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**Core Seminar**

**How to Study the Bible**

**Class 1: The Inductive Bible Study Method, Part 1**

*“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”*

*(2 Timothy 2.15)*

**Introduction**

**\*\*\*[Teacher: Your word count for the manuscript is low, because you’ll be reading the additional page, “Agassiz and the Fish”]**

Good morning, my name is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and welcome to our **How to Study the Bible** core seminar; I’ll be teaching this class alongside \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (co-teacher). Today is our first of six classes, and over the next six weeks we’ll consider:

* The most important methods of understanding how the bible fits together
* The bible’s structure and literary genres
* Some specific study tools and methods to allow us to better understand the bible.

Be sure to follow alongside your handout for references, and if you have any follow up questions, feel free to email me or \_\_\_\_\_\_ (co-teacher); you can find our emails on the back of the handouts.

Our goal for this class is to: by teaching you how to read and understand the bible, we want to equip you to grow in your love for God, and grow in your discernment of how to live as faithful followers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[Caveat]: Let’s keep this class in perspective. It’s only six weeks long, and there is a lot of material to cover. We can only cover so much, so for the most part we’ll deal in big ideas. So think of this class as winning a lifetime supply of Frequent Flyer miles. I’ll show you some fun places to visit, I’ll tell you some local customs to be aware of, and all the insider tips to being a wise traveler. But, it’s up to you to do the exploring, and put the principles into practice.

And we’re going to begin with some practical matters. You can think of this class as the Driver’s Ed. of bible reading. When you go for driving lessons, there are certain rules that govern the way we’re allowed to use the roads.

You arrive at a yield sign, and give right of way. If you want to pull out from the curb, you need to check for traffic and use your indicator (apparently in DC, they don’t teach you how to use one of those!). The point is, you follow the rules and use common sense in every situation.

Studying the bible is very similar to driving. There are some simple, undeniable, well-established rules for how to read well. And common sense always needs to be used, especially when we take into account the context for each book.

The way we like to teach people to study is through a means called the Inductive Bible Study Method.

[Optional mention: Wed night bible study]

**The Inductive Bible Study Method**

The word *inductive* can sound confusing. It’s a way to describe how we reason, but it’s not a word we use often.

Inductive reasoning refers to reasoning that takes specific information and makes a broader generalization that is considered probable, allowing for the fact that the conclusion may not always be 100% accurate.

A good example of inductive reasoning would be:

I always leave 15 minutes early to get to my appointments on time;

My appointment is in 30 minutes;

Therefore, I should arrive early for my appointment

When we apply this approach in the bible, we’re looking at what we see in the text in order to learn what its saying. Inductive Bible Study is about the faithful exercise of coming to the Bible without an agenda, and reading the passage in order to establish God’s agenda.

***Any questions so far?***

**How to do Inductive Bible Study**

First, always begin your bible studies with prayer. We need the Holy Spirit to help us understand God’s word. In I Cor. 2.14 it says,

“The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

After that, inductive study can be divided into three distinct phases:

(1) observation

(2) interpretation

(3) application.

Or, to phrase it another way:

What does it say?

What does it mean?

What does it mean for me?

The phases are **progressive** in that you always begin with observation, move to interpretation, and only then can you move on to application. We’re going to look at observation and interpretation today and then talk about application next Sunday.

**Observation**: The goal of observation is to ***interrogate*** the text. You want to be able to answer the “5 W’s ” - who? what? when? where? why?

Who is speaking to whom?

What are they saying?

When are they saying it?

Why do they say they are saying it?

What is the context, etc.?

Things you can do to answer these questions include marking key persons, words and phrases, making lists, watching for contrasts and comparisons, as well as noting expressions of time, and geographic locations. All of these help us to *interrogate* the text so that we have a rich understanding of what the text contains. From there, we move on to interpretation.

I think you’ll find over time that good observation is what makes for good Bible study. To illustrate this, let me read to you the first-hand account on an early-20th century biology student. What he says has nothing to do with studying the Bible *per se*. I don’t even know if he was a Christian. But the lesson he learned has everything to do with good Bible study.

[Read abridged *Agassiz and the Fish* handout, starting with the second paragraph: “It was more than fifteen years ago…” (840words)]

***So what relevance does this student’s experience have for Bible study?***

The main point I want to impress upon you with the story I just read, is that bible study takes effort. We can’t expect everything to simply pop out of the text. We need focused effort.

OK. What does good observation look like? Let me give you a few guidelines.

1. Observe with a pencil (or pen or laptop or iPad). Just like Agassiz’s student, you want to write everything you see as you observe the text.
2. It can help to print out your text so that you can write on it directly.
3. Observe patterns in the text. These could be comparisons and contrasts, or parallelism, for example.
4. Mark linking words (like for, so that, therefore, and, but…) and summarize what they’re there for. For example, a “therefore” should lead you to summarize what comes before that word—and then figure out the connection between your text and the section before.
5. Write down connections you see to other passages in Scripture. These could be direct quotations that are noted in the text. Or they could be allusions—so long as they seem to be deliberate allusions by the author.
6. Write down allusions to time or place—and what significance they might have.
7. Mark terms of conclusion (e.g. “thus,” “for this reason”) and what significance they might have.
8. Write down questions. These can be questions of fact. “Where was Susa?” Or they can be questions of speculation. “Why is the remnant of Israel in great trouble and shame?” Try to get the best answers you can for your questions.
9. One of the best tools for observation is memorization. Put your passage in your head and you’ll probably notice things as you call it to mind through the day.

Let’s practice! Open up to Nehemiah 1:1-3. You’ll see it on the inside of your handout.

[Use whiteboard: write down all the observations the class has about this text. Spend 5 minutes observing individually before compiling a class list.]

**Interpretation**: If observation tells us what the text *says*, interpretation tells us what the text *means*. And mainly, what it meant to its original audience. Let me give you 7 guidelines for interpretation:

1. **Context Rules**: Your interpretation should be consistent with the theme, purpose, and structure of the book in which is it found. If it isn’t, you’ve made a wrong turn somewhere. Ask yourself if you’re considering the historic and cultural context or are you ignoring these things to get a more pleasing interpretation?
2. **Let scripture interpret scripture**. Always seek the full counsel of the Word of God: If your interpretation runs contrary to the clear, established doctrines of the faith then you need to reconsider your interpretation. No part of the bible will ever undermine another part of the bible. Sometimes sorting out what initially seems like a contradiction takes work, but this is the point of studying the bible. I think as you read the bible, you’ll be amazed at how consistent its teaching is on things like, sin, the nature of man, and the character of God.
3. **Never base your convictions on an obscure passage of scripture**: An obscure passage is one in which the meaning isn’t clear, even when the proper principles of interpretation are used. Again, employ the full counsel of the bible.
4. **Interpret scripture as the author intends you to**: Take the words you read in the bible at face value. Often, that means interpreting “literally.” By which I mean, it is what it says. If it says God created the heavens and the earth, it means exactly that. But of course not all the Bible intends to be taken literally. Later in this class, we’ll talk through how we need to take into account differences in genre, imagery, and symbolism to understand the author’s intent. God gave us the bible so we could read it easily and understand Him better, so we should not feel the need to reinterpret everything in a more “spiritual” manner.
5. **Look for the main message of the passage**: Always keep in mind what the author is trying to communicate. What’s the main idea? What’s the clear purpose? Any conclusions you come to must come from and support this main idea.
6. **Study the OT in view of Jesus and the NT**: Ask how an Old Testament passage fits within the teaching of the New Testament. Ask yourself these questions[[1]](#footnote-1):
   1. Where does this passage fit in the timeline of redemptive history?
   2. How does this passage point to Jesus?
   3. How does this truth about OT Israel relate to the New Testament idea of the church?
   4. How is this passage foundational for an understanding of New Testament Christianity?
   5. Which New Testament passages help me to answer these questions?
7. **Adopt the New Testament’s attitude toward the Old Testament**: Train your brain to make connections between NT passages and what has come before in the Old Testament. Ask these three questions[[2]](#footnote-2):
   1. How is this passage a fulfillment of something promised in the Old Testament?
   2. How is this New Testament idea different from or similar to an Old Testament teaching?
   3. In what way does this New Testament passage clarify, unveil, fulfill or amplify something from the Old Testament?

These 7 guidelines are essential to interpretation and it’s only after we properly interpret a passage that we can move on to applying it.

Well, let’s go back to our passage in Nehemiah and see what it would have meant to its initial audience.

[This should be a fairly straightforward exercise.]

Today we covered the first two parts of inductive bible study – observation and interpretation.

Next week, we’ll cover application.

Let’s close in prayer.

1. Taken from *What is a Healthy Church Member?* By Thabiti Anyabwile, page 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)