

How to Process what God is Saying in a Bible Study (Summarizing and Application)

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Summarizing

The purpose of summarizing at the end of a group discussion before moving into more focused discussion of application is to tie together and clarify the central elements of the passage and discussion. Through the summary, the leader is able to emphasize a particular point that he or she believes the Spirit is pressing. This is the spot in teaching where the leader gets to preach and persuade rather than just facilitate discussion. It should be given with passion and confidence.

During preparation, write a succinct, punchy statement that captures the tension or drama of the passage. The summary should highlight what is remarkable about God or life with God. A good summary captures the picture and feel of a passage. It is a short paragraph, not a slogan or a sentence of truth in a propositional form. The truth of the passage is captured through the drama of the text and what that text reveals about Jesus or the life of faith.

You should have thought through the main parts of a summary statement ahead of time, but be ready to change or nuance it according to the way the Lord has led the group to experience the text together. Once the group has had its experience in the text together, nuance your summary to tie together the group's experience, using their words and images. The summary must be a fair distillation of the group discussion or it will violate the premises of group.

This skill requires a deep dependence on the Holy Spirit before and during the study. You need to have prepared the study deeply ahead of time so that you have a good summary in mind, and then be "listening" throughout the study to the way that the Spirit is leading the group to experience the main teaching(s) of the passage. Your summary needs to tie together both the main teaching(s) and the way that the group has experienced and defined the teaching(s).

A summary of Mark 4:35-41 (Jesus calms the storm) could look as follows:

After a full day of teaching, Jesus asks the disciples to row across the lake. A huge storm hit and the disciples were sent into the first crisis of the passage, "Are we gonna die?!" To make matters worse, Jesus sleeps through the emergency. After waking him, he commands the wind and the sea to be still and they obey him! Jesus' handling of the situation sends them into the second crisis of the passage, "Who then is this?!" Jesus is more than they expected. He isn't just a teacher, he is the creator of the whole universe. Like the disciples, following Jesus will lead us into situations which press to the surface the true state of our understanding of him. Jesus will take us into crisis in order to reveal more of himself to us.

Leading the Group to Apply the Text

What makes a Bible study transformative rather than merely comforting, cathartic, or informative? Without concrete and specific application, it is too easy to be "like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror... and at once forgets what he was like." (James 1:23-24) If

we are not doers of the word, the power of the word does not impact and change us, and we deceive ourselves.

Helping a study enter into transformative application is a leadership skill. You must start with where the group connected to the scripture intellectually or emotionally, and then move them from general to specific. It is not enough to say that, "Jesus addresses our fears." Students of the word must be helped to name the specific fears, in fact, fears that they presently experience, rather than fears they have experienced at some point in their life. In naming and articulating live issues, and then letting the truth of the scripture address those real issues, the Bible study becomes a direct encounter with the living God.

In preparation, first do a thorough study of the passage. Then, brainstorm 4-8 application questions. Write questions that address different parts of the study. Paired questions work well. The first question is often broader and helps identify an area of life. The second question in the set brings a greater level of concreteness by asking for specific action or response.

When it comes time for application in the study, select the two questions that seem to connect most with the group given the discussion the group has just had. Help people be specific and concrete by writing down answers on the back of their paper, splitting into pairs to share their answers, or deciding together on a communal application (e.g. taking out the trash of everyone one in the residence hall after a Bible study about servanthood). If you chose a communal application, provide leadership to bring the experience to completion, rather than throwing some ideas around and seeing what happens.

If you were leading a study in Mark 4:35-41 (Jesus calms the storm), your list of application questions might look like this:

We often lose sight of the reality that Jesus, whom we follow, is the creator of the whole universe. What areas of your life are you struggling to trust him in?

What difference does it make to you in those areas that he controls creation?

What difficulties have you experienced lately?

How has Jesus used those to expose what is in your heart?

What is he trying to reveal to you about himself?

Do you struggle more to believe in Jesus' care for you or his power?

Talk to him about those struggles and pray for him to increase your faith.

On the back of your sheet, make 3 columns. Title them fear, stress, and distress, respectively.

List areas of your life where you are currently experiencing any of those.

In Ps. 107:23-32, those in distress because of a storm at sea cried out to the Lord. The disciples accuse Jesus rather than ask for his deliverance. Are you more likely to accuse the Lord or pray when you hit difficulty?

Spend some time praying in pairs about the difficulties you are currently experiencing.