

## HOW TO DO A BIBLE CHARACTER STUDY

The Bible is alive with personality. It includes numerous accounts of the lives of individuals, and we can read about their relationships both to God and to one another. This inspired and infallible record has been preserved for us through the centuries, and is still a great source of teaching for us today. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

These Bible characters were real everyday humans like us. Even Elijah, one of the greatest men of all time, is described in this way: "Elijah was a man just like us" (James 5:17). It was his life lived in obedience to God that made him great.

There is much to learn by studying how the lives of these individuals were touched by God, how they responded to God, what kinds of persons they became, and what mark they left on their times.

### *Getting Started*

Follow these directions:

### *Scriptures Used*

Once you have selected the person for your Bible Character Study, list the character's name (and any limitations on your study of that character) under the heading PERSON STUDIED. Then choose and list the passages of Scripture you will use for your study. A good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia or an exhaustive concordance will tell you where the person is mentioned. The index in a study Bible may also help. It is best to do your study in rough draft form first, and later to neatly organize it into final form.

Some people in the Bible have little written about them, and you will want to include every reference to them in your study. Others, such as David, have so much written about them that you will have to select the passages you think are most significant. Use scratch paper as you look up various references; eliminate some and keep the others. When you have decided on the passages you will use, list them, and add a key thought for quick identification of each reference.

### *Biographical Sketch*

Read each of your selected Scripture passages several times and meditate on them. Then begin writing a brief biography of the person. This will be mainly the facts of the character's life, without interpretation. Include such things as the meaning of his name, when and where he lived, and his family background. Record any unusual influences or environmental factors which shaped his life and thinking, as well as his occupation and his contemporaries and associates. What were the major events in his life? Mention the growth of his relationship with God, his crowning achievement and contribution, his influence on his nation and family, and anything else of interest about him.

When you have included everything you think belongs in his biographical sketch, rewrite it, condensing and rearranging parts as needed to make a one- to three-paragraph summary of his life.

### *Key Verse*

Choose from your list of Scriptures a key verse for your subject's life. This will be a verse, or pair of verses, which more than any other sums up his life.

If you cannot find such a verse, then choose one which speaks of his outstanding characteristic. For example, a key verse *summarizing* Noah's life might be Hebrews 11:7, while one *characterizing* the life of Mary of Bethany could be John 12:3.

NOTE: A *summary* verse will probably come from your Scriptures chosen for study, while you may want to look elsewhere for a *characteristic* verse (Psalms or Proverbs, for example).

The key verse from your study might well be one you will want to memorize.

### *Leading Lesson*

Read through your Scriptures and your biographical sketch again. What do you see as the leading lesson of this person's life?

Perhaps your key verse holds a clue to the leading lesson. It might be positive or negative, something worthy of following or something that should be avoided. The leading lessons in the lives of two women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus Christ, for instance, might be *the reward of faith* for Rahab and *the deceitfulness of idols* in the case of Rachel.

When you have decided on the leading lesson for your subject, write it down and give a little background of the passage from which you chose it. Then tell why you think this is the leading lesson to be learned from this person's life.

### *Problems*

As you study, some things may cross your mind that are problems to you—either about your subject or about God's dealings with him. List these things under the heading PROBLEMS. Don't try to resolve them now; just write down the nature of your questions. Later you can track down some answers, or perhaps discover that God has not made the answers available to us.

### *Application*

Review the other parts of your study and go back over the Scripture passages. Ask the Lord to show you some principle you should apply or some characteristic you need to build or strengthen—or avoid—in your life.

Write under the heading APPLICATION the principle or characteristic you have decided on through prayer, and include the Scripture passage from which it is taken.

Add a sentence or two about what needs to be corrected or improved in your life along the lines of this principle or characteristic. If you can refer to a specific example of the attitudes or actions you need to change, this will clarify your application and also help you see the changes in your life as you look back later.

Now record what you plan to do in cooperation with the Holy Spirit to help conform your life more into the image of Christ. Your part is to yield your will to Him and take steps to obey what He has shown you in His Word.

Your step of action might be to do more Bible study on certain subjects, spend a stated time in intercessory prayer, visit the sick, do something practical for the needy, or any number of things, according to the need you have recognized. If, for example, your need is for self-sacrificing care for others, you might plan to deprive yourself of funds, leisure time, or privileges in order to spend those resources on someone who cannot repay you. Ideas for carrying out your application will come as you seek them.

### *Summary*

Your Bible Character Study should include these headings:

PERSON STUDIED  
SCRIPTURES USED  
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH  
KEY VERSE  
LEADING LESSON  
PROBLEMS  
APPLICATION

Character Study can be most rewarding when worked out individually and later discussed in a group. Groups of two to eight persons are best; more than eight could become unwieldy. Jot down any good ideas from others' studies that you can use in the future and share yours with them.

## **EXAMPLE OF CHARACTER STUDY**

PERSON STUDIED: Nehemiah

SCRIPTURE USED:

Vs.	Key Thought
Nehemiah 1:4	Intense feeling for the distress of his people
1:9	Claimed God's promise
2:5-9	Trusted God, yet planned in detail
2:20	Gave God credit for success
4:14	Taught fearful people to remember God and family
5:15	Set an unselfish example out of reverence for God
6:13	Enemies devised a plot to ruin his reputation
8:10	Encouraged the people to rejoice in God
13:14	Expressed desire for God's recognition
13:25	Harsh in dealing with sin among the people

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH:

Nehemiah, whose name means "comfort of God," lived during the reign of the Persian King Artaxerxes. The events recorded in the Book of Nehemiah occurred around 445 to 433 B.C. Nehemiah was a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, a job which required him to test the King's food for poisoning (International Standard Encyclopedia, p. 2131).

The city of Jerusalem had been destroyed to the point that the protective walls of the walls of the city needed reconstruction. Nehemiah was granted permission and all necessary provisions by Artaxerxes to rebuild the city. Under his direction, the wall was completed.

During the time that Nehemiah served as governor in Jerusalem, he also challenged the Jews on such issues as unjust business practices and marrying foreign wives.

KEY VERSE: Neh. 2:17

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace."

LEADING LESSON:

James 2:17 "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

Nehemiah is an example of a man who demonstrated his faith by his works. He believed God could overcome all obstacles in the way of rebuilding Jerusalem, and was willing to step out and act in light of that belief.

PROBLEMS:

Vs.	Identifying Questions
Nehemiah 4:5	Jesus taught us to pray for our enemies, not against them. Nehemiah prayed against his enemies. Was that right?
Nehemiah 13:25	How often is such harshness needed in dealing with sin?

APPLICATION:

Nehemiah was a man of action. He saw a need and even though it was costly and dangerous he took the opportunity to help meet the need.

I felt as I read the account of his life that willingness and availability make the difference. Though Nehemiah was a cup bearer and not a construction foreman, he was available to help build the wall at Jerusalem.

As an application, I am going to evaluate my attitudes and schedule in light of being available to needs. I realize I am not responsive to needs if they appear too big or difficult. But to trust God is to rely on His sufficiency and ability to overcome obstacles.

I now have some opportunities to help others, yet I haven't been very available. This week I will prayerfully evaluate my schedule and make whatever changes are necessary to be free to help.

The opportunities for helping which I will consider include:

1. Joining the evangelism program at church.
2. Spending more time with Harry and Jim.
3. More involvement with the people in my Sunday School class.