

## INTRODUCTION

In the last session, we began a four-part mini-series on *the practice of Bible Study*. These four parts cover a process consisting of four stages designed to lead any student of Scripture from an initial acquaintance with the text to the faithful application of the text's message. These four stages are:

- Stage I. Orientation** – *Surveying the text's surroundings.*
- Stage II. Observation** – *Examining the text's contents.*
- Stage III. Interpretation** – *Understanding the text's meaning.*
- Stage IV. Application** – *Obedying the text's message.*

The first stage of this process is designed to orient the student to the world *around* the text. The second stage focuses on acquainting the student with the contents *in* the text. The third stage guides the student to draw meaning *from* the text. The fourth and final stage leads the student to respond appropriately *to* the text.

The first stage—*orientation*—was the focus of the previous session. Fundamental to that stage was a five-step process that moved the student through the most general aspects of context to the most specific.

## STAGE 2: OBSERVATION

Now the focus turns to **observation**. *Observation* can be defined as “**the art of awareness**” or “**the act of taking notice**.” Robert Traina describes it vividly: “The process of observation should generally resemble the absorbing process of the sponge when it is exposed to a liquid” (*Methodical Bible Study*, 48). The primary question to be answered in this stage is “**What does the text say?**”

**Observation:**  
the art of  
awareness.

Three personal prerequisites are essential for an effective observer. First, he must have *the will to observe*. One cannot observe well if he is not convinced of its necessity. He must be driven to invest time and effort because of a settled conviction that this demanding process glorifies God. Second, he must have *a passion for precision*. Good observers are always characterized by a penchant for detail. They are not content with viewing the big picture only but are eager to pick up the magnifying glass and look for the tiny brushstrokes. Third, good observers must have *a pledge to persistence*. To observe well takes time—and good observers are not stingy with their time. Good observers refuse to surrender to boredom or the tyranny of the urgent, but instead stay in the chair, at the desk, with the Bible open before their eyes, committed to finding the treasure that emerges only after extended exploration.

The purpose of observation can be described as twofold: it is **(a) to become thoroughly acquainted with the text's details**; and it is **(b) to become thoroughly convinced of their need for explanation**. Good observation is crucial for preparing the student for success in the next stage—*interpretation*. Only once the student has become aware of the text's particulars is he be able to appreciate fully how all those details function to convey divine revelation. It is for this reason that the psalmist prays, “**Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Thy Law**” (Psalm 119:18). Although we are used to hearing that “the devil is in the details” when it comes to important documents like contracts, the psalmist believed the exact opposite when it came to the Scriptures!

How can one develop the skill of observation? Four strategies for growth are listed below:

## STRATEGY 1:

Read the  
Text

### 1. Read the text.

**PRINCIPLE:** Good observation begins with a thorough acquaintance with the text, and a thorough acquaintance comes through good reading.

This sounds self-evident. Yet when presented with a text of Scripture, we commonly rush to *interpretation*. Even before our eyes finish reading the paragraph, we have already formed significant conclusions. But one cannot interpret correctly until he knows all that the text before him contains. Reading is essential! In particular, reading is crucial for two reasons—it is needed *to inform* one’s awareness (to introduce to or remind the reader of what is actually stated in the text), and it is needed *to correct* one’s awareness (to indicate to the reader what is not actually there, but what may have been assumed).

FIVE LAWS OF READING
Read Prayerfully
Read Inquisitively
Read Repeatedly
Read Progressively
Read Patiently

On the topic of *reading Scripture*, it is important to recognize two complementary approaches that should mark the Bible reading of all students of Scripture:

**PLAN A (focus: *breadth*):** Be reading through the Bible chronologically and systematically for the big picture, in order to be able to connect the dots in the storyline of God’s plan of redemption.

**PLAN B (focus: *depth*):** Take opportunities to study individual texts deeply, for extended periods of time, and preferably in sequence through whole books.

It is the latter (PLAN B) that is the focus of this process. The kind of reading that is needed here is not for the big picture—although it begins there. The kind of reading that is needed here is reading is intentionally narrow and progressively slower, deeper, and more detailed.

To help with this process, find an edition of the Scriptures that is printed on good paper and that has lots of space for marking and notetaking. Although expensive, a “loose-leaf Bible” is particularly helpful for this kind of detailed reading, but a “journaling Bible” also provides more space than most Bibles for marking the text and adding notes. Marking the text while reading increases awareness.

Another helpful reading practice is *to listen* to the text read to you, or to read it out loud for yourself. It is often surprising what one can observe in the text when it is *heard* in addition to when it is *seen*. Hearing the text introduces a new dimension of awareness.

Ultimately, begin your study of the text by reading it—over and over, even to the point of committing it to memory.

## STRATEGY 2: 2. Query the author.

Query the  
Author

**PRINCIPLE: To increase awareness, the student should generate a leading question for each sentence of the text, creating a kind of Q & A dialogue with the writer.**

The logic behind this strategy of observation is to treat each of the text’s sentences as *the answer*. If you have a passage that contains five sentences, then you have five answers. If you have ten sentences, then you have ten answers. If you have two sentences, then you have two answers.

With those “answers” before you, consider it your task to create the question to which those sentences provide the answer. As you work through the text, you create a kind of Q & A dialogue with the writer, with each of your questions setting the stage for each of his answers. The challenge, of course, is to come up with the right questions—ones which smoothly introduce each answer.

- 1) Create a two-columned chart, with the column on the left designated for the “leading question,” and the column on the right for each sentence of the text.
- 2) Paste the sentence of the text in the right column; it serves as the writer’s “answer.”
- 3) Generate a question that *leads into* the answer, and record it in the left column.
- 4) Each subsequent question must take into account the previous “answer” given, and lead into the next “answer,” so that the final “transcript” should read smoothly like an interview.

QUERYING THE TEXT – PSALM 1	
Leading Question	The Writer's Answer
<i>Who is the one whom I can truly consider as "blessed"?</i>	→ "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers!" (v. 1).
<i>If this "blessed" man has no regard for the wicked, in what, then, does he delight?</i>	→ "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night" (v. 2).
<i>What will this "blessed" man be like, and what does the future hold for him?</i>	→ "He will be like a tree <i>firmly</i> planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers" (v. 3).
<i>But do not the wicked also prosper, and if not, what happens to them?</i>	→ "The wicked are not so, but they are like chaff which the wind drives away" (v. 4).
<i>What future, then, lies ahead for the wicked?</i>	→ "Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous" (v. 5).
<i>Why are the futures of both groups so different?</i>	→ "For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish" (v. 6).

### STRATEGY 3: 3. Compare the Translations

Compare the Translations

**PRINCIPLE:** To recognize both the simple and complex details in the text, the student should compare the text in several respected translations.

No other language in history has as many translations as English—both good and bad. The prevalence of good translations in English provides the English-speaking student with a unique opportunity to sharpen his skills in observation. How? Comparing the text to be studied in several reputable translations is uniquely helpful in identifying matters of the text that are easier to understand and matters of the text that are harder—which will need the student's special attention in the interpretation stage to follow.

Choose the translation to be used as the standard—the one in which the main work of study will be done. This translation should be a *literal* or *word-for-word* translation like the NASB or the LSB. (A good resource on the issue of choosing a Bible translation is Robert Thomas's book, *How to Choose a Bible Version* [Christian Focus, 2000].) Then choose two or more reputable translations for comparison.

- 1) Create a chart, with the standard translation (NASB or LSB) in the left column and the other selected translations listed to the right.
- 2) Insert a single verse of text in each row, under the appropriate translation.
- 3) Arrange the display in such a way that each line of text corresponds in each of the translations.

Differences among the translations show details which translators find challenging to translate; these are the details which you will want to study in the commentaries in the next stage of *interpretation*.

COMPARING THE TRANSLATIONS – ROMANS 8:26			
NASB	ESV	CSB	NIV
In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; . . .	Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. . .	In the same way the Spirit also joins to help in our weakness, ...	In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

<p>STRATEGY 4: Examine the Particulars</p>	<p><b>4. Examine the particulars.</b></p> <p><b>PRINCIPLE: To observe the text well requires consideration of every detail. No detail of the biblical text can be assumed and ignored as inconsequential.</b></p> <p>There are no disposable “jots and tittles” in Scripture. As Jesus stated in Matthew 5:18, “For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not <u>the smallest letter or stroke</u> shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” Jesus hereby indicated that the nuances of the Law are often communicated in the smallest of alphabet markings.</p> <p>The curiosity of a meticulous investigator is crucial. The student should go to great lengths to find the most “hands-on” approach to the text as possible that works for him.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Write or print out the text on paper to allow you greater freedom to underline, draw arrows, circle key words, and add notes.</li> <li>2) Use different colored pens or highlighters to mark certain patterns.</li> <li>3) Devise a personal system for marking consistently the same kinds of details (main verbs, prepositional phrases, pronouns, etc.).</li> <li>4) Keep an additional notepad to record your key observations and questions for further study.</li> </ol> <p>Integral to the process is the most “hands-on” approach to Scripture as possible.</p> <p>If the student is able to employ these strategies successfully, he will be ready for the next step, <i>interpretation</i>. He will be well-acquainted with the details and well-convinced of their need for explanation.</p>
<p>DISCUSSION QUESTIONS</p>	<p>Discuss these questions in your small group:</p> <hr/> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explain in your own words the four strategies recommended for developing the skill of <i>observation</i>.</li> <li>2. According to Strategy 1, there are two approaches to Bible reading that should characterize Christian practice. What are those two approaches, and what is the benefit of each? How are you doing in each of these areas? In what ways should you improve?</li> <li>3. Do you regularly mark up the biblical text—either in your regular Bible or in some other format? If so, explain to the other men in your group what you do and how it has benefited you. If you do not, inquire about how you can implement this into your study of Scripture.</li> <li>4. How can the comparison of Bible translations heighten your awareness of the details in the text?</li> </ol>
<p>FURTHER STUDY</p>	<p>For further study this week:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Memorize Psalm 119:18.</li> <li>2. Read the classic illustration of observation entitled, “The Student, the Fish, and Agassiz,” available online at this link: <a href="#">Microsoft Word - student-fish-agassiz.doc</a>.</li> <li>3. Listen to the sermons by Tom Pennington, entitled “Bible Study for Every Christian (Part 2): Observation,” available here: <a href="#">Bible Study for Every Christian (Part 2): Observation   Countryside Bible Church</a>; and “Bible Study for Every Christian (Part 3): Observation,” available here: <a href="#">Bible Study for Every Christian (Part 3): Observation   Countryside Bible Church</a>.</li> <li>4. Listen to the sermon by John MacArthur, entitled “Cultivating a Hunger for God’s Word” (<i>Grace to You</i>), preached October 5, 1997, available here: <a href="#">Cultivating a Hunger for God's Word</a>.</li> </ol>
<p>RECOMMENDED READING</p>	<p>The following books are recommended for students of Scripture who are at an intermediate level in their study of Scripture:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traina, Robert A. <i>Methodical Bible Study</i>.</li> <li>• Duvall, Scott J., and J. Daniel Hays. <i>Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible</i>.</li> <li>• Thomas, Robert L. <i>How to Choose a Bible Version: Making Sense of the Proliferation of Bible Translations</i>.</li> </ul> <p><b>Audio, video, and handouts for this session:</b> <a href="http://www.gracechurch.org/motw">www.gracechurch.org/motw</a></p> <p><b>Next meeting:</b> April 23, “I Am the Way, the Truth, the Life” (Chris Hamilton)</p>