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**Core Seminar**

**How To Study the Bible**

**Class 2: The Inductive Bible Study Method, Part 1**

*“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”* (John 17.17)

**Opening Illustration:**

When trying to describe a bible study, some people illustrate it by means of an adventure – in search of hidden treasure. Others prefer a more workman-like approach, preferring to compare it to a crime scene investigation, where the detective is looking for clues to understand what happened.

But whether you’re Indiana Jones or Sherlock Holmes, you need the right tools and methodology to help you on your way. In this morning’s core seminar, we’re going to put some of those tools into your hand, as we start getting practical in our *How to Study the Bible* class.

**Introduction:**

Explain to class:

* Name and co-leader
* Class 2 of 13
* Handouts for reference
* Follow up questions – email

This class aims to equip you to study the Bible. Prior to this, we covered how the bible came together, and its’ reliability. This morning, we’re going to talk about more practical matters.

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!).

And depending upon the weather conditions, your driving habits change. If it’s a beautiful sunny day, you’re likely to drive faster than if its pouring down rain.

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**

If you’re less familiar with how to read the bible, the word *inductive* can sound confusing. It’s a way to describe how we reason, but it’s not a word we use often. You’re probably more familiar with the term, ‘deductive reasoning’, from which we get the word ‘deduce’.

Deductive reasoning is a type of reasoning which goes from general to specific. It’s based on premises and if the premises are true, then the reasoning will be valid.

A good example of this would be:

I deduce that if my next appointment is in 15 minutes, and I am more that 30 mins away, then I will be late for that appointment.

See what I did there? I took two true statements/premises, and combined them to reach an accurate conclusion.

1st premise: Appointment is in 15 mins.

2nd premise: I’m 30 mins away

Conclusion: I’m going to be late!

We do deductive reasoning every single day in many different scenarios.

Inductive reasoning is a little different: it 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 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

Can you tell the difference between the two conclusions?

In the deductive example, I am dealing with certainty.

In the inductive example, I am dealing with probability. I say probably because, I’m not certain I will arrive early. I could get stuck in traffic and arrive late.

To restate the difference:

Inductive reasoning deals with probability, and generally goes from the particular to a universal. Deductive reasoning deals with certainty, and goes from the universal to a particular.

Where deductive study is most helpful is when we do a topical study of the Bible. That’s when we gather separate passages of the bible and arrange them to make specific conclusions about a particular topic, such as the deity of Christ, or the inerrancy of scripture. We call this ‘systematic theology’.

So deductive study is a good and worthwhile tool.

[Illustration] Think of it as the rake in your toolshed. Just as rake is great at gathering together leaves and grass in your lawn, so deductive reasoning is great for gathering together different parts of the bible to inform us on a particular topic.

But do you know what a rake is really lousy for? Digging a hole! For that, we need a shovel. We’re going to need it to dig into God’s Word and expose its treasures. Most of your bible study is going to look like this.

It’s 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.”

Always begin with a prayer for the Holy Spirit’s assistance. Inductive study can then 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 to 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 *Agassiz and the Fish* handout, starting with the second paragraph: “It was more than fifteen years ago…” (1266 words)]

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

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 any linking words that you see (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 any 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. In two weeks we’ll hand out a list of NT quotations and allusions to the OT that should be of help to you.
6. Write down any allusions to time or place—and what significance they might have.
7. Mark any terms of conclusion (e.g. “thus,” “for this reason”) and what significance they might have.
8. Write down any questions you might have. These can be questions of fact. “Where was Susa?” Or they can be questions of speculation. “I wonder why Ruth and her family decided to leave Israel?” 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 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)