL findings publicly? Under what conditions?
Answer: Yes. BAL findings can be used and shared for noncommercial purposes. Please credit BibleAccessList.org as the source.

7. Myths and Misconceptions

Question: Isn't the Bible already available everywhere?
Answer: No. Research shows that 34 countries severely restrict or prohibit Bible imports, 37 do not allow local Bible printing or have severe restrictions, 30 severely restrict or prohibit personal Bible ownership, and 39 severely restrict or prohibit distribution. While Bibles may be easy to obtain in some places, millions still live where access is blocked or highly restricted.

Question: If someone really wants a Bible, can't they just get one?
Answer: Not always. Desire does not equal access. Converts from other religions may face legal penalties or violent backlash if they own a Bible. In areas controlled by extremists, Bible access is dangerous or impossible. Poverty is also a major barrier. In some places a Bible can cost a week's wages, and the nearest copy may be days of travel away.

Question: Haven't online Bibles and Bible apps solved the access problem?
Answer: Digital tools help, but they are not enough. Internet coverage is poor in many rural areas. Smartphone ownership among the poor is low. Government monitoring in many countries makes online Bible use unsafe. Connectivity costs often make internet access unaffordable.

Question: Between printed Bibles and online Bibles, hasn't the shortage been solved?
Answer: Not yet. Even together they have not closed the gap. Illiteracy and visual impairment prevent many from reading text, especially women and older adults. Access is not only about format, it is also about freedom, affordability, and safety. That is why audio Bibles and safe physical distribution remain vital.