

# Bible Study Methods

## Part 016 - Observing God's Word - WHAT DOES IT SAY?



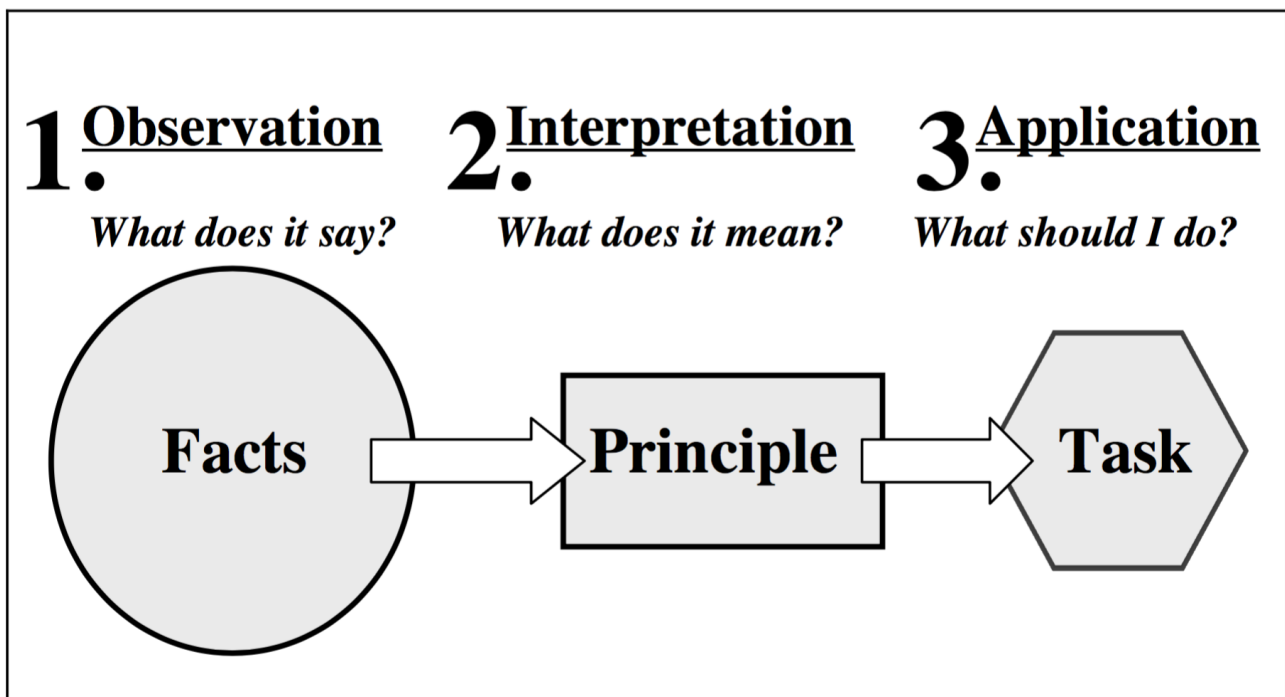
### INTRODUCTION

All Christians need to be able to study the Bible for their own spiritual growth as well as for the growth of those under their spiritual care.

One of the best ways to systematically discover, understand, and apply God's truth is the **"Inductive Bible study method"**.

The inductive Bible study method leads to this process of discovery through three basic steps that are called "observation", "interpretation", and "application."

**Figure 1.3 The Three Steps**



**Observe** - what does it say? That's the facts. Not what do we think it says, but what is there. We start with observation.

**Interpret** - this is where we ask what it means. What did it mean at the time it was written - how does the principle translate to today? It's from here we find the biblical principle.

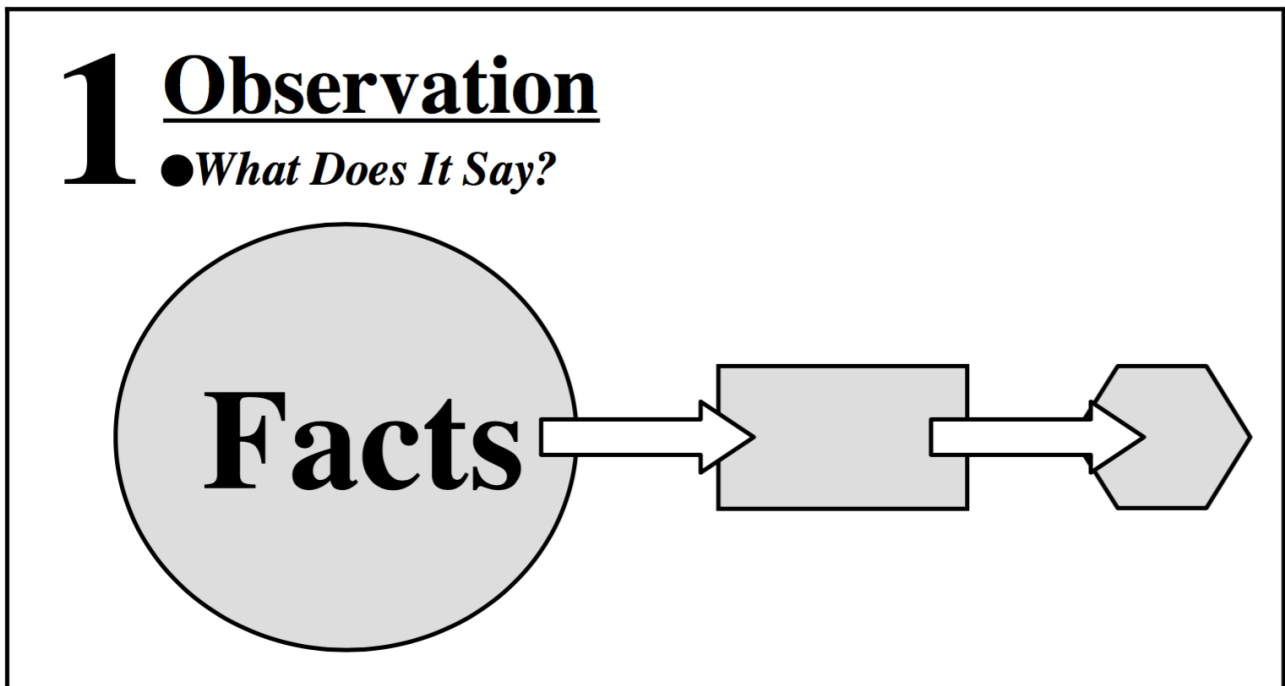
**Apply** - what do I do with this? How can this principle be used in my life - study without application is pointless.

The Holy Spirit teaches us, but God also expects us to study His Word diligently using all the resources He has put at our disposal.

We should never choose between studying hard or depending on the Holy Spirit—both are important!

## I. **OBSERVATION—WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?**

Observation concerns the details and facts that are seen in a selected Bible passage. It answers the question “What does the text say?”



### **A. Prepare for Observation**

Since the Bible is the inspired Word of God, we cannot approach it like any other book. There are several factors that will affect whether or not we understand it.

---

#### 1. Belief

The Scripture says that a “man without the Spirit” cannot understand the things that come from God (1Co 2:14).

---

#### 2. Prayer

Proper Bible study will always be surrounded by prayer.

Before starting the study, we should pray and confess any sin or other obstacle that prevents us from learning from the Word.

We should also pray for enlightenment (Ps 119:18; Eph 1:18).

---

### 3. Readiness to Obey

James tells us that we must not only listen to the Word, but also obey it (Jas 1:22-25). Jesus also said that putting His words into practice was like building a house on a rock (Mt 7:24). Not obeying them, however, was like building on sand (Mt 7:26).

---

### 4. Self-examination

Every good cook samples the food as it cooks to determine whether or not it is ready to serve to others. At the very least, we should always look for application to ourselves, even when our goal is to preach to others.

---

### 5. Willingness to Learn

Approach the Scriptures with an open mind. Be willing to let God teach you what His Word really says. Always be willing to expose your personally held belief to the light of God's Word. Don't be afraid of changing your viewpoint if God's shows you the truth about an issue.

## ***B. Take Enough Time***

There are some proven principles for understanding the general focus of the passage. If the process is rushed, the result will be a shallow understanding of the text.

## ***C. Look at the Context***

The term 'context' refers to the verses that surround the passage being studied. Understanding the context is one of the most valuable tools of Bible study, and yet it is often ignored.

- What do the preceding and following verses talk about?
- What is the theme of the paragraph?
- What is the theme of the chapter?
- What is the purpose and theme of the book?
- Is the passage in the Old or New Testament and what does this mean?

## ***D. Examine the Structure***

Having looked at the passage from a distance, it is now time to look more closely. Read the passage several times, looking for and recording any of the following details of the structure:

**Key words** - Note any word or words that are repeated. Often this indicates the theme.

**Comparisons or contrasts** - Is something the same as something else, or the opposite?

**Progression of an idea** - Does one thing builds upon another? Are they linked to other ideas like a chain?

**Verbs** – Is there some kind of action? Is there a command we must obey?

**Conjunctions** - Is something equal to something? Often the conjunction "but" appears in contrast, and the words "like" or "as" may indicate comparison.

**Illustrations** - Visualize in your mind the thing or action that is being described.

**Kind of literature** – A passage may be history, prophecy, allegory, didactic truth, logic, parable, or many other possibilities. we shall look at a list of many more of these. Noting the type of literature in the passage will also affect the interpretation in the next stage, so it should be recorded carefully now.

## The Language of the Bible

When we study the Word of God, we are looking for its intended, literal meaning. We want to understand the message that the Lord desires to communicate through it.

But it is important to realise that, like all great literature, the Bible writers often used figures of speech to communicate truth.

In addition, they used many different kinds of literature in their writing. Studying the Bible accurately requires that we recognise these differences, and treat each passage according to the kinds of language and literature used.

### 1. KINDS OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN THE BIBLE

---

#### A. Simile

A simile compares two dissimilar things, using words such as "like," "as" or "than." Psalm 1 compares the righteous man to a tree planted by streams of water. Both bear fruit and prosper - but a man is not exactly the same as a tree and we know that.

---

#### B. Parable

A parable is a simile in a longer story form. Jesus helped the disciples understand His kingdom by telling a parable about workers who were paid equally though some had worked longer than others had.

He begins with the words, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard..." (Mt 20:1).

---

#### C. Metaphor

A metaphor compares two dissimilar things without using obvious words such as "like" or "as." In Jeremiah 1:18, the Lord said to Jeremiah, "Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall..."

---

#### D. Allegory

An allegory is a long metaphor. In Judges 9:7-15, Jotham tells a story about a worthless thorn bush being king over the other productive trees to describe a corrupt political leader.

## E. Hyperbole

Hyperbole expresses something in extreme terms to make a point.

When Jesus says that a judgmental person has a log in his eye and doesn't know it, he is saying something that is physically impossible. His point, however, is that a person who is unaware of his own sins is totally unable to evaluate another person's sins.

If you want another example of Hyperbole, just look at any news headline ever - or any link that asks you to click it on the internet. It always takes it to the extreme.

---

## F. Sarcasm

Sarcasm criticises by using undeserved or ridiculous praise. Paul criticises the Corinthians' pride by writing, "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings – and that without us!" (1Co 4:8).

How can we know the difference between literal and figurative language? You can ask some simple questions like these:

- Does the passage state that it is figurative? ("Listen to another parable..." "The Kingdom of Heaven is like" Mt 21:33).
- Does the passage become absurd or impossible if it is interpreted literally? ("I see a boiling pot, tilting away from the north... from the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land..." Jer 1:13-14).
- Does the passage describe God, who is Spirit, as if He had a physical body and other strictly human qualities? ("Then the Lord reached out His hand and touched my mouth..." Jer 1:9).

If the above questions don't apply, then the verse can most probably be interpreted literally.

## **2. KINDS OF LITERATURE IN THE BIBLE**

The bible is not just one book - or even one type of book. Therefore we need to always ask a question of what type of book is it we are reading this passage in?

---

### A. History

The Bible is full of historical accounts and biographies.

For example, the book of Judges tells the history of Israel between the time of Joshua's conquest of the land and King Saul's reign.

The book of Nehemiah is Nehemiah's diary of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. The Gospels are Jesus' biographies and include His teachings.

The book of Acts records the significant happenings in the early history of the Church.

---

### B. Instruction

Throughout the Bible you will find guidelines, commands, principles, proverbs, doctrines and practical advice.

The major part of the book of Leviticus contains detailed instructions for the Israelite priests. Proverbs gives advice on finances, relationships, and work.

Paul's letters to specific churches are full of both doctrine and practical guidelines for the Christian life.

---

### C. Prophecy

Most prophetic literature is a written account of sermons originally preached to God's people.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, the larger prophetic books, are collections of sermons spanning the careers of these prophets.

These books were not meant to be read from start to finish as a single unit.

The secret to understanding these books is finding the beginning and ending of the individual sermons and reading from one sermon to the next.

Nearly all the sermons dealt with the historic periods of the writers. Some of the sermons dealt with the future beyond the lifetimes of the prophets.

---

### D. Poetry

In the poetic literature of the Bible every human emotion is expressed.

Many biblical books contain poetry. The Psalms and the Song of Songs are entirely poetry and many of the prophetic books are predominately poetic.

Sometimes those writers express feelings that whilst human and understandable are not prescriptive.

---

### E. Apocalypse

Some prophecy is written in a special kind of literature known as apocalyptic. The word apocalyptic means "unveiling" because it reveals events that will take place in the future.

Apocalypse does not mean destruction, as the world has often misinterpreted it to be. Is means to reveal. The book of Revelation is also called the book of the apocalypse. It's official called the apocalypse, or the Revelation of Jesus Christ. And that's what it's about - Jesus becoming revealed. Yes it's talking about the end of time - but it's chief purpose is revealing Christ and His kingdom.

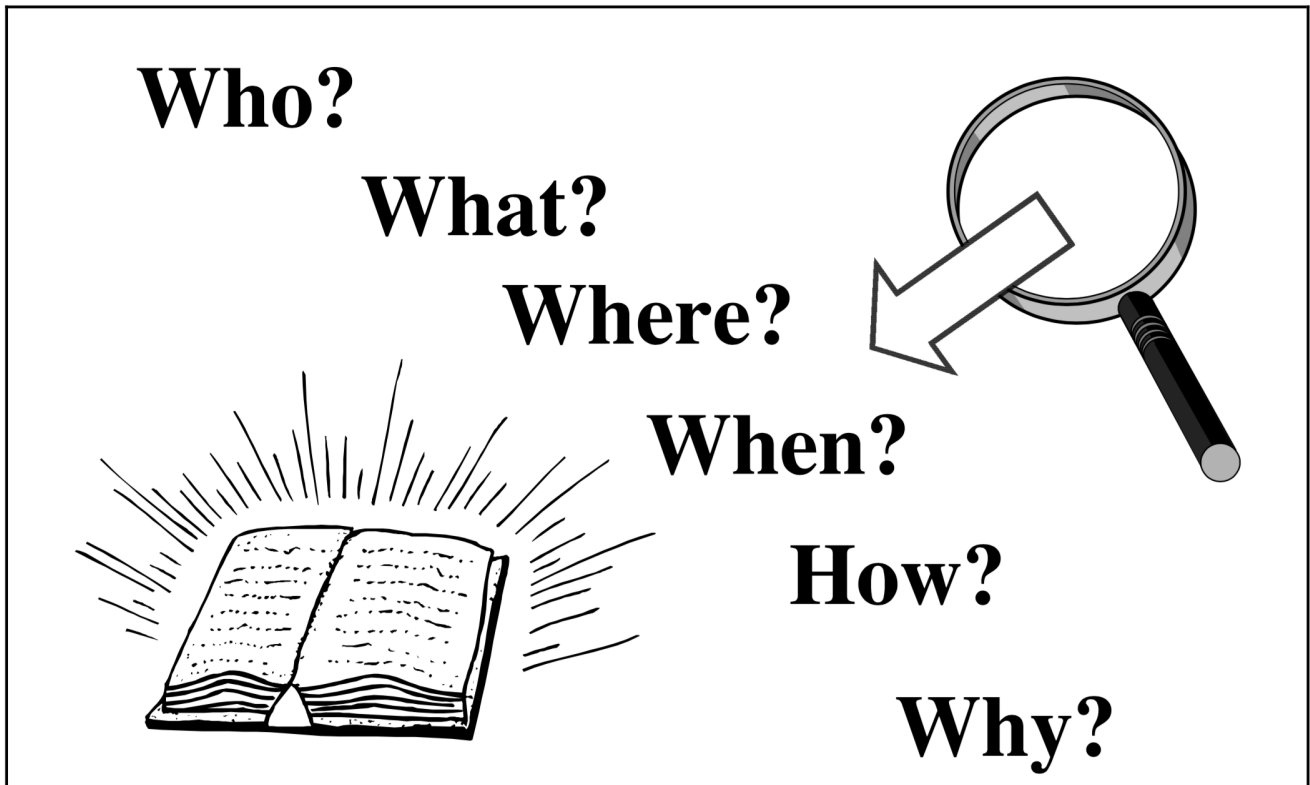
The book of Daniel and the book of Revelation are good examples of this literature. Apocalyptic passages are highly symbolic and it is necessary to understand the symbolism in order to interpret the message.

## ***E. Ask Questions: Who?, What?, Where?, When?, How?, and Why?***

The best method of discovering the content and meaning of a passage of Scripture is to ask key questions about it, and record the answers.

Figure 2.2 shows the six key questions that should be asked and answered.

There are, of course, other possible questions, but these are the most important ones.

**Figure 2.2 Key Observation Questions**

Other questions tend to be variations of these six.

## **II. SAMPLE OBSERVATION**

We are going to use the six questions to see what we can discover about God's truth in an Old Testament passage about a young man called to serve God.

As we study this passage, it will become very clear that he was being called to take a stand that was radically different from his contemporaries.

No doubt some of you will be able to identify with the struggles this young man had to face as he responded to God's call.

**The passage is Jeremiah 1.**

Open your Bible to that passage, pray for enlightenment, and then look for the answers to the following questions.

Take special note of the kinds of questions that are asked. In your own study later, you will need to make up similar questions to ask of other passages as you study them. Write the answers next to each question.

**DO THIS EXERCISE AS A GROUP**

**REMEMBER - THIS PART IS JUST OBSERVATION. WE ARE NOT MAKING ANY ASSESSMENT AS TO WHAT IT MEANS \_ JUST WHAT IT SAYS AT THIS POINT.**

**A. Who?**

- To whom is this part of Scripture attributed (verse 1)?
- Who are the persons mentioned in this passage (verses 1-2)?
- Who are the kings noted in verses 2-3?
- Who are the people God is summoning to bring disaster on the land (v.15)?
- Verses 18-19 list Jeremiah's main opposition. Who will these people be?
- (Other?)

**B. What?**

- What special event is noted at the beginning of verse 2?
- Is it possible to deduce what Jeremiah's role was from verse 2?
- If so, what was that role?
- According to verse 2, what event took place at the end of the reign of Zedekiah?
- What happened to Jeremiah in verse 3?
- What was the "word of the Lord" that came to him (verse 5)?
- What are the four specific actions attributed by God to Himself in verse 5?
- In verse 5, what was to be Jeremiah's role?
- What was the extent of Jeremiah's role? Limited to the nation of Israel, or much broader?
- What was Jeremiah's response in verse 6?
- What was God's response to Jeremiah in verses 7-8?
- What are the two imperatives God gives to Jeremiah in verses 7-8?
- What options does Jeremiah have according to verse 7?
- What is Jeremiah's emotion that God addresses in the first part of verse 8?
- What two reasons are given to Jeremiah for not being afraid (verse 8)?
- What does the Lord do to Jeremiah in verse 9?
- Verse 10 describes Jeremiah's task. What were the elements of that task? What is the progression noted in verse 10?
- What were the two things God showed Jeremiah in verses 11-16?
- What does verse 12 describe God doing?
- According to verses 14-16, what is about to happen to the people of God? What are the specific reasons God is bringing judgment on His people (v.16)? What are the instructions God gives to Jeremiah in verse 17?
- What commands have been repeated from earlier?
- What is the new promise (verse 17)?
- What will the people of verse 18 do to Jeremiah (verse 19)?
- What is the promise God gives Jeremiah for the battles ahead (verse 19)? (Other?)

**C. Where?**

- Where is the setting of this passage according to verse 1?
- Where is this located?
- Where will the people described in verse 15 come from?
- (Other?)

**D. When?**

- When is the time period described for the overall contents of this book?
- In verse 5, when did God know (choose) Jeremiah?
- In verse 5, when did God set Jeremiah apart for ministry?
- When did the action in verse 18 take place?
- (Other?)



**E. Why?**

- Why is God “watching” in verse 12?
- Why is God pronouncing judgment on His people (v.16)?
- (Other?)

**F. How?**

- How is Jeremiah described in verse 1?
- How is his father Hilkiah described?
- How does Jeremiah address God in verse 6?
- How does Jeremiah respond to God's word in verse 6?
- How does God describe Jeremiah in verse 18?

Use the space provided below to list any other observations you made concerning Jeremiah 1:

**QUESTIONS**

1. WHAT DOES 'CONTEXT' MEAN?
2. WHAT ARE THE SIX KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK A PASSAGE?
3. WHEN, DURING A BIBLE STUDY, SHOULD WE PRAY?

**ACTION PLAN**

If you did not have time to complete the observation of Jeremiah 1, do so before the next meeting. See if you can ask other appropriate questions of the same passage.