



HOW TO GET THE MOST
OUT OF
studying
YOUR BIBLE



what do I see? OBSERVE

Every time we study the Bible, the first thing to ask is, “**What do I see?**” This is the crucial skill of **observation**, and it lays the groundwork for the rest of our study. Here are four tasks involved in observation which should be performed in the order below:

OBS TASK 1: Mark up the passage by visually identifying the following elements:

- **Underline all verbs.** A verb is a word or group of words used to indicate either that an action takes place (“I thank my God”) or that a state or condition exists (“God is faithful”). Verbs are often the most significant indicators of the author’s flow of thought.
- **Circle key words or phrases.** These are words or short phrases that are important theologically (like “word of the cross” in 1:18) or thematically (they set the theme or main idea for the passage, such as “wisdom” and “foolishness” in 1:18-31).
- **Highlight repeated words or phrases.** Include words and phrases that are closely related even if not exact duplicates (such as “judgment” and “judging”). You’ll want to highlight things that are repeated from previous passages (such as “Now concerning” found in 7:1,25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1).
- **Box connecting words.** These important words indicate the logical connection between words, phrases, and clauses. Here are eight types of common connecting words to look for:
 1. **COMPARISON:** either points out similarities between two or more related ideas, or simply joins like ideas. Comparison words include: and, like, as, just as, also, so also, even so (e.g. “LIKE a wise master builder I laid a foundation” 3:10).
 2. **CONTRAST:** points out dissimilarities between ideas. Contrast words include: but, rather, yet, however (e.g. “Jews ask for signs ... BUT we preach Christ crucified” 2:22-23).
 3. **PURPOSE:** indicates the intended goal of an idea or action, whether or not it was realized. Purpose words include: that, so that, in order that (e.g. “I have made myself a slave to all THAT I might win the more” 9:19).
 4. **RESULT:** very similar to “purpose,” but indicates the actual consequence, whether or not it was intended. Result words include: that, so that, as a result, with the result that (e.g. “I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius SO THAT no one would say ...” 1:14-15).
 5. **CAUSE:** expresses the basis or cause of an action. Cause words include: because, since and sometimes for (e.g. “I praise you BECAUSE you remember me in everything” 11:2).

6. **EXPLANATION:** what follows further explains the previous idea, giving reasons why it is true or why it occurred or simply adding additional information. Look for the key word for (e.g. “FOR by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” 12:13).
7. **INFERENCE:** provides a logical consequence, a conclusion, or a summary to the previous discussion. Inference words include: therefore, for this reason (e.g. “FOR THIS REASON I have sent to you Timothy” 4:17).
8. **CONDITION:** presents a condition that must occur before a certain action or conclusion can occur. The statement may or may not reflect reality (i.e. it could be hypothetical). Key word is if (e.g. “IF any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward” 3:14).

OBS TASK 2: List 2-3 primary themes you see in the passage each week.

A primary theme is the big idea, the central truth or command that the passage focuses on, such as “the wisdom of God” and “the Spirit reveals truth” in 1:18-2:16. After reading the passage, write your themes as single words or short phrases. Identifying these themes at the beginning of your study will help you develop a good overall grasp of the passage.

OBS TASK 3: Write two or more observations per verse.

Our observations might identify people, places, or events, point out repeated words or key terms, record important connections between words and sentences, or even point out something missing that we expected to see.

OBS TASK 4: Record your own interpretive questions.

Here are a few examples:

WHO is...

...Paul talking about?
 ...accomplishing the action?
 ...benefiting from it?

WHAT is the...

...meaning of this word?
 ...significance of this phrase?
 ...implication of this statement?
 ...relationship between these phrases?

WHY did Paul...

...choose this word?
 ...include this phrase, statement, or command?
 ...connect these ideas?
 ...not say _____?



what does it mean? INTERPRET

Our observation of a passage should have stirred up interesting yet challenging questions, leading us to the second stage of our Bible study, interpretation. Fortunately, we do not have to run to a commentary or study Bible for answers (though these are helpful tools to check our conclusions). Use the following six methods, as needed, to tackle a variety of questions, and make sure to familiarize yourself with the three “Principles of Interpretation” below:

PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION:

PRINCIPLE #1 - Your goal is to discern the author’s intended meaning to the original audience. Unfortunately, most people begin their Bible study by asking, “What does this passage mean to me?” While there may be multiple possible applications to my life, there is only one meaning, the author’s intended meaning; and we must first seek this out. This involves three important steps:

- 1. Always start your study with prayer,** asking the same God who composed Scripture through these ancient authors to give you insight to understand His intended meaning.
- 2. Be very careful to avoid reading your 21st century circumstances and theological issues into the text** as they will skew our understanding.
- 3. Work diligently to see the text from the point of view of the original readers.** To do this: [a] dig into the historical and cultural background using Bible dictionaries and commentaries, and [b] spend a few moments thinking about the original audience’s religious understanding by asking - What books of the Bible did they have access to? What did they know about God? about Jesus? about salvation? etc.

PRINCIPLE #2 - Assume a “normal” use of language. The Bible was given to us because God desired to communicate with us, not to hide Himself from us. Therefore, we should not be looking for “hidden” meanings as we study. Instead, we should use the “normal” techniques we would use to understand any piece of literature:

- 1. Study the grammar.** Yes, most of us hated grammar in junior high, but it really is helpful for understanding Scripture! So pay attention to nouns, verbs, adjectives, and prepositions. Think through any figures of speech. Observe how phrases and clauses are connected into sentences and how sentences are linked together into paragraphs.
- 2. Remember that chapters came later.** When Paul wrote Corinthians or Luke wrote the book of Acts, they wrote single, unified stories without verse or chapter divisions. These books were meant to be read just like you would read a letter or a novel. So always keep the overall story in mind as you study each passage.

PRINCIPLE #3 - Let Scripture interpret Scripture. Since God is unchangingly truthful and always consistent (Jn 7:17; Heb 3:6; James 1:17), we can, and should, expect the same of His word. This has two practical applications:

1. Check your conclusions. Always compare your conclusions with the teachings of Scripture as a whole. If you find that your interpretation of a passage contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture elsewhere, you probably need to revise your conclusions.

2. Allow clear passages to illuminate ambiguous passages. Whenever you encounter a passage that is confusing or open to multiple possible interpretations, use clearer passages of Scripture to guide you to the correct interpretation.

One last caution - remember that God revealed Scripture progressively, not all at once. Therefore, we should not be surprised by differences between how people related to and understood God at different times in the history of Scripture. For example, while Abraham needed only believe that God was faithful in order to be justified (Gen 15:6), in the NT era, we must believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus to be saved (1 Cor 15:1-7).

INT METHOD 1: Use the context.

Look for important clues in the sentences and paragraphs that come before and after the verse in question. Try to follow Paul's flow of thought through the whole chapter. This may take you to the previous lesson, so have it handy as a review. You may need to read ahead in 1 Corinthians for clues.

INT METHOD 2: Compare multiple translations.

This packet uses the New American Standard (**NASB**) translation. You can often find helpful interpretive clues by comparing this translation with other translations. The New King James Version (**NKJV**), like the NASB, is a fairly word-for-word translation of the Greek text. The New International Version (**NIV**) and the New Revised Standard Version (**NRSV**) are excellent phrase-to-phrase translations of the Greek and are thus often easier to read. Another excellent phrase-to-phrase Bible, which includes extensive translation notes, is the New English Translation (**NET**) available online for free at www.bible.org. You can find and compare numerous translations of any Bible passage at www.biblestudytools.net.

INT METHOD 3: Look up key words.

While looking up a key word in English is helpful, doing so in Greek is far better and is surprisingly easy thanks to the internet. Simply log onto www.biblestudytools.net, and as an example, type in "1 Cor 2" in the "search for:" box, set the "using:" box to "NAS with Strong's Numbers" and click "Find." All of 1 Cor 2 will appear on the screen with most of the words highlighted in blue. Clicking on any of these will bring up a new screen that will tell you the Greek word used here, its possible definitions, and the total number of times it is used in each book of the New Testament (NT). Click on any of the other NT books (under the title "NAS Verse Count") and get a display of every verse in that book that uses this Greek word. To refine your understanding of Paul's use of a word, look at some of his uses in his other books, such as Romans or Philippians.

INT METHOD 4: Study cross-references (Xrefs).

XRefs are simply other passages in the Bible that are somehow related to the study passage. They often prove incredibly helpful as we seek to understand our passage. You can find a few XRefs in the margins of most Bibles, but you can find many more by logging onto another helpful website: **net.bible.org**. In the top left of the screen under “Display Bible,” choose “1 Corinthians,” then the chapter you are interested in, and then click “Go.” A new screen will appear with the NET Bible translation of the chapter you requested. Click the “XRef” tab at the top of the screen, and this will take you to an extensive list of XRefs for every verse in this chapter based on the classic book *The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*. Clicking any of these will bring up the single verse, but you can then click “context” to see the verse in the midst of its surrounding context.

INT METHOD 5: Look up background info.

You can find very helpful insights by looking up confusing names or words in a Bible dictionary, or looking up the particular verses you are studying in a background commentary. One of the best dictionaries is *The New Bible Dictionary* by Wood & Marshall, but you can also find the older *Int’l Standard Bible Dictionary [ISBE]* online for free (**net.bible.org/dictionary.php**). *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* by Craig Keener is an excellent example of a verse-by-verse background resource.

INT METHOD 6: Tackle tough questions step-by-step.

When trying to answer the most challenging questions, follow this four step process. **(1) LIST ALL THE OPTIONS.** Always start by brainstorming every possible answer to your question. **(2) LIST PROS AND CONS FOR EACH OPTION.** Seek out all the evidence you can find that either argues for or against a particular option. This evidence comes from your study of key words, the grammar of the sentence, the context of surrounding verses and the book as a whole, cross references to other books, and comparison with your overall understanding of Christian theology. **(3) CHOOSE THE MOST LIKELY OPTION.** Look back at your evidence for each option. Typically, evidence from the immediate context is most important, followed closely by evidence from the book as a whole. Evidence from other books or from Christian theology as a whole does not carry as much weight unless the solution contradicts a clear passage elsewhere or a major tenant of Christian doctrine. In that case, since Scripture never lies and God can not contradict Himself, you know that solution will not work. **(4) DECIDE ON YOUR CERTAINTY LEVEL.** Once you have chosen the best solution, step back for a second and humbly gauge how certain you are of its accuracy (90% = I am very sure this is correct... 60% = this solution is just a bit more likely than the others!) Finally, talk with others and check commentaries or reference books to see what solutions they have chosen and why.



how does it work?

APPLY

Our Bible study is not over until we apply what we have learned to our everyday lives. And lest we underestimate the value of this last step, remember that in God's eyes it is the person who does not just **know** His Word, but also **obeys** His Word that truly loves Him (see John 14:21). So how do we apply this passage to our lives? Application involves the following two tasks:

APP TASK 1: List potential principles from your passage.

A "principle" is simply a fact or command stated or implied in a particular passage that is practically relevant to our lives. Legitimate principles are not specific to a particular person (e.g. 1 Tim 5:23 is just for Timothy) nor a particular time (e.g. "do not leave Jerusalem" in Acts 1:4). An example from 1 Cor 2 would be, "We can find true wisdom by reading God's Word as we rely on His Spirit to help us understand it." It is often helpful when listing principles to consider the following questions:

- *Is there something to worship or thank God for?*
- *Is there a promise for me to claim or a truth for me to believe?*
- *Is there something I am convicted about that I need to change or begin doing?*
- *Is there something or someone I need to pray for specifically this week?*
- *Is there any relationship I need to work on?*

APP TASK 2: Choose one principle and create a plan to apply it to your life this week.

Once you complete your principle list, prayerfully *choose the one principle you most need to work on* (do not just choose the easiest to apply!) If you felt deeply convicted about one in particular, that is probably the one God is leading you to apply! Once you have chosen a specific principle, answer these two questions:

- *What exactly will I do differently this week to apply this principle to my life (be specific)?*
- *Who, other than the Lord, will I ask to help me follow through with this application?*

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Bible Study Methods:

*The Joy of Discovery by Oletta Wald

helpful, very short booklet on basic inductive Bible study methods

Living by the Book by Howard Hendricks

classic medium-length guide to Bible study; a helpful supplement to GBC's Inductive Bible Study notes

Greek for the Rest of Us by William D. Mounce

medium length guide that will help those who do not know biblical Greek get the most out of studying the NT; includes detailed discussion of basic Greek syntax along with practical guides to key bible study methods (e.g. Greek word studies, analysis of structural indicators, etc)

Bible Dictionaries and Word Study Tools:

*The New Bible Dictionary by D. Wood and I. Howard Marshall (3rd edition; 1996)

the best single resource for good background articles on key biblical words, places, people, objects, themes, and events

Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words by William D. Mounce

provides in-depth definitions for most of the Greek and Hebrew words found in the Bible. No Greek or Hebrew knowledge needed.

Bible Commentaries:

*The Bible Knowledge Commentary by J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (1 vol for OT, 1 for NT)

best single-volume commentary on either testament from a dispensational perspective; not much depth but helpful at tracing flow-of-thought

Expositor's Bible Commentary: Abridged Edition, Two Volume Set by Kenneth L. Barker and John E. Kohlenberger III

excellent two volume commentary on the entire Bible from an evangelical perspective

*www.soniclight.com

Dr. Tom Constable's Expository Notes are free on this site; basically mini-commentaries on every book of the Bible by a DTS professor

Helpful Websites:

*www.biblestudytools.net

free resource for language study – includes Greek text, strong's numbers, and many English translations; can do full concordance searches; contains some antiquated commentaries

www.bible.org

NETbible translation as well as articles by many DTS profs on a wide variety of resources

Bible Study Software:

*LOGOS Bible Software 3 – Christian Home Library or Bible Study Library at www.logos.com

very powerful electronic Bible study library; these are both upgradeable base versions (\$149 for first, \$259 for second) that provide fast language study and include many of the resources listed here in searchable electronic form (Interlinear Bibles, Greek concordance, New Bible Dictionary, Bible Knowledge Commentary, Ryrie's and Enns' systematic theologies, etc)