

Pastor Grady Covin

The Mission

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How to Study the Bible Lesson 8

Work with a Paragraph

Now, when we started out talking about the first step of how to study the Bible, which is of course the step of observation; we looked initially at just one verse, Acts 1:8.

But tonight we're going to step it up a notch and we're going to be looking at a paragraph. And actually, a paragraph will be the basic unit of study going forward and should also be the unit you use in your own study. We don't usually use a singular verse and we don't necessarily use a complete chapter. We use a paragraph.

Now, a paragraph can sometimes be as short as one verse or it could be as long as an entire chapter. But in every case, a paragraph represents a complete thought. In other words, it's a group of related sentences and statements that deal with one main topic or idea. And that makes it ideal for observational study.

By the way, let me remind you, that originally the Scriptures were not divided into chapters or paragraphs or verses. They were just scrolls and similar documents with long, unbroken passages. And it was nearly twelve hundred years after Christ, before scholars began to carve them up into the divisions we have today.

And of course they did so to try and enhance Bible study, but their efforts were in no way inspired by the Holy Spirit. In fact, many of the breaks imposed on the text are obviously flawed and so sometimes we have to ignore them in order to read and interpret the scriptures properly.

So turn in your Bible with me if you would to the Book of Nehemiah and we're going to be looking this evening at The Prayer of Nehemiah, which is in Nehemiah 1:4–11.

4 So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

5 And I said: “I pray, Lord God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments,

6 please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of

Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father's house and I have sinned.

7 We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

8 Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations;

9 but if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.'

10 Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand.

11 O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."

For I was the king's cupbearer.

So the first thing we need to do is to check the context.

So verse 4 begins, “4 So it was, when I heard these words. Another version says, Now it came about, when I heard these words.”

So the first question would be: What is the significance of that first word “So” or that first word, Now, depending on the version you’re using?

Well, it’s a connective, right. In other words, it links this paragraph with something else.

Also that next phrase “these words” should compel me to ask, what words?

So both of these questions force us to go back to the beginning of the book to check out the context.

And let’s just read that. Look at verse one.

1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah.

It came to pass in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the citadel,

So what do we observe here?

Well, I see three very important clues.

First, I see that these are the words of a particular man. Second, I see who that man is. It’s Nehemiah. And third, I learn

about the family from which Nehemiah came. And that's helpful because the name Nehemiah appears elsewhere in the Bible and it's a different Nehemiah.

In the last part of verse 1 I read, **“It came to pass.”**

And so naturally **I need to ask what came to pass?** Well, next I see three prepositional phrases: **“in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, and as I was in Shusan the citadel or capitol.”**

And so what does this tell me?

Well, first it tells me when. It tells me the time; the month and the year.

And if you consult a Bible dictionary you'll find out that the month of Chislev would have been equivalent to our month of December. And so it was winter time.

Next he says this is taking place “in the twentieth year.” And that forces us to ask, the twentieth year of what? Well, we can't answer that here, because it's not given to us. But when we get to chapter 2 we find out it means the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes.

And then finally, what does “Sushan the citadel tell us? What is Sushan the capitol of? Well, when I look it up in my Bible dictionary, I discover that there were two palaces in this kingdom. Sushan was the winter palace. And remember, this is taking place

in December. But there was also a summer palace, as well in Ekbatana. But Nehemiah was at the one in Sushan. And further study will tell you that it wasn't a winter cabin in the mountains! In fact, it covered five thousand acres, and it was extremely plush.

And so here's a man living in this luxurious and privileged situation when he gets a disturbing report in verse 2.

It says, a brethren or a brother of his by the name of Hanani comes to him along with some other men from Judah. Look at verse 2.

2 Hanani one of my brethren came with men from Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.

So what does Nehemiah do? He asks them something. What two things does he ask? First of all, "concerning the Jews." In other words, he asks about his people. And then secondly he asks "about Jerusalem." He asks about the place, which was of course his home.

And then in verse 3 Hanani responds.

3 And they said to me, "The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire."

So notice the dialogue here. It's a question-and-answer session. Nehemiah asks about the people and he asks about the place. And the brothers give him a three-part answer: (1) **“The survivors or those who are left are in great distress and reproach”** (that has to do with the people); And then number (2) “the wall of Jerusalem is broken down” (that has to do with the place); and (3) “its gates are burned with fire” (that also has to do with the place). And keep in mind, that place was his home.

So the order of the answer is exactly the same as the order of the question: the people first, and then the place.

And I think that says something about Nehemiah. His first concern was for people, not the places. And later on we'll see how that figures even more into the story. And so that's the context.

Next, we need to label our observations.

Once Nehemiah hears about the condition of his people and his place, what does he do? What does Nehemiah do?

I see four things: he wept, he mourned, he fasted, and he prayed.

So what kind of responses are these?

Well, weeping and mourning have to do with what?
Emotions, right?

What about fasting and praying? They have to do with the spirit right? Fasting and praying are spiritual responses.

And that's one of the things we need to do when we study the Bible; we need to hang some labels on our observations. That will help you better organize your observations.

For instance, beside verses 1 & 2 you could label that portion the "report". And then verse 4 you could label the "response". Nehemiah has a total response, both emotionally and spiritually, to the report.

And then moving on to verse 5, we find a prayer and we could label that prayer the "request" that Nehemiah made. And now, we have a three point sermon we could preach. The report, the response and the request.

Now, we've already looked at this prayer in a previous lesson, but remember the pattern?

In verse 5, Nehemiah starts out with **adoration**.

5 And I said: "I pray, Lord God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments,

And then in verses 6 & 7 he moves to **confession**.

6 please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I

pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father's house and I have sinned. 7 We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

And then, only after confessing his sin and the sin of his people, Nehemiah begins to **petition** God on the basis of His promises.

8 Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations; 9 but if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.'
10 Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand. 11 O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let

Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

And so we have another three point sermon on prayer and Nehemiah gives us a model for how we can approach God.

And when we look at this prayer in its context, we see how it ties directly to the report of Hanani and the brothers from Judah. They come to Nehemiah and they report that, **“The people are in great distress, and the walls are in ruins.”**

And Nehemiah’s immediate response is what? It’s prayer, but it’s not just any prayer; it’s prayer based on the Word of God.

God has promised; that if Israel would disobey Him, He would scatter them; but if they would return to Him, He would restore them to their land. So Nehemiah hears the report, he reviews God’s Word, and then he reacts by falling to his knees in prayer.

Next we need to remember that no detail is unimportant.

Is that the end of the paragraph?

No. What do you notice in the last part of verse 11? Nehemiah adds an interesting detail: He says, “I was the cupbearer to the king.”

Now, why would he tell us that? Why is that important?

Most people would probably just pass right over that statement. But remember what we’re asking in the step of

observation? What are we asking? What do I see? We're assuming the role of a biblical detective—and no detail is unimportant.

So what was a cupbearer?

Well, most people probably think he was some guy walking around carrying a cup for the king with nothing better to do. And again here's where a good Bible dictionary will come in handy. If you look up the term "cupbearer," you'll find that his title derives from the fact that he was responsible for tasting the king's wines.

Now, not unlike today, there were constant attempts to try and eliminate people who were in authority. And so rulers trusted no one—except the cupbearer.

The cupbearer was virtually the prime minister, the second-in-command. He had a personal expense account and he had direct access to the king.

And so the Holy Spirit includes this detail about Nehemiah to show us how God accomplished His purpose. Later in the book we'll discover that it was because Nehemiah was the cupbearer that the king gave him permission to go back to the land and to rebuild the walls and the city.

In other words, God purposely had His man in a strategic position. And because of that, Nehemiah was able to leverage that position to accomplish God's purposes.

Now, there are plenty more observations we could make from this paragraph from Nehemiah. And you may have already made others. Or you may be thinking I'll never be able to do this.

Well, I can promise you, you won't if you don't try. But if you'll try, you'll get better and better at it as time goes on.

So what have we learned so far? We've learned that we need to become better and more effective and efficient readers. And we've learned that we need to learn how to make observations. We need to learn what to look for and then practice looking for it.

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Lesson 8 Exercise

In this chapter I've worked with a paragraph, observing how Nehemiah responded to the report of Hanani and the brothers. Now it's your turn. Below is a paragraph from Paul's letter to Titus, who was a first-century pastor on the Mediterranean island of Crete.

Read the paragraph carefully, using the ten strategies to first-rate reading and paying attention to terms and grammatical structure. See what you can discover here about the lifestyle that should characterize all believers, and especially leaders.

Titus 1:5, For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you— 6 if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. 7 For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, 8 but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, 9 holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.