

GRACE BIBLE TRAINING CENTRE (GBTC)
SCHOOL OF MINISTRY
ARUSHA - TANZANIA

SUBJECT: BIBLE STUDY METHODS

LESSON 4: METHODS OF BIBLE STUDY

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There are 3 key methods of studying the Bible:

- a) The Biographical Method
- b) The Topical Method, and
- c) The Devotional Method

There are other methods people use but these 3 are the most common and popular.

4.1 Biographical Method of Bible Study

Biography is the study of someone's life as written by someone else.

Characters of the Bible were real people. Yet somehow they often seem less real than the people we see every day. You have never seen them. You meet them only in the pages of a book. Your life is probably very different from theirs.

Archaeologists dig up bones of those who lived long ago; they find artefacts (tools and utensils used by people) which help us imagine what life was like hundreds (or thousands) of years ago. But this is still the dim past and is difficult to accept as real.

How can we get to know people of the Bible better?

How can we really learn from the mistakes they made?

How can we profit from their godly lives so that we too can inherit the promises they inherited?

How can we come to appreciate them as real although they were imperfect human beings like us?

Bible Biography or Studying the people of the Bible is a good way to find the answers.

4.1.1 Introduction to Bible Biography

In Matthew 8:11, Jesus made the following statements to a crowd of people, *"And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven"*. On another occasion, Jesus told the unbelieving

Sadducees that God said, *"I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"* (Matthew 22:32). He is the God of the living, not of the dead.

Since this lesson is about the **biographical** method of Bible study, we will be studying about the lives of Bible people as they lived long ago. One way to help think of Bible people as **real** people is to consider some Bible facts.

Let's see an example of Abraham:

In John 8, Jesus was giving facts about Himself to unbelieving Pharisees. He told them that He was the **light of the world** and that He **came from above**. He told them many things they did not want to hear. *(Read the whole of John 8 and especially verses 31 to 59, to get the full debate between Jesus Christ and the Pharisees about Abraham).*

The Pharisees boasted to Jesus that they belonged to the family descended from Abraham. Jesus showed them that while they were Abraham's physical descendants, they were not really Abraham's children *(verses 33-39)*. Finally, in verse 58, he said to them, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."* He claimed in this statement that He existed long before Abraham was born. They were clearly unhappy with this assertion and accused Jesus Christ of being a demon for making such claims. Eventually, they tried to stone Him.

In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus revealed a little more about the activities of Abraham after his physical death. In the story, Jesus actually named the people involved. In this account, Jesus told of a conversation between Abraham and an unbelieving rich man who saw the beggar Lazarus being entertained by Abraham at a feast.

So, as one study a person like Abraham in the Bible, one needs to keep in mind that there is more to the story!

Moses and Elijah may be physically dead but they are alive. Hundreds of years after they left the earth, they were seen talking with Jesus on a mountain *(Matthew 17:1-6; Luke 9:28-36)*.

As one study about Moses and Elijah from the Bible, remember also that there is more to the story!

Hebrews 11 gives many snapshot life stories of Old Testament believers who lived and died in faith. These were real people. More to their story can be found in several passages of Scripture.

No book could contain the accounts of all the life stories that started on earth and are continuing in heaven. Hebrews 12:22-24 tells us that such people are still alive in heaven, the Paradise of God.

As believers, we are already citizens of that great community! With these facts in mind;

- i) We should learn how to study about those people of the Bible
- ii) We should learn faith from their faith;

- iii) We should learn from their earthly experiences as God intends for us to do;
- iv) We should follow in their footsteps to inherit eternal life as they have!

4.1.2 Kinds of Biography

Biographical information is in Scripture because of specific purposes the authors had in mind. 2Timothy 3:16 teaches that all Scripture is useful. God inspired the writers to include information that He intends should be included.

There are four basic reasons why biblical authors included biographical information in Scripture.

A. Simple Narrative

The first reason is *simply to list the facts as a matter of record*. This is called *simple narrative*. It is simply telling the facts in story form. This is a common kind of biographical information found in Scripture, and it can be readily studied with reference to many different Bible characters.

B. Narrative Exposition

The second reason for the author's inclusion of biographical information is to use the narrative (the story of a person's life) as *a means of teaching a historical lesson*. In this case, the facts are more than a simple record. They are there to teach.

The entire span of the person's life is studied, with special attention given to the way God's dealings in his life affect his nation. When teaching a historical lesson is the purpose of the biographical information, the story of the person being studied becomes incidental to the main theme of God's interest and care for His own people. There are fewer examples of this kind of biography to study because the number of people with crucial roles in history is limited. However, people like Daniel, Paul, Abraham, Isaac, Joseph and others can be included in this group.

C. Character Exposition (1Corinthians 10:1-12)

The third reason for the author's inclusion of biographical information may be to *teach character*. This is closely related to narrative exposition, but with a different slant. In this case the author is primarily interested in presenting the facts as they relate to the spiritual progress and character of the person being studied.

The kings of Israel and Judah lend themselves to this kind of study. The details of their lives are given in a very thorough manner along with God's pronouncements about them. These pronouncements are praise in some cases and stern condemnation in others. Many Bible people can be used for this type of study: disciples, prophets, and godly people from many walks of life whose stories are included in Scripture (Examples are Sampson, Moses, Daniel, etc)

Character exposition is written for the purpose of exploring a person's character and spiritual development. Therefore, it should be organized around categories related to character. The main topics might be centred on decisions made by the individual which were clues to his character.

Subtopics under those major decisions might be personal influences or environmental influences that had a bearing on the decisions.

Other headings might be his dominant personal traits, his major accomplishments, his religious experiences, and clues that might be found in his relationships with other people.

D. Argument (*John 20:30-31; Luke 1:1-4*)

The fourth (and least common) reason for the author's inclusion of biographical information in Scripture is *to prove a point*. The facts of the individual's life are used to convince someone of something. Occasionally you will see this aim in evidence in the gospels concerning the life of Jesus, or in Paul's writings.

4.1.3 Summary of Biography

The basic steps for any kind of biographical study will be the same.

For any of the four types of biographical study one must read, observe, and make notes. Then, outline the notes to help interpret the information collected.

For a *simple narrative*, cite the facts as a matter of record. The main points of outline might be:

- a) Birth and Early Life
- b) Conversion and Ministry
- c) Relationships with Others
- d) Character Evaluation
- e) End of Life Experiences and Death
- f) Author's Purpose for Writing

Subtopics and details would be organized around this framework. One might not find facts for each of these categories available, but it's important to use whatever one could find.

The outline for the other types of biographical study will follow the same pattern. The emphasis will be different.

In an *argument*, one will seek to understand what point the author was trying to prove. What was he trying to convince someone of? Who was he trying to convince?

In a *character exposition*, the person's spiritual life and influence on others will be the main focus, and the rest of the information will be incidental.

Sometimes the same person is mentioned in more than one Bible book. In that case you almost need to have access to a Bible *concordance* to find all the information. A Bible concordance lists words of the Bible in alphabetical order, along with places in Scripture where each word listed is used. If you do not have a concordance, you will have to use the book method. That is, get all the information that is given in one book and build your study around that.

4.2 Topical Method of Bible Study

In Romans 1:20 we find a relationship between the visible and invisible qualities which are valuable to topical Bible study: *"For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse!"*

This Scripture explains that God created the very nature that surrounds us, with the intent that we could learn about Him through our observation of it.

The early and latter rains which water the crops of Palestine are the autumn rains (early) and spring rains (latter). These rains are used as significant illustrations in Scripture. (See Proverbs 16:15, Zechariah 10:1, James 5:7.)

Any topic that is treated or mentioned in the Bible is a possible topic to study. This would include not only such things as *clothing, housing, foods*, etc. but also *words*; that is, how certain key words are used in Scripture. Your study would include themes such as *faith, prayer, the second coming of Christ*, and topics concerning Christian living.

There will be great differences in the amount of information available about various topics in the Bible. For some, there may be enough information in just a chapter or a passage. For others, it may be necessary to glean information from many books in both Testaments to get the fullest possible meaning from the study. The more comprehensive the study is, the longer it will take. The length of a topical study will depend on the amount of information to be found and the amount of time one wishes to spend on it.

A long, complete study is made much easier if one has access to a Bible concordance or a Bible dictionary. Bible software is also available to speed up searches. In these concordances and dictionaries, words and topics mentioned in the Bible are listed in alphabetical order along with their Scripture references. These allow one to save time in finding all the places where a topic is mentioned.

However, topical studies can be done without such helps. In fact, it is better in shorter topical studies to do your own reading and searching for occurrences of the topic you wish to investigate. This is true because in doing so, you will not only find *Direct* references to the topics, but *Indirect* references as well.

Direct references are those which actually contain the specific word or phrase you are looking for.

Indirect references are those which refer to the theme or general idea of your topic. These *Indirect references* are important for a more complete understanding of your topic.

There are two types of Topical study:

- a) Theological study;
- b) Nature study

4.2.1 Theological Study

An example of a topic for Theological study could be *The Nature of God*. Typical references for this topic could be Habakkuk 1:2, 12, 13; 2:1, 13-14, 20; 3:3, 5-6, 13, 18-19.

These passages reveal the nature of God as being personal, holy, and righteous. He is supreme in power, fair in judgment, and patient in His administration of justice, and He is the Saviour.

It is important to write down qualities or observations from each verse that you read in order to build a picture or an outline of the subject or topic under consideration.

This example of *The Nature of God*, deals with a topic that is a *quality* rather than a *thing*. Additional qualities that can be investigated are hope, love, faith, forgiveness, repentance, and eternal life.

4.2.2 Nature Study

A typical example that one can chose for Nature study is the *sparrow*. This small bird is representative of the many topics of interest that can be found in the area of nature. It can be a study to illustrate how much God cares for us (*Matthew 10:29-31*) or an illustration of sorrow and loneliness (*Psalms 102:7*).

You can check for translations, meanings and various usages of the topic.

Plants, animals and minerals are sometimes used in the Bible as *illustrations* and sometimes as *symbols*.

An *illustration* of a truth pictures that truth in a way which makes it easier to understand. The *mustard plant* is an example of such an illustration. Because the mustard plant is known for growing an unusually large plant from a very small seed, Jesus used it to illustrate truth about the Kingdom of Heaven (*Matthew 13:31-32*) and faith (*Matthew 17:20*).

A *symbol* is something that stands for something else. A symbol has one or more qualities that are reminders of the object it stands for. For example, in Daniel 2 the "head of gold" was revealed to be a symbol of King Nebuchadnezzar himself (verse 38). In Daniel 8:1-8, a ram and a goat were used as symbols of kingdoms and kings who were to come.

In addition to those already mentioned in this lesson, some possible topics from nature might include light, water, grain, herbs (such as cumin, Matthew 23:23) and many others.

4.2.3 Procedures for Topical Method of Study

1. List occurrences of a topic or information about it
2. Classify them into categories – historical, nature, theology, moral, sacrifices, etc
3. Examine the context in which they are used
4. Summarize each category
5. Compare each summary statement. What can you learn from them?
6. Summarise the entire outline study. What stood out for you in the study? etc

4.3 Devotional Method of Bible Study

To have an idea of devotional study, let's imagine a tired, hungry traveller in a desolate place who finds a beautiful tree, filled with delicious fruit. His one desire is to eat a piece of the fruit, to be nourished and refreshed by it. After he has eaten, he may now consider finding out more about the tree itself. He may note where it is growing, the shape of its leaves and branches, its colour and fragrance.

No matter how much he satisfies his curiosity about the lovely tree itself, it is his eating of the fruit that satisfies his hunger and nourishes his body.

So it is with God's Word, the Bible. Every aspect of it is fascinating. No human mind can ever reach the depths or the heights of it because, like its Author, it is eternal and infinite. New aspects of familiar verses will continue to unfold as long as you study Scripture. Like the beautiful tree and its fruit, the part of the Scripture that you *eat*, is the part that nourishes and satisfies you.

How can one *eat* Scripture? You begin by reading it, and doing more than that. You must internalize it through *devotional study*. You must make its teachings your own. When you do this, Scripture becomes your spiritual food and gives you spiritual life. Jesus said, "*The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life*" (John 6:63).

Other methods of Bible study are very much intellectual exercises, and should be more than that. As you become aware of the *devotional attitude*, and each time you enter into the study of Scripture with an open heart, you will find that it speaks to you personally.

There are really no new techniques to present in this lesson. Devotional study is accomplished by combining all the tools and skills learnt so far. However, there will always be two aspects of this study; the *textual* and *spiritual*. What this means is that the text that you read in the Bible should produce spiritual growth and nourishment within, leading to spiritual maturity.

4.3.1 Purpose of Devotional Study

The important thing to learn is *Purpose*.

The main purpose of devotional Bible study is

- a) To personally feed upon God's Word, allowing it to become life to you;
- b) To seek the mind of God;
- c) To listen to the voice of God;
- d) To pursue the will of God;
- e) To rest in His holy presence in praise and worship.

This is accomplished by using every possible means to understanding what the Scriptures are saying, and then responding to the Lord in loving obedience.

Devotional study should be a part of every Christian's daily activity. It is intensely personal. While there may be times when a devotional study is prepared to be shared with others, its main purpose remains personal. What is the Holy Spirit saying to me? Devotional study will help find the answer.

Because Christians have an enemy who tries to keep them from knowing and doing God's will, you may find more hindrances to your study when you are studying in this manner.

Peter warns in 1Peter 5:8-9 saying;

"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world."

4.3.2 Devotional Method of study by Text

The text for devotional Bible study can be a *word*, a *verse*, a *paragraph*, or a *longer segment* of Scripture.

a) Word Study

A devotional study should not be based on just one word because such a study would require access to reference materials which could give further insight into the ways specific words are used in the original Greek and Hebrew texts.

Devotional studies should be based on a verse, a paragraph, and a longer segment.

b) Verse and Chapter Study

Verse and chapter divisions are not found in the original Greek and Hebrew texts of the Bible. Scripture has traditionally been divided that way by translators to break up the text into smaller portions for better understanding. Once in a while you may find that the first verse of one chapter would fit better if it were the last verse of the previous chapter, or vice versa. The choice of just where to begin and end the chapters was made several centuries ago.

The great convenience of having Scripture divided into easy-to-handle sections far outweighs any problem about which verse should end the chapter! You always are free to start or stop your study at any logical place. Just be sure that your starting or stopping does not alter the meaning of the passage. Include all the words that make the thought complete.

Example of Devotional Study of a Verse:

In devotional study, heart attitude is more important than intellectual technique. Also, methodical study is more valuable than random or haphazard study. A good Bible scholar will combine right attitude of heart with best method of study. You will be responding to God's Word to feed your spirit, and you will bring to bear all you have learned about Bible study.

There are three convenient steps in making a devotional study. The steps are:
Choose the Text, Observe the Facts, Interpret the Facts.

i) Choose the Text

The first step is to decide on the verse to be studied. You will rely heavily on the Holy Spirit to direct your attention to His Word for *you* at that particular time.

This reliance is difficult to explain to anyone because it is so personal. But if you are a Christian and you spend time with the Word of God, you probably are aware of the way the Holy Spirit quickens your mind to certain Scriptures. Each person's experience can be expressed such as, *"the letters just seemed to jump off the page."* The Holy Spirit has His own special way of attracting one's attention if one seeks Him for guidance in the study of the Word.

So, one way to choose a verse is to pay close attention to a given passage of Scripture. You may be especially drawn to a verse as you read. Any time you read the Bible, make a note of verses that are interesting to you. The verses that lend themselves to devotional study are those which contain *directions to follow* or *warnings to heed*.

What if you receive no "special" guidance? Does that mean you should not study the Word? By no means! "All Scripture is inspired by God. So, if you are not drawn especially to any verse, just choose one that contains directions to follow or warnings to heed.

ii) Observe the Facts

The second step is to read the verse thoughtfully many times. As you read, think this question to yourself: *"If I had to give this verse a three or four word title, what would it be?"*

By thinking of a title for the verse, you will grasp the main idea in it. When you have the main idea of the verse, read it through and *list all the facts you can find in it*. Look for facts that are either *directly stated* or *implied* by this verse.

Look for answers to the following 5 "W" questions:

WHO? WHAT? HOW? WHEN? WHERE?

Note that you will not be able to find answers to all five of these questions in every verse you study. Make a note of the names of things, the action words, *the words that describe things*. All of these observations should be written in your notebook.

iii) Interpret the Facts

The third step is to interpret the verse by writing the meaning of it in your own words. By doing this, you will be answering the question that is the key to interpretation:

“What does this mean?”

“What does this mean to *me*?” – (You make the question personal to you.)

In preparing a devotional study you will be more interested in finding truth to feed your spirit than in technical matters.

c) Paragraphs

Usually, modern translators include not only chapter and verse division but also divide the Scripture into paragraphs. A *paragraph* is grouping together of sentences that relate to the same main topic. The first line of that group of sentences, in most Bibles, is often *indented* or demarcated by spacing, or a started with a bold verse number, to show transition from one thought to another. A paragraph is a convenient unit to study.

These small “bites” of Scripture will be important to devotional study. When Jesus was tempted by Satan, He quoted the Scripture which says, “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*” (Matthew 4:4). Jesus was quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3. This is an example of an intense study of small portions of Scripture as though looking at them under a microscope.

Example of Devotional Study of a Paragraph:

Devotional study of a paragraph is very similar to devotional study of a verse.

For a chosen paragraph, firstly read each verse carefully.

Secondly, observe the facts. That is, reread as many times as necessary to find answers to the five *fact* questions:

WHO? WHAT? HOW? WHEN? WHERE?

Note the verbs or actions, the statements of truth, the commands and warnings.

When you begin to clearly understand the message of the paragraph, write a three or four word title for the paragraph.

The third step will be interpretation. It will include the writing in your own words of a statement of meaning on the paragraph. This statement will bring all your observations and interpretations together in a unified whole.

d) Longer segments

Sometimes you may want to use longer segments such as several paragraphs or more than one chapter. The length of the text is not as important as the “listening heart.”