HISTORY OF BIBLE READINGS (STUDIES)

In the 1880s, Adventist leader Ellen White, addressing church leadership, said that more teaching was needed and less preaching. This made an impact on another leader named Stephen Haskell. After prayer and contemplating the challenge, he started a meeting where questions were asked to the leading individuals of the day and answers had to come directly from the Bible.

During the exercise it began to rain so hard that no one could leave the tent meeting. Haskell extended the Bible readings for nearly two hours with unabated interest from all in attendance. Everyone was excited about the effectiveness of the method and demanded more. It was labeled “fireside preaching” and later morphed into “Bible readings” (which would be known as Bible studies today). A movement of this method spread across North America. These readings were later compiled into a magazine called the Bible Reading Gazette, which then morphed into the book Bible Readings for the Home Circle. Haskell later authored the Bible Handbook, which was used to train others in this method.

“The plan of holding Bible readings was a heaven-born idea. There are many, both men and women, who can engage in this branch of missionary labor. Workers may thus be developed who will become mighty men of God. . . . The Bible is brought into families, and its sacred truths come home to the conscience. . . . God will not permit this precious work for Him to go unrewarded. He will crown with success every humble effort made in His name” (Gospel Workers, 192).
Write out John 15:1–8 from the translation of your choice. You may also re-write the passage in your own words, outline, or mind-map the chapter.
ABIDE

After disciples have prepared the soil of the heart with friendship and service and created interest by planting the seed of God’s Word, the next phase in the disciple-making process is to cultivate the growing spiritual interest. This is the longest and most labor-intensive part of the disciple-making process and is best accomplished by engaging in ongoing personal Bible studies.

In John 15, the word repeated often is “abide.” Using again the motif of agriculture, Jesus likens spiritual growth to the biological growth of plants, namely the vine. The concept of the vine-branch connection is intimately related to the Word. Two hypotheticals are presented in the text, where verse 6 posits the case of anyone who is not in Christ and verse 7 posits the case of anyone who is in Christ. We abide in Christ just as His Word abides in us; it is by the power of the Word that growth occurs. In addition to the Word of God being the seed that gets spirituality started, it is also the means by which spirituality is cultivated.

Bible studies are needed not just as a prerequisite for baptism, but on-going Bible studies are needed to feed the individual (as discussed in lesson 4). Rather than have a disciple only receiving personal Bible studies, it is just as important for them to give ongoing Bible studies, or at least bring friends and people to small-group Bible studies or evangelistic meetings. “Let ministers teach church members that in order to grow in spirituality, they must carry the burden that the Lord has laid upon them,—the burden of leading souls into the truth” (Christian Service, p. 69). “The more one tries to explain the Word of God to others, with a love for souls, the plainer it becomes to himself” (Christ’s Object Lessons, 354).

The best way to lead someone who has shown an interest in spiritual truth is to invite them to take regular, weekly Bible studies. These Bible studies aren’t sermons but rather opportunities where questions can be asked, similar to Haskell’s Bible readings. Like the Ethiopian in Acts 10 (see lesson 5), many people are looking for help to understand what the Bible means. As Christ’s disciples, we have a responsibility to ensure that their spiritual hunger is satiated with the Word of God.
Vibrant Bible Study Ministry

To ensure that spiritual interest is being cultivated in preparation for a bountiful harvest, a vibrant Bible study ministry should be at the heart of every local church’s evangelistic activities. Vibrant means more than the pastor, Bible worker, and a few eloquent church members giving Bible studies. It means involving every member in some enthusiastic and comprehensive way. The reality is that every local church should be a training ground for discipleship as well as a Bible school for everyone who has a desire to learn and become like Jesus. Here are some practical ways to get this started:

1. ELECT a Bible school coordinator to oversee the Bible study ministry.
2. CHOOSE a Bible study plan or lessons/videos/media for members to use in giving Bible studies.
3. TRAIN every member to be involved in some way—offering, advertising, hosting, giving, and/or inviting to Bible studies.
4. GENERATE Bible study interests using every means possible (ask people you know, ask door-to-door, offer at events, advertise using tracts, advertise online, on social media, by a mail offer, and so on).
5. RECORD and TRACK Bible study interests.
6. PROVIDE leadership support—promotion, financial support, and participation.
7. PRAY for laborers and for the salvation of souls through the Bible study ministry.

The more members are involved in the ministry of Bible study, the greater potential there is for growth. Bible studies are not just another program, but the actual core/meat/essence/nucleus of evangelism. Too often, churches have some ministry that they favor. Some are the health ministry church; others are VBS oriented. While some limit themselves to friendship evangelism, others merely conduct evangelistic programs to get decisions.

Every church is different, and all are wonderful and needed! But at the end of the day, Bible study is the means by which we all start and grow in Christ—through abiding in Him. In the discipleship process, all the other ministries are the funnel by which all are directed to Bible study! The Bible study ministry initiative is more than just another program. It is the stage of fostering, strengthening, deepening, and enriching faith. It is the opportunity to ask all sorts of questions, to receive answers from the Word of God, and to make the teachings of the Bible your own—all through the vibrancy of the local church Bible study ministry.

For more information on the cultivation stage and the Grow cycle, visit https://grow.adventist.org/cultivate/.
Review your memorized verse from John 15:1–8.

What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Mark 4:26–28
1 Peter 1:22–25
1 Peter 2:2, 3
Hebrews 4:12, 13

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with discipleship and teaching the Word of God?
THE ART OF THE QUESTION

In following Jesus and becoming a Christian disciple, we find a component of active learning. While this sounds elementary, the fact remains that many approach religion from a purely experiential perspective. In other words, some think the sum total of spirituality is a feeling of ecstasy. While indeed joy and bliss accompany the Christian walk, it also has a crucial space for learning—not rote learning but engaging reason in question and answer. The Old Testament records “‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the LORD” (Isa. 1:18). The New Testament says, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:29).

Within a relationship where trust is established (preparation stage) and spiritual things are considered (plant stage), a time must come when the questions of the mind and heart are asked. While many answers will be addressed from Scripture, not all answers may be provided immediately, as some require more spiritual maturity to comprehend. Nonetheless, for this space to occur, one must embrace the art of the question.

Questions introduce new information, stimulate emotions, motivate us to action, and open the beginning points for discussion, as well as open up any prejudices and misunderstandings. Jesus, in His earthly ministry, had mastered the art of the question. It provided opportunities not only for answers but also for healings, emotions, conviction, guilt, and freedom to be experienced. In the Gospel of Mark alone, Christ asks questions like, “Why do you reason about these things in your hearts?” (Mark 2:8); “Which is easier to say . . . ?” (Mark 2:9); “What is your name?” (Mark 5:9); “Who touched My clothes?” (Mark 5:30); “Who do men say that I am?” (Mark 8:27); “What will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:37); “What are you discussing with them?” (Mark 9:16); “Whose image and inscription is this?” (Mark 12:16); and many more. Yes, some are simple questions of dialogue, but in some narratives, Christ is not seeking information (because He already knows!). Rather, He is seeking a teaching moment where He opens up the presuppositions of the student’s perspective.

Have we had this type of one-on-one question-and-answer time with the Lord Jesus? Have we had our presuppositions questioned as we reason together with God and learn directly from His Word? And have we passed that experience on to someone else, continuing the lineage of discipleship?
“Many will be called into the field to labor from house to house, giving Bible readings, and praying with those who are interested. . . .”

“Many workers are to act their part, doing house-to-house work, and giving Bible readings in families. . . .”

“If we follow in Christ’s footsteps, we must come close to those who need our ministry. We must open the Bible to the understanding, present the claims of God’s law, read the promises to the hesitating, arouse the careless, strengthen the weak. . . .”

“In the experience of Philip and the Ethiopian is presented the work to which the Lord calls His people. The Ethiopian represents a large class who need missionaries like Philip, missionaries who will hear the voice of God, and go where He sends them. There are those in the world who are reading the Scriptures, but who cannot understand their import. The men and women who have a knowledge of God are needed to explain the word to these souls.”

“The followers of Jesus are not meeting the mind and will of God, if they are content to remain in ignorance of His Word. All should become Bible students. . . .”

“Those who are truly converted must become more and more intelligent in their understanding of the Scriptures, that they may be able to speak words of light and salvation to those who are in darkness and perishing in their sins.

“We are to give the last warning of God to men, and what should be our earnestness in studying the Bible, and our zeal in spreading the light! Let every soul who has received the divine illumination seek to impart it. Let the workers go from house to house, opening the Bible to the people, circulating the publications, telling others of the light that has blessed their own souls.

“A well-balanced work can be carried on best when a training school for Bible workers is in progress. While the public meetings are being held, connected with this training school or city mission should be experienced laborers of deep spiritual understanding, who can give the Bible workers daily instruction, and who can also unite wholeheartedly in the general public effort being put forth.

“Bring earnestness and fervency into your prayers, and into your Bible readings, and into your preaching, that you may leave the impression that the sacred truths you are presenting to others are to you a living reality. Whatever you do for Jesus, seek with all your powers to do it with earnestness. Never feel that you have attained to the highest point, and can therefore rise no higher. . . . Set your mind to task, that you may present the truth in a manner to interest them. Seize the most interesting portions of Scripture that you can bring before them, come right to the point, and seek to fasten their attention, and instruct them in the ways of the Lord. . . .”

“A great work can be done by presenting to the people the Bible just as it reads. Carry the Word of God to every man’s door, urge its plain statements upon every man’s conscience, repeat to all the Saviour’s command, “Search the Scriptures.” Admonish them to take the Bible as it is, to implore divine enlightenment, and then, when the light shines, to gladly accept each precious ray, and fearlessly abide the consequences.”

*(Christian Service, p. 141–144)*
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How does the Word of God abide in you? How do you abide in Christ?

How regular is your habit of giving Bible studies?

Who, at your local church, can help train you in giving Bible studies?

What happens when the cultivation stage never happens?

Why do people think that only “church professionals” can give Bible studies?

In what way are you directly discipled by Jesus? In what way are you directly discipling someone else?

Where is your space to ask questions and receive biblical answers?