

How to Study the Bible

An Introduction to Inductive Bible Study

Introduction

1. If we want a significant level of spiritual maturity, we must get serious about Bible study.
 - a. Many people are haphazard in their approach to studying the scriptures.
 - b. While there is no one right method in Bible study, there are many wrong or ineffective ways.
2. In this lesson we will introduce an inductive Bible study approach, and some important principles of study.

I. Introduction to Inductive Bible Study

A. *The Inductive Study Method*

1. The inductive Bible study method seeks to understand the text of scripture in its context.
 - a) Deductive study usually starts with a conclusion and seeks to confirm or disprove it.
 - b) Inductive study begins by examining the text and then draws conclusions from its study.
2. The principles of inductive Bible study can be remembered with a simple acronym, O.I.A.

B. *Observation*

1. The first stage of inductive Bible study is the observation phase.
 - a) At this stage we want to read the text completely, multiple times, in context.
 - b) Our focus here is to get an overview of the book, passage, or topic we're studying.
2. As we continue reading and re-reading the text, our examination gradually intensifies.
 - a) The observation stage is like looking a forest, then the trees, then the leaves, etc.
 - b) A minimum of three complete readings is highly preferable as we begin our study.

C. *Interpretation*

1. The second stage of inductive study is the interpretation phase.
 - a) In this phase we will begin to more carefully analyze and interpret the data.
 - b) This is where our examination moves from books and chapters to paragraphs and sentences.
2. It is important to do background research as the interpretive phase progresses.
 - a) Background references, word studies, and cross references are explored at this stage.
 - b) When we have thoroughly studied the text we are ready for the third stage.

D. *Application*

1. The third stage of inductive study is the application phase.
 - a) This is the purpose of Bible study, not merely intellectual but practical. (cf. Ja. 1:22)
 - b) Bible study should not only enlighten but also correct, shape, and train us. (cf. 2Ti. 3:16-17)
2. The application stage of Bible study will consist primarily of two parts.
 - a) First, we need to identify the meaning and purpose of the text for its original audience.
 - b) Second, we need to apply those lessons and the relevant principles to ourselves today.

E. *A Six Phase Approach*

1. When studying a book or passage it may be helpful to subdivide each stage into two phases.
 - a) Observation 1 (Book) – Observation 2 (Section)
 - b) Interpretation 1 (Sentences, Phrases, and Words) – Interpretation 2 (Research)
 - c) Application 1 (Then) – Application 2 (Now)
2. This division is logical, easy to remember and may help enhance our study method.
3. See the attached outline for a fuller summary of each of the three stages and six sub-phases.

II. 10 Principles of Good Bible Study

A. *Original Meaning*

1. The Bible is inscripturated truth revealed by God; it has a definite meaning. **Jn. 12:48-50**
2. We must seek the original message of the text intended by the divine and human authors.
 - a) To discover this, we must consider the original audience and setting of the passage.
 - b) The scriptures, though written and preserved *for* us, were not originally written *to* us.
3. When our interpretation conflicts with the intended meaning, our conclusion needs adjustment.
4. What the text meant in ancient times is what it continues to mean today. (e.g. 1Co. 14:34-35)

B. *Literal*

1. Common sense requires us to accept a text as literal unless the context suggests otherwise.
 - a) We must acknowledge there are symbolic images and figurative passages in scripture.
 - b) But some interpreters go so far as to deny its historicity or empty it of divine authority.
2. Sometimes this principle is discarded to fulfill a student's personal agenda.
 - a) E.g. The premillennialist must make Revelation literal to justify his position (cf. Re. 1:1)
 - b) E.g. Some try to mythologize the miracles of Jesus or the resurrection (cf. Jn. 20:30-31)

C. *Grammar*

1. It is important to note the grammar and structure of the text being studied.
 - a) The grammar of the original language is obviously of particular importance.
 - b) Remember that the punctuation in our English Bibles is not inspired, though it is helpful.
2. One of the best ways to find the structure is with multiple translations and language tools.
 - a) Of particular importance are the connective words in scripture. (e.g. Rm. 5:1, 6, 7, 10)
 - b) Some translations remove these connectors, emphasizing the need for multiple translations.

D. *History*

1. It is helpful to know something about the historical and cultural background of our text.
 - a) We find this information in Bible dictionaries, atlases, handbooks, and good commentaries.
 - b) E.g. Re. 3:14-19 cf. "Laodicea," Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, pp.1011-1012
2. Knowing something of the culture and circumstances can help us appreciate biblical imagery.
 - a) Many Biblical texts make more sense when we know something about the history.
 - b) Sometimes the historical background can be found in the OT. (e.g. 2Ki. 17:24ff Samaritans)

E. *Context*

1. It is vital that we read and study the Bible in context, noting the overall biblical revelation.
 - a) Failing to note the context of a passage can easily lead to false conclusions.
 - b) A text without a context usually becomes a proof-text for our prejudices and traditions.
2. We need to recognize both the immediate and the remote context of a passage.
 - a) The context of a verse is the section, then the chapter, then the book, then the Bible!
 - b) Be careful of pitting verses against each other in an attempt to prop up a beloved proof-text.

F. *Genre*

1. It is important to recognize the different literary genres represented in the Bible.
 - a) The Bible is full of narrative, law, poetry, prophecy, sermon, discourse, and dialogue.
 - b) Each type of literature has its own unique style. (e.g. Revelation vs. Ephesians)
2. Sometimes characteristics will overlap, but it is important to note the differences between styles.

G. *Correlate*

1. To understand the full counsel of God we must correlate all Biblical teaching on our subject.
2. The Bible is not self-contradictory; therefore our interpretation of it should be consistent.

H. *Commentary of Scripture*

1. Scripture is its own best commentary and we need to allow it to explain itself whenever possible.
2. Sometimes an inspired insight may go beyond what is otherwise discerned. (e.g. Mt. 2:14-15)

I. *Scripture to Experience*

1. Our experiences must always be interpreted in light of scripture, not visa versa. (cf. Ga. 1:8-9)
2. Experience may mislead us, but an honest search for truth will always be rewarded. **Jn. 7:17**

J. *Clear Text to Obscure*

1. Passages that are straightforward and clear should be used to understand the more difficult.
 - a) The difficulty is sometimes in agreeing on what is clear and what is obscure!
 - b) We must be careful of making dogmatic assertions about things we don't really know.
2. Many false doctrines are created from a few obscure references, contradicting other texts.

Action

Put these principles and concepts to use in your Bible reading and study in 2012

Six Phases of Inductive Bible Study

Observation – Phase One (Book)

- Read entire book a minimum of 3 times, preferably in multiple translations
- During the 1st and 2nd reading note the major theme of the book
- After the 3rd reading divide the book into its major divisions (basic outline)

Observation – Phase Two (Chapter/Section)

- Read entire chapter or section a minimum of 3 times
- During the 1st and 2nd reading note the major theme(s) of the chapter
- After the 3rd reading divide the chapter into its major divisions

Interpretation – Phase Three (Sentences, Phrases, and Words)

- Begin to analyze each section of verses within the chapter outline
- Progress from Section to Paragraphs to Sentences to Phrases to Words
- Analyze the grammatical structure of each section in the text

Interpretation – Phase Four (Research)

- Research background information on the text
E.g. Bible dictionaries, atlases, handbooks, and good commentaries
- Investigate cross references of prominent words and themes
E.g. Cross references in Bible, concordance, topical Bible
- Study difficult and/or prominent words within the text
E.g. Bible dictionary, concordance, lexicons, language commentaries

Application – Phase Five (Then)

- Summarize the purpose and import of the text for the original audience

Application – Phase Six (Now)

- How does the author's original intent impact my life today?
- Why would the Spirit preserve this message for Christians living today?
- Identify facts, commands, prohibitions, promises, challenges, faith-builders, etc.