



# How to Study the Bible

I remember taking an exam upon my entrance to Dallas Theological Seminary. It is infamous among the student body. The goal of the test was to calculate our Biblical and theological knowledge at the beginning of our seminary career. We all take the exact same exam as we exit and graduate. The difference between the two scores is supposed to quantify the knowledge we gained during our tenure there. Whether or not the test adequately fulfills its intended goal, I remember approaching the first exam, as a first-year student, with wide-eyed and arrogant enthusiasm. I was going to break the seminary records, of course. In fact, there would be an unprecedented hustle behind the large computerized scan-tron scoring machine when they entered my score card. "Something must be wrong," the technician would say. "No one has ever scored this high on the first test. There must be a mistake." So they would run it through again and yes, there was a mistake. The score would come out higher the second time.

Reality humbled me.

I had to gently hound an administrator for my scores and eventually she only reported the percentile of all test results in which I fell. It was nowhere near the top. In fact, it was right smack in the middle of ordinary. I was the vanilla of average.

But what I soon discovered was that my ordinary experience and understanding of the Bible would be transformed into an overwhelming affection for God and His Word. The truth slowly resurrected my heart and mind to the Scriptures. It was a beautiful beginning to a brand new adventure, no seminary admission or diploma required.

Perhaps you find yourself on a similar wrung of the knowledge/experience ladder. Perhaps you are miles ahead or even on the very first one. It doesn't matter. God's desire is that we all make progress in our relationship with Him, getting to know Him and love Him more each day. We do this by spending time with God, listening to Him and talking back. We spend time with Him primarily by spending time in His Word. So let's get to it.

The hope for this brief reference is to both aid and inspire the Christian of any age and experience to fall in love with God all over again through study of His Word. As with many of the other things I write, please consider this a tool. Use it as you see fit. It can become anything from a one-time reference to a slow-paced workbook. Whatever form it takes, the goal is the same: equip you to enjoy God through His Word on a consistent basis.

What is Bible study exactly? We talk about it and use these words often, but what do they mean? Why would we ever approach something like God's Word in a patterned, or methodical, way? Doesn't that seem artificial? Forced?

Yes, it can seem that way. To be honest that is a danger in Bible study. It has happened to many in the past. Very often theological students, pastors and professors of Bible or theology slowly, over a period of years or decades, begin to view the Bible primarily as a textbook, a code to be cracked, an experiment to be analyzed or even like a dead pear tree that they are desperately trying to bring back to life. Yes, this is a danger.

But let's be honest yet again. This danger is not imminent for most of us. Most of us tip-toe on the edge of the opposite danger, the one on the other end of the spectrum from dry academics. I'm talking about an intimidation and even fear of reading the Bible at all. Perhaps rather than intimidation, you struggle with simply lack of desire, indifference or even antagonism towards the Scriptures. If so, you are in ample company.

The truth about the Scriptures is far from either of these extremes. It is anything but dead and boring academics. Although it has ineffable depth and beauty, it is not a lifeless experiment fit only for a laboratory, lecture hall or library. Nor does God intend His Word to be intimidating or fearful. Yes, in its pages there are high cliffs to be climbed, dangerous waters to be navigated and sharp swords that pierce and challenge, but every page welcomes the most inexperienced youth as well as the seasoned scholar. That is its beauty. This feature makes the Bible the most unique piece of literature in human history. There is quite simply nothing that comes close.

## Why Methods?

The word "methods" is indeed plural because there are many approaches and it involves many steps. Why a method? Why would one need steps or procedures to study the Scriptures? That is a great question. The answer is in the goal of our study of the Bible. The end result of Biblical

study is the most important aspect of it. Where do we want to end up? What is the specific goal?

I would submit that the following popular goals, even though some are good, are not best:

- Knowledge to teach
- Knowledge to evangelize
- Knowledge for prideful reasons such as superiority, comparison, competition or argument
- Knowledge that fuels self-improvement

The following goals, although not exhaustive, represent God's intention for our study of His Word:

- Increased love for God
- Increased worship of God
- Life-change by the transforming work of God's Holy Spirit
- Increased capacity to represent God well by becoming more like His Son Jesus
- To familiarize ourselves with *The Refuge of Truth* and there find consolation, guidance and hope

Let me belabor the point in one final illustration. The difference between these two lists of goals is the reason why we have a method. A specific method of study produces a corresponding product or result. Generally speaking, assume that if we do A and B then we will produce C. And if we do X and Y then we will produce Z. We would never then intentionally try to produce Z by attacking A and B. A specific method or approach produces a corresponding product. So it is with study of our Bible.

Can you imagine the kind of study method that is geared toward the first list? It would focus on answering questions, memorization for the sake of conversation ammunition and a potential focus on legalism and self-righteousness.

Now can you imagine the kind of method that will intentionally produce the second list? It will be focused on the hard work of understanding God's intentions in every passage of the Scriptures, asking questions, application in worship and life-change as well as a reliance on the work of the Holy Spirit. This is the kind of method we are after. We want to realize these kinds of goals in our study of the Bible.

There are two approaches to Bible Study: Bottom-up or Top-down. These are generally spoke of as Inductive and Deductive, respectively. **Inductive Bible Study**, the bottom-up approach, begins by observing the details of the Bible and examines them unto their logical conclusion. It allows the Bible to take the lead, or do the talking, so to speak. Inductive Bible Study is the kind of study we will be discussing in this document.

However, **Deductive Bible Study** is also useful in its own way. It begins with a proposed conclusion and tests it by studying the details of Scripture. That is why it is described as a top-down method. This method, while useful for areas of Systematic Theology, can be significantly troublesome in the pulpit and in personal study because of the danger of talking to the text, instead of letting the text do the talking. As is clear from the descriptions, Inductive study is the best approach for overall effectiveness.

## What is the Method?

Solid Inductive Bible Study method has at least four steps. These steps build on each other and guide the student to the best goals of the study. The steps are **Observation, Interpretation, Correlation** and **Application**.

Even though you may recognize and understand these words, do not be discouraged by the fact that they all rhyme and seem about as much fun as power-washing your driveway. These multi-syllabic steps are actually life-giving and exciting. Trust me. Or just stick with me long enough to see it for yourself.

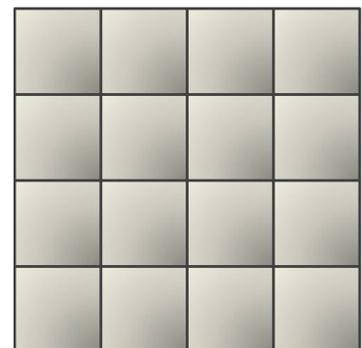
# Observation

The first step in good Bible study is the most forgotten. It also happens to be the most important. Generally, most readers of the Bible jump from simple reading to matters of interpretation. They want to know *what it means*. Isn't that the point after all? Yes, but interpretation is only part of the whole story. We actually need much more than that. And in order to get more, we must begin with observation. Simply put, the better our observation of the text, the easier and more effective the rest of the steps will be.

Wait a second. I'm supposed to observe the Bible? Are you talking about biblical ornithology? (That's *bird watching*, by the way.) And, no I'm not talking about observation like someone looking through binoculars at a woodpecker. But observation like a scientist is not far off from the intention of this step. **Observation** in Bible study simply means that you pay patient attention to the details of the text. You read and reread. You look for key words, main verbs, connectors and maybe learn more about the English language in the process. Honestly, I didn't understand English well until I became a serious student of my Bible.

Let me quote Dr. Mark Bailey from Dallas Seminary on observation. "The more time you spend in observation, the less time you have to spend in interpretation and the fewer mistakes you will make." He says further, "The more adequate your observations, the more accurate your interpretations and the more effective your applications." As you can see, observation is vital.

Are you a good observer? Do you notice details? This comes more easily for some of us than others. Some of us dreamt about laboratory experiments as a kid. Many of us love the modern phenomenon of crime-investigative television, where we have to follow the clues to ascertain the truth. This is observation. If those well-dressed investigators drove their expensive SUV's to the crime scene but didn't do the hard work of observation, the show would be frustrating and brief. Are you a good observer? For example, look at the geometric image on the right. How many squares do you see? Think about it.



If your answer is in the teens, then you are way off.

If you observe that there are actually squares in the image that are larger than the smallest square (for instance there are sixteen small squares and nine 2x2 squares, etc.), then you will

begin to get closer to the correct answer, which is thirty. This is just a simple example of how challenging observation can be.

In my first year of seminary, I took a class called Bible Study Methods, or *Hermeneutics*. One of our assignments in the class was to apply our study methods to **Acts 1:8**. *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.”* We were assigned 25 observations based “exclusively on what you see in Acts 1:8.” Luckily my professor stopped there. Dr. Howard Hendricks would often make his students write 50, and follow it up with another 50.

*Open my eyes, that I may behold  
wonderful things from Your law.  
Psalm 119:18*

Maybe you could take a stab at it. How many can you come up with? Remember, these are not interpretations, but simple observations. Let’s talk more about what observation is in Bible Study.

## What exactly do I observe?

Observation of the Biblical text happens on an expanding scale from single terms, to multiple word phrases, to sentences, to sentence groupings, to paragraphs, to groups of paragraphs or chapters, to an entire letter or book.

Do you believe that every single word in the Scriptures is important? Do you believe that even the single-letter article “a,” as in “hammered a nail” is significant? In reality, the presence of an “a” instead of “the” can be extremely important in the proper context. Picture a hunky C.S.I. finding one unusual fiber in the middle of an oriental rug at the crime scene. It could break open the case.

As you practice Observation of a Biblical text, try to pay attention to:

**Unusual, Difficult, Rare or Theological Words** – These kinds of terms are usually significant. Some words appear only once in the entire Bible. Some were perhaps created by the author for a specific usage, such as the single word “*abundantly-overflowing*” in **1 Timothy 1:14**. Even in your English translation, if you can’t remember seeing that word or phrase often, that may be a clue that it is important and worthy of a closer look. Think about “*propitiation*” in **1 John 2:2**.

**Repeated Words** – Some words are repeated throughout a paragraph or even a whole letter. These are very often key terms in the overall theme and argument of the author. For instance, the word “*immediately*” appears 39 times in the 16 chapters of the **Gospel of Mark**. He is clearly trying to choreograph a high-action and fast-paced retelling of the Jesus story. What about the word “*better*” in the book of **Hebrews**, especially **chapter 11**?

**Connecting Words** – When the contrastive “*but*” begins a sentence rather than a coordinating “*and*,” there is a significant difference that must be noted. Look for connectors that identify *timing* or *temporal* connections, *emphasis*, *geographical* or *local* connectors, and *logical* connectors that help identify *reason*, *result*, *purpose*, *contrast*, *comparison*, etc. These words tend to be on the small side, but their impact on Bible Study is huge. How important is the word “*therefore*” in **Romans 12:1**? Other connecting words include, but are not limited to: *likewise*, *also*, *consequently*, *yet*, *since*, *then*.

**Main Verbs** – Verbs, or action words, carry the main thrust of a sentence. They are the heavy lifters in written literature. Identifying the difference between a main verb and supporting verbs is key. Verb tense is also a key feature to determine (past, present, future). The subject of the verb, verbal force, verb tense and object of the verb (person/thing acted upon) are all key features to identify.

**Structure** – Often the way a sentence is structured is important. For instance, word order can easily reflect emphasis; words at the beginning or reserved for the very end of a sentence are often placed there for sake of added emphasis. (English translations like the *New American Standard* work to retain the word order of the original text even when difficult, and can be helpful here.) Look also for a “piling up” or multiplication of adjectives (words modifying a noun), similar verbs, or adverbs (words modifying a verb) within sentences. This is another element of structure that needs to be noted.

**Relationship** – For lack of a better term, this feature describes how phrases or sentences relate to one another. They are also described as elements of literary composition. For example, phrases or groups of phrases can serve within any of the following *relationships* in a sentence: *Comparison*, *contrast*, *repetition*, *continuation*, *cause*, *means*, *introduction*, *summarization*, etc. This describes how the phrases interact or relate to each other. **Matthew 6** is a great chapter to study this feature of observation in all of the ways listed above and many more.

Beyond these beginning steps, observation on the level of **context**, **logic** and **argument** are also extremely important when studying a larger section or whole book. These come with

practice and experience at laboring to understand and evaluate what is written “between the lines” so to speak. The author communicates his intended meaning not only through specific words but more importantly through specific arguments placed in a specific context and according to references, reason and logic. Although it may sound distant, observation on this level is not out of reach for even a junior high student. It simply takes patience, attention to detail and critical thinking. Oh, and, as I said, practice.

## Practice

Working the step of observation can be frustrating for those of us accustomed to functioning in an *immediate* world. We often seek the quickest, most convenient way of doing things. Waiting is not good. This may be why most of us are unfamiliar with observation in Bible Study. It takes time and effort. Perhaps this **Observation outline** will be helpful

1. Read the passage slowly. Then read through it several more times, prayerfully, thoughtfully.
2. Ask as many questions of the passage as possible. (Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?)
3. Observe words.
4. Observe structure and relationship.
5. Try to identify the heart of the passage. What is the central word, phrase or sentence?
6. Observe how the other words, phrases and sentences relate to/support this central heart?
7. Work back down from high-level structure and heart to the details again.
8. Discard unimportant detail or observation and summarize your work by restating it.

Try these texts to start honing your skills of observation.

- **1 Samuel 5:1-12**
- **Luke 10:25-37**
- **Mark 3:1-6**
- **Matthew 17:1-13**
- **John 9:1-11**
- **Ephesians 4:1-10**

# Interpretation

Unlike Observation, this second step is very familiar. In the step of **Interpretation**, we begin to ask questions concerning *meaning*. What does this text mean? You may enjoy the conversation that Lewis Carroll dreamt up between Alice and Humpty Dumpty. It speaks, even if rather comically, to the idea of meaning.

...As I was saying, that *seems* to be done right—though I haven't time to look it over thoroughly just now—and that shows that there are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get un-birthday presents"

"Certainly," said Alice.

"And only *one* for birthday presents, you know. There's *glory* for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knockdown argument,' " Alice objected.

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

Alice was too much puzzled to say anything, so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. "They've a temper, some of them—particularly verbs: they're the proudest—adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs—however, I can manage the whole lot of them! Impenetrability! That's what I say!"

"Would you tell me, please," said Alice, "what that means?"

"Now you talk like a reasonable child," said Humpty Dumpty, looking very much pleased. "I meant by 'impenetrability' that we've had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you'd mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don't mean to stop here all the rest of your life."

"That's a great deal to make one word mean," Alice said in a thoughtful tone.

"When I make a word do a lot of work like that," said Humpty Dumpty, "I always pay it extra."

"Oh!" said Alice. She was too much puzzled to make any other remark.

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

So, if given the chance, we might object as Alice did. Who determines meaning? Does the reader of a document determine its meaning? Hopefully not. This would lead to an extremely

relative interpretation, which can be extremely problematic. Unfortunately, this is a popular approach in group Bible study. One will often ask, "What does this text mean to you?" What if someone understands one meaning and another a contradictory or disparate meaning? There must be a more reliable way to get to the true *intended* meaning.

Better than the reader's intent is the author's and text's intent. The author of a text and the text itself should determine its meaning. That is, not what we think the author "meant to say," but what he actually did say and write in the document. Combined with a true understanding of the Bible's Inspiration by the Holy Spirit, this approach is the most objective and reliable.

(See **2 Peter 1:20-21**)

**Luke 24** is an envious account of Jesus "explaining" to two men all of the things concerning Himself found in the Scriptures. What a wonderful conversation to have eavesdropped on. The word "explained" is where we get the term *Hermeneutics*. It is the science and art of interpretation. And again to quote Howard Hendricks, it is the primary need of Bible study: "To determine what God meant by what God said." Bernhard Ramm has said it in a more expansive way: "The primary and basic need of [bible study methods is] to ascertain what God has said in Sacred Scripture; to determine the meaning of the Word of God."

## How Exactly Do I Interpret?

Picture a birthday or anniversary present wrapped in several layers of paper. To get to the treasure inside, you must first unwrap each layer. This is similar to Biblical Interpretation. The first and most important layer is the immediate context of the passage including the basic paragraph where the text is found. The second layer is the wider context of the larger section or whole book. The last layer of interpretation is a study of the context of literature, culture, history, etc. that is outside of our Bible. The gift inside the wrapping is the meaning as God intended it to be communicated to us.

*Then [Jesus] opened their minds to understand the Scriptures...*  
**Luke 24:45**

Let's look at this first and most critical step: the immediate text or passage and its context.

## The Labor of Interpretation

There is significant work to be done in interpreting a Biblical passage of any size. This is true because the Bible was written long ago, in another place, in another culture, in other languages, in a different literary genre and style, and by the power of God's Holy Spirit. Each of these truths represents a considerable gap or hurdle that we must overcome in our

interpretation of a text. To again quote Bernhard Ramm, "The second great need for a science of [Bible study methods] is to bridge the gap between our minds and the minds of the Biblical writers."

**Time** – The Bible was written over a period of 1500 years, and the final part almost 2000 years ago. When was this specific book, letter, or prophecy written?

**Place** – Geography weaves its way into culture and language in intricate and delicate ways.

**Culture** – The Ancient Near East and Greco-Roman cultures of the OT and NT are alien to ours. Again, when was this specific book or letter written? Who is the author? Why was he writing it?

**Language** – Biblical Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek are clearly and adequately represented by English translations, but translation from one language to another inevitably loses some nuance of the original.

**Literary** – We do not often confuse newspaper articles with novels or personal emails with science fiction. These represent different genres of literature that are distinct. The OT and NT also contain distinct genres of writing, each with corresponding characteristics that are crucial for interpretation. Biblical Genres include: Historical narrative (**1 Samuel**), prophecy (**Amos**), wisdom (**Proverbs**), poetry (**Psalms**), gospel [often also called a *bios* or life-story] (**John**), epistle (**Galatians**), apocalyptic (**Revelation**). What makes this more complex is that often a particular book includes multiple genres. **Revelation** for instance is made up of epistolary, prophetic and apocalyptic genres; perhaps others.

**Supernatural** – The mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, both to write truth through a human author and communicate that truth to the mind of the Christian reader, is yet another facet in our interpretation because in this step we are asking this same Holy Spirit to teach, illuminate and convey meaning.

But, wait just a second here.

Interpretation shouldn't be this hard. Isn't the meaning of the text plain? Isn't it obvious?

In a word, yes.

But also, no.

These gaps represent significant difficulties in many texts that we read. The problem is really this: with any given text, the meaning is BOTH plain and deep. This is the nature of a Divine book. God is not trying to *hide* meaning, so it should be plain. But it is the Holy Spirit of the eternal God that wrote this Scripture through the human authors and so it is always deeper and more *meaning-ful* than we expect. Add to this the difficulties of the gaps, and we've got a significant but joyous task before us. Below we see how much more meaningful the text becomes when we bridge the gaps.

Try this passage on for size.

**Matthew 19:3** *Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?"*

This is simple isn't it? The Pharisees were asking Jesus about divorce. True.

They were questioning Him about legal reasons to allow a divorce. True.

They were asking Him if any reason is acceptable for a divorce. True.

Here this meaning is plain. It is obvious.

However, what you may not know unless you labor to understand the culture, background and language of the text is that a divorce "for any reason" had a long and colorful background among the Jews of Jesus' day. It was actually a specific kind of divorce, a "for-any-reason-divorce." Because of a rabbinical teaching tradition based off of **Deuteronomy 24:1ff**, certain Jews thought it was legal for a man to divorce his wife literally "for any reason at all." If she burnt supper, and it displeased him, he could divorce her. If he didn't like the color of her dress...well, you get it. This information makes the Pharisees' question and Jesus' response much more *meaning-ful* and interesting. This background only comes by the hard work of interpretation, bridging the gaps.

## Tools of Interpretation

Just like observation tools, there are a small bag of implements that help us understand meaning in interpretation. Here are a few of the big-hitters.

**Meditation** – Just like with observation, the step of interpretation is best served with a healthy helping of patience. We must become accustomed to slowing down when we study our Bible. We must be patient investigators of the beautiful truth that God reveals in His Word. It is worth it.

**Logical Flow/Argument** – Each and every text was written by the human author with Divine inspiration by the Holy Spirit. This means that every sentence has a point, a goal, and is part of a larger argument or logical flow. Discovering and maintaining this big picture logic while zooming in on the pieces is the task of admiring the forest AND the trees. This is also the most dismissed and overlooked piece of interpretation in my opinion. It is difficult at first, but with practice it can be second nature.

**Word Studies** – Don't be intimidated by this idea. To study a word is not just for seminary students or egg-heads. Meanings and usage of individual words are absolutely critical to interpretation. Words also, and almost always, contain an instructive range of meaning. The GOAL is to *discover* the meaning of words, NOT to *assign* words with meaning. This is a critical distinction.

With some simple resources listed below, try to study words in this simple way:

1. How is this word used in the sentence?
2. Is this specific word used elsewhere in the immediate context? How?
3. Is this word used elsewhere in the same book/letter? How?
4. Is this word used elsewhere by the same author? How?
5. Is this word used elsewhere by other authors?
6. How does this information help me clarify meaning in the passage I am studying?

This simple format of word study will open up an unexpected beauty in your study of God's Word.

**Figures of Speech** – Break a leg. I'm not sure where that came from, but we recognize it for what it is. We are not hoping for someone to snap their femur, but actually to do well. This is a figure of speech and the Bible is full of them. To understand them in their context and culture will reveal their intent. The most common figures are simile (uses "like") and metaphor, but there are many other kinds. Example: What does "cause your face to shine" mean in **Psalms 80** and **Deuteronomy 6:25**?

**Person/Place Names** – These are often very meaningful, especially in the Old Testament. A good Bible will often help you with these meanings and translations in the margin. Example: What does the name "Isaac" mean and how does it relate to the story in **Genesis 18 and 21**? You'll crack up at that one.

**Structure and Synthesis** – As you progress through a Biblical book or letter, try hard to maintain the forest for the trees. The meaning of individual words, phrases and sentences support the overall argument and are really meaning-less without the big picture. Context is everything. It may help to keep notes as you study. Try to continually hone and refine your understanding of the overall message of the book and how each section supports it. Try to identify the key verse or verses and synthesize your thoughts as you go.

**Resources** – For a serious student of the Bible, access to and familiarity with a couple key resources is critical. Don't be scared of these. Many are written for a lay audience.

First of all, a good **Bible** is absolutely essential. You should own one that fits your age range and reading level. Prefer those that offer *cross references* and perhaps *study notes*. These are often very helpful (see the WARNING below as it applies to study notes).

A **Concordance** is a great second step. This tool will allow you to easily track word usage in the word-study steps mentioned above. A **Lexicon** (essentially a dictionary that focuses on Biblical words) will take it to the next level by defining the range of meaning and usage of a word.

Next you will need several good **Introductions**, which is a technical term for overview. A good one for the OT and a good one for the NT is a great start. This will help you get a summary of each book, including brief discussions of author, date, occasion, etc.

Beyond this you will eventually want to build your library by adding **Theologies** and **Commentaries** on specific books as extended and specific reference tools (I highly recommend the FREE commentary notes on every book of the Bible at [www.soniclight.com](http://www.soniclight.com)).

**WARNING:** With written works from any author and especially online resources, **READ CRITICALLY**. Filter what you read through a biblical grid and use Spirit-led discernment. The Bible is the only book that is without error in the original manuscripts. That means that every other one gets it wrong somewhere.

# Practice

Robert Traina, in his great resource *Methodical Bible Study*, outlines phases of Interpretation and breaks them down into three basic steps. Because of their simplicity, I will repeat them here.

## 1. Interpretive Questions

Based on your observation of terms, structure, etc. in the first study method step, you will begin to form as many specific and relevant questions of the text as possible. Over time, this will become intuitive and internal. Interpretive questions may look like this: What is meaning of this term, this structure, this form, this context? Why is the larger reason for stating it this way? How are these two clauses related? Who is he talking about? Who is speaking? What is the sense of this verb? Why does he speak in the negative rather than the positive? What? When? Where? Why?

## 2. Interpretive Answers

Based on the plethora of questions generated, now we begin to answer them. This is the heart of interpretation. This relies on many factors besides the hard work mentioned above. It depends on the miracle of illumination by the Holy Spirit. This is God opening your mind to the meaning of His Word. We should first and always PRAY for God to reveal Himself and teach us through His Word. It also relies on common sense, intelligence and experience. The hard work we already mentioned composes the objective "meat" of interpretation. We employ all of these methods to press on to answers. This process must be patient, thorough and methodical. It may happen quickly for a given passage; however you may also find you enjoy investing time.

This advertisement appeared beneath a picture of a puzzled young boy reading a letter. It was promoting the new book by Mortimer Adler entitled *How to Read a Book*. It appeared in *The New York Times*, April 10, 1940 and illustrates the process of questioning.

### How to Read a Love Letter

This young man has just received his first love letter. He may have read it three or four times but he is just beginning. To read it as accurately as he would like, would require several dictionaries and a good deal of close work with a few experts of etymology and philology.

However, he will do all right without them.

He will ponder over the exact shade of meaning of every word, every comma. She has headed the letter 'Dear John.' What, he asks himself, is the exact significance of those words? Did she refrain from saying 'Dearest' because she was bashful? Would 'My Dear' have sounded too formal?

Jeepers, maybe she would have said 'Dear So-and-So' to anybody!

A worried frown will now appear on his face. But it disappears as soon as he really gets to thinking about the first sentence. She certainly wouldn't have written that to anybody!

And so he works his way through the letter, one moment perched blissfully on a cloud, the next moment huddled miserably behind an eight-ball. It has started a hundred questions in his mind. He could quote it by heart. In fact, he will – to himself – for weeks to come.

Anyone who has ever received such an important correspondence relates to these sentiments. Reading the Word of God, essentially a letter from God to you, is much the same.

### **3. Interpretive Summary**

This final step is the important work of synthesizing and summarizing your work in order to arrive at the main message of the passage. The parts must be assembled together to form a whole, and the whole must be in line with the larger message of the book and even the higher message of the Bible. It may help to list the main truths you have discovered, state the main theme or message of the passage, outline the passage, paraphrase it or even illustrate it in art or diagrams.

Try to apply these principles and steps of interpretation to these familiar texts:

- **Psalm 23**
- **Romans 8**
- **Luke 15**
- **Matthew 4:1-11**
- **Psalm 1**
- **1 Timothy 1:3-17**

So far we have covered the first two steps of our Bible Study Method Plan: Observation and Interpretation. We have seen that the step of Observation is the step most people forget or misunderstand. It prepares us for solid Interpretation. "Observation is discovery; Interpretation

is digesting. Observation means depicting what is there, and Interpretation is deciding what it means." Now we will continue our discussion by looking at steps 3 and 4: **Correlation** and **Application**.

To remind us of the overall purpose of our study, allow Roy B. Zuck to speak again from his instructive work *Basic Bible Interpretation*. "Bible study is an intellectual pursuit in which we seek understanding of what God says. But Bible study must go beyond that to include spiritual discipline, in which we see to put into practice what we read and understand. Heart appropriation, not merely head apprehension, is the true goal of Bible study."

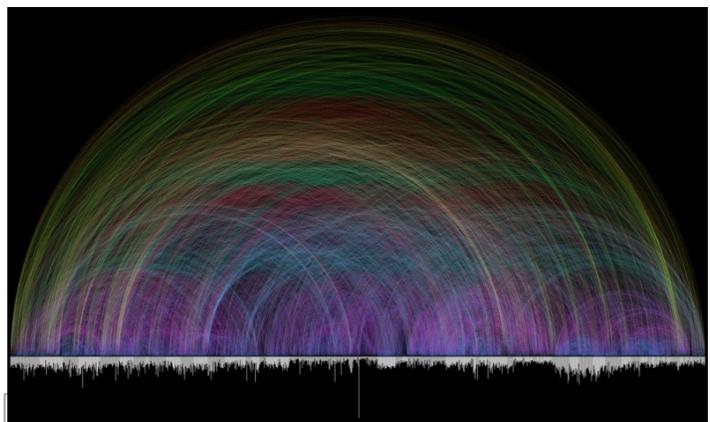
## Correlation

This step of Bible study methods tries to see the passage under review in the greater and grander scope of the whole Bible. It is the art of seeing the Bible as a whole. Along with Observation, step one, this is the most forgotten step of solid study methods. It logically follows adequately examined observation and interpretation and it provides a solid basis for thoroughly Biblical application, our fourth and final step.

**Correlation**, of course, means *to connect*. It is the work of recognizing relationships and as such is closely related to Interpretation.

Some actually consider this step as a part of Interpretation. Although we are treating it differently here, Correlation and Interpretation should be understood as partners in methodical Bible study. One leads to the other. One informs the other. Each sharpens and clarifies our goal of determining accurate meaning and transforming application.

As a critical partner to Interpretation, we will touch on a few very important aspects of Correlation, including: Cross-Referencing, Use of the Old Testament



This image is a visual representation of Biblical cross references. The long line at the bottom middle is **Psalm 119**, the longest chapter in the Bible. The colored arcs represent clear cross references from chapter to chapter, over 63,000 of them. When you factor in allusion, which is more difficult to track than clear references or quotes, this large number may double or triple.

within the New Testament (including Old Testament types and allusions), New Testament use of other New Testament teaching, themes, vocabulary, and finally, developing principles that bridge interpretation and application.

**Cross Referencing** is an extremely important facet of good interpretation and correlation. A good Bible will go a long way in facilitating this skill. The image here illustrates this tool well. *First* locate the corresponding chapter (and sometimes verse) in the margin. *Next*, notice that several key words or phrases will be notated with small letters that correspond to other reference passages listed in the margin. Connect the dots. For example, here in **Psalm 23**, the phrase “*my shepherd*” (most often the word or phrase immediately following the small letter is intended in the reference) is designated with the superscript <sup>a</sup>. In this case the superscript <sup>a</sup> in the margin leads you to three passages: **John 10:11; 1 Peter 2:25; Revelation 7:17**. In each of these passages you will find similar uses of “shepherd.” *Finally*, repeat these steps in **John 10, 1 Peter 2** and **Revelation 7** and you may see a reference to **Psalm 23**, but hopefully other passages will be listed there and your study will continue. After reading all of these passages (some of which may only relate in vocabulary alone, others in larger theme and context) a clarified picture of the text and context in your original passage emerges.

Specific types of Bibles specialize in including abundant cross references. Free online or inexpensive hard-back concordances will take your cross-referencing study even further.

A study of cross references in wording and vocabulary as well as character and theme leads directly to the fascinating topic of **Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament**. Let me first say, specialized scholars devote their whole lives to this subject and an increasing amount of expensive academic books are produced on the subject each year. That being said, this facet of Bible Study remains accessible and profitable for even the beginner.

The authors of the New Testament used the Old Testament in diverse ways. They include:

- Simple quotation – **Hebrews 1:5-13; Matthew 2:15**
- Clear reference without quotation – **John 1:17; Matthew 19:3** (refers to **Deuteronomy 24:1**)
- Veiled reference or allusion – **John 1:51** (refers to **Genesis 28:10ff**)
- Analogy or Illustration – **James 5:17** uses Elijah to illustrate a man of prayer
- Type and Antitype (examined below)

When a faithful Bible student comes across an element of a text or longer passage that may be a use of the Old Testament within the New (or use of other writings within the same testament and time period), several key questions must be investigated:

- How is the reference/quotation/allusion used?
- Why is it used in the present context?
- What about the author's purpose is benefitted by this usage?
- What about the original context of the referenced material is pertinent to the text studied?
- How would this reference have been received by the original audience?

The literary tools of **Type and Antitype** are also common features of the Bible, as well as the source of common abuses by its readers. Throughout the history of the church there have been many who see deep spiritual significance and Biblical relevance in the number of hinges on the doors of Solomon's sanctuary or the two coins that the Good Samaritan gave to the innkeeper. These are not true Biblical types. A **Type** is an element of literature that *resembles and corresponds to something else*. The **Antitype** is the *counterpart*, literally "answering to the type," and is *that to which the Type refers*. In more simple terms, a *type* foreshadows the *antitype*. Let's look at an example. Jonah, who spent three days in the belly of a fish is a *type* of Christ, who spent three days buried in the earth (**Matthew 12:40**). So, in this case, Jesus is the *antitype*.

Perhaps some examples of Biblical types will help clarify this sometimes difficult concept. Think about: Melchizedek and Christ (**Hebrews 7:3ff**); the Passover feast and Christ's sacrifice (**1 Corinthians 5:7**; etc.); the Feast of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit (**Joel 2:28**; **Acts 2**); the Old Testament Tabernacle and Christ/our access to and fellowship with God (**Hebrews 8:5**; **Hebrews 9:23ff**).

WARNING: Not all things that refer or resemble something else are types. It is a slippery slope to begin seeing correspondence behind every story and illustration. Roy B. Zuck in *Basic Bible Interpretation* helpfully instructs that Types have the following characteristics:

- **Resemblance** – A natural and significant correspondence between type and antitype, not a superficial or shallow relationship.
- **Historical Reality** – Based in actual persons, places, things, events. Types rise naturally out of the text and are not something read into the text by the student.
- **Prefiguring** – Types have a forward focus, a predictive or foreshadowing nuance.
- **Heightening** – From type to antitype there is escalation, increase. The true antitype is always superior to its type.

- **Divine Design** – Types are resemblances planned in the mind of God, not merely analogous references invented or contrived in the (sometimes fickle) mind of man.
- **Validation by the New Testament** – Scripture must indicate or designate the type in some way.

New Testament use of other New Testament teachings, themes, wording and phrasing, as well as Old Testament use of the Old Testament is yet another facet of Correlation and generally follows the same principles and guidelines as Use of the OT in the NT above.

## What is the Goal?

Let's be honest and remember that in our Bible Study we are headed somewhere. We have a goal in mind. We want accurate meaning and true transformation in our personal lives, in addition to the ability and responsibility to minister to others these same goals.

One of the chief goals of Correlation is to synthesize the hard work of the first three steps of methodical Bible study. This synthesis should produce principles and themes that bridge the gaps of time, place, culture, language and literature.

A **Principle** is "an outstanding and abiding truth that is not limited to a moment in time." Let me offer an example: Humans are corrupt and sinful. After the fall into sin in **Genesis 3**, this statement is a universal truth. It is a principle. The rest of the Bible corroborates this truth.

Establishing principles from the text is not the same as "spiritualizing" the text. My professors in seminary would remind us countless times, "*principlize, don't spiritualize.*" This means that as students of the Bible we are to try hard not to force every teaching into some preconditioned and mystical interpretive box. The task is to connect the "then" Biblical world to the "now" contemporary world without losing any meaning or significance. Confusingly, this is simple work as well as being very difficult work.

Think about these two necessities as you extract principles from the text you're studying:

- Complete familiarity with the text and its context (this means the hard work of steps 1 and 2)
- An ability to think with the whole text and context in mind

Proceed with these helpful steps:

- Ask simple diagnostic questions of the text: Who, what, when, where, why, how?
- Record all the truths contained in the text.

- Group these truths by subject
- Determine the central, major, guiding truths and the secondary, non-central ones
- Reword these central truths into simple sentences that will begin to form principles
- Principles are simple, positive statements of fact, written in the third person.

## Practice

This brief discussion forms the skeleton of a sincere study of Biblical Correlation. Work your way through the skills and elements mentioned in this section in these beautiful passages: **John 5; Hebrews 1; Revelation 4-5**. In these passages (as any) you will find good fodder for study. Pray. Think. Write.

## Application

One of my favorite seminary professors and mentors would often say “Truth not lived is truth not learned.” That is a nice and neat way of saying just how essential application is to Bible Study. This is where the rubber meets the road. Action time.

Before we begin to explain our final step, let’s pause for a moment and remember what is at stake and why we are reading a document like this. Throughout our study I’ve tried to illustrate common pitfalls in popular Bible study methods. We’ve noticed a few already and here in Application we see perhaps the most devastating.

- Most people completely overlook the step of *Observation*
- *Interpretation* becomes the first and last step for many and is often mishandled
- *Correlation* is misunderstood and rarely applied in a significant way
- **Application** (life change) is difficult and often exchanged for simply increased Knowledge

Arriving here at our final step actually helps us make sense of where we have been in the previous three. Observation really allows the text to speak to us. It curbs our sometimes capricious and unconscious way of interfering. Interpretation furthers this process by using methods and tools that help us to determine the meaning of the text. Correlation furthers and clarifies this process of determining meaning as well as prepares us for landing the plane in the entire intention of the Bible itself. Application then translates the principles of Correlation into practices. **2 Timothy 3:16-17** reveals this intention: Life Change, instruction that leads to

*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*  
**2 Timothy 3:16-17**

truth, equipping for good works and making one adequate for this task. This is Application. This is our ultimate goal. Bible study is incomplete until true Application is discerned and appropriated.

Howard Hendricks in his popular and worthwhile book on Bible Study Methods, *Living By the Book*, repeats a similar warning about misunderstanding application. "The Bible was not written to satisfy your curiosity; it was written to transform your life. The ultimate goal of Bible study is not to do something to the Bible, but to allow the Bible to do something to you, so truth becomes tangent to life."

Look up **Joshua 1:8** and **Ezra 7:10** and meditate on what you find there. How do these passages speak to application?

## Where Does Application Begin?

What is the purpose of Application? It may seem obvious but let us state it clearly, for the purpose of Application defines our pursuit of it. One of my seminary professors summed it up in three important terms. **Relevance**: Application makes the facts of the Bible meaningful to your personal life. **Realization**: Application promotes Living Truth instead of simply learning truth. And **Response**: Application calls for a commitment to the truth rather than simple consideration.

## Prayer

Did you see that word coming? Prayer? Do not overlook or underestimate the power and relevance of prayer in Bible Study. I have tried to mention this throughout the study, but lest you gloss over it, permit a repeating. I have personally experienced, time and time again, the absolute necessity of prayer in Bible study. I have studied without prayer, and I have studied through, in and with prayer. The results and transformation are starkly different in each situation. We MUST begin with prayer as we sit to open our Bible. We must pause when we come to certain trouble spots or overwhelmingly magnificent revelations. We must conclude with prayer for continual life change and transformation. After all, every time we pick up our Bible to read and study we must remember that we are doing so *with a Living God*. We study *with a Partner*. If intimacy with God is our goal, then we must never allow mere abstractions, details or information to be the purpose of our study.

The beautiful and haunting words of Philip Yancey in *God the Jilted Lover* provide an apt warning.

As I read through the pages of the Bible, I was haunted by the reality of a God who lets our response to Him matter that much [the anger and pain of a wounded parent or lover in Jeremiah and Hosea]. ...I realized afresh a danger in our study "about" God. When we tame Him, in words and concepts, and file Him away under alphabetized characteristics, we can easily lose the force of the passionate relationship God seeks above all else.

There may be no greater danger to those of us who write, talk, or even think about God. Mere abstractions, to Him, may be the cruelest insult of all.

Soaked and steeped in prayer, Application begins as every other step in Bible Study begins, by asking questions. We are simply asking: How does this truth apply to my life? What does it demand of me?

Roy B. Zuck, again from *Basic Bible Interpretation*, offers some helpful pointers as we begin to ask questions of all that we've learned through the first three steps.

- Build applications on interpretations
- Determine what was expected of the original audience
- Base applications on elements present day readers (that's you) share with the original audience
- See the principle in the text
- Think of the principle as an implication of the text and as a bridge to application
- Write out specific action-responses
- Rely on the Holy Spirit

A list of simple Application Questions may be the easiest reminder and Bible Study help. A list of questions that you can ask any and every text of the Bible may begin like this:

- Is there a command to obey?
- Is there a sin to avoid or confess?
- Is there a promise to place faith in?
- Is there a person to emulate or examples to follow?
- Is there a person that is a negative example of what to avoid?
- Is there a godly characteristic to appropriate?
- Is there a correction necessary to my thinking?
- Is there an activity I need be involved in?
- Is there a passage to commit to memory?

- How can I respond to God in worship from this truth?
- How does this text lead me to pray?
- What does this text demand of/for my relationships?

Can you think of other questions to add to this list? Consider printing it out or writing it in the inside cover of your Bible or perhaps on a bookmark as a reminder.

Application is not rocket science, it actually comes easily when you prepare your heart and mind properly.

One of my closest friends studies his Bible with two different color pens. The blue pen is used for the first three steps of Bible Study Methods. His seminary training and immense ministry experience has helped him excel in these areas. The red pen is used to record and work on Application. At the end of his study time, the page or pages before him can be easily discerned. Was he focused entirely on meaning in blue ink? If there is little red ink, then he sits back down to meditate further and prayerfully work out true application. His goal is life change, not simply knowledge.

Maybe you can consider adopting a similar game plan.

## Where do I start in Bible Study?

Okay, after all of this discussion (some of it rather academic and lengthy, I admit), where in the world do I start? Perhaps you actually feel MORE intimidated by the Bible than before you began reading this resource. Maybe you feel more distant than ever before from the living Word of God.

Press through that. Pray through it. Reject it as false intimidation and shallow distance. It is not true.

**Step One is the Only Step** and therefore the most important: **Schedule time to read God's Word.**

That's all you really have to do. If you are IN the Bible, then God's Word will do God's Work. Combine simple *presence* with a conscious *intention* to study it well and...well, that's all you really need. These two ingredients: *presence* and *intention* combine to form a marvelous explosion of truth and grace in the life of the believer.

It really doesn't matter where you start reading, but if you need some suggestions, try one of the four Gospels (my favorite is **John**) and the book of **Psalms** at the same time. Read the Gospel at your own pace, repeating the same section several times to slow yourself down. Read the Psalms one or two at a time, again repeating the same ones for several readings to maximize impact. Move from there to the book of **Acts** and/or the letters of Paul. You really can't go wrong.

If you are up for something more challenging try a minor prophet ("minor" simply refers to the size of the written material, not the impact or value; thus "minor prophet" equals "smaller books of prophecy") and practice your Interpretation skills in the background of the book. Try wisdom books like **Ecclesiastes** or **Proverbs**, working hard to understand how that specific genre works.

Again, it doesn't matter where you begin. Just begin.

I pray that your labor in the Word of God is the greatest adventure of your life. May God richly bless you as you press into Him through His Word.