

BIBLE STUDY METHODS

Looking at Personal Problems in the Light of Scripture¹

When several group members are experiencing common struggles and difficulties, the group may want to study what Scripture says about these issues. Here is a format you can use to facilitate a meaningful topical study in your group.

Personal Preparation

1. After asking for God's direction and discussing needs with group members, choose the problem and biblical materials to focus upon. Only one problem should be discussed in a meeting. Warning: Not all personal problems have biblical material and enough general reference to all the group members to warrant group time and examination. Problems that are less focused or that apply to just one group member may be shared for prayer but should not be chosen for this kind of study. Using a Bible, a subject or thematic index, or a concordance, search for passages that seem related to the problem chosen for discussion. These questions may aid in the search:

- Did anyone in the Bible experience a similar problem? Who? When? Where is their story told and what can we learn from it?
- Is this problem mentioned by Jesus in any of His parables or His teaching? Did Jesus ever experience this difficulty? What can we learn from Him?
- Did the early Christians ever experience this problem? Where is it described? What did they do and what suggestions might we draw from their experiences?
- Is there any systematic instruction about this problem in the Bible? Are there key words we could look up in a concordance to locate this teaching?
- If there are many examples or many passages on this subject, which ones are the closest to our own situation or the most helpful for group study?

After searching the Scriptures, select one or two key stories or passages for group study.

2. Develop a "springboard" or introductory question to start the discussion. These questions may help you in thinking through the problem to develop this "springboard" question:

- Have you ever suffered for your faith as a Christian? What happened and how did you cope with it?
- Think of a time when you were in conflict with another person and you couldn't seem to solve the problem. What did you feel at the time, and how did the conflict affect you?
- Have you ever had trouble forgiving someone? What made it so hard?
- Have you ever prayed seriously for something and felt that God wasn't answering? How did it affect you?
- What is one of your greatest challenges

Group Procedure

1. Exploring the problem. Ask the springboard question. When people begin to respond, extend the discussion by asking others to share their experiences, either personal experiences or ones they have seen in others. Try to move beyond theoretical discussion to get at feelings: How did you (or they) feel about that? Or

¹ Hestenes, R. (1995). Looking at personal problems in the light of Scripture. *Discipleship Journal*, 88, p. 14-15.

perhaps relevance: Is this something you have ever struggled with? Or general relevance: How often does this problem occur? Where and when is it likely to occur?

The goal of this stage is to bring the problem to the surface and define it with enough clarity so that all the group members know what is involved. Your discussion should cover a description of the problem itself, accompanying feelings, and any contributing people or factors. Do not seek a specific solution to the problem at this point. Time should be limited and focused upon clarity and shared understanding. Key skills required include active listening to the person or people sharing their ideas and feelings, and asking questions for clarification. Allow 5 to 15 minutes for this stage.

2. Searching the Scriptures. Next, look at one or more biblical passages that are related to the problem you have been discussing. Ask one member to read it aloud if it is relatively brief. If you are studying several chapters, give 5 to 10 minutes for reading each one. Ask group members to read selected materials looking for events, experiences, or instructions related to one or two observation questions—e.g., Who are the characters in this story and what happens to them? Or, what does this passage say and how is it related to our topic? Then discuss the key event or main idea in the passage as it relates to the topic.

Ask such questions as: What was the experience or counsel of the person or the writer, and what can we learn from this about the problem at hand? Why was it written? What is the central thrust of the story? What is the passage teaching us? Spend at least 25 to 30 minutes in a careful examination of the facts, feelings, events, key concepts, and applicability of the passage.

3. Personal Application. After a good discussion of the biblical material, ask the group to spend some moments reflecting on the question: When, if ever, is the problem that we have been discussing a problem for you, or a problem for those you care about? How can the Scripture we studied help you? What further help do you need to meet the problem or challenge for yourself or others? What resources are available? This reflection may be done in silence, in writing, or in general group discussion. Give at least 10 to 15 minutes to this step before moving to prayer.

Keys to Success

- Do not let the discussion become focused on one person's problem and how to solve it. Focus instead on a more general discussion of the subject and of the ways different people meet and deal with it. This is not a problem-solving meeting. You are discussing a problem common to many Christians and looking at biblical materials to gain insight and perspective.
- Avoid giving advice and focus on general principles and positive possibilities. The value in a study like this can be in the encouragement that comes from knowing one is not alone in having problems and that there is help available from Scripture and the Christian community.
- Always end the discussion in prayer, committing any needs to the Lord and expressing gratitude for His willingness to hear and answer.