



# How To Study A Bible Character

All those people in robes and sandals have something to say to *you*.

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For many of us, the people in the Bible have all the excitement of a flannelgraph.

Even those who defeated mighty armies with a handful of men, witnessed miracles on a grand scale, or heard the voice of God Himself can seem distant and remote. It's hard to relate to someone who traveled by camel when you drive a Corolla.

Yet despite their distance from us in time and culture, these Bible characters were real, everyday humans. Even Elijah, one of the greatest men of all time, is described as "a man just like us" ([Jas. 5:17](#)). The people whose stories are recorded in Scripture struggled to follow God against the grain of their culture, lead the unappreciative, fight temptation, deal with loss, and hold on to faith just as we do.

We can learn much by studying the lives of these individuals. As you employ the simple Bible study method that follows, you can begin to see them as they were: flesh-and-blood people whose lives have a crucial message for your life today.

## Getting Started

Once you have selected the subject for your Bible Character Study, list the character's name 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 organize it neatly 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. For more insight, you may want to consult Bible reference books. Find out all you can about the place your character lived

and the customs of the day from a Bible atlas, Bible encyclopedia, and commentaries. Begin to ask yourself how his or her life, times, and the choices he had to make are similar to yours.

Then begin writing a brief biography of the person—the facts of V 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 that 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 related to his outstanding characteristic. For example, a key verse *summarizing* Noah's life might be **Heb. 11:7**. ("By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.") One *characterizing* the life of Mary of Bethany could be **Jn. 12:3**. ("Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair.")

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 Lessons

Read through your scriptures and your biographical sketch again. What do you see as the leading lesson or lessons 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 or lessons for your subject, write them down and give a little background of the passages from which you chose them. Then tell why you think these are the leading lessons to be learned from this person's life.

## Problems

As you study, some things may cross your mind that are confusing 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, 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 regarding 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 to 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, do something practical for the needy, praise God for His goodness, 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.

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

Adapted from *The Navigator Bible Studies Handbook* (NavPress, 1979), which is no longer available.

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