

THE BIBLE LESSON

by
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NOTE

The first book written by Jennifer Haaijer on this subject entitled “Teaching a Bible Lesson to Children” was published in 1986. This new book on “The Bible Lesson” replaces that publication and reflects Jennifer’s growing insight and experience since she wrote her first book on the subject many years ago. This book is being used as a guide when the subject is taught at CEF Children’s Ministry Leadership Courses throughout Europe.

THE BIBLE LESSON

by Jennifer Haaijer

Chapter 1 Introduction

A Bible lesson is something that is crafted or created by the teacher. As with any creative task, there are tools to use and skills to learn and practise. Most important of all is the raw material the craftsman uses. In the case of a Bible lesson teacher the “raw material” is unique and priceless – the Word of God. It needs to be handled with care and respect, “*rightly handling the word of truth*” (2 Timothy 2:15). The lesson is all about communicating something from the Bible.

We can teach the Bible with confidence because as the Word of God it is incisive and incorruptible: “*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joint and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart*” (Hebrews 4:12). “*since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;*” (1 Peter 1:23).

The Bible is incomparable so teaching it is unlike teaching maths, science or history! God promises to fulfil His purposes as His Word is taught: “*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it*” (Isaiah 55:10-11).

God has not revealed all the purposes He fulfils through His Word but two are very clear: He uses His Word to bring about regeneration as is clear from 1 Peter 1:23, He uses His Word to bring about spiritual growth being compared to milk and meat (1 Peter 2:2; 1 Corinthians 3:2).

Each Bible lesson will focus on a small section of the Bible. Often it will be a story but it is important to remember that the Bible is one wonderful story, the story of the unfolding of God’s plan of redemption. Over a period of time children should become aware of the big picture and the unity of the Bible; they should see how individual stories fit and are part of the greatest story of all.

When it comes to teaching the Bible the teacher needs to use many tools and skills. While the dynamics of teaching a Bible lesson are different from teaching anything else there are many ideas in the educational world that we can use to good advantage. Probably there are more creative methods of teaching and learning around in the 21st century than there have ever been before. There are some core tools and skills which every teacher must have; there are others which some teachers may use well but others struggle with. An experienced teacher may include a teaching idea which a new teacher could not carry through. Thankfully we don’t all teach the same way!

There are four essentials in every Bible lesson:

- It must be thoroughly biblical.
- It must hold the children’s interest.
- It must communicate Bible truth.
- It must include application of that truth.

Around these principles there is freedom for teachers to be themselves, using tools and skills best suited to them, to those they teach and to the subject matter.

It is helpful to look at how Jesus and the apostles taught the Gospel; in their ministries we see variety and adaptability. One fact, however, stands out very clearly – they preached. There was authoritative proclamation of God's message. Furthermore the value of preaching is emphasised in 1 Corinthians 1:21. One of the most solemn charges in the Bible is that of Paul to Timothy to "*preach the word*" (2 Timothy 4:1-2). Has this any significance or relevance to teaching the Bible to children? It is gloriously possible to "preach" on a child's level and use good creative teaching methods as you do so. It is hardly possible to teach the Bible to children without this being an important part of the regular programme: the teacher needs to take the Bible in hand and teach from it. There will of course be supporting elements in the programme which will engage the children in different ways. That part of the programme where the teacher, with Bible in hand, teaches something from God's Word emphasises the centrality and authority of the Bible. We should aim for a Bible centred, God honouring and child friendly ministry and the Bible lesson will be at the very heart of that. If we are aiming to integrate children into a local evangelical church, including this style of teaching in our programme will help prepare them for the preaching of God's Word in worship services.

Chapter 2

Storytelling

Storytelling is one of the oldest methods of teaching; it is one of the most used tools in the teacher's tool box. Jesus was superb at using all sorts of stories. When God wanted to get through to His disobedient chosen king, he sent Nathan with a story (2 Samuel 12:1-7). Everybody loves a story!

The Bible is full of wonderful, "God breathed" stories and it is our privilege to tell them. You need to be able to tell a story and tell it well.

Gather the Facts

Read from the Bible the narrative you plan to teach, read it several times. Read parallel passages if there are any. The Bible is your primary source but you will find it useful to consult the teacher's manual (a handbook providing helps and an overview of the lesson you are preparing) if there is one, a map, commentaries and dictionaries and a children's Bible.

Make notes as you answer questions like these:

- What is the context? Where does it fit on a Bible timeline? What happened just beforehand?
- Who are the main characters? What can I discover about their actions, words, attitudes, motives, thoughts and reactions?
- Where did the events take place? Was there more than one location?
- Do I understand the events and the order in which they happened?

Having saturated yourself with the Bible narrative, you need to decide who the main character is because that determines the story line. Usually the main character is fairly obvious but when there are several possibilities you choose one and then develop the story from their perspective. When you are teaching a story that the children already know you will keep their attention if you tell it from the point of view of a less obvious character.

In developing the story line the main character should have a goal – something he wants to achieve, a problem he has to solve or a decision he must make. As the story unfolds there will be obstacles in his way. It is these that bring suspense to the story, so it is important to identify them in the story you are planning to tell. Someone has said that a story without suspense is like watching one wrestler in the ring! On the other hand measure the suspense according to the age group, very young children don't cope well with a lot of anxiety.

Make a Structure

The next step is to list the events in the order in which they happened to the main character. Use a short phrase or sentence to summarise each event. Establish what was the first event and then ask yourself, "What happened next?" Note the answer and ask the question again. You will discover that often you do not always include every event recorded in the Bible narrative because to do so would obscure or slow down the story line. Children want lots of things to happen and to happen quickly.

The list should not be haphazard or disjointed; one event should lead to the next. There should be a clear progression – we will call it the "**progression of events**". It will normally consist of six to ten events.

This is an example of the progression of events for the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, from Acts 8. In this outline the main character is Philip but it could also be developed with the Ethiopian as the main character.

1. Persecution scatters Christians v1-3
2. Philip preaches in Samaria v5
3. God sends Philip south v26
4. Philip meets Ethiopian v27-31
5. Philip explains the gospel v31-35
6. Philip baptises the Ethiopian v36-38
7. The Spirit takes Philip to another city to preach v39-40
8. Ethiopian returns to Africa rejoicing v39

One event on the list often summarises several verses of Scripture. When the Bible narrative is long, perhaps covering several chapters of Scripture, you will omit what is not essential for the story line. (In the outline on Acts 8, verses 9 to 25 are not referred to at all.) You decide where you must have detail and where a summary is sufficient and develop the progression of events accordingly.

The events in a story build up towards a **“climax”** which is the high point where the main character achieves his goal, solves his problem or wins the battle. If the story has been built up around a mystery, the mystery is solved at the climax. This high point climax must satisfy all the curiosity, suspense and anxiety that has been built up, it must untangle all the threads of the plot. Clearly mark the climax on the progression of events (in the example it is the baptism of the Ethiopian) and work hard in preparing how to make the most of this part of the story. The climax should be near the end, otherwise you will also have an anti-climax – it is harder to keep the attention once the excitement of the climax is over.

The **“conclusion”** comes very soon after the climax. It should tie up any loose ends in the story. Think through your story and ask “Is there something I must include in order to leave the children satisfied that they have heard all they need?” In the story of Philip it is necessary to tell what happened the Ethiopian as well as Philip, otherwise the children will have unanswered questions. The conclusion is not the place to go on and on. Aim to make the conclusion brief and satisfying, leaving the children with the feeling that it was a good story.

Mark the conclusion on the progression of events and also write out how you plan to finish. This will help you to finish and stop at the same time!

The conclusion for the story about Philip could be as follows:

As Philip was busy preaching about Jesus in another city, the Ethiopian was heading home. He was so happy, he had come to know Jesus Christ and he couldn't wait to tell others. Philip's trip to the desert had been very worthwhile!

At this stage you are ready to plan how you will begin the story. The **“beginning”** is important because this is the point at which you get the attention of the children. You need something that will “hook” your hearers. It should be interesting and something to which those you are teaching will relate. Keep the beginning brief, it is only a stepping stone into the rest of the story.

There should be a clear link between the beginning and what follows.

Be careful not to give away the secret of the story in the beginning and avoid making it so dramatic and gripping that nothing following can compete!

There are many ways to begin; the following are suggestions rather than an exhaustive list.

- Perhaps the easiest is to **go directly into the beginning of the story**. Have a couple of sentences which immediately get the attention, and off you go. For example:
“We’ll have to get out of here, it’s just too dangerous.” Philip agreed. His friend Stephen had been stoned to death for preaching about Jesus. Yes, it was time to go – and quickly.

- **A question** can be used to get the attention.
For example:
“When you are going away on holiday, what do you put in your suitcase?”
When the children have shared their experiences you can link with the Bible story by saying, “Philip was leaving home, but not on holiday. He had to pack quickly or he might not get away safely”.

Or: “How do you feel if someone interrupts when you are busy and having a good time?”
You could link into the story by saying that God interrupted Philip when he was busy.

Children love to participate in this way so if you ask a question give several children the opportunity to share. Be careful, however, that the sharing does not last too long, the beginning should be brief.

- You may **choose an exciting event in the progression of events**; focus on it and then go back to event number one. It as if you are zooming in on something and then go back to tell the whole story.

For example:
There was a little group travelling by chariot in the desert. “Stop!” called one of the men, “There is water...” He didn’t need a drink but he was very glad to see water. We need to go back to the beginning of the story to understand why. One of the group, Philip, had had no plans to be in the dessert...

- You may **use an object**.
For example:
Show a scroll and talk about how books used to be, how they were made and read. Then add “In the middle of today’s Bible story we are going to meet a man who had a scroll – watch out for him! He’s not the first man we meet; the first man is Philip...”

- You may **use a skit**.
For example:
Tim: I’m just fed up with Maths. I’ve spent ages on this homework and got nowhere! *(He throws the book on the floor)*
Mum: Oh Tim just try a bit more, I am sure you can work it out.
Tim: I have tried, I don’t understand and I hate maths. *(He stamps his foot and pouts)*
Mum: Let me see if I can help – but it is 20 years since I did this sort of stuff. *(She lifts the book and Tim shows the page rather grudgingly)* Let me think – this is how we did it – you put these figures in the right hand column and others in the left.
Tim: *(loudly)* No Mum we don’t use columns – that much I do know!
Mum: There’s no need to shout. Is there anyone who is good at this – who could help?
Tim: Well, Mike at the end of the street did it last year and he got a prize for Maths.

Mum: Look, I'll phone and see if it's OK for you to call down and get help.
Teacher: In no time at all Tim was back home with a big grin on his face. The homework was finished.
Tim: It is easy when you know how!
Teacher: And when someone helps you to understand. That's what happened in this story about Philip.

- You may have a **little everyday story** with which the children identify and it **has a clear link with the Bible story**.

For example:

Ellie was surprised to see Lena walking down the street towards her. Nobody in their school class talked to Lena. "She's a strange one" they said, "Look at her clothes, they look old and they're probably dirty."
 "She talks in a funny way."
 "I don't think she's too smart."
 Ellie hadn't been too happy about these remarks but she said nothing and, like the rest, she ignored Lena. But now within one minute she would meet Lena face to face.
 "I could look in a shop window and pretend not to see her. I can cross the street or I could..."
 There was Lena one metre away. "Hi Lena," said Ellie.
 Lena's face lit up, "Hello Ellie", she said shyly.
 "Do you live nearby?", asked Ellie.
 "Just over there", Lena pointed.
 "I can go that way too, will we walk together?" Ellie had made a brave choice.
 Philip in the Bible made a brave choice too when he chose to go to Samaria.

Write down those first few sentences, this is a real help when you stand up to teach. Also write down the sentence which you will use to link the beginning with the first event in your outline.

The discipline of preparing an outline helps to get the essentials and non-essentials sorted. It is easier to remember the outline than the heaps of notes you accrue as you prepare. The outline is like the pegs on which everything else hangs – these points will bring the details to mind. You can have the outline in your Bible to keep you on track, helping you not to go off on a tangent or miss out an episode.

The outline on the lesson about Philip would look like this:

Beginning: "Let's get out of here!"

Progression of Events:

1. Persecution scatters Christians
2. Philip preaches in Samaria
3. God sends Philip south
4. Philip meets an Ethiopian
5. Philip explains the Gospel

Climax: 6. Philip baptises the Ethiopian

Conclusion: 7. The Spirit takes Philip to another city to preach
 8. Ethiopian returns to Africa rejoicing
 "Philip's visit to the desert had been very worthwhile!"

Use your imagination

A story that has never lived for you will never live for the children you will teach. It is important to think yourself into the circumstances of the story and live out the drama in your own mind. Get to know the characters, listen to their conversations and empathise with them. Try to understand their actions, reactions and motives. Get into the story and let the story get into you. Don't, however, allow your imagination to run away with you so that you dress up the Bible story so much that it is no longer recognisable. The story you tell must be true to the historical context and spirit of Scripture. When you have finished you need to be satisfied that it likely did happen that way. We don't want to teach anything that would later have to be untaught. Avoid inaccuracies of any sort.

Dig for more details

Sometimes it is necessary to find out more information in order to guide the imagination. If a narrative is *very* short in the Bible, as some of Jesus' parables are, it will be necessary to do more research. You will be looking for information about the customs, dress, manners, geography, history and general conditions in Bible times. If you were going to tell the story of the lost coin it would be important to know the significance of the coin, why it mattered that it was lost, what furniture was in the house and how many rooms, what was the lamp and broom like? Having found these points of significance use them to good effect in the story.

When the story is well known you will dig for more information – for your own sake and that of the children. Finding new insights will make the story fresh for you and for them. It is like adding spice to soup, it gives it an edge.

Use Dialogue

Characters who don't talk, are dead! Bible people spoke to each other in the same natural, free, often vigorous way that we do. If we want them to come across as real people, they need to speak. When a person speaks, he reveals himself and so you don't need long descriptions of him. Let characters express themselves aggressively, fearfully, respectfully, sarcastically or whatever way is appropriate. Bible characters from different walks of life would have expressed themselves differently; Nicodemus's and Simon Peter's speech would have sounded very different. Yet, no matter who is speaking we should not make their conversation cheap or nasty. It isn't even necessary to use slang. Just make sure it is natural and up to date.

When someone talks to himself it is a monologue but even that can come alive. There is a wonderful example of this in the story of the rich fool, as told by Jesus (Luke 12:13-21). Read it aloud and immediately you know a lot about the man. So you can even make a person's thoughts come alive using this approach.

Choose your words

It is important that the children understand the words you use as you intend them to be understood.

Watch out for the unfamiliar words, especially Bible words. You may explain a word or substitute an accurate equivalent. Remember, children have literal minds so it is best that our words have only one meaning.

Storytelling is all about words and words can be used to great effect. Children don't relish long descriptions but a few well-chosen words can add life and colour to a story. It is so easy to say "he went", but a change of word will tell how he went: "he dashed", "he crept", "he plodded", all create very different pictures.

Chapter 3

Story or lesson

Evan was eager to tell his older sister all about the story he had heard at BibleZone Club. He remembered all the details: the name of the leader, the way they lined up to march around Jericho, who blew the trumpets, who carried the ark, what was different about the seventh day. “Man, I wish I’d been there,” he concluded. “It’s a pity God doesn’t do amazing things nowadays. Hey, is Jericho a real place?”

Sophie had learned the story of Pentecost. She remembered it happened in an upstairs room in Jerusalem and that there was wind and tongues of fire. She smiled at the idea of all the people hearing their own language. But for her the very best bit was when her teacher explained that from then on the Holy Spirit lives in every Christian and helps them to live for Jesus. Sophie had been putting off trusting Jesus because she knew she could never live for God. Now she knew she would have a helper – she was ready.

Evan had heard a well told Bible story, Sophie had learned a Bible lesson. A lesson is more than a story, it is a means of teaching and applying Bible truth.

What is Bible truth?

Jericho was the first city God’s people captured in Canaan; Joshua was the leader; they marched around the city once per day and seven times on the seventh day. These are all true Bible facts. In this narrative there is also teaching or doctrine. Evan could have learned that God’s way of doing things is always best or that God always wins.

The truth is usually expressed in the present tense as it is as true today as it was in the narrative. The main exceptions to this are factual *and* doctrinal statements about Jesus, such as “The Lord Jesus died for sinners” or “Jesus Christ was tempted but never sinned”.

The following are Bible truths which are clear in the relevant Bible story:

- The creation of people (Genesis 2): God made people to know, love and enjoy Him.
- Hagar (Genesis 16): God is everywhere all the time.
- Red Sea crossing (Exodus 14): God has the right, the power and the wisdom to do whatever He pleases.
- Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10): Jesus looks for and finds lost people.
- Jesus calms the storm (Mark 4:35-41): Every situation is under Jesus’ control.
- The Samaritan woman (John 4): Jesus welcomes all kinds of people into His family.

Truth spans the centuries

Bible times are fascinating but they are far removed from the customs and lifestyle of 21st century children. People, however, still have the same hopes, fears, failings and needs. The God who took decisive action in Bible times is still the same so He can meet those human needs and satisfy the human heart. When we help children to identify with the heart needs of Bible characters and learn about the God who is still the same, we focus their minds on the present and the future. They are less likely to reach a stage where they pack away their Bibles with their other children’s storybooks.

Every Bible narrative teaches truth

The Bible is unique for it is God’s revelation of Himself. So through the prophecies, the wisdom, the poetry *and the narratives* He is revealing Himself. “The narratives of the Bible are very important. They are much more than good stories of historical accounts. They contain within themselves a revelation of God Himself, of His own character and of His will

for men” (*Preach the Word, Denis Lane, p33*). It has to be said that the more we understand the other parts of Scripture the more we understand the narrative – and vice versa.

Children need to learn Bible truth

It is good that children become familiar with the Bible stories, but knowing that Moses was the leader of the children of Israel, that Deborah was a judge in Israel, that Saul met Jesus on the road to Damascus will not transform their lives. They need to learn what God is doing and saying through these incidents. It is the truth that will transform: it is the truth that sets us free (John 4:32).

If we want to evangelise children we must teach them truth, to try to do otherwise is not true evangelism. If we want children to be grounded in their faith and ready to face a hostile world we need to teach them truth. If we want our children to have a distinctive world view they need to learn Bible truth.

The children you teach already have a mind-set, they are not a blank page on which you may write the Gospel message. Children in a postmodern culture will already have absorbed at least some of the following:

- People are fundamentally good.
- I am the centre of my world.
- If it feels right, it is right; there are no absolutes.
- God is what you choose him to be. All religions, or none, are fine.

Children from a religious background will have a different mind-set or world view. It is important to try to understand their thinking because this will influence what and how you teach them. Only Bible truth can infiltrate the mind and reshape thinking, causing false ideas to crumble and be replaced by Biblical concepts.

It is not a matter of having a short list of truths which are suitable for children; many, indeed most, truths can be introduced to children in a simple way. It is like taking them to the ocean of truth. At first they paddle near the edge and gradually venture further out. You don't take them to the ocean and restrict them to one little rock pool!

“Is it not a shame and a crying scandal, that they (children) should be deprived of that Word which they may sometimes grasp more tellingly than their elders? Why should they be served a diet of trivialities, when there is all the glory of the Gospel for them to understand and learn to live by?” (*Talks to the Children, William Still, p10.*)

Chapter 4

Finding the truth

The young student studied the passage of Scripture, with furrowed brow and frequent sighs. One of his teachers noticed that he was struggling. "What's your problem?" he asked kindly.

"I am trying to decide what this passage says," he replied.

"Discover rather than decide," advised the older man and walked on.

When you are putting a Bible lesson together, the secret is to find truth that is in the Bible passage and bring it out in your lesson. Do not try to fit truths in but teach what emerges from the passage. Let the Bible speak, rather than make the Bible say. This is what happened in Nehemiah's time: *"They read from the book, the Law of God, clearly, and **they gave the sense**, so that the people understood the reading"* (Nehemiah 8:8 – emphasis mine).

Find truth in the passage

Prayerfully study the passage of Scripture, asking the Lord to show you what He is saying. It is helpful to ask questions as you study.

Perhaps the most helpful one is:

- **What did God do in the passage and what does this show us about Him?**

Note the answer to the second part of the question; that may well be the main truth in the passage. Since the Bible is God's revelation of Himself we can expect to find an answer to that question. It will also help us to correct any tendency to make our teaching man centred, rather than God centred. It will be helpful to have the progression of events on the left hand side of a page and then note what you learn as you ask this question.

Here it is done with the story of Philip and the Ethiopian:

Beginning:

"Let's get out of here"

Progression of events:

1. Persecution scatters Christians

2. Philip preaches in Samaria

3. The Lord sends Philip south

4. Philip meets an Ethiopian

5. Philip explains the Gospel

Climax:

6. Philip baptises the Ethiopian

Conclusion:

7. The Spirit takes Philip to another city

8. Ethiopian returns to Africa rejoicing

"Philip's visit to desert had been very worthwhile!"

God saved Samaritans – God saves all kinds of people

God gave Philip clear instructions – God guides His servants

God planned the meeting – God is interested in individuals

God gave understanding and salvation – God saves

God took Philip away – God puts his servants where He wants them

There are other helpful questions which may help you discover the truth:

- **Is there a statement of spiritual truth in the passage?**

The direct quote from Isaiah 53 in the story of Philip is an example of this (Acts 8:32-33). The significance of this statement cannot be ignored as you teach, it may well be a key to the meaning of the whole passage. In the story of Zacchaeus, Luke 19:10, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost", provides the explanation of the whole story and it needs to be explained.

- **What can I learn from the main character?**

Perhaps the main character does something which provides a teaching point in the lesson. Joseph stayed faithful to God in difficult circumstances so you may be able to teach how and why that is possible for children today. There are lessons to be learned from Peter, Naaman's maid, David as shepherd and later as king, Thomas and Martha. When children identify with people they find it easy to learn from them and in our lessons we can help them to do that without placing the unique responsibilities that were on the prophets or on God's anointed king, on children's shoulders.

- **Do other parts of Scripture throw light on the narrative?**

John the Baptist's statement, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" needs reference to the Old Testament in order to be understood. The often told Christmas story must be put in the context of Old Testament prophecies in order to make clear the real significance of Christ's birth. Hebrews 11 throws light on why Abel's offering was accepted and why Moses' parents hid him in a basket in the Nile.

We should not be surprised when our teaching of the Old Testament leads us to Jesus because it is full of clues, pointers and pictures of Him.

- **Is the story an apt illustration of a Bible verse found in another part of Scripture?**

Sometimes when you read a Bible narrative it brings another verse of Scripture to your mind. As you read Daniel chapter 1, the story of the faithfulness of Daniel and his three friends, you may think of God's declaration in 1 Samuel 2:30, "those who honour me I will honour". You may teach that truth through the story of Daniel and his friends.

Perhaps as you read Acts 16 you are struck by the transformation in the lives of two very different people – Lydia, the fortune teller and the jailer – and you realise that they illustrate the verse, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

It may be a warning that comes to mind as you read a particular narrative. In Esther chapters 6 and 7 we read of the very different characters of Mordecai and Haman. God is not mentioned in the whole book but what happened to these men illustrates the verse, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6) which is part warning and part promise.

Obviously the teacher who knows the Word of God well will be more likely to see Bible stories as apt illustrations of a Bible verse, be it a promise, a principle or a warning.

When you study a Bible passage using these questions as a guide you may find several or many truths. When you return to a passage you know well you are likely to discover a truth you never saw before. That is the richness and wonder of Scripture! It is wise to check your findings with a reliable Bible commentary for even the most experienced teachers can get off target.

Taking all these possibilities into consideration the outline on Philip could become quite crowded!

Beginning:

“Let’s get out of here”

Progression of events:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Persecution scatters Christians | It costs to follow Jesus |
| 2. Philip preaches in Samaria | God saves all kinds of people |
| 3. The Lord sends Philip south | God guides His servants |
| | The importance of obedience |
| 4. Philip meets an Ethiopian | God is interested in individuals |
| 5. Philip explains the Gospel | Explain Isaiah 53:7 |

Climax:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 6. Philip baptises the Ethiopian | God saves |
| | Significance of baptism |

Conclusion:

- | | |
|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| 7. The Spirit takes Philip to another city | God puts his servants where He wants them |
| 8. Ethiopian returns to Africa rejoicing | Jesus gives joy |
| “Philip’s visit to desert had been very worthwhile!” | |

It *may* be possible to mention all these truths but you would not be teaching them, you would just be bombarding the minds of the children. Teaching involves much more than saying or telling.

There are five levels of learning:

1. **Rote level.** The learner can repeat something from memory without thought of what it means. A child may parrot a verse, a phrase or Bible facts but with no evidence of understanding.
2. **Recognition level.** The learner understands the words and meaning. If given a choice of multiple answers he can choose the right answer.
3. **Restatement level.** The learner can explain in his own words what has been taught and can relate it to other biblical concepts he has learned.
4. **Relation level.** The learner understands how what has been taught relates to his own life.
5. **Realisation level.** The learner actually applies it to himself.

(Based on Creative Bible Teaching by Lawrence Richards)

If we include too many truths the children may not even reach the first level. We must respect the learning process and aim to truly teach.

Choose one truth

Establish what is the dominant truth, or **central truth**, in the passage – usually that is the one you teach. It is better to teach one truth in a thorough meaningful way than to mention a multitude of truths. In some Bible narratives you see a truth several times. In the lesson on Philip the truth “God wants everyone to hear the Gospel” could be taught throughout the lesson; it is evident several times in the narrative – in Samaria God is obviously at work among “unlikely” people, God set up the meeting with the Ethiopian, God sent Philip to other places to preach, God sent a new convert back to Ethiopia.

In the story of Elijah running away from Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 19) God’s patience is evident several times in his dealings with the prophet, so you could teach, “God is patient”.

In some stories the truth is revealed gradually and is only fully evident near the end; this would be so in the story of the raising of Lazarus with the central truth, “Jesus is more powerful than death”.

When there are several possibilities, prayerfully consider the needs of the children. If the specific group you will teach knows very little of the Bible, choose to teach the most foundational truth. If the children are well taught, build on what they know.

Summarise the truth

Work out a simple, complete, concise and accurate sentence which summarises the truth you plan to teach throughout the lesson. It should be simple, in language a child would understand. It is likely that you will use this sentence as you teach; so “God knows everything” is better than “God is omniscient”. It is best not to have a long rambling sentence summarising the truth, try to have it concise enough to be remembered.

By using a complete sentence you set perimeters on what you plan to teach: “The Holy Spirit” is a very general theme and is not a sentence, “The Holy Spirit lives in every Christian” would be a more precise summary.

When using the word “you” in the summary, check that it is true of the entire group you will teach. “God made you” or “God knows all about you” are true of all, but “God is your shepherd” is not true of all, it is the privilege of God’s children.

When you summarise the central truth you will discover that almost always it falls in one of the following categories:

- **A doctrine to believe:**
“God wants everyone to hear the Gospel” in the lesson about Philip and the Ethiopian.
“God is patient” in the lesson on Elijah fleeing from Jezebel (Exodus 19).
“Jesus is more powerful than death” in the story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44).
You will discover that you teach more central truths from this category than from any other.
- **A promise to claim:**
“God promises to save anyone who believes in the Lord Jesus” in the lesson on the Philippian jailer (Acts 16).
“God promises that all things work together for good for those who love him” in the lesson on Joseph’s reunion with his family in Egypt (Genesis 45 and 46).
- **A command to obey:**
“Listen to and obey God’s Word” in the story of the wise and foolish builders (Matthew 7:24-27).
“Jesus still calls, ‘Follow me’” in a lesson on the calling of the disciples (Luke 5:1-11).
- **An example to follow:**
“Take God at his word, as Abraham did” (Genesis 12:1-9).
“When God speaks to you, listen as Samuel did” (1 Samuel 3)
- **A warning to heed:**
“It is foolish to make proud plans that leave God out” in the Tower of Babel lesson (Genesis 11).
“Bad company corrupts good character” in a lesson on Samson (Judges 16).

Write the summarising sentence at the top of your lesson outline – the aim of your lesson is to teach and apply that central truth. It is a basic teaching principle that each lesson should have a specific and achievable goal. Keeping the aim or goal in mind will keep you on track and help you not to go off on a tangent.

Adapt the outline

In the light of the central truth you may decide to include an additional event from the passage because it helps you teach the central truth. You may decide to use a beginning which is related to the truth you are going to teach, rather than to the narrative.

Chapter 5

Choosing and planning

Choosing a lesson for a particular situation is not a “lucky dip”, it is not a case of any lesson fitting every situation. A number of principles need to be considered:

We have a twofold responsibility: to teach the Gospel and to edify believing children

There is a body of Gospel truth which we should know, care about deeply, hold on to and pass on. Paul’s testimony to the Ephesian elders was that he “did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), he had omitted nothing essential. Timothy had been entrusted with “a good deposit” which he was to guard (2 Timothy 1:13-14).

We need to understand and define essential Gospel truth:

- God has revealed Himself through the Bible, His Word.
- God is the Creator, ruler and owner of all things.
- God created people in His image and for His glory.
- God is holy and will punish all sin.
- All people are sinful.
- God is loving and kind to sinners.
- Jesus is God’s only Son, He is God and man.
- God put the punishment for sin on Jesus, raised Him from death and exalted Him in Heaven.
- God offers the free gift of salvation to all who repent and believe in Jesus.
- All who trust Jesus will live to please Him through the help of the Holy Spirit.

We must not change the Gospel under the guise of simplifying it. “Avoid a canned or programmed approach which often abbreviate the Gospel, downplay the demands of the Gospel or leave out key aspects of the Gospel altogether” (*John McArthur*).

When we have unsaved children in our class we have a responsibility to evangelise them. If they are there for an extended period of time their knowledge of the Gospel should be deepening.

The Gospel will strengthen faith and assurance in believing children but they also need a wider scope of teaching. They need help with how to handle temptation, what to do when they sin, the ministry of the Holy Spirit in their lives, how to witness, the attributes of God, teaching about the church and a multitude of other things. Through our Bible teaching we must help them to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

We must sow for there to be a harvest

The Word of God is the seed that must be sown. Just as in the natural world, the seed must be sown generously and carefully. No farmer can expect a bumper harvest if he sows sparingly and carelessly. So too, in evangelising children, we sow much seed, we sow carefully and thoroughly, and we wait for a harvest. If you want children to come to a strong, unshakable faith, sow the Gospel. This is how God works, the Word of God rightly taught brings this about: “So faith comes through hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). God is sovereign and sometimes saves where there has been little or no sowing but that does not absolve us from our responsibility to keep sowing. When you gather a group of unreached children with no Bible knowledge and have a one hour programme with them, you sow God’s Word but you do not expect to see many conversions right away; more sowing will be required. Of course God can do the unexpected, but in the

Scriptures when we read about teaching children the emphasis is on thoroughness (eg Deuteronomy 6:6-7 and Psalm 78). A harvest of true conversions is well worth waiting for.

We must adapt to different situations

A group of unreached children in a one-off open air club, a special church service for the children of an evangelical church, one week of evangelistic outreach to children on a beach, a weekly outreach in a housing development are all very different evangelistic opportunities. One lesson does not fit all; you have to choose what is best for each situation.

The one-off open air club is not an ideal situation for teaching, but it is a God-given opportunity. Sowing sparingly is better than not sowing at all. You choose a lesson which simply and clearly presents the Gospel and does not presume to build on previous knowledge. Obviously you will not be able to teach all ten truths listed above: choose a lesson which lends itself to teaching...

- **Our need in the light of who God is**

The Bible passage will determine how the need is explained; for example in the lesson about the prodigal son it would be explained in terms of going your own way; whereas in the lesson on Bartimaeus, it would be explained as blindness or darkness.

It is important that the children realise the seriousness of the problem. It has huge consequences in our lives now and in the future. You cannot outline all the consequences in every lesson but highlight whatever the lesson lends itself to naturally. Children need to be faithfully and gently warned that God will punish sin.

It is helpful to be specific in explaining how the need shows itself in the life of a child. How would a child recognise going his own way or darkness? It is often necessary to relate your example to God's law or His character because children often have very many orientated reasons for why certain things are wrong. We need to balance this with teaching that we are sinners not just because of what we do but because of what we are; this explains why a radical, inward change is needed.

- **God's salvation in Jesus Christ**

Teach as much as you can about the person and work of Christ. Explain why He is unique. When teaching about the death of Christ avoid graphical detail about the physical sufferings. It is vital that children know that all His suffering was for us, but that the worst part was when God put our sin on Him and punished Him. It is all too easy for children to get the idea that God was going to punish us all and Jesus came to the rescue. Teach that God planned salvation and out of love for His Father and for us Jesus came to earth to fulfil that plan.

Jesus must be Saviour and Lord before he is Friend; the words Saviour and Friend are not interchangeable.

It is vital that children know that Jesus is alive and King over all. The more awareness they have of His majesty the more it will make sense to them that as their Saviour He will also be their King.

Different lessons teach different concepts of salvation – being saved, being found, changing kingdoms, being born again, cleansing, forgiveness, adoption, justification. Identify the concept in the passage and stay with it.

- **How salvation can be yours**

"All you need to do is say a prayer" is true in one sense but it is also very misleading.

Establish the word best suited to the lesson and explain it very clearly and accurately; it may be believe, come, receive, repent, call or another word. Make it very clear that the children must respond to God in their hearts, it is not a response to you. As an essential part of applying the Gospel you must explain how to trust Christ rather than saying "If you want to come to Jesus come and see me and I will tell you how".

When the Gospel has been taught and applied it is helpful to let the children know that you are available to answer questions they may have about what you have taught. Be careful not to do this in a way that will confuse the children or cause them to think they must talk to the teacher in order to be saved.

You cannot develop the central truth into a "well rounded" Gospel message in every Bible story, but some lend themselves to it:

- Noah – CT: You can be saved from God's punishment.
- Four friends bring a paralysed man to Jesus – CT: Jesus has power to forgive all your sins.
- Paul's conversion – CT: Jesus Christ can make you a new person.
- Cain and Abel – CT: You must come to God His way.
- The death of Jesus – CT: Jesus was God's great rescue plan.

In the development and application of each of these central truths the need of the children, God's answer in Christ and how to appropriate salvation will be simple and clear.

Alternatively you may use a Gospel presentation which is not a Bible story, like the Wordless Book. You could teach a lesson about redemption, justification or being born again. (See chapter 11.)

If you have an opportunity to speak to well taught children you would not normally choose a Bible story that they are likely to know; rather, teach a lesson that will keep their attention and will include application for the saved child as well as an evangelistic challenge. Sometimes in these circumstances the Lord uses a visiting speaker to "draw in the net" and a child whose heart has been well prepared through regular, faithful teaching in the church trusts the Saviour.

When you have an opportunity to have an evangelistic outreach for five consecutive days you will probably take lessons that follow a theme. Each lesson stands on its own as a Gospel message but each day you can highlight one aspect of the Gospel and endeavour to teach it more thoroughly. Your goal is that by the end of the five days most children will have *really learned* some basic Gospel truths.

For example:

Stories Jesus Told

- The lost sheep – CT: Jesus is the Good Shepherd.
- The wedding banquet – CT: You must have Jesus to be welcomed by God.
- The hidden treasure – CT: God's kingdom is more valuable than anything.
- The prodigal son – CT: God welcomes all who turn back to him.
- The two prayers – CT: God can make sinners right.

Road Signs

- No entry Adam and Eve sin – CT: Sin cannot be where God is.
- One way The Passover lamb – CT: Only the blood of God's Lamb can keep you safe.
- Yield Peter follows Jesus – CT: Following Jesus means He is the boss.

- Stop Saul's conversion – CT: You can't ignore God's Son.
- Warning Rich young ruler – CT: If you reject Jesus you will not have eternal life.

Teaching children on a weekly basis is the best teaching opportunity. You can plan your programme so that the children are taught the basics of the Gospel and a good Bible overview. *Over a period of time the children's knowledge of Bible truth should deepen and widen.* You may decide to devote nine weeks to the basic truths outlined at the beginning of the chapter and then move on to teach several lessons on a Bible character. Week by week the children learn central truths. Occasionally you will come to a lesson in which the central truth develops as a very clear Gospel presentation and you teach it as such. But you should not feel that you need to teach "all the Gospel" as well as the central truth in one lesson. Teach what is there and trust the Lord that He will give opportunities for further learning. Remember, the more you clutter the lesson the less likely the children are to learn.

If the central truth applies only to the saved child do not feel the unsaved cannot benefit: God can use this to help the unsaved to see the privileges and responsibilities of following Christ. If the central truth is primarily a gospel truth, the saved children will benefit; "the Gospel is not something we master once and pass, but it is the answer to every problem there is" (*John McArthur*). Of course Gospel presentations should not be so shallow or predictable that children feel they have heard it all before and become bored – what a disservice to the greatest story ever told!

Some teachers can plan a curriculum and research helps and visuals for each lesson but most teachers find it easier to follow a readymade curriculum. Make sure the teaching programme you choose is built on the conviction that children need the Gospel and the Bible must be at the centre of the teaching.

Develop the capacity to adapt as you teach

A lesson is not a speech which you must deliver as prepared, come what may. When you ask questions, listen to the answers for evidence of understanding or misunderstanding and respond accordingly. In the middle of your lesson a child may ask a good question which raises an issue not in your lesson plan but all will benefit if you answer it.

Perhaps you plan a five day outreach and on the first day you teach a very simple Gospel lesson but realise it made no sense to the children for they don't even know there is a God. You need to adapt and on the second day focus on teaching that there is a God and on following days build on that teaching.

The children in an inner city outreach may have a short attention span and it is obvious that you will lose them if your lesson lasts your usual 16 minutes! On the spot you will need to simplify the story and the truth. This adaptability comes through prayer and experience.

Chapter 6

Teaching the central truth

Know it

“If you begin in the fog, you will leave your people in the dark” (*J.C. Ryle*). The teacher cannot adequately teach something he himself does not understand. It is important that you know more about a truth than you plan to teach; then you are ready for questions and will feel more at ease with your subject. Depth of knowledge of Bible truth will lead to variety in the lessons and will avoid lessons having a “sameness”. You as the teacher will be blessed beyond measure as you deepen your knowledge of Bible truth.

Take the time to come to grips with the central truth. Address questions to it and find the biblical answers. If you were teaching the story of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:10-15), it would be essential to understand what “justified” means. Often it is necessary to go to other passages of Scripture in order to understand the central truth. The truth should not only be clear in your mind, it should saturate your heart, so that when you teach, it comes from a heart that has been already moved by the message.

Simplify and explain it

It is not enough to repeat the summary sentence – the truth needs to be explained thoroughly and simply. If the central truth is “God is holy” it will be necessary to explain the meaning of “holy”. If the central truth is “We are all born sinners” it would be necessary to explain why this is so, how it shows in our lives, and the radical answer to the problem.

You may find it helpful to ask questions about the central truth; the answers to those questions will become the explanation of the truth as you teach it in the lesson. If the central truth is “Jesus rose from the dead”, ask questions like: What does “rose from the dead” mean? How do we know He rose? Why did He rise? What does it show about Him? You may not include every answer but this will help you see aspects of the truth you should explain.

If the central truth is a warning, a command or an example, it is a response statement rather than a doctrinal statement. In explaining this type of central truth, however, you will include truth. If you are teaching a lesson with the central truth, “Today Jesus calls, ‘Follow me’”, you would explain why He has this authority and how does He call as well as what it means to follow Him. If you are teaching a lesson on Abraham with the central truth, “Take God at His word, as Abraham did” you need to explain why God can be trusted; this provides the reason for taking God at His word. You need to explain how we know what God is saying and then explain the response of taking Him at His word.

As you explain the truth it will help the children to understand if you can explain it in terms of their experience. When teaching that God is everywhere, ask them the different places they go each day and show that God is in each place. When explaining that we are all born sinners, point out that in school we learn to write, to spell to count, but there is no class to teach us how to lose our temper or to lie; we can all do those things without being taught. Why?

Of course if the central truth is an integral part of the Bible narrative, the unfolding of the story will help in explaining the truth. It will usually be necessary to bring in other truths in order to adequately explain the central truth. This is normal, sound practice used by Bible teachers. In the story of Cain and Abel you could teach “You must come to God in His way”. It would be necessary to go to the New Testament to adequately explain what is God’s way.

It is good to use short quotes from Scripture to explain the truth and to give the explanation authority and authenticity.

You will not teach everything you know. Keep the explanation simple; remember simple and shallow are not the same. The challenge is to take what you have learned of a particular truth and translate it into “childrenese”. As with any translation work, the challenge is to make sure it is accurate. It is possible to falsify while trying to simplify. Your aim is to communicate the truth using words that cannot be misunderstood. Many of the concepts will be unfamiliar to the children so the challenge is to teach these using words and ideas that are familiar to the children.

You need to consider the background of the children, try to think as they think and listen to your explanations from their perspective. The mind-set of the postmodern child is very different from that of a child from a religious background; you want to teach them in such a way that they really think things through.

It is all too easy to lapse into the habit of using Bible words with which we are familiar but they are an alien language to those we teach. Even when the children repeat those words back to us it does not mean they understand; they may simply be parroting them. By all means use Bible words like “salvation”, “eternal life” and “faith” but explain them simply. “Eternal life” could be explained as “knowing God and belonging to him forever”. “Salvation” could be explained as a rescue, Jesus can rescue from the grip sin has on us and He can rescue us from the punishment we deserve. Even the word “sin” needs explanation! It is essential for children to learn these concepts and very useful that they know the words when they read the Bible for themselves.

Include it in the outline

Write the central truth at the top of your outline. Have the progression of events on the left hand side of a sheet of paper, on the right hand side write **CT** where you plan to teach an aspect of the central truth. Write it opposite the event where you see it naturally emerging from the passage and indicate the aspect of the truth you plan to teach. Usually you will have the central truth marked on an outline three or four times.

Central Truth: God wants all people to hear about Jesus.

Beginning:

“Let’s get out of here”

Progression of events:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| 1. Persecution scatters Christians | CT God’s purpose to spread the Gospel |
| 2. Philip preaches in Samaria | CT All means all |
| 3. The Lord sends Philip south | |
| 4. Philip meets an Ethiopian | CT Not just crowds, individuals, you |
| 5. Philip explains the Gospel | CT Explain the Gospel |

Climax:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 6. Philip baptises the Ethiopian | CT The reason God wants all to hear |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|

Conclusion:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 7. The Spirit takes Philip to another city | |
| 8. Ethiopian returns to Africa rejoicing | CT Recap |
- “Philip’s visit to desert had been very worthwhile!”

Illustrate it

The central truth, or aspects of it, are often abstract concepts which children find difficult to grasp. We need to put them into concrete terms. Illustrations can be very useful in achieving this. Often the Bible narrative itself is an illustration of the central truth but as you

“dissect” the truth you may need to use an illustration to help the children understand some aspect of it.

An illustration may be an example from nature, an incident in everyday life or from biographies and history. The Bible teems with illustrations: “as a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him”; “those who wait upon the Lord will mount up with wings as eagles”; the word of God is like a hammer, a sword, a fire; believers are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Jesus taught in parables which are illustrations. The purpose of an illustration is to illumine or let in light. So when we use them we should ask, “Do they clarify what I am trying to explain?” There should be a very clear connection between the illustration and the point you are making.

The illustration should suit the age group you are teaching; it should not be too long or it will get mixed up with the Bible story in the minds of the children. Avoid using too many illustrations in one lesson.

The teaching of the central truth should be just as lively and gripping as the telling of the story. As the story unfolds, so does the truth. As well as a progression of events there should be a progression in the building of the central truth in the lesson.

Integrate it into the lesson

If you tell a gripping Bible story and at the end say, “Now we learn from this story that...”, the children will tend to switch off, the good part is over and here comes the preaching! It is better to integrate the truth into the narrative, teaching the truth little by little in “bite size” pieces as the narrative lends itself to it. You will use a link sentence to introduce the truth, you will explain a little and then you will use a link sentence to return to the narrative. The link sentence may be a comparison, an exclamation or a question.

For example:

“The boy was very happy to leave home. He couldn’t wait to get going just as he pleased. “I’ll run my own life”, he thought. *In just the same way you and I like to do our own thing.* We like to be in charge. This is how the Bible puts it: “We have turned everyone to his own way”. There are 19 people in this room right now, how many have turned to their own way? *So we are like this son who was hurrying away from home...*”

“Zacchaeus was amazed that Jesus knew his name. *Why did Jesus know his name?* (Children give suggestions.) Jesus knew it because He is God’s Son. God knows everything, Jesus knows everything. He knows all about the past, all about what is happening in every country right now, He knows all about the future. Nobody can tell Him anything He doesn’t already know. He knows all the big things and the little things. *He knows your name just as He knew Zacchaeus’...*”

“The Philippian jailer washed Paul and Silas’s wounds, he took them to his home and gave them food. *What a change! God still changes people from the inside out.* If a monkey put on a lion skin and growled like a lion, will he be a real lion? No! The real lions are the ones who were born lions. If you want to be in God’s family that does not happen just because you do some Christian things like saying prayers and going to church. God has to change you on the inside and make you a new person. We read in the Bible that you become a “new creation, the old has passed away...the new has come”. Everyone who believes in the Lord Jesus is a new creation. *That explains why the jailer was so different...*”

Teachers are sometimes concerned that this approach spoils the story for the children. It does break the story but the break is scarcely noticeable if the truth is truly emerging from

the narrative at that point and the break is not too long. It is important to remember that our task is not simply to tell stories but to teach lessons – well integrated, unified lessons.

If, during the course of the lesson, you include aspects of the central truth three or four times, you will be repeating the central truth during the lesson. You may or may not use the same phrase – younger children like to repeat the summary sentence with you. This repetition is essential in teaching. Many truths are repeated and repeated in Scripture – our Creator knows how we learn!

Visualise it

It is likely that you will use visuals for the story part of the lesson but it is equally important that you use visuals for the truth. It may be as simple as having the central truth on a card and having it on display as you teach. This will, however, become monotonous and largely ineffective if you do it in every lesson. Try to be creative. You may put key words on display as you use them in relation to the central truth or you may use symbols. You may put on display a question related to the central truth and as you teach add visualised answers. You may use an object related to the central truth; for example have a gift and from it draw key words about eternal life.

As a general principle it is good to teach a little and teach it well, but there are times when you will deviate from this. You may have a lesson which will review several truths you have taught recently.

Occasionally you will see a truth which is not the central truth of the lesson but you feel it is pertinent for your group; so you mention it. From time to time we all encounter lessons with which we struggle to find one dominant truth so we include two or three and teach them less thoroughly.

These principles are sound teaching principles but should never be a strait jacket; there is room for freedom and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 7

Applying the truth

The ten year old boys tumbled out of Sunday school, free at last. Their conversation went something like this:

“That is the sixth lesson on what God is like – I think we know it by now.”

“Mr. Bell gets so excited about it all – I must be missing something”.

“OK God is everywhere all the time –”

“Omnipresent you mean.”

“OK smarty, omnipresent and holy and He knows everything –”

“Omniscient”

“And sovereign, supreme and self-sufficient!”

“Yes, all those things – and so what?”

Something was missing; the boys could see no relationship between the attributes of God and their lives. Application provides the answer to the “so what?” Application is the process whereby the truth is brought to bear directly and personally on the lives of the children, helping them to understand how to respond to it.

It is important to help the children understand the response the Lord wants towards Himself as a result of the truth taught. All truth has implications for our lives, in terms of desires, attitudes, behaviour or actions and we want the children to think through those implications.

In 2 Timothy 3:15-18 we see the purpose of Scripture: it is profitable for teaching (for learning truth), but that is not all. It works out in our lives in reproof, correction, training in righteousness and equipping us for good works.

The application is built on the truth

The central truth determines the application. A lesson about God's sovereignty will have an application that is different from that of a lesson on the death of Christ. Application is the flower that grows from the root of truth, the root determines the flower.

It is helpful to put the word “therefore” after the sentence that summarises the truth, thus making it an incomplete sentence. You then need to complete the sentence and that gives an indication of the application.

For example:

- The Bible is God's word...therefore...read it.
- Jesus Christ is going to come back to earth...therefore...be ready.
- Jesus Christ is alive for ever...therefore...you can know Him.

When the central truth is a command, a promise, an example or a warning there will already be an indication of the application of the lesson. In explaining these central truths it is vital to lay the doctrinal basis for the command, example or whatever the case may be.

When teaching a Bible lesson **the normal pattern is to lay the foundation of truth first and then build the application on it.** The first time you introduce the central truth you will probably not apply it, that will come later in the lesson.

Application is built into the lives of the children

Application is like a bridge, it is built from the truth into lives of those you teach. Try to know and understand their world. Be aware of their anxieties and problems, their pressures and pleasures, their attitudes, beliefs and values. When you can give an example of peer

pressure or a game they enjoy and it rings true, you are on the way to helping them to apply the word of God.

Application needs to discriminate

God sees all the people in the world, including the children, in two groups – those in His Kingdom and those outside, the saved and the lost. Some children have trusted Christ and are in God's Kingdom, those who have not are still outside. The application of a Bible truth is sometimes the same for both, but often it is not. As you teach you want to help the unsaved child to understand the response God wants from him and you want the saved child to understand how he should respond to God.

Perhaps in the lesson about Jesus calling his disciples you teach the central truth, "Jesus is still calling people to follow Him". The application to the unsaved would be, "you begin to follow Him when you trust Him as your Saviour"; the application for the saved child could be, "you follow every day as you live for Him".

Usually the central truth can be applied to the saved and to the unsaved but sometimes a truth applies only to the unsaved child; don't force an application. Similarly when a truth applies only to the saved, bring the clear, natural application of the truth.

Christians benefit from the Gospel, as so much of our lives are an outworking of that Gospel and it is good for non-Christians to hear the privileges of being in God's family and the obligations.

As you apply the truth indicate to whom you are speaking. In the lesson on Philip you could say, "If you are a Christian, God wants you to tell someone about Jesus. Let's think how you could do that..." In applying the truth to the unsaved, you could say, "Perhaps you don't yet know Jesus, but here you are in Good News Club! How did it happen that you came?...God worked all that out so that you would hear about His Son. He wants you to hear so that you can believe."

At the top of your lesson outline indicate clearly to whom and how you will apply the truth.

Central truth: God wants everyone to hear the Gospel.

Application to saved: Tell someone (provide a leaflet).

Application to unsaved: When you hear, believe, like the Ethiopian.

If the central truth already indicates the application, you specify how you will develop the application.

Central truth: God promises to honour those who honour him.

Application to saved: Ask God to help you when it is hard to choose His way and be different.

Application to unsaved: You need to turn from dishonouring God.

We should not slip into a practice of teaching all the children as if they are all in God's Kingdom, thus giving them all the securities and comforts of the Gospel and leading them to the false conclusion that all is well.

Applications should be specific and relevant

The following questions help you to make your application specific and relevant:

- **Who?**
- **What response does God want from the children?**
- **When?**
- **Where?**
- **How?**

As you apply the truth, lead the children to see the answers to these questions. Use specifics to help them understand the relevance of the truth.

If you are teaching “The Bible is God’s Word”, the answers to the questions may look like this:

Who? Saved and unsaved.

What response does God want? Read it. If you don’t have a Bible, we can get one for you if your parents permit.

When? Often, each day if possible. It is good to have a set time, eg before breakfast or before you go to bed.

Where? At home, find a quiet place. Ask children for ideas.

How? Ask God to help you understand. Start at the Gospel of Mark and read a little each day. Mark where you stop and start there next day.

If you teach a lesson with the central truth “Jesus is the only way to God” the answers may be as follows:

Who? Saved and unsaved.

What? Unsaved – Turn away from other ways you’ve tried and come to Jesus.

Saved – Think of someone who is trying another way and pray for a chance to tell them about the one way. The memory verse (John 6:14) is good to share with that person.

When? Unsaved – Now here in club, or when you go home.

Saved – Pray about the person today and when you get a chance to talk, take it.

How? Unsaved – Tell God that you are sorry for trying other ways and that now you know they don’t work. Thank Jesus for dying for your sin and tell him that from now on you are depending on him to bring you to God.

Saved – Show your friend the craft we made today. If she is interested, you could say, “We did other interesting things too.” If she asks, “What?” tell her the Bible verse you learned.

The application is always a response to God in belief, attitude or actions. The children should be able to relate to the examples you use. When you teach that God is patient and the application for Christian children is that they should be patient use examples like being patient with a boy on the football team who isn’t such a good player – how will you show patience with him?

Applications should be realistic

Recognise that children are children and often their steps in obedience to God will be small steps. Encourage them to witness to one friend rather than give the impression that they must tell everyone in their class about Jesus. After all, how many of us teachers have told all our work mates or neighbours?

The applications should not all be about doing, often they will be about trusting, or enjoying the privileges of being in God’s family. If we get the balance wrong children can reach the false conclusion that while we are saved by grace we don’t live by grace.

Applications should provoke thought

If we want children to reach the relation and realisation levels of learning it is vital that they think through the applications. We must do more than simply tell them the response God wants. Ask questions like “We learned today what Romans 8:28 means. So if you are a Christian and you don’t get accepted by the school you want to go to, what difference will the promise make? Will you feel disappointed? Will you complain? What would you say to God? Would you have any reason to be excited?”

You can take an example of an imaginary child and ask questions: "Oscar was confused. His dad and uncle said there is no God and everything just happened by chance. At camp they had lessons from Genesis and Oscar learned that God created the world. He learned that through Jesus people can know this God. Oscar asked lots of questions and one leader especially gave him answers, good answers. Oscar faces a hard choice. If he believes the Bible and trusts Jesus, what might happen? What are the results of not believing? Would he be wise to wait?" When you approach it in this way, children can think it through for themselves without being in the spotlight.

Another way to encourage thought is to explain a situation where the application is relevant and give three possible options. For example: "Zara's mother is very firm, 'Zara, I don't want to hear another word about Jesus. You can go to church once on Sundays but not on other days. I will allow you to keep the Bible you bought, but no preaching. Don't ask me to go to church with you'."

Zara wants to be a witness, which way is best and why?

1. Get a Christian book and leave it in her mother's room and pray she'll read it.
2. Pray that she can *show* Jesus even when she can't talk about Him.
3. Ask an adult from the church to come and speak with her mother and get her to change her mind.

Applications are for "you"

Often we use words such as "we", "us", "we all", "everyone", "anyone", as we apply the truth and there is a place for using these words. From time to time share your own experience of applying a particular truth and point out that it is true "not just for me, but for you too".

The application will be more personal to the individual child when you use the word "you". You may even see that recognition, "This is for me!", in a child's facial expression. Of course the "you" is for each individual child present, not one child whom you make squirm as you keep your eye fixed on him as you say "you"!

Application is a response to God

It is very helpful, and it strengthens the application, when you include a verse of Scripture which indicates what the Lord wants. This underlines the fact that the response in the heart and life of the child is to God, rather than to the teacher.

As you bring the application, your demeanour and way of teaching should indicate that it really matters what children do with what they have heard. There should be an element of gentle entreaty and challenge in your application, but no pressure. We must always try to avoid children responding as a result of pressure or out of a desire to please the teacher. Only those responses brought about through the work of the Holy Spirit are a genuine work of God. "There is no need to pressure or coerce a confession from a child, for genuine repentance will bring forth its own confession as the Lord opens the heart in response to the Gospel" (*John McArthur*).

Applications can be added to your outline

As with the central truth, the applications are integrated into the lesson and usually there is a final, brief application at the end of the lesson.

In the example, **AppS** indicates application for saved, **AppU** indicates application for unsaved.

Beginning:

“Let’s get out of here”

Progression of events:

1. Persecution scatters Christians
2. Philip preaches in Samaria

3. The Lord sends Philip south
4. Philip meets an Ethiopian

5. Philip explains the Gospel

CT God’s purpose to spread the Gospel

CT All means all

AppS (Mark 16:10)

CT Not just crowds, individuals, you

AppU

CT Explain the Gospel

Climax:

6. Philip baptises the Ethiopian

CT The reason God wants all to hear

AppU (Romans 10:13)

Conclusion:

7. The Spirit takes Philip to another city
 8. Ethiopian returns to Africa rejoicing
- “Philip’s visit to desert had been very worthwhile!”

CT Recap

Carryover Activities

From time to time it will be possible, and helpful, to provide something which helps the Christian get going in applying the central truth. Perhaps you have taught about prayer and show how to use a little notebook as a prayer diary. Notebooks are then made available for those who wish to have a prayer diary. Following a Bible lesson about witnessing two leaders may demonstrate how to give a tract to a friend, and then make tracts available to those who wish to have one. When you teach a lesson about thankfulness, you could provide a little card with a box for each day of the week, the child colours a box on each day he thanks God for something.

The children’s participation is entirely voluntary and, while the activities are geared for Christian children, you would never say that the others should not or cannot have them.

Chapter 8

Presenting the lesson

An aspiring cook may have all the ingredients for a delicious meal on the table in front of her but this does not guarantee the quality of the meal that will be served to guests! Similarly with teaching a Bible lesson, it has to be presented in an attractive way and it needs to be “palatable” and enjoyable.

Use visual aids

Visual aids are objects, symbols, materials and methods that appeal to our sense of sight and help clarify thoughts by making them concrete.

The proper use of visual aids will make learning more lasting because we remember 50% of what we hear and see. They help get and keep the children’s attention and make learning more enjoyable, this in turn leads to better behaviour. Visuals will clarify the teaching and often help to illustrate a difficult point. It is hardly surprising that there was a visual element in the teaching ministry of Jesus.

There is a huge variety of visuals, probably more than at any other time. If you are following a curriculum visuals will probably be provided. Use what you find useful, omit what you don’t find helpful and add your own ideas. Everyday objects are often useful visuals. Simple is usually best, if the visual aid is very complicated it may distract you and the children. Avoid visuals which distract or trivialise the message. Even the most attractive visuals can become monotonous if used time after time with no variation. The visuals you use should be of a high standard, not dog eared, worn or old fashioned.

Use visuals that suit the age group you are teaching. The very young like to be able to handle the visuals and simple, bold pictures are best for them. Maps and a time line are useful when teaching older children. Check that the children can see the visuals and can read the style of print you use.

Whatever visuals you use it is important to be comfortable with them, so practise beforehand!

Flannelgraph

Children love flannelgraph. Teachers, not children, sometimes complain that it is old fashioned. It has the advantage of offering an element of movement and “life” on the board and yet the children still focus on the teacher who is placing the figures.

If you have to cut out the flannelgraph figures do so carefully and accurately, it isn’t nice if Joseph or Esther lose fingers or toes! Leave no little white pieces around the edges. Little parts which are too difficult to cut out neatly may be shaded in with a dark colour.

Make sure the flannelgraph board can be seen by all children. Have the board slightly slanted backwards.

Place the figures in the order in which you plan to use them in a place where it is easy to lift them as needed. When you remove a figure which you will not need again, set it to one side. If it is a figure you need again, place it beside the other figures you still need to use.

Lift the figures by the middle or side rather than by the head.

Avoid walking around with a figure in hand.

There is no need to “pat” or rub the figures when you place them on the board, they will stick!

Avoid talking to the figures when you place them, speak to the children. There is no need to introduce the figures – “This is Noah”. Place the figure and get on with the lesson – “Noah was listening carefully to God”.

Consider perspective in the placing of figures. People in the foreground are the larger figures: they should be placed slightly off centre towards the bottom of the board. (If children are in the foreground they will, of course, be smaller than the adult figures.) People or things in the distance will be smaller and should be placed further up the board. Check that all figures look “grounded” and do not appear to be floating in the air. When people are supposed to be speaking to each other check that they seem to have eye contact. Figures should not look “tipsy”!

Avoid having two pictures of the same person on the board at the same time; remove one before placing the other.

Flannelgraph backgrounds enhance the visual impact, provided they suit the narrative. Have them on the board before you begin the lesson and give due consideration to the background scene when placing the figures.

It is vital to practise before teaching with flannelgraph. Relax and enjoy using these versatile visual aids. If you make a mistake the children will tell you and they are very forgiving!

If possible give the children the opportunity to use the flannelgraph, they love to recreate the scenes.

Store the figures carefully in folders or envelopes and you will be able to use them again and again.

Flashcards

Flashcard pictures are easier to use but they too bring their challenges. Familiarise yourself with the pictures and the order in which they come so you don’t have to “peek”.

Hold the flashcards straight and at a good level for the children. Be careful that your hand or arm does not hide part of the picture.

When the visual is not relevant to what you are saying, set it down or hold it at your side.

Practise turning the pages in front of a mirror. Check that as you turn the pages nobody would see a picture before they should.

Sometimes you may return to a picture used earlier in the lesson, use a paper clip to mark which page and this will enable you to find it easily.

If you are using something that “works”, make sure it really does. When using technical equipment ensure it is in order and that you know how to use it. Children don’t excel at sitting and waiting quietly while a glitch is sorted.

Visual aids are precisely that – they are aids to teaching. In and of themselves they do not make a good lesson. So avoid spending a disproportionate time on getting the visuals ready or expecting everything to go well just because you have clever or outstanding visuals.

Remember you too are a visual; the children will focus on you as you teach. Live the lesson. Your facial expressions and gestures matter. “Good storytellers use the whole body when presenting stories. Eyes, eyebrows and mouth make the many facial expressions which bring characters to life. Hands and arms illustrate what’s said. Body and legs add character and action”. (*Know How to Tell a Story, Clifford Warne, p38*). Don’t overdo the gestures or movement, they should all be purposeful – the product of the mind before they are the product of the body. Work this out for yourself and do what is best suited to your personality.

Involve the children

I hear and I forget,
I see and I remember,
I do and I understand.

Teaching is much more than telling, it is guiding involved and participating learners. Your goal as a teacher is to motivate and involve your students in the learning process.

This principle of involvement was evident, though not dominant, in the teaching ministry of Jesus; that is a good guide for us as we teach the Bible lesson part of the programme. In the overall programme there will be activity centred segments but during the Bible lesson pupil involvement will be evident but not dominant.

The involvement of the learners should be planned, purposeful and “do-able”. The purposes for the involvement may be many and varied, but always identified by the teacher.

- **Questions** are one of the most effective ways to involve children in the lesson. Avoid questions where children simply guess the answers with no prior information or guidance. You will use some “test questions” which require factual answers. The best questions, however, are “training questions” in which the key words are “think” or “why”. If you are teaching about Paul and Silas at Lystra where the people worshipped Zeus and Hermes (Acts 14) you could ask, “Why not just leave them to their own religion?” If the children conclude that salvation is through Jesus alone, ask, “Can you think of a Bible verse that tells us that?”

These questions need to be thought through beforehand and should be clear and concise. Give the children time to think and listen carefully to their answers and sometimes ask another question to guide their thinking. You cannot accept a wrong answer as correct but deal with it sensitively.

Sometimes you may ask a question and the children discuss it with their neighbour. You could begin a lesson on David and Jonathan by asking, “What makes a good friend? Talk with the person next you and come up with three ideas”.

- In some lessons **mime or drama** can be used. All the children can pretend to be Bartimaeus begging and calling out for money. All the children could mime different actions of the disciples in the boat caught in a storm; the teacher would call out “Tighten the ropes”, “Bail out water”, “Try rowing”, “Call for help”.

Children like to be involved with the visuals for the lesson. All could have pictures of people and together create the visual of the big crowd that followed Jesus before He fed them with five loaves and two fish. For a lesson from 2 Kings 4: 1-7 a small picture of a jar could be placed under each child’s seat and when the widow asks her neighbours for jars each child put a jar on the flannelgraph board.

When teaching the crossing of the Red Sea the teacher could have lots of inflated blue balloons as the sea. At the point where God makes a path, the children could rub the

balloons on their hair (to create static electricity) and then place them on facing walls to create the water piling up. They will stick!

- **A game or activity** can be used to make a point. If your lesson is about the trustworthiness of the Bible you could play a game of Chinese whispers (the teacher whispers something to a child who whispers it to the next until all have received it. Listen to the message the last person gets) to show that if God had allowed His Word to be passed on by word of mouth there would be many mistakes.

You may have an activity designed to draw the children into the story: they make particular sound effects every time they hear certain key words. For example, every time Goliath is mentioned they respond with “Grrr....grrr” and every time David is mentioned they cheer. Alternatively they repeat key phrases; in the story of Samson and Delilah (Judges 16), each time Delilah says “Samson, the Philistines are coming!”, the children say it together.

It is useful to ask yourself the following questions about involvement that you are considering:

- **Why include it?**
It is important to identify the reason for the involvement and later evaluate if it was effective.

Some groups of children have a very short attention span and need activity so you plan to give them an opportunity to move around, otherwise you lose their attention. Another purpose may be to help the children experience the reality of what happened. Often you will involve the children to help them think through and understand truth and application and so reach a higher level of learning.

- **Can all participate?**
Sometimes we involve a few children in a skit or other activity but generally when there is involvement it is best that all can participate. It is difficult for the children to just watch others having fun doing something. Consider the age group and suit the activity accordingly; if you are teaching a wide age range it is more difficult as older children may consider something “babyish” and younger ones cannot do what appeals to the older children.
- **How much time will it take?**
If your Bible lesson is 15 minutes long, an eight minute activity is too long. Make sure the activity enhances the lesson and does not spoil its progression and entity. If the involvement is useful but too long, include it in another part of the programme.
- **Will it cause discipline problems?**
There are some groups and the balloon activity mentioned above would not be a good idea in the middle of the lesson! If the involvement includes the children being up and about it may prove very difficult to settle them again for the rest of the lesson. It is possible to do more active things in a smaller group.

Use your Bible

The Bible is our authority so it is good that the children see that we teach from it. When possible teach with the Bible open in your hand. Also refer to the Bible: “The Bible says...”. During the lesson you will read from the Bible, perhaps a verse related to the truth or application or part of the narrative. In the story of Peter’s denial of Jesus you might say, ‘Peter was there in the courtyard warming himself by the fire. He didn’t want to talk to

anyone and he didn't want anyone to recognise him. A servant girl came by – I'm going to read straight from the Bible what happened next. "When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. 'You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus,' she said". What should Peter say?...Let's read what he *did* say – "I don't know or understand what you are talking about." (Mark 14:66-68 NIV)

It is good for the children to engage with words directly from the Bible; you could read a verse or two which you have on display and ask questions about it. When teaching about the raising of Lazarus it would be good to have the key words in John 11:25-26 on display. "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.'" Ask the children, "What did Jesus say about Himself? What did Jesus say about people who believe in Him?" Obviously the teacher must do some explaining but the children are finding answers in the Word of God.

If you can, involve the children in reading the Bible for themselves. When children bring their Bibles with them they should be given opportunities to use them. Sword drill can be fun *and be useful*. Don't just use random verses which the children find and read aloud with no idea what they mean. Rather use carefully chosen verses and ask the children to read aloud the words which answer a specific question. In this way you encourage them to think of the meaning.

Use your voice

It is reckoned that everyone has at least six voices so there is no excuse for being monotone! Explore and develop your vocal range. Vary the volume, speed and tone of your voice: louder for action, softer for suspense, faster for excitement, slower for sadness. Learn to use pauses, silence and appropriate emphases to good effect.

Some people, but not many, can use voice changes for different characters. If you can't give each character a different voice, try giving each one a different manner of speaking. Listen how different people around you speak and you will discover all kinds of manners of speech. You can use some of these for your Bible characters.

When you are teaching and applying the truth you need to be just as enthusiastic and expressive as you are during the narrative. The way in which you say something communicates something about what you are saying.

You want every child to hear every word you say, so aim your voice for the child farthest away. When you drop your voice, every child still needs to hear. Children who can't hear get distracted and may cause distraction.

Be yourself

God has given you your unique personality (minus the sinful bents) and that is what he will use as you place yourself in His hands. He has given you certain gifts to be used in His service. Develop these and use them for His glory. We can all learn from other people but resist the temptation to imitate someone to such a degree that you no longer are yourself. God uses extroverts and introverts, the academics and the practically minded, the articulate and those who struggle with words, the expressive and the undemonstrative.

Some people are fun loving with an almost irrepressible sense of humour and there is a place for humour and playfulness as you teach a Bible lesson – there is humour in the Scriptures. There is, however, a tipping point where you begin to trivialise the message.

Children can be serious, they even enjoy being serious! The Bible lessons we teach will always deal with serious issues which cannot be taught in a light hearted, jovial way. People who act silly are not as effective as they think they are, for children, while entering into the fun, know that life's big questions are not being answered. So teachers who naturally overflow with humour may have to curtail it, as C.H. Spurgeon did. A lady reproached him for telling too many jokes. His reply was, "Dear Madam, please give me credit for the jokes I don't tell!"

Enjoy teaching each lesson; your enthusiasm and love for God's Word and for the children will be sensed by those you teach. If you make a silly mistake, laugh at yourself. If you inadvertently leave something out, learn from your mistake and leave it with the Lord.

Be aware of time

Usually you teach a Bible lesson as part of a longer programme and you will know how much time has been allocated to the Bible lesson. Keep to your time – give or take a few minutes. The length of the lesson will be determined by a number of factors, not least the concentration span of those you are teaching: if it is a group of pre-schoolers it may be 5-7 minutes, if it is a group of older children it may be 15 minutes, in an open air, inner city club you may discover that after 5 minutes your audience moves on. It has to be said that different teachers have different capacities to keep the children's attention. There is no hard and fast rule about timing, if the children are willing and eager to listen for longer, give more time to the lesson, if their attention span is very short, consider splitting up the lesson in smaller sections throughout the programme.

Depend on God

It is your responsibility to prayerfully and thoroughly prepare your Bible lesson. As you teach, you give it your all. You need the Lord's help in all of that; Jesus said, "...apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:3). Having done all that you can in and through the lesson *you* cannot give spiritual understanding or elicit a spiritual response from even one child. That is God's work. He will work through the teaching of His Word. "The Holy Spirit's favourite place is right behind the preaching of the Gospel" (*John Piper*). God will work in His own way and time; when it happens, the credit and glory belong to God rather than the teacher.

Chapter 9

The lesson and the whole programme

When you have “crafted” a Bible lesson it is something which is self-contained and clearly identifiable as “the Bible lesson”, yet it can be strengthened and enhanced by other parts of the programme. The wise teacher will consider adding supporting elements to the programme. These may be as basic as a memory verse or song which teaches the central truth. Sometimes, however, as you prepare you come across a very apt illustration but it would break up the storyline of the lesson too much; consider including it in another part of the programme, especially if you can do so in a way other than telling it. These parts of the programme will provide opportunities to use all sorts of creative teaching methods. You must also consider the time available, often it is a matter of choosing between what is good and what is best.

The following are suggestions for strengthening the teaching through other parts of the programme:

- **Introduce an unfamiliar, but key word, or concept before the lesson begins**
For the lesson about Philip and the Ethiopian you could explain “scroll” early in the programme by having each child make a little scroll. After the memory verse they glue their verse on to the scroll – because that is how the Bible originally was. By the time you begin this lesson the children will know what a scroll is.

Have the children dress up as slaves all held by (paper) chains and supervised by a harsh owner. One of the leaders comes and buys a slave, takes off his chains and tells him he is free. Thus the concept of redemption is introduced and the activity can be referred to when explaining redemption in the lesson.

A DVD clip of a chrysalis becoming a butterfly could be used to introduce the concept of a new creation.

- **You may want to reinforce the narrative**
The children can act out part of the story. You may organise them into Joshua’s army to march around Jericho. Use as many or as few props as are appropriate.

Divide the children into small groups and ask each to do something related to different parts of the story. For the lesson on Philip and the Ethiopian one group could build a chariot, another could be Christians deciding to leave Jerusalem and what to take, another group could interview the Ethiopian after he returns home, and in another group one child pretends to be an older Philip (provided with cotton wool beard!) telling his inquisitive grandchildren (the others in the group) about his visit to the desert.

- **Application can be strengthened as children are given time to work it out together**
You may divide them into groups to do case studies where the truth must be applied or they act out a situation where a child applies the truth. They could practise explaining the Gospel using a leaflet or the Wordless Book. It helps if each small group has a leader to guide or help when necessary.
- **Occasionally a short “read aloud story” at the end of the programme** can summarise the truth or application in a very helpful way.

- **A craft can reinforce the narrative, truth or application**

The children could make a door hanger with the promise on it that has been taught in the lesson.

The children could make attractive little prayer notebooks to encourage them to apply a lesson on prayer.

- **Sometimes a game can be a very effective way to make a point**

Each child gets a picture of an animal which he does not show anyone else. Each child makes the sound of his animal in order to find his partner (the same animal). Having found each other they move to the “ark” in the room.

Mark out an obstacle course and divide the children into pairs, blindfolding one. Each pair sets off on the obstacle course with the sighted person giving only verbal instructions. After a while the positions are reversed. At the end the children discuss how they felt and if they could trust their partner. If you get good instructions you can find your way – God’s instructions are good we can trust him fully.

The person teaching the Bible lesson should always, if at all possible, have input into the overall programme. The Bible teacher is in the best position to decide what else would be helpful and where to include it.

Establish the purpose of the added segment. What part of the lesson does it introduce, clarify, expand or reinforce? It is appropriate to have an activity just to use up energy after the children have been sitting still for a time but if you can combine that activity in a meaningful way with the Bible lesson it is even better.

Think of the time available – perhaps a one hour programme – and consider how much time the activity will take. If it takes too long, you may have to adapt it or omit it. It is possible to be economical with time if you plan ahead: providing individual kits for crafts reduces the amount of time needed to complete the project.

All children should be able to benefit in a meaningful way: think of the age range, their spiritual understanding and their developmental stages.

Make sure you have enough help to carry it through successfully; helpers should know beforehand what is expected of them.

Vary the supporting elements so there is some surprise in the programme.

Afterwards evaluate if and how it strengthened and enhanced the lesson.

Chapter 10

Preparation

Some people have the ability to do a Bible talk with no preparation whatsoever! Is this a “gift” to be coveted? Doesn’t the Lord tell us, *“do not be anxious how you are to speak and what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour”*? (Matthew 10:19)

It is clear in the Bible that teaching God’s Word is a serious responsibility, not to be taken lightly. *“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth”* (2 Timothy 2:15) – it is impossible to carry out this instruction without studying and preparing before you teach the Scriptures.

J.B. Philips’ paraphrase of Romans 12:7b makes the point very clearly: *“If our gift is teaching, let us give all we have to our teaching, let us not allow slackness to spoil our work.”*

Ezra set a good example for every Bible teacher; *“For Ezra set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel”* (Ezra 7:10). He was committed to studying, to working it out in his life and *then* teaching.

As for the promise in Matthew 10, the context is when believers are “dragged before governors and kings for my sake” (v18), “it offers no comfort to preachers (*or children’s workers*) who are either too lazy or too proud or too pious to prepare”. (*I Believe in Preaching, John Stott, p.212, words in italics added.*)

Big bonuses come with preparation! You will learn many personal lessons as you prepare and your knowledge of the Bible will widen and deepen. Your teaching will improve and become more interesting. The children will, therefore, be more interested and may even behave better! If there is disruption as you teach you will find it less of a challenge if you are well prepared. Some reckon that a well prepared lesson is 90% given. A well prepared lesson sounds deceptively simple. On the other hand, as Benjamin Franklin said, “By failing to prepare you are preparing for failure.”

Give it time

It is impossible to meditate in a hurry! It will take time for you to get your mind submerged in the passage of Scripture that you plan to teach so read it through a week or several days before you will teach. This was Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s practice before preaching, in order to “try to sink deeply into it, so as really to hear what it is saying”. It is a good idea to read the passage each day and then think it over as you drive to work, do some housework or go for a walk.

Plan a time which you set aside for study and guard this time. Some people like to study half an hour each day, others opt to block out a morning or an evening for preparation. Work out what suits you best then give preparation time the priority you would give any other appointment in your diary.

Some people are too conscientious about preparation; they have done their work thoroughly and the preparation is complete but they cannot leave it and every spare moment is spent preparing. This does not necessarily enhance the lesson, so it is best to learn to entrust completed preparation to the Lord and step back from it.

Ask the Lord to help you to understand his Word, to use this lesson to shape your life, to lead you in making it understandable and applicable to the children. “All preparation must begin,

continue and end with dependence upon God and in prayer” (*U can Teach a Bible Lesson to Children by Sam Doherty p78*).

Study

The Bible is the only inspired text available to you so use it as your primary source. As you read the passage you endeavour to take the steps outlined throughout this book:

- Identify the main characters.
- In your mind’s eye see the story unfold.
- “Dig” for a central truth.
- Think through possible applications – for you, for the unbelieving children, for the believing children.
- Open up your own heart to God’s Word. You may not always focus in your lesson on what God has said to you as you studied but when the Lord ministers to you personally as you prepare it will certainly be evident in the way you teach.
- It is helpful to consult other books. If you are following a curriculum, read through the Teachers’ Manual which, while it is not a script, will provide a lot of help and save a lot of time. Decide what you will or will not use from it. If it suggests an illustration which does not suit your group replace it with one that does and which makes the same point. It is useful to have a doctrine or theology book. When you are teaching a truth it is important that you can define it correctly on your own level of understanding before working out how to explain it to the children. We can be quite “sloppy” in our definitions and explanations of truth.
- Bible commentaries will help you sort out any difficulties in the passage and explain the context. A Bible dictionary is useful for looking up about customs, people, dress, food and so on.
- A good children’s story Bible can often provide ideas for making the story come alive.

Write notes

As you find out information, as you see a possible central truth, and truths which help explain it, write them down. At some stage you will have many unorganised notes; you need to create order out of the chaos! Make an outline; it should have the Scripture passage at the top followed by the central truth and the summaries of the applications. Under these you have the introduction, the progression of events the climax and conclusion.

Then mark in where you plan to teach and/or apply the truth and when and how you will involve the children. Many people use an outline like this as they teach but even if you don’t, it is useful in giving you a clear overview of your lesson.

It is a very profitable discipline to write out the entire lesson because it makes you think through the details, it also makes you think through exactly how you will explain the truth and apply it; writing down precisely what you wish to say is very useful.

Don’t try to memorise the complete script or try to teach from it, reduce it to something manageable for you. The notes you use should be helpful to you without being a distraction to the children; don’t allow notes to break your vital eye contact with the children.

If you want some supporting elements in the programme or if you need helpers or children to participate in a way which requires prior preparation, you should inform the relevant people and give adequate guidance as to what they should prepare.

Prepare the visuals

If visuals are provided with the curriculum, choose what you will use. If you are making visuals they should be attractive, clear and large enough for all to see. Use aids which are appropriate for the age level of your group; for example, for younger children, words need to

be in lower case. “The tools must be accurate, authentic realistic and educational, rather than just entertaining” (*What Every Sunday School Teacher Should Know*, Elmer L. Towns, p100).

Organise the visuals in the order you plan to use them as having to break the flow of a lesson to find a visual can mean losing the attention of the children or losing your train of thought.

When you buy visuals or invest time in making something attractive it is worthwhile to plan how you will store them so they can be used again and again.

Always give priority to preparing the content of your lesson rather than to the preparation of visuals.

It is all too easy (especially if you have an artistic bent) to get caught up in making amazing or quirky visuals and leave little time for working through the lesson.

Practise the lesson

It is reassuring to have already taught the lesson before teaching it to the children. Practising it informally at home, especially when you are inexperienced, helps impress it on your mind, helps sort out unforeseen snags and helps you get a feel for the timing.

Prepare yourself

It is easier to teach when you are mentally and physically rested so it is wise to avoid a series of late nights before you teach. Be ready for unexpected eventualities just before you are going out to teach – a phone call with disturbing news, a toddler son or daughter who will not co-operate or the car you need to get to club has not arrived home. Satan wants to disturb your peace and make it more difficult for you to teach God’s Word. Be ready to deal with spiritual opposition with prayer and confidence in God.

The teacher’s spiritual walk and growth are very much part of the lesson he teaches. The children, who are by nature imitators, need to see the truth modelled before their very eyes. They notice sincerity and consistency, hypocrisy and inconsistency. There are many believers who testify to the spiritual impact of a godly Bible teacher. Robert Murray McCheyne said, “It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus.”

Chapter 11

A lesson which is not a story

If we restrict ourselves to teaching only story based lessons we will miss out on some important Bible truths – for example, what Bible story teaches justification as simply and thoroughly as it deserves? Furthermore, introducing other types of lessons brings variety into the programme. Occasionally you may be invited to speak at a special event and it is helpful (or even required) that the talk is linked to the event. Many of the principles already outlined hold true for this type of lesson but there are some differences.

When you do not have a story line to give unity and progression to the lesson, something else must hold it together. You may decide to teach a doctrine and the development and explanation of that particular truth gives the lesson unity.

You need to develop a structure, **headings which summarise how you will explain and apply the truth.**

The following is a possible outline for a Bible lesson on justification:

- God's standard is perfection.
- Nobody reaches it.
- We are condemned.
- We cannot make things right.
- God did - Jesus reached God's standard
- Jesus was condemned.
- Trust Jesus for "the great swap".

It is important that the headings should be as clear and logical as possible, staying very close to the truth you want to teach.

Another possibility is to **pose a question and then answer it.**

Perhaps an Easter lesson could pose the question, "Who did it?" The answers give the lesson structure and unity:

- The Jewish leaders
- Judas
- Pontius Pilate
- The Roman soldiers
- God
- Me

The lesson will include some narrative but there won't be a continuous story line.

Other possible questions for a Bible lesson are "How can I be sure?" or "What is special about people?"

A Bible talk can be built on a theme which you want to teach but there is not a story which lends itself to that purpose. The talk could be about "Running God's Race" or "Angels".

The following is a possible "skeleton" for a talk on angels:

- God made angels.
- Angels are spirits.
- Some angels turned against God.
- Angels are God's messengers.
- Angels protect God's people.
- Angels have celebrations.
- Angels worship God.

Work hard to come up with a good structure for it is next to impossible to put together a strong, clear Bible lesson without one.

Do these lessons have a central truth? Most lessons have a central truth which is applied to believers, unbelievers or both.

- The central truth for the lesson on justification could be, "You can be right with God".
- In the lesson "Who did it?", the truth "God planned the death of Jesus" would unfold.
- "God made angels for a purpose" would be taught in the lesson about angels.

Occasionally you may find yourself teaching a lesson which highlights two or three truths. Perhaps you have come to the end of a teaching session and you want to highlight some things the children have learned. You may develop a "non-story" lesson to do that. Having a central truth and applying it is based on sound teaching principles but it is not a straightjacket that allows no deviation!

Add flesh to the skeleton

A skeleton without flesh is a dead thing! Consider how you will teach each point of your outline. Some will require only simple explanation on a child's level. Write down exactly how you will explain it. Others will need illustration. You may need several illustrations during the course of your talk; if so, use different types.

Too many analogies or anecdotes will cause confusion. Step by step, add flesh to the skeleton. When this is complete write in the beginning and the conclusion according to the principles already outlined.

Make sure the lesson flows

You will need good link sentences when you introduce an illustration, when you have completed it and when you are moving on to the next point in your talk. You will not have a story line to make the lesson flow so the way you link each part together is important and worth thought and effort.

Chapter 12

The ministry of the Holy Spirit

We have examined the structure of a Bible lesson, various techniques, the importance of content and application and all of this is important. We could, however get all of these polished and correct and have a fruitless ministry. We could be highly thought of as a gifted children's worker yet lack what is most essential – the Holy Spirit working in and through us.

We need to work on our Bible lessons and we need the Holy Spirit as we do so. Only He can give us spiritual insight and make us sensitive to the spiritual needs of those we teach. But He will not do what we should do. If we use difficult words like justify, sanctify or glorify, the Holy Spirit will not supernaturally explain their meaning to the children: that is our job. It is the teacher's responsibility to lead the children to understand truth on a human level. The Holy Spirit alone can give spiritual understanding.

In the New Testament there is a very clear principle: power through weakness. The Corinthians were proud people who were impressed by wisdom, gifts and attainments. Paul did not endeavour to win them with these things. *“And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:3-5).*

Paul highlighted this principle again in 2 Corinthians: *“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).* When he told of his “thorn in the flesh” and God's promise of grace, he concluded that he would *“boast all the more gladly of my weakness, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me...when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).* This does not mean we adapt a showy, false humility and deny gifts which God has given us. Rather we recognise that the children we minister to are spiritually dead and we cannot give them life. We realise that those who have God's life, Christian children, will never grow unless the Holy Spirit works through God's Word. We feel our utter helplessness and cast ourselves on the aid of God's Spirit. We understand that we are involved in a spiritual battle, the forces against us are powerful; we know our weakness but rejoice that the one in us is greater than He who is in the world (1 John 4:4).

C.H. Spurgeon said, “It were better to speak six words in the power of the Spirit than to preach seventy years of sermons without the Spirit.” We can change the wording and the same principle applies to our ministry to children. All too often we do not see or experience this empowering; perhaps we are too dependent on our skills, techniques, personality or visuals. We are proud of these and that pride robs us of what we most need – to be *“clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:29).*

Perhaps you struggle with a weakness that makes you question if you will ever be able to teach children; it may be a personality trait, a physical problem or some other “thorn in the flesh”. Hudson Taylor is reputed to have said, “All God's giants have been weak men”. The weaknesses were not always apparent but hidden from public view those mightily used by God struggled with particular weaknesses; Spurgeon for example struggled with depression. Such weaknesses make us even better show cases for God's power!

God is not reluctant to give us His Spirit to work in us and through us. *“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13).*

Our desire for the Holy Spirit's work in the children and in us and our dependence on Him will profoundly shape our ministry with children. We will recognise that there is no formula for guaranteed results.

There is always an element of mystery in the Spirit's work – *“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8)*. We will not try to pressurise children to respond to the Gospel or to any aspect of our Bible teaching. Such a response is merely human and will not last. Rather we leave it to the Spirit to bring about a true, spiritual response. When we do not see fruit we do not despair or take short cuts because the fruit is the Spirit's responsibility. We learn to be patient and trust him to continue to work long after the lesson is finished. We will not see all the fruit of our ministry in this life but when we see some we recognise and acknowledge that it is His work. We are thankful that He empowers us and helps us but we do not take any credit, the praise and honour go to the Lord alone.

Sample Bible Lesson

Scripture: Acts 8:1 – 8, 26 – 40.

Central Truth: God wants everyone to hear and believe the Gospel

Application to saved: Tell someone

Application to unsaved: You have heard, now believe.

Additional visuals

Clothes and cloth for beginning

1 Timothy 2:4 printed large enough for children to read

Map of Israel

Modern map of Africa

Scroll with Acts 8:32-33 and Isaiah 53:5a

Attractive evangelistic leaflet for children

Two helpers dressed as **Philip** and the **African** could mime the story as you teach. In the text there are suggestions what they, **P** and **A**, could do.

Supporting elements

Before the Bible lesson and when the memory verse has been taught give time for each child to make a scroll with their take home Bible verse. A5 is a good size. Tape a plastic drinking straw to the short sides of the paper and show how to roll up as a scroll and tie with a ribbon. Explain that this is how books, including the Bible, used to be.

If you need a game to use up energy you could have chariot races. Divide the children into groups of three. Two are tied together as in a three legged race – they are the horses! The charioteer is behind them, he puts a long length of fabric around them at waist level and holds the ends as reins.

Lesson Outline

Beginning:

“Let’s get out of here!”

Progression of Events:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Persecution scatters Christians | CT God’s plan 1Timothy 2:4 |
| 2. Philip preaches in Samaria | CT All means all. AppS |
| 3. The Lord sends Philip south | |
| 4. Philip meets an Ethiopian | CT Each one counts. AppS (leaflet) |
| 5. Philip explains the Gospel | CT Explain about Jesus from Isaiah 53. AppU |
| 6. The Ethiopian requests baptism | |

Climax:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| 7. Philip baptises the Ethiopian | CT AppU You have heard, believe |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|

Conclusion:

- | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| 8. The Spirit takes Philip to another city | |
| 9. African returns to Africa rejoicing | AppS |
| “Philip’s visit to the desert had been very worthwhile.” | |

Lesson

A helper (or P) acts out the following, putting clothes in a bundle.

"We must get out of here, it's too dangerous to stay. Stephen has been killed, others are in prison and Saul's on the war path. Have I all I need? Yes, I think so. *(Tie up bundle and throw it over shoulder)* Don't know where I'll go or when I'll be back. Good to know that Jesus is with us." *(Walk away)*

The Christians in Jerusalem were living in dangerous times; none knew when there would be a knock on the door and they would be dragged off to prison. It was all because they believed that Jesus was the Son of God who had come back to life after his death. Would it no longer be possible to tell others the Gospel? Look at what *happened* – *(display Acts 8:4 and discuss what the Christians did).*

God had a plan, He wanted others, as well as the people of Jerusalem, to hear about Jesus. It is the same today; God wants more people to hear the Gospel. Look at these words from the Bible. *(Show 1 Timothy 2:4 – God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" and read the words together.)* God had a plan when the Christians left Jerusalem in a hurry.

One of these followers of Jesus was Philip. Where would he go? He went to Samaria. *(Ask an older child to point out Jerusalem and Samaria on a map.)* This was a VERY brave thing to do because the Jews – until now all the Christians were Jews – and the Samaritans did not get along, they did not mix with each other and they even hated each other; it had been like that for about 1,000 years. But in the Bible we read that "Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ" (Acts 8:5). **(P mimes preaching.)** God wanted the Samaritans to hear about Jesus. Those of us who love the Lord Jesus need to remember that God loves all people. Perhaps there are people in your class at school or living in your street, who are different; they dress different, they look different they speak different. They are often left out at play time and others don't sit with them or talk to them. God wants them to hear what Jesus can do for them but unless you are kind and friendly you will not have a chance to tell them. Perhaps you need to ask God to help you change your attitude towards them. God cares about them just as He cared about the Samaritans.

Crowds listened as Philip spoke. God even gave Philip the power to do miracles so that the Samaritans would know that he was God's man with God's message.

Then, "out of the blue" this happened. "Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Rise and go towards the south...'" (Acts 8:28). Philip knew that God was sending him to a desert. **(P looks puzzled.)** Perhaps he thought, "Why? Crowds of people here in Samaria want to hear about Jesus, why go to a desert where there are no people?" It was rather puzzling but very wisely Philip did what God said. **(P walks off and comes on again. A is sitting reading, P points to him.)**

Once he got to the desert he saw a chariot, (only wealthy people had chariots). Philip must have wondered who was in it – just as you might wonder if you saw a limousine drive past your house!

"Go over to the chariot," God said. Philip hurried to obey. **(P hurries to A.)** Who was the VIP in the chariot? He was an African who looked after the money and treasure of the Queen Mother in an African country. *(Point out the Upper Nile area, from Aswan to Khartoum on a modern map of Africa. This is where Ethiopia was located.)*

God sent Philip to the desert just for this man; we could say it like this – God desires this African VIP to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. *(Display 1 Timothy 2:4).*

That is how much God cares for each person. If you are a Christian you probably won't preach to big crowds, at least not yet, but God will surely use you to tell one person about Jesus. Can you think of someone you could tell? You could put their name in this Bible verse. God "desires _____ to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth". I have a nice little leaflet here (*show leaflet*) and it explains the Gospel. If you wish you may take one to give to that person you thought about just now. Each person matters to God and He wants all to hear. That is why Philip was in the desert. As he got close to the chariot he saw the man reading from a scroll and he could hear him reading aloud.

"Do you understand what you are reading?" he called. **(P cups hands as if calling and A puts hand to ear as if listening.)**

"How can I unless someone helps me," the African called back. "Why don't you come up and join me?" **(A signals with hand.)**

Probably Philip had never been in a chariot like it. The two men sat side by side as the chariot jolted along. They read the scroll. **(P and A study scroll together.)** (*Hold up a scroll.*) I am going to read aloud what was written on it. Please listen carefully so you can tell me if it was about a person getting married, a person dying or a person getting a job as a shepherd. (*Read Acts 8:32-33 from scroll, beginning "Like a sheep..." And establish that it is about someone dying.*)

"Is the writer saying this about himself or someone else?" asked the puzzled African.

The Bible tells us what happened next: "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). **(P and A mime talking together.)** The words on the scroll were part of the Bible; they were written by a man called Isaiah. They were about Jesus, even though they were written 700 years before Jesus came to earth. God had a plan for His Son to die and He made sure that Isaiah wrote these words. They tell us that Jesus was killed, He did not shout and scream and His death was not fair. Philip must have told the African *why* Jesus died. That too was in the scroll – listen (*read from scroll*), "He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5). Perhaps Philip said to the man, "That means that God punished His Son for all the wrong you do. Jesus died for you".

God wants you to know that too. Just as He took Philip to meet one man in the desert He has also made sure you are here today. Perhaps football was cancelled, perhaps a friend brought you or perhaps you forgot all about club till your mum reminded you. That wasn't just good luck, that was God bringing you here to learn about Jesus. He cares about *you* just as he cared about the African VIP!

Philip and the African trundled along in the carriage until they came to a pool of water. **(A points to water.)** "Look there is water," exclaimed the African. "Why shouldn't I be baptised?"

Maybe "baptised" is a new word for you. When a person trusted the Lord Jesus they were taken into water and covered with water for a moment as a sign that they now belonged to Jesus. That was called being baptised. The African was asking to be baptised.

Philip answered, "If you trust Jesus with all your heart, you may."

The African said, "I believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God". Philip must have felt like jumping for joy.

Together the two men got out of the chariot, went into the water and Philip baptised the African. **(P and A mime baptism and P walks out of sight.)**

This man had been saved and had come to a knowledge of the truth. That is what God wants for you too. It isn't enough just to learn about Jesus you too must trust Him with all your heart. You need to believe he died for you and hand over your life to Him. Don't think, "When I'm older" or "Later"; if you know in your heart that what you have learned is the truth, tell the Lord Jesus that you want Him to forgive you and you want to live His way. The African believed at once. He turned to speak to Philip **(A turns to speak to P and looks surprised.)** but – surprise, surprise! – Philip was no longer there! God had moved him to another place where people needed to hear about Jesus.

The African wasn't sad. **(A, very obviously happy, returns to chariot.)** We read in the Bible "he went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39). Why was he so happy? *Discuss with the children and conclude that he was saved, Jesus was with him and he was excited about telling the good news at home.* The same is true for every person who trusts Jesus.

If you belong to the Lord Jesus remember God wants you to tell others, *(hold up leaflet as a reminder)* He "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4).

Philip obeyed God and told others about Jesus; his visit to the desert was very worthwhile! **(P and A return and wave goodbye!)**