

Bible Study Methods

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I have been asked to say a word or two about how I go about studying Scripture. To be precise, what I have been asked to do is to say how *I* go about studying Scripture, not how other people should. I gather from what one or two people have said that what you're interested in is how on earth do I come to think that there are such structures and patterns in some books of Scripture, such as in Romans for instance. So, let me say forthwith in talking about these matters that this isn't a thing that will make Bible study easy. At least I've never found it easy; in fact I've found it tremendously difficult. But I do it because I have personally found it helpful. I know a lot of other people don't find it helpful at all, and positively a hindrance. So I'm not laying down rules.

On the other hand, in so far as questions of structure and pattern arise in some books of Scripture, I would issue a warning. Whatever you do in your study of Scripture, don't make it your primary aim to look for structures and patterns. It is desperately easy, and particularly nowadays when round the world what is called rhetorical criticism has become exceedingly popular, for people to go hunting for structures and patterns as though they were the main purpose of study. They are not. Structures and patterns are there in the final analysis to help our understanding of what Scripture is saying. Certainly, I have found it so. I speak from personal experience and not simply criticism of other people's work. It is so desperately easy to see patterns, and then not to see the point of them. And unless we see the point of Scripture, what is the sense of seeing patterns in it, or structures either?

So I would personally make it my aim in studying a book of Scripture, whether it is narrative or poetry, to first get hold of the facts—to get the details, the factual details of the book, into my head as best I can. Then, having got the facts, or in process of getting the facts, I ask two things of it. 'What is the point of it, what does it say?' And then I start asking myself, 'Why does it say it?' And in that question, I am thinking, 'Why does the Lord say this to me?' Very often I find I can understand what the English Bible says, but what I don't readily understand is why I am being told this. What is the point of it?

Next, I am asking myself a somewhat deeper question. 'Why is that said here? What has that got to do with what went before, and what came after?' To put it in one phrase, what I'm doing now is looking for what I would call the thought flow, the flow of the thought both within a verse or within a story, and then between one story and another. Here again we have to be careful. Let me give a caricature of what sometimes happens. Both in scholarly and amateur writing on these matters sometimes people say, 'Look at this marvellous structure. It says here "And he went." Then the next story is a miracle, and the next story begins with "But", and the next story is a miracle, and then the final story says, "And he went." See the

delightful pattern: you could put it A–B–C–B–A.’ So what? What does that signify, if anything at all?

In other words, from four or five stories we picked out certain phrases and because they match, we suppose we have found a pattern or a structure. But what is this story about, that begins, ‘And he went’? What is the point of the story as a whole, or the verse as a whole or whatever. And what is the point of this second story that begins with, ‘And he went’? Just to be ridiculous for a moment, the one could be, ‘He went into the synagogue and preached’, and the other, ‘He went to bed.’ Similarly, we may notice in our reading that this is a miracle and that is a miracle—which could be significant, but you’d have to ask yourself, ‘What was the point of each miracle?’ Are you saying there’s a pattern just because that happens to be a miracle and this a miracle? Well, that could be so, but was there any point to the miracle? This could be, ‘Our Lord did a miracle, opening somebody’s blind eyes, because he says, “I am the light of the world.”’ What a marvellous lesson to convey, if that’s the point of the miracle. Suppose this other miracle is cursing a fig tree. What have the two got to do with each other? I don’t know. I can’t see any connection, can you? There could be some, I suppose.

So beware of looking for patterns and structures too soon. Beware of taking odd phrases out of them in order to make a pattern. Whether there appears to be a pattern or not, start by asking what the story is about. What is the major point of the story? In other words, concentrate first of all on the facts, and then on thought content and thought flow. If you are prepared to concentrate on thought flow, say in a book of narrative, you can get a long way with understanding it and seeing the point of all sorts of things, without seeing any structures whatsoever. I’m going to take an example that my friends have heard me use many times, but I take it deliberately because it is very simple. And I take it deliberately also because you’ve asked me to say how did I come at it and, as best I can remember, I’ll tell you how.

I refer to chapters 7 and 8 in the Gospel of Luke. Now, in a narrative, why should I even think that chapters 7 and 8 of Luke form a group that hang together? Well, because of certain formal markers that the writer himself puts in his text. At chapter 7, verse 1, the historian himself says, ‘After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people,’ so that’s finished then. And what has gone before was a whole lot of teaching on ethics. Well, after he’d ended that, ‘he entered Capernaum.’ There follows a lot of stories of a centurion and a widow from Nain, and various other things, through chapters 7 and 8. When you come to the end of 8, and look into the beginning of 9, you don’t have any more a succession of miracles and stories for the moment. You have another topic. He called the twelve together, commissioned them and sent them out upon their mission. So, as a working hypothesis I say, let’s take those stories in 7 and 8 and see if in any sense they are a group. And if they’re not a group, if they’re all isolated stories, to God be the glory. We have no right to expect they’re going to form a group, but supposing they are, are they connected or aren’t they connected?

How I would then begin is to notice what the first story is about.

Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. (7:2–3)

So, whatever else the story is about, it's a story about saving. And that the Lord does, he saves this man's servant. He was sick at the point of death, and he saved him from death. It sounds interesting. I wouldn't actually say to myself, if the first story's a story about saving, does the idea reoccur? You can soon find that out by reading the text, which you ought to have done about seventy times by now to get it into your mind! Then, get out a good concordance. A very useful concordance for seriously minded ladies and gentlemen is the Englishman's concordance¹ based on the Greek text. Although modern translations are delightful, they can have the effect of making study very difficult for some people, because the learned translators have observed that there is a Greek word 'save' and it has many connotations. So, to translate it into modern English, sometimes they translate too literally as something like 'rescue.' Well, it can mean save in the sense of rescue or it can mean save in the sense the medics use it, to heal somebody. Or, it could mean save in the sense of spiritual salvation. It's the same word in Greek but with various connotations. If you look at a modern translation, you might first come across heal, and then you come across rescue, and then you come across save in the spiritual sense. It doesn't at once dawn—at least on me—that it's the same Greek word that's being used, and what we have are variations on a common theme. If you're using a more literal translation, and it said, 'Come and save my servant,' the thing to do is to look it up. And if you don't know Greek, the concordance is something that you can consult even if you know only English. What it will do is take the Greek word and list every occurrence of it in the New Testament, regardless of how the Authorised Version translates it—heal, save, rescue, deliver. However it's translated, it will list that same Greek word wherever it occurs.

If, at this stage, you'd got out your Greek dictionary, you'd find that this word is a compound word. It is *diasōzō*, and doesn't occur very frequently. But then if you began to read a little bit further, two or three stories later on you would come across a woman in Simon's house, and our Lord said to her, 'Your faith has saved you' (v. 50) and he used the simple verb *sōzō*. At which point you would say, 'I'd better look at that dictionary again.' So you look up the word *sōzō*, or its English equivalent, and lo and behold, there are many other occurrences. The thing to do now is to make a list of the stories and see how many of them talk about this being saved business. What you end up with might look something like Figure 1.

¹ George V. Wigram, *The Englishman's Greek Concordance*, [1839] repr. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996.

Figure 1. Luke Chapters 7 and 8—references to ‘saved’

	Topic	Ref	English Translation <i>(ESV or KJV)</i>	Greek original	Note
1	Centurion’s servant	7:2–10	heal	save (<i>diasōzō</i>)	Saved from dying
2	Widow’s son	7:11–15	–	–	Saved/raised from death
3	John and the Pharisees	7:18f.	–	–	–
4	Woman in Simon’s house	7:37–50	saved	saved (<i>sōzō</i>)	Saved by faith Forgiven
5	Women from Galilee	8:2–3	healed	cured	
6	Storm on the Lake	8:22–25	–	–	Saved from drowning
7	Man of Gadara	8:26–39	healed	saved (<i>sōzō</i>)	
8	Woman with bleeding	8:43–48	made whole made well	saved (<i>sōzō</i>)	
9	Jairus’s daughter	8:41–42 8:49–55	made whole made well	saved (<i>sōzō</i>)	

Note: numbers in later paragraphs refer to the numbers in this table.

As far as the idea of saving goes, of whatever sort, it is very simple to observe where it occurs. That might not be the only thing the stories have in common, but obviously this is going to be one of the predominant themes in this part of the gospel. And it’s not some arbitrary word that we picked out, a little circumstantial phrase. It lies at the very heart of the stories. If you’re preaching this first story and you had not realised that any of these others talked about saving, wouldn’t you go full guns as you got up to preach? ‘This story is about being saved, and the man who was saved. Are you saved?’ Well, you wouldn’t do it in such a blunt fashion as that perhaps, but you’d say to yourself, ‘What I’ve got to get across tonight as I talk to these people is that this story is about salvation!’ You don’t have to know structure to do that, nor patterns either. So, that is one of the major points of these stories. But I’ve missed one out, haven’t I? There are also some parables in these verses and, lo and behold, the word ‘saved’ comes in here too: ‘So that they may not believe and be saved [*sōzō*]

(8:12). It did occur to me to ask myself whether the several stories here about salvation are all just repeating the same thing. First story, how to be saved. Second story, how to be saved . . . and so on. (Answer? ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved’ [Acts 16:31].) Or, is it that while they are on the same theme they have significant differences? Suppose you were obliged for some reason to preach on Luke 7 and 8. There are 6 stories on salvation, and you’re preaching on one each night, Sunday to Friday. Well, Sunday wouldn’t be so bad, would it?

How to be saved. But what would you say on Monday night that's different from what you said on Sunday? That's what I mean. Given the similarities, what are the contrasts?

That's a very simple thing, so simple I'm ashamed to say it. But I've found that it is absolutely fundamental. All higher learning proceeds by contrast and similarity. Noticing the genus, as Aristotle would say, and then classifying things *per genus et differentiam*. What is the general class they belong to, and then what are the differences between the members of the class? You can do it on these stories. Just by observing the text, it's clear that they're not all the same. This one (1) is saving from death: the servant was about to die, so he got saved from that. This woman (4) wasn't about to die, so she wasn't being saved from death. What was she being saved from, and in what sense was she saved? Well, our Lord said, 'Your sins are forgiven' (7:48). He didn't say that to the man at Gadara (7), did he?

So, keeping to the Lord's words, and thinking of salvation in the sense of forgiveness, here is a parable about seed (8:5-8). And when the seed is sown by the wayside, the devil comes and takes it away so they don't get a chance to be saved at all. That in itself is a lesson—how to miss salvation. Then the demoniac (7), he was saved too. What from? Not from death, and there is in fact no word about forgiveness, though surely he was forgiven. The point of his story is that he was saved from the power of Satan and of demons galore. And this woman (8) was bleeding. She wasn't under the power of demons: it was a physical weakness which was draining away all her strength. Saved from the weakness of the flesh, perhaps. And once more there is this girl (9) who had actually died and was saved from death.

So, quite simply upon the surface, and so simple that a kindergarten child could see it, there is a series of salvation stories but they're not identical. There are different kinds of salvation, different aspects of salvation. All that would make it easy to preach a sermon on them from Sunday to Friday. Now you could say something different each night! Why would you need to say something different each night? 'Well,' you'd say, 'because people's needs are very large but there is such a great salvation, it covers the whole gamut of need.' 'How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?' (Heb 2:3)

Notice how I would be constantly on the alert to ask, 'How would this apply? Why do I need to be told it, and why would I need to tell anybody else? And how, in the bigger sense, would knowing this save anybody?' Always keep that in the forefront of your thinking. How would what I'm about to say contribute to anybody's salvation? You may say, 'I thought that we'd left that to the evangelist.' Well, too often we do, but teachers ought to bear it in mind as well. 'Why do I need to know this? How would it save me and others knowing it?'

There is another question I would now ask myself. I've listed the stories. I have picked out one theme that seems to reoccur. But is there any rhyme or reason in the order? Would it matter to you if they were in a different order? Is there any reason for the order in which they are recorded? Just because they happened in that chronological order? Or are there any other reasons? Why, for instance, and you have a little help here to compare Luke with other gospels, is this story peculiar to Luke? Why does he add that in here when nobody else has? That's interesting, isn't it, because it turns out to be a salvation story.

So you begin to think about things. This man, the centurion's servant (1), was saved from dying. The widow's son (2) was dead. So there's being saved from dying and being saved from death. And Luke brackets them together, saying that this happened soon after the other

one. Despairing of all this, I say, 'Well, I'd better come back to the story. Could I perhaps see what the rest of the story says, and just preach the story?' It says that the man was saved from dying. What else does it tell us? And here, if we've got the right exposition, we shan't just arbitrarily select one detail or two out of the story. We should try to expound the whole story; whether or not it fits into any structure or pattern. And the story is this. The centurion asked the Lord Jesus if he would come and save his servant, or rather he sent the Jews to ask the Lord. Now, foolishly, when they came to the Lord they said, without the centurion's permission, 'He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue' (7:4-5). When the centurion heard of that, he swiftly sent another messenger. He said, 'Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed' (vv. 6-7). And the Lord's comment was, 'Not even in Israel have I found such faith' (v. 9).

So now it's not me commenting on the story. The story itself is saying that this man asked for the gift of life for his servant to be saved from death, and the story itself tells you on what terms the Lord Jesus gave him his request. Not on the ground of merit, not on the ground of works, but on the ground of faith. That is very interesting, because this other chap here (2), the widow's son, was dead. And if you read that story closely, you'll find that when our Lord touched the bier and said, 'Young man, I say to you, arise' (v. 14), the young man that was dead sat up. The Lord, it says, gave him to his mother. And when I saw that, I said, 'I think I've heard this before somewhere.' 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast' (Eph 2:8-9). So I found out where in the Bible it said that, because that's another method of interpreting Scripture—to see where else Scripture talks about this theme. And I found it eventually, in Ephesians chapter 2—the explicit statement of the principles of salvation. By grace, through faith, and that not of your own doing, it is the gift of God, not of works. And when Paul issued that statement of the principles of salvation, what salvation was it he was talking about? You know it all by heart: Ephesians 2 and the first verse, 'you were dead'. He has given you life. Now we're coming somewhere near the truth of it. Here are stories of two men that were given life, and the stories themselves are telling us on what principles they were given life. Not of works, not of merit. Through faith, as a gift.

I'm not adding anything to the story but I dare say you're jumping to all sorts of conclusions. You're saying, 'In Luke, that was physical life but in Ephesians it's spiritual.' Well, so it is and one illustrates the other. When I saw that I said to myself, 'That's not a bad place to start, because the unconverted man is dead. Perhaps the first thing he needs is life.' And when I came to this story (4) of the woman in Simon's house, I said, 'Well, that's a different aspect of salvation: salvation in the sense of forgiveness. I need that part of salvation too.' And this one, the demoniac (7), what was the good of offering that man salvation if all you could offer him is forgiveness? Don't we need more than that, just as he needed to be freed from the power of sin?

And then I came to this last story (9). I suggest you look at that. It's also salvation from death: the girl was dead. Jairus came to the Lord Jesus and he said, 'Master, come and lay your hands on my daughter, because she's at the point of death.' And the Lord began to go, but he

got held up, particularly by this woman with the issue of blood, and Jairus was getting all impatient and desperate. Then someone from his house came to say, 'Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the Teacher any more.' And our Lord, overhearing it, said, 'Do not fear; only believe, and she will be well [Greek 'saved']'. Saved in what sense? Not saved from dying, but saved from death. 'Only believe and she shall be saved.' That made me think of another verse, 'For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep' (1 Thess 4:14). And I wondered, 'Could it be that this story illustrates salvation in that ultimate and last sense, salvation from death?'

So, I read the story again. And here was Jairus coming to the Lord, and saying, 'Lord, please come and heal my daughter,' and the crowd stopped him. I thought that wouldn't matter, because I had learned in this other story (1) that the Lord didn't have to come to the house to heal the girl. He could have done it at a distance, like he did for the centurion's servant. So he presently will, I suspect. But no, he didn't. I said, 'Why didn't he heal the girl at a distance?' While he delayed, apparently the girl died. When he got there, he found the mourners outside, weeping. He said, 'Do not weep, for she is not dead but sleeping' (v. 52). And when he came to the house, he woke her from the sleep of death at his coming. This is the last story because it is what's going to be the last thing in your salvation. The last aspect of your salvation. You will say, 'I'm waiting for the Lord to come. I've got rheumatism and various other things creeping on me, but if the Lord doesn't come soon, I shall die. I shall fall asleep.' He could heal you at a distance, but he's not proposing to, ladies and gentlemen. If he gets held up another 75 years, I shall be dead. Most of you will be too. So what? For he is coming, one day. And what he said to Jairus, Paul could say to you. 'Do not fear; only believe.'

You should be saved, you know, for the Lord will come. And those that sleep in Jesus will be raised and reunited with their relatives who were believers but weren't yet dead. Nice, isn't it? And do you know, I think I could be prepared to speak from Sunday to Friday on this being saved. I have a different message for every night! On Sunday I would start at the beginning—'Salvation by grace through faith, the gift of new life, and that's what you want. Not religiosity, you want life. You won't get anywhere unless you start there, and on what terms can you have it?' Marvellous. The next night, I would say, 'There's more than that. You need forgiveness, don't you? Release from the guilt of the past, like that woman in Simon's house.' And the next night I could talk about the demoniac, 'Some of you drunks wobbling down the street in the grip of the power of Satan. You need not only forgiveness, you need something to break your chains.' And come Friday, well it would be marvellous, for there's still more left in God's salvation! We can say all that and we haven't seen structure at all yet, have we? And if God has helped you, half a dozen have already got converted.

There are some elements we haven't yet said much about. There is this storm on the lake. And you might well ask, 'Why hasn't the story used the word 'save' about that, because it was an example of salvation? They nearly drowned in this boat, and the Lord got up and made it calm, and they were delivered. Why do you not talk about being saved?' Well, what does it say in the story? There came this storm, and they went to wake up the master, and said, 'Master, Master, we are perishing!' (8:24). He awoke and rebuked the storm, and there was a calm. And then he said, 'Where is your faith?' (v. 25). So, I read that, marked it down in my

book. 'Where is your faith?' And they were amazed, and they said, 'Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him?'

Do you remember what the centurion said? 'For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: I say to one, "Go", and he goes; and to another, "Come", and he comes; and to my servant, "Do this", and he does it' (7:8). And our Lord said, 'Not even in Israel have I found such faith' (v. 9). Well, how unfortunate that the centurion, being a Gentile, showed more faith than the holy apostles themselves in the boat. And they remain saying, 'Who is this who commands?'

Reading down the passage to see what other things were around, I came across this woman in Simon's house and read the story over and over again. And I found the words were as follows:

And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. (Luke 7:37-38)

Simon bristled and said under his breath, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner' (v. 39). Implication: he doesn't know what woman this is that touches him. It's all part of the passage, not me making it up! Let me repeat it, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him.' And then I came down to this story (8) about the woman with the issue of blood. You know the story, but notice what it says, 'There was a woman who . . . came up behind him' (8:43-44)—just like the one in Simon's house. And she thought, 'If I but touch the hem of his garment, I shall be made whole.' She did touch him and immediately she was made whole, but the story doesn't end there. Jesus asked, 'Who was it that touched me?' (v. 45).

'Come, come,' said the apostles, 'there are crowds of people all around you and you say, "Who touched me?"'

'No,' said Christ, 'someone touched me.' And he did know who touched him, even before she came to admit it.

And I said, 'That's very curious, that touch business. What on earth is it all about?' I'm trying to be as honest as I can: I don't see the point of it. I see the words and a similar situation, but so what? I don't know that I could preach that. Could you get up and preach it? It's no good seeing patterns if they're not preachable. And if you've really got the message, you don't have to point out the pattern. You can get across the results of your study without bothering your listeners with pattern and structure.

And there are other instances where one story has got a lot in common with another story. It would make life easier if you could put them down side-by-side instead of in a list. First there's the centurion's servant and then I notice that Luke says, 'Soon afterwards' (7:11), which is followed by the story of the widow's son. So, I put them together, because by this time I've seen that they're both about salvation from death. And then I said to myself, 'There's that story of John Baptist, plus a conversation with the Pharisees. And next there's this woman in Simon's house.' And I noticed that the story of those other women (5) is joined on by the same

phrase, 'Soon afterwards.' So I put with her, these good ladies from Galilee. Then I put down here the parables. And at this stage, now simply as a technique regardless of whether it leads anywhere, but seeing what happens if you put them side-by-side, we come to the storm on the lake and this matter of command. The centurion could say, 'I say to one "Go", and he goes' (7:8), but the disciples were left pondering, 'Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water?' (8:25). You see command plus obedience and the question of faith—'Where is your faith?' And so you can continue setting them side by side and seeing similarities and differences.

In the story of the woman with bleeding there was this question of touch, and again with the woman in Simon's house. At least this shows that Simon was wrong: our Lord did know what kind of a woman it was that touched him. Then I fell to thinking, and I still haven't got all the answers: 'What's the point of just pointing out that touch is involved in both occasions, and that our Lord being God incarnate knew who had touched him? Well, that's very nice to know, but so what? What's the point of it?' The very similarity was provoking my mind to say, 'There's something in these stories more than I have seen.'

There still is, and I'm not sure I know all the significance of it. Is there anybody here who'd like to come forward now and preach us a sermon on those two stories?

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.