

School of Biblical Studies: The Basics of Bible Study

There are two approaches to Bible study – Inductive and Deductive.
We will be using the Inductive approach.

A. The Inductive Approach:

1. Pray – the Holy Spirit is your teacher
2. Independent – no helps
3. Letting the text speak for itself
4. Your conclusions evolve out of what you have observed
 - a. Lay aside your preconceived ideas and let the Bible speak for itself.
 - b. Try to be impartial
5. Become a listener and hearer of the Scriptures. A thorough examination of the content becomes the basis for one's conclusions.

B. The Deductive Approach

1. One comes to the text with a thesis and then seeks out passages to support the thesis
2. One has already, to a certain extent, drawn conclusions before reading the whole text of Scripture in context
3. One is dictating to the Scriptures rather than letting the Scriptures speak

Overview of the Three Basic Steps of Bible Study

A. There are three basic steps in inductive Bible study:

1. *Observation*: what does the text say?
2. *Interpretation* (exegesis): what did it mean to the original hearers or readers?
3. *Application* (hermeneutics): how does the truth of this book apply to my life in the 21st century?

B. These three steps should be done in their consecutive order. Observations should be done first, followed by interpretation and ending with application. Thorough observation leads to good interpretation and good interpretation leads into life changing application.

The Three Basic Steps in Depth

OBSERVATION

Observation is seeing what the text says. Observation is not determining what the text means; it is seeing what is in the text. The following is a list of things to LOOK for. This list is designed to increase your power of observation. Howard F. Vos: "...stay with a portion until looking becomes seeing."

*The motto of observation is **LOOK, LOOK, LOOK.***

Record your preliminary findings and then record significant observations on your vertical charts.

1. Find repeated words.
2. Find repeated ideas, themes.
3. Ask "who" questions. Observe the main characters, people.
4. Observe: *commands, advice, promises, warnings, and predictions.*
5. Observe atmosphere, moods, and emotions.
6. Observe key words. They may be key because they are repeated frequently or they are key because their meaning is essential in understanding a passage.
7. List the things you don't understand: meanings of words, statements, theological concepts, etc.
8. Put in your own words the main idea of the paragraph.
9. Observe the author's logic in his argument.
10. What type of literature is this book, passage? *Poetry or Prose*
(*Historical Narrative, Gospel, Apocalyptic, Epistle, Poetry, Prose, Didactic, Parable*)
11. What illustrations are used? Are they illustrations from Scripture, everyday life situations, personal experiences, etc.?
12. Ask the when question. Note the time elements. Observe words that identify time sequences: *before, after, during, while, then, until, when, etc.*
13. Observe any geographical locations on a map.
14. Observe conditional statements: *if...*
15. Observe any summary statements that the author makes. Watch for words such as: *therefore, so, finally, last of all, etc.*
16. Observe progression. Does the author move to a climax of ideas or emotion? Does he move from general to specific, from a question to an answer, from a statement to an illustration, from a teaching to an application, from a need to the remedy?
17. Observe the beginning and the ending of the book or passage.

18. Observe contrasts. Simple contrasts can be identified by the conjunction *but*. However, look for broader contrasts such as contrasting ideas, characters, events, concepts and attitudes.
19. Observe comparisons. Comparisons are introduced by the words *like* and *as*. Also note comparisons of ideas, characters, events, and attitudes.
20. Observe pronouns: *I, he, she, it, they, them, us, who, me, etc.*
21. Observe verb tenses: *past, present or future.*
22. Ask the “what” question. What events are taking place? What is the order of these events? What was said? Etc.
23. Observe figures of speech. See separate handout on this subject.
24. Observe questions that are asked and answered.
25. Observe rhetorical questions. These are questions that stir up the readers’ thinking.
26. Ask the “where” question. Note the places.
27. Observe emphatic statements: *truly, behold, indeed, I tell you, (I Paul), verily, etc.*
28. Observe any lists. Note the order in these lists. Is there a definite progression?
29. Observe nous. Notice who is doing the acting.
30. Observe important connectives which reflect reasons, results, and conclusions, such as: *therefore, yet, however, likewise, so then, nevertheless, etc.*

INTERPRETATION

Interpretation is determining what the book or passage meant to the original hearers or readers.

Interpretation is not what it means to the 21st century reader, but what it meant to the original audience. This involves understanding the author’s viewpoint as well as the viewpoint of his audience. Sometimes this is twofold. For example, in a Gospel one must consider how Jesus’ words impacted the people who heard them and secondly one needs to consider how those words were understood by the first readers.

Interpretation builds on the foundation of observation and thorough observation results in better interpretation.

*Observation focuses on what is in the text. Interpretation asks –
Why is this said? What does this mean?
“Interpretation is to explain or tell the meaning of something.”
(Joy of Discovery, pg. 41)*

We have compiled a list of questions that you can ask which will aid you in moving into the second step of Bible study. You can apply these questions in an overview fashion to the whole

book or to specific passages, sections or segments. Jot down your answers and then record significant interpretations on your vertical charts.

1. From the text, what do you see are the author's concerns, characteristics, convictions, emotions?
2. Likewise list the reader's concerns, questions, emotions, characteristics, convictions, strengths and weaknesses.
3. Ask "meaning" questions. What is the meaning of this word? What is the meaning of this phrase, statement, or theological concept? What did it mean to the author? What did it mean to his audience? To develop this, one should ask, how is this word, term or concept used...

...in context of this passage?

...in the rest of the book?

...in other writings by the author?

*Look it up in **Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words.***

Look it up in a concordance.

Look it up in other word study books.

Look it up in a dictionary of your mother tongue.

After doing all this then relate your findings back to the original context of the passage you are studying.

4. Does the author give his own interpretation? Does he state why he wrote the book? Does he interpret his use of symbols?
5. Is this literal or figurative language? Interpret accordingly.
6. What is the significance of this passage, idea, word or statement?
7. Does the author quote Scripture? Look up the passages quoted and observe their context. Why does he use this passage? Does it prove a point, illustrate a truth, support the author's argument or contribute to the emotion of the passage?
8. Pay careful attention to the context. How does this passage fit in with the overall message of the whole book? What is its relation to the surrounding paragraphs?
9. What is the historical context?
 - *Who is addressed?*
 - *What cultural issues need consideration?*
 - *When did the events occur?*
 - *Determine whether the issues addressed apply to the local situation in the author's day or universally to all believers. Are they temporal or timeless?*
10. In the Epistles, determine from the text what questions the believers were asking, and what struggles they were encountering. This is like listening to one side of a phone conversation. For example in Paul's letters, we know what Paul says but we must do

some thinking as to what the congregations may have been asking or thinking that would result in Paul responding as he does.

11. If you're having difficulty then ask yourself if you need to backtrack and do some more observation.
12. Interpret figures of speech.
13. Bombard the text with "why" questions.
14. Read the book or the passage in another translation.
15. Ask "What does this mean?"
16. Ask "Why is this said?"
17. Ask "What does this imply?"
18. What elements of composition or structure are used in this book or passage? (See separate handout entitled *Structure and Composition*)
19. How does this passage prepare me for what follows, for what went before?
20. Write out a summary statement of the book, a division, a section, segment or paragraph: "It seems that the author is saying..."
21. Summarize, meditate, reflect on the material you've observed and interpreted. Does your proposed interpretation agree with the rest of Scripture? The New Testament interprets the Old Testament and clear passages are to shed light on the unclear and obscure passages.
22. Have I taken into consideration the kind of literature?
23. Consult a commentary. **Do this last.** Use the commentary as a tool, not a crutch. Dialogue with the commentary. What did you learn from the commentary? Do you agree or disagree with the author's conclusions? Indicate the sources used on your charts.
24. Consult Bible dictionaries, atlases and historical background resource materials for unanswered questions or more information.

Interpretation Extra Helps

Your Basics of Bible Study handout is the main guideline for doing interpretation; however, there are some guidelines in interpretation that need to be considered which are not in the form of interpretation questions.

1. It is very important to do thorough observation first. You must gather facts before making conclusions. Use your Basics of Bible Study (BBS) handout to get you into observation. Use material gained in observation to back up your interpretation.
2. Seek to understand the author's intention and purpose. Consider carefully BBS interpretation questions 1, 2 and 10. Keep in mind the BIG PICTURE of the book etc.
3. Make it a habit to ask the "Why" question. This is the bridge between observation and interpretation. See BBS handout questions 13-17. You'll never get far in interpretation if you don't start asking and answering "Why" questions.

4. Scripture interprets Scripture, and the New Testament sheds light on the Old Testament. Scripture will never contradict Scripture. If it seems to...then rethink your conclusions.
5. Don't assume that you know everything on a subject because you've seen the subject in a few places. A BIG PICTURE of the whole Bible is necessary.
6. Use clear passages of Scripture to interpret obscure passages.
7. Interpret the Scripture in a simple fashion. Don't treat the Scriptures in a mystical fashion. Interpret the Word of God in a natural, normal sense as you would any other book. This means that you do make allowances for different types of literature and figures of speech and elements of composition.
8. CONTEXT – Context is probably one of the most important things to consider in doing interpretation. Context is the connection of thought that runs through a passage; it is those links that weave it all into one piece. The interpreter's goal is to discover this link that runs through the whole book or passage. How do things fit together? What is the connecting link? Are the points woven together around a certain theme, event, point of logic, character, time period, etc.? Context needs to be considered on various levels:
 - a. Immediate: the surrounding verses
 - b. Section: within the section of the horizontal
 - c. Book: within the big picture of the book
 - d. Bible: within the whole counsel of God's Word

In the BBS handout the context questions are interpretation questions 8 and 20

9. Always answer interpretation questions 5, 8, 9, 10, 18

APPLICATION

You have observed and interpreted. You are now ready to do the final step of Bible study: APPLICATION. **Application** is the goal of all Bible study because in the end the Scriptures demand a response and changed lives.

With OBSERVATION and INTERPRETATION as the groundwork, you are now ready to ask the question "How does the basic truth(s) of this book or this passage relate to my life in the 21st century?"

We have listed below four application questions that are taken from Josh McDowell's book, *A Guide to Understanding Scripture*. You may apply the questions to the overall truths of the whole

book or to a specific passage. Please write out your answers and be specific. This will take some time and waiting on God. Don't take this step lightly.

1. What are the basic, timeless truths in this book or passage?
2. How does this truth apply to my life? Be specific.
3. In view of these truths, what changes should I make in my life?
4. How do I plan to carry out these changes? Be specific.
5. Commit these changes to the Lord in prayer.

In determining the basic truths consider the following questions:

1. Where is God specifically encouraging me?
2. Where is He asking me to change?

If it is a didactic (teaching) passage or book then ask these questions:

1. What am I to believe?
2. Are there attitudes or actions that I need to change?
3. What do I learn about my relationship with God/people?
4. What is the Good News for me?

If the book or passage is a narrative, then consider some of the following questions to get you thinking:

1. What character do I identify with?
2. What can I learn from that character's life?
3. What were his/her responses to God?
4. Perhaps a certain event in the book coincides with where you are in your walk with God.

Application is looking into the mirror of Scripture and walking away a changed person.

PITTFALLS IN APPLICATION

According to Josh McDowell, there are some pitfalls in application that one needs to be aware of:

1. Mistaking interpretation for application.
2. Having an emotional response to a Biblical truth but not following through to put the truth into action.
3. Frustration may develop from not seeing quick results and changes in one's life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

We want to give credit to the excellent resource materials from which we have borrowed information that shaped our thinking:

Jensen, Irving. *Enjoy Your Bible*, Moody Press

McDowell, Josh. *Guide to Understanding Your Bible*, Campus Crusade

Mickelsen, A. Berkeley and Alvera M. *Better Bible Study*, Regal Books c. 1977

Morey, Dr. Earl W. *Class lecture notes and handouts*

Traina, Robert A. *Methodical Bible Study*, Zondervan

Vos, Howard. *Effective Bible Study Methods*, Eerdmans

Wald, Oletta. *The Joy of Discovery in Bible Study*, Augsburg Publishing House c. 1975