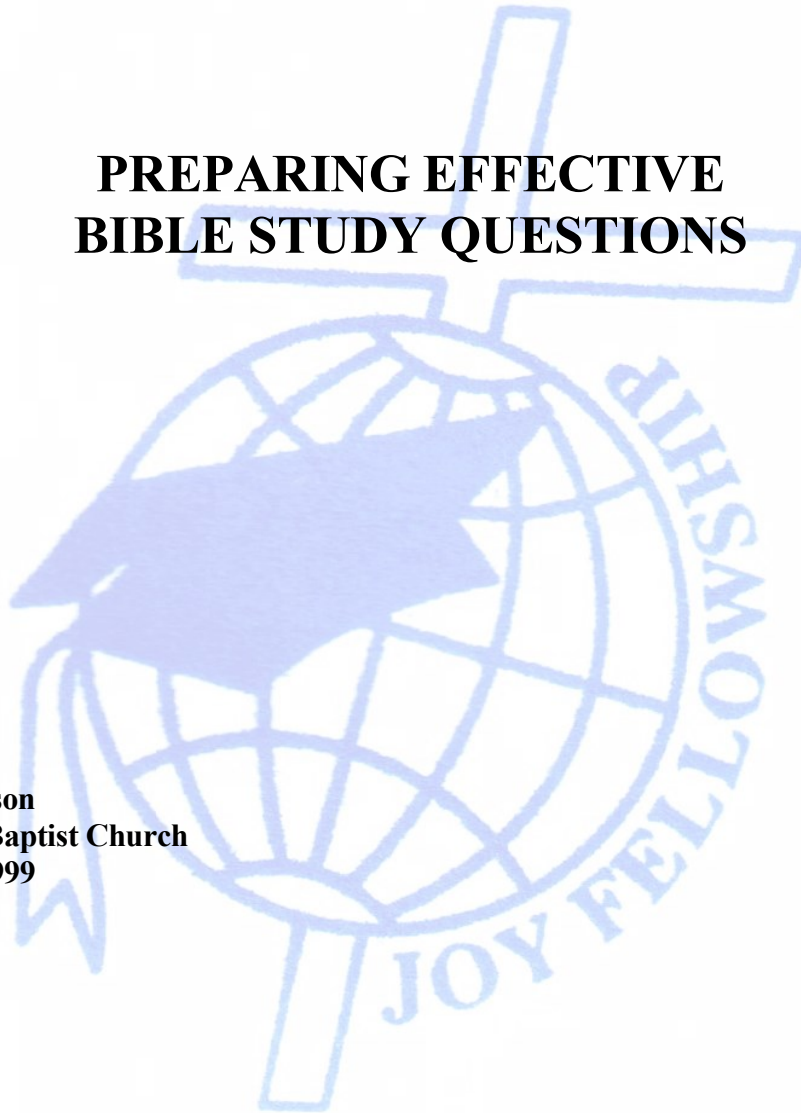


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# PREPARING EFFECTIVE BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

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**October 1999**



## Effective Bible Study Questions

What is the role of Bible study questions? What makes some effective and others not?

The Bible is God's word. All of it has value and is useful:

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2Tim 3:16-17)

The Bible is one of the ways through which the Spirit speaks to and guides us:

"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12)

"Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (Eph 6:17)

However, it is possible to read the Bible in a superficial way and not respond:

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." (James 1:22-24)

In the parable of the sower, Jesus warns us that the word of God can have varied effects in peoples' lives (Mk 4:1-20). For some it goes in one ear, and straight out the other. Others respond enthusiastically, but then give in as soon as the going gets tough. Still others receive it, but become distracted by worldly things. God's desire is to see us act upon the word and so bear fruit in our lives.

What is the difference? The action of the Spirit to convict us, and a willingness on our part to respond.

Our role in preparing study questions is to help prompt people to hear God's voice and to respond to it. It is so easy to academically read and understand one of God's commands or promises, but to forget to take action on it. An effective study is one where the questions lead/force people to consciously respond to God.

## STEP 1: Studying the Bible

Before you can prepare questions on a passage, you need to have studied and journeyed through the passage yourself. Once you have decided on a passage to study, read it through several times, asking God to help you hear and respond to his message. It may help to use the passage in part of your regular bible reading program (quiet times).

There are three stages in this process:

- (i) Observation and Comprehension of what the passage says.
- (ii) Interpretation of what the passage means.
- (iii) Application of the passage to life today.

### (i) Observation

As you read the passage, ask yourself:

- **Who** is the author? To whom is he writing? Who are the major and minor characters?
- **What** actions or events are taking place? What words or ideas are central to the passage? What is the mood of the characters, author and recipients?
- **Where** do these events occur? Are there references to cities, towns, provinces or geographical locations? Where do the recipients live? Look these places up in a map or atlas.
- **When** do the events described take place? Are there references to the time, day, month, year or other contemporary events? When was the book written?
- **Why** - Does the passage offer any reasons or explanations for the events described?
- **How** is the passage written - a letter, poem, parable? Is there any structure or pattern in the writing?

### (ii) Interpretation

Were there any words or figures of speech used that you did not understand? Look them up.

What major ideas were presented? Try to grasp their meaning and significance.

Did you encounter any difficulties? Seek to resolve them.

Can you identify the original author's intention in writing the book?

Find out the following:

- discover the historical context of the book.
- identify the type of literature (letter, narrative, poetry, proverb, parable, prophetic, apocalyptic)
- Get an overview of the book
- Study the book passage by passage
- Compare your ideas with a good commentary

### (iii) Application

The purpose of the bible is to transform us, both in our thoughts and actions:

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but 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." (Romans 12:2 NIV)

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." (James 1:22 NIV)

Rules of Application:

#1: Whenever our situation corresponds to that faced by the original readers, God's word to us is exactly the same as it was to them.

#2: Whenever our situation does not correspond to that faced by the original readers, we should look for the principle underlying God's word to them. WE can then apply that principle to comparable situations today.

SPACESTEP is a simple acrostic to remember which helps to identify ways of applying Scripture to our lives:

S - Is there a **Sin** to avoid or confess?

P - Is there a **Promise** to receive?

A - Is there an **Attitude** to cultivate or avoid?

C - Is there a **Command** to obey?

E - is there an **Example** to follow or avoid?

S - is there **Something** for which to give thanks or praise?

T - is there a **Truth** to believe?

E - Is there an **Error** to reject?

P - Learn to **Pray** the passage.

Other questions to ask include:

What does the passage teach me about God, Jesus, myself or others?

FINAL NOTE:

This series of steps may at first seem like a very mechanical procedure devoid of spiritual involvement. However, as you practice this method, it will begin to become second nature to you and the richness of God's word will emerge. Ask the Holy Spirit to continually guide and challenge your thinking.

## **STEP 2: Writing Questions**

During your own study, you will have identified the central theme of the passage. The purpose of the questions you now write should be to direct people towards this theme and help them wrestle with it. Where more than one major theme is present, you may decide to focus on just one of them.

It is helpful to recognise that there are many different types of questions you can use:

- **Ice Breakers**

Ice breakers are questions used to get group warmed up and may have nothing to do with the passage being studied. They provide a useful way for getting to know more about different aspects of each other's life e.g. favourite childhood memory, most embarrassing moment, etc.

- **Approach questions**

Approach questions are used to focus the group on the topic area of the study before the passage is read (they may serve as ice breakers themselves). These questions help to reveal our true thoughts or feelings on a subject before we become influenced by the "proper" answer according to the bible. They may also help us to recognise the relevance of the topic being studied to everyday life. e.g. a study on humility (Mk 10:32-45) could be introduced with questions like: "What is the difference (if any) between humility and low self esteem?" or "Do you know anyone who you would describe as humble?"

- **Observation or Comprehension questions**

These questions usually follow immediately after the bible reading and are used to make sure everyone understands what the passage says. They will identify if there are any words or concepts that people did not understand.

e.g. Who are the main characters in this passage? What definitions of greatness does Jesus give in this passage?

- **Interpretation**

Interpretation questions encourage the readers to go beyond superficial observations of what the passage says to explore the reasons and meaning behind the events. These questions force the reader to distinguish literal and figurative language.

e.g. What is the "cup" from which Jesus and the two sons will drink? Why were the two disciples indignant toward the other two?

- **Application**

A good application question should force people to consider how the principles in the passage can be applied to their lives today. Discussion should try to lead to concrete and realistic goals (the SPACESTEP acrostic is one way of helping identify points of application).

e.g. In what specific way can you be a servant to someone at work or home this week? If you seek to become a servant to others, what difficulties might you encounter?

- **Prayer**

It is usually useful to conclude with a time of prayer where you invite people to ask God to help them apply what they have learnt during the week ahead. It is worthwhile

keeping a prayer journal so that people can be followed up at the next meeting to discuss how they went in their resolutions.

Some questions requires knowledge from outside of the passage e.g. the geography of a particular place, the local political scene, cultural habits of the times. This background information should be provided, either via an information sheet at the start of the study, or with the question itself. e.g. "The seats on the right and left of a host were positions of honour. How does this help you to understand the mother's request?"

Try to avoid Yes/No questions. When you do use yes/no questions, always ask people to explain their answers.

### **SOURCES OF QUESTIONS**

Sometimes it is good to look at other peoples' questions to get inspiration in formulating your own:

- Sermons - a good preacher will usually pose at least one application question during the sermon, and may also raise issues of interpretation which the group can pursue further.
- Study guides and Quiet Time Notes - there are study guides available covering most books of the bible. These are of mixed quality, but do provide some ideas.
- NIV Serendipity Bible - contains questions in footnotes.
- Search the Scriptures (IVP) - this single volume devotional guide has one or two questions on every passage of Scripture.

### **STEP 3: Arranging the Questions**

You now need to choose and arrange the questions. The total number of questions will depend on the length of the passage being studied and the time available. The proportions of each type of question will depend on the level of the group. Young people, new Christians or those who find reading difficult may benefit from additional observation questions, whereas others might find these tedious.

The observation (O), interpretation (I) and application (A) questions can be arranged in a number of different ways, depending on the length of the passage.  
e.g. O-O-O-I-I-A or O-I-O-I-O-I-A

It is possible (and often desirable) to combine two types of questions into one e.g. "Why do you think the ten disciples reacted as they did towards the other two?" (requires observation of how the disciples did react and interpretation of why they acted in this way).

## A FEW CREATIVE IDEAS

### Bible Readings:

When reading historical narratives, assign different readers to each character plus a narrator.

### Questions:

Rather than hand out a sheet of all the questions to each group member, wrap each question up in a pass-the-parcel game together with a prize in the middle. Put in a few jelly beans along the way. You'll be amazed how focussed people will stay on getting on with the study!

## QUESTION EVALUATION FORM

After the study, it may be helpful to ask one or two group members to evaluate the effectiveness of the study questions you have prepared, so you can identify areas for improvement:

How would you rate the overall quality of the study in terms of interest, content and applicability? 1...2...3...4...5 (1 is low, 5 is high).

Was the spoken or written introduction helpful in orientating the group to the study?  Yes;  No

Did the approach question (if any) help to orientate the group to the study?  Yes;  No

Was the study interesting and thought provoking?  Yes;  No

Did the questions draw out the content and meaning of the passage?  Yes;  No

Did they do a good job of generating discussion?  Yes;  No

Were any of the questions problematic or poorly written?  Yes;  No  
If so, which ones and why?

At the end of the study, did the group have a good grasp of the central truths of the passage?  Yes;  No

Did the study lead the group to apply these truths in a helpful manner?  Yes;  No

Were there a proper number of questions for the amount of time the discussion was meant to last?  Yes;  No

What suggestions can you offer for improving the quality of this study?

## USEFUL RESOURCES

Fee, G.D. and D. Stuart, "How to read the bible for all its worth", 2nd Ed., IVP (1993)

Kuhatschek, J., "Taking the guesswork out of applying the bible", IVP (1990)

Mallison, J., "The small group leader: A manual to develop vital small groups", Open book publishers (1996)

Nyquist, J.F. and J. Kuhatschek, "Leading bible discussions", IVP (1985)

A Study Bible, Bible Dictionary or Bible Commentary

