



Chapter 6: The Inductive Bible Study Method

The Inductive Bible study method is applicable to every level from individual study, to leading a small group, to every level of Bible teaching from children's Sunday School to the main message coming from the pulpit.

It's goal is to provide a framework by which you can hear God speaking through His Word and make personal application to your life. It's how one becomes a *doer* of the Word and not just a *listener*. This brief introduction is essential to understanding Walk with the Word's perspective and approach to providing Bible studies and related materials to all levels of ministry. There are many books and web sites devoted to this topic that will provide much more detail. This discussion is provided as an overview.

At its simplest, the Inductive method employs three basic techniques:

- Observation
- Interpretation
- Application

Observation

Observation teaches you to see what the passage says and is the basis for accurate interpretation and correct application. It is vitally important to understand the context of the Scripture being studied and to not pull the words or sentences away from their true meaning. Observation answers the question, "What does the passage say?"

You don't have to earn a degree in Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic to figure out the correct context of any portion of Scripture. (Can't hurt, either.)

But it's essential that you keep in mind that language changes over time, and that speech patterns, writing styles, communication methods differ during the course of our own lifetime, much less over 2,000 years and many, many cultural hand-offs. The observation techniques that follow allow you to glean what is being said in the proper context as you study.

Begin with prayer.

If you want to "hear" what God has to say to you personally, you really need to enter into 2-way communication. Prayer begins the "conversation" and places your mind, heart and soul in the right relationship with Him.

Ask the 5 W's and an H.

The hardest thing to do is ridding ourselves of assumptions when we approach God's Word, whether it's a book ("Revelation is nothing but symbols and allegories.") or a familiar passage ("1 Corinthians 13 is all I need to know about 'love.'"). Presuppositions are the most common culprits leading to wrong interpretation and mis-application. Carefully observing who, what, when, where, why and how are the best assurances leading to correct interpretation. **DON'T RUSH PAST THIS.** Doing this on a chapter-by-chapter basis consistently places the paragraphs, sentences, and words in their proper context.

- **WHO** is speaking? Who is this about? Who are the main characters? **To Whom** is he speaking?
- **WHAT** is the subject or event covered in the chapter? What do you learn about the people, event, or teaching?
- **WHEN** do/will the events occur or did/will something happen to someone in particular?
- **WHERE** did or will this happen? Where was it said?
- **WHY** is something being said or mentioned? Why would/will this happen? Why at that time and/or to this person/people?
- **HOW** will it happen? How is it to be done? How is it illustrated?

Mark key words and phrases.

A key word or phrase is one which, when removed, leaves the passage void of meaning. They are often repeated by the author throughout a chapter or book in order to reveal the point or purpose of the writing.

However you decide to mark such things in your Bible, determine to be consistent in your use of colors, symbols, or a combination of both throughout in order to capture important themes that transcend just a single passage of Scripture. (e.g. "love", "covenant", "sin", "grace", etc.)

Pay attention to pronouns ("he", "she", "we", "they", "I", "you", "it", "our", etc.) as they often indicate a change of direction or emphasis. (e.g., when it changes from "He" says to "you" say.) And note synonyms which are different ways to referring to the same person, place, or thing. For instance, there are many names for "God", several names for "Jerusalem", and so on. These often hint at different character traits of the same entity, trying to teach us a little more about it.

Look for lists.

Trivia Time: In movies, books and everyday speech people often refer to "The Seven Deadly Sins" – where did that come from? One of Paul's epistles. (Looking it up would be good for you.) Lists are often additional words used to describe a key word, but are also what is said about someone or something or related thoughts/instructions grouped together.

Lists are something you should develop as you study a particular topic throughout the Bible such as "grace". Listing the characteristics of grace as provided by each use throughout Scripture will provide you with a much broader view of the whole meaning of grace. Such a list allows you see the bigger picture and avoid incorrectly interpreting it on the basis of just one Scripture in and of itself. Lists are the building blocks to developing something usually described in the much more intimidating terms "doctrine" and "theology".

Yes, keeping lists of the important topics provides you with the basis for personalizing doctrines and theologies that follow from studying a theme across the entire Bible. Essentially you are placing the foundation layers of your faith into their right and proper context.

Watch for contrasts and comparisons.

A *contrast* is a comparison of things that are different or opposite, such as light/darkness, proud/humble, good/evil. The word *but* often indicates a contrast to something just stated.

A *comparison* points out similarities and is most often indicated in the use of words such as *like, as, as it were*.

These small words are great eye-openers in the process of observation as they set the words on either side of them into their proper context.

Identify terms of conclusion.

Wherefore, therefore, for this reason, and finally are terms of conclusion that usually follow an important thought in order to tell you how to personally apply the teaching. They're a bridge between the "teaching" and the "application" and often clearly spell out the proper meaning and context of the passage with no guesswork as to what it means.

Develop your own chapter themes.

The printed chapter themes in most Bibles are more of an aid for finding a specific story or passage such as "Jesus Heals a Blind Man"; they're not very descriptive of the spiritual topic or theme that reveal the lessons God is directing to your heart. Nearly every Bible translation is available without such markings, usually in a "wide margin" edition conducive to making personal notes. *The New Inductive Study Bible* by Harvest House Publishers, for instance, builds this into several versions and even provides a place at the end of every book to record your personal chapter headings in order to see patterns and development of themes. But this can also easily be maintained on a separate sheet of paper.

Note expressions of time

This is often the most-overlooked part of observation. A crucial part of attaining the correct context is understanding when something has/is/will happen.

Time is often directly indicated such as “during the reign of”, “on the tenth day”, “at the feast of”, etc., etc. Sometimes the context is as much about when, or its relationship to a past or present event, as it is the person, place, or thing mentioned.

Pay attention to words such as *until*, *then*, *when*, and *after* as they reveal the relationship of one event to another. This is of particular importance when studying the Gospels as you will begin to see that Jesus’ acts and miracles are often an extension of the teaching He gave just before or after them. Throughout the Bible these words help connect actions with teaching in the proper context.

These are the fundamentals and, to be sure, there are added guidelines for the proper observation applied to some of the different types of literature provided throughout the Bible such as psalms, songs, parables, allegories, etc. But this will serve as the baseline throughout. Proper observation takes the guesswork out of interpretation and application. As stated previously, don’t rush through observation because you want to get to interpretation or application more quickly. The latter are only properly achieved through patient and thorough observation.

Interpretation

Interpretation answers the question, “What does the passage mean?” Tons of books and web sites are available on this topic—not to mention hundreds of institutions providing degrees in related fields—so these are the basic rules. But don’t let anyone intimidate you in following these steps; God makes His knowledge and will known to **ANYONE** who seeks. (There’s a good topic for you to keep track of throughout your studies.)

1. **Context ALWAYS rules first.** Never take a Scripture out of its context to make it say what **you** want it to say. Look at context first from the perspective of the book being studied, the overall chapter, the paragraph, and the sentence. Try to stay away from giving individual words meanings that reinterpret sentences, paragraphs, and onward up.
2. **Always seek the FULL counsel of God's Word.** Never accept someone's teaching based on one or two verses; ensure that they're not taken out of context as they're employed throughout the whole Bible.
3. **Scripture never contradicts Scripture.** It's amazing how the best interpreter of Scripture is other Scripture. One of the best study aids is a good Bible dictionary which will show words and concepts as they're presented throughout **ALL** of Scripture. This is often the best use of footnotes in your Bible that indicate other verses utilizing the same words or phrases in other places so you can compare and contrast how it's used in *many* passages.
4. **Never base a belief or conviction on an obscure passage of Scripture.** You can always ask other Believers, go to Bible dictionaries or commentaries, or submit it to God in prayer and await His direction.
5. **Interpret Scripture literally.** Obviously there are no dragons and the Bible uses it and other symbols. But these are far and away the exceptions in the Bible as the vast majority are very, very literal. Beware of false teachers who teach that **all** the Bible is but allegory, such as Jonah and the big fish, or the Garden of Eden, etc., etc. These and all events, places and things in the Bible are real and not allegory. God is very clear in Scripture when He uses allegory, parables, or other literary devices to communicate His Word.
6. **Begin with the primary meaning of the passage.** Let the passage speak for itself. Seek to understand what the author had in mind. Flee from those that teach about things such as "Bible codes" or try to twist Scripture to support a meaning it never had in the first place. Making something complicated is usually an

outward sign of someone that is going to great lengths to justify some kind of sin in their life or the choices they've made. Keep in mind that allegories and typology always *illuminate* what is already present in Scripture – they are never used as the basis for doctrine but to support and explain it in harmony with the rest of God's Word.

7. **The NT has priority.** A long-time rule of interpretation is expressed in the saying, "The 'New' is in the 'Old' concealed, the 'Old' is in the 'New' revealed". In other words, what was initially set forth in the Old Testament is brought to light and fulfillment in the New Testament.

Application

Application answers the question, "What does it mean to me personally? What truths can I put into practice? What changes should I make to my life?"

Paul states in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, *"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."* Paul provides the activities involved in application: Teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness.

- **Teaching** is what the Word of God has to say on any topic or subject and is *always true*. Once you discover what the Word of God teaches, you are obligated before God to accept that truth and to live by it, dropping any false beliefs or teachings you may have previously held.
- **Reproof** is finding out where you have thought or behaved wrongly or have not been doing what God says is right according to His Word. It's your personal acknowledgment that you were wrong in thought or behavior and now accept and agree with God's truth, setting you free from sin and unbelief.

- **Correction** is the step wherein the knowledge gained from teaching and reproof are placed into action resulting in changed behavior. It's converting knowledge into obedience.
- **Training in righteousness** can be thought of in terms of God's Word as a handbook for living, for how we conduct ourselves. It's continually returning to the source and consistently putting into practice the reproofs and corrections of His Word to build our character in Him.

In seeking to apply Scripture to your life, ask the following questions in light of your observation and interpretation:

1. What does the passage teach?
2. As I've studied this passage, do any errors in my belief or problems with my behavior come to mind?
3. Remembering that God is my Father and I am His child, what instruction is my Father trying to pass to me, His child?

Finally, in the process of applying Scripture, take note to beware of the following:

- Applying cultural standards rather than biblical standards
- Attempting to strengthen a legitimate truth by using Scripture incorrectly
- Applying Scripture out of prejudice from past training or teaching.

Conclusion

Observation, interpretation, and application lead to *transformation*. This is the goal at every level of Bible teaching whether in an individual's daily devotions or the Sunday morning sermon. This is the process of becoming more and more like the image of Christ that we might not only enjoy a deeper personal relationship with our Savior but reflect His image to the world rather than our own.

Or as Christ described it, becoming *doers* of the Law.