

# Basic Bible Study Skills

## Observation

### *The three stages of inductive Bible study:*

- **Observation:** What does it say?
- Interpretation: What does it mean?
- Application: What does it mean to me?

### **Observation**

The aim of observation is to gather facts, much as a detective gathers evidence before he can accurately solve a crime. It is obviously impossible to understand what an author means without understanding what he is saying, and the better we understand exactly what he is saying by observing the passage, the better we will be able to understand what he means when we interpret the passage

Basic fact questions – Who?, What?, Where?, When?, How?

### **The Context**

- Author, purpose for writing (2 Thessalonians 1:11; John 20:31, “that you may believe”)
- Surrounding paragraphs (1 Corinthians 13 must be understood in light of chapters 12 & 14)
- Historical setting

### **Terms**

#### *Non-routine terms*

- Terms that are difficult to understand (Isaiah 6:2, “Seraphim”)
- Terms which express profound concepts (Romans 5:1, “justified”)

#### *Literal and figurative terms*

- Tree in Genesis 1:12
- Tree in Romans 11:24

#### *Identity of terms*

- Nouns
- Pronouns and their antecedents (Hebrews 11:4, who does “he” refer to?)
- Verbs and their tenses
- Adjectives and adverbs that modify nouns and verbs (Genesis 1:31, “it was very good”)
- Conjunctions that connect thoughts (Mark 3 – “and” is the first word of almost every verse)

### **Structure**

Writers often use structure to emphasize ideas. Therefore, observing structural relations in a passage will help us discover the author’s main points and the inter-relationship of his ideas. We are not trying to invent structure but to discover the structure that is there. Several common structural relationships include:

- Repetition of the same term or phrase (Mt. 6 – “Father”)
- Continuity of similar terms or ideas (three parables in Luke. 15; lost sheep, lost coin, lost son)
- Contrast between different words or ideas

Although – Romans 1:21

- But – Romans 5:14

- Nevertheless – 1 Corinthians 10:5
- Yet – Romans 5:14
- Comparison between similar terms or ideas
  - As...so – Romans 1:27
  - Likewise – Romans 1:27
- Cause and effect; effect and cause
  - If...then – Galatians 2:21
  - Therefore – 1 Corinthians 10:12
  - Thus – 1 Corinthians 8:12
- Explanation – Jesus explains his parable in Mark 4
- Emphasis
  - Indeed – Romans 9:25
  - Only – 1 Corinthians 8:9
- Selectivity – What is included and what is not? The first eleven chapters of Genesis cover many generations, while the next thirty-nine chapters span only four generations.

### Literary Form

- Discourse – logical arguments with careful attention to detail (Romans)
- Prose – stories, biography (Gospels, Acts)
- Poetry – figurative language (Psalms)
- Parable – analogy, down-to-earth story with accompanying spiritual truth (Mark 4)
- Apocalyptic – symbolic, predictive visions (Revelation)

### Atmosphere

- Tone or spirit of a passage
  - Despair – Romans 7:24
  - Thanksgiving – Romans 7:25
  - Joy – Psalm 145:1-3
  - Awe – Isaiah 6:5
  - Urgency – Galatians 1:8-9

### General Aids to Observation

Use paper and pencil.

Scan the whole before concentrating on details. Don't look at the whole without seeing details or at details without seeing the whole.

Title paragraphs and chapters.

Observe every passage as if you had never seen it before.

Don't give up too soon.

Avoid application and keep interpretation to a minimum. (Some observations will automatically lead to an obvious interpretation.)

Observe what is in the passage as well as what the author left out.

Compare different translations.