

How to Teach a Scripture Passage

by Julie M. Smith

Here's a systematic approach to preparing a lesson on a passage of scripture.

Preparation

1. Each time you begin a study session, offer a prayer. I usually pray for a few specific things: that I will be able to understand what I am reading, that I will be able to discern truth from error, and that I will be guided to those ideas that will be of most benefit to the people that I will be teaching. Prayer is, I think, the single most important element in this entire post.
2. Try to have at least seven study sessions. In each one, read the entire passage that you will be teaching. This may seem like overkill, but it isn't. Here's an analogy that I like to use: think about the first time that you visit a home. You begin by noticing big, obvious things (such as the arrangement of the furniture or the color of the walls). It is only after you have spent more time in a place that you begin to pick up on details (titles of books, faces and places in photographs, whether the baseboards have been dusted since the last presidential administration). The same holds true for our study of the scriptures: on the first or second pass, you will notice the big things (plot, characters). It is only on the fifth or sixth reading that—now that you are familiar with the big things—you will notice some little things. A key to interesting scripture study is to study and discuss details, and you can't do that if you haven't noticed them.
3. I have a rule that the first time I read a passage, I don't write anything down, because it is more likely that what I write will reflect my preconceived notions of the text instead of the text itself. But after that, I keep pencil and notebook handy and write down my thoughts.

Research

I think this is the neglected element in most scripture study as done by the Saints. I use the following resources, but not necessarily in any particular order:

Constable's Study Notes (<http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes.htm>) (for the OT and NT) You need to scroll down and then click on the title of the book you want. Now, these are far from perfect—they are a little too conservative for my tastes (although, um, that actually means that they would be just right for most Saints), but in terms of what is available as a full text online, they aren't bad at all.

General Conference Scripture Citation Index (<http://scriptures.byu.edu/>) (for all scriptures) This is a wonderful resource because it lets you find out how a particular passage has been used in General Conference talks. I have had great discussions by asking something like, "Elder Nelson said that this verse teaches a great truth about prayer that is often overlooked. What do you think he meant by that?"

Gospel Library (<http://library.lds.org/>) (for all scriptures) I usually do a keyword search on the main character or event in the passage. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the Ensign published many good articles on specific passages or people in the scriptures.

Interlinear Bible (<http://bible.crosswalk.com/InterlinearBible/>) (for OT and NT) Here's what you can do with this fabulous resource: pull up any verse in the Bible with most words in it hyperlinked. When you click on the link, you'll get more info than you ever wanted about the Hebrew or Greek word

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behind the word in the KJV. Further, on the right sidebar is a list of all the times that that word appears in the Bible (which is generally not evident from English translations). This is a great way to get a sense of what any word means.

[Alternate Translations \(http://scripturetext.com/\)](http://scripturetext.com/) (for OT and NT) You can look at a half dozen or so translations of a specific verse on one page—this can be very helpful for getting the feel of what translations are possible.

[Scriptures \(http://scriptures.lds.org/\)](http://scriptures.lds.org/) With the online scriptures, I can do two main things: (1) check out all of the footnotes very quickly and with no flipping pages and (2) see if my person or event or keyword is mentioned in any other scriptures.

[Webster's 1828 Dictionary \(http://www.cbtministries.org/resources/webster1828.htm\)](http://www.cbtministries.org/resources/webster1828.htm) (for Book of Mormon, D & C, and PoGP). This dictionary is a reasonable (but not perfect) representation of what the English language was like when Joseph translated and wrote. This is important because some words have lost or added meaning since then.

[The NET Bible \(http://www.bible.org/netbible/index.htm\)](http://www.bible.org/netbible/index.htm) The advantage of this Bible translation is that it includes extensive (and I do mean extensive) footnotes about the verses, mostly concerning the meaning of the underlying Hebrew or Greek word.

[OT Gateway \(http://www.otgateway.com/\)](http://www.otgateway.com/) (for the OT) This is a collection of links to various articles on the OT. Quality of articles varies quite a bit.

[NT Gateway \(http://www.ntgateway.com/\)](http://www.ntgateway.com/) (for the NT) Same as above for the NT.

Two cautions on these resources:

(1) They are far, far, far from perfect—use your discretion. (I think that the greatest danger in using commentaries is not even so much that they might be wrong as that they might prohibit you from thinking outside of their box.)

(2) If you compare teaching a lesson to serving dinner to your friends, these resources are the farmers' market. If you spend all of your time gazing and gaping, you won't have time to cook. Further, not everything that catches your eye at the market belongs in the same meal. It doesn't matter how lovely the feta cheese is—you still can't put it in Thai food. You will no doubt have found all sorts of interesting little gems in the above sources, but don't force them into a lesson where they don't belong.

Writing the Lesson

So now that you've got your notes, you've read the passage a half dozen times, and you've prayed alot—how do you make a lesson out of it all?

(1) Narrow it down. It is virtually impossible to 'cover' all of the material that is assigned for one Sunday School or seminary or institute class period. So don't try. Pick one or two passages where you can have a fruitful discussion.

(2) Think big picture What are 2-3 'big picture' points that you want to convey? These should be ideas that are applicable to the lives of your class. So, "From the Book of Job we learn that we generally do not know why we suffer, although the Lord does know" is a good big picture

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idea. I like to use something I call The Grieving Widow Test. Imagine that there is a grieving widow in your class—someone who is desperate for the peace and comfort of the gospel. (And you'll almost always be right in making this assumption.) If your big picture ideas will not succor the grieving widow, go back to the drawing board.

(3) *Develop interesting questions.* I think that poor questions are the biggest stumbling block to good lessons. Here are some guidelines for asking questions that lead to good discussions:

- (a) Don't ask fact questions ("What happened to Abraham next?"). They are boring. If you need to establish facts, just do it yourself and get it over with. Questions are for discussing.
- (b) A common mistake that teachers make is to ask controversial questions because they know that it will lead to a discussion. This is an abuse of the teacher's position. Find interesting questions that are not contentious. (Contention is for the bloggernacle!)
- (c) Work with images. Any time an analogy, parable, or metaphor is used, explore the image with your class. These are some of the best questions to ask because they encourage people to think, they don't have just one correct answer, and they are ponderable by everyone from the newest member to the most grizzled high priest. "2 Nephi 26:22 describes Satan leading people by the neck with a flaxen cord: What does this image teach you about Satan?"
- (d) Think about 'minor' characters. Encourage your class to focus in on the 'other people' in a story. "What might the bystanders have thought when they first heard Jesus say that Lazrus' illness wouldn't be fatal and then heard that Lazarus had died?"
- (e) You can encourage people to share their testimony by asking something like, "In this story, the widow had her faith sorely tested when Elijah asked her for a meal, but then she was blessed with a miracle when she proved faithful. Have you had any similar experiences?"
- (f) Questions that make comparisons between scripture passages are also useful: "It rains on Noah for 40 days and nights; the Israelites are in the wilderness for 40 years; Jesus fasts for 40 days. What do these stories have in common and what might we learn from them?"
- (g) Probably the single most effective question that you can ask is, "What else?" Regardless of the question, there is usually a first, obvious answer that someone will offer. There is nothing wrong with this, but there is always most depth if you'll seek it.