



# How to Study a Bible Passage

| *A basic process to study any Bible passage*

## Goals for the Session

The primary goal is to encourage persons to make a commitment to engage in a discipline of regular Bible study and to enjoy doing so. The following objectives should help you and the class members accomplish that goal.

By the end of the session the class members will be helped to

- Become more confident in their approach to studying the Bible
- Realize the value of using a study Bible and reading more than one translation
- Use the built-in resources available to them in their own Bibles
- Increase their understanding of texts by comparing several passages
- Practice a simple process for doing Bible study
- Explore additional tools for use in Bible study
- Set a goal for themselves regarding their commitment to studying the Bible

## Preparing for the Session

In addition to each person having a Bible, you will be using a variety of other resources during the session, so it will be most comfortable if participants are seated at tables.

Provide as many Bibles as you have participants, if possible. For one of the activities it will be helpful if everyone could work with the same Bible translation. Perhaps you could borrow Bibles from the Sunday school or from the church pews. This course is based on the NRSV translation of the Bible, but you could also use the NIV if that is what is available.

Speaking of Bibles, it will be useful in one of the activities if you could arrange to have several Bible translations available. You could probably borrow Bibles from the church library or your pastor's library. The more translations you have available, the better.

You will need to duplicate the two resource sheets before the session. In addition, it will be helpful to have a few pencils available for those who do not have anything with which to write.

There are several additional resources that will be helpful to have available to show the class members:

- One or more examples of a study Bible (See suggestions in "For More Information.")
- A single-volume Bible dictionary and a single-volume Bible commentary (See suggestions in "For More Information.")
- An example of a Bible commentary on one book of the Bible, perhaps the Gospel of John, to show in exercise 6
- A Bible concordance
- Other resources available to you that might assist individuals doing Bible study

Please read through this Leader's Guide and consider the time you have. In exercise 6 you will walk the entire group through a study of a Bible passage. In exercises 7 and 8, small groups will do a short Bible study together and then reflect on it. There may not be time to do both activities. If there is not time and your group is capable of skipping exercise 6, consider doing so. Another possibility is to assign exercise 7 individually to members and have them return at your next session to discuss what they've done and complete the study.

## Teaching Tip

Class members will likely bring a variety of Bibles to class. They should be affirmed for whatever Bible they bring because it probably is a favorite or has sentimental value. By having a variety of translations available in the class and examples of study Bibles, perhaps some of the participants will consider purchasing and using another translation to complement the one they prefer. It will be important to make very clear the differences between paraphrase versions of the Bible and standard translations. If some like very much their paraphrase Bible (*The Living Bible*, *New Living Bible*, and *The Message* are the most popular), try not to make them feel they have an inferior Bible, but affirm that paraphrase versions are good for devotional reading and for seeing the ancient world of the Bible in our contemporary vernacular. Encourage them to consider complementing their paraphrase Bibles with an NRSV or NIV study Bible. You might also consider following this session with the two-session study “Which Bible Should I Buy?” which explains some of the varieties of types of Bibles and their respective uses.

## Opening (10 minutes)

### 1. Welcome and Introduction

Welcome all who arrive for the class session. If there are new persons or visitors, introduce them to the regular class members. If some have arrived without a Bible to use, give them one that you have provided. Go around the group, inviting members to introduce themselves by name and share a brief story of the occasion when they received their first Bible.

State that the purpose of this session is to introduce for some, and review for others, basic steps and resources to use for personal Bible study. You may want to write out ahead of time on a sheet of newsprint the objectives that are outlined in the goals statement.

### 2. Litany Prayer

Use the first resource sheet to lead the class in “A Litany of Scriptures.” There are a number of passages in the New Testament that speak of “the scriptures,” which refer to the scriptures of the time of Jesus. These scriptures were the books of the law, the prophets, and writings such as Psalms. Invite several individuals to read the “One” quotes from New Testament passages and for the whole class to pray in unison the “All” response.

## 3. Differences between Paraphrase and Translation Bibles

Check to see which versions of the Bible persons have brought. Ask if there are particular reasons why anyone brought that version of the Bible. Affirm that it is good to have a variety of paraphrases and translations because our understanding of a passage is enhanced when we read and study in more than one version of the Bible. Take a few minutes to explain the differences between paraphrases and standard translation Bibles.

## Exploring (30 minutes)

### 4. Finding Passages

Ask the class members if they remember hearing a passage from the New Testament with the words, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). Mention that this is referred to as “the Great Commandment.” Some, or all, in the class have probably heard the passage. Ask them where they think they will find the passage. Perhaps someone will know it is words of Jesus quoting the law. It is likely that no one will be able to identify the passage by chapter and verse. Ask, “What do we need to help us find the passage?” Someone might say, “Ask the pastor,” and that is a good possibility. You could suggest taking time to flip through the pages of the New Testament to find it.

If no one has suggested it, you could mention that a Bible concordance is the tool needed to help us find Bible passages. Show a concordance you have brought to class, and demonstrate how by using key words you can find the quoted words in three different Gospels (Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27), which are part of larger passages (Matt. 22:34–46; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–30). Comment that you do not expect everyone to have a concordance, but there should be one in the church library. Also, if class members have access to the Internet, there is a site on which they will be able to do word searches in many English Bibles: <http://www.biblegateway.com>. In addition, if they get really serious about Bible study, they could purchase a Bible program to use with their computers. Such Internet and computer resources are more useful for word and verse searches than a printed concordance.

Ask three class members to each read a different one of the three passages. Ask the whole class to listen for

differences and similarities in the three passages. Some of the differences they should notice include the following:

- In only one of the passages, Matthew, is Jesus asked the question to test him about which is the greatest commandment.
- In Mark, Jesus is asked the question because the scribe observes that Jesus gives good answers.
- In the Luke passage, the lawyer asks a different question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" In response Jesus asks, "What is written in the law?" and the lawyer ends up quoting the law about loving God.
- The Luke passage leads to the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is Jesus' response to the lawyer's second question, "Who is my neighbor?"
- In each passage there is reference to "commandment," "commandment of the law," or "written in the law." This suggests that the lawyer and Jesus are referring to something they know from the law, known as the Law of Moses.

## 5. Cross-Reference Citations

Focus on the above passages as an example of a way to find parallel passages and quotes from other places in the Bible. Use a Bible with a center column of cross-reference citations or a study Bible to show how to find the above three parallel passages. Explain that cross-reference citations, concordances, or word searches on the computer will lead to two Old Testament passages that are quoted by Jesus and the lawyer: Deuteronomy 6:5 (love for God) and Leviticus 19:18 (love for neighbor). Finding parallel passages and making connections between Old and New Testaments will lead to increased understanding of the text one is studying.

## 6. Exploring a Bible Passage

In the Participant Handout on page 4, there is a suggested process for studying a passage in depth. Work through the following steps as quickly as you are able. This exercise is to give an example of the process.

- Show the group the resources you have gathered: two or three different Bibles, a study Bible, a Bible dictionary, and a Bible commentary.
- Turn to the John 1:35–42, the call of the disciples. Ask two class members to read the passage, each from a

different translation. Ask the others to listen and to think of any questions that come to mind from the reading.

- Ask the group to share the questions they have, and write them on a sheet of newsprint or the marker board in the room.
- Have everyone look at the passages that come before and after the selected passage.
- Show the class the study Bible and read the notes that accompany the passage.
- Identify passages in other Gospels that parallel this passage.
- Select one or two key words from the passage. Possibilities are *disciples*, *lamb of God*, *rabbi*, *messiah*, and *Simon*. Read a paragraph or two from a Bible dictionary on the topic(s).
- Show the class the Bible commentary you brought, and read two or three paragraphs related to John 1:35–42.

After going through this process, ask several questions to reflect on what was read and heard:

- How many of our questions were answered by the information that was read?
- What do you think the writer was trying to communicate to the readers?
- What learnings from the passage can we apply to our faith-and-life journey today?

## 7. Comparing Passages

Where there are parallel passages, especially in the Gospels, I think most Bible readers, even the veterans among us, tend to have one version of the narrative imprinted in our memories. When we compare two or more passages of the same narrative, we discover that there are surprising differences and that we have to expand our understanding of the narrative. For instance, with the above passage of Jesus calling the disciples we tend to think first of the narratives in the Synoptics where Jesus calls four fishermen. In the John account there is no mention of fishermen.

There are passages in all four Gospels where Jesus calls his first disciples, and Peter, also called Simon, is a key member of the called group: Matthew 4:18–22; Mark 1:16–20; Luke 5:1–11; John 1:35–42. Explain briefly what

is meant by Synoptic Gospels as compared to the Fourth Gospel. (A Bible dictionary will help if you are not sure what to say.) Even though the Synoptic Gospels have similar narratives, there are differences.

Distribute the second resource sheet, "Jesus Calls Peter: Comparing the Four Gospels." Divide the class into four small groups. The instructions are as follows:

- Assign each small group a different one of the four passages.
- Have everyone read the passage.
- After they read the passage, instruct the small group to discuss their answers to six questions. For the sixth question they will not find a specific answer in the text; it asks them to interpret what they read.
- Give the small groups just a few minutes to work.
- Then gather the whole class together and receive answers from each group, one question at a time.

When the sharing of the answers to all six questions is completed, move to the "Responding" activity.

## Responding (5 minutes)

### 8. Questions for Reflection

The class has worked in small groups to do quickly a task that would take an individual much more time. However, there should be some learnings and insights derived from the activity. Lead a discussion guided by questions such as the following:

- As a result of comparing these four passages, what are some observations you have about the process?
- What does this tell us about the nature of similar narratives presented in four different Gospels?
- What are some insights or learnings you have gained?
- What are some implications of such an activity for your own personal Bible study?

## Closing (5 minutes)

### 9. "Instant" Litany

On a sheet of newsprint or the marker board in the room, print the brief phrase, "The Bible is . . ." Also, print the sentence for a response: "O God, may your holy word inspire and guide us." Invite class members to com-

plete the sentence that begins with "The Bible is . . ." Ask them to take one minute to write their sentence on a sheet of paper. After everyone has completed a sentence, say, "With those sentences we have the ingredients of a litany. One at a time, those who are willing, please share your sentence." After each reads his or her sentence, invite all class members to say in unison the prayer response quoted above.

Thank the folks for coming to the class, and wish them well in their Bible studies in the days and weeks to come.

## For More Information

The following resources will be of great help to you and members of your class for leading and participating in the activities suggested in this course. Even though particular resources are identified, you will need to gather whatever resources are available to you of the type suggested. Check your church library for resources, and also ask your pastor(s) if you can borrow some resources from their libraries. If such resources are not available in your church's library or if there is no library, you may want to recommend that such books be purchased for a resource shelf in the library or in the room where adult Bible study groups meet.

### Study Bibles

Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, gen. eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Gail R. O'Day and David Peterson, gen. eds., *The Access Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Walter J. Harrelson, ed., *The New Interpreter's Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003).

### Bible Dictionaries

Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

### Bible Commentaries

James L Mays, ed., *HarperCollins Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000).

John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001).

# Resource Sheet 1

## A Litany of Scriptures

- One: Jesus said, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matt. 4:4).
- All: **Help us, O God, to feast on your word that we may come to know better your way.**
- One: Responding to a question of the Sadducees, Jesus said, "You know neither the scriptures nor the power of God" (Matt. 22:29).
- All: **Merciful God, forgive us for not seeking to know more of your word and your power.**
- One: In the synagogue Jesus "unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor'" (Luke 4:17-18).
- All: **O God of truth and power, may we be empowered by the good news that Jesus brings us.**
- One: After encountering the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, the two disciples said, "Were not our hearts burning within us . . . while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).
- All: **We pray that we will experience "our hearts burning within us" when the Scriptures are opened to us.**
- One: The writer of 2 Timothy writes, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching . . . and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).
- All: **We come before you, dear God, to be inspired and empowered by your word for us.**
- One: The writer of 2 Peter writes, "You must understand . . . that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation" (2 Pet. 1:20).
- All: **Remind us, O God, to be open to your Spirit leading us to knowledge and truth. Amen.**

# Resource Sheet 2

## Jesus Calls Peter: Comparing the Four Gospels

In your small group, read one of the following four passages that present Jesus calling the first disciples to follow him. After you have read the passage, with others in your small group discuss answers to the questions below.

### Passages

Matthew 4:18–22

Mark 1:16–20

Luke 5:1–11

John 1:35–42

### Questions

1. Where does Jesus meet Peter?
2. Who are the others involved with Peter?
3. What are the circumstances of the meeting?
4. What does Jesus say to Peter and the others?
5. How do Peter and the others respond to Jesus?
6. What do you think the author wants us to understand about Jesus, Peter, and the others?