

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Practicing Wesleyan-Holiness
Spiritual Formation



SESSION 10

Three Ways to Read the Bible

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Three Ways to Read the Bible

SESSION OVERVIEW

Reading for Information

Reading for Transformation

Formative Reading

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- define and explain the significance of reading the Bible for information, transformation, and formation
- appreciate the privilege and need of making balanced Bible study a lifelong pursuit
- devise a plan for an ongoing, balanced study of the Bible

Three Ways to Read the Bible



INTRODUCTION

THIS BOY WILL GO FAR

Niki loved candy. Goopy nougats, orange slice jells, lollipops, chocolate bars—he loved them all. But times were hard in the neighborhood in which Niki grew up. Bread was hard to come by, let alone candy. But Niki had a plan, and a special source for candy.

Every Sunday, the priest would give candy as a prize to the boy who memorized the most Bible verses. Niki was a bright boy. He studied the Bible hard. And almost every Sunday, he won the sweet, sweet candy prize. “This boy will go far,” the priest would say to Niki’s mother. “He is storing the Word of God in his mind.”

The good priest believed that if you memorized the Scriptures, you had learned them. So he stressed memorizing Bible verses. Besides the regular Sunday competitive recitations, he scheduled Bible quoting meets the way some people do spelling contests or basketball tournaments. If you had to give out candy to get boys to memorize Scripture, then you gave out candy—peppermint sticks, caramels, jelly beans, and for the tournament winner, a big bag of mixed candy.

So Niki worked hard. He memorized the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, 1 Corinthians 13. For one tournament, he recited the whole Gospel of John, having to be prompted only four times. “This boy will go far,” the priest said. “He is storing up the Word of God in his mind.”

Well, the good priest was right. The boy did go far. In fact, he became the number one leader of his country—Communist Russia. You see, the boy who memorized all the Bible verses, the boy I have called Niki, was better known as Nikita Khrushchev. Under his rule, God was outlawed, preaching was illegal, and people were forbidden to read the Bible. *David Knaile (used by permission of the author)*

Nikita Khrushchev had memorized the Scriptures. But had he really learned the scriptures? At what level had he learned them—informational, transformational, and formational?

Niki's story demonstrates that a balanced approach to Bible study is vital. It is not enough just to get information from the Bible. Even memorizing content does not mean that formation or transformation will occur. Reading for information is important.

Informative reading concerns the content of the Bible, the facts about the Bible and its background in a particular historical setting. But just getting the history straight, memorizing facts, or reading the Bible to win an argument is not enough. In fact, reading for information alone is a misuse of and a disservice to the Holy Scriptures. *Quoted by Mel Lawrenz, The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation, 64*

Reading for *transformation* must enter into our study of the Holy Scriptures. We must submit ourselves to the text, letting it enter into us and cleanse our hearts. Some have called this moving from reading the Bible to letting the Bible read us. Reading for information is an effort to master the text; reading for transformation is letting the text master us. Richard Fisher says this is the kind of reading in which "the mind descends into the heart, and both are drawn into the love and goodness of God."

Closely related to transformation is reading for formation. Formative reading is devotional reading for spiritual growth. The goal is to permit the image of Christ to be formed in you through study and meditation. In this module, we will explore each of these three essential forms of Bible study.

READING FOR INFORMATION



NOTES

NABOTH AND HIS VINEYARD: 1 KINGS 21

After reading 1 Kings 21, consider the following questions.

1. What are the moral or ethical questions?
2. What are the legal questions?
3. What are the personal questions?
4. What are the political questions?
5. What are theological or religious questions?

A matter of information affects the answers to all the above questions. Without the information one struggles to make sense of Naboth's story. Beyond the obvious ethical questions, the story has powerful legal, political, and religious significance.

In ancient kingdoms around Israel, the king owned the land as well as everything and everybody on it. In Israel, however, the King was the Lord, Yahweh. The land belonged to Him. This did not change when Israel clamored for a king. Yahweh still owned the land, not Saul, the newly anointed king. Israel did not call their early monarchical rulers kings; rather, they were called heads. Part of the fine-print distinction was that the sacred land belonged to God and not the king. All Israel knew that God was the true King and Owner of the land.

God's land was subdivided to every household in Israel. Lest anyone forget to whom the land really belonged, the farms were redistributed by drawing, every seven years. Let's say that a certain township had 50 farms. The family who worked farm number 12 for a period of seven years at the next drawing might draw farm 39, 18, or any other number. The homestead a family drew could not be sold because it did not belong to the family. It belonged to God, and seven years in the future another family would work that farm. Not even the king could own land permanently. *See The Preacher's Magazine, MAM, 1981, 18-22.*

The Greek historian Herodotus, along with other scholars, noted this rotating system of land tenure. It was a noble idea, but the plan got in trouble when David took the throne. David faced a tough job when he united the shattered kingdom of Saul.

 **NOTES**

He hired Egyptian managers and mercenary soldiers from Crete and Philistia. But David had no money. He paid off his debts by giving the foreign debtors permanent land grants in Israel. They chose the best land and they did not have to submit to the seven-year rotation plan, either.

It was not long before the Hebrew kings started keeping land as if it belonged to them personally. Soon the land grab was on. By hook or by crook one schemer after another pushed the common people off their land and took permanent possession of it, forcing the poor into debt and slavery. Prophets like Micah and Isaiah thundered warnings: "Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field" (Isa. 5:8, KJV). If the foreigners got to keep their land the Hebrews were bound and determined to own land too.

Almost everyone forgot the old seven-year rotation of land that signified the covenant with Yahweh, the true King and Owner. Only a few conservatives, a few religious throwbacks to the covenant even worried at all about God as Owner. Among those who did remember was Naboth. When Ahab, the head not king of Israel, wanted to buy it, Naboth refused.

He was not being hardheaded. He was standing up for the covenant with God. "Ahab, I couldn't sell you this land if I wanted to. It is not mine to sell; it belongs to God. And furthermore, Mr. Head, not King, you have no legal right under God's law to be trying to buy this land or any of the other land you have been buying up."

Naboth's challenge was a legal, political, and religious challenge. But more than that, he challenged a worldly system that was making Ahab rich. Ahab's plan clashed with the covenant. Ahab did not care, but Naboth thought it was about time someone stood up for God and His law. That is why Naboth died. He would not acknowledge Ahab as a true king or as a legitimate buyer.

Ponder these questions:

- In what ways does this information affect your understanding, teaching, and devotional use, of 1 Kings 21?
- In what ways does it shed light on your previous understanding and feelings about this biblical event?

READING FOR TRANSFORMATION



NOTES

Lectio divina is Latin for divine reading. Today it is called spiritual reading or reading for holiness. You come to *lectio* (pronounced lexio) *divina* with an open heart. You are not trying to master history, win a doctrinal argument, justify your past behavior, or get today's chapter read. You are simply presenting your open mind and heart to the Lord.

Lectio literally means reading. It signifies a different kind of reading than we often engage when reading a newspaper or a text. This reading is reflective, gentle paced, one-bite-at-a-time. It means reading if you had a love letter in hand. The question behind our reading is God and asking what are you saying to me?

Meditatio translates as meditation. The mind work of meditation allows our minds to focus and concentrate on the meaning of the text. Active imagination can help us find connections between our life stories and the great story of God's redemptive work in us. Meditation engages us at the level of the heart in its biblical sense where memory, experience, thoughts, feelings, hopes, desires, intuitions, and intensions are joined. This is where we are likely to discover what a given passage means in our lives personally or as a community.

Oratio means the prayer that naturally flows out of our meditation. It is the cry of the heart to God that arises when we have heard ourselves addressed through the Word. *Oratio* allows a full range of human responses (hurt, anger, frustration, confession, repentance, thanksgiving, joy, adoration, praise, etc.) to tumble forth in heartfelt prayer to the One for whom we were made.

Contemplatio means contemplation. It is entrance into the presence of God. Contemplation is essentially rest, play, Sabbath-time, in God's presence. Here we are receptive, open, listening to God, and responsive to His voice. We enjoy the simple pleasure of the presence of Jesus. *From Marjorie J. Thompson, Soul Feast, 25-27*

For centuries, Christians have found that *lectio divina* cleanses the soul; thus the label, reading for holiness. Try this exercise:

- Read by giving emphases to different words—let them soak into your soul.
- As led by the Spirit, offer a meditation or prayer—written, spoken, or wordless.
- Notice that Bible study and prayer merge and blend and flow from one to the other.


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The following reading from Isaiah is one way of practicing the *lectio divina*. Note the sequence of text, emphatic repetition, and meditation/prayer. The whole passage is not restated in the text selections; only the parts the Spirit put into italic for the creator of this exercise are included. The meditations or prayers are those of the author of this exercise. But the last meditation/prayer section is blank. Fill it with your own meditation. You may then wish to go back to the other verses and add your own prayers or meditations.

TEXT: ISAIAH 57:13-15

Text: “When you cry out for help, let your collection of *idols save you!* The *wind* will carry all of them off, a *mere breath* will blow them away” (v. 13).

Emphatic Repetition: When you cry out for help, let your collection of *idols save you!* The *wind* will carry all of them off, a *mere breath* will blow them away.

Meditation/Prayer: O God, have I set up idols in my soul? Have I taken the deepest hungers of my heart to idols for satisfaction? Do I turn to praise, achievement, worldly possessions to satisfy the hunger for God? Break down every idol, O Lord. Help me depend only on You. My idols are playthings of the wind.

Text: “The man who makes me his refuge will inherit the land and possess my holy mountain” (v. 13).

Emphatic Repetition: The man who makes *me his refuge* will inherit the land . . . The man who makes me [God] *his refuge* will *inherit the land* and *possess* God’s holy mountain.

Meditation/Prayer: O my God, be my Refuge, my safe place. You are my safe place. But why do I seek You, my Refuge, so seldom? Make me hunger for Your land, long for Your holy mountain. May I thirst for You, my Refuge.

Text: “This is what the high and lofty One ways—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in the high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite’” (v. 15).

Emphatic Repetition:

I live, *I live* . . . with him who is *contrite*.

I live, I live . . . with him who is *lowly in spirit*.

The high and lofty One . . . whose *name is holy* . . . lives with the contrite.

To [in order to] *revive the spirit* of the lowly . . .

To [in order to] *revive the heart of the contrite*.

Meditation/Prayer: (reader supplies).


NOTES
FORMATIVE READING

Formative Bible study, as used in this module, embraces both informational and transformational concerns and practices. On the *informational* side, it endorses seven principles of Bible study (by Tremper Longman).

1. Look for the biblical author's intended meaning. The meaning of the text does not change, and this should be determined before one starts making applications to one's own life.
2. Read the Bible passage in context. Is the text you are studying a transition, introduction, summary, or is it the second point of three the author is making on a broader theme?
3. Identify the type of passage you are reading (i.e., Phil. 2:6-11 is a hymn; Micah 3:9-12 is a doom saying). The type of literature makes a difference.
4. Consider the historical and cultural setting. The Naboth story illustrates the importance of this.
5. Consider the grammar and structure within the passage. If you run into a therefore see what it is there for.
6. Interpret experience in the light of Scripture, not Scripture in the light of experience. Otherwise, you are likely to be reading your own ideas into the Bible.
7. Always seek the full counsel of Scripture. If a passage you are considering seems obscure or unclear, check out what the rest of the Bible has to say on this theme. Bible concordances, dictionaries, and commentaries are helpful in this and in many other ways.

Objective as it is, however, the Bible is not a paper pope from which we can extract infallible judgments every time we need to win an argument or a doctrinal debate. Early Protestants, who had just excommunicated the real pope, were tempted to make of the Bible a paper pope with which to hit each other over the head. What a trivialization of the divine revelation! *From Shaped by the Word, Upper Room, 1985.*

On the *formative* side of the equation, we have other considerations. Informational reading is linear. The reader covers as much material as possible. It has, according to Robert Mulholland, a problem-solving mentality that drives us to be judgmental and analytical.


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Formational reading, however, is reading in depth to capture the dynamic of the message. Speed is not nearly as important as openness to the mystery of God in the Word. The approach is humble, detached, willing, and loving. It is a relational rather than a functional approach. As in transformational reading, we invite the text to master us rather than trying to master the text. Another way of saying this is we invite the Bible to read us as we read the Bible.

The informational and formational aspects work to keep us from imbalance. The devotional life is subjective by nature. Add to that our cultural intoxication with individualism that says truth is different for each of us and you have a lot of private and improper interpretation of Scripture. Bible study that begins with me and my felt needs is not legitimate. We must first establish what the text says and what it means. The meaning does not change just because you have a new temptation, your child has rebelled, or you lost your job in the downsizing craze.

First, get the meaning of the passage. How it applies to you will change as you change. We are not free to make the Bible say whatever we need to hear. Though our felt needs are urgent—and the Bible does often speak to them—the Bible does not exist primarily to help you feel better, reduce stress, find joy, peace, or self-actualization.

The Bible is the revelation of God in Christ and the Gospel Jesus came to demonstrate. To reduce Bible study to self-motivation, mental hygiene, or to psychological up cheering is to trivialize both the Bible and the spiritual life. *What It Means to Me*, Walt Russell, *Discover the Word*, 83-90.

METHODS OF FORMATIVE BIBLE STUDY

Explorer's Method of Bible Study

1. *Observation*: Notice every word. Use the shifting emphasis method. Notice what happens as you emphasize different words as you read it aloud.
2. *Interpretation*: What does the Bible text mean? What does the context contribute to the meaning? Step into the shoes of the Bible characters in the text and view the issues from their point of view.
3. *Correlation*: What have others said about this text? Compare what you have gotten out of the passage with the interpretation of others. Check your study Bible or a concordance to see what other Bible passages speak to this same issue. Check a reputable Bible commentary.
4. *Evaluation*: Ask questions like these: "What part of this passage is particularly valuable to me right now? Why am I glad I read this passage today?"
5. *Application*: "Lord, what do You want me to do with what I have read?"


NOTES
Asking the Text Questions

1. What does this passage tell me about God?
2. What does this passage tell me about Jesus Christ?
3. What does this passage tell me about the Holy Spirit?
4. Is there a sin to avoid?
5. Is there a command to be obeyed?
6. Is there a prayer to make my own?
7. Is there a promise to claim?
8. What does this passage teach me about myself?
9. What does this passage say about Christian service?
10. Is there something here I should memorize?
11. Is there something here I should share?
12. Is there an example to follow or avoid?

Stepping Into the Scene

The Step into the Scene methodology is very old. It got into the Wesleyan heritage through Richard Baxter and his 17th-century book *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*. John Wesley reprinted this book in the 18th century. This is not some New Age concept—it has been in our tradition for a long time.

- A. Read Luke 12:13-21
- B. Get the scene in mind: It's early in the day. Jesus has called His disciples together for a staff meeting. It is going to be a long day. Already Jesus' fame has spread, and a huge crowd is spreading out before them in a valley. But before the preaching, teaching, and miracles are to begin, Jesus called the staff meeting. They are on the crest of the hill partially hidden by cedars and boulders. It is still cool where the shaded staff meeting is taking place. Jesus is lecturing His dozen disciples about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (vv. 12:1-2), comforting them with God's providence (vv. 12:4-7), and sharing about faithful witnessing for Christ (vv. 8-12). A self-absorbed joker who demands that Jesus settle a financial fight then interrupts this staff meeting. By the time Jesus gets around to answering, the crowd has surged forward, the staff meeting is over for now, and Jesus addresses the throng. Read verses 13-21 again in light of this scene setting.


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C. Respond to these items:

1. Imagine the Bible scene before you.
2. What is the temperature, the weather, the time of day? What sounds do you hear? What scenery? What smells are present? What animals are there?
3. Step into the scene yourself. Who is standing on your left? Your right?
4. How is the person next to you dressed? How is Jesus dressed? The disciples?
5. Listen to the dialogue, the parable, catch every word. Don't miss anything.
6. Notice the characters in the story:
 - a. The Multitude
 - b. The Disciples
 - c. The Questioner
 - d. The Rich Fool
 - e. Jesus
 - f. God
7. With what character did you identify most? Which did you resist most?
8. What did you perceive Jesus' mood and attitude to be?
9. Did you get any new insights into the meaning of this Bible passage? Jot down your feelings, insights, and ideas.

D. Step out of the scene and write a letter: Step out of the scene and think it over. Then write a letter or e-mail message (three or four paragraphs to one of the characters. Tell him whatever is on your heart. Here is a letter one student wrote to the man who interrupted Jesus with a financial problem. He called the guy Harvey.

Dear Harvey:

Count on you to mess up. Did you ever miss the point! You have not one clue as to what the gospel is about, not an inkling of what the Carpenter has been teaching all along—that it's better to make a life than to make a living. He showed you how trivial your problem really was. As kind and tender as Jesus is, He wouldn't give your problem the time of day. Now if you had been confessing your sins you would have had His undivided attention, but no, you wanted to grab an inheritance.

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Talk about selfish. And speaking of sins, I imagine that you have plenty of them. You strike me as the sort of guy who runs a pawnshop and charges widows and homeless folks 200 percent interest, right? Read the *Wall Street Journal* more than the Bible, right? You did achieve one thing. You became famous.

Centuries of Christians now know you as the dunce who interrupted Jesus with a question so selfish that it provoked the parable of the rich fool. Could you see yourself in that parable? Probably not, but I sure did. I saw you, and you looked a lot like me.

Sincerely yours

CLOSING THOUGHT

When world-renowned theologian Karl Barth, the father of neoorthodoxy, made his last visit to America, a Chicago reporter asked him publicly, “Dr. Barth, what is the most important truth you have discovered in a lifetime of study?” Barth replied, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” *From Discover the Word, Everett Leedingham, ed.* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1997), 121.

APPLICATION

**NOTES**

1. Take the following Reading for Information Bible Quiz.
 1. Where can you find the Ten Commandments in the Bible?
 - A. Genesis 4
 - B. Psalm 84
 - C. Exodus 20
 - D. Acts 2
 2. Which of the following does not belong in this list?
 - A. Micah
 - B. Hosea
 - C. Amos
 - D. Joel
 - E. Jeremiah
 - F. Nahum
 3. Arrange these persons in order of their appearance on the stage of history.
 - A. Blind Bartimaeus
 - B. Esau
 - C. Philemon
 - D. Moses
 - E. Solomon
 - F. Abraham
 4. Hupim, Mupim, and Ard were
 - A. Sons of Benjamin
 - B. Daughters of Jethro
 - C. Brothers of Jesus
 - D. Disciples of Elijah
 5. Which covenant came first?
 - A. Davidic
 - B. Abrahamic
 - C. Mosaic
 - D. Messianic



6. Where would you find the “Love Chapter”?
 - A. Song of Songs 3
 - B. Luke 5
 - C. 1 Corinthians 13
 - D. John 17

7. The Beatitudes are found in
 - A. Proverbs 30
 - B. Isaiah 53
 - C. Matthew 5
 - D. Hebrews 11

Answers: 1. C; 2. E; 3. F, B, D, E, A, C; 4. A; 5. B; 6. C; 7. C

2. Devise a two-week plan for your daily personal Bible study. Cite the books or passages to be studied. Be sure the plan includes:
 - informational, transformational, and formative elements—label the three elements
 - the tools, aids, and methods that you will use

3. Select a Bible passage of your choice. Apply each of the Bible study methods (Explorer, Asking Text Questions, Stepping into the Scene) to the passage.

JOURNALING

Note: Throughout your work in this module, it is suggested you keep a journal. This is an important tool in the study of spiritual formation. Journaling is a tool to help you slow down in your studies and listen to your heart, soul, mind, and most importantly to God.

In your journaling time, record your reflections on the three most significant times of Bible study that you have experienced in the past year. Be specific. State the passage, the setting, others who may have shared the experience, and how your life and/or ministry have changed because of those experiences.

NOTES**SUGGESTED READING**

- Gordan D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).
- Mel Lawrenz, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 56-67.
- Everett Leedingham, ed., *Discover the Word* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1997), 49-60, 83-90, 104-35.
- Wesley Tracy, et al., *Reflecting God* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City and Christian Holiness Partnership, 2000), 103-10.
- Wes Tracy, *Reflecting God Workbook*, 67-75.
- Wes Tracy, *Reflecting God Leader's Guide*, 27-29.
- Morris Weigelt, et al., *The Upward Call* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1994), 69-80.

EXAM



NOTES

1. Memorizing content from the Bible guarantees transformation will occur in one's life.
 - A. True
 - B. False
2. *Lectio divina* means reading for holiness.
 - A. True
 - B. False
3. It is important to find out first what the text says rather than beginning a study with "me and my felt needs".
 - A. True
 - B. False
4. The Bible primarily exists in order to help us find joy, peace, and self actualization.
 - A. True
 - B. False
5. Reading for information is an effort to master the text; reading for transformation is letting the text master us.
 - A. True
 - B. False
6. The Step into the Scene methodology is relatively new.
 - A. True
 - B. False
7. It is important to interpret the obscure passages by looking at the whole Bible.
 - A. True
 - B. False
8. Formative reading is devotional reading for spiritual growth.
 - A. True
 - B. False

 **NOTES**

9. It is important to read the Bible for _____.
- A. transformation
 - B. formation
 - C. information
 - D. all of the above
10. Informative reading concerns _____.
- A. the content of the Bible
 - B. the facts about the Bible
 - C. the background of the Bible in a particular historical setting
 - D. all of the above
11. Which one of the following questions is NOT important for informational Bible study?
- A. What are the moral or ethical questions?
 - B. What does this mean for my life?
 - C. What are the legal questions?
 - D. What are the political questions?
12. Which of the following is NOT one of the seven principles of Bible study?
- A. Look for the biblical author's intended meaning.
 - B. Read the Bible passage in context.
 - C. Consider the historical and cultural setting.
 - D. What does the passage teach me about myself?

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Discuss the two-week plan for your daily personal Bible study you created. Show your mentor ways you are utilizing the information from this module of study.
2. Share the letter (or e-mail message) you wrote to one of the characters. Did you enjoy this exercise? Why? Why not?