

# How to Study the Bible, Part 2

2017-02-23 at SGC

## Review – Observation

*15 minutes*

1. The “Fish” story (6 minutes)
2. Review homework from 1 Corinthians 13
3. Tools & Tips for making observations
  - Pen and Paper (don’t try to do it all in your head)
  - Review passage in different **translations**
  - Print text without chapter/verse numbers (double or triple space)
  - Mark it up and make observations
  - Identify significant **terms**

- Write down **questions** (regarding terms, or history, or context, or theology, etc.)
- Consider making a block **outline** or sentence diagram
- Review the list of **things to look for** when reading carefully.

*The basic difference between Bible reading and Bible study is simply a pen and paper (or some other means of preserving your thoughts). Write down observations about the text as you read, and record questions that come to your mind... Another way to begin is to outline a chapter, one paragraph at a time. When you finish that chapter, move on to the next until you've outlined the entire book. Before long you'll have a far stronger grasp on a section of Scripture than you had by just reading it.*

- Donald Witney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, pp. 32-33

1. All of this could/should be done before going to external sources like commentaries or study Bibles. This first step should be focused

on seeing what's in the text, not trying to interpret it or apply it.

## Key Issues in Bible Interpretation

55 Minutes

### Inductive Bible Study

Just as a reminder, what we are seeking to do throughout this six-week class is to explore a method for understanding the Bible.

The method we are discussing is called the *inductive method*. (As compared to deductive method.) This simply means that we are drawing our conclusions based on the **evidence** of what the text actually says.

1. **Observation** – this was the focus for our last class and homework (and the review). If you haven't read those chapters, then please take time to read to help sharpen your observation skills. Don't be like Watson, when Sherlock said to him, "You see, but you do not observe." You see, but you do not

observe.”<sup>1</sup>

2. **Interpretation** – this and application are the focus of the rest of the class. Once we become more disciplined at making observations in the text, we must then interpret what the text means.
3. **Application** – once we know what the text meant to the original audience, we must discern how to apply that to our situation today.

## Why is Bible interpretation difficult?

- We are separated from the original audience by:
  - a **time** gap: written 2000-4000 years ago.
  - a **geography** gap – places, geography, topography
  - a **cultural** gap – culture, custom, manners, politics

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” in *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* (Secaucus, NJ: Castle, n.d.), 11-12.

- a **language** gap – Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic. Not just different vocabulary, but different structure, figures of speech, and grammar.
- a **literary** gap – 66 different books by many authors over thousands of years. Different writing styles.
- a **theological** gap – not just historical differences, but differences in covenant and different amounts of progressive revelation.

## **Review our overall task from Journey Into God's Word. (pp. 15-19)**

1. Grasping the text in **their town**
  - What did the text mean to the biblical audience?
2. Measuring the **Width of the River** to Cross
  - What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?
3. Crossing the **Principalizing Bridge**

- What is the theological principle in this text?

#### 4. Consult the **Biblical Map**

- How does our theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible?

#### 5. Grasping the **Text in Our Town**

- How should individual Christians today live out the theological principles?

*“The Bible is a deep well whose waters lie close to the surface.”*

- *Kostenberger, Inductive Bible Study, p. 17*

So, let's assume that we have understood our interpretive method (observation, interpretation, and application), and that we have put in the effort to make accurate observations about the text. What's next? How do we approach interpretation to discover what the text meant to the original readers/hearers?

## What do we bring to the text (the reader's context)?

### Preunderstanding

Before we actually try to “Grasp the text in their town”, we need to consider our own context. We are not approaching the text with a blank slate. We have already consciously and subconsciously made decisions about the text. We come with a certain amount of **preunderstanding**.

*Preunderstanding refers to all of our preconceived notions and understandings that we bring to the text, which have been formulated, both consciously and subconsciously, before we actually study the text in detail.* <sup>2</sup>

Duvall goes on to say that we have experiences and encounters that make us assume that we already understand the text.

- danger of familiarity
- danger of theological agenda
- danger of cultural assumptions

When there are gaps in our understanding of a text, we are tempted to fill in the gaps

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<sup>2</sup> Duvall, Journey, p. 42.

(or limit the options) with our own cultural understanding. (p. 46)

We must be willing to submit our preunderstanding to the text instead of placing the text under our preunderstanding.

## Presuppositions

There is something else we bring to the text that is helpful. We bring our presuppositions about the Bible. Granted, we do need to form these beliefs from the text of the Bible, but once we come to these convictions, they impact the way we approach the Bible for the rest of our lives. These presuppositions do not change with each of our encounters with the text.

- the Bible is the Word of God
- the Bible is trustworthy and true
- the Bible is sufficient
- the Bible is not contradictory
- the Bible can be understood
- the Bible is authoritative
- the Bible points to Christ
- the Holy Spirit will help believers understand the Bible



## The historical-cultural context – the “then and there”

- We cannot immediately jump to what the passage means to us. We must recognize that God spoke these words to his people in a specific time and place.

*For our interpretation of any text to be valid, it must be consistent with the historical-cultural context of that text. If our interpretation would not have made sense back then, we are probably on the wrong track.*

<sup>3</sup>

Things to consider:

- the audience
- the geography
- customs
- writer
- occasion of the writing

How do you discover the context?

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<sup>3</sup> Journey, p. 51

- First, realize that much of the context can be discovered in the Bible itself.
- Consult other Bible dictionaries, atlases, handbooks, introductions, etc.
- Good commentaries will help with this information as well

Be careful:

- it is the text that is inspired and authoritative, not the background commentary that you consult.

## The literary context

Context determines the meaning.

When we study the Bible, we're not just reading lists of random truths and facts. We read words, sentence, paragraphs, prophecies, and narratives in a context. The author is going somewhere with the thought.

*When it comes to interpreting and applying the Bible, context is crucial. In fact, we would go so far as to say that the most important principle of biblical interpretation is that context determines meaning. When we ignore the context, we can*

*twist the Scriptures and “prove” almost anything.*<sup>4</sup>

Consider:

- Literary genre - a covenant of communication (p. 64)
- surrounding context (concentric circles)
  - immediate context
  - rest of larger section
  - book
  - other books by same author
  - rest of the Bible
- “The interpretation that best fits the context is the most valid interpretation.” (p. 73)

### **Who determines the meaning? (Reader or author)**

- Authorial intent vs. reader response

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<sup>4</sup> Journey, p. 62

## Seven Sensible Principles for Thinking Through Scripture <sup>5</sup>

1. **The Literal Principle**—Take the words of the Bible at face value. Avoid reading into the text what is not there.
2. **The Contextual Principle**—Always strive to understand the text within the confines of its historical, literary, and theological context.
3. **The One-Meaning Principle**—There will normally only be one correct interpretation of a text, although there may be multiple applications.
4. **The Exegetical Principle**—The meaning of any biblical text must be drawn from the text rather than be ascribed to the text.
5. **The Linguistic Principle**—The original languages of the Bible always take precedence over any given translation.

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<sup>5</sup> Kostenberger, *Inductive Bible Study*, pp. 21-22

6. **The Progressive Principle**—Later revelation may clarify, complete, or supersede earlier revelation.
7. **The Harmony Principle**—Any given portion of the Bible can have only that meaning which harmonizes with the doctrine of the Bible as a whole. There will be continuity between books of the Bible.

## **Homework for next meeting**

5 minutes

1. Read the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman recorded in John 4:1-39. Then read an article on “Samaria” or “Samaritan” in a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia and make a list of all the ways the article helps you understand the conversation between Jesus and the woman.
2. Turn to the Old Testament book of Jonah and do the following:
  - Read the entire book of Jonah and identify how the book is divided into paragraphs or sections.

- Summarize the main idea of each section in about a dozen words or less.
- Explain how your particular passage (use Jonah 1:13-16 for this exercise) relates to the surrounding context.

## Read Carefully and Look For...

### Sentences

- **Repetition of words**—look for words and phrases that repeat.
- **Contrasts**—look for ideas, individuals, and /or items that are contrasted with each other. Look for differences.
- **Comparisons**—look for ideas, individuals, and/or items that are compared with each other. Look also for similarities.
- **Lists**—anytime the text mentions more than two items, identify them as a list.
- **Cause and Effect**—look for cause-and-effect relationships.
- **Figures of speech**—identify expressions that convey an image,

using words in a sense other than the normal literal sense.

- **Conjunctions**—notice terms that join units, like “and,” “but,” “for.” Note what they are connecting.
- **Verbs**—note whether a verb is past, present, or future; active or passive; and the like.
- **Pronouns**—identify the antecedent for each pronoun.

## Paragraphs

- **Questions and Answers**—note if the text is built on a question-and-answer format.
- **Dialogue**—note if the text includes dialogue. Identify who is speaking and to whom.
- **Means**—Note if a sentence indicates that something was done by means of someone/something (answers “how?”). Usually you can insert the phrase “by means of” into the sentence.
- **Purpose/result statements**—these are a more specific type of “means,” often telling why. Purpose and result are similar and sometimes indistinguishable. In a

purpose statement, you usually can insert the phrase “in order that.” In a result clause, you usually can insert the phrase “so that.”

- **General to specific and specific to general**—find the general statements that are followed by specific examples or applications of the general. Also find specific statements that are summarized by a general one.
- **Conditional Clauses**—a clause can present the condition by which some action or consequence will result. Often such statements use an “if . . . then” framework (although in English the “then” is often left out).
- **Actions/roles of God**—identify actions or roles that the text ascribes to God.
- **Actions/roles of people**—identify actions or roles that the text ascribes to people or encourages people to do/be.
- **Emotional terms**—does the passage use terms that have emotional energy, like kinship words (father, son) or words like “pleading”?



- **Tone of the passage**—what is the overall tone of the passage: happy, sad, encouraging, and so on?

## Discourses

- **Connections to other paragraphs and episodes**—how does the passage connect to the one that precedes it and the one that follows it?
- **Shifts in the story/pivots**—is the passage being used as a key to understanding a dramatic shift in the story?
- **Interchange**—Does the passage shift back and forth between two scenes or characters?
- **Chiasm**—does the passage have any chiastic arrangements, like a-b-c-d-c'-b'-a'?