

Getting God's Message

A Bible Study Guide

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My mother was a remarkable woman. She grew up in a poor Eastern European village and never had an opportunity to attend a day of school. Her young life was very hard. Often she worked as a maid away from home. As a 16 year old she became the first in her family to experience salvation. Under threat by her mother of persecution, imprisonment, and even death, she pressed on in her newfound faith. When she was baptized in a river early one spring, she was given a Bible. She treasured it but couldn't benefit from it since she never learned how to read. She turned to God in prayer as she often had for other needs in her life and asked him to help her learn how to read. On her own she slowly but surely learned how to read. The Bible became her very life. When she died at age 86, I was privileged to get that Bible as a keepsake. As I paged through it, I saw she had put a number at the beginning of each book indicating how many times she had read it. The last time I visited her, just months before her death, she said she had almost finished the Book of Jeremiah again. She had walked with God for 70 years, and now she was riddled with cancer, but she still wanted to be better prepared to meet her Lord Jesus.

When I asked if she had a life verse, she quoted Hebrews 13:8, beaming with a radiant smile, "He is the same yesterday, today, and forever." Her focus was on the Lord. Her meditation on the Word of God over the years had sharpened that focus, and it was obvious to everyone she was anxious to be with her Savior soon. Many of us struggle to spend time reading, studying and meditating on Scripture. Why? Why is this so hard for us? Maybe we don't understand how fortunate we are. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would teach us, guide us into all truth, and even bring to remembrance what we learn (John 14-16). The One Who inspired the writers of Scripture is available to be our personal Teacher as we study the Bible. Before we begin our study, it would be wise to pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us and teach us what God wants us to know.

GOD HAS SPOKEN.

What He said is recorded in a book which He guided holy men of old to write. We know it as the Bible. Because He oversaw and inspired all that was written it is also known as The Word of God (II Timothy 3:16).

Getting the Message from God's Word should be a high priority for each of us. It is able to make us wise unto salvation (II Timothy 3:15). It addresses issues we all face and provides insight for daily decision-making (Psalm 119:105). It is able to penetrate to the deepest recesses of our lives (Hebrews 4:12). If we don't make God's Word our map and mandate for life we might find its ready availability taken from us. It has happened before (Amos 8:11-12). It can happen again.

PREPARATION FOR THE TASK

It is hard to do a good job at anything without the right tools. This is as true in getting the message from God's Word as it is in any other project. What tools are necessary to make the most of your Bible reading and study?

A good Bible. One with large enough print that it is easy to read. If possible, get one with wide margins so you can make notes in them. Try finding one with paragraph breakdowns, as well as single columns like you have in most books you read. I would recommend the New International Version, the New American Standard Version, or the New Kings James Version. For general

reading a modern day paraphrase like the Living Bible or the Good News Bible are helpful. Other tools would include a marking pen, a sturdy notebook, and a flexible ruler to use when underlining in your Bible. Also useful are a good Bible dictionary, Bible handbook, concordance and commentary.

Once you have the tools, you need to make time for the task. Jesus was awakened by His Father morning by morning. It would be wise to pray that God would awaken you, open your ears and teach you (Isaiah 50:4-5).

You also need a place where you can keep your tools and where you can study undisturbed. Habakkuk the prophet did (Habakkuk 2:1-2).

When you have everything ready, don't go to the task with a legalistic mind-set. If you do, you will miss the message as the people did whom Jesus addressed in John 5:39. We should delight in the Word of God (Psalm 1:1-3) and expect God to teach us (Habakkuk 2:2). Gather the tools. Give the time. And get on with the task of Getting the Message from God's Word.

READING FOR INSPIRATION

God encourages the faithful reading of His Word (I Timothy 4:13). He promises to bless those who read and listen to it (Revelation 1:3). It is interesting to note throughout the Gospel records how Christ answered people who came to Him for answers. He would often say, "Have you not read...?" and then quote from the Old Testament. The implication is that if they read God's Word faithfully they would know God's answers to the issues they faced day by day.

According to Psalm 78, when we read we should focus on God's great acts of creation and redemption. These great themes are to be passed on from generation to generation to stimulate faith in God, obedience and faithfulness. I can remember once reading the whole Bible looking for the one major practical principle in each book. It was so stimulating I read the Bible through in about half a year and wrote a reading guide based on my discoveries.

We should also be open to the Spirit's focusing on specific issues. For example, in reading Acts you might be drawn to notice how the first century church witnessed or worshiped. Every Christian needs to feed on God's Word so he will be nourished and grow (I Peter 2:2-3). Continued growth comes to those who constantly use what they have learned in their daily decisions. This exercise enables them to grow until they can feed on spiritual meat (Hebrews 5:11-14). God's Word also provides a basis for fellowship with God. In prayer we talk to God. Through His Word He talks to us. Read His Word with a prayerful attitude to cultivate this fellowship with Him.

STUDY FOR ENRICHMENT

There is a price to pay if you really want to get God's message. Truth never comes easily. Hosea 6:3 tells us we will come to know the truth only if we keep on seeking to know the Lord. We must "follow on" or "press on." It takes effort, commitment and patience.

Paul wrote Timothy to do his best to be approved of God. If he did he would not be ashamed as a workman and he would learn how to handle the Word of God correctly (II Timothy 2:15). Even at the end of his life, Paul wanted to know Christ better (Philippians 3:10). He wanted the

knowledge he had to become a more vital part of his daily experience. He wanted to know the power of His resurrection, the fellowship of His sufferings, and become like Him in His death.

Many get discouraged when studying God's Word. They want easy, instant answers. But God is not in a hurry. A faithful search and willingness to obey is what He asks. He will teach you all you need to know, when you need to know it, if you remain a faithful student. It took Abraham years to learn the faith life. Even under Christ's masterful teaching the disciples didn't learn overnight. Too many Christians are content to be spoon fed. Unfortunately, too many churches are willing to spoon feed them. According to I John 2:20, 26-27, we have the privilege of getting God's message directly from God's Word through the teaching of the Holy Spirit. In addition, God has gifted teachers in the church - we should go to learn from them and then follow the example of the Bereans by returning home to check the Bible to be sure that what was taught is correct (Acts 17:11).

Conversely, when we discover something new in the Word ourselves, we should check it out with a mature Christian or by consulting a Bible commentary or handbook. Paul did this regarding his ministry and message (Galatians 2:1-10). This process will confirm the truth in our hearts. Study does take work. But the results are well worth it. In the next few chapters we will look at study techniques which I trust you will find beneficial.

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Whenever you attempt to study the Bible the first step you need to take after praying for the Holy Spirit to guide and enlighten you is to observe what is being said in the text. Note the actual facts or statements. Then you need to try to understand what it actually means. That is, you need to interpret what you have observed. Once you do this you need to apply what you have learned to your life. In other words you need to answer the question, what does it mean to you personally? What kind of changes do you need to make in the way you live to have this truth implemented in your life?

As an example of this study approach, look at the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13. Fortunately two of them were interpreted by Jesus Christ Himself; the parable of the sower, verses 3-9, was interpreted in verses 18-23, and the parable of the wheat and the weeds, verses 24-30, was interpreted in verses 37-43.

With Christ's explanation of what the facts in these parables mean you can develop applications to your own life. For example, based on the parable of the sower you could say that you should take care where you sow the seed of God's Word. Try to sow it into the lives of those who have been prepared by God's Spirit. On the other hand, no matter how careful you are, since you can't see what is in the heart of the hearer, have realistic expectations regarding the results. Some who respond will not follow through. Don't be too hard on yourself.

Regarding the parable of the wheat and weeds you could say that it would be wise to realize that your eternal destiny is determined by what you are or become in this life. By choosing to trust in Jesus Christ you become a son of the kingdom with the blessed hope of eternal glory.

With these three steps in mind – observation, interpretation and application – you will be able to better understand the relevance to your life of any portion of the Bible you choose to read. You

will also see how these three steps will become a part of every other study method explained in this booklet.

AN IMPACT STATEMENT

Do you ever find while you are reading along in your Bible a statement seems to jump out and grab your attention? I keep my eyes open for such statements. When I find one, I stop and reflect upon it for a while. I ask, “Why did this statement grab me?” “What might God be saying to me?” It’s important when this happens to you that you not limit your reflection on the statement alone. After you think you have a grasp of what it really says, go back and read the context around the statement. If the context supports what you understood the statement to mean, then prayerfully apply it to your life. I call this an **impact statement**.

I came across such a statement while reading I Kings 1. I almost missed it because it was in brackets. You’ll find it in verse 6: “His father had never interfered with him by asking, ‘Why do you behave as you do?’” No child likes his father to interfere in his life. Most fathers know there is a risk in interfering in the life of their child. But if it never happens, the child will be spoiled. In looking over the context it becomes clear that Adonijah indeed was spoiled. He was handsome and one of David’s oldest sons. Now David was near death and Adonijah thought he could pull one over on his father and brothers. Since David never interfered in his plans before it was likely he wouldn’t do anything to stop him at this time. Even after his plot was foiled and Solomon forgave him, he got himself into hot water by again wanting something that was purely selfish. It cost him his life. In looking over the statement again I noticed that David had never interfered by asking the question, “Why do you behave as you do?” That suggests when a father interferes in his child’s life he might best do so by asking questions about why the child is choosing what he is. This gives the child an opportunity to express his thoughts and opens the door for dialogue. It also suggests that the father is willing to listen to the child’s ideas. Listening as you confront your child lessens the risk and increases the possibility of having a positive influence on the child’s actions and character development. I don’t think I’ll ever forget this impact statement. I didn’t even find it hard to memorize. That’s how indelibly it impacted my life. When reading your Bible, keep your eyes open for impact statements. Make sure you check out the context to be sure you are not misdirected into thinking it says something other than what God intended. Once you have checked it out, ask God to impact your life with the truth in the statement. That’s how you grow through the Word of God.

IMPACT THOUGHT

While reading the Bible it is important to interact with what you are reading. Questions like, “Is that right?” “Where is that mentioned elsewhere in the Bible?” “Is this consistent with what my pastor, friend, or Bible study group concluded at our last meeting?” etc. Try crystallizing in your mind what you understand is being said.

Sometimes this process just happens. As you are reading, a thought germinates in your mind. As it develops in your mind you might still be reading the text. Two things are going on at the same time. When this happens, I usually stop long enough to try writing out the thought that is developing in my mind. I might read on to a logical break in the account or I might stop right after writing the thought down.

This is a good time for reflection / meditation. Try re-writing the thought more clearly and cogently. Think about it some more. Then go back and re-read the portion that prompted the thought. Cross check to see that the thought is consistent with what God says in His Word. Sometimes this process leads to a re-writing of the thought so it says in your words what you understand God is saying. Then prayerfully apply what you have written out in your own life. I call such a thought an **impact thought**.

While reading the record in Luke 15:11-32, which primarily focuses on the younger son, my mind was preoccupied with the older son. He was faithful to his father, but jealous of his younger brother. This jealousy was like a cancer which made it virtually impossible for him to rejoice with the rest of the family when his younger brother returned. He was incensed that they threw a big party for him and he was hurt they had never thrown a party like that for him. When his father went out to talk to him, he tried putting it all into perspective for him. He pointed out, "all that is mine is yours" (verse 31). Then he shared his father heart, "We had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found" (verse 32). The thought which crystallized in my mind was the tragic destructive nature of jealousy. Jealousy robs us. What does it rob us of? Taking the whole story into account I came up with this impact thought: Jealousy robs us of the appreciation and enjoyment of what we have ourselves, as well as sharing in the blessings of others. If applied faithfully, this thought would make a significant impact on my life. I would be far more content with what I have where I am. I would be able to make the most of what I have. And I would be able to affirm others and rejoice with others in their times of success and blessing.

As you go to your Bible reading, pray that God would enable you to interact with what He is saying. Be thinking of how what He is saying relates to and can be applied to your life. When thoughts germinate, cultivate them. Stop long enough to write them down. Crystallize them into a form you will readily remember and be able to apply to your life. These impact thoughts will influence your life for God's glory and the good of others. You will become more the person God wants you to be.

INSIGHT WORDS (A)

There are times when the repetition of a word in a verse or a portion of the Bible will give you an insight into the meaning of what is being said. I call such a word an **insight word**. And I look for such words as I read the Bible.

I remember vividly one of the first times this happened in my Bible study. I had spent a summer in missions work in South America and had studied I Corinthians 13 all summer. I had memorized it and gone over it enough I could almost quote it backwards. That fall I did a devotional study of I Corinthians. When I got to chapter 13 I was tempted to skip it because I wouldn't get anything more out of it. But I remembered what I had told others - "Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to teach you from the portion you are going to read or study."

After praying this I began reading and to my surprise I saw something I had never noticed before: the pronoun "I" is mentioned eight times in the first three verses. In the next four verses it isn't mentioned even once. The simple conclusion was that when "I" (self) is present or obvious in my life the end result will be, "I am nothing...I gain nothing." When "I" (self) is surrendered to Christ and not obvious in my life then I will be manifesting the true nature of love. And "Love

never fails.” The word “I” was an insight word in that portion which helped me better understand the true nature of Christian love.

You find the same word repeated in Romans 7:14-25. Noticing it will help you understand that portion as well. Or take the word “all” mentioned four times, and a similar word, “every,” mentioned once, all in one verse (II Corinthians 9:8). Meditate on that verse with a focus on that word and you will discover the meaning more readily than just reading the verse without that focus. Such words are insight words. Let me suggest you look for them in your Bible reading and study.

INSIGHT WORDS (B)

Another form of an insight word is when the meaning of a verse or portion of Scripture revolves around the meaning of one key word. This is where a Bible dictionary or a word study book is helpful.

An example of such an insight word is in Romans 12:2, where we are told to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is -- His good, pleasing and perfect will.” Knowing what the word “transformed” means is important to understand what the command involves.

In his *Word Studies On Romans*, Dr. Weust says, “The word...speaks of the act of a person changing his outward expression from that which he has to a different one, an expression which comes from and is representative of his inner being.” It is the same basic word used to describe Christ’s transfiguration, when what He was inwardly, deity, became outwardly manifest through the veil of His flesh. We must renew our minds at each decision crossroads, and determine to behave in keeping with what we are inwardly as Christians, new creatures. Then what is inwardly true of us will be outwardly manifest and we will demonstrate that God’s will is good, pleasing and perfect. Interestingly, the same basic word is used in II Corinthians 3:18. The picture there is one of a Christian looking into the mirror of God’s Word, the Bible, and picking up the reflection of God’s glory. As the Holy Spirit works in the process, what you expose yourself to in God’s Word the Holy Spirit internalizes and then works out in your life, from the inside out. Thus, you will be transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory.” Knowing the meaning of the word “transformed” will help you understand the meaning of each of these verses. It is an insight word.

A DEVOTIONAL STUDY

I can remember talking to my brother some years ago about Bible study. He was frustrated as a Sunday school teacher because he felt so dependent on his teacher’s manual. Even after hours of preparation he would revert to reading from the manual because he was afraid he would forget something important. I suggested he try a different approach. Go directly to the Bible and read over a few times the portion to be taught. Then try answering the following questions:

1. What does this portion teach about God the Father...the Son...the Holy Spirit?
2. What does it teach about man?
3. Are there any warnings to heed?
4. Are there any commands to obey?
5. Are there any promises to claim by faith?

When completing this exercise, draw some conclusions you can apply to your life or to the lives of those you are teaching. Then read over the teacher's manual or a Bible commentary to see if it agrees, clarifies, expands or qualifies what you have discovered. You will find this process will make the material more your own. You will be able to remember it better and share it with greater confidence.

Not only did it make a difference in my brother's teaching, but it also was the start of a deeper study which has led to maturity, spiritual leadership in his church and home, and greater confidence in witness. To illustrate this technique, look at John 15:1-8 and answer the above questions.

1. The Father is the Gardener Who cuts off unfruitful branches, prunes or trims fruitful branches, and is glorified through much fruit. The Son is the Vine. His Words are used to prune fruitful lives. He wants to have vital union with His branches (disciples) so He can produce much fruit through them. The Holy Spirit is not referred to.
2. Without being in vital union with Christ, man is useless. When in vital union with Him, he becomes fruitful. Man needs continued pruning to remain fruitful.
3. If man is not in vital union with Christ, he is useless and will be thrown out to be burned.
4. He commands us to be in union with Him.
5. If I remain in Christ, He will remain in me and make me fruitful. God will prune me so I become even more fruitful and thus bring God glory. In addition, if God's Words remain in me, my prayer life will become more effective.

Now that we have answered the questions in this devotional study, we need to pull it all together and prepare some applications.

1. Start with establishing a vital relationship with Jesus Christ, which can be described as you abiding or remaining in Him and He in you. In prayer let Him know you recognize that apart from Him you can't become anything worthwhile. Ask Him to be the source and substance of your life - your Savior.
2. Ask God to fulfill His promise of making you fruitful, yes even more fruitful, for His glory. Thank Him for His work of pruning even though it might be painful.
3. Build your prayer effectiveness by memorizing Christ's Words (teachings) and meditating on them regularly. His Words will help you pray in harmony with His will. Then you can expect answers.

Try doing this devotional study with Matthew 28:16-20. Then use it to study other portions you are interested in.

A FACT FINDING STUDY

News reporters must be careful to get all the facts accurately before they go public with their story. They are trained to probe relentlessly for those facts by asking six questions. The same questions can be used to gather the facts of a Bible verse or passage. Following are the questions:

- Who? the principle people in the story, the author, the recipient
- What? action, message, commands
- When? time element
- Where? geographical notations

Why? reasons behind the action, message, or commands

How? in what way does the action of the story affect the people in the story? In what way has the message affected the author? How should it affect the reader?

You will not be able to answer all these questions in every passage, but try to get as many facts as possible.

EXAMPLE: Read over Acts 5:40-42 a few times and try answering the questions. Compare your answers to mine.

Who? The apostles, Gamaliel (verse 34 and 40), and the Sanhedrin.

What? The apostles were flogged and ordered not to preach Jesus. They rejoiced in their suffering. They continued teaching and proclaiming the good news.

When? After Gamaliel's address to the Sanhedrin.

Where? Jerusalem: the Sanhedrin courtroom, the temple courts, and house to house.

Why? They were flogged as a threat to stop preaching about Jesus. They rejoiced because they were counted worthy to suffer disgrace for the Name.

How? Day after day they taught and proclaimed the good news that Jesus is the Christ, in public, in the temple courts, and in private from house to house.

Some practical observations and applications can be made based on these gathered facts:

1. Obstacles, suffering and threats should not be allowed to intimidate us from obeying and serving God.
2. We need to teach (explain) and proclaim (challenge people with) the good news.
3. We need to teach and proclaim the good news both in public (in large groups) and in private (in small groups).

If you use this approach to study Acts 1:8, Acts 8:1-5, and Acts 14:26-28, you would get a feel of how God sent out the first century church and enabled them to carry out their task. And you would learn principles that would help you and the church of today to do God's work.

FOCUS AND AMPLIFY STUDY

Do you ever miss seeing the forest because you are preoccupied with examining a tree? There is great danger in doing this in Bible study. Getting interested in a statement without considering its context often leads to misinterpretation and confusion. The focus and amplify approach to Bible study helps one get the bigger picture and see how each part fits into the whole. The following steps are taken in this approach:

1. Read the portion or book over a few times to grasp the main focus.
1. Read it over some more to identify main points or explanations which amplify the focus.
2. Study each section covered by a main point to find sub points which flesh out each main point.
3. Write all this out in an outline and then determine some conclusions or applications based on the outline.

EXAMPLE: Based on the book of Philemon.

Focus: Forgiveness is a test and testimony of Christian love and faith.

Amplify: Main points are often determined by paragraph breakdowns in the text. The translators determine the paragraph breakdowns, so different translations might not be the same. For my study of Philemon, I followed the William's translation. His paragraphs start with verses 1, 4, 8, 21, 23 and 25. The first paragraph (1-3) is an introduction. Paul writes as though this is a family affair with brothers and sisters. As in every family, God's grace and peace are necessary for things to go as desired. The last two paragraphs, (23-25) are concluding personal remarks including greetings and the wish for God's blessing on Philemon. That leaves three paragraphs which present three main points which amplify the focus.

- (4-7) Paul's confining approach
- (8-20) Paul's convincing argument
- (21-22) Paul's confident anticipation

Now to flesh out the main points we develop the following outline:

Focus: Forgiveness is a test and testimony of Christian love and faith.

Introduction: A family affair needing God's grace and peace.

1. Paul's confining approach
 - a. Paul thanks God for His faith and love
 - b. Paul prays he might share his faith more
 - c. Paul affirms the positive impact of his love
(*what you've been and done in the past do now*)
2. Paul's convincing argument
 - a. He appeals to, rather than commands him
 - b. He pleads for Onesimus as a new, useful Christian
 - c. He affirms Onesimus' help to him in behalf of Philemon
 - d. He asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother, not a slave
 - e. He offers to pay anything owed Philemon by Onesimus
 - f. He asks Philemon to refresh him by granting his request
(*every element of the appeal is a legitimate spiritual point*)
3. Paul's confident anticipation
 - a. Philemon would do even more than asked
 - b. Onesimus would be a responsible servant
 - c. Prepare for a visit
(*love forgives, faith accepts*)

Conclusion: Greetings and grace

Application: Meditating on this outline will give us spiritual insight into how we should respond to others who have ripped us off in the past. Forgiveness is not easy, nor cheap. When dealing with broken relationships we need to consider spiritual guidelines. We should do the Christian thing no matter how humiliating we might think it is. Choosing to forgive and accept one who has wronged us is a true testimony of Christian love and faith.

You can use this study method for chapters or for whole books. The longer the portion, the more demanding it will be. At first you might not come up with an outline as thorough as the one presented above. Don't worry about that. The important thing is to organize the material you are studying so you understand and remember it more clearly. It is more demanding than some other study methods. But it is worth the extra effort. Try it.

THE '4 S' STUDY

Have you ever put together a picture puzzle with a large number of small pieces? The first thing you do is spread out all the pieces before you right side up. I normally group all the pieces of a similar color together and start putting those pieces together. Then I try connecting the groups together. Finally I fill in the remaining pieces. When you use the '4 S' study method you follow the same basic procedure.

1. Identify and **spread out** all the facts in a portion before you.
2. **Sort** related facts together and give each group a descriptive title.
3. **Structure** the material by organizing the facts under each title and organizing the titles in a logical sequence. Then determine a main theme growing out of the outline you have developed.
4. **Summarize** by making applications based on your study and outline.

EXAMPLE: **Spread** the facts you find in Acts 2:42-47 before you.

- they - the new converts
- devoted themselves - to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread (meals and/or communion), and to prayer
- everyone - including outsiders - filled with awe at what God was doing
- many wonders and miraculous signs done by the apostles
- believers spent much time together
- believers had everything in common - it must be remembered that many of them were visitors from other countries who had extended their stay, some beyond their resources
- those who had possessions sold them and shared with any who had need they continued meeting together every day in the temple courts and in homes, where they shared meals with gladness and sincerity
- they praised God
- they enjoyed the favor of all the people
- they received new converts into their fellowship daily

Now that you have the facts spread out before you, **sort** them under titles or descriptive statements and **structure** the material into an outline as follows:

1. What the apostles did
 - a. They taught the new converts
 - b. They performed wonders and miracles
 - c. They met with believers in large and small groups

2. What the new believers did
 - a. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to breaking bread, and to prayer
 - b. They shared what they had with any in need
 - c. They met with other believers daily in the temple courts and from house to house
3. What those in the world around them did
 - They looked favorably on what God was doing among the believers
4. What the Lord did
 - a. He performed wonders and miracles through the apostles
 - b. He saved people
 - c. He added new converts to the church daily

The next step is to determine a main theme. A word that came to mind as I meditated on the material in the outline was TOGETHERNESS.

To **summarize** this material into applications, I asked myself some questions:

- Do I sense this spirit of togetherness in my church?
- Is there a close togetherness between the leaders and the people in my church?
- Do the believers in my church enjoy getting together for meals, for learning, for prayer and praise, both in large and small groups?
- Do the believers in my church really care for and share with each other?
- Are the people in our community attracted to Christ because of my church's togetherness?

Genuine togetherness requires deep and daily commitment on the part of all. This is also brought out in Ephesians 4:11-16 and I Peter 4:7-11. Try doing an analytical study of these portions of the Bible for further practice and to learn more about how the church of Jesus Christ should function.

THE '3 C' STUDY

When reading the Bible, don't be surprised if certain topics jump out at you. Often the writer of a given book wanted to highlight a given topic. Paul obviously had **freedom** in mind when he wrote Galatians. In writing to the Philippian church he repeatedly refers to **joy** or **rejoicing**. To do a topical study you first select the topic and then **collect** all of the references in which that topic is found in a given portion or book. You can do a more extensive study by using a concordance and listing all the references in the Bible. Second, after each reference, write an explanation of what that reference says about the topic. For example, Philippians 1:4 says as Paul thought about the Philippians' faithful partnership with him it brought him great joy and led him to pray for them. Third, once you have done this with each reference, **correlate** the material by grouping similar emphases together and give each group a descriptive title and put the titles into a logical order. Fifth, based on the resulting outline, **crystallize** some conclusions or applications showing how the topic relates to your life experience.

EXAMPLE: In Philippians the words **joy** or **rejoice** are mentioned in the following references: 1:4, 18, 19, 25-26; 2:2, 17, 18, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10. In your notebook give a brief statement about what is said in each reference regarding joy or rejoicing. After I **collected** this information, I **correlated** it into an outline:

1. Joy through fellowship
 - a. 1:4 and 4:10 joy in prayer for faithful partners
 - b. 2:2 joy because of Christian harmony
 - c. 2:29 joy in welcoming a faithful servant
2. Joy through service
 - a. 1:18 joy because Christ is preached by others even when their motives are questionable
 - b. 1:19 joy because of deliverance through the prayers of others
 - c. 1:25-26 and 2:17 joy, even through suffering, because of progress in Christian growth
 - d. 4:1 joy because of fruitfulness
3. Joy through worship
 - a. 2:18 share what God is doing so others can rejoice in and praise God
 - b. 3:1 focus on the Lord as the basis of your joy
 - c. 4:4 focus on the Lord as a habit - "again I say, Rejoice!"

Based on this outline, I **crystallized** the material into the following conclusions and/or applications:

1. Christian joy is found through participating with God in the developing of other lives and in creating and cultivating mutually supportive relationships.
2. I can bring joy to others by sharing what God is doing in my life.
3. I can contribute to creating an atmosphere of joy by living in harmony with fellow Christians.
4. I should rejoice if Christ is preached even if I question the motives of some doing the preaching.
5. Work at meditating on the person of Christ. Even if you don't seem to have any other reason to rejoice, rejoice because you know Him.

For further practice and enrichment, do a study on **freedom** in Galatians, **love** in I John and **faith** in Hebrews 11. You could use this study method for understanding what the Bible says about a given doctrine such as sin, salvation, the church or the return of Christ.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY

Human interest always stimulates concentration and captures the imagination. We perk up when we see or hear how someone else manages in a situation. This is especially true when the circumstances are similar to what we might be facing at the time. The more we can learn from others the less we need to learn through the hard knocks of experience.

The biographical study helps us learn from the experience of Bible characters. It uses an approach similar to that for the '3 C' (topical) study, only now you are **collecting** all references in the Bible referring or relating to the character you want to study. A concordance will be necessary for most characters. You then **correlate** the material into either a character analysis or an historical portrait. The latter emphasizes events in the person's life while the former emphasizes the qualities of an individual. Then you **crystallize** what you have learned into applications.

EXAMPLE: Barnabas

Following are the references where you can find information about Barnabas. Write out all you can learn about this man and his ministry after each reference: Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-27; 11:22-26,

30; 12:25; 13 and 14 (Paul's first missionary trip); 15:1, 36-41; I Corinthians 9:6; Galatians 2:1, 9, 13; Colossians 4:10.

If you were to do an historical portrait, you would do something similar to what I have done in the following outline:

1. His birth and early life - family was from the tribe of Levi, born in Cyprus, names Jose
2. His adult life prior to conversion: a landowner
3. His conversion - probably on the day of Pentecost or shortly thereafter
4. His work for God - he exercised...
 - ~ the gift of giving when he sold his land and gave the proceeds to the apostles
 - ~ the gift of discernment when he welcomed Paul as a genuine believer and when he was sent to evaluate the work in Antioch
 - ~ the gift of administration when he got Paul from Tarsus to help in Antioch, helped deliver financial assistance in Jerusalem and participated in the first church council
 - ~ the gift of prophet and teacher as a leader in Antioch and as a missionary
 - ~ the gift of discipling as seen in his work with Paul and Mark
5. There is no mention of his death

If you were to do a character analysis you would find the following:

1. He was a committed man - sold all and gave to help the needy
2. He was a gracious man - believers named him Barnabas, son of encouragement. He was chosen to evaluate work in Antioch, rejoiced with them and exhorted them.
3. He was a sensitive man - didn't want to offend Jewish believers, so he compromised; and he was willing to give John Mark another chance
4. He was a humble man - readily let Paul become leader of first missionary team and willingly withdrew from prominent leadership to help John Mark mature
5. He was a courageous man - risked his reputation by bringing Paul to the church in Jerusalem
6. He was a wise man - sought out Paul to help him at Antioch, encouraged Paul to become a leader and disciplined John Mark until he become useful. He saw the potential in others
7. He was a good man - full of the Holy Spirit and faith

Some conclusions and applications I drew from this study are that Barnabas was not a perfect man (he compromised his convictions in Antioch and got very angry in his disagreement with Paul over John Mark), but he left an indelible imprint on the life of the early church and on its leaders. He modeled the life of a true discipler (II Timothy 2:2). He was always working at helping others realize their full potential. He rejoiced when others were experiencing the blessing of God in their lives. He realized he couldn't keep doing all he wanted to do for God so he reproduced himself and multiplied and extended his ministry through others. He was always encouraging others to keep the work of God going forward. Oh, how the church today needs more men like Barnabas. Reflect long on his life and follow his example. Try the study of other lives such as Gaius (Acts 19:29; 20:4; Romans 16:23; I Corinthians 1:14). From him I learned what faithfulness entails and that whatever we have should be shared with others in the family of God. Tychicus is another interesting character (Acts 20:4; Ephesians 6:21-22; Colossians 4:7; II Timothy 4:12; Titus 3:12). He was one who was happy doing routine jobs. He remained faithful even though he was never promoted. He made the most of his opportunities.

A biographical study will always be a good change of pace. Turn to it when you get bogged down in your Bible reading and study. The human interest factor will add the spice and stimulation you need.

A CHAPTER BY CHAPTER STUDY

As we have seen with other study methods, the primary objective with any study is to get the message. The process is through gathering and organizing information and then drawing conclusions and establishing applications based on the material. Let me suggest one additional method which many have found helpful.

Read a chapter over a few times, possibly in different translations. Then go through it verse by verse to identify or establish the following: a chapter title, a key verse, significant truth, any cross references either you think of or are listed in your Bible's margin, any difficulties you will want to do further study on or that you think others might have, any obvious applications to be made, and finally, a brief summary statement or outline.

There are some similarities to other study methods. But in studying through a book, chapter by chapter, especially the longer books of the Bible, this method has unique benefits.

EXAMPLE: Read over Acts 20 a few times, then identify answers to the following. Compare your answers with mine.

1. Chapter title: A Faithful Ministry
2. Key verse: verse 20
3. Significant truth: when we have done all we can do there is always more work still to be done. We must learn to delegate that to others, and depend upon God and His Word to finish the task.
4. Cross references: Ezekiel 3:18-21, I Thessalonians 2:7-12
5. Difficulties: should Paul have gone on to Jerusalem when the Spirit had been warning him of the difficulties he would encounter?
6. Applications: There are two factors related to finishing the task - we must reach as many as possible with the good news of salvation and then we must teach as much truth as would be helpful to mature those who respond. Until we have done both, our task isn't finished in a given area. If God calls us out of that situation to go elsewhere we must delegate the rest of the task to others and depend upon God to use them and His Word to finish the task. Another application would be the words of Jesus which are quoted in verse 35: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."
7. An outline of the chapter might look like this: Title: Paul, An Example Of Faithful Ministry
 - a) He encouraged believers in various cities (v. 1-12)
 - b) He enlightened both non-believers and believers as he had opportunity (v. 13-27)
 - c) He equipped leaders to shepherd the church (v. 28-38)

If you were to summarize the chapter, you might write something like this:

Paul exemplified what he wanted others to experience. He wanted to help believers press on even if the going got rough. He shared the truth of God any time, any place, and with sincerity. To be sure that what he had started in Ephesus would be carried on he met with the leaders one final time to challenge them regarding the task and the goal towards which they should be

moving. The work of God will be done effectively by those who are more concerned with giving than they are about receiving.

Try this chapter by chapter study with one of the longer books of the Bible. It will enable you to be enriched day by day as well as help you remember more of the total contents of the book. When you are done with the whole book, review your notes and determine a title, key verse and some major truths for the whole book.

MEMORIZATION AND MEDITATION

We have been looking at study methods we can use for getting the message from God's Word. The Psalmist wrote about hiding God's Word in his heart (Psalm 119:11). He also talked about meditating on God's Word day and night (1:2; 119:97; 148). How does one best hide God's Word in his heart so he can meditate on it day and night? We have looked at a number of ways. But the most basic way is to memorize God's Word.

I started this series of studies by encouraging the **reading** of God's Word. Then I challenged you to **study** God's Word. Now I want us to look at God's command to **memorize** His Word. This is a logical progression. If in our reading we are stimulated to look into a subject or portion more thoroughly we should use a study method to do so. If after studying it we want to remember more than the outline or application, we should memorize the material on which they are based.

A good place to start would be key verses that capture a truth you have learned. Then you might want to memorize the paragraph in which it is found. Finally, you might consider memorizing the chapter or whole book. At first that kind of challenge might seem overwhelming. But remember, Christ promised the Holy Spirit would not only teach us all things but would remind us of everything Christ taught (John 14:26). He is there to help us memorize and remember.

There is a basic secret to memorization. Always learn the reference where the verse is found along with the verse. After you have gone over a verse enough times so you can say it without looking at the Bible or the card on which you have written it, you must review it. After you have reviewed it, review it some more. Review, review, review is the secret of memorizing. There is no short cut.

As you learn new verses or sections, don't neglect to review what you have already learned. Then use what you have memorized in your praying. Use it in your conversations with others. Think about it when you're taking a shower, when you're walking or driving to work, when you have a moment here or there throughout the day. Think about it as you review it in bed just before you fall asleep. If you wake up in the middle of the night think about it, review it, pray over it - I have found that to be the best sleep inducer around. When you have God's Word in your conscious mind as you fall asleep, I believe your subconscious mind will be mulling it over while you sleep.

Someone has likened this process to the way a cow eats. It starts by getting grass into its mouth and chewing it. After swallowing it, the cow brings it up again and chews it some more. That's what God wants us to do with His Word. Get a mouthful. Chew it. Re-chew it. And finally digest it. When we hide God's Word in our hearts in this way, we will be guarded from sinning against God (Psalm 119:11), and grow into maturity in our faith (Acts 20:32, Romans 10:17).

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

We need to be reminded that getting the message is not merely an intellectual exercise. This is a spiritual discipline. God is interested in feeding us, enlightening us, equipping us and perfecting us through His Word. He has given us His Spirit to teach us all things and remind us of all we have learned. He will guide us into all truth (John 14:26, 16:13). He at times will use others whom He has gifted to teach us (Ephesians 4:11-12). This would include books which Spirit-gifted men and women have written for our enrichment. He also might help us grasp things as a result of a small group discussion. But for us to be teachable we must consciously surrender to His control and in prayer ask Him to fulfill His promised ministry in our lives.

Prayer helps us in our preparation for study. Once we have studied God's Word it helps us in our praying (John 15:7, I John 5:14-15).

Meditating on God's Word will make us wiser than our enemies, teachers or elders (Psalm 119:97-100). It will equip us thoroughly for every good work (II Timothy 3:17).

Give the Word of God and the discipline of reading, studying, memorizing and meditating on it high priority in your daily experience. Then, once you get the message, implement it through obedience and trust.

The Word of God will not make sense to you, no matter how diligently you study it, if you have not become spiritually live. Paul said, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (I Corinthians 2:14). He also said, "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ" (Romans 8:9). To belong to Christ you must trust in Him. He came to die for our sins and be raised from the dead (I Corinthians 15:3-4). He is alive and wants to become your Savior and Lord. In prayer, tell Him you trust in Him and in what He has done for you. Tell Him you want to belong to Him and be filled with His Spirit (I Corinthians 6:19-20, Ephesians 5:18). When you take this step of faith, He will make you spiritually alive. Then you will find the Bible to be a Living Book with a living message. And getting the message from God's Word will become a lifetime adventure.

Order from your bookstore for further help:

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Effective Bible Study, by Howard F. Vos, Zondervan

Galatians: The Charter of Christian Liberty, by Merrill C. Tenney, Eerdmans

Order from me:

A Daily Guide To Knowing God, by Lud Golz, Tyndale (\$5 donation). A manual with daily readings designed to be catalysts for meditation and worship based on Biblical truth. The objective is to use the Bible references and the author's thoughts as springboards to meditation and worship.

A Call To Responsible Freedom, by Lud Golz, Treasure House (\$5.95 donation). This book will give insight and handles you can grasp in maintaining balance between the extremes of a rigid adherence to a narrow set of rules and a laissez faire attitude where most anything goes. If Scriptural maturity is eluding you, you need to read and respond to this call to responsible freedom.