

Observation: What Do I See?

**Dr. Daniel L. Akin
President
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
Wake Forest, North Carolina**

OBSERVATION: WHAT DO I SEE?

Becoming a diligent and trained student of Scripture is essential to the task of teaching the Bible. Unfortunately, many are stagnant when it comes to growing in their knowledge of the Bible.

REASONS WHY WE AREN'T "IN" THE BIBLE

- Problem of *motivation*; we don't have the energy or see the necessity of why we should study.
- Problem of *priorities*; too busy, lack of time.
- Problem of *technique*; we don't know how.
- Problem of *preoccupation*; we just don't get around to it.

WHY STUDY THE BIBLE

- A. Hebrews 5:11-14 - It is the means to develop spiritual maturity and Godly wisdom - the ability to see life from God's perspective and react and respond to it with His mind (Phil. 2:5)
- B. 1 Peter 2:2 - Scripture is the primary means of spiritual growth. Our aim as believers should be to be like Jesus (Rom. 8:28-30).

Howard Hendricks says, "There are three kinds of Bible students:

1. To the first it's like castor oil – bitter and hard to take.
2. To the second it's like shredded wheat – dry but nourishing.
3. To the third it's like peaches and cream – can't get enough."

- C. 2 Timothy 2:15 - The Bible gives the only guidelines to follow for presenting ourselves to God in a manner approved by Him (Rom. 12:1-2)

The bottom line of Christian experience is how we answer three questions we should ask ourselves daily:

1. Is the Lord well pleased?
2. Is the work well done?
3. Is the Word well used?

2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that all Scripture is profitable for:

1. *Doctrine*, for teaching
2. *Rebuke*, for where you're out of bounds
3. *Correction*, for conforming to image of Christ
4. *Training* in righteous living

The overall purpose - so we may be thoroughly equipped for God's work (cf. Eph. 4:11-16).

D. Study is a necessary means of being able to serve Christ.

We need to develop four basic skills in order to read the Bible and it mean something in our lives!

The skills are:

1. **Observation** – “What do I see?”
2. **Interpretation** – “What does it mean?”
3. **Correlation** – “How does it fit together (integrate)?”
4. **Application** – “How does it work? How can I translate it to my own experience?”

THE FIRST MAJOR STEP IN BIBLE STUDY IS OBSERVATION.

I. DEVELOPING THE ABILITY TO SEE AND DETERMINING WHAT THE TEXT SAYS.

Observation is taking a good hard look at what is in the text.

Why don't we get more out of God's Word?

1. We don't know how to read.
2. We don't know what to look for.

A. Learn to read intelligently, intentionally, and interactively.

Observation requires concentration. It is not a difficult procedure. It is not a complicated process. It can be mastered with practice and diligence.

TWO RULES FOR READING THE BIBLE

Learn to read better or faster.

- Learn to read as for the first time (the advantage of reading the text in the original language if you can).
- Learn to read as a love letter (personal).

B. We need to read the Bible:

- thoughtfully
- repeatedly
- often at one sitting
- start at the beginning
- patiently
- sometimes selectively

C. When we read the Bible we need to ask these six questions:

1) **WHO?**

- Who is the author of the book?
- To whom is the book written?
- Who are the characters in the book?
- Who is speaking?
- To whom is he speaking?
- Etc. Etc. Etc.

2) **WHAT?**

- What is the atmosphere of the book or passage? Friendly? Chastening? Loving?
- What is the author's general topic? What is he saying about his topic?
- What is the CONTEXT?
- What are the key words? What do they mean?
- What? What? What?

3) **WHEN?**

- When was the book written?
- When did this event happen in relation to other events?
- When was this prophecy fulfilled or has it been?
- “When” questions are important to ask especially in narrative literature such as the Gospels. This will help give you the “time” perspective.

4) **WHERE?**

- Where was the book written?
- Where were the recipients of the book living?
- Can you locate the places mentioned on a map?
- Where else does this topic appear in Scripture?

5) **WHY?**

- Why was the book written?
- Why does he include this material and not other things?
- Why does the author give so much space to that topic and so little to another?

6) **HOW?**

- How many? How many times does the author use the same word in this book, chapter, passage, verse?
- How long?
- How much?
- How does he do this? Say this?
- How does this relate to the preceding statement? To the succeeding statement?

AS WE READ, WE ARE TO READ:

Prayerfully	recall God's promises and claim them.
Imaginatively	identify with it.
Reflectively	meditatively; take time.
Purposefully	what's the purpose in light of...
Acquisitively	how can I hold on to it?
Telescopically	in light of the whole.

II. LEARN WHAT TO LOOK FOR

To see the text is to observe what information God has put in a biblical passage. See the details and seek meaning from those details. Make all possible observations from a text.

1. Look for key terms.

(i.e., the verbs, significant concepts, repetition)

LOOK FOR:

- things that are *emphasized*
- things that are *repeated*
- things that are *related* and how
- things that are *alike* (uses words like “as” or “like”)
- things that are *unlike/unusual* (contrasting words such as “but”)
- things that are *true to life*

2. Look for atmosphere.

Last words are lasting words. Last words usually flow from a deep concern.

3. Observe relationships

Some kinds of relationships you will observe are:

- a. **Grammatical relationships** - How are words put together in the text? Basic observations would include relationships between tenses (past, present, future), number (singular, plural), and gender (masculine, feminine, neuter).
- b. **Logical relationships** - How are thoughts put together in the text? How does the author build a case or argument for his point? Chronological and/or geographical relationships - What are the times and places that are involved in the text?
- c. **Psychological relationships** - Are there any psychological aspects to this text, which are stated or implied in the words?
- d. **Contextual relationships** - In what context does this text occur? You will need to take immediate and wider contexts into account.
 - The context of the Bible
 - The context of the book
 - The context of the text
- e. **Relationships in genre** - Relationships in genre have to do with the kind of biblical literature in which a passage is found. Here are some kinds of literature that are found in the Bible.
 - *Teaching* - didactic or discourse material like Jesus' sermons or the epistles.
 - *Narratives* - narration of historical events.
 - *Poetry* - Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and others.
 - *Parables* - primarily in the parables of Christ.
 - *Miracles* - primarily found in three periods of biblical history (Moses and Aaron, Elijah and Elisha, the Lord and the apostles).

- *Prophetic* - futuristic books like sections of Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation, and also the major and minor prophets of the Old Testament.
- *Apocalyptic* - prophetic imagery depicting endtime events.

4. Seek meaning from the details of a passage.

Seeking meaning deals with interpreting the observations, and seeing and seeking are most often and best done simultaneously. Interpretation is basically asking questions of your observations and answering them.

Seeking meaning from the Details

1. Asking Questions
2. Answering Questions
3. Analyzing Answers
4. Applying Answers

A. ASKING QUESTIONS

You must ask many good questions. Ask questions of the words. Ask questions of the relationships between the words.

Seeing details

Words

Relationships

Seeking meaning

Questions for words

Questions for relationships

1. Ask what the words mean today.
2. Ask what the words meant at the time they were written.
3. Ask how the Bible or the author used these words elsewhere and how other biblical authors used them (marginal references, concordances, key phrases, and repeated statements in your text are all important).

SUMMARY OF QUESTIONS TO ASK:

Background Questions

Fact Questions

Meaning Questions

Application Questions

B. ANSWERING QUESTIONS

The plain, natural interpretation of Scripture (some call it “literal,” and others call it “grammatical-historical interpretation”) is what the expositor is after. Basically, it is interpreting Scripture on its own terms that is most important in understanding its meaning.

C. ANALYZING ANSWERS

Robert Traina in *Methodical Bible Study* (p. 181) speaks of three dangers in interpreting Scripture:

1. Misinterpretation - assigning the wrong meaning to a passage.
2. Subinterpretation - the failure to ascertain the full meaning of a passage.
3. Superinterpretation - attributing more significance to a passage than is actually implicit in it.

You will analyze your answers with the following test:

The Test of Authenticity - Can you make a good case that your interpretation is authentic?

The Test of Unity – Is there unity of meaning between the terms, affirmations, and interpretation of the text? Is there a contradiction or discrepancy in my interpretation?

The Test of Consistency – Is your interpretation consistent with the rest of the chapter, book, and the Bible? Can you explain an apparent difficulty?

The Test of Simplicity – Is your interpretation simple or contrived? Plain or mystical? Easily stated and understood or heavily supported by allusions and concoctions or arguments?

The Test of Honesty - Have you been careful not to read yours or others’ prejudgments and preconceptions into the text?

*Since our interpretations are not infallible we must always leave open the possibility for change, as new evidence and/or questions are brought to bear on the interpretation.

D. APPLYING ANSWERS

Preaching/Teaching has to do with transferring information that transforms people. What we preach and teach ought to change lives.

First we must and will apply Scripture in our own lives. Then we will show people how to integrate biblical truth into their lives.

Application may be *content* oriented, or it may be *conduct* oriented.

Often these two orientations in application are intermingled, simply because people will often do only what they know, believe and value.

To make proper application you must ask the following rigorous questions:

1. What is the application (present-day relevance) of the text?
2. What kind of application should you draw from the text?
Content, conduct, or conduct based on content?
3. Is my application really based on this text? Does it have the authenticity of the text behind it?
4. What will convince my audience that this is the application from the text?
5. How can I be sure that the people will understand the application of the text? That is, we cannot take it for granted that they have gotten the application. Application is not automatic. Actually, people are not prone to apply truths to themselves. They would rather apply them to someone else!

Dispense with the applications that do not carry textual authority or have textual warranty, even if they are true.