



BIBLE STUDY METHODS

Grace Institute for Biblical Leadership
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Introduction

Why Do Bible Study?

The Bible is Inspired by God

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; (2 Timothy 3:16)

The word “inspiration” in 2 Timothy 3:16 is in the original Greek θεόπνευστος (theopneustos), which literally means “God-breathed.” For scripture to be breathed by God suggests that it originated from God’s mouth or that it is the Word of God. Indeed, the term “word of God” is used synonymously with the Scriptures throughout the Bible (e.g. John 10:35).

The Mechanics of Inspiration

There are numerous theories of how inspiration took place, including the following¹:

- Natural inspiration - Human authors were inspired to write by God in the same way that a poet might be inspired to write poetry by natural events or conditions.
- Spiritual illumination – Human authors themselves are inspired by God in the same way God inspires any Christian today through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
- Conceptual inspiration – God inspired human authors with the general concepts of the passage, but left the words and details to the author.
- Verbal inspiration – God inspired human authors with each word, superintending even the details.
- Divine dictation – Human authors just took dictation from God as he spoke.

The best description of the process is found in 2 Peter 1:21, as he describes the process of prophecy being passed to human authors:

...for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (2 Peter 1:21)

Inspiration means, then, that the decision to write it came from God, but human authors were used to speak as from God as the Holy Spirit carried them along. This eliminates divine dictation, as it is the men who speak. Furthermore, this eliminates natural inspiration, as it has a divine origin. Spiritual illumination would mean the scriptures had no more authority than any Sunday morning sermon, which would contradict the authority attributed to Scriptures by Jesus and Paul.

That leaves us with conceptual and verbal inspiration. Both suggest that human authors were involved in the writing, and that the individual personalities and styles of the authors come through in the process. However, God motivated the human author to write, and he oversaw over

¹ Paul Enns. *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 160-162.

the process to ensure the end result communicated His message. The question is how detailed was this oversight? Did he oversee the general content, or did he oversee each word?

Jesus gives us a clear insight into the level of detail in Matthew 5:18:

For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (Matthew 5:18)

It seems Jesus was concerned about each word and stroke of the pen, suggesting that the oversight of God was detailed down to the finest detail. Therefore, verbal inspiration seems to be the best definition of what Paul means by the term in 2 Timothy 3:16.

The Ramifications of Inspiration

So if God superintended over the writing of each word, what does that mean about the veracity of the scriptures? If we believe God is a truthful God, his writings would also be truthful. This is the feeling of King David as he writes Psalm 19. David, in describing the Scriptures, uses adjectives such as perfect and sure (v. 7), right and pure (v. 8), clean and true (v. 9).

- ⁷ *The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.*
- ⁸ *The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.*
- ⁹ *The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether.*
- ¹⁰ *They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.*
- ¹¹ *Moreover, by them Your servant is warned;
In keeping them there is great reward.*
- ¹² *Who can discern his errors?
Acquit me of hidden faults.*
- ¹³ *Also keep back Your servant from presumptuous sins;
Let them not rule over me;
Then I will be blameless,
And I shall be acquitted of great transgression.*
- ¹⁴ *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
Be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.*

Why should we study the bible? The Bible gives us wisdom and enlightenment, refreshment and joy. It warns us, corrects us, and keeps us from sin. According to 2 Timothy 3:16, the Scriptures are the primary tool by which a Christian is to hear and understand God's will and serves as the primary authority in the life of a Christian. *If we don't study the bible, we will be ignorant of God's will and therefore we are rejecting the authority of God over our life!*

The Bible is Placed in History

The Bible is indeed the very word of God. However, God chose to reveal His Word through human authors who wrote to specific audiences in a specific place and time. As such, the Scriptures are not written as a series of timeless principles and commandments which can be read and understood simply. If God has chosen to reveal His Word to us this way, it might have made our bible study easier.

However, God because God chose to communicate His Word through his interactions and relationships with humans, it gives us comfort and an understanding that God still desires to be

involved personally with us and is not merely impersonally dropping commandments on us from on high.²

This is what also makes bible study necessary. The bible is written in a number of different literary genres, to a number of different cultures, in 3 different languages, through dozens of different human authors to people throughout a 1,500 year span of time.

The primary reason why we need to study the bible, rather than just read it, is because we must read and hear God's Word as the original recipients would have heard and read the scripture. Bible study requires that we have a solid understanding of biblical cultures, languages, history, and geography. Bible study is essential so we can hear the message in the context originally given.

One has to hear the Word they heard; you must try to understand what was said to them back then and there³.

In contrast, the purpose of bible study is not to enhance or augment the scripture. The scripture already is God's Word. There is nothing we can do to the text to make it anymore than it already is. The purpose of bible study is not to make the bible relevant. The scriptures already are relevant. We can't make them more or less relevant. The purpose of bible study is not to make the scriptures "come alive." The scriptures already are alive. The purpose of bible study is not to defend the bible. The bible is its own apologetic, because it convicts and penetrates the heart.

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

If the bible does not seem relevant or alive to us, it is not God's fault nor is it the bible's fault. It is our fault for not understanding how to study the bible properly. The purpose of this term is to provide you with a simple, proven process to study God's word so that you can see for yourself the relevance of the living word of God in your life.

The Relevance of our English Bible

God's inspiration applies only to the original texts, which were written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, and not any subsequent translations. Ideally, we would all become experts in these ancient languages and be able to understand the nuances of the original vocabulary and grammar as we read from the original text.

However, this is not a practical solution for most of us. Fortunately we have an abundance of tools in the English language that can make the nuances of the original language accessible to the modern English reader. In this class we will learn to use some of these tools, such as concordances, lexicons and interlinear bibles.

The English language has also been blessed with a multitude of translations. There are more translations of the bible into English than into any other language. As such, by comparing and contrasting the better of these translations, the modern English reader can have confidence that they understand the original text as well as can be possible without actually learning the original Hebrew and Greek.

² Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for all it's Worth*. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2003), 22.

³ Ibid, 23.

Which translation, however, is the best? That is a difficult question to answer, because each translation was written for a different purpose. To understand which is “best” you have to understand the different philosophies of translations:

- Literal translations: Some translators attempt to follow the original languages as literally as possible. That is, each word is translated directly and consistently. There is less importance placed on readability in English and more importance placed on the original word order and grammar. Such translations are more consistent with the original text, but are much more difficult to read in English. Examples of literal translations are the King James Version (KJV), New American Standard Bible (NASB), and English Standard Version (ESV).
- Dynamic Equivalence translations: Other translations attempt to translate not each word, but each thought. These translations are much easier to read in English and capture the significant point of each passage. These translations are not as consistent in the translation of the words nor do they follow the original word order. This requires that the translator make some interpretative decisions in the process of translation. Examples of dynamic equivalence translations are New International Version (NIV) and the New Living Translation (NLT).
- Paraphrases: Like a dynamic equivalent translation, the focus of the paraphrase is to make the text easier to read in English and to capture the impact of each passage. The author will take broad liberties, often amplifying and expanding from the original text. Paraphrases are useful for gaining an understanding the original feeling of the passage. However, the paraphrase has significant interpretation done for the reader. Examples of paraphrases include the Message, the JB Philips translation and the Living Bible (LB).

There is a place for all three translation methods. A paraphrase is useful for understanding the feel or emotional impact of a passage, something which is frequently lost in a literal translation. However, for a detail verse-by-verse study or exegesis, a literal translation is best as it leaves most of the interpretative decisions to the reader. For general use, the dynamic equivalence makes a good compromise of readability and accuracy.

New translations are always welcome, because language continually changes. While the language of the King James Version is beautiful and poetic and has had significant impact on the English language, one must re-translate from the Elizabethan style of language to understand it today. Even the NIV and NASB are no longer contemporary, having been translated now two decades ago.

In this class, because we are doing detailed bible study, we are using a literal translation: the New American Standard Bible (NASB). The NASB closely follows the word order of the original languages and it is more consistent in its translation of words. This translation tries to minimize interpretative decisions. For example, the NASB leaves the “genitive case” as ambiguous. The genitive case in Greek is similar to the possessive in English (“the Word of God” vs. “God’s word”). But the genitive can also mean a more generalized relationship. So, for example, if we were to talk about the “Judgment of God”, are we talking about God judging people, or are we talking about people judging God? The NASB leaves this vague. The NIV and other dynamic equivalent translations make the interpretation for you and translate this as a straight possessive.

How to Do Bible Study

Know the *Author*⁴

The church in Corinth was filled with disunity. Different factions were claiming to follow different church leaders, some following Peter, some Paul, others Apollos (1 Corinthians 1:11-12). Paul chastises the Corinthians for such an attitude, and he is particularly upset that some would be using him as an excuse for this divisiveness (1 Cor 1:14). Paul explains that following him is not a good idea, for he is not eloquent or clever. After all, his message was that merely of cross of Jesus Christ, and the message of the cross is not clever or even wise according to the world. In fact, the message of the cross is foolishness to the world (1:18).

To the unregenerate person, the cross is foolishness and a stumbling block, but to the regenerate man, it is the power and wisdom of God (1:22-25). Paul goes on to say that the unregenerate person can not accept the Word of God, because it is foolishness:

But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:14-16)

The first prerequisite for doing proper bible study, is that a person needs to know the author. Those who are not Christians will not understand or accept the Word of God. Indeed, no one can know the mind of the Lord, for He is so far above us that we can not comprehend Him or His precepts. But those who have believed in Jesus as the Christ and as their Savior, have received the mind of Christ. Those with the mind of Christ are able now to comprehend the mind of God, and are able to comprehend the Word of God.

Have the Correct *Attitude*⁵

We Must Have An Attitude Of Expectation

Many times we don't believe everything the bible teaches or we think that because it was written so many centuries ago, it has no value for us today. If in our closed hearts we are not convinced that *all* of the bible is profitable, or if we doubt the veracity of parts of God's word, we will fail to search for the message God has for us.

But Paul tells us that *all* scripture is inspired, and *all* scripture is profitable for us:

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; (2 Timothy 3:16)

We should have a sense of expectation that our life will be changed as we begin our bible studies. This applies to *all* scripture, even the boring parts. It is profitable not just to study the gospels or the epistles, but it is profitable to study the book of Leviticus, the prophets, and even the genealogies. If we approach with an attitude of expectation, then the scripture will indeed be profitable to us.

⁴ John Wecks. Classroom notes from "Bible Study Methods." (Multnomah Biblical Seminary, Summer 2000), 6.

⁵ Wecks, 7-11.

We Must Have An Attitude Of Eagerness

Often we approach scripture with a defeated attitude. We are so unsure of our own ability to understand the scripture and we give up before we even start. Our doubt in our capacity to understand sets us up for failure. But God assures us that if we are in Him, that we have the capacity to understand the word of God.

As for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him. (1 John 2:27)

This passage does not mean we don't need teachers, for throughout scripture the role of the teacher is affirmed. However, this passage does mean that God has given each believer the capacity to understand His Word and to discern truth. We should never doubt our capacity to glean truth from scripture, for we have the Holy Spirit indwelling in us, teaching us. We have the mind of Christ.

Therefore, we should approach the attitude, not with an attitude of defeat, but with an attitude of eagerness. We should be longing for the Word of God, hungry and thirsty for the truth it contains. Our attitude should be that of David, Jeremiah and Job:

*My soul languishes for Your salvation; I wait for Your word.
(Psalms 119:81)*

Your words were found and I ate them, And Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; For I have been called by Your name, O LORD God of hosts. (Jeremiah 15:16)

"I have not departed from the command of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food. (Job 23:12)

We Must Have An Attitude Of Examination

Sometimes we are just too lazy to take the time to study God's Word. Bible study does take effort, energy and time. We suppose that if we tried we could understand more than we do, but what we read seems rather hard or dull. We don't know if we want to invest the energy to learn how to study.

In Acts 17, Paul comes across Jews in the city of Berea who were not lazy when it came to bible study. As Paul told them of Jesus, they did not just accept blindly what Paul had to say, but they tested his words against the scriptures to make sure Paul was teaching the truth.

For they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. (Acts 17:11)

Are we ready to examine and test all new ideas and thoughts against the Word of God? When we listen to a preacher or read a book, are we blindly accepting their word for it, or do we have an attitude of examination, searching the scriptures to make sure what they are saying is true.

We Must Have An Attitude Of Humility

Sometimes we approach the scripture with an arrogant attitude. We already know what we believe, and all studying the bible would do is confirm or contradict what we already know to be true. Other times we approach scripture while we are in blatant rebellion to God, and our only reason to look into the scriptures is to try to justify our sin.

Both attitudes must be put aside, and when we approach the scripture it must be with humility and with a eagerness to understand the truth, no matter the cost.

Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord. (1 Peter 2:1-3)

When we come to scripture, are we willing to deal with whatever God bring to us? Are we ready to change our thinking to conform to scripture? Are we ready to deal with the sin that it reveals in us? Only when we come with this attitude of humility will bible study be effective.

Use the Correct *Approach*

Various Methods of Bible Study

Academic Approaches to Bible Study

Today there are several ways bible scholars approach studying the bible. These approaches are based on presuppositions regarding the nature of the scriptures. That is, those who believe the bible to be inspired by God approach the scriptures much differently than those who don't. Likewise, there are those who believe the scriptures to have multiple layers beyond its obvious message. This has given rise to at least four primary academic approaches to Scriptures:

- Allegory – Interpreting the Scriptures to have a mystical or spiritual interpretation beyond the literal meaning of a passage.
- Liberal – Interpreting the Scriptures from an academic perspective which rejects the possibility of the supernatural or transcendental inspiration.
- Neo-Orthodox – Interpreting the Scripture from a perspective that believes the Bible can only imperfectly point us to the true Word of God, Jesus Christ.
- Literal or “Plain” – Accepting the literally rendering of the Scriptures unless the text specifically gives us reason not to.

Rationale for “Plain” Interpretation

In this class, we will be using the literal or “plain” interpretative approach. Because we hold to the inspiration of the scriptures, the liberal and neo-orthodox approaches are not appropriate. Furthermore, the allegorical approach does not have any valid basis in the scriptures:

- Jesus never made an allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament. Paul only used allegorical interpretation on very rare occasions, and then only in a restrained manner⁶.
- Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled literally, indicating that these prophecies were not meant to be considered as allegories.⁷
- I John 2:27 rejects the idea that there are multiple layers of meaning beyond the simple message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Only the “plain” interpretation can be objective. If we use an allegorical approach, then interpretation becomes an exercise in creative thinking rather than an object attempt to discover truth.⁸
- Language, which was given by God, is intended to provide communication in a normal, plain manner.⁹

⁶ Michael Fink. “Allegory.” *Holman Bible Dictionary*, (Parsons Technology CD-ROM, 1994)

⁷ Charles C. Ryrie. *Basic Theology*. (Victor Books), 113.

⁸ Ibid.

Pragmatic Approaches to Bible Study

However, even among those who hold to the plain interpretation of scripture, there are a multitude of practical approaches to studying God's Word. Many of these approaches are as dangerous as an allegorical or liberal interpretation¹⁰:

- The Chapter Check-off Method – This is when we read a chapter a day just because we are supposed to, and not to gain any understanding or application from it. It's the "chapter-a-day keeps the devil away" philosophy.
- The Commentary Crutch Method – This is when we read a commentary or the study notes with more interest than we do the text itself rather than do our own independent study of a passage.
- The Dart Board Method – This is when we randomly open the bible and just start reading without any strategy to our study.
- The Proof Text Method – This is using the text to support my opinion rather than letting text determine my opinion.
- The Surfing Method – This is just skipping around the surface of the bible, moving from verse-to-verse without ever stopping to dig into a passage.

Principles of Inductive Bible Study

The approach we will be using in this class is called Inductive Bible Study. There are two hallmarks of inductive bible study¹¹:

Inductive

In the deductive method or the "scientific" method the student first develops a hypothesis and then tests that hypothesis with the evidence. In deductive bible study, the student begins with a generalization or a hypothesis and then looks to support this from the scripture. This approach tends to be subjective and is by nature prejudicial.

Inductive study means to let the text speak for itself without any preconceived notions or ideas of what we expect it to say. It is an objective approach which does not presuppose what the text says before we get to it.

It should be noted there is no such thing a pure induction, for it is impossible to let go of all our preconceptions. It is important that we are aware of this, for otherwise, we can arrogantly and ignorantly be just reaffirming our subjective opinions. However, as much as it is possible, we need to let the scripture speak for itself rather than use it to support our opinions.

Independent

Inductive bible study requires that the student do his or her own research and not rely on the interpretation of others. Inductive bible study emphasizes letting the text speak for itself, forcing students to immerse themselves in the biblical passage rather than in commentaries or study helps. As we will see, there is a place for commentaries and study bibles, but only as an aid and only after the text itself has been thoroughly explored.

Overview of Inductive Bible Study¹²

Finally, Inductive Bible Study is methodical. There is a proper path to follow to determine what the Scriptures are saying. There are specific steps necessary in order to keep our approach inductive and independent. Skipping one of the steps or taking the steps out of order will result in a less effective understanding and application of the scripture.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Weeks, 12.

¹¹ Robert A. Traina. *Methodical Bible Study*. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1985), 6-9.

¹² Weeks, 12.

Step #1 – Observation

When studying a passage of the bible, we begin by observing that passage. We begin our study by asking, **what does the text say**. It requires that we be good readers. It requires that we be detectives. And, it requires that we look at the big picture. But we always want to know what does the text say. To accomplish this we must look for and understand the following components of any passage:

- Terms – the meaning of the specific words in a passage.
- Structure – the parts of speech in a sentence, and the development of sentences within a paragraph.
- Literary Forms – understanding the structure of different literary genres.
- Atmosphere – understanding the historical context of the passage.

Step #2 – Interpretation

After observing the passage, we are ready to interpret the passage. We are ready to ask the question, **what is the point of the passage?** There is only one true interpretation of any passage of scripture. That interpretation is the meaning, principle, or point that the original author was trying to communicate to his original readers.

In interpretation, we are attempting to stand in the author's shoes and ask, what did he mean? What was he trying to say? What principle was the author trying to communicate? What is the key point of the passage to the original readers? To accomplish this we:

- Ask interpretative questions – Developing questions are the key to interpretation.
- Utilize good hermeneutics – There are specific rules of interpretation which will guide our understanding of a passage.

Step #3 – Correlation

The Bible never contradict itself. Therefore, we must always check our interpretation against other passages of scripture to make sure we have the proper interpretation. The correlation step asks, **where does the passage fit in the overall teaching of God's word?** This requires that we:

- Capture the unique contribution of the text
- Let Scripture interpret scripture

Step #4 – Verification

Up to this point, our study has been independent, using only the bible and tools which help the observation process. However, in this step we must ask, **is the meaning I discovered the best meaning?** How have others understood this passage? If our interpretation is so unique that no one else in the history of the church has come up with this, our interpretation is on shaky ground. Therefore we look the good bible commentators to verify our interpretation. To do this we will learn:

- How to choose a good commentary
- How to use a good commentary

Step #5 – Application

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. (James 1:22)

It is not enough to know what the passage says, or even what it means. We must make the bridge from knowing about the Bible to living it. This is called *Application*. Here we ask the question, ***what does the point or principle of the passage mean to me?*** How does it work in my own life? What does it mean to me today? This is a three step process of:

- Determining the timeless principle.
- Personalizing the principle.
- Practicing the principle.

Observation

Observing the Scripture

When studying a passage of the bible, we begin by observing that passage. We begin our study by asking, *what does the text say*. It requires that we be good readers. It requires that we be detectives. And, it requires that we look at the big picture. But we always want to know what does the text say.

Learning to Read

1. **Read better and faster.** Some of us struggle with our reading skills. Some of us devour books. All of us could learn to read better and read faster. Reading better means retaining more of the meaning. Reading faster allows us to see the bigger picture, but should never be such so as to sacrifice our reading comprehension.
2. **Read as if for the first time.** – Use an unmarked text without study notes.
3. **Read it inquisitively.** – Ask questions while you are reading. The key is to be active and engaged as you read, and if you keep asking questions your mind will remain on the text.
4. **Read Prayerfully.** - We tend to think of Bible Study and prayer as separate disciplines. But prayer is the key to effective Bible study. Learn to pray before, during, and after your reading of scripture.
5. **Read Repeatedly** – Don't settle for just reading a passage one time. Read it again and again. Try reading an entire book at one setting. Try reading different translations. Try reading aloud, or listening to the Bible on tapes. Be creative and work to make it interesting. But give yourself repeated exposure to the same passage. Set a regular time each day to read the Bible and pray.

Impress them (God's commandments) on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:7-9)

6. **Read Meditatively** - Don't just read it, but think about it. Mull over it. Contemplate the passage over the course of the entire day. One very effective way to meditate on God's Word is to memorize a verse or a passage of scripture.

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. (Joshua 1:8)

Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. (Psalm 119:97)

The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold. (Psalm 119:72)

7. **Read Purposely** - Purposeful reading looks for the aim of the author. Every word of every verse is there for a reason. When reading we want to read to understand the author's purpose in writing.. Look for:
- **Things which are emphasized** – How much space is devoted to a topic? Does the passage tell you its purpose plainly? What is the order of topics or events? Does the passage increase or decrease in intensity?
 - **Things that are repeated** – Are there words or themes that are repeated? Are there patterns that are followed?
 - **Things that are related** – Is there a movement from the general to specific? Does the passage use a “question and answer” format? Does the passage state a cause and effect relationship?
 - **Things that are Alike and Unlike** – Does the author use a simile or a metaphor? Are their contrasting words used, like but or however? Is the author using irony? Always keep in mind, as we read, that we want to know *What Does the Text Say*.
8. **Read Strategically** - One of the biggest mistakes people make when reading the Bible is selecting a passage at random, or choosing books without considering why they want to review a passage. Taking a little time to strategically read through the bible is important. Try choosing a reading plan, and stick with it.

Making Observations

The first exercise in inductive bible study is to make a list of observations from the target passage. An observation is a complete statement of one thought that is true according to the text.

Observations do not try to determine meaning. Meaning comes from the interpretation phase. Therefore, observation statements use the same words as the text and does not make any assumption about the meaning of those words by replacing them with synonyms.

Where the process of observation become difficult is when the text doesn't make sense. But observation doesn't try to create meaning or sense of the text, but merely observe what it says. Avoid short circuiting the process by beginning to assign meaning to early.

Finally, the task of observation is an on-going task, and one should never think they have exhausted all there is to observe.

Observation Guidelines

1. The statement should be a *simple* sentence, not a compound sentence.
2. Observations are true according to the *target* text.
3. Observations may refer to the *relevant* context (e.g. using the context to determine the antecedent to a pronoun).
4. Observations are not correlations with other scripture portions.
5. Observation is not speculation. Avoid words like might, maybe, and perhaps.
6. Observations can build on one another.
7. Observations are positive statements. Don't state what the text doesn't say.

8. Observations should not use the pronouns I, me, my, we, us, etc. This is application, not observation.
9. A good observation observes more than simple grammar (e.g. rather than saying “God loved the world,” say “God’s love was in the past.”)
10. Observations should avoid meaningless numerology observations. Observing that that a verse has 45 words is not helpful to the process.

Observational Questions

The key to the observational process is to continually asking questions as you approach the text. Some of your questions will have to wait until the interpretation step to be answered. Other questions will result in additional observations about the passage.

You have to learn the difference between “observational” questions and “interpretive” questions. Observational questions answer the questions, “who, what, where, when, why, and how.” If the text answers these questions, write them the answers as observations. Interpretive questions ask, “what does this mean?” On a separate sheet of paper, write down your interpretive questions for answering later.

Here are some questions you can ask to help spark additional observations in a passage:

Where?

- Where is are the events of the passage taking place?
- Are there any geographic identifiers in the passage?
- Is the text closely connected with a geographic setting?
- Is there movement from one location to another?
- From where are the people going or coming?
- Are there any topographical references (e.g. above, below, high, low, etc.)
- Are there any relationships between two locations?

When?

- When are the events of the passage taking place?
- What are the time references in the passage?
- What tenses do the verbs use?
- Are there any references to frequency?
- Are there any references to sequence or cause and effect?
- Are there references to the time frame between different events?

Who?

- Who is involved in the passage? (List all the persons mentioned)
- What are the relationships between the persons in the passage?
- Who are the antecedents to every pronoun in the passage?
- Who is doing what in the passage? (List out the activity of each person mentioned).

How?

- How do the events of the passage happen?
- Are there any processes mentioned?
- How are each of the persons mentioned related to these processes?
- How did each event come about? (Be careful not to interpret!)
- How did the setting (time and place) influence the events of the passage?

What?

- What is happening in the passage?

- What events take place?
- What is the sequence of these events?
- What is the most important or climatic event?
- What is the response of the participants?
- What role do each participant play in the events?

Why?

- Why are these events taking place?
- What cause and effect relationships are in the passage?
- What is the authors intent or purpose in writing?
- Be careful not to interpret. Only make observations of the whys if they are specifically disclosed in the text.

Assignment

Write down at least 25 unique and legitimate observations of Ephesians 2:4-7. Do not consult with others on this assignment.

1. Number each observation consecutively.
2. No speculation (“appears, might be, perhaps”)
3. No interpretation (“means” or “is defined as”)
4. No personal pronouns (I, me, my, we, us, etc.)
5. Must be true according to the target text
6. Don’t say what the text isn’t saying (“is not” and “but not” statements).
7. Statements can build, but only if it matches the text.
8. Statements can contain even slight differences.
9. Each statement should be unique and not just a rephrasing of the same thing.
10. Don’t just make simple observations of grammar (“love” is a verb)

When you are finished with the exercise go back over these guidelines and the other guidelines from class to be sure each observation is unique and legitimate.

Observing the Structure

Observing the Grammar – Syntactical Analysis

The Need for Syntactical Analysis

God does not think or speak in English. Nor does God think or speak in Greek, Hebrew, Arabic or any human language. Yet God has chosen to communicate His truths through human language. Therefore the deep spiritual truths of God had to be simplified so that it can be communicated in a form which we can understand. This does not reduce the truth of the Bible, but rather, it elevates human language as it becomes the vessel which contains the very Word of God.

Because God has chosen language as the means by which to communicate with us, we must become experts at the use of language. Observation of the structure of language becomes imperative in our bible study methodology. This structure, which we call grammar, serves as the building blocks in language, and becomes the focus of our next observation exercise.

While the most accurate structural observations uses the original languages, observing the structure of our English translations is also extremely valuable. However, this is where using a literal translation becomes critical. The grammar of the original languages is often lost in a

dynamic equivalence. However, a more literal translation will more closely match the grammatical structure of the original. While this clearly sacrifices readability, it serves us well in our grammatical observations.

Syntactical Analysis Defined

Syntactical Analysis is a bible study methodology used to rearrange the text to highlight the grammatical ideas and relationships within the text.

Importance of Syntactical Analysis

1. Syntactical analysis requires the reader to make basic grammatical observations of the text.
2. Syntactical analysis highlights the key words and phrases, helping us to determine which words to select in our word study.
3. Syntactical analysis helps to determine the outline of a text.
4. Syntactical analysis will raise additional interpretative questions.
5. Syntactical analysis will require the reader to begin making some interpretative decisions. These interpretations, however, must be restrained to the context of grammatical interpretations, and not a wholesale interpretation of the text. That remains for the next step.

A Grammar Review

Parts of Speech

Words are the basic building blocks to language. Each word in a language can be grammatically categorized as a *part of speech*.

- **Nouns** – The name of a person, place, thing or idea.
 - Common nouns – the general descriptive name of a person, place or thing (*table, dog, church, man, automobile*).
 - Proper nouns – the name of a particular person, place or thing (*Bob Smith, Oregon, Grace Community Fellowship*).
- **Pronouns** – Words which substitute for a noun. (*I, my, me, we, our, us, you, your, he, his, him, she, her, it*).
- **Verbs** – Words which declare the action in a sentence (*kick, run, think, believe*).
 - Forms of a verb:
 - The tense of a verb tells you when an action took place. (*He kicks the dog, he kicked the dog, he will kick the dog.*)
 - The voice of a verb tells the noun which initiated the action. (*He kicked the dog, the dog was kicked by him.*)
 - The mood of a verb tells the attitude of the speaker, the factuality or likelihood of what is expressed. (*He can kick the dog, he did kick the dog, he might kick the dog.*)
 - *Auxiliary verbs*, sometimes called *helping verbs*, help complete the form and meaning of main verbs. The auxiliary verbs include the *modal verbs*, the *primary verbs*.
 - The modal verbs help express the *mood* of verbs. Examples include: do, does, did, can, could, shall, should, will, would, may, might, and must.
 - The primary verbs have the distinction of being able to function either as main verbs or as auxiliaries. As auxiliaries they combine with other verbs to help determine the tense and voice of the verb. Examples include: be am is are was were been, have, has and had.
- **Adjectives** – Words which modify nouns (*tall, dark, handsome*).

- Adverbs – Words which modify verbs (*fast, thoughtfully, submissively*).
- Prepositions – Words which begin prepositional phrases which indicated where, when, why or how a verb took place. (*in, around, up, through*).
- Conjunctions – Words which combine sections of a sentence (*and, but*).
- Articles – Words which identify the particularities of a nouns. (*The definite article: the. The indefinite article: a.*)

Sentence Structure

These words are connected together into sentences to communicate a single idea. Within each sentence words take on particular roles in the sentence.

1. Subject – The doer of the action (unless the verb is in the passive voice). (*The man kicked the dog*).
2. Verb – The action in the sentence. (*The man kicked the dog*).
3. Object – The receiver of the action. (*The man kicked the dog*).
4. Indirect Object - An object indirectly affected by the action of the verb. (*The man gave the present to his wife.*)
5. Prepositional Phrase - A phrase that consists of a preposition and its object and functions as an adjective or an adverb. (*The man gave the present to his wife in the restaurant.*)

Construction of a Syntactical Analysis

Basic Construction of a Syntactical Analysis

1. Use line paper or graph paper and a pencil. Usually you will need to use a landscape orientation on the paper. **Print small!** If you are using a computer, I recommend using a spreadsheet with the columns set to a very minimal width.
2. Place the main subject of the sentence at the top left of the page, followed by the verb and the object.

Example:

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Verb</u>	<u>Object</u>
He	put	things

3. Place any modifying words, phrases, or clauses under the terms they modify, slightly indented.

Example:

He	put	things
	in subjection	all

4. Place conjunctions and other connecting words on a vertical line between the first letters of the words being joined.

Example:

<u>And</u>		
He	put	things
	in subjection	all

5. Words which refer to the same noun should be directly under each other (such as a relative pronoun beginning a clause).
6. Use the exact words of the text. Every word of the verse needs to be included. Don't leave out or add any text (except to repeat elements for clarity sake).

Help in Constructing a Syntactical Analysis

1. Syntactical Analysis is not the same thing as sentence diagramming.
2. Keep groups of words, clauses and phrases together on the same line if they serve the same function.
3. Finding the direct object: The direct object usually answers the question "what?" or "who?" following the subject & verb. Note, some verbs do not have a direct object (intransitive verbs or verbs in the passive voice).
4. Differentiate between main and subordinate clauses. Subordinate clauses use participles and gerunds ("-ing" words). These subordinate clauses are modifiers to the subject, verb or object.
5. "If-then" constructions, the "then" portion usually is the main clause and the "if" clause modifies it.
6. Keep connecting verbs together on the same line (keep auxiliary verbs with their main verb).
7. Modifiers usually answer a linking questions. Noun modifying words and phrases answer the question "what kind, how many, whose, etc." Verb modifying words and phrases answer the question "why, where, how, to whom, according to."
8. When trying to determine the antecedent to the pronoun, remember the basic rule that the nearest noun is usually the best antecedent.

Assignment

Complete a syntactical analysis of Ephesians 2:8-10.

1. It is okay to work with others on this project.
2. Read carefully the notes and examples.

Observing the Structure of a Book

Syntactical Analysis helps us to determine the structure at the sentence and paragraph level. The next step is to look at the interrelationships between the paragraphs of a passage. Syntactical analysis looks at the trees. However, at some point we must back up and look at the forest as well. This takes a different set of skills. The best tool for doing this is the book chart.

Why do a Book Chart?

1. To help understand the relationship of the parts of the passage to each other and to the whole.
2. To remember the main themes of a large portion of scripture.
3. To fit each passage into its proper context.

4. Provides an excellent summary of main ideas of scripture.

Looking for Structure

1. Don't let chapter & verse breaks dictate your structure (or study bibles either!)
2. Look for changes in the subject matter.
3. Look for connecting phrases (e.g. "So then," "Finally, brethren," "Therefore," "And now concerning.")
4. Look for significant changes in persons involved (e.g. Eph 6:1-4, "Children", "Fathers".)
5. Look for changes in time or place, especially in narrative or historical literature.
6. Look for summarizing statements (see Acts)

Developing a Book Chart

Summarizing the paragraph

From your syntactic analysis, use the subject-verb-object you found to summarize each sentence in the paragraph in 2 to 5 words. Write them down in a list. What is the overall idea of the paragraph? Summarize this in a 2 to 5 word title. Write that down in your book chart by paragraph.

Summarizing the sections

Look at the paragraphs coming before and after the target text. What paragraphs seem to have related topics? What distinguishes one paragraph from the next? Is it a change of audience or context, but the same overall topic? If so, draw a box around those paragraphs and write a 2 – 5 word title for this section.

Summarizing the book

Look at each section you created. Are there consistent themes in connecting sections? If so, draw a box around those sections and write a 2 to 5 word title for this section. Continue the process until you encompass the entire book. Then determine a 2 to 5 word "theme" for the entire book.

Assignment

Update your Ephesians book chart and show at least two levels of section breaks as well as an overall theme for the book.

Observing the Setting

Purpose of Historical Background Study

The Bible is a historical book, recording events of history and dealing with people in particular places and times. To make proper observations we need to understand where in history the passage we are studying fits.

The background makes the events and topics discussed come alive. We understand better why things were said. It helps us lay the ground work for good interpretation (understanding what the text means). It gives us the framework for correlation (comparing other scriptures). It helps us develop more accurate application.

A historical background is attempting to find the context of the writer and the reader, focusing on the circumstances which lead to the writing of the book. Don't allow the historical background to run down a rabbit trail. Instead the historical background is ultimately trying to help us determine the purpose for which the book was written.

Procedure of Historical Background Study

The Tools

External Tools

A true inductive bible study would require that the student independently pursue historical facts to determine the historical background to a book. This would take an inordinate amount of time. Fortunately, we are blessed to have abundant materials to help us with our background observations. Proper use of these tools can save us time and effort in our background study. Some recommended tools include:

- Study Bibles (look at the beginning of the book you are studying)
- Bible Handbooks
- Bible Atlases
- Commentaries (use for background only at this stage!)
- The Web

However, be careful in your source material. Not all biblical scholarship believes the Bible is inspired!

Internal Tools

In addition to these tools, a good background study should also use the bible itself. The student should look for related passages which would provide additional background to a book. The books of the bible tend to be written in clusters of history, with historical, epistolary, prophetic and poetic books all written in the same eras. For example, if a student is studying a Pauline epistle, often times the book of Acts will have historical background for both the author and the receiving church. The study of an Old Testament prophet should include a review of the book of Kings or Chronicles to provide history. A good concordance or topical bible can help make these connections.

Components of a Historical Background

The geographic setting

- Where was the writer of the book when he wrote the book?
- Where were the readers of the book when they read it?
- Where did the events in the book take place?
- What geographic movement takes place in the text?
- What impact does the geography have on the text?

The chronological setting

- When was the book written?
- When was the book read by its original audience?
- When did the events of the text take place?
- What biblical events take place immediately before and after the events of the writing?
- What biblical events take place immediately before and after the writing of the book?

The political setting

- Who was in power in the region at that time?
- How did the political systems work?
- What was the political history of that region?

The cultural setting

- What were the customs, habits or traditions of the readers at this time and place?

- What was the family structure like?
- How did they “earn their living?” What was the economy of that region? Were they rich or poor?
- How did the people spend their “leisure time?”
- What kind of education would the reader have had?
- How did they dress? What did they eat? What were their houses like?

The spiritual setting

- What is the spiritual condition of the writer?
- What is the spiritual condition of the reader?
- What spiritual strengths and weaknesses did they have?
- Are there specific spiritual problems which they had?
- Is the spiritual condition of the reader improving or declining at the time of the writing?

The purpose

The background study should then conclude by stating the purpose of the book. Why did the writer write this book to these readers? This can usually be summarized in a simple one sentence statement. Sometimes the purpose is clearly stated in the book (c.f. John 20:31). Other times it must be surmised from the historical background. Usually there will be one primary purpose, but often there are a number of secondary purposes as well. The background study should give the rationale used to determine the purpose.

Assignment

Complete a historical background on the book of Ephesians. The background can be completed on the provided form, or can be done using your own format, as long as the same information is presented. Use at least 1 biblical reference outside of Ephesians and 2 to 3 external sources.

The Importance of Literary Genre

Narratives

More than that, the entire bible really is one large historical narrative; one grand story from creation to the cross to the coming kingdom. Therefore it should not surprise us that historical narrative makes up nearly half of the bible. The bible is the story of God’s interaction with humanity in history.

The narratives do not directly teach doctrine. They might illustrate doctrine which is taught propositionally elsewhere, but they should not be a primary source for determining theology. Narratives are selective and incomplete, only presenting the historical facts necessary to make the point of the author.

When reading narrative, then, we begin by looking at each story and asking how this story fits within the full scope of the biblical narrative. How does each story fit within the eternal, universal plan of God and His salvation story.

After this, then we look to see how a story fits in with the story of God’s people. What impact does this story have on the nation of Israel or the church? What development or foundations are being laid in the story of Israel or the church.

Finally, after looking at these broad strokes, we look at the story of each individual. What examples are being provided for us. But be careful! Sometimes the examples are negative ones. For example, in Judges 6:36-40, we see the story of Gideon laying out a fleece to determine God’s will. Many have taken this passage as an positive example to follow. However, this is a story of Gideon’s lack of faith, and serves as a negative example!

Finally, remember that in each narrative the real hero of the story is not the individual, but God himself! Rather than looking at the human characters as heroes to emulate, take a larger view of God as hero, and that He is the one we should emulate.

Books of the Bible

OT: Genesis, most of Exodus and Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. Additionally many of the prophetic books have large sections of historic narrative as well.

NT: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts.

Basic Unit of Study

Think big! We should be looking at the broader sweep of the narrative rather than the individual events.

Contribution

Primary Contribution

Narratives provide us with an understanding about God's eternal plan and how he works in human history. With each narrative passage, we should ask, "what does his passage tell me about God, His plan, or the role that His people should play in His plan."

Secondary Contribution

Narratives provides us with positive and negative examples of people living life in relationship with God. With each passage, we should ask, "what is the positive or negative character quality being highlighted in the passage."

The Law

The Old Testament law was given to the nation Israel as the foundation of their political and religious constitution. This law dealt with issues of importance to an Israelite of the 15th century BC. In addition, the Old Testament Law was never given as a means to salvation, but are the regulations which apply to those living in the Israelite community. As such, there are many situations addressed in the Old Testament law which are completely irrelevant for a 21st Christian.

The purpose of the Law to a Christian reader today is therefore not to provide direct commandments to be obeyed, except where it is renewed in the New Testament. The essence of the law was indeed renewed (i.e. the ten commandments, the greatest commandments- love God, love your neighbor).

Furthermore the law provides a broad understanding of who God is and, in a broad sense, the way He wants his people to live. Secondly, the law is used to illustrate our own sinfulness, and how impossible it is for us to live up to any standard.

Books of the Bible

Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Basic Unit of Study

Because most of the details of the Old Testament Law are not specifically binding on us today, rather than study each detailed element of the Law, a bigger view is better. Look at each section of the book as a whole and look at the greater principles behind the commandments.

Contribution

Primary Contribution

The law explains to us the holiness of God and the standard of holiness God desires for His people. With each Law passage, we should ask ourselves, "what does this passage teach us about God and His holiness? What principle of holiness does God desire for His people?"

Secondary Contribution

The law provides an illustration of the ethical and moral guidelines for His people. With each Law passage, we should ask ourselves first, “is this commandment reaffirmed in the New Testament, and therefore relevant to me as a New Testament saint?”

Wisdom

Wisdom literature is a unique form of literature within the bible. Proverbs are, well, they are proverbial. That is to say, the Proverbs are generalized statements about common-sense issues in life. The Proverbs are not promises, per se, but observations about what is true in life. For example, we have the modern English proverb, “an apple a day will keep the doctor away.” Now this is not a promise that by eating apples everyday you will never get sick, but a general observation that eating healthy foods will improve your health.

Job, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon are books which present one single point per book. The development of the argument in Job and Ecclesiastes begins by presenting alternative viewpoints to the author’s main point. Those alternate viewpoints, in both these books, take up the bulk of the book. Then finally, in the closing chapters, the author’s real viewpoint is expressed. Great care must be taken in Job and Ecclesiastes to not pull things out of the context of the entire book, or the reader will be reading a *false* viewpoint, and not the intent of the book!!

Books of the Bible

Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon.

Basic Unit of Study

In Proverbs, the individual Proverb.

In Job, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, the entire book.

Contribution

They directly (Proverbs) or indirectly (Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon) tell us how to make wise choices for living in real life situations. Therefore, ask, what does the proverb or book tell me about general patterns of living which will be beneficial to me?

Prophecy

The Old Testament prophets were messengers of God, calling on the nation of Israel (and Judah) to remember and keep their covenant with God. They were the enforcers of God’s covenant, serving as God’s direct representative and messenger to the people. The prophets were addressing specific situation in the history of Israel as they brought forth the word of God to the people.

In conjunction with the role of “forth telling” the prophets often also were “foretelling” the future. Usually this foretelling was the simple consequence to their sinful behavior. However, foretelling in the prophets presents significant interpretative difficulties for the modern reader. To understand foretelling, we must understand the law of “double-fulfillment.” This law states that most prophecies in scripture have both a near term fulfillment and a later, greater fulfillment. For example, in Isaiah 7, he foretells that “the virgin shall be with child.” This was fulfilled first in Isaiah’s lifetime when his wife gave birth, but was also fulfilled in a fuller sense when Christ was born.

Books of the Bible

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

Basic Unit of Study

The oracle.

*Contribution**Primary Contribution*

The prophets were to encourage and admonish the nation Israel to keep the covenant God had with His chosen people. Therefore asks, how does this oracle speak of Israel's keeping of the covenant, and might we be susceptible to neglect in this area in keeping of the new covenant?

Secondary Contribution

The prophets also give us glimpses into the future of God's kingdom program. Sometimes these prophecies were immediately fulfilled, sometimes they are yet to be fulfilled, and sometimes the prophecy had both an immediate and a greater distant fulfillment. Therefore, ask, what does this oracle tell me about God's future plans for Israel and/or his future plans for His new covenant people?

Epistles

The epistles are letters written to specific people in specific situations. The epistles are addressing their specific concerns and issues. The epistles are not theological textbooks expounding a systematic teaching of doctrine. Having an understanding of to whom and where each epistle was written is critical to understanding. When we come across difficult passages to understand in the epistles, it is usually because we aren't familiar with the background to the book. When reading the epistles (as with all scripture), we must remember, the basic rule: the text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his readers. However, the second rule is critical to remember as well: wherever we share common particulars with the readers, God's Word is the same to them as it is to us.

Books of the Bible

Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, and Jude.

Basic Unit of Study

The paragraph.

Contribution

To teach exhort and admonish the various churches addressed to live consistent with the grace they have received, to live in unity with other believers, and to keep to the doctrinal truth they had been taught by the apostles. Therefore ask, what does this paragraph tell me about living according to grace, living with other believers, or persevering in the truth of God's Word?

Apocalyptic*Books of the Bible*

Revelations, Zechariah.

Basic Unit of Study

The whole book.

*Contribution**Primary Contribution*

Apocalyptic literature is written to encourage and exhort us to overcome persecution, knowing that God's kingdom program resulting in His victory over all evil in the end. Therefore ask, what does this passage tell me about God and his long-term plan for the world which encourages me to live faithfully for Him today?

Poetry

Poetry is an expression of the author's feelings. As a result, you find some very intense and deep emotions within the Psalms; emotions and feelings that sometime may sound contradictory to other passages within the Bible. If we don't understand the nature of poetry, we could draw some very erroneous conclusions about who God is. Take Psalm 22, where it says,

"My God, my God, why have you left me alone? You are too far away to save me. You are too far away to hear my moans."

If we read this as a doctrinal treatise or a theological lesson, we might incorrectly conclude that God sometimes is far away and unable or unwilling to intervene in our lives. But if we understand that this is a poem in which the author is honestly and truthfully describing his experience and deep feelings. As such, as you read on in this Psalm, you would see that actually, the intent of the author is actually communicating just the opposite!

So we must be careful when reading the Psalm to understand that these poems are truthful to the author's feelings, and only when read in their full argument can we draw accurate principles of who God is and how he relates to us.

Books of the Bible

Psalms, Lamentations, and portions of the Old Testament prophets.

Basic Unit of Study

The psalm.

Contribution

Primary Contribution

Poetry in scripture is a model of a God-centered world view, through expressions of worship, prayer, and the way a saint is to express their deepest emotions and concerns to God. Therefore, when approaching a psalm, ask, what does this psalm tell me about God and his relationship with the author in the midst of difficult of joyous circumstances?

Secondary Contribution

The poetry in scripture gives us a model for worshipping God. Therefore, ask, what does this psalm tell me about how we are to pray, praise and express ourselves in worship to God, both individually and corporately;

A Closer Look at Studying Hebrew Poetry

Importance of Poetry

Poetry is not very important in American culture. Outside of pop music, which has is a very unsophisticated form of poetry, we are strictly a prose culture. But in other cultures poetry is a highly esteemed and deeply ingrained form of literature. In ancient cultures the epic poems, such as the Illiad in Greece or the Aeneid in Rome, are the basis for national identity.

In the Hebrew Bible, poetry is extensively used, not only in the Psalms, but throughout the prophets. Poetry is used to impact the reader not just in the head, but the heart. Poetry is used because it is more readily memorized than prose. Poetry has a way of making profound statements in such simple and emotive language that it can penetrate through our cynical rationalism and hit us right in our soul.

The Structure of Poetry

It is the very nature of poetry that makes it memorable and penetrating. Poetry is required to follow certain ground rules. For example, in English, we expect poetry to follow a certain rhyme

and meter. For example, every other line might end in a rhyme. Hebrew poetry uses rhyming and meter as well. However rhyme in Hebrew poetry tends to be not at the end of the line but in successive words. Hebrew poetry might also use alliteration in the successive words in a line. Hebrew poetry often also uses alphabetical acronyms, where each line starts with a different letter of the alphabet (e.g. Psalm 119).

However, the most distinguishing characteristic of Hebrew poetry is *parallelism*. A Hebrew poem is divided into lines which repeat the point of the author in different words. This repetitive style is the most distinguishing mark of Hebrew poetry because, unlike rhyme and meter, it transcends translation.

For example, in Psalm 19:7-9, each line in these 3 verses is really saying the same thing in a repetitive fashion.

- ⁷ *The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.*
⁸ *The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.*
⁹ *The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether.*

The psalmist is trying to penetrate our heart and get us to feel his point rather than making a rationalistic argument to make his point. Therefore, when studying Hebrew poetry, we don't dissect each line and try to determine the subtle differences in each word. Rather we let the overall sense of each parallel section give us an overall sense of what the author intends for us to feel about the passage.

When analyzing a psalm, we begin by breaking it into "stiches." A stich is a group of related lines which have the parallel structure. In a passage, there can be a distich (two related lines) or tristiches (three related lines), as seen in Psalm 1:1-2:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 | <i>How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,</i> |
| 2 | <i>Nor stand in the path of sinners,</i> |
| 3 | <i>Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!</i> |
| 4 | <i>But his delight is in the law of the LORD,</i> |
| 5 | <i>And in His law he meditates day and night.</i> |

Type of Parallelism

- Synonymous Parallelism – Subsequent lines reinforce the first line.

*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin. (Psalm 51:2)*

- Antithetical Parallelism – Subsequent lines contrast the first line.

*The perverse in heart are an abomination to the LORD,
But the blameless in their walk are His delight. (Proverbs 11:20)*

- Synthetic Parallelism – Subsequent lines add further information to the first line.

*The LORD also will be a stronghold for the oppressed,
A stronghold in times of trouble (Psalm 9:9)*

Steps for Observing Hebrew Poetry

1. Break the poem into stiches.
2. Determine the type of parallelism for each
3. Look for the parallel elements in the stich.
4. Summarize the stich into a 2 to 5 word phrase.
5. Divide the stiches in to sections which are related. Summarize the sections into a 2 to 5 word phrase.
6. Look at the sections of the poem. What is the development of thought in the passage? What is the overall theme of the poem.

Assignment

1. Using the provided text of Psalm 8, break the psalm into stich units (distich, tristich or four stich patterns) by putting a bracket around the line numbers.
2. Identify the parallel elements of the stiches found in lines 7-12 (using the signifiers: a b c; a' b' c'; -a -b -c.)
3. Identify the sections of Psalm 8 by grouping the stiches with brackets.
4. Summarize each of your identified sections of Psalm 8 with a 2-5 word phrase.

Interpretation

Preface to Interpretation

Interpretation Defined

After observing the passage, we are ready to interpret the passage. We are ready to ask the question, *what is the point of the passage?* Interpretation is the process of determining the meaning, principle, or point that the original author was trying to communicate to his original readers. In interpretation, we are attempting to stand in the author's shoes and ask, what did he mean? What was he trying to say? What principle was the author trying to communicate? What is the key point of the passage to the original readers?

Interpretation Distinguished

Interpretation is distinguished from the other steps in the inductive method:

- **Observation** does not address the question of meaning.
- **Correlation** compares the subject passage to other passages. Interpretation does not require other passages to determine meaning.
- **Verification** compares the student's interpretation with other interpreters. The student must conduct their independent interpretation first before taking this step.
- **Application** moves the meaning from its original setting into a current life situation.

The Process of Interpretation

Step One: Interpretive Questions

Interpretative questions are the bridge from observation to interpretation. Thoughtful questions help identify where the challenges to meaning are to be found in the passage. Often time many of these questions will arise during the observation stage.

Interpretative questions might include:

- What does this mean?
- Why is this said here?
- What does this imply?

After creating a list of questions, the interpreter then selects specific questions to answer which will drive the student towards the passage's meaning.

- Avoid questions which relate to application. Don't ask how this works today. Ask instead how the meaning relates to the original reader and author.
- Avoid questions which have been or should have been answered in the observation stage.
- Avoid yes or no questions.
- Good questions are tough to answer.
- Select a few questions which seem to focus on the point of the passage, rather than send us down some theological rabbit-trail.

Step Two: Synthesis/Analysis Interchange

The synthesis/analysis interchange involves a three step process:

- **Observing the whole** – Initial observation of the unit of study as a whole, including a horizontal chart if the passage is extended.
- **Examining the parts** – Detailed observation of the detailed parts, including syntactical analysis.
- **Restating the whole** – After looking at the details, the student revises and restates the whole based on the detailed observation.

Step Three: Contextual Study

To understand any unit of study requires an understanding of its relationship with the surrounding context. This requires an understanding of the larger context and an understanding of how the study unit fits within this whole.

There are various levels of context, each of which must be considered:

- Immediate Paragraph
 - Nearby Paragraphs
 - Sections of a Book
 - The Entire Book
 - Biblical Books of Related Periods
 - The Bible as a Whole

Context has significant impact on meaning. For example, consider the word “fan.” In the context of a hot day in the orient, a fan has one meaning, while in the context of a baseball game, a fan has a completely different meaning.

Within scripture, a word or a passage can have a very different meaning for us depending on the context. For example, in Matthew 18:20, Jesus says:

For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.

While many believers have found this an encouraging passage about the presence of God within the body of believers, the context is one of church discipline and speaks of God’s presence when the church excommunicates believers.

Step Four: Word Studies

Why Word Studies?

Interpretation moves beyond simple observation, and begins assigning meaning to those observations. Because the scripture is the written word, meaning then is closely connected with definition, connotation, and meaning of words.

However, because the bible was written in ancient Hebrew and Greek, we sometimes lose the subtle nuances of the words of scripture. To recapture the full meaning of the words of scripture as intended by the original author, we have to take the extra effort and do a word study.

Selecting Words for Study

1. Consider words which are syntactically significant. This will come from your syntactical analysis.
2. Consider words which are repeated within the passage.

3. Consider words which seem to be the center of the theme of the passage.
4. Consider words which theological in nature.
5. Consider words which you do not understand.

Tools

- Concordances: Strongs, NAS Exhaustive Concordance, Youngs
- Lexicon: Thayer (Greek), Brown, Driver Briggs, Gesenius (Hebrew)
- Word Study Books: TDNT (New Testament, “Kittle”), TWOT (Old Testament), Zodhiates, Vines (New Testament) or Wilsons (Old Testament).
- www.biblestudytools.net: Use NAS with Strong’s Numbers or the Interlinear bible.

General and Specific Word Meanings

As we have learned, words have different meanings depending upon context. Yet within all these various meanings, each word has a general meaning which ties all the uses of the word together in a general way. In doing a word study, we look first for the general meaning of the word by looking for the commonalities in a words usage.

After this, we look for a specific meaning for a word as found in our particular passage. This involves looking for the subtle nuances or connotation so of the word within the immediate context.

For example, the Greek word kosmos (κόσμος) is used three times in the book of Ephesians:

Eph 1:4 ... He chose us in Him before the foundation of the kosmos, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.

Eph 2:2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this kosmos, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

Eph 2:12 remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the kosmos

In the first instance, kosmos is something whose foundations represent the beginning of time. In the second instance, kosmos is a course of behavior which is connected with the Satanic kingdom and disobedient people. The third instance, being in the kosmos is in opposition to being with God and having hope.

What is the general meaning which connects these three uses of the word kosmos? In all three cases this word refers to a large or universal domain. But the specific meaning within chapter 2 refers to a universal system or order which operates within that universal domain.

In a word study we begin with the general and use that to help us determine a definition for the word within the context of the passage we are studying.

The Process

1. Use the transliterated Greek or Hebrew word.
2. Find the definition and word origin from a lexicon.
3. Find how the word is translated in other passages.
4. Look up where the word is used in other passages and make observations on how the word is used. Select passages that are near your target passage and/or are from the same author, date, or genre.
5. Summarize the way the word is used in the passages you selected. You are looking to find meaning based on the context.

6. From the word usage, determine a general definition of the word.
7. Determine the specific definition as it is used in your target text.
8. Use a word study book to correlate your results.

Assignment

Using the handout as a template, do a word study on the Greek word *charis* (χαρις), using Ephesians 2:1-10 as the target text. Be sure to look up all the usages of this word in the book of Ephesians in your study.

Step Five: Make Your Interpretive Decision

After our contextual study and our word study, it is time to answer the questions raised in step 1. When two or more viewpoints are available, each viewpoint needs to be tested according to sound interpretative principles (see below). The viewpoint that satisfies these principles best should be the viewpoint we use.

Step Six: Write a Paragraph of Explanation

The final interpretative step is to communicate the results in a final paragraph. This paragraph is the beginning of your own personal commentary on the passage. It is to explain the meaning of the passage using the data gathered from observations, syntactic analysis, contextual studies, word studies, and your interpretative questions and answers.

The goal is to clarify the meaning of the text by explaining the text phrase by phrase in the order in which the text appears. Such an explanation uses equivalent expressions to make the meaning of the passage clear.

Eventually the correlation, verification, and application stages will be incorporated into this paragraph as a final personal commentary on the passage.

The Principles of Interpretation

Errors in Interpretation

1. **Allegory** – Allegorical interpretation asserts that there is a plural meaning to scripture: that which is to be understood at face value and a secondary meaning where each element of the primary meaning has a deeper spiritual meaning. This style of interpretation relies upon imaginative allegorical connections. A sub-set of this is “typological” interpretation, where every story found in the Old Testament is assumed to foreshadow the New Testament.
2. **Cults** – Cults interpret the bible to have a secret meaning which can only be revealed through special knowledge.
3. **Protestant Pietism** – Scripture is read in anticipation of specific directions emerging from our daily reading of scripture. The secondary meaning of a passage is what God is saying to me right now. This happens when we read a passage as if it is intended to be a specific answer to decisions or situations that we are confronted with each day.

For example, a believer may be trying to decide whether or to make a trip to the coast for the weekend. That day during their quiet time they read in Acts how Paul and Barnabas were sent by the church in Antioch to go on a journey, so the believer sees this as confirmation that indeed God wants them to take the trip.

This treats scripture no better than some sort of Christian horoscope or biblical 8-ball.

4. **Premature association** – This is when correlation is brought into the interpretative process too early. As a result, the interpreter may take the meaning of the correlative passage as the meaning of this passage without truly determining if it is what this passage teaches.
5. **Fragmentary Interpretation** – The fragmentary interpreter treats the bible as if it is a collection of isolated verses to be understood apart from its immediate and broader contexts.
6. **Dogmatic Interpretation** – This is when the interpreter has theological agenda in which they believe strongly or which colors their view of every scripture. The bible is seen as a series of proof texts for that preconceived viewpoint.

Correct Interpretation

1. *Meaning is derived out-of the text. It is not imposed on the text.*

If we have done our observation steps correctly, this will take care of itself. Nonetheless we must always keep in mind that meaning comes from the content of the subject passage. This is the foundation of inductive bible study.

2. *There is only one true interpretation to the text.*

There are not secondary allegorical, secret meanings hidden within the passage that require some special knowledge or creativity on the part of the reader. The primary meaning of the passage is the only meaning.

3. *Don't let the difficulties in a passage keep you from the primary point of a passage.*

Within a passage there may be some details which might be difficult to understand, usually the point of the larger passage is clear. For example in 1 Corinthians 15:29 Paul speaks of the "baptism of the dead." It is not clear what he means by this, and this is the only time this phrase is used in scripture. However, what we do know from 1 Corinthians 15 is that Paul is talking about the truth of the resurrection. Our focus should be on that clear truth rather than on the uncertain elements within the passage.

4. *If the literal sense makes sense, seek no other sense.*

The text means what is normally or plain stated in the passage. This does not mean the interpreter overlooks figures of speech, metaphors or obvious allegories. However, we only consider a passage metaphorical or symbolic only when text clearly expects us to, or when a literal meaning is impossible or absurd (Revelation 1:16).

5. *The easiest explanation is usually the most accurate explanation.*

Often we assume that the trickiest or most creative interpretation must be accurate. Instead, after making our observations and connecting this with the historical and grammatical contexts, most of the time the interpretation is readily obvious to us.

6. *The text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his readers.*

This rule may not help us determine the actual interpretation of the passage, but it can exclude certain interpretations for us. The proper interpretation of a passage must conform to the laws of grammar and the facts of history.

Context, context, context!

- *Literary context* – The original readers usually read the subject passage as part of a greater whole. For, example, an entire epistles would have been read aloud to a church in one sitting. Each passage therefore needs to fit within the structure of the entire book.
- *Historical context* – What was taking place politically, socially or economically at the time the original readers heard the passage? What was taking place at the same time this was being written and read?
- *Cultural context* – Who is in power in this culture? How forms of communication are used? What is used for money? What ethnic issue do the readers face? What is family-life like? All of these factors will change the meaning of the passage.
- *Geographic context* – What was the terrain like? What topographic features are significant? What was the weather like? How far were the readers from the action taking place? What was the city like? Was it rich or poor?
- *Theological context* – What did the readers understand about God? How did they worship God? How much of the scripture did they have? What other religious ideas were competing for influence at this time?

Use your imagination!

The key to interpretation is to use our imagination. We must put ourselves back in time and space, imagining what it would have been like for the original readers. We need to consider what it would have been like for the original reader to encounter the subject passage.

Correlation & Verification

Correlation

One of the hallmarks of the Protestant reformation is *sola scriptura*. This is the principle that scripture alone is our final authority. This has been, however, one of the greatest criticisms of Protestantism, for it has led to a multitude of denominations and cults as each person interprets scripture alone.

However, *sola scriptura* was never intended to allow for each person to have their own private interpretation of the bible. Rather, as our final authority, we must let scripture interpret scripture. This is the correlation step in inductive bible study.

The bible is a unique book, in that it is a collection of 66 different books written over the course of more than a millennium by forty different authors in 3 different languages. Yet it has a unity and consistency which is awe inspiring. The correlation step in our process guards us against wrong interpretation as we test our conclusions with the unified message of the scriptures.

Principles of Correlation

1. **Progressive Revelation** – The Bible shows God’s revelation to man as evolutionary. That is, the New Testament fulfills and clarifies the truth of the Old Testament (Matthew 5:17-20, Galatians 3:17-25, Hebrews 1:1-2). New Testament passages should give way to the Old Testament
2. **Scripture Interprets Scripture** – Doctrines should be based on extensive treatments of scripture, not a single enigmatic verse. That is, obscure passages should give way to clear passages.
3. **Scripture is Harmonious** – Scripture has one unified system of theology. Scripture is not contradictory. If passages appear to contradict, it is because we have misinterpreted a passages or because we have not applied principles 1 and 2.
4. **Theology of the Whole** – No doctrine may be found in 1 or 2 verses. Debates over doctrine can not be settled by a list of scripture references. Instead each passage of the bible must be interpreted within its immediate context and in the context of the whole of scripture.

Process of Correlation

We can not hope to correlate every passage with the entire bible. For one, we don’t have time to do a full review of the entire bible with each passage we are studying. Instead, the process of correlation requires that we connect the passage with what we currently know about the whole of scripture, and then narrow down our correlation to specific related passages. Finally, the process is always on-going. As we study more and more of scripture, we will find that interpretations we have done in the past will be modified and improved as we gain in our understanding of more and more of the bible.

Formal Association

We begin by looking for passages which have related topics. This helps narrow down the process of correlation. However, there is a danger in that it tends to divide scripture into superficial compartments rather than see the interconnectedness of all scripture. Furthermore, following cross references can take you down rabbit trails which lead away from the target text. Stay on topic!

- Use bible study tools to find related passages. Such tools might include a Topical Bible, Concordance, or the cross-reference system in your bible. However, don't take for granted that these tools have properly related a passage. Use good discernment and judge each cross reference by the context of the passages.
- Your Word Study will often provide an important process which helps you to find and analyze related scriptures.

Informal Association

This process looks for connections between various biblical passages or theological concepts which do not appear on the surface to be directly related. The danger in this process is that we try to force scriptures that have no relation to each other connect. For example, just because a metaphor works in one passage doesn't mean that metaphor always relates in all of scripture. Informal association is related more to the unity of the whole message of scripture, not each component part.

Informal association improves as a student grows in their general bible knowledge.

Verification

Uses of a Commentary

The final step in the process is to verify your conclusions with other bible scholars. This serves only as a final check on your interpretation to make sure that we are in the ball park with our personal inductive bible study. For example, if you've come up with an interpretation that no one else has in the history of Christendom, then you are probably wrong in your interpretation. Let's face it, we aren't that smart!

We must never become arrogant enough to think that we are going to have all the answers or that the Holy Spirit only illuminates the scripture to us. We should benefit from the research, insight and illumination of others.

Commentaries are especially useful when you face difficult interpretive questions that just can't be answered from your own inductive study. However, be careful, because commentaries often disagree. Never use just one commentary, but check two or three reliable commentaries. If there interpretations differ, then read through the justification each uses. Objectively weigh the justifications and if you've done your own independent study of the passage, you'll be able to make an informed decision as to which interpretation is most likely the accurate one. Finally, remember, commentaries and study bibles are not inspired by God. They are just one person's opinion.

For that reason, using commentaries are to be left for the end of our study, not the beginning. The Scriptures will always mean more to us when we have done our own discovery than if we short cut the process and just read commentaries and study bibles.

Selecting Commentaries

Types of Commentaries

- Exegetical – Highly technical commentaries which are bases on the original language text. Emphasizes textual criticism. Difficult for the layman to read.
- Expository – Bases comments on the original language, but often will transliterate the Greek. Does both a phrase-by-phrase review of the text as well as synthesize the text into the whole.
- Devotional – Easy to read commentary which emphasizes practical application of the passage. Uses many illustrations and often uses the text as a springboard for other topics.

Evaluating Commentaries

Be aware that not all commentaries approach the scripture as the inspired Word of God. Just because it is in print doesn't mean it is accurate. Nonetheless, we can often find valuable information in commentaries which come from a different theological bias than our own. Furthermore, just because you agree with a commentator's theology doesn't mean they are going to have the best commentary.

The easiest way to judge a commentator is to review which seminary the commentator graduated from. "Safe" seminaries include Dallas, Denver, Western, Trinity, Talbot, and Trinity. Be more cautious with Asbury, Harvard and Princeton.

The publisher can also be a good test for the theology of a commentator.

- Normally reliable: Moody's, Zondervan, Baker, Inter-Varsity, NavPress.
- Inconsistently reliable: Word, Tyndale
- Charismatic publishers: Bethany Fellowship, Vision House, Logos.
- Denominational publishers: Broadman (Southern Baptist), Standard Publishers (Church of Christ), Abingdon (Methodist), Concordia (Lutheran).
- Sometimes secular publishers have great books written by solid authors: Oxford.

Recommendations

- Bible Knowledge Commentary – Edited by Walvoord & Zuck. This was written by professors from Dallas Seminary. Consistent theology, thorough and in 2-volumes (Old & New Testament).
- Expositor's Bible Commentary – Edited by Frank Gaebelin. 12-volumes. Available on CD-ROM for less than \$100. More detailed than the Bible Knowledge Commentary, but a solid Expository commentary.
- Other good commentaries: Wycliffe, New Bible, International Bible Commentary, Bible Exposition Commentary (Wiersebe), John McArthur.
- Be careful with the "public-domain" commentaries. They tend to be devotional and dated in their research. Examples: Matthew Henry, Jamieson Fausset & Brown.

Other Useful Tools

- Study Bibles: Ryrie, Nelson, NIV Study Bible
- Bible Handbooks: Eerdmans Handbook of the Bible, Unger
- Bible Dictionaries: Holmans, Easton.
- Bible Atlas: Moody's Atlas

Application

“We’re like a poor photograph—over exposed and under developed.”

-Howard Hendricks

“We are educated beyond the level of our obedience.”

-Gordon Ruddick

“Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”

-James

It is not enough to know what the passage says, or even what it means. We must make the bridge from knowing about the Bible to living it. This is called Application. Here we ask the question, **what does the point or principle of the passage mean to me?**

While there is only one proper interpretation of a passage, there are numerous applications for a passage. The interpretation of a passage asks what the author originally meant for his original readers to understand. Application asks us to take that original interpretation and connect it to our lives. Therefore, each person may have a different application stemming from the same interpretation. Furthermore, one might come back to the same passage some time later and find a completely different application because their life situation has changed.

Principles of Application

Application Counterfeits

1. Application isn't a statement of principles.

Often we confuse a general principle from scripture with application. Application is not just the broad general principle found in a passage, but is a personal and direct call to action.

2. Application doesn't apply truth to areas we already practice.

It is always easy to apply truth to areas that we already have under control. The person who already serves diligently in the church comes to a passage about ministry in the church and chooses to see their application as an affirmation of what they are already doing. But application shouldn't affirm our current practice, but spur us on to change.

3. Application doesn't apply truth to other people.

Many times when preaching, people will come to me and say, “I wish so-and-so would have been hear. They really needed to hear your message today.” Applying God's Word to others is not application. It must be personal!

4. Application doesn't involve lengthy rationalization to make scripture fit our current pattern of behavior.

We have an amazing capacity to rationalize away the application from the scripture. Rather than deal with the uncomfortable nature of life change, we find ways to avoid the obvious, often by looking for other passages of scripture to justify our current attitudes or behaviors. Be careful not to use correlation as an attempt to talk ourselves out of obedience.

5. Application is not conviction.

Often times scripture will point out a sinful practice, and we feel guilty and convicted that indeed we have been harboring sin. But application is not an emotional reaction to the scripture. Emotional response is irrelevant. Application requires a life changing response to the scripture.

6. Application is not blessing.

People often will hear a sermon or read a passage and come away with a warm “blessed” feeling. While, indeed, the scriptures are meant to be a comfort, blessing is not application. Application takes that blessing and asks how we can do better.

7. Application is necessary even if there is confusion over a passage.

Often when we struggle to understand a passage, we will ignore it completely and not apply the passage. Rather than looking for things we don’t understand in a passage, we should look for the things we do, and then apply them to our lives.

8. Application is not a broad generalization.

Our applications often are too broad. For example: “I need to not be such an angry person,” or “I need to evangelize more.” If the application is too broad we will never do anything about it. Keep asking the question, “how” until a specific course of action emerges.

Proper Application

1. Application is focused on what God wants, not what man wants (Mark 7:9-13)

Often our own traditions are the greatest hindrance to applying God’s word. Don’t ask what others want from us. Ask what God wants.

2. Every problem we have relates to our concept of God. (Psalm 50)

Approach each passage of scripture by asking yourself, what does this passage say about God’s character? Then personalize it. How has this passage changed my understanding of the character of God? With that changed perspective, how does that apply to the struggle I am facing today?

3. Attitude change is as important as action (Matthew 5:21-22).

God is more concerned with the heart than our external actions. A change of heart is more lasting than a change of behavior.

4. All application requires a surrender of our will. (Romans 12:1-2)

If there is not a change of our will, then there is no application. Application requires a surrendering of our will to God’s.

5. Application is a process, not a single event

We will never, on this side of heaven, achieve perfection. Therefore, we can never say we have fully applied God’s Word. While application works best with discrete action steps, when we are done with those steps we are not done with application.

Process of Application

Preparation for Application

- Know your interpretation - Use your interpretation of the target passage as the basis for your application. Avoid application from other passages than the one you are studying. To do so is to avoid what God has for you. Remember, there is only one interpretation, but many applications. Therefore, a wrong interpretation yields many wrong applications.
- Know your personal situation - Know your strengths and weaknesses. If you are preparing a study for others in a group, know where they are coming from.

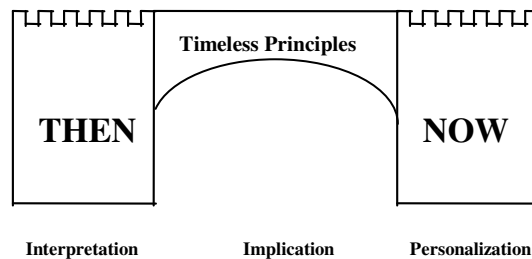
The Timeless Principle

Interpretation asks what the passage meant in its original context. Application asks what the passage means in your current context. The bridge between these two is the **Timeless Principle**.

Keys to developing the timeless principle:

- Principles are text centered.
- Principles are based on the literary type.
 - Epistles – The paragraph is the unit of study which yields a single principle. There are often tiers of principles within the paragraph.
 - Parables – There is only one principle. No more, no less.
 - Proverbs – One principle per proverb. Most often each proverb consists of two complimentary phrases or sentences.
 - Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Sol. – One principle for the whole book.
 - Narrative – Each story has one principle with perhaps some sub-principles.
 - Prophecy – One principle per oracle (message from the Lord).
- Principles are timeless truths. They apply to everyone no matter where in history.
- Principles are trans-cultural. They apply to everyone no matter what culture.

The Application Bridge



The Degrees of Transfer

We need to be alert to the degree of transfer from the biblical passage to the current situation. Some of the commands in scripture are relevant only to the time and place they were originally given. Others are meant for all times and all occasions. Knowing the “degree of transfer” becomes critical.

There are four degrees of transfer found within scripture:

1. Obsolete Situations. These are principles or commands which address specific situations and there is no timeless principle to transfer. Principles or commands in these cases should be ignored.
2. Normative Patterns. These are principles that can be gleaned from the example of others. In these situations the timeless principle is the example set before us.

3. Universal Principles. These are basic truths which are found in scripture. These are not specific commands, but guiding doctrines and beliefs. In these situations our timeless principle is a call to belief.
4. Moral Absolutes. These are timeless commands that apply in all situations and times. The timeless principle in these situations is a call to obedience.

Determining the Degree of Transfer¹³

- Whenever we share common particulars (i.e. similar specific life situations) with the original hearers, God's Word to us is the same as his Word to them.
- We need to distinguish between the central core of the message of the bible and what is dependent on or peripheral to it.
- One must distinguish between what the bible presents as inherently moral and what the bible presents as a cultural expression.
- We must look for those principles which have a uniform and consistent witness and those where the principle varies.

Personalizing the Application

1. Personalize the principle. Be specific in how the principle works in your life. Relate the truth to your experience.
2. Evaluate your application. Have you avoided the counterfeit applications? Is your application:
 - a. Relevant – Does the passage teach that? Good principle but wrong text? The application must be relevant to the text.
 - b. Realistic – Does this work? Is it possible (e.g. “I will witness to everyone I meet.”)
 - c. Related – The Christian life is best understood in the context of relationships—with God, with others, and with myself. How does my application relate to others and God?
3. Consciously practice!
 - a. We must sense our own need to change. (If you think your okay, you won't change your behavior).
 - b. We must consciously decide what immediate steps to take.
 - c. We must take actions by faith! All good application will require us to trust God.
 - d. Our practice will demonstrate our understanding (“we can only possess what we experience”)

¹³ Gordon D. Fee, Douglas Stewart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 75-87).

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