Women Equipping Women

Bible Study Process:
Observe, Interpret & Apply

*** The following handout is taken from Pastor Jason’s Notes on How to Read and Understand the Bible
The Process: Observe, Interpret, Apply

Step 1: Observe – What is there?

Learning to Read

Observation begins with reading the text carefully. Learn to read:

- Repeatedly - Many times over, perhaps in different translations
- Patiently - Take your time, do not go too fast or skim over details
- Prayerfully - Before, during and after
- Meditatively - Thinking about it quietly, its implications and treasures
- Purposefully - Look for structure and relationships between words
- Telescopically - Viewing the parts in light of the whole

Ask 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?

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?

**Things to Look For**

- Pay attention to the verbs (action words!)
- Relationships between words, phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs
- 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

**Summarize Your Observations**

Take notes as you study. Highlight as necessary. Draw pictures, make a chart, etc. Just make sure your observations are recorded in a way that makes them accessible in the next step.
Step 2: Interpret - What does it mean?

After summarizing your observations, you’re ready to move on to the next step. If observation asks the question, “what’s there?” interpretation concentrates on “what does it mean?” Remember that

Bible study takes time and practice. Don’t get discouraged at first; keep working and believing that God’s Word is true.

Genre

The first question to ask in the interpretive stage is, what kind of literature is this? The bible has “types of literature” called genre’s. These genre’s are:

- **Narrative** – stories or accounts of actual historical people and events. These stories are not disconnected but are actually smaller stories that fit into one large story of God’s plan for redeeming mankind. These books include Genesis through Esther and the book of Acts.
  - **Gospels** - Each of the four Gospels presents a “portrait” of Jesus, and taken together they give us a full understanding of the Savior’s person and work.
- **Law** – The Old Testament laws, as represented in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, were God’s means of teaching his people, in their time and context, how to relate well to Him and to each other.
- **Prophecy** – Prophets were not fortune-tellers. They were chosen by God to deliver God’s messages. Messages of blessing and curses depending on obedience to God’s commands. Books include: Isaiah through Malachi.
 Wisdom – Most often offers *principals, not* promises. Wisdom literature exists to make you wise, not give you precise instructions about particular situations. Books include: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes

 Poetry – Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Psalms.

 Parable – Wisdom embedded into story form. Jesus taught earthly stories to teach heavenly lessons about the kingdom of God.


 Apocalyptic – Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah & Revelation. Apocalyptic literature deals with heaven breaking into earth in a significant way. Apocalyptic literature uses imagery or symbolism a lot.

You have to know what type of genre you are in to read it correctly. You can’t read a letter like you would read poetry. And a narrative is read very differently than wisdom literature. The genre’s need to be read according to the “kind” of literature they are.

**Content**

This is in the observation process. You have looked at key terms, literary form, asked important questions, looked for patterns and emphases, and possibly even done a diagram. The more time you spend in this section, the more accurate will be your result.

**Context**

The Bible is a unified whole; it speaks with one voice. This interconnectedness means that context matters. Context is what comes before and what follows after. As an example, look at Philippians 2:12. **When you get lost, climb a tree and get some perspective.**
Types of context:

• Literary
• Historical
• Cultural
• Geographical
• Theological

Comparison

The best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture. Some best practices in this regard:

1. Use cross-references

2. Compare words and concepts among the same author and different authors (e.g., works and faith in Paul and James)

3. Assume unity

4. Think in terms of both letters and stories (Romans 8:28 and Genesis 50:20)

Culture

Understanding the cultural background of a story or writing helps you understand its meaning and significance. Take the book of Ruth, for example. The cultural backdrop is Israel in the time of the Judges, and specifically Judges 21:25.

Another example is Paul’s warnings about eating meat offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8. Would that have any significance for us today? Understanding cultural context is key to crossing the bridge from meaning to significance.
Consultation

Consultation involves the use of secondary sources. Why do we do that? Don’t we believe that the Holy Spirit is sufficient to guide our understanding of Scripture? Of course we do, but we also recognize that the Holy Spirit guides others, too, and we recognize that we can learn from other believers as we walk through life together.

Sources of consultation include:

- Pastoral leadership (Ephesians 4)
- Other believers (Colossians 3)
- Sermons
- Resources
- Study Bible
- Concordance
- Dictionaries and handbooks
- Atlases
- Commentaries

Make sure, though, you remember the order: Study first, consult second.

The Goal

The goal of interpretation is to discover the author’s intended meaning of the text. Another way to say that: It cannot mean what it never meant. As you finish this step, a good practice to make is to distill your notes into a relatively short statement, put in your own words, of the main point of the passage you are
studying. This will help you launch into application, because you cannot understand what it means to you until you know what it means.

**Step 3: Application**  *How do I apply this in my life?*

**Cautions in Application**

Application is always built on interpretation. If the interpretation is wrong, the application will be wrong.

**AND**

The opposite of ignorance is not knowledge, but obedience. The Bible is not understood until it is obeyed. We cannot stop with interpretation.

**Four Steps in Application**

1. **Know** the text and know yourself.

2. **Relate** 2 Corinthians 5:17 reminds us that all of our lives now revolve around our relationship to Christ, so all things fall under his lordship. This means that his Word speaks into every area of our lives as well (remember 2 Timothy 3:16-17?).

3. **Meditate** Do not empty your mind, but fill it with God’s Word.

4. **Practice** Make a plan to change based on the grace and mercy found in Christ.

**Questions to Ask**

1. Is there an **example** for me to follow?

2. Is there a **sin** to avoid/confess?

3. Is there a **promise** to claim?
4. Is there a prayer to repeat?
5. Is there a command to obey?
6. Is there a condition to meet?
7. Is there a verse to memorize?
8. Is there an error to avoid?
9. Is there a challenge to face?
10. Is there a principle to apply?
11. Is there a habit to change - i.e. start or stop?
12. Is there an attitude to correct?
13. Is there a truth to believe?

Remember: Attempting to apply biblical truth outside of the grace of God found in Christ is moralism, and it is deadly. All change comes through faith in Christ.

Belief → Practice