Bible Studies

A "Bible study" is an aid to help one or more (but usually a group) people to work through and understand a particular passage from the Bible. It may contain comments on the passage, but mostly consists of questions. These questions are meant to facilitate discussion within a group and serve as a guide to help people work through the passage by showing them what needs to be asked and understood.

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One Thing is for Sure...

Introduction

During MYC 2009 [2] I was part of a workshop that studied how to compile a Bible study for a passage in the New Testament. We were given Hebrews 12:18–29 and had three days to complete our Bible studies.

The **main idea** of this Bible study is: *Through Jesus, we do not need to fear condemnation, but can be sure of redemption if we follow Him closely*. The Bible study was presented on 19 July 2009.

The **target group** I wrote this passage for is students who are growing in their faith and who have at least a very basic knowledge of the Old Testament.

The Bible Study

> [18]You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; [19]to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, [20]because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." [21]The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."
> [22]But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, [23]to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, [24]to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.
> [25]See to it that you do not refuse Him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused Him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from Him who warns us from heaven? [26]At that time His voice shook the earth, but now He has promised: "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." [27]The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. [28]Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, [29]for our "God is a consuming fire." — Hebrews 12:18–29 (NIV)

1. Given a choice by a close friend to go on a blind date with either someone she knows to be kind, gentle, funny, upright and faithful, or with someone she briefly met in the Pick'n'Pay yesterday and who she says looks "sort of OK", who would you choose?
2. People often fear the unknown. vv. 18–21 are set against the exodus of the Israelites from

Egypt as they came to Mount Sinai (Exodus 19). Why was the mountain so terrifying?
3. vv. 24–25 paint a very different picture than the first part of the passage. What does it mean to "come to Mount Zion"?
4. Who is the "firstborn" mentioned in v. 23 and what is the "church of the firstborn"?
5. By using the word "have" in vv. 22–23, the writer indicates the past tense. But these verses clearly speak of heaven and we are still on earth. How "have" we entered heaven?
6. Genesis 4:10–12 speaks of how Abel's blood cries out from the ground. Able was murdered by Cain for his righteousness, thus the blood of Abel symbolises a testimony against the unrighteous. What is the "better word" the blood in v. 24 speaks of?
7. Entering the new covenant is conditional, not universal. In what ways can people "refuse Him who speaks"?
8. What is the warning spoken of in v. 25?
9. Who will be affected by the shaking up of the earth and the heavens (v. 26)?
10. How do you think the shaking of the earth and the heavens will look like if you consider vv. 18–21? What will remain, based on vv. 22–24?
11. We have said that people often fear the unknown. Sometimes knowledge of something is much more terrifying. Do you think the fear for God of an unbeliever would be irrational?
12. Fire is mentioned at the start (v. 18) and end (v. 29) of our passage. In each case, which trait(s) of God does the fire symbolise?
13. Sometimes we allow things which would be beneficial for us to slip away from us, because of uncertainty, fear or just plain apathy. Is this something we can afford with heaven in light of the passage?
14. What/who makes it possible for us to approach Mount Zion while the Israelites could not approach Mount Zion?
15. Fear of God comes from not knowing Him and being under His judgement. To know God through understanding what Jesus has done for us on the cross and believing that our sins are thereby forgiven leads to joy and celebration. How do you show this celebration outwardly? How do you share this joy with other people?
16. Do you fear the perfect holiness of God? Is this fear different from that of the unbeliever?

Critique

The passage was well received by the group. Admittedly, I didn't have time to progress past a first draft. I was therefore expecting (and hoping for) some criticism, but didn't get any. I can, however, highlight some of the things which bothered me:

- I realised too late that the opening question can conceivable backfire for certain individuals, although probably unlikely. A different opening question with the same idea would be better.
- Question 13 doesn't seem to fit well with the flow of the rest of the questions. I'm am also unsure of the specific relevance of the question at this specific point. (But maybe that's just me.)

Addendum

We were strongly urged not to use any Bible commentaries or other study aids in writing our Bible studies. The idea was that we should wrestle with the passage ourselves and come to insights for ourselves. When I returned home after MYC, I was eager, however, to see what the NIV study Bible had to say about the passage. I was shocked when I learned that, in v. 23, "Firstborn cannot refer to Christ, since here the Greek word is plural. Now, I (as well as other members of my workshop group) had question 4, for which the intended answer was "Jesus". This again highlighted how careful one needs to be when compiling a Bible study. The NIV text makes an ambiguous effort to dispel what seems to be an obvious assumption: the word "firstborn" does not indicate singularity of plurality, but the phrase the "church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven" uses "names" which indicates plurality. But does this mean that "firstborn" is plural, or does is refer to those who are within "the church (of the Firstborn)"?

The KJV/MKJV might also lead to confusion: "the general assembly and church of the firstborn"

The ESV and ISV are more helpful: "the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven". (This is also very close to what is in the 1983 Afrikaans translation.)

- Add new comment [3]

A Promise is a Promise

Introduction

This Bible study was composed as part of a workshop while attending Equip 2010 [4]. In that workshop, we looked at Old Testament passages with an understanding that the entire Old Testament points towards Yeshua. We were given Genesis 23 to study and looked at it over three days, presenting our final Bible study on the fourth.

The **main ideas** were

- in the immediate context, "*Abraham buying into the the land of Canaan, literally and figuratively*"; and
- pointing towards Yeshue, "*Living for God's promises to one in faithfulness and obedience*".

The **target group** of this study would be Christians, perhaps young in their faith, exploring the Old Testament.

This study was presented to the workshop on 5 April 2010.

The Bible Study

> [1]Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old. [2]She died at Kiriath Arba (that is,
> Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her.
> [3]Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said, [4]"I am an
> alien and a stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury
> my dead." [5]The Hittites replied to Abraham, [6]"Sir, listen to us. You are a mighty prince among
> us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will refuse you his tomb for
> burying your dead." [7]Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the
> Hittites. [8]He said to them, "If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and
> intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf [9]so he will sell me the cave of Machpelah,
> which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as
> a burial site among you." [10]Ephron the Hittite was sitting among his people and he replied to
> Abraham in the hearing of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of his city. [11] "No, my
> lord," he said. "Listen to me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. I give it
> to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead." [12]Again Abraham bowed down before
> the people of the land [13]and he said to Ephron in their hearing, "Listen to me, if you will. I will
> pay the price of the field. Accept it from me so I can bury my dead there." [14]Ephron answered
> Abraham, [15]"Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver, but what
> is that between me and you? Bury your dead." [16]Abraham agreed to Ephron's terms and
> weighed out for him the price he had named in the hearing of the Hittites: four hundred
> shekels of silver, according to the weight current among the merchants. [17]So Ephron's field in
> Machpelah near Mamre—both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees within the borders
> of the field—was deeded [18]to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who
> had come to the gate of the city. [19]Afterward Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave in
> the field of Machpelah near Mamre (which is at Hebron) in the land of Canaan. [20]So the field

> and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site. — Genesis 23 (NIV)

1. You have had a strong desire to do missionary work for a long time. Eventually this realises and you arrive with your spouse in a foreign place: a place you have desired to see for a long time. But shortly after you arrive, your spouse contracts an exotic disease and dies from it. You can barely speak the native language, at best. What do you do? How do you feel now about being in this mission field?
2. Verses one and two tell us about the death of Sarah, and Abraham, her husband, mourning for her.
    1. Why are Abraham and Sarah important in the Old Testament? Read Genesis 17:5–7 and Genesis 17:15–16.
    2. Read Genesis 21:6–7. Name one reason why Abraham mourned his wife.
3. Why is it necessary for Abraham to buy land from the Hittites? What does Genesis 12:1–7 tell us about this?
4. Abraham insists on wanting to buy the land from the Hittites. How does Abraham feel about unearned gifts in the light of Genesis 14:21–24?
5. The transaction in our passage is a formal legal transaction in ancient near-eastern culture. What is the implication of this for Abraham?
6. A proper burial was crucial in ancient near-eastern culture. Ideally a person was buried where their forefathers were buried. Given this, what is the significance of Abraham purchasing a burial plot in Canaan?
7. Read Genesis 24:6–9. This takes place some time after Sarah's death. What does this tell us about Abraham's attitude toward God and His promises to Abraham?
8. In Genesis 15:6, we see that God credits Abraham for his faith. In our passage, we see a small example for Abraham's faith and obedience by tying himself to the land where he is an alien and a stranger (v. 4). How do these qualitites—faith and obedience—summarise a Christian's relationship with Jesus?
9. God promises eternal life through Jesus. Although we have not seen this reward for dedication and obedience with our own eyes, what should our attitude be in the light of the life of Abraham?

Critique

The Bible study was well received. It was a different approach than most other in the group had followed; their target group was more mature Christians and relied somewhat on the *Swedish Method*. My approach was partially inspired by the approach certain Bible study guides take, especially the interactive Bible studies [5] published by Matthias Media [6].

I found writing this Bible study challenging and what I presented was only, in effect, my first draft. Writing the launching question was particularly difficult and I never come back to it. I considered several different possible launching questions, but settled on the one above to get the audience thinking about loss and alienation in a strange place. I hoped to evoke some empathy for Abraham in his situation as described in the passage.

Admittedly, I never tied the passage back to a New Testament, which I probably would have done if I had more time. Possible such passages could have included, but not limited to, Romans 9:6–8, Hebrews 11:8–16, Acts 7:2–16 and 1 Peter 1:3–12.

The main points of criticism were:

- The leading questions were good, but could be less general/vague.
- I should have stayed more inside the passage, especially regarding the big picture of the Bible study.

The leader of the workshop and I were somewhat at odds about the main idea of the passage. While I placed emphasis on Abraham's faithfulness, he believed it should rather have been on God's

faithfulness. I do not think one should necessarily make such a distinction: one ties in to the other (Abraham is faithful to God because He is faithful, and God will in turn honour His promises because Abraham is faithful and obedient). It should have made this point more clear in this Bible study.

Another reason why I stuck with Abraham's faithfulness as a theme, is because that is how I believe the apostles presented him whenever they wrote about him (see, for example, Hebrews 11 and Acts 7).

I wanted to tie the ideas of *faithfulness* and *obedience* to how it is when one comes to Yeshua: a person believes Yeshua can forgive sins and accepts this forgiveness (faithfulness), and appoints Him as Lord and Ruler over his/her live (obedience).

Addendum

This was a challenging Bible study to write, but one that taught me much. I learned how a Biblical passage can easily be twisted to say something which it, in fact, doesn't.

Additional questions which didn't make the final cut:

- What does v. 4 reveal to us about Abraham's lifestyle? Why do you think Abraham wants to own the land Sarah is to be buried in?
- At this point in his life, Abraham is a widower, has only one unmarried son with him and the only land he owns is a small patch which holds the tomb of his beloved wife. How well do you think this bodes for the promises which God gave Abraham?

Final Thoughts

> "The meaning of a passage is always the same and must always be taught. This must not be changed to suit a particular audience! The application of a passage can be tailored to a specific audience."
>
> "What would the gap [in the Bible] be if our passage was taken out of the Bible?"

- Add new comment [7]

Poverty and Sin

At Equip 2011 [8] I was introduced to doing systematic theology Bible studies. Systematic theology is taking a single topic and then looking at what the Bible as a whole has to say about that topic. This is different from Biblical theology, which we had studied in previous [9] years [10], in that Biblical theology considers how a single passage forms part of God's greater plan.

Systematic theology obviously requires hard work, as you need to consider all that the Bible has to say *before* reaching a conclusion! One also needs to resist the temptation of using proof texts out of their individual immediate contexts. All that said, I found writing this study slightly less taxing than the previous two. Obviously we were limited by time and could not consider all the passages in the Bible which dealt with the topic (we were limited to six passages, but I went slightly over), but we still had to search the Bible for key passages which we wanted to use in our studies.

Our topic was **poverty**. My **main idea** was to show the link between poverty and sin, and what the response of a Christian to poverty should be.

This study was presented to the workshop on 25 April 2011.

The Bible Study

In 2005, film producer Morgan Spurlock and his fiancée Alexandra Jamieson had their bank accounts frozen and took minimum wage jobs for 30 days. They soon found themselves in trouble: unable to afford basic medical care, they were spiraling into debt. Their experiment highlighted serious flaws in the American social security system.

1. If you were to freeze your bank account for 30 days, what would you like to prove or demonstrate? What would you absolutely refuse to do to survive?
2. Think about some of the reasons for people to be poor. Who or what is responsible for poverty?
3. Read Genesis 2:8–9 and 15–17. Did Adam lack anything? Or do you think that he was provided for abundantly?
4. What do you think was the most valuable that Adam has in the garden of Eden?
5. Read Genesis 3:17–19. Think of some reasons why these curses can lead to poverty.
6. Read Deuteronomy 28:12–14 and 45–48. The former are some of the covenant blessings which God promised the nation of Israel if they were to remain faithful, while the latter are some of the covenant curses promised for unfaithfulness. In light of Deuteronomy 28, how do you think an ancient Israelite might view wealth and poverty?
7. Can you identify any similarities between Deuteronomy 28 and Genesis 2 and 3?
8. Read Deuteronomy 15:1–11. If the people of ancient Israel were being faithful to God, what should not be in the land? Does verse 4 agree with your answer? What about Deuteronomy 28:12–14?
9. If someone were to fall into poverty, how were the Israelites commanded to respond?
10. If poverty is a consequence of sin, why do you think the Israelites are commanded to act towards them as they were done?
11. Compare verses 4 and 11. Why do you think they are stated in that order?
12. Read Job 24:5–7. Job was a man "blameless and upright", but was allowed by God to be afflicted and become poor. Here he laments the fact that the poor are dependent on the wicked, who prosper. Do you think Job's observation is accurate?
13. Do you think that we can still hold to a view that poverty is only a form of punishment for sin?
14. Read the whole of Job 24. Does it seem like there is currently a correct order in the world regarding punishment and reward?
15. Read Matthew 9:9–13. Although not stated as being poor, the tax collectors and sinners recognise a need within themselves which only Jesus can fulfill. What other passages which we have looked at deal with similar issues? What parallels can be drawn? What about the Pharisees?
16. Read 2 Corinthians 8:9. What was the richness that Jesus had? In what ways did He become poor? Where have we seen this before?
17. Read Matthew 25:31–46. How does Jesus want the faithful to respond to the needy?
18. Why do you think Jesus is so serious that we should care for the needy?
19. What are the implications of providing for the needy as Jesus commands?
20. Verse 34 speaks of the righteous inheriting a kingdom. Revelations 21 makes it clear that there will be no need or suffering in this kingdom; the new heaven and earth. Discuss the similarities between the new earth and Eden, and the differences with the old (current) earth.

We have seen that poverty will only ever exist in a period of human history whre we are living under the effects of sin. Poverty is not, however, now a universal punishment for sin.

21. What do you think the relationship between poverty and sin is?
22. Why should we as Christians be involved in helping the poor?
23. What aspects need to be addressed in a person who is stuck in poverty? [Answers: material needs, spiritual needs, helping to understand their afflictions as part of a fallen world]
24. How can we practically help to alleviate poverty in our community?

Critique

The Bible study was well received. I tried to thread the different passages together by connecting ideas of abundance with God and lacking without Him. Again this was but a first draft and could do with some refinement.

The main criticism was that it was much too long. I somehow got confused as to the length. But then this study could be presented as a short series of Bible studies.

Addendum

Other ideas which could have been explored:

- What does the whole of the Mosaic law say about poverty and attitudes towards the poor?
- Poverty as a result of injustice (see the Wisdom literature and the Prophets).
- Poverty amongst believers (Acts 4:34).
- The issue of accountability (e.g. Paul and the Macedonians in 2 Corinthians).

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