

# Inductive Study Guidelines

Inductive Bible study is primarily asking questions and looking for answers **in the text**.

- Observation – What does it say?
  - Interpretation – What does it mean?
  - Application – What does it mean for me?
- (More detail in the handout: *Inductive Bible Study – A few general ideas*)

Asking **questions** is key to good Bible Study

At the end of the study (personal or group), if all your questions were answered, you didn't ask enough questions.

Questions often prompted Jesus' teaching:

“How can a man be born when he is old?” John 3:4

“Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?” Matthew 9:11

“Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?” Matthew 9:14

Even awkward questions, questions that completely missed the point:

“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?” John 9:2

“Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” Matthew 11:3

Inductive method is **detective** work. Ask questions, look for any clue, gather evidence, decide later if the clue is important. If you find yourself saying early in a study, “That can't be important” you may miss some key part of a passage.

**Sequence** of questions is important: Observation, Interpretation, Application

“How does this apply to my life?” is not the first question to ask. Critical, but not first.

Observe until there is nothing left, then observe some more.

Don't be satisfied with “hearsay impressions” or generalities about what the Bible says – they are often wrong or superficial at best.

Application without thorough observation and interpretation can lead to error.

*Heretical* Wrong understanding leads to mistaken behavior.

*Familiar* Reaffirming what we already know is good, but is there anything else in the passage?  
What more might the Holy Spirit want to teach us?

*Superficial* Shallow thinking, avoiding difficult questions is easy but unproductive. “Raking is easy, but you only get leaves. Digging is hard, but you may find diamonds.” John Piper

Some suggestions about **mechanics**:

Good: Marking the text is very helpful in seeing the flow of the writer's thinking.

Not good: Marking in your Bible will limit your thinking the next time you want to look at that passage.

- Print out a passage from **BibleGateway.com** (or dozens of other sources). Or photocopy a page from your Bible. Use a fresh copy for your markup each time you study a passage.
- If possible, remove verse numbers, paragraphs, and section headings (under the “Page Options” icon – a little gear wheel – on BibleGateway). **Start fresh** with the basic text. You may see connections between paragraphs (breaks determined by the translator, not in the original text) that may be helpful.
- For group discussion **line numbers** can be helpful to find particular words or phrases. (In Microsoft Word 2013, line numbers can be added under the “Page Layout” menu in the “Page Setup” section.)

Delay **cross-referencing** until you have spent time on the passage. Cross-references are valuable and important for broad understanding of Scripture. Looking at cross-references too soon can lead to superficial jumping from one passage to another. First get as much as possible from the passage under study.

Avoid quickly using a **study Bible** or commentary. These are great resources but they can short-circuit the process the Holy Spirit might want to take you through. After reading study Bible notes or a commentary our perspective on the passage becomes much narrower, mostly limited to the ideas from the notes or comments. Even if the notes and comments are true and very good, first spend time in the passage to see what God the Holy Spirit wants to show *you* from the passage.

## Industrious dependence:

Inductive study is methodical, but much more than merely techniques or procedures.

Open my eyes, Lord, that I may see wonderful things in your Law. – Psalm 119:18

God opens our eyes enabling our seeing, making our efforts fruitful

## Suggested Reading:

Arthur, Kay. *How to Study Your Bible*. Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1994.

Very readable with details about using the inductive method for different types of Biblical writing (poetry, figurative language, biography, narrative, etc.) as well as other techniques, such as outlining and topical studies.

Davis, John Jefferson. *Meditation and Communion with God: Contemplating Scripture in an Age of Distraction*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2012.

Helpful and challenging to remind us that Bible study is not about technique but about growing in our communion with the Triune God.

Traina, Robert A. *Methodical Bible Study*. Wilmore, Kentucky: Asbury Theological Seminary, 1952.

Dated, sometimes difficult, and probably the best book I ever read on the inductive method. Time spent in its detail and rigorous digging into the text of Scripture will pay great rewards.

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## Inductive Bible Study

(A few general ideas)

### Observation (What does it say?)

What facts do you **observe** about the passage that help bring out the writer's thought process?

- Who are the people involved?
- What action takes place?
- What type of literature is it (poetry, history, didactic, etc.)?
- What details are included or left out?
- Are any unusual words used?
- Is there symbolic language?
- What is the grammar of the passage (pronouns, prepositions, verb tenses)?
- Are words or ideas repeated?
- Any comparisons or contrasts?
- Any cause and effect?
- Are there indications of purpose ("in order that...")?
- Are there conclusions ("Therefore...")?
- Are there explanations?
- Does the passage logically break into sections?
- How would you summarize the passage?
- What would be a good "headline" for the passage?

### Interpretation (What does it mean?)

What questions come to mind about the facts that would help you **interpret** the meaning?

- How would the original readers have understood the passage?
- What is the main emphasis?
- Why does the writer use repetition, or contrast, or unusual words?
- What does the grammar or structure of the passage reveal about the writer's thought pattern?
- Is there a logical sequence in the passage?
- How are different ideas in the passage connected?
- Are there any new ideas or concepts presented?
- Are there difficulties in the passage?

### Application (What does it mean for me?)

What is the impact on your life? What **application** does the Holy Spirit want to show you?

- Is there a command to obey?
- Is there a promise to be thankful for?
- Is there an attribute of God to worship?
- Is there an example to follow?

**Read nothing into the Scriptures,  
but draw everything from them,  
and suffer nothing to remain  
hidden that is really in them.  
J.A. Bengel (1687-1752)**