

How to Do a Biographical Bible Study

Purposes and Principles

Biographical study is a method that examines the lives of the people in the Bible. Biographical study of the Bible has much appeal because people are interested in others' experiences. The people of the Bible demonstrate actions we can imitate and faults we must avoid. We can look at one incident in the life of a Bible character, or we can survey the entire life.

Read the following Scriptures and summarize the reasons God gave us the Old Testament accounts.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13:

Romans 15:4:

The verses from 1 Corinthians indicate that God gave the Old Testament accounts to serve as examples for us. Paul reminds us in Romans 15:4 that “whatever was written before was written for our instruction.” The purpose of biographical study of the Bible is to learn the lessons God has shown through His people in the past. In the Bible we find numerous people—men and women, good and bad—whose lives we can examine in detail.

The tools you need for biographical study are a Bible, a concordance, and a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia. Here is the general process you will follow.

1. Read relevant passages about the person in the Scriptures.
2. Read in a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia an article about the character you are studying.
3. Interpret the information you have collected and apply it in four ways: to your relationship with God, to your life, to your relationships with others, and to the church.

Here are four foundational principles for doing biographical Bible study.

1. *Begin with a simple character.* Some people of the Bible, such as Barnabas, Priscilla, and Aquila, appear only a few times. Other characters, such as Moses, David, and Paul, are so important that you will not be able to study their lives quickly. Begin with a simple character and work up to a more complex character.
2. *Watch for name changes and confusion of identity.* The Bible contains the stories of several people with the names of Mary, James, and John. As you study these people, be sure that you are studying the right character. Some people of the Bible are known by more than one name.

Mark, the author of the second Gospel, is known as Jon, Mark, or Marcus, and many books speak of him as John Mark. To gather all of the facts about people mentioned with more than one name, learn the names the Bible writers use for them. Usually a glance at a Bible dictionary, encyclopedia, or concordance can give you this information.

Discover the number of times each of the following names appears in the Bible.

Mark:

John:

James

Zechariah:

Discover by what other names the following persons were known.

Silas:

Peter:

Paul:

Jacob:

3. *Extend your exploration beyond a name search in a concordance.* In the Books of 1 and 2 Timothy we can learn a lot about Timothy even in sections where his name is not mentioned. Paul wrote both books to him. Information about Joshua appears throughout the entire Book of Joshua, even in those paragraphs in which Joshua's name may be absent.
4. *Use your imagination vividly.* Learn about the customs and culture in which the persons lived. Try to imagine how they felt and thought. Observe how they responded to circumstances. This will demand that you repeatedly read the Scriptures about the characters and think about them. As you study the characters, do not look for outside help in understanding their lives until you have thought about them. Using a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia too early will rob you of the freshness and joy of discovering what God wants to show you through your personal experience with His Word.

The Process

As you read the following steps, refer to the chart "Biographical Bible Study" on the following page. Later you will fill it in when it's time to practice.

1. *Select a character for study.* You will want to choose someone whose strengths you admire and whose failures you want to avoid. Begin with a character whose life is simple enough to analyze easily. You will write the character's name at the top of the chart.
2. *List Scripture references.* Use a concordance to find all of the references about that person. If possible, list every verse in which the name of the person appears.
3. *Use the Bible to learn all you can about the person.* You may find information about that person's birth, life, and death. Record the person's history and life setting. For example, if you study Barnabas, you may want to find out something about the missionary journey he made with Paul (see Acts 13–14). Later you may want to read articles in a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia about the events during your subject's lifetime, but start with the Scripture references

Biographical Bible Study

Bible character:

Scripture References	Biographical Information	Observations	Life Outline	Character Traits	Summary

you have listed to find information about the person. You will record your information adjacent to the applicable Scripture references you have listed on the chart.

4. *List observations about the person.* Your observations may include questions or problems for which you want answers. Some of your questions may lead you to do more research later, but for now record only the observations that arise from the Scripture references you have listed. You will write them adjacent to the related references on the chart.

Stop and practice. Use the chart “Biographical Bible Study” on the previous page to do a biographical study of John Mark by following the steps outlined so far.

5. *Write an outline of the person’s life.* Include as much about the person’s life as you have been able to discover. Sometimes you can formulate a chronological outline of the person’s life. Sometimes your outline consists of the places in which he lived—a geographical outline. You may not have enough information to make a clear outline, but an effort to use what you have will be helpful. Studying Paul’s life, for example, becomes more meaningful when you divide his life into his three missionary journeys and his imprisonment. That way you can observe the changes and developments in each section of his life.

Outline as much as you can of John Mark’s life. Write your outline in the appropriate column on the chart “Biographical Bible Study.”

6. *Identify positive character traits or failures to avoid.* Among the items you may want to observe are general reputation, aims and motives, family and national background, relationships and actions with other people, and general personality and spiritual life. List these traits in the appropriate column on the chart.

Stop and list John Mark’s character traits in the appropriate column of the chart “Biographical Bible Study.”

7. *Briefly summarize what you have learned from the person’s life.*

In the last column on the chart “Biographical Bible Study,” write a brief summary of what you have learned from your study of John Mark’s life.

8. *Apply the lesson you have learned.* God’s Word comes alive when you let it speak in your daily walk with God and in your relationships. Be sure your application is specific and feasible. Make it something you can do.

Write applications from the life of John Mark that you will try to make to the following areas. Make your statements clear, feasible, and specific.

To my relationship with God:

To my relationships with others:

To my life:

To the church:

Applying a Biographical Bible Study

You have found all of the references to the life of John Mark that appear in the New Testament. You have recorded information, made preliminary observations about him, outlined as much of his life as possible, listed character traits, and summarized lessons to be learned from his life. We want to provide some information about John Mark so that you can check and possibly improve your work. See if the work you have done on the chart “Biographical Bible Study” includes the information and answers the questions that follow.

John Mark is mentioned as Mark in Acts 12:12,25; 15:37,39; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24; and 1 Peter 5:13. He is mentioned as John in Acts 13:5,13, and the name John also appears in the previously mentioned Scriptures of Acts 12:12,25 and 15:37.

As you reflected on these verses, did you observe that in Acts 12:12 Mark’s family home was used in a prayer meeting for Peter’s release from jail? Is Mark’s father mentioned? What does this indicate about the influence of Mark’s father on the son? What size home was probably needed to host the praying Christians? What does this show about the wealth of Mark’s family?

In Acts 13:5 Mark left on Paul’s first missionary journey. Mark is described as a helper. What does this indicate about the kind of role Mark had?

In Acts 13:13 Mark left Paul and Barnabas for unexplained reasons. What does the terrain around the town of Perga suggest as possible reasons for leaving Paul and Barnabas?

In Acts 15:37-41 Paul and Barnabas disagreed over the question of taking Mark on the second missionary journey. What does the description of this discussion suggest about the intensity of their feelings? What happened to Paul and Silas after they began the second missionary journey?

Notice the gracious descriptions of Mark given by Paul in Philemon 24; Colossians 4:10; and 2 Timothy 4:11. In what area of ministry does Mark’s most significant ability seem to lie? What do these verses indicate about Paul’s willingness to admit that he had made a mistake?

Notice the reference to the relationship between Barnabas and Mark in Colossians 4:10. What attitude does Barnabas show in his defense of and work with Mark?

Can you assign possible dates in Paul's ministry to the passages in Philemon 24; Colossians 4:10; and 2 Timothy 4:11? Are they Paul's earliest or latest opinions of Mark? What insight into the potential usefulness of Mark does the reference in 1 Peter 5:13 show?

Was it difficult or easy to develop an outline of Mark's life? No particular outline is correct to the exclusion of all others. Compare your outline to the following one.

1. Mark's home background and early life—Acts 12:12
2. Mark's opportunity for service—Acts 12:25; 13:5
3. Mark's failure—Acts 13:13; 15:37-39
4. Mark's comeback—Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11; 1 Peter 5:13

What general traits of character did you observe in the life of John Mark? How did his early life affect him? What attitudes are reflected in Acts 13:13? What character traits appear in the later references to him in Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11; and 1 Peter 5:13?

Check your evaluation of John Mark's character by briefly surveying an article about him in a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia.

One fact that may come to your attention is that church tradition says that John Mark was stump-fingered. This may mean that he lost a finger in an accident or was born without one.

Take time to change or add to the information on the chart you completed.

Now that you have studied the life of John Mark, it is time for you to determine what application you can make. Remember, Bible study is always to be applied to life. God's Word comes alive when you let it speak in your daily walk with God and in your relationships. Be sure that your application is specific and feasible. Make it something you can do.

**Write applications from the life of John Mark that you will try to make.
Your statements should be clear, feasible, and specific.**

To your relationship with God:

To your life:

To your relationships with others:

To the church:

When you have completed the various applications from the life of the person you study, you may want to check your study by comparing it with other helps. For example, if you study the life of Caleb in the Old Testament, check a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia for a good summary of his life. If your sources strongly suggest a trait you have overlooked or question a trait you have found, review your interpretation.

Adapted from Thomas D. Lea, *God's Transforming Word: How to Study Your Bible* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1986), 117–26. Out of print.

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