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How to Study the Bible
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Lesson 3

Step 1

Observation

What do I see?

The Value of Observation

The first step in Bible study is Observation, and this is where we ask and answer the question?

What do I see?

When the psalmist prayed, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Thy law” in Psalm 119:18, he was praying for the power to observe. He was asking the Spirit of God to open the eyes of his heart so that he might see with sight and insight into the truth that God had revealed through His Word.

Now, what do you think makes one person a better Bible student than another?

The answer is that he can see more. They’re both introduced to the same truth in the text. The only difference is what they can each see or observe in the text.

Have you ever gone to a Bible study or heard a message preached on a passage of scripture that you’ve read and studied many times before—and maybe even taught to someone else—but afterward you wondered, “Are we studying the same passage?” And you may have asked, Why did that person

see what I couldn't see? Or why did they get so much more out of that passage than I did?

Well, the difference between you and that other person is the difference that Sherlock Holmes so often pointed out: He said, "You see, but you do not observe."

And the truth is, the ability to observe is a developed process. It's a learned process and not many people take the time to learn or develop the process.

There was story told in Dr. Kendrick's textbook on Living by the Book, which is by the way where most of this material in our study comes from about a renowned nineteenth-century naturalist of Harvard, named Louis Agassiz, and he was asked on one occasion, "What was your greatest contribution, scientifically?"

And his answer was: "I've have taught many men and women how to observe."

And the process he used to do that was rather unusual. He would place this terrible smelling fish on a dissecting tray, and he would stick it beneath the nose of every freshman student and instruct them to observe. He would say, "Observe this specimen and write down everything you see."

The student would start out very enthusiastic, writing down twenty or thirty things and look up only to see that the professor had disappeared. He wouldn't return until the next day, but when he returned he would ask, "How are you doing?"

And they would answer. "Oh, I saw thirty-seven things," the student would boast.

"Wonderful!" the master teacher would cry. "Continue to observe."

And the student would think, Man, I've seen everything there is to see on that fish! But since the professor told him to keep at it, he'd go back and he'd look some more.

This same process would continue day after day for two weeks. Every class consisted of nothing but looking at this fish. And the genius of this professor was his awareness that the basis of scientific inquiry is the process of observing.

And the basis for good Bible study is just the same.

And so going forward, we're going to be learning a number of ways in which we can boost our powers of observation when we read Scripture. And we're also going to have several opportunities to test our skills on various passages of scripture.

But for now, here's a little exercise to make the point that seeing is not the same as observing. Answer the following questions from memory. Then go find out whether your perceptions are correct:

1. The steps that lead into the front of this church building. How many are there? What about the ones that lead up to the back porch?
2. How many stoplights do you pass on your way to work?
3. How many tables are in the fellowship hall?
4. Describe in detail what your husband or wife wore yesterday?
5. How many pews are in this sanctuary?
6. What was the title of my sermon last Sunday? What was the text I used?
7. How many miles has it been since you changed the oil in your car, within 1,000 miles? How many miles since you got new tires? How many miles are on the odometer?

10. Which phase was last night's moon closest to: new, first quarter, full, or last quarter?

So how did you make out? Are you a Sherlock Holmes or blind as a bat? Well, thank God none of those questions is a matter of life and death. But in some real life situations it is more serious. If you watch many crime shows you know that what witnesses see and hear often make the difference in a case.

The color of a suspect's eyes, the time of day, the way a person pronounces a word. There are a lot of observations when it comes to the facts of a crime that are there for anyone to see, yet not many people see them. And the reason is because they don't observe.

(Do Observation Exercises on Handout)

So let's look at a scripture and see what we can see.

Let's start small. Turn to Acts 1:8.

And I want you to follow along in your Bible as I ask questions of the text keeping in mind that my main concern in observation is, What do I see?

You'll notice on one of the handouts, I've rewritten the text in a way that will help facilitate the process. It clarifies not only the grammar, but also the ideas that the writer wants to communicate to us.

Now, where do we start. We start with terms, right?

We said that when we observe, we need to start by looking for some terms. So what's the most important term in this verse? It's the first word I see: **But**.

Mark that word in your Bible.

That word "but" indicates contrast. Later on we're going to see that contrasts are always important in Scripture. "But God" for instance, we run

across that contrast often in the Bible and thank the good Lord for it.
Amen?

So contrasts indicate a change of direction. So what does the word, **“but”** force me to do?

It forces me to go back to the preceding context, which is another crucial aspect of Bible study that we’ll come back to later.

Never should we try and study one verse in isolation,. We should always study scripture in context, which means in relation to something else. And since we’ve started with verse 8, to do that we’re going to have to go back. And that word, “but” causes us to go back. And since we’re so close to the beginning of the book, let’s just go back and pick up the context from the very beginning.

**But you shall 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 remotest part of the earth.**

Verse 1 begins by mentioning “the first account or the former account,” which upon further investigation turns out to be the Gospel of Luke. And so right away I learn that Acts is written by the same writer as the Gospel of Luke and that writer is of course Dr. Luke.

Now, an obvious question I’m going to go ahead and ask, but let you answer is, Who was Luke? And you should make a list of everything you can find out about Luke. And so Luke and Acts form a two-set volume if you will.

The gospel of Luke gets the story started; and Acts is more less the sequel.

If you take a further look you'll find that Luke and Acts have the same subject: **“all that Jesus began to do and teach.”** That's a clue that Acts is going to give me a continuation of Christ's ministry through His apostles.

Now, not only do Luke and Acts have the same subject, but they're also addressed to the same reader, and who was he? He was a man named Theophilus.

Now, who was Theophilus? Well, if you go back to Luke 1:3, we find that he's called, **“most excellent Theophilus,”** and that indicates that he had a title and a position of prominence.

But now, here he's just called, Theophilus. The most excellent is no more. That may mean that something changed. Maybe between the writing of Luke and Acts, he had come to know Christ and that cost him his position or prominence. Or maybe Luke just knows him better and so he just drops the most excellent part. At any rate, Luke had a particular individual in mind as he wrote.

Now, the Acts account begins with a discussion. In verse 6, we find the Lord and His disciples talking about the kingdom of God. The text says, **“And so when they had come together, they were asking Him.”**

And so the first thing they do is raise a question: **“Is this it?” Is what it? “Is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”**

Well, first, Jesus answers their question in verse 7 in sort of a negative way by saying, in effect, **“It is not for you to know times or seasons that are under the Father's authority.”**

But then He gives a more positive response in verse 8—and it starts with that word that figures so prominently—That word “**but**”.

But this is your responsibility when the Holy Spirit does come upon you.

And so verse 8 is part of a dialogue in which the disciples are asking questions; and the Lord is answering them.

So that’s the preceding context. But now we also need to look at what follows in verses 9–11, because they recount the ascension of our Lord.

Remember that in addition to terms, you should always look for atmosphere. And these verses that follow create a tremendous atmosphere, because if this is the ascension, then the words of Jesus in verse 8 are His very last words to His disciples.

And in essence, He’s giving them their marching orders. He’s saying, “Now the job is yours,” And right when He finishes telling them, then while they’re still looking, He goes up into heaven.

In other words, He’s gone—and they’re on. Tag, you’re it!

And so whenever we study any verse of Scripture, it’s important that we place it into its context. In other words, see it both in terms of what goes before and also what follows.

Next, who are the people involved?

Let’s go back to verse 8. We’ve already noted the importance of the word “but” as a contrast. But there’s a second key term we need to notice and that’s the word “you”. Notice or observe if you will, it’s repeated: “**You** shall receive power ... **You** shall be My witnesses.”

Now, that raises the question, Who are these people? Well, the context tells me that they’re the apostles. That’s in verse 2 right?

Well, from there I could make a list of general information that I already know about these individuals. For instance: I know

1. They have walked with Jesus for about three and a half years during His ministry.
2. Jesus has chosen them.
3. They are anxious, which is probably why they ask the question about the kingdom.
4. They are all Jewish.
5. Many of them are, or have been, fishermen.

Now, I could add more, but the point is, when you come to something like this, recreate in your mind who these people are. In this case, they're people who have heard the Lord's teaching, seen Him perform miracles, and spent a lot of time with Him.

And now they have the opportunity to ask Him one of the most burning questions on their mind.

Another question to ask is, What is the main verb in this verse?

What is it?

It's "**shall receive.**"

And what tense is it? It's **future tense**. It looks ahead to something that is going to happen later.

And what are they going to receive? "**Power.**" That word could actually be translated "ability," and in some translations you will see it that way. Which means Jesus is not talking about physical power; He's talking about the ability for the apostles to accomplish what He wants them to. The Holy Spirit will give them the ability to accomplish what God wants them to accomplish.

Next, we need to look for **Cause-Effect Relationships**.

Look at that phrase that comes next: **“When the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”**

Now, what does that add to the verse?

Well, first, it indicates a cause-effect relationship. In other words, the power won’t come or the ability won’t come until the Holy Spirit comes.

Second, it answers the question of time. It tells us that the receiving of the power or the ability will happen at the same time the Holy Spirit comes upon them.

Now, earlier we observed that the word **“you”** indicates the apostles. But, here we have another person introduced; **the Holy Spirit**.

Now, Who is He?

Well, again, I can generate a list of what I know about Him. For one thing, He’s the third Person of the Trinity; He is supernatural. And He’s the Person linked with the power. And so we’re talking about supernatural power.

But you shall receive power

when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;

Now, did the apostles need that? Absolutely they needed it! I mean the last thing they had done at the crucifixion, at the most crucial time in their lives, was to let the Lord down. And so they needed that supernatural ability—that supernatural power—that only the Holy Spirit could give.

Next, notice that Jesus says that the Spirit is going to come **“upon”** them. That word indicates that they don’t possess that power from within . It’s not some power they already possess. It’s a power that’s going to come from outside. In other words, there’s going to be an invasion of supernatural ability on these otherwise ordinary human beings.

And that says a lot about the task to which Jesus is calling them to do.

Now, a moment ago we saw a cause-effect relationship in terms of timing. But here I want you to see one in terms of two statements, **“You shall receive power”** and the next phrase, **“And you shall be My witnesses.”**

In other words, the apostles are going to receive power; that’s the cause. And the effect is that they are going to be something—and what is that something? **“Witnesses!”**

But also notice that “becoming witnesses” is also in the future. And that order is very significant. It’s not, **“You are going to be witnesses, and then you are going to receive power,”** it’s the other way around: **“You are going to receive power, and the result will be, you are going to be witnesses.”**

And that’s important, because a lot of times, we spend a lot of time and effort in trying to get people to witness concerning their faith. But if we have to move them or motivate them to witness then they don’t have anything to witness about. They don’t already have a story to tell. And if they were to try upon our motivating them, then they would be telling a lie.

The truth in this scripture tells us that when the Holy Spirit comes upon us from outside ourselves and when we’re truly saved and filled with the Holy Spirit, we will not only have the ability to witness, but we will be witnesses.

Nothing inside any of us could ever give us the ability to witness. That’s a supernatural power that can only come from God.

It’s like a young lady when she gets engaged to be married. She waves that ring in front of everybody! Post pictures on the FB and what have you and she couldn’t keep that good news to herself if her life depended on it.

She's in love with a man, and she's got to share that good news with somebody else.

Well, that's the kind of dynamic that Dr. Luke wants us to see in this passage. As a result of what the apostles receive, they are going to be witnesses.

But whose witnesses? Christ's witnesses!

By His by personal identification; they're going to represent Him.

Next, we define the terms. For instance,

What is a "witness"?

Well, a simple definition would be someone who has seen and can tell others about an event, person, or circumstance. A witness is someone who has experienced something. And that's exactly what these apostles are going to be. For three and a half years they have lived side by side with the Savior. But soon, as a result of their contact with the Holy Spirit and the provision of His power, they're going to be totally different people.

Up until now, they've lived pretty much in their own strength. And that's been pretty obvious as we've read through the gospels, because their performance hasn't been that great. In fact, more than once they've fallen flat on their faces, and especially in the most critical moment.

But now that the Holy Spirit is going to give them power, they're going to become witnesses for the Savior.

Now, what does the next phrase begin with? **"Both in Jerusalem."**

If I tell you "both" of us are going downtown, then you would assume that there are two of us. But there are more than two things here. In fact, there are four different places mentioned. Now why is that?

Well, that's why it's always good to have a commentary by someone who knows Greek and Hebrew.

But you shall 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 remotest part of the earth.

Now, if you consult a commentary on this passage, you'll learn that the word translated "both" is a very interesting term. In the Greek, it indicates the beginning of a series. There may be two in the series, there may be twenty-two. Here there are only four here. And so "both" begins a series of four places where the apostles are going to be witnesses for Christ.

Now, what's the importance of the place? That's another question to ask.

Well, the first place is Jerusalem. What do I know about Jerusalem?
 Well, I know

1. It's a city.
2. The Temple is there.
3. It's where they are at this moment.
4. It also has become their home.

And so they're to begin witnessing at home. Now, that's an easy place to start, right?

Not hardly! Have you ever tried sharing your faith with the people in your own home? It's difficult isn't it? The problem is, they know you.

Nevertheless, Jesus tells the apostles that's where they're going to start. Right there in Jerusalem!

In Jerusalem where the crucifixion had taken place. In Jerusalem where they're all known. In Jerusalem the hardest place in the world they could ever witness!

But they're not stop there, afterward they're to go to Judea.

Now, how can I relate Jerusalem and Judea? Well, this is where a good book map or Atlas comes in handy. A glance at a good map will show you that what a city is to a state in America, Jerusalem was to Judea. In other words, Jerusalem is a city within a larger province called Judea. And so the Lord is moving from the city to the province.

Now, there would have been three provinces central to the apostles' thinking: Judea in the south; Galilee in the north; and in between, was Samaria. There was also a fourth one on the eastern side of the Jordan River called Peraea, but Jesus tells them to begin in Jerusalem and then go to Judea.

But notice the little connective, "and," which brings them to the third place—Samaria. That's fascinating, because they hated Samaria! And under no circumstances would a Jew ever go through Samaria or have any dealings whatsoever with Samaritans."

But in Acts 1:8, Jesus says that the very area that the apostles would normally avoid, He wants them to invade. "Go to the place that is out-of-bounds for you, off-limits for you, to the despised areas or people.

The next phrase tells them where else they are to go: **"even to the remotest part of the earth."**

Now, that word Jesus uses for the word "earth"; it means the inhabited earth. And this is where a Bible dictionary comes in handy. You'll find several different words for the word "earth" as it's used in the New

Testament. And later on we'll learn how to look up words and how to discover their meaning and significance, and the differences between them.

At any rate, here, Jesus is talking about the populated earth. He's not telling them to go everywhere in the world, but everywhere there are people.

**But you shall 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 remotest part of the earth.**

Next, we relate this one verse to the book as a whole.

Now, let's just assume this is the first time we've ever studied this verse. What have we discovered?

Well, two things that are usually separated—Judea and Samaria—are actually linked together as one. We've also seen that the apostles are not to stop until they go to the very last part of the inhabited earth. Also we've learned that these are the very last words of the Lord to the Apostles.

So the question I ask is, Is it possible that this verse is in any way an outline for the book? Do the apostles actually follow this pattern? When I study the book as a whole, I discover that the answer to both questions is yes.

Did they start out in Jerusalem? Acts 2 shows that they did. Then did they go to Judea? Exactly—but not by choice. It was by persecution in chapter 8:1.

But that got them started on their journey outward, until by the end of the book, they're well on their way toward reaching the inhabited world of their day.

Now, if you just consider what we've seen together in this exercise and count the observations, you'll find that we've come up with at least thirty observations from Acts 1:8. And this is only one verse. I've not studied the entire paragraph, much less the entire chapter or book. It's just one verse!

And yet each time you come back to it, just like that stinking fish, you'll see more. Dr. Kendricks gave this assignment to some of his seminary students; to list as many observations as they could from this single verse in Acts 1:8 and he said they came up with more than six hundred different observations.

Imagine the sermons you could preach on six hundred observations! Well, that's the power of observation; the first step in good Bible study.

So this next week you try one.

Take Joshua 1:8:

**This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth,
but**

you shall meditate on it day and night,

so that

you may be careful to do

according to all that is written in it;

for

then you will make your way prosperous

and

then you will have success.

Remember, your main concern is, What do I see? Pay special attention to terms and grammatical structure. Also look at the context. Use a pen or pencil to record your observations in and around the text. See what you can find in this fascinating passage.