

Studying a Narrative

So far in your study, you have focused on what is called discourse literature—literature that focuses on ideas. You have studied one section of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and one chapter in an epistle. Both of these passages were didactic in nature—that is both Jesus and Paul were trying to teach some important concepts. They used a variety of literary techniques to communicate their ideas.

To gain insight into the message of these passages, you were guided to look for some of these techniques. You were to look for key words, admonitions, cause-and-effect relationships, contrasts, comparisons, illustrations, and connectives. The methods you used with these two passages can be applied to all kinds of literature.

The Six Guide-Words

But there is still another way of observing a passage, especially a narrative, that will help you gain insight into the details of a story. You can use six words as your guides: *who, where, when, what, why, how*.

Let us consider how we might use these words as guides for observing the details of a narrative. Remember that they can also be used for observing any other kind of literature.

WHERE: Note the setting of a story. It is helpful to locate it on a map.

WHEN: Note the time element in a story. Sometimes you may have to study other passages to determine the time.

WHO: Note the characters in a story and how each is described.

WHAT: Note the exact order and details of the events, actions, and conversation of the characters. Sometimes you will find it helpful to list the events, the actions, and conversation in chronological order. Note the way characters respond to each other.

Read the story imaginatively, trying to build mental images, re-creating the story in your own mind. As you read, try to *see, hear, feel* what the characters *saw, heard, and felt*.

How: Note how the story ends, how the events and actions of the characters shaped the ending. Note how the characters act and respond as normal human beings. Note how they respond to each other.

WHY: Observe more than mere words. Ask yourself some questions: Why did events happen as they did? Why did the characters act and respond as they did? Could they have responded differently?

Approach to a Narrative

Too often we approach a Bible narrative superficially. We may have heard the story so many times that it is commonplace to us. Or we think of the story only in terms of its message and forget that these Bible characters were real flesh-and-blood people who lived in a certain period of history. Because of the superficial way we approach the stories, we are also superficial in the way we interpret and apply them. Besides using the six guide-words, consider these additional approaches in your study.

Be realistic. As you study a Bible story, try to view it in the context of the historical setting of that day. Beware of viewing it through twentieth century glasses. Remember that in the biblical days there were no welfare programs, refrigeration, women's liberation, etc. For this reason it is important that you study about the laws, the religious teachings, the customs and practices of the day.

Be imaginative. Most Bible stories tell only the bare facts. As you read a story, give it "flesh and blood" in your imagination. Picture yourself as part of the scene. Visualize what you would be seeing and hearing. Try to see and hear not only the words and actions of Bible persons, but the tone of their voices, facial expressions, bodily responses.

Be empathic. *Empathy* means to identify with a person and his problems and his feelings. Try to place yourself in the "skin" of Bible characters, identifying with them and their emotions, yearnings, hurts, concerns, difficulties, joys. While it is not difficult to identify with outward actions and responses of Bible persons, try also to determine the inner emotions and needs which are reflected in the outer actions.

Practice A – Observe the Details

1. Study Luke 23:32-49

In order to practice the skills in the use of these six words as guides for observing details, you are to concentrate on a very familiar passage in Scripture, one of the accounts of Jesus' crucifixion.

First, read the section quickly and note these things:

WHERE: Note the places mentioned in the passage.

WHEN: Note the references to time.

WHO: Note the many persons mentioned in the account.

WHAT: Look for some key words in the statements that Jesus and other persons make.

2. Analyze carefully Luke 23:34-49

Your first reading should give you an overview of the main emphasis in the passage. Now make a more careful study of a part of the passage, noting especially how each person responds to Jesus. Divide a sheet of paper into four sections and record the details in chronological order.

Section 1: Record the **WHOs**—List the persons (other than Jesus) mentioned in the passage.

Section 2: Record **WHAT** they did relating to Jesus.

Section 3: Record **HOW** they responded to Jesus in terms of what they said. Note the titles they gave him and the pronouns they used relating to Jesus.

Section 4: Record **HOW** Jesus responded.

WHO (list persons)	WHAT they did	HOW they responded verbally	HOW Jesus responded
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Practice B – Seek to Know Meanings

1. Build mental images

The account of Jesus' crucifixion is a dramatic story. As you study the account, try to imagine what it was like to be there. Recreate in your mind the scene and all the people involved. Try to *see, hear, feel* what the persons were *seeing, hearing, feeling*. Try to imagine the actions, the gestures, the way the persons said what they said.

Select one of the persons at the cross and share with your group how you think this person spoke and acted.

2. Ask yourself questions

a) ABOUT THE WORDS AND ACTIONS OF PERSONS:

- Any significance in the titles the different persons gave Jesus?
- Any significance in the pronouns they used? Note that the soldiers said “you” and the rulers said “he.”

b) ABOUT KEY WORDS:

One of the key words in this passage is *save*. Note that the rulers, soldiers, and one criminal all use the word. Some questions you might ask yourself are:

- What does the word *save* mean?
- What did it mean to those who were speaking to Jesus?

3. Seek to find answers to questions

You might gain insight into the message of this narrative by doing some of these things:

- Define words:* Look up the word *save* in a dictionary. Think about its meaning and use.
- Cross-references:* Read the account of Jesus’ crucifixion in other Gospels. Study the meaning of the titles given to Jesus.
Consider the use of the word *save* in these cross-references: Luke 19:10; John 12:47. What did Jesus mean by the word *save*?
- Translations:* Read the account in other translations to see if you gain additional insight.

Practice C – Personalize Biblical Teachings

The persons who witnessed the crucifixion reflect the many ways persons can respond to Jesus. They are a composite of humanity. They can represent the many kinds of people. But they can also represent the many ways each one of us can respond to Jesus at different times in our lives.

1. Identify responses

What kind of responses do the following reflect:

soldiers	rulers	second criminal
people	first criminal	centurion

2. Identify with a person

While it is easy to be judgmental of those at the cross, at different times in our lives, each one of us may have responded to Jesus in any one of these ways. Think about your present feelings and a problem or situation which you are facing. Identify with one person at the cross which reflects your response to Jesus *right now*:

- ___ anger because Jesus is not doing what you want him to do
- ___ watching on the sidelines, not getting too involved
- ___ taking Jesus rather casually
- ___ demanding that he “save” your situation
- ___ feeling totally helpless, praying “remember me”
- ___ praising him
- ___ beating your breast

3. Meditate on this scene at the cross

Complete these statements:

One thing I can believe is . . .

One thing I have learned about relationships is . . .

The Good News I find in this scene at the cross is . . .

4. Pray about your response to Jesus

Invite the members in your group to pray with you about your response to Jesus.

Pray with them about their response to him.

DISCOVERY SKILLS IV Bible Focus: Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23 (optional)

Purpose of Bible Study

As you have been learning these skills in how to study the Bible, you have been involved in three studies. Hopefully by now you have found that the learning of the skills has not been an end in itself, but a means by which you were enabled to gain deeper insights into the Word of God. But even deeper insights can become ends in themselves unless you have been responding to God's Word with open and receptive hearts.

Studying the Bible is never to be an end in itself, but the means by which you grow in faith and knowledge of God through Jesus Christ. The Bible might be described in two words: *revelation* and *response*. It is a record of God's revelation of himself to men through Jesus Christ and of man's response to this revelation. Its purpose is to enable men to come to know this revelation and respond in faith. John in his Gospel best describes the purpose of the Bible:

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).

While the passages which you have studied may not seem related in any way, they all have to do with relationships and response.

Matthew 6:25-34: The focus is on our response to the kingdom of God in contrast to our response to the "things" of life.

1 Corinthians 13: The focus is on our response in personal relationships.

Luke 23:32-49: The focus is on our response to Jesus and his cross.

Since the emphasis in this book is on how to study the Bible, it seems appropriate to have one study on Jesus' parable of the sower and the four soils. The focus of this parable is on man's response to the Word of God itself.

▶ Practice A – Observe the Details

1. Read Matthew 13:1-3.

As you study the introduction to the parable, continue with the techniques you used with your study of a narrative. As you read these first three verses, note the *who, where, when, what* of the introduction. Verbs are your clues as to *what* Jesus did.

2. Read Matthew 13:4-9.

As you read the parable, again use the six words for insight into the details:

WHO: The sower and the seed.

WHERE: Note the kinds of soil on which the seed fell.

WHAT: Note what happens to the seed in each illustration.

How: Note how the illustration ends in each case in terms of growth of the seed.

WHY: Note that in some illustrations Jesus gives a reason (vv. 5-6).

3. Read Matthew 13:18-23.

Note that you are to skip Matthew 13:10-17. This passage needs special study which we do not take the time for now. Concentrate just on Jesus' interpretation of the parable.

a) Read this section and underline what seem to be some of the key words. Select about four which you feel are the key words.

b) Make a special study of Jesus' interpretation of each of the illustrations. If there are several in your group, divide the illustrations among you, each taking one: 13:19; 13:20-21; 13:22; 13:23. With each of the illustrations you are to do the following:

WHO: The who in each illustration is *anyone* or *he*. Note how he responds to the Word.

WHAT: Note what happens to the word that is sown.

HOW: Note how the illustration ends.

WHY: Note if there are any reasons for the illustration ending as it does.

If you would like to record your observations, you might use the following pattern:

WHO (response to the Word)	WHAT happens to the Word	HOW the illustration ends	WHY (not always given)
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Practice B – Seek to Know Meanings

1. Ask questions for understanding.

Hopefully, as you have been observing, you have also been asking yourself some questions. To guide you in the asking, here are some general ones to ask yourself:

a) *Definitions:* What is the meaning of some of the key words: *hear, word, understand, unfruitful, bear fruit, good soil, etc.*

b) *Relationships:* What is the relationship between hearing and understanding? What is the relationship between the things that hindered or helped in the growth and the results of the growth?

Focus on the illustration which you have been studying and ask yourself some additional questions which you feel need answering for a deeper understanding of this parable.

2. Interpret your questions.

a) **USE CROSS-REFERENCES:** Read Mark 4:14-20 and Luke 8:11-15. Note the additional information and the different ways the ideas are stated in these references. If you have studied one special illustration, focus on the verse which relates to your illustration.

b) **COMPARE TRANSLATIONS:** Read Matthew 13:18-23 and Luke 8:11-15 in some other translations to gain further insight.

c) **DEFINE WORDS AND WRESTLE WITH MEANINGS:** Think seriously about the meaning of some of the key words. What does it mean to *hear?* to *understand?* What is the relationship between *hearing* and *understanding?* *Not understanding?* What is the relationship of *understanding* and *good soil?* What is the meaning of *unfruitful?* To *bear fruit?*

Practice C – Personalize Biblical Teachings

In summarizing the teachings of this parable, it seems that Jesus was saying:

- There are at least four ways to respond to the Word of God.
- There are a variety of things which can hinder the response to and the growth of the Word in our hearts.
- There are a variety of outcomes.
- The degree of receptivity seems to determine the kind of response.

As we think in terms of how we might respond to these teachings, we might add to the summary:

- Any one of us can respond in one of these four ways at different times in our lives.
- There is a progression in the illustrations, from no response to a great deal of response. We all face many hindrances which can erode our faith, but the difference between the good soil and the other soils has to do with *perseverance, hanging on, holding fast*. The person with the good soil is one that holds fast to the promises of God no matter what are the problems or difficulties. Note that sin is not listed as one of the hindrances!

Ways to Apply and Actualize

1. Paraphrase the interpretation of this parable in terms of your own experiences.

2. Complete these statements:

- a) Learning how to study the Bible should help me in *understanding* . . .
- b) What I receive in this Bible study will depend on . . .
- c) Some hindrances which will prevent the Word of God growing in my life are . . .
- d) The Good News I find in this parable for me is . . .

3. Pray with your group on your individual responses to the Word.