

Core Classes

Unit 1: Foundations

Class 2: How to Read the Bible

Week 3: The Observation Process

Introduction

Many Christians want to understand the Bible better, but they are not always sure **how** to begin. Often, we come to Scripture looking for encouragement, guidance, or answers, but we move too quickly to interpretation and application without first taking the time to really see what the text says. That is where observation comes in.

Observation is the discipline of **reading the Bible carefully, attentively, and honestly**. It means learning to notice what is actually in the text before asking what it means or how it applies to our lives. In other words, before we ask, *“What does this passage mean?”* we must first ask, *“What does this passage say?”*

Observation is the process of carefully examining a passage in order to identify its details, structure, emphasis, and flow of thought. It is the practice of learning to see what the biblical author intentionally wrote.

This matters because good Bible study begins with a simple but essential commitment: **we must let Scripture speak for itself**. We do not want to read our assumptions, traditions, or preferences into the text. We want to understand God’s Word as He gave it.

A good observer learns to slow down and ask:

- What is happening here?
- What stands out?
- What is repeated?
- What is emphasized?
- How is this passage put together?
- Why did the author say it this way?

The more carefully we observe the text, the more accurately we will understand it. In sum, observation is the first step toward faithful interpretation and meaningful application.

Steps in The Observation Process

1. Before You Begin: Pray

Before we begin observing the text, it is important to remember that Bible study is not merely an academic exercise. We are not simply analyzing literature; we are reading the Word of God. For that reason, careful Bible study should begin with prayer. Prayer does not replace careful reading, but it rightly reminds us that we depend on the Holy Spirit for humility, attentiveness, and spiritual understanding. We should ask God to help us read honestly, think clearly, and respond obediently. A good Bible student comes to the text not only with a pen and an open Bible but also with a humble and teachable heart.

Example: Psalm 119:18

“Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.”

Explanation:

Before reading, the psalmist asks God for help in seeing what is already there. That is exactly the posture we should bring to Bible study. We do not pray because observation is mystical, but because our hearts must be rightly aligned before God as we approach His Word.

2. Read the Passage Carefully and Repeatedly

The first step in studying any passage is simply to read it — and then read it again. This may sound obvious, but many misunderstandings happen because we rush past the text too quickly. Careful reading allows us to notice details we would otherwise miss. Repeated reading helps us become familiar with the passage and often reveals patterns, emphasis, and connections that are not obvious at first.

If possible, read the passage in **two or more Bible translations**. Different translations can help highlight shades of meaning, sentence structure, or repeated terms.

At this stage, it is also important to **study the passage for yourself before turning to outside sources** such as study Bibles, commentaries, sermons, or online articles. Those resources can be useful, but they should come later. First, you want to train yourself to see the text with your own eyes.

As you read, ask:

- What immediately stands out?
- What seems important?
- What feels unclear or surprising?
- What do I notice on a second or third reading that I missed the first time?

Careful Bible reading begins with patience.

Example: Philippians 4:4–7

Explanation:

If you read this passage once, you might walk away with “be joyful.” But if you read it several times, you begin to notice repetition (“rejoice”), commands, promises, and the progression of thought (rejoicing → gentleness → prayer → peace). Repeated reading slows you down and helps you see what is actually there.

3. Identify the Boundaries of the Passage

Before you can study a passage well, you need to know **where it begins and where it ends**.

A verse should rarely be studied in complete isolation. Most verses belong to a paragraph, a section, an argument, a story, or a larger unit of thought. If we cut the

text too narrowly, we may miss the point. If we take too much at once, we may lose focus. The goal is to determine the **natural unit of thought**.

Ask:

- Where does this thought begin?
- Where does it end?
- Is this verse completing an earlier idea?
- Does the next paragraph introduce a new thought?

This step protects us from one of the most common Bible study mistakes: pulling verses out of context.

Example: Philippians 4:13 vs. Philippians 4:10–20

Explanation:

Philippians 4:13 is often taken on its own to mean “I can do anything.” But when you read the whole paragraph (4:10–20), you see Paul is talking about contentment in both abundance and need, not “invincibility.” The meaning becomes clear only when the verse is read within its proper boundaries.

4. Record Your First Impressions

Before getting too technical, take time to write down your initial observations.

This is where you begin to train yourself to become an active reader rather than a passive one. Writing your observations forces you to slow down and pay attention. It also helps you avoid forgetting important details.

At this stage, you are not trying to be polished or profound. You are simply gathering what you see.

Write down:

- words or phrases that stand out
- repeated ideas
- obvious themes
- surprising details
- emotional tone
- unanswered questions
- anything that seems important

One of the best habits in Bible study is this: **write down what you observe**.

Example: Psalm 23

Explanation:

When you first read Psalm 23, you might notice words like “shepherd,” “green pastures,” “valley,” and “fear no evil.” You may also notice the tone of the psalm—peaceful, confident, and deeply reassuring. Writing these things down helps you begin tracking not only the details of the passage, but also the

atmosphere and emotional movement of the text. You're not interpreting yet—you're simply noticing what stands out.

5. Identify the Literary Form of the Passage (You Don't Read a Cookbook Like a History Book)

Not every part of the Bible is written the same way. The Bible contains many kinds of literature, and each should be read according to its nature.

For example, we do not read a proverb the same way we read a historical narrative, and we do not read apocalyptic imagery the same way we read a New Testament letter.

Recognizing the **literary form** of a passage helps us read it more faithfully.

Common literary forms in Scripture include:

- narrative
- poetry
- wisdom literature
- prophecy
- apocalyptic literature
- parables
- epistles
- law
- teaching or doctrinal instruction

Genre affects how a passage communicates. It helps us know what kind of language to expect, how the passage is functioning, and what kind of reading is appropriate.

A wise reader asks not only, "*What does this say?*" but also, "*What kind of writing is this?*"

Example: Psalm 23 vs. Romans 3:21–26

Explanation:

Psalm 23 is **poetry**, filled with imagery ("The Lord is my shepherd"). Romans 3 is **doctrinal teaching** that explains justification in precise terms. If you read poetry like a legal document—or doctrine like poetry—you will misunderstand both. Recognizing genre helps you read appropriately.

6. Pay Attention to Literary Signals

Biblical authors do not simply present information — they shape and arrange it in intentional ways. One of the most helpful parts of observation is learning to notice the literary signals that reveal emphasis and meaning.

Look for things like:

Repetition

If something is repeated, it is usually important.

Comparison

When one thing is compared to another, the comparison often helps explain the point.

Contrast

Differences are often used to sharpen the message.

Illustration

Examples, analogies, and images often clarify or reinforce truth.

Explanation

Sometimes the author states something and then explains what he means.

Figures of Speech

The Bible frequently uses metaphor, simile, irony, symbolism, hyperbole, and other forms of figurative language.

These features often reveal what the author wants us to notice most.

Example: Psalm 1

Explanation:

Psalm 1 contrasts the **righteous** and the **wicked**:

- righteous → like a tree (stable, fruitful)
- wicked → like chaff (unstable, blown away)

This contrast is the key to understanding the psalm. The meaning becomes clear when you see the difference being emphasized.

7. Observe the Flow and Structure of the Passage

Once you have noticed the details, begin asking how the passage is put together.

Every passage has a structure. The author is not simply dropping random statements onto the page. He is developing a thought, telling a story, making an argument, or building emphasis in a particular way.

This is where Bible study moves from simply noticing details to seeing how those details work together.

Look for structural patterns such as:

- comparison and contrast
- cause and effect
- problem and solution
- question and answer
- command and reason
- general statement followed by explanation

- explanation followed by illustration
- progression or sequence
- climax or emphasis
- quotation or appeal to another text

At this point, you are beginning to see not only **what** the author says, but **how** he says it.

That is often where meaning becomes much clearer.

Example: Ephesians 2:1–10

Explanation:

This passage moves in a clear flow:

- verses 1–3 → our condition (dead in sin)
- verses 4–7 → God's action (rich in mercy)
- verses 8–10 → the result (saved by grace for good works)

Seeing the structure helps you understand the message: salvation is entirely God's work, from beginning to end.

8. Make Simple Lists

As you observe a passage, it can be helpful to organize your discoveries by making simple lists.

For example, you might ask:

- What does this passage teach me about God?
- What does this passage reveal about people?
- Are there any commands?
- Are there any promises?
- Are there any warnings?
- Are there any repeated truths or themes?

Making lists helps you gather and organize your observations in a clear and useful way. It can also help you see patterns and emphasis that might otherwise be missed.

This is especially helpful in passages that contain:

- many commands
- repeated themes
- theological truths
- descriptions of character or conduct

Example: Colossians 3:12–17

Explanation:

In this passage, you could make a list of Christian virtues (compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience), commands (forgive, let the peace of Christ rule, let the word of Christ dwell in you), and repeated themes (thankfulness, Christ-

centered living). Making a list helps you gather what the text emphasizes without yet moving prematurely into interpretation.

9. Ask Questions of the Text

A good Bible student learns to ask good questions.

One of the simplest and most effective ways to observe a passage is to ask the basic investigative questions. These questions help uncover the facts of the text and often expose details we might otherwise miss.

The Basic Observation Questions

Who?

Who is speaking? Who is being addressed? Who is acting? Who is affected?

What?

What is happening? What is being said, commanded, promised, or explained?

Where?

Where does this take place? Does the setting matter?

When?

When is this happening? Is timing important to the meaning?

Why?

Why is this being said or done? Is a reason or purpose given?

How?

How does this happen? How is the argument developed? How does the passage move from one idea to the next?

These questions may seem simple, but they are often the doorway to deeper understanding.

Example: Mark 2:1–12 (Jesus heals the paralytic)

Explanation:

Ask:

- Who? (Jesus, the paralytic, the scribes)
- What? (A healing and forgiveness of sins)
- Why? (To show Jesus' authority to forgive sins)
- How? (Through both declaration and miracle)

These questions uncover the core of the passage: this is not just about healing—it's about who Jesus is.

10. Look for Key Words and Important Details

As you read and ask questions, begin identifying the words and details that seem central to the passage.

Some words carry special weight. They may be repeated, emotionally loaded, theologically significant, or essential to the author's main point. Other details — names, locations, actions, commands, descriptions, or transitions — may also prove important.

Pay attention to:

- repeated words
- commands
- promises
- warnings
- descriptions of God
- descriptions of people
- references to time, place, or sequence
- words that seem central to the passage's message

You should also note words, customs, practices, or institutions that are unfamiliar to you and may require further study later.

Good observation often begins by noticing what the text emphasizes.

Example: Ephesians 2:8–9

“For by grace you have been saved through faith...”

Explanation:

Key words here include **grace**, **saved**, **faith**, **gift**, and **not of works**. These words carry the main theological weight of the passage. If you miss them, you miss the point. Observation helps you identify what matters most.

11. Pay Attention to the Grammar of the Text

Grammar may sound intimidating or boring, but in Bible study, it is simply another way of asking: **How do the words relate to each other?**

Because God gave us His Word through human language, grammar matters. Small words often carry big meaning.

Pay special attention to:

Verbs

Verbs often carry the action or movement of the passage.

Ask:

- What is happening?
- What is being commanded?
- Is the action past, present, or future?
- Is it a statement, command, or possibility?

Modifiers

Adjectives and adverbs help define and clarify meaning. They often tell us:

- what kind
- how
- when
- where
- to what degree

Connective Words

These are often some of the most important words in a passage.

Examples include:

- **and**
- **but**
- **for**
- **if**
- **because**
- **therefore**
- **so that**
- **however**
- **nevertheless**

These little words often reveal:

- contrast
- reason
- condition
- purpose
- result
- conclusion

Many people miss the point of a passage because they overlook the words that connect the ideas together.

Example: Ephesians 2:4

Explanation:

The word “**but**” changes everything. Verses 1–3 describe hopelessness, but verse 4 introduces God’s intervention. That one small word marks a dramatic shift. Many people miss the meaning of passages because they overlook these connecting words.

12. Study the Context Carefully

One of the most important principles in Bible study is this: **always read in context.**

A verse can only be understood correctly when it is read in relation to what surrounds it. Context protects us from misunderstanding, oversimplifying, or misusing Scripture.

There are two major levels of context:

A. Immediate Context

This includes the verses, paragraphs, and sections immediately before and after your passage.

Ask:

- How does this passage connect to what came before it?
- How does it prepare for what comes after it?
- Is it continuing, explaining, correcting, applying, or concluding something?

B. Broader Biblical Context

This includes how the passage relates to the rest of Scripture.

You may compare your passage with:

- parallel passages
- related themes
- important background texts
- quotations from the Old or New Testament
- other passages using the same key ideas or terms

Scripture often sheds light on Scripture. The Bible is its own best interpreter.

Example: Jeremiah 29:11

Explanation:

This verse is often used as a general promise of personal success. But in context, it was written to Israel in exile, promising eventual restoration after judgment. The context doesn't remove the application, but it guards us from misusing the verse.

Conclusion

Learning to read the Bible well begins with learning to observe it carefully.

Observation teaches us to slow down, pay attention, ask questions, notice details, follow the author's flow of thought, and respect context. It trains us to become readers who listen before we speak, who see before we assume, and who let God's Word set the agenda.

Before interpretation comes observation.

Before application comes understanding.

And before we ask what the Bible means for us, we must first ask what God has said.

That is the heart of learning how to read the Bible.