

Lesson 1

WHAT WE WANT TO ACCOMPLISH

When I became a Christian as a 13 year old I knew a lot about the Bible. I had great parents and great teachers as a child to teach me the Word of God.

When I became a preacher just 10 years later I knew even more about the Bible. I had sat at the feet of great preachers like Bill and Sewell Hall, Paul Earnhart, and the preacher who was my mentor, Pete McKee.

But now, having been a Christian for 20 years and having been a preacher for 10 years, I feel like I'm finally learning how to study the Bible.

Learning to Feed Ourselves

I remember hearing a story a long time ago about a problem in one of our national parks. The bear population was going down and park rangers couldn't understand why. Actually, they knew the problem, the bears were starving to death, but they couldn't explain why the bears were starving because there was plenty of food. They did a study and found out that the tourists who came to the park were to blame. During the summer months tourists would come and feed the bears, and by feeding them the bears lost the ability to feed themselves. When the winter months came they starved. No one was there to feed them.

When I think about those bears I see myself. I have been blessed with great parents and great teachers and great preachers in my life. I've been enriched by the understanding and spiritual insights of great men and women. But that great blessing has also been a curse in some ways to me spiritually.

Many of my early sermons were merely retreaded lessons I'd heard from my heroes. Even the lessons that were "original" with me were just lessons I had in my mind that I had heard someone else preach.

I also depended very heavily on commentaries in my studies. When I taught a class oftentimes the first thing I would do is open

up a commentary, sometimes even before I would read through the text!

But as terrible as all of that was, it's not even the worst part. The tragic thing about my early life as a Christian and a preacher is the fact that it was a rare occasion that I would ever just pick up the Bible and read it – to read the Bible just for the sake of reading it, not to find a sermon or to prepare for a Bible class, just to listen to what God had to say to me.

I remember hearing complements of what a good Bible student I was, when really I was a terrible Bible student. I only regurgitated what others had said. Perhaps I did an adequate job of feeding others with the word of God. The irony was I did not know how to feed myself.

Building Self-Confidence

I've overstated a little. There were times that I did read the Bible just to read it. There were also classes I taught where I didn't crack open a commentary. There were also some sermons driven by a personal study of the text. What were the results? Those were by far my best classes and my best sermons.

Why didn't I do that more often? Lack of self-discipline for one thing. Reading the Bible for yourself is hard work. But it wasn't just laziness. I lacked self-confidence. Standing before an audience as a 23 year old is a frightening experience. Add to that the realization that you are influencing the eternal destiny of those you are teaching and it's downright terrifying!

Most people lack self-confidence with the Bible. The Bible is just an intimidating book. It's long for one thing. It's not an easy read either. Parts of it are downright difficult. The first adult Bible class I taught at Auburn was as a substitute on a Wednesday night. The book: Romans. The chapter: 11. I still haven't figured out that chapter!

So while I've had to work on developing the discipline to study the Bible for myself, I've also had to build self-confidence. And maybe

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“self-confidence” is the wrong way to put it. Confidence in God’s ability to reveal Himself in an understandable way would be more accurate. Instead of running to a commentary every time I run across a difficult text, I’ve had to trust the fact that you don’t have to be a Bible scholar to understand those tough passages.

The irony is the Bible is usually much easier to understand than the Bible scholar. C.S. Lewis noted that his philosophy students would run to read long books about Plato before they would ever read Plato himself. He said, “If the student only knew that Plato is much more intelligible than this modern commentator.”

The Joy of Personal Discovery

There’s nothing like figuring out a difficult passage. It’s like you’ve just discovered gold. You dig and dig. You look at a text, you read it over and over, you examine the context, and then it’s almost like someone turns on a light – you get it! It’s a thrilling and exhilarating experience. That’s something you don’t get from reading a commentary or listening to someone else.

What makes Bible study dull and boring is when we turn our mind off and let others do the thinking for us. Christianity is a thinking man’s religion. God has made the Bible simple enough that anyone can understand it, but He’s made it challenging so that we have to use our brain in order to get it. We can’t turn our mind off and reap the benefits of Bible study.

Learning to Feed Ourselves

- 1) We are blessed at Embury Hills with a wealth of great teachers. Many congregations struggle Bible classes taught by men who really don’t need to be teaching at all. Is there a danger when you’re in a church that has so many capable teachers?
- 2) What about you personally? Have you ever used commentaries or teachers as a crutch? Have you ever had periods in your life when you just answered your questions for class but didn’t really spend much time just reading the Bible?
- 3) Are great teachers a negative (Eph. 4:11-16)? Are commentaries a bad thing? What is the proper way to look at our teachers/commentaries (Acts 17:11)?

“Speak, Lord, Your Servant Hears”

But there’s more to the joy of Bible study than just the thrill of figuring out something that is difficult. You can get that in any academic endeavor. Bible study is much more than an academic exercise. It is the process by which God speaks to our hearts. It’s the way God changes us and remakes us into His image (2 Cor. 3:18). The greatest joy of Bible study is not discovery, it’s application.

An elder once told me that preachers tend to be poor Bible students. He explained that preachers often go to the Bible looking for a conclusion, or worse, go to the Bible with a conclusion in their mind looking for scripture to back it up. Even if the conclusion is right, the process is backward.

Our single purpose in Bible study should be to simply listen. We should come to the Bible with nothing. Our mind should be totally empty. We don’t seek to find what we want to find. We don’t try to make the Bible say what we want it to say. We listen. We ask God to speak to our heart so that we might know what God wants.

My personal goal in this class is to become a better listener. I want to do a better job of listening to what God is saying to me. I feel I’ve come a long way, but I’ve got a long way to go. My goal for this class is that it might equip us by giving us the tools we need to properly read and study the Bible. May God bless us in this lofty endeavor!

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Building Self Confidence

- 1) Is the Bible an elementary book? Does it read like a popular novel? What is it about the Bible that makes it difficult? List some of the unique characteristics of the Bible that make it different than other books which makes it difficult to understand.
- 2) Why did God make the Bible so hard? Is there a reason?
- 3) Do you have to be a scholar to understand the Bible (Eph. 3:4)? What does it require (1 Tim. 4:13-16; 2 Tim. 2:15; 3:15)? How would you rate the average intelligence of the one who accepted the gospel in the first century?

The Joy of Personal Discovery

- 1) Is reading a commentary fun? Is answering a bunch of true/false or fill in the blank type questions for a Bible class fun? Why not?
- 2) What is it about discovering something in Bible study that is so exciting (I mean true discovery without the help from aids or being guided to a truth by a teacher)?

“Speak, Lord, Your Servant Hears”

- 1) What is the goal of Bible study? Why is that the goal? Why is our Bible study something less than that sometimes?

Your Personal Goals for this Class

- 1) What do you feel are some weaknesses in your Bible study/reading? Do you see something lacking? Do you feel you approach the Bible in the wrong way? Do you feel your study is superficial or motivated by wrong reasons?
- 2) What do you hope to accomplish in this class? What do you seek to improve?

Lesson 2

FINDING THE RIGHT TOOLS

Having the right tools is essential to any project. Ask anyone who has tried to do a job without them. A carpenter needs a hammer, saw, and nails. An artist needs a canvas, palette, paints, and brushes. Likewise, as a student of God's word we need the right tools.

Let's start with the basics. To study the Bible, what you need is... a Bible. That sounds simple, but there are many who spend more time studying books about the Bible than on the Bible itself. Hundreds or even thousands of dollars are spent amassing huge libraries, thinking that all of those books are essential to understanding the Bible. While those books may be helpful, the most important book in Bible study is the Bible. All the other books are secondary.

Choosing the Right Bible

But what Bible should you use. Like everything else today, we've got a lot of Bibles to choose from. We've got different versions: the King James, New King James, American Standard, New International, the Living Bible, etc. We have red-letter editions (words of Jesus in red). We have Bibles that have only center column references and a short concordance in the back. We have study Bibles complete with explanatory notes, historical commentary, and a cross-reference guide. In other words, you don't just go into the bookstore and ask for a Bible. You've got to know what kind of Bible. Here's some suggestions on how to choose the right one.

Selecting a Translation

The Bible was not written in English, but in Hebrew and Greek. These ancient languages have been translated into English.

If you do any research on the translation of the Bible you'll discover that no translation is perfect. These are ancient languages that use peculiar words that sometimes have no good English equivalents. Transferring the words,

phrases, and ideas from one language to another is sometimes a challenge.

There are two fundamental methods of translation. Translators either attempt to make a literal "word for word" rendering of the original text or they paraphrase the text in a "thought for thought" translation.

Examples of the word for word, literal translations would be the King James, the New King James, the American Standard, and the New American Standard.

Examples of the thought for thought, paraphrased versions would be the Living Bible, the New English Bible, and J. B. Philips *New Testament in Modern English*.

The popular New International Version is a middle of the road approach combining the two methods.

It is my opinion that you should use a word for word translation for the bulk of your reading and study. Paraphrased Bibles sometimes mistranslate because of the doctrinal biases of the translators. They also tend to sacrifice accuracy for readability. It's easy for the interpretations of a translator to slip into a paraphrased version.

I'm not saying that paraphrased versions should never be used. They are easier to read and that can be very helpful, especially to a new student of the Bible. However, they should always be read along side a word for word translation.

What About a Study Bible?

Study Bibles have many features an ordinary Bible won't have: chapter outlines, introductory paragraphs, supplemental notes, maps, valuable cultural and historical background, expanded indexes and concordances, and many other study tools.

The advantage of a study Bible is they put a wealth of information you could only find in Bible dictionaries and commentaries at your fingertips. The notes are right along side the

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text itself so you don't have to go look it up making a more in depth study of the Bible more convenient.

But I must tell you that I don't like study Bibles personally. I don't believe it's wrong to use a study Bible, but I don't recommend people buy them. I discourage it, actually. Two reasons:

First, a study Bible includes bad commentary on the text. For example, the Ryrie Study Bible has a note on Acts 22:16 which says, "Baptism does not wash away sins." That's in direct contradiction to what Acts 22:16 plainly says! Of course, you'll find similar statements in other commentaries that we often use. The difference is that this uninspired commentary is placed right along side the inspired text.

The other problem with study Bibles is discourages independent study. The convenience of a study Bible makes it easy to just read the notes and not think about the text for yourself.

If you already have a study Bible I would advise you to use it only after you've had plenty of time to think and meditate on the text for yourself. Use all the methods of observation, interpretation, and application we're going to suggest later in this study, and then go to your study Bible. You can then compare your own conclusions with those the authors of your study Bible have made.

Margin Notes

When choosing a Bible, it's a good idea to find one with margin notes. These notes offer a more literal translation of a word or phrase. Some notes include alternative renderings from comparative Hebrew and Greek texts. They can also translate the meaning of proper names from the Hebrew and Greek—insight you wouldn't otherwise have. Sometimes ancient weights, distances, monetary values and other measures are converted into modern equivalents.

Another common use of margin notes is to provide cross-references to passages of Scripture that will shed light on the verses you are reading. With these references the Bible can be used as its own commentary.

Binding

There is nothing more frustrating than to have a Bible start falling apart. I bought an expensive genuine leather Bible about two years ago and now the Bible will fall right out of the cover. I've learned that Bibles are bound in one of two ways: it is either glued or sewn. The sewn binding will hold up much better than the one that is merely glued.

Stuffing a lot of Bible class material, bulletins, letters and other things into your Bible will put strain on any type of binding and eventually will cause it to break. Take care of your Bible!

Second Most Important Study Tool

Next to your Bible, the most important study tool in Bible study is a notebook. A notebook can be used to record sermon notes, daily devotional reflections, and observations gleaned from personal studies. Writing down your thoughts helps to sharpen your mind in study. It helps to focus your study giving it more purpose and direction. It can also remind you later of conclusions you've made and then reinforce those truths in your mind.

Writing in the Bible: Good or Bad?

Of course, you can do most of that in your Bible. Many people write in their Bibles. They underline and highlight important passages and write notes in the margins. Some Bibles even provide wide margins for that purpose.

There are many strong believers in this practice. I heard one preacher say, "If you can't write in your Bible, throw it away and find a Bible you can write in!"

There are drawbacks, however, to doing this. For one thing, you may change your mind about a conclusion you've made. If I wrote down every conclusion I'd made years ago in my Bible, it would be filled with a lot of things scratched out by now.

The most significant problem is the fact that you are reminded of past conclusions whenever you come to a text. Your eye is naturally drawn to whatever was underlined or highlighted. It's harder to make new observations and consider new perspectives when you're staring at all of your old

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observations and old perspectives in the text itself.

If you do write in your Bible, you might consider having another unmarked Bible to use when you study. Then, after you've thoroughly studied the text, go back and look at your old notes.

Other Tools

There are many other helpful aids to Bible study. Here are a few you should consider:

Concordance

The Bible is its own best commentary. When I come across a challenging passage, the first thing I do (after thoroughly examining the immediate context) is look for other passages which might shed light on the one I'm studying. I want to let the Bible interpret the Bible.

The problem is I can't find the passage sometimes. I know the general area, and I could probably find it if I had a lot of time to hunt it down, but I don't have to spend a lot of time doing that. All I need to do is grab a concordance.

A concordance is an alphabetized index of words used in the Bible with a listing of verses where each word appears. It gives you the ability to find a verse even if you can remember only a word or two.

Many Bibles come with a concordance in the back, but they normally don't offer much assistance because they only have limited number of references. There are "exhaustive" concordances which offer every reference of a given word in the Bible such as *Strong's*, *Young's*, and *Cruden's*. And if you want to know which one is for you, just remember that *Strong's* is for the strong, *Young's* is for the young, and *Cruden's* is for the crude (OK, that's a bad joke).

The problem with *Strong's*, *Young's*, and *Cruden's* is they are all keyed to the King James Version. You can nowadays find a concordance keyed to different translations. The easiest solution is to buy computer software that will give you the ability to look up words and phrases in almost any

translation. You can also do searches on phrases instead of just key words.

Bible Dictionary

A Bible dictionary defines words, topics, names, and places in the Bible. Most consist of brief articles, arranged alphabetically, containing a summary of information about various subjects. They often contain invaluable information from extra-biblical sources that the average reader of the Bible will not have.

They generally come in a single volume, but you can also find expanded editions that are referred to as Bible encyclopedias.

Greek/Hebrew Dictionaries

As we mentioned ancient Greek and Hebrew words are sometimes difficult to translate into English. Translators are unable to find a word in the English that directly corresponds to the Hebrew or Greek. Greek and Hebrew dictionaries help the reader to understand what the original word meant.

Greek and Hebrew scholars have researched the use of Bible words in ancient literature and in the Bible itself. They can demonstrate what a word originally meant by seeing how it was used in a variety of contexts.

Commentaries

Well-written commentaries can be a good tool in Bible study. They reflect years of careful research by scholars who have studied the original languages, ancient history and culture, and the overall message of the Bible. They will carefully cross-reference passages with other passages to help interpret the text and to help put the text into the overall message of the Bible.

That being said, of course, commentators are not inspired. They can and often do misinterpret the Bible. They should be used very carefully with an eye of suspicion.

There are also some bad commentaries produced that you just need to avoid. Don't ever buy a set of commentaries if it hasn't been recommended, and recommended by a good Bible student you trust. Otherwise, you will spend a lot of money on books you'll never use.

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Computer Resources

Computer technology has revolutionized Bible study. CD-ROM and online resources have made a wealth of information accessible to everyone. All of the resources above can be found on the web. You can purchase thousands of dollars worth of books on a CD-ROM that will cost you less than \$100.

Not only are these resources cheaper, they are lighter and don't take up as much space. They also make research faster and more efficient by giving you the ability to pull up information more quickly.

A Final Word

Some of the very best Bible students have only a Bible, a concordance, and perhaps a

dictionary of some kind. It's nice to have all of these other helps, but they really are not necessary to have a good understanding of the Bible.

If you are a new student, I would advise you to stay away from commentaries for now. Develop a good understanding of the Bible first. I read commentaries when I first started to seriously study the Bible and that was a mistake. It made me a lazy student. I did not practice studying the Bible inductively, but relied on what outside sources said. The purpose of this study is to show you how to make your own observations and applications of God's truth.

Choosing the Right Bible

- 1) What are the two fundamental methods of translation? Is either kind perfect? Which should we use? Why?

- 2) What's the advantage of a study Bible? Are there disadvantages?

- 3) What do you find in the marginal notes of your Bible? How are these things helpful?

Second Most Important Study Tool

- 1) How can a notebook help you in your Bible study?

Writing in the Bible: Good or Bad?

- 1) How is writing in your Bible helpful?

- 2) Are there any reasons why you wouldn't want to write in your Bible?

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Other Tools

- 1) Briefly define and explain the benefits and/or potential negatives of the following:

Concordance

Bible Dictionary

Greek/Hebrew Dictionary

Commentaries

Computer resources

- 2) Are these things necessary to understand the Bible? Can they discourage good Bible study in any way?

Lesson 3

FINDING THE RIGHT TOOLS (Exercises)

Several of our lessons in this study are going to be devoted to application. In this lesson we're going to use the tools we learned about in the last lesson. First, we'll apply these tools to Mark 1:1-8:

1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in the Prophets: "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You." 3 "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight." 4 John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. 5 Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And he preached, saying, "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. 8 I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

- 1) Compare the translation of this verse provided above (taken from New King James Version) with a paraphrased version of the Bible: the Living Bible, the New English Bible, J.B Philips *New Testament in Modern English*, etc. If you can't find one of those, compare with the New International Version (which mixes the paraphrase with the literal).

Share with the class your impression of the paraphrased version. Is it easier to read? Are there any significant differences between it and the New King James? Is there any value in reading a paraphrase alongside a literal version?

- 2) Share with the class all the information you found in your study Bible on Mark 1:1-8. Did you find this information helpful?
- 3) Look for any marginal notes in your Bible on Mark 1:1-8. Look up the cross-references. Share with the class whatever you find interesting or helpful.
- 4) Use your concordance to find all the other passages that speak of John's baptism. Briefly summarize each verse about John's baptism.
- 5) Use a Bible dictionary to research one of the following:
 - a. The Jordan River
 - b. Locusts
- 6) Use a Greek/Hebrew dictionary (like Vine's or Thayer's) to define one of the following words:
 - a. Baptism
 - b. Repent

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Use our Bible study tools (concordance, dictionary, commentary, etc.) to understand the following passages with a focus on the words in bold:

Ephesians 5:19

“...speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and **making melody** in your hearts”.

Ephesians 3:3-4

“... how that by revelation he made known to me the **mystery** (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the **mystery** of Christ)...”

Colossians 1:15, 18

“He is the image of the invisible God, the **firstborn** over all creation.”

“And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the **firstborn** from the dead, that in all things he may have the preeminence.”

Romans 3:25

“...whom God set forth as a **propitiation** by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed...”

II Peter 1:20

“...knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any **private interpretation**...”

Ephesians 5:15-16

“See then that you walk **circumspectly**, not as fools but as wise, **redeeming** the time, because the days are evil.”

Lesson 4

GETTING STARTED

You've got all your tools now: Bible, notebook, concordance, and dictionary. You're ready to begin. Now what?

Besides having the right tools, there are some other preparations you should make to get the most out of your study.

Time and Place

It's really important to find a time and place that is conducive to study. Distractions abound in our lives. There needs to be both a time and a place that we can sanctify (set apart) to the Lord. What I mean is this must be a time and a place where nothing can interrupt our study.

I find it very difficult to study when the kids are up. I have to do my study while they are in bed. I also have a hard time studying at night because my mind is tired. So I like the early morning before the kids wake up.

There are no rules. What is best for me might not be best for you. Whatever time you choose (morning, noon, or night), make that time holy to the Lord. That "quiet time" with God is to be non-negotiable. Guard this time carefully.

Preparing Our Hearts

Attitude is everything. If your attitude is right you will carefully study and apply God's truth. If your attitude is not right the truth of God will never penetrate your heart (Lk. 8:1-15).

Good Bible study begins with spiritual hunger. Jesus said that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled (Mt. 5:6).

Are you hungry? If you're not it may be because you've been eating too much junk-food. You've filled your life with worldly things. You've got a hectic schedule. You're a work-a-holic. Dozens of entertainment options all vying for your attention.

These worldly distractions don't satisfy the longings inside us. They are junk-food for the

soul. Like Coco Puff cereal they are sugary and sweet, but full of air. There's no substance to fill our souls with what they really crave.

What our souls crave is Jesus. Peter said, "as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious." (1 Pet. 2:2-3) Notice that our desire for the pure milk of the word is dependant on our tasting the graciousness of the Lord. Once we've had a good taste of the Lord, we come back for more like a baby who wants her milk.

This is an acquired taste, however. It does not come overnight. Worldly things can be easily digested. They are enjoyed immediately. The spiritual feast Jesus offers takes time to appreciate. It may take some time to discover that the Lord is gracious. But if our heart is right, the Lord will taste so good we won't want the junk-food anymore.

This is the way we have to approach Bible study. This is not to be seen as a mere duty. This is not another thing to check off on our daily "to do" list. Bible study is a time to feast. It is the food we eat. It is the water we drink. It is the air we breathe. It is our life. When we truly appreciate Bible study for what it is and what it can do for us, we will see it as much a part of our life as eating and drinking. In fact, it will be more important than that. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Mt. 4:4)

Shaking the Tree

"Martin Luther said that he studied the Bible the same way he gathered apples. First he shook the whole tree so that the ripest fruit would fall to the ground. Then he climbed the tree and shook each limb. After he had shaken each limb, he shook each branch, and then every twig. Finally, just to make sure he hadn't missed any good apples, he looked under each leaf." (Heitzig)

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When we begin studying the Bible we need to “shake the tree” by surveying the Bible first. We read through to get a feel for the overall message and theme of the Bible. Doing that we’ll pick up a bushel or two of spiritual apples. We’ll discover great truth and wisdom along the way. We’ll develop insight into the character of God.

As we proceed we begin to shake every limb. We go back to some of the individual books of the Bible that we surveyed and look at them a little more closely. We then go on to shake each branch, each twig, and finally look under each leaf as we delve deeper and deeper into the unfathomable depths of God’s word.

One of the wonders of Bible study is that this process never ends. I’ve heard great Bible students over twice my age confess that the more they study, the more they find. They continue to uncover more and more spiritual truths and wisdom. “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!” (Rom. 11:33)

Reading and Retaining

I’ve heard that we only retain a small fraction of what we read. To retain more of what we read we must interact with it in some way. In this class we’re going to look at a simple three-step process that will greatly enhance our enjoyment of the Bible. It will also help us retain what we read from the Bible. These steps are *observation*, *interpretation*, and *application*.

Observation is simply *opening our eyes* to what the text says. It’s more than just reading, it’s a process of discovery. It’s reading with our eyes wide open. We read and reread the text several times. We look for interesting things. We ask questions. And, most importantly, we write down all of the discoveries we make.

Interpretation involves *opening our minds* to what the text means. We review all of the facts we have recorded in our notebook from our observation. We then try to make sense out of all of our observations. We paraphrase and summarize the significant points from the text. As we put the passage down in our own

words, we move beyond the facts and begin to grasp the meaning of the text.

Application occurs when we *open our hearts* to what the text is saying to us. We personalize the message. We ask ourselves: “What does this passage have to do with me and my life?” “What specific changes do I need to make?” “How should this affect my relationships, my job, my perspective, my goals, etc.?” It’s at this point that the Bible comes alive. God is now speaking directly to us. He’s molding and shaping us like a potter with clay. We are transformed into His image (2 Cor. 3:18).

Different Approaches

There are three different approaches you can choose in your daily Bible study: systematic, topical, and devotional. These are not rigid categories, neither is one necessarily better than the other. One may be more appropriate than another in a given season. It’s good to be familiar with all three.

Reading Systematically

One way to approach the Bible is to read all the way through it from beginning to end. This is the approach you should probably take if you are new to the Bible or if you’ve never read the whole way through the Bible before. It’s necessary to have the big picture in mind when reading individual books or specific passages from the Bible.

The key is breaking up the Bible into manageable portions. There are many different plans you can use to read through the Bible in a year. Some Bibles even have reading plans in the back. There are some Bibles which are actually broken up into 365 daily readings telling you where to begin and end (like *The Daily Bible* by LaGard Smith).

Skip Heitzig in his book, *How to Study the Bible and Enjoy It*, suggests a different kind of seven-day reading plan:

SUNDAY: Read the passage of Scripture your preacher preaches from. Do this either before or after church to reinforce the message.

MONDAY: Read from the legal books (Genesis to Deuteronomy).

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TUESDAY: Read from the historical books (Joshua to Esther).

WEDNESDAY: Read from the poetic books (Job to the Song of Solomon).

THURSDAY: Read from the prophetic books (Isaiah to Malachi).

FRIDAY: Read from the Gospels (Matthew to John).

SATURDAY: Read from the rest of the New Testament (Acts to Revelation).

When you stop each day, either place a marker where you stop or write it down in your journal or notebook and resume your reading of that section on the same day the next week.

This plan injects variety into your reading. It also keeps your reading from bogging down in some of the more difficult portions of Scripture.

You can also set your own pace. If you are a fast reader (four chapters a day), you'll read through the Bible in nine or ten months. But if you're a slow reader like me, you don't have to feel guilty if you don't read through several chapters in one sitting. Take your time and don't forget to follow the basic steps of observation, interpretation, and application. If you're reading through the Bible for the first time, you don't want to go too slowly, but you also want to be an active reader, retaining the things you learn. So always have your notebook open and don't feel rushed to get through so many chapters each day.

Reading Topically

Another good approach to Bible study is to select one idea or topic and study everything the Bible has to say about it. This is where a concordance really comes in handy. If you are discussing the subject of baptism with someone, you can pull out your concordance and find all the verses in the Bible that speak about baptism. You are then able to compare many different passages on the subject of baptism and come to a clearer understanding.

There are dangers with topical studies. One danger is there is always a temptation to proof-text with this kind of study. Proof-texting is when a passage is taken out of

context to prove a point. This is not done always intentionally either. When we examine individual verses instead of entire passages as a whole, the context is often lost. That's why topical studies must be balanced by systematic studies. If we have already studied the context of the individual passages we find, we will do a much better job of interpreting those passages correctly.

Another danger is to become imbalanced in our studies. If all of our study is focused on baptism or the other conditions of salvation, we may lose sight of God's grace. Again, that's where our systematic study will help us. If we regularly read through the Bible we will remain grounded in the major themes and doctrines of the Scriptures.

Reading Devotionally

"Devotional Bible study is the process of reflecting on a few verses or a passage of Scripture and making a personal application." (Heitzig) Devotional reading in some ways from systematic reading. Systematic reading seeks to understand the Bible as a whole. Devotional reading seeks to understand an individual book or passage. Systematic reading focuses on information primarily and then application. Devotional reading does not bypass the information, but its main focus is application.

Devotional reading can almost be considered the next step. After we've shaken the tree we start shaking the limbs, and then the twigs, and so on. We had a visiting preacher at Embury Hills compare it to taking a sightseeing trip in a car. Sometimes we just ride through the countryside observing the beautiful scenery that flies by. But after we've seen everything from inside a car window, we then want to go back and look at some things up close. We get out of the car and soak in all of the beauty of God's creation.

That's the way it is with Bible study. There is a time for systematic study to give us a panoramic view of God's revelation. But there's also times for closer investigation in our topical or devotional reading. It's important to stay flexible and use all three methods, each in the appropriate season.

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE AND ENJOY IT

Time and Place

- 1) What is the best time for you to study? Why?
- 2) What is the best place for you to study? Why?

Preparing Our Hearts

- 1) What is the “junk-food” in your life? What sometimes takes priority over Bible study?
- 2) How does daily Bible study become a passion for some people? It isn't like a novel that you just can't put down. These people know how the book is going to end. They've read it several times. But it is a book they can't put down. If they go a day without reading it they know and can feel something was missing from their day. It's not even always stimulating, but they keep coming back for more. What is it that brings them back? Is it a sense of duty? Is it incredible self-discipline? What is it?

Shaking the Tree

- 1) Using Luther's analogy, where do you believe you are in your Bible study? Are you shaking the tree, the limbs, the branches, or the twigs? Do you feel you've started looking under individual leaves yet?

Reading and Retaining

- 1) Describe in your own words what we mean by the following terms:
 - a) Observation
 - b) Interpretation
 - c) Application
- 2) How will this process help us to retain more of what we read? How will it help us to enjoy Bible study more?

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE AND ENJOY IT

Different Approaches

- 1) Describe in your own words the following approaches to Bible study:
 - a) Systematic
 - b) Topical
 - c) Devotional

- 2) Share with the class any approaches to Bible study you've tried and found helpful.

- 3) Is one approach better than the other? Why?

- 4) List the advantages and disadvantages of each approach:
 - a) Systematic
 - b) Topical
 - c) Devotional

Practicing What We Preach

- 1) This class won't do us any good if we only *study* about Bible study. If you do not already have a study routine in place, make a commitment right now to do it. Make decisions about the following:
 - a) Time and place:
 - b) Approach – systematic, topical, devotional (or mix):

- 2) Jason Reynolds has challenged the teens to commit to 14 days straight and he has paired everyone off with “accountability partners.” They are to call or email their accountability partner everyday. If you lack self-discipline and feel you need extra encouragement to do this, why not ask someone in class to be your accountability partner?

Lesson 5

OBSERVATION: OPENING OUR EYES

Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law.” Psalm 119:18

Have you ever fallen asleep at the wheel... with your eyes wide open? You’ve experienced this, haven’t you? Your brain switches over to autopilot. You pass by familiar towns or significant landmarks. You know you’ve passed these because you know where you are and where you came from, but you sure can’t remember them because your mind was somewhere else.

It’s easy for this to happen when reading. It’s possible to read something and our mind be somewhere else completely. As a result our mind retains very little (if anything) of what is read. We would be unable to answer even the simplest of questions about a text because our mind was not engaged when reading.

There’s a difference between reading and observing. Reading can be done with little thought. Observing requires an alert and inquisitive mind. When we read it is easy to “fall asleep at the wheel.” When we observe we exercise our minds by focusing on different aspects of the text. After a simple reading of the text we may retain little information. Observing helps us to retain much more of the information in our minds. Most important, reading may or may not lead to proper interpretation and application while observing naturally leads us to both.

Observation Level One: A Flyover View

One of the joys of flying is getting to look down at all of God’s creation from above. I wish the windows in the plane were bigger sometimes! Seeing everything from above just adds a dimension to my appreciation for the majesty and beauty of God’s creation. I believe this is true in our study of Scripture as well. We will both appreciate and discern much more from our study once we’ve observed the overall “landscape” of the text.

Before we examine the individual verses or even chapters of a book we should read the book in its entirety first. Shorter books can be done in one setting. Longer books like Isaiah may take several days to read through. Romans (16 chapters) could be easily read in three days. This keeps the load manageable without undermining the momentum.

As you read, it’s still good to jot down questions or key words you encounter along the way, but don’t get bogged down with this. You don’t want to lose the “flyover view” effect.

This kind of reading is the way many of the books of the Bible were intended to be read. When Paul wrote the Philippian letter, he surely expected the brethren to read the letter (at least initially) all the way through. Could you imagine the reader standing up and reading the first few paragraphs and then just stopping, announcing that he would finish the next day or the following week? Even worse, could you imagine him reading one sentence at a time and then asking after each sentence, “Okay, now what do you think Paul meant by that?” I can hear the brethren now: “Get on with it! We’ll talk about what he meant when you’re through!” What’s worse is verses often break up sentences. If we examine a book verse by verse, we aren’t even reading complete sentences!

We miss a lot when we fail to read a book of the Bible all the way through. This is true even when we feel we know the book pretty well already. The fact is we probably don’t know it as well as we think we do. Let’s face it: we don’t read through whole books very often. When’s the last time you read a book of the Bible all the way through (even one of the shorter ones). We preach “book, chapter, and verse,” but for some reason our study tends to focus on “verse,” sometimes on “chapter,” but rarely on “book.” We should spend more time in the “flyover view.”

Observation Level Two: A Ground-Level View

You've taken a flyover tour. You're ready now to take the ground-level tour. You're still surveying, however. Don't get caught up with the details just yet. That will come later. You're simply trying to discover some order and structure to what you've just surveyed.

Outlining is one of the most valuable study exercises you can do. In outlining, you begin to discover the overall thesis or emphasis of the book (which you might have found already in the flyover view), and then try to figure out how that is developed in the major sections of the book.

This can be a challenging process. Finding the structure of the letter is sometimes difficult because our Bibles are filled with a lot of "clutter" (things not put there by the authors). Believe it or not, the authors of the Bible did not write in our "chapter and verse" format! When Paul finished writing the first chapter to the brethren at Corinth he didn't say, "Whew! Finished the first chapter. Now let's work on chapter two!" These chapters and verses were supplied by uninspired men, hundreds of years after the books were written.

What this means is that the end of chapter one in Paul's first letter to Corinth does not necessarily represent the end of the thought Paul started in chapter one. If you've heard a teacher talk about a "bad chapter division" that's what he's talking about. The thought is not finished yet. We read chapter two expecting there to be a new thought when the author hasn't finished his first point yet.

The verses also present a challenge. I don't know of any other document we read that is arranged in this way. Could you imagine if you had to read a newspaper or a novel broken up into verses? It would be a little annoying to me. Don't you just love it when someone actually reads the Scripture verse by verse? He reads verse one (pause...), and then reads verse two (pause...), and then verse three... The flow of thought is totally lost.

Some recent Bibles have helped by using a more familiar (and logical) format with the text presented in chapters with the verses indicated in a very small font for reference

purposes. But even these paragraphs can be misleading. Where does the first paragraph end and the next one begin? That's determined by the translator and is sometimes misleading.

There are also chapter headings to deal with. In my Bible the chapter heading over 1 Corinthians 2 reads: "Christ, the Wisdom of God." Is that true? Well, yes, Christ is the wisdom of God, but is that the point of this chapter? Maybe, maybe not. The heading over 1 Corinthians 3 reads: "You are the Temple of God." Is that true? Without a doubt. Is that the point of chapter three?

And then there are the notes you have penciled in (which we've discussed before). These notes are not bad (they can be useful), but they may guide us to the same conclusions we've made previously about the outline and structure of the book.

Actually, none of this "clutter" is necessarily bad. The chapter and verse divisions serve a useful purpose. The other things supplied by the translators, like paragraphs and chapter headings, can be very helpful. The point is you're going to have to ignore all of this "clutter" to come to a fresh, independent conclusion about the structure of the letter.

A few thoughts on outlining a book:

Look for major divisions. Keep it simple. Don't try to divide everything up. If you only find two or three major divisions, don't feel like you've failed. You'll be amazed at how valuable just that little bit of knowledge will be for you later.

Be flexible. Be willing to modify the outline as you read through the text again and again. You might even feel the need to scrap the whole thing and start over. It's okay to do that.

Relax. If you don't see anything the first time don't worry. It may be there is no real clear structure to the book (try outlining 2 Corinthians). If you don't see anything, just move on to the next step. You might discover more structure later.

Observation Level Three: Digging Deeper

The Grand Canyon is one of the marvels of God's creation. I've only seen it from a jet window, but the enormity of this magnificent chasm from this perspective is breath taking. Seeing it from this perspective makes me want to see it up close some day. I can only imagine how awesome the ground level view would be. Standing at the top of this canyon must certainly be a religious experience! However, after having seen all of the glory of the Canyon up close I doubt I would be content with just a "ground level" view. I would want to go down into the Canyon itself!

Once you've taken the "flyover" and the "ground-level" view of one of the books of the Bible, you will be motivated to dig deeper. You will want to uncover insights and details that are not as readily apparent as the information you've gathered thus far. You've come a long way towards understanding the truth this author wanted to convey. With this step you draw even closer toward this goal.

There are five things we look for at this level:

1. Repeated Words and Phrases.
2. Peculiar Words and Phrases.
3. Comparisons and Contrasts.
4. Figurative Expressions.
5. Anything Strange.

Note: For this step writing in your Bible is very helpful. I would suggest having a Bible to mark up and a clean Bible for when you want to read through the text again.

You could also photocopy the text to mark up. With a photocopy you can freely circle, underline and highlight with no inhibition.

But if you're really inhibited about writing in the Bible (like me) and too lazy to go make a photocopy (guilty again) you still have your trusty notebook to jot down observations.

Observe Repeated Words and Phrases

Have you ever noticed that an author sometimes repeats himself? Have you ever noticed that an author sometimes repeats himself? There's usually a reason. We repeat

ourselves to our children all the time. Why should we think God would be any different when speaking to us?

Circle or jot down in your notebook all of these repeated words and phrases as you read through the text again. Don't be surprised when you continue to find more and more repeated words and phrases in the text as you read through it becoming more familiar with what's there.

Observe Peculiar Words and Phrases

You will encounter words and phrases in the Bible that are a little unusual. Words for salvation like *propitiation*, *redemption*, *justification* and *sanctification* are not words we use every day. They are unique to the Bible.

The authors of the Bible were not trying to use words that were difficult or unusual. These words were not strange in biblical times. These words made sense in the context of ancient Jewish culture. They just don't make much sense to us today.

When you find an unusual word or phrase, be sure to highlight it or write it down. It may be a key to understanding the meaning of the text. The context may help define the word, but you may also need to look it up in a Bible dictionary.

Observe Comparisons and Contrasts

To have an appreciation for one thing, it often helps to compare or contrast it with something else. The Bible does this a lot. The book of Hebrews is full of this, comparing Christ to angels and individuals such as Moses and Joshua. It compares His priesthood with that of Aaron's and His sacrifices to those offered in the Old Testament.

Jesus' teaching is full of comparisons. His parables compare ordinary things and events from everyday life to spiritual concepts concerning the Kingdom.

These comparisons and contrasts are sometimes obvious (as those listed) but they can also be subtle (it seems that Luke lays the birth narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus side by side to draw comparisons). Investing time to discover these comparisons will pay dividends later when we seek to understand the meaning and purpose of the text.

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE AND ENJOY IT

Observe Figurative Expressions

Figures of speech add spice and flavor to our communication. Expressions like “that’s driving me up the wall” or “that doesn’t hold water” or “you’re standing on shaky ground” abound in our speech. We use them so much we don’t even realize we’re using them (until you try to converse with someone from a foreign country). Every language and culture has expressions like these, so we should not be surprised to find them in the Bible as well.

John the Baptist said about Jesus, “There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose” (Mk. 1:7). What a colorful way for John to say Jesus was greater than himself! Using our vernacular we might say, “I don’t hold a candle to Jesus,” but John’s expression related to the culture of the first century. When a guest or the master entered the house, a slave would stoop and untie his sandals as a gesture of hospitality and then wash his feet. So what John was really saying was, “I’m not even worry to be Jesus’ slave.”

Sometimes figurative expressions can be hard to explain. Their origin can be difficult to determine. Some expressions are rooted in the Old Testament and require a good knowledge of the Old Testament (like the apocalyptic language of Revelation). Others are rooted in the ancient near eastern culture (which is foreign to us). But it’s okay if we don’t understand all of these expressions. The goal at this stage in our study is to simply identify these. We’ll look at how to interpret some of these unusual expressions in a later lesson.

Observe Anything Strange

As you read your Bible, you’ll observe some strange things. Recognizing these things can be a lot of fun. Think about John the Baptist. Anything strange about him? What would you think if someone came to church wearing a garment made out of camel’s hair? How often do you meet someone who lives off of locusts and wild honey? Unusual to say the least!

These strange things are usually placed in the text for a reason. With John the Baptist it appears that the gospel writers were seeking to identify John as an authentic prophet (2 Kings 1:8; Zech. 13:4; Lk. 7:24-26). John was

not just weird or eccentric, he was poor, and that’s significant in understanding the kind of man he was. He did not preach a message that would place him in “kings’ courts” or among people who would be able to support him financially.

Another unusual aspect of John’s ministry was the location, the Jordan River. The center of Judaism was in Jerusalem, but John brought his message of repentance to a dry, dusty, and virtually forsaken area about thirty miles away. Why did he baptize people there rather than at one of the populated pools in Jerusalem? In town, people could have walked a few short blocks to be baptized. Down at the Jordan, people had to walk many miles and down several hundred feet. We know it was prophesied that John would be the voice of one crying in the wilderness, but why? Thinking about the reasons for this makes Bible study fun.

A. B. Simpson put Bible study in perspective when he wrote:

God has hidden every precious thing in such a way that it is a reward to the diligent, a prize to the earnest, but a disappointment to the slothful soul. All nature is arrayed against the lounging and the idler. The nut is hidden in its thorny case; the pearl is buried beneath the ocean waves; the gold is imprisoned in the rocky bosom of the mountains; the gem is found only after you crush the rock which encloses it; the very soil gives its harvest as a reward to the laboring farmer. So truth and God must be earnestly sought. (*How to Study the Bible and Enjoy It* by Skip Heitzig)

Henry Ford is reported to have said, “Cut your own wood and you warm yourself twice.” The exercise warms you as much as the fire itself. Discover the treasures of truth contained in the Bible when reading a commentary or listening to a sermon is a joyful experience, but it’s even more satisfying when we mine the Scriptures and find those treasures for ourselves. Besides, reading a commentary can be boring and tedious. Bible study, to those with proper training and good hearts, is never boring.

The Student, The Fish, & Agassiz

The following story (taken from *Independent Bible Study*, by Irving Jensen) teaches the importance of observation. It is a classic used by teachers of many different disciplines to introduce the fundamentals of original firsthand study.

It was more than fifteen years ago that I entered the laboratory of Professor Agassiz, and told him I had enrolled my name in the scientific school as a student of natural history. He asked me a few questions about my object in coming, my antecedents generally, the mode in which I afterwards proposed to use the knowledge I might acquire, and finally, whether I wished to study any special branch. To the latter I replied that while I wished to be well grounded in all departments of zoology, I purposed to devote myself specially to insects.

“When do you wish to begin?” he asked.

“Now,” I replied.

This seemed to please him, and with an energetic “Very well,” he reached from a shelf a huge jar of specimens in yellow alcohol.

“Take this fish,” said he, “and look at it; we call it a Haemulon [pronounced Hem-yulon] by and by I will ask what you have seen.”

With that he left me, but in a moment returned with explicit instructions as to the care of the object entrusted to me.

“No man is fit to be a naturalist,” said he, “who does not know how to take care of specimens.”

I was to keep the fish before me in a tin tray, and occasionally moisten the surface with alcohol from the jar, always taking care to replace the stopper tightly. Those were not the days of ground glass stoppers, and elegantly shaped exhibition jars; all the old students will recall the huge, neckless glass bottles with the leaky, wax-besmeared corks half eaten by insects and begrimed with cellar dust. Entomology was a cleaner science than ichthyology, but the example of the professor, who had unhesitatingly plunged to the bottom of the jar to produce the fish, was infectious; and though this alcohol had “a very ancient and fishlike smell,” I really dared not show any aversion within these sacred precincts, and treated the alcohol as though it were pure water. Still I was conscious of a passing feeling of disappointment, for gazing at a fish did not commend itself to an ardent

entomologist. My friends at home, too, were annoyed, when they discovered that no amount of eau de cologne would drown the perfume which haunted me like a shadow.

In ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started in search of the professor, who had, however left the museum; and when I returned, after lingering over some of the odd animals stored in the upper apartment, my specimen was dry all over. I dashed the fluid over the fish as if to resuscitate it from a fainting-fit, and looked with anxiety for a return of the normal sloppy appearance. This little excitement over, nothing was to be done but return to a steadfast gaze at my mute companion. Half an hour passed, an hour, another hour; the fish began to look loathsome. I turned it over and around; looked it in the face — ghastly; from behind, beneath, above, sideways, at a three-quarter’s view — just as ghastly. I was in despair; at an early hour I concluded that lunch was necessary; so, with infinite relief, the fish was carefully replaced in the jar, and for an hour I was free.

On my return, I learned that Professor Agassiz had been at the museum, but had gone and would not return for several hours. My fellow students were too busy to be disturbed by continued conversation. Slowly I drew forth that hideous fish, and with a feeling of desperation again looked at it. I might not use a magnifying glass; instruments of all kinds were interdicted. My two hands, my two eyes, and the fish; it seemed a most limited field. I pushed my finger down its throat to feel how sharp its teeth were. I began to count the scales in the different rows until I was convinced that that was nonsense. At last a happy thought struck me — I would draw the fish; and now with surprise I began to discover new features in the creature. Just then the professor returned.

“That is right,” said he; “a pencil is one of the best of eyes. I am glad to notice, too, that you keep your specimen wet and your bottle corked.”

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With these encouraging words he added, "Well, what is it like?"

He listened attentively to my brief rehearsal of the structure of parts whose names were still unknown to me: the fringed gill — arches and movable operculum; the pores of the head, fleshy lips, and lidless eyes; the lateral line, the spinous fin, and forked tail; the compressed and arched body. When I had finished, he waited as if expecting more, and then, with an air of disappointment, —

"You have not looked very carefully; "why," he continued, more earnestly, "you haven't seen one of the most conspicuous features of the animal, which is as plainly before your eyes as the fish itself; look again, look again!" and he left me to my misery.

I was piqued; I was mortified. Still more of that wretched fish! But now I set myself to my task with a will, and discovered one new thing after another, until I saw how just the professor's criticism had been. The afternoon passed quickly, and when, towards its close, the professor inquired, —

"Do you see it yet?"

"No," I replied, "I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before."

"That is next best," said he earnestly, "but I won't hear you now; put away your fish and go home; perhaps you will be ready with a better answer in the morning. I will examine you before you look at the fish."

This was disconcerting; not only must I think of my fish all night, studying, without the object before me, what this unknown but most visible feature might be; but also without reviewing my new discoveries, I must give an exact account of them the next day. I had a bad memory; so I walked home by Charles River in a distracted state, with my two perplexities.

The cordial greeting from the professor the next morning was reassuring; here was a man who seemed to be quite as anxious as I that I should see for myself what he saw.

"Do you perhaps mean," I asked, "that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?"

His thoroughly pleased, "Of course, of course!" repaid the wakeful hours of the pervious night. After he had discoursed most happily and enthusiastically — as he always

did — upon the importance of this point, I ventured to ask what I should do next.

"Oh, look at your fish!" he said, and left me again to my own devices. In a little more than an hour he returned and heard my new catalogue.

"That is good, that is good!" he repeated, "but that is not all; go on." And so, for three long days, he placed that fish before my eyes, forbidding me to look at anything else, or to use any artificial aid. "Look, look, look," was his repeated injunction.

This was the best entomological lesson I ever had — a lesson whose influence has extended to the details of every subsequent study; a legacy the professor has left to me, as he has left it to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, with which we cannot part.

A year afterward, some of us were amusing ourselves with chalking outlandish beasts upon the museum blackboard. We drew prancing star-fishes; frogs in mortal combat; hydraheaded worms; stately crawfishes, standing on their tails, bearing aloft umbrellas; and grotesque fishes, with gaping mouths and staring eyes. The professor came in shortly after, and was amused as any, at our experiments. He looked at the fishes.

"Haemulons, every one of them," he said.

"Mr. -----drew them."

True; and to this day, if I attempt to draw a fish, I can draw nothing but Haemulons.

The fourth day, a second fish of the same group was placed beside the first, and I was bidden to point out the resemblances and differences between the two; another and another followed, until the entire family lay before me, and a whole legion of jars covered the table and surrounding shelves; the odor had become a pleasant perfume; and even now, the sight of an old, six-inch, worm-eaten cork brings fragrant memories!

The whole group of Haemulons was thus brought in review; and, whether engaged upon the dissection of the internal organs, the preparation and examination of the bony framework, or the description of the various parts, Agassiz's training in the method of observing facts and their orderly arrangement was ever accompanied by the urgent exhortation not to be content with them.

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“Facts are stupid things,” he would say, “until brought into connection with some general law.”

At the end of eight months, it was almost with reluctance that I left these friends and

turned to insects; but what I had gained by this outside experience has been of greater value than years of later investigation in my favorite groups.

Exercise: Go back and read through *The Student, The Fish, & Agassiz* again. This time do it with a highlighter or a pen in hand. Circle or highlight everything you believe is important or interesting. Then go back and relate the important points of this story to Bible study. List all of the important facts and principles below. What do each these facts or principles teach us about the importance of observation in Bible study? Why must a good observation of the text come before any interpretation or application of it? List as many points as you can.

Introduction to Lesson 5

- 1) Describe in your own words the difference between reading and observing.

Observation Level One: A Flyover View

- 2) What is the advantage of observing the overall “landscape” of the text before we get into the details? What is lost when we read the books of the Bible exclusively in “piecemeal” fashion (chapter by chapter, verse by verse)?
- 3) We’re probably going to spend two classes (perhaps even three) going through all of the principles of this lesson. Once we’re finished we’ll apply these principles to 1 Corinthians. Go ahead and set up a “flyover” reading schedule of this book that begins today. If you have time to read through the whole book in one setting, that’s great, but don’t feel rushed. You have plenty of time to spread out this reading over the space of a few days. Remember not to stop while you’re reading. We’ll examine some of the details more later. Just read through it to get a feel for the overall message (even if you’ve studied this letter and feel comfortable with it already).

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Observation Level Two: A Ground-Level View

- 4) What is the value of outlining a book? What are some of the important things that come out of an outline? How is an outline useful when interpreting individual passages later?

- 5) What is some of the “clutter” (as I called it) that gets in the way of properly outlining a book? How does this stuff interfere? How can you overcome it?

Observation Level Three: Digging Deeper

Repeated Words and Phrases

- 6) Why do you think words or phrases are repeated in some passages?

- 7) Read Matthew 5:21-48. What words or phrases are repeated in this passage?

- 8) Read Matthew 6:1-18. What words or phrases repeated in this passage?

- 9) List any other passages you are aware of that use repetition?

Peculiar Words and Phrases

- 10) Why are there some unusual words in the Bible? Were the authors of the Bible just trying to confuse us?

- 11) Read Romans 3:21-26. Identify any peculiar words or phrases in this passage. What do these words mean?

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Comparisons and Contrasts

- 12) Why does the Bible compare and contrast things?
- 13) Read Ephesians 2:1-10. What contrast does Paul make here?
- 14) List any other passages you are aware of that use comparisons and/or contrasts?

Figurative Expressions

- 15) List some of the idiomatic expressions we use in our vocabulary. What would a person from a foreign country who is just learning English think about these? Would he always be able to understand what we're saying?
- 16) Identify the figurative expressions in the following passages:

Mt. 5:13-16	Jn. 11:11
Mt. 16:6	Gal. 2:20
Mk. 2:18-22	Eph. 6:11
Lk. 11:39	Col. 1:15
Lk. 17:37	1 Pet. 1:13
- 17) List some other passages that use figurative expressions?

Anything Strange

- 18) Read Ruth 3:1-13. What do you find strange in this passage?
- 19) Are there any stories or passages in the Bible that seem a little strange to you?

Conclusion to Lesson 5

- 20) Thinking about what we've learned from this lesson about observation, list any reasons why Bible study is boring and tedious to some but fun and exciting to others.

Lesson 6

OBSERVATION: OPENING OUR EYES (Exercises)

It's time to put our observation skills into practice! We're going to go through the three levels of observation with the book of 1 Corinthians.

Observation Level One: A Flyover View

Read all the way through 1 Corinthians. I read through it this morning and it took me exactly 52 minutes. It's the first time I've ever read through 1 Corinthians in one sitting! It's not at all necessary to do it one sitting. Break it up into two or three readings if you need to.

REMEMBER: Avoid the temptation to stop! I had to force myself to keep reading in some places.

Another suggestion I would make (that I forgot make in the lesson, pg. 16) is that you read it aloud. It makes a difference. There are several advantages to reading this way. You'll be less tempted to stop. You'll focus more on the flow of thought. It also keeps you more alert by exercising parts of the brain you don't use when you read silently. Try it. (I heard someone suggest recently that this is the way people always read books in Bible times, Acts 8:30. He said that while we feel strange reading aloud to ourselves, they felt just the opposite way. If you encountered someone reading, or even praying – 1 Samuel 1:13, to themselves you would think something was not right.)

Observation Level Two: A Ground Level View

You want to do two things at this level:

- 1) Briefly in one or two sentences explain Paul's purpose in writing this letter.
- 2) Outline the major divisions of the letter.

You might want to go back and review the suggestions made on page 17.

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Observation Level Three: Digging Deeper

Now you're ready to look at the details. We'll examine 1 Corinthians 15.

What are you looking for?

- 1) Repeated Words and Phrases
- 2) Peculiar Words and Phrases
- 3) Comparisons and Contrasts
- 4) Figurative Expressions
- 5) Anything Strange

Don't forget that, even at this deeper level where you look at the specific details, you're still in the observation phase of our study. Don't try to interpret what you're observing.

How do you find these things? READ, READ, READ, READ, and then READ it again. The more you read, the more you'll discover. So get your highlighters, colored pencils, or whatever you want to use to mark up the text, and go to it. Enjoy!

1 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, *2* by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you--unless you believed in vain. *3* For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, *4* and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, *5* and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. *6* After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. *7* After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. *8* Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. *9* For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. *10* But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. *11* Therefore, whether it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

12 Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? *13* But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. *14* And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. *15* Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up--if in fact the dead do not rise. *16* For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. *17* And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! *18* Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. *19* If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.

20 But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. *21* For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. *22* For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. *23* But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. *24* Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an

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end to all rule and all authority and power. 25 For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. 26 The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. 27 For "He has put all things under His feet." But when He says "all things are put under Him," it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. 28 Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all. 29 Otherwise, what will they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead? 30 And why do we stand in jeopardy every hour? 31 I affirm, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily. 32 If, in the manner of men, I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantage is it to me? If the dead do not rise, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!" 33 Do not be deceived: "Evil company corrupts good habits." 34 Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame.

35 But someone will say, "How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?" 36 Foolish one, what you sow is not made alive unless it dies. 37 And what you sow, you do not sow that body that shall be, but mere grain--perhaps wheat or some other grain. 38 But God gives it a body as He pleases, and to each seed its own body. 39 All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of animals, another of fish, and another of birds. 40 There are also celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. 41 There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory. 42 So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. 43 It is sown in

dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. 44 It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. 45 And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46 However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual. 47 The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. 48 As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. 49 And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man. 50 Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption.

51 Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed-- 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." 55 "O Death, where is your sting? ^{E55} O Hades, where is your victory?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

Lesson 7

INTERPRETATION: OPENING OUR MINDS

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. 2 Timothy 2:15

“But that’s just *your* interpretation.” Ever heard that before? You can believe what you want to believe, but don’t push *your* beliefs on me.

Many believe that interpretation is subjective. We can’t really know what the Bible says. It’s impossible to objectively discern the truth of God’s word.

When you look at the wide variety of interpretations in the religious world you can see why so many believe this. Perhaps you have struggled with this. After all, you know some good, seemingly honest people who disagree with you on Scripture. There are even disagreements with those you would consider “like-minded” brethren. You think to yourself, “Could they be right? Am I wrong? Am I way off track here?”

It’s good to feel doubt about our interpretations of Scripture. We need the humility to admit we could be wrong. We’re all prejudiced in certain ways. None of us is totally objective. I’m certainly not unbiased in my study. I was “raised in the church” (as they say). I’ve heard preaching and teaching from pretty much just one perspective my entire life. I have very little exposure to other points of view. So am I biased? Absolutely! Do I lean a certain way when I study the Bible? Of course I do! We all do (whether admit it or not).

Being aware of this fact is important. It’s necessary if we’re going to approach the Bible with an open mind. If we’ve already decided what a passage means before we read it, we won’t correct any misinterpretations we’ve made. But if we recognize which way we “lean” on certain issues, then maybe we’ll consider the other side more seriously.

But we need not despair. The religious world is divided. We (in our narrow fellowship) don’t even agree on some points. And often times we’re just wrong. But this should not cause us to throw in the towel and give up. This is not a hopeless task. God is able to communicate His will. God can communicate to us in an understandable way. He has also given us brains to discern that will. God’s will is not subjectively discerned. It’s not about *my* interpretation and *your* interpretation. It’s *God’s will* we seek. There is an objective method we can follow to “rightly divide the word of truth.”

The Key to Sound Interpretation

There is a term for what we’re studying about in this lesson. It’s called *hermeneutics*. The dictionary defines hermeneutics as “the science of interpretation; especially, the branch of theology dealing with the principles of exegesis.” After hearing that definition you’re probably thinking that you are in way over your head now! But hermeneutics is not as complicated as it might sound. In fact, the principles of hermeneutics are really just common sense. Go to a college textbook on hermeneutics and you’ll find a lot of long, fancy words to describe the different rules and methods of interpretation, but when you boil it all down, what lies at the heart of all of those rules and methods is one simple thing: *context*.

Context is defined as “the parts of a sentence, paragraph, discourse, etc. that occur just before and after a specified word or passage, and determine its exact meaning.” How do you determine the “exact meaning” of a word or passage? The context. What is the context? It is what comes just “before and after” the word or passage you’re studying.

Have you ever heard a politician say, “Those words were taken out of context?” He’s been misrepresented. Someone has taken his words out of context making him sound like he believes in something he doesn’t.

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The same can be done with the Bible. Did you know the Bible says, “There is no God?” It does! Psalm 53:1. The context, however, makes the true meaning plain: “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” When the phrase is seen in the context of the entire verse, it means the exact opposite of our initial interpretation. Granted, this is a simplistic example, but it illustrates the point: *any text without a context becomes a pretext for a proof-text*. A lot of false doctrine (if not most) is produced by an ignorance of the context.

Notice our definition states that there is an *immediate* context (“sentence” and “paragraph”) and a *remote* context (“discourse”). Either one of these can help determine the meaning of a word or passage. All that was required to clear up the misinterpretation of Psalm 53:1 was the immediate context. In many cases, that’s all that is necessary. Two or three verses before or after helps the true meaning to come to light.

But sometimes a larger context is required. Hebrews 12:1 reads, “Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” Who are these “witnesses” surrounding us? Notice the first word in the verse: “Therefore.” That word informs us that what is said here is “as a result of” what has just been revealed. From the previous chapter we learn that the cloud of witnesses refers to Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and many other great men and women of faith.

Whether it is the immediate context or the remote context, good interpretation is all about context. Without context, we’re liable to come up with almost any interpretation. Armed with the context, we’re much less likely to go wrong.

One More Word on Observation

This is where our good observation skills really pay off. If we’ve already taken several “flyover” and “ground-level” views of the text, then we’ve got a good handle on the context. We’ve gotten the landscape clearly in

mind. Most importantly, *we’ve done our observation without trying to interpret as we go*.

The reason we want observation and interpretation to be two separate steps, is because we don’t want our interpretation to shape our observation. If a crime scene investigator comes to a murder scene with his mind already made up of who did it, it’s going to affect his collection of evidence. A good investigator gathers all the information he can first, and then seeks to interpret what that evidence means. A good Bible student does the same.

“How can you say that baptism is so important when there’s only one verse that says we should be baptized?” Have you ever been asked that question? I challenged a Baptist friend recently to restudy the subject of baptism for himself. He got his concordance and just looked up all the references. He came back a week later and declared in amazement, “I didn’t know there were so many references in the Bible about baptism!” Now my friend is no novice to the Bible. He has studied for years and is a diligent student. He’s read through the New Testament numerous times. He’s been in classes on Acts. How could this be a surprise? How could he not know? It’s simple. He comes from a theological perspective that doesn’t take baptism seriously, and so when he would come to verses that mentioned baptism he would just read over those references with little thought to their significance.

Have you ever heard it said, “We see what we want to see?” It’s true. Our observation is very much affected by the interpretation we’ve already made. I’ve got a theory. I’ve yet to test this, but I think it’s true. I believe I could probably figure out the doctrinal persuasion of someone just by looking at what he highlights in his Bible. Not the notes, just the highlights. The Catholic, the Protestant, the premillennialist, the charismatic, the one who believes you’re “once saved, always saved,” the one who believes in salvation by “faith only.” Just by what’s underlined! How? We tend to see (and pay attention to) the things that support conclusions we’ve already made. Whether it’s intended or not, we see what we want to see.

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We're not immune to this problem either! While our Baptist friends might read through Acts and gloss over references to baptism, we might have every reference to baptism highlighted! That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it could get us off track in some ways. It's important that we see baptism in the book of Acts, but we've got to see baptism *in context*. Sometimes baptism is a key idea (even *the* key idea), but there are also places where it is not the main idea. God may want us to focus on something else, but we've zeroed in on baptism.

Good interpretation is all about context, and the only way we can truly see the context is through a thorough, *unbiased* observation of the text. Before you start to figure out what a passage means, you've got to first forget what you think it means. Read it like you've never read it before. Get the big picture, gather all the facts, and squeeze out every last tidbit of information you can. Then you've got the context to work with. Then you're ready for interpretation.

What Do the Words Mean?

Words can have different meanings. Take the word *light*. It can refer to radiant energy that illuminates. As an adjective it could be used as the opposite of heavy or the shade of some color. It can be used metaphorically in reference to understanding. And if you make *light* of something it means you deem it unimportant. The Bible uses light in all of those ways (Gen. 1:3; 2 Cor. 4:17; Lk. 2:32; Mt. 22:5). The context is what makes the meaning clear in all those verses.

As we interpret words, we must remember that language is fluid. Words change meaning over time. Take the word *conversation*. In the King James translation, Hebrews 13:5 says, "Let your conversation be without covetousness," which makes it sound like we should not reveal our sinful desires when we speak. But that's not the meaning of that verse. A more modern rendering would be, "Let your *conduct* be without covetousness." The English word *conversation* once meant "conduct" or "manner of life." Over time, the meaning changed until now conversation refers to our talk instead of our behavior.

The context sometimes helps to correctly define words that have changed meaning. The next statement in Hebrews 13:5 says, "be content with such things as you have." That sounds more like conduct than speech. But if the context is not conclusive, go to other places where the same word is used. The contexts of these other passages will usually help nail down the specific meaning.

If you still have problems defining a word, you can always turn to a Bible dictionary.

What Does the Grammar Show?

You don't have to be an English major to understand the Bible, but it is helpful to identify different parts of speech: noun, verb, adjective, adverb, conjunction, etc. Knowing the function of these different parts of speech enhances our understanding of what the author is saying. A noun is a "person, place, thing, action, or quality." Verbs are action words. Adjectives describe things (nouns). Adverbs describe actions (verbs). Conjunctions are words that connect words, phrases, or sentences.

When looking at a passage, give some attention to the grammatical structure. The key thought can often be found by identifying the subject (the main thought or idea – it will be a noun) and the verb (the action or condition of the subject). Then notice the relationship of the other words around it. See how the subject and verb are described (adjectives and adverbs). See how key thoughts or ideas are connected (conjunctions). Then think of possible meanings.

What is the Background?

There is another kind of context we need to consider – the cultural context. The culture of the Bible was very different than our own. Skip Heitzig writes,

The societies were mostly agrarian and simple. The cities were small and compact and had towers, walls, and gates for protection. They generally were on elevated sites with a water source nearby for sustenance and protection. Water didn't come from the tap but was fetched from huge cisterns or wells. The clothing was certainly different. Rather than being purchased

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from a mall, it was handmade, earthy, and simple. The basic article of clothing was the tunic, to which various accessories were added.

Understanding the lifestyle and customs of the Bible helps us to interpret the meaning. Some commandments in Scripture may sound strange to us when the culture is not considered. We're told about a man who wanted to first "bury his father" before he would follow Jesus. Jesus told this man, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." (Lk. 9:60) That sounds severe and insensitive, but an understanding of the culture helps us to see why Jesus made this statement. Skip Heitzig comments on a similar situation:

A few years ago, a missionary asked a rich young Turkish man to go with him on a trip to Europe, during which time the missionary hoped to disciple the man. When the young man replied that he must bury his father, the missionary offered his sympathy and expressed surprise that the father had died. The man told him that his father was alive and healthy. He explained that the expression "bury my father" meant staying at home and fulfilling his family responsibilities until his father died and he received his share on the inheritance.

That really changes the way we interpret these words from Jesus! What that man was saying was, "I want to receive my inheritance," and that could involve a long period of time. Jesus was not encouraging this man to shirk family responsibility, but to realize that discipleship demands self-sacrifice.

How Does Your Interpretation Balance with the Rest of Scripture?

The issue here is still context, only the context is the entire Bible. The Bible is an extraordinary book! It is a collection of 66 books written by at least 40 men over the space of about 1500 years. These men came from a variety of backgrounds: Amos, a shepherd; Daniel a political leader; Joshua, a general; Peter and John were fishermen; Luke was a Gentile physician. The Bible deals with controversial issues such as the origin of the universe, the existence and nature of God, the origin and ultimate end of evil, and the purpose of life. You would expect a collection

like this, with so many variables, to be a chaotic text. But there is perfect unity!

Skip Heitzig offers this analogy:

Imagine taking twenty-five medical books from various cultures, written in different languages over the past one thousand years, and trying to treat someone based on the findings. What do you think would happen to the patient? He'd probably be dead in a week—or less! Yet the Bible's diagnosis and prescription for the ills of humanity reads with synthesis and cohesion.

We have such strong evidence for the inspiration of the Bible! How can you explain the incredible unity of the Bible if it did not come from one mind: the mind of God?

But what does this mean to you and me? If the Bible comes from the mind of God, then it will have no contradictions. We will not be told one thing in Matthew and then something different in Mark. This is why we must be careful to consider the rest of the Bible's teaching when we interpret a specific passage.

Many false teachings could be eliminated if this was done. People who still bind the Sabbath restrictions base their conclusions on statements from the Old Testament that say it is wrong to work on the Sabbath. If they were to take an honest look at the whole of Scripture, however, they would see that those restrictions ended at the cross (Col. 2:13-17).

If all of this interpretation and critical thinking seems a little laborious, take heart! There is a big payoff at the end. We have to sow before we reap, and God has a wonderful harvest planned for us.

My favorite Bible class teacher in college used to say that Christianity is the thinking man's religion. What he meant was that we've got to use our brains when reading the Bible. God has not just handed us a list of commandments: "Do this, this, and this... And don't do those things." That would be easy. It would require very little brainpower, but it would not accomplish God's purpose. There would be no transformation. God seeks to change us from the inside out. He wants more than just mindless obedience. He wants our heart. To do this God shows us His

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heart, much more than a simple list of commandments.

Bible study produces some of the greatest joys we can experience this side of eternity, but these joys don't come easy! It will cost us a lot. There is sacrifice involved. It's hard work. It takes years and years of diligent study. But when we truly apply ourselves to understanding God's will – when we see God's heart and experience the transforming

power of that knowledge – we soar to heights of glory!

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. 2 Corinthians 3:18

Introduction to Lesson 7

- 1) Why do some believe it's impossible to agree on what the Bible means?
- 2) Is it bad to have doubts about your interpretation? Why?
- 3) Do we have any reasons to feel confidence in our ability to interpret the Bible correctly? What are those reasons?

The Key to Sound Interpretation

- 4) What is hermeneutics? Is this something that's beyond the average Joe? Why or why not?
- 5) What is context? Describe it in your own words.
- 6) What is the difference between the immediate and remote context?
- 7) List any verses you can think of that are taken out of context.

One More Word on Observation

- 8) Why do we mean when we say that observation and interpretation should be two separate steps? Why is it important to keep these steps separate?

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- 9) Do we see what we want to see? Did Jesus ever say something about that? Where?

- 10) Do you think my theory about highlighting (bottom of pg 29) is valid? Is it possible that we do the same things when we read the Bible? Have you ever had an experience where you see something in a passage that you've read many times (and then wonder why you hadn't seen that before)? Has that ever happened when listening to someone from a different theological background (perhaps in commentary, on radio, or private study)? Why do you think that happens?

What Do the Words Mean?

- 11) Define how light is used in the following passages:
 - a) Gen. 1:3
 - b) 2 Cor. 4:17
 - c) Lk. 2:32
 - d) Mt. 22:5

- 12) Define these words in these passages by using the context (all of these are from the New King James Version):
 - a) Mammon – Luke 16:11, 13
 - b) Doubtful things – Romans 14:1
 - c) Faith – Romans 14:23
 - d) Baptized – Acts 8:36, 38
 - e) Depart – 1 Corinthians 7:10-11
 - f) Peace – John 14:27 & Matthew 10:34

What Does the Grammar Show?

- 13) Identify the different parts of speech in the lesson and describe what they are.

- 14) Read 2 Peter 3:14-18. Identify all the verbs in this passage. How does this help us in our understanding of the text?

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- 15) Read through the passage below and identify all the different parts of speech. How does this exercise enhance our understanding of the text?

1 Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: 2 that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. 3 For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, 4 imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. 5 And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God.*

What is the Background?

- 16) Why is it important to understand the cultural background?
- 17) Indicate if there is anything culturally unique in the following passages that will shape our interpretation?
- a) Matthew 10:14
 - b) Luke 1:25
 - c) John 13:14
 - d) 1 Timothy 5:14

How Does Your Interpretation Balance with the Rest of Scripture?

- 18) Give examples of passages that are used (like the Sabbath day restrictions, Exodus 20:8-11) without consideration to the larger context of the whole of Scripture (your examples may also show an ignorance of the immediate context as well).
- 19) Give examples of where the Bible can be used to help interpret itself (i.e. using the gospels to explain each other).

Lesson 8

INTERPRETATION: OPENING OUR MINDS (Exercises)

Now let's take our text in 1 Corinthians 15 and try to interpret it using all the tools we learned about in the last lesson. You may use a concordance or a dictionary, but don't use a commentary. You don't need any help! You can do it!

Remember when answering these questions that context is your best friend. Let the context guide you to the correct answers. Reread this chapter a couple of times through again to get the overall context fresh in your mind. Do this before you look at the exercises below.

You've made an outline of the entire book. Try now to find structure within the chapter itself. This will help you see the context more clearly when interpreting specific verses or words. Look for major divisions first. Then subdivide those major divisions into smaller divisions. Also look for little detours Paul makes. You can use the space below to write out your outline.

What Do the Words Mean?

- 1) What do the words "asleep" and "sleep" mean in this chapter?
- 2) How is the word "firstfruits" used in verse 20? What does it mean in the context?
- 3) Identify the different ways the word "death" (die, died) is used in this chapter.
- 4) What does the word "company" have reference to in verse 33?
- 5) What does the word "knowledge" mean in verse 34?
- 6) Identify the different ways Paul uses the word "body" in the last part of the chapter?
- 7) Identify the different ways the name "Adam" is used?

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What Does the Grammar Show?

- 8) Identify all of the “if... then” statements in the chapter. How many can you find? Note that sometimes the “then” is implied. What kind of argumentation is Paul using?

- 9) Identify all of the subjects contrasted in verses 35-49. What is the point of all of this?

What is the Background?

- 10) What is the New Testament background behind the concept of “sleep” as used in this chapter? Where did it come from? You may use a concordance.

- 11) What is the cultural background behind the concept of “firstfruits” as used in verse 23?

How Does Your Interpretation Balance with the Rest of Scripture?

- 12) In my Bible there is a cross-reference next to the word “trumpet” in verse 52 to Matthew 24:31. Compare 1 Corinthians 15:50-53 to Matthew 24:29-35. Are these the same trumpets? How do you know? Are there other passages that speak of a trumpet blast? You can use a concordance to look up the word “trumpet.” How does your interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:50-53 balance with those other passages?

- 13) List all the main arguments Paul makes here about the resurrection: the fact, the nature, the timing, etc. Are there other passages in the New Testament that support these arguments? You might use a concordance or a topical dictionary to research the word “resurrection.”

Putting it All Together

- 14) Verse 29 has been a problem for commentators for a long time. See if you can figure it out. What do the words mean? What does the grammar show? Can you make any conclusions about the background? How does your interpretation balance with the rest of Scripture? Remember... *Don't use a commentary!* You can do it!

Lesson 9

APPLICATION: OPENING OUR HEARTS

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Good Bible study is all about finding answers to three basic questions: “What does the text say?”; “What does the text mean?”; and “How does this text apply to my life?” Of these three questions, which of these do we tend to forget? That’s right, the last one. We work so hard to find out what the Bible says and means, but leave the text without even considering how it applies to us today.

This truth becomes painfully clear sometimes in Bible class. You’re sitting in a class on Hebrews and the class talks about how Jesus is greater than the angels, greater than Moses, greater than Aaron, etc. The class talks about how this letter would encourage persecuted first-century Jewish believers who were tempted to forsake the Lord and go back to the old Mosaic system. And that’s all well and good, but at the end of the session you’re well informed but not really inspired. Why? Because you’re not a Jew and you’ve never been tempted to follow the regulations of Moses’ Law! The whole class was spent talking about what Hebrews meant to them, but not a word was uttered about what Hebrews means to you!

Don’t get me wrong. It’s *very important* to understand what books and letters meant to the original audiences. That’s good Bible study. It’s imperative that we know 1 Corinthians 8-10 answers questions about eating meat sacrificed to idols. We need to see that 1 John was written to address problems created by Gnostic false teaching. It’s important to understand that the letter to Philemon deals with how a slave owner should treat his runaway slave who is returning home. But are you a pagan idol worshiper or a Gnostic false teacher or a slave

owner? We’ve got to see what those messages have to do with us.

There is a message for us. Even though the Bible was written to people who lived in much different circumstances than we do now, it is not an outdated book. It is relevant. It has something to say to every culture and every generation. Just as 2 Timothy 3:16 says, Scripture is given to us from God and *it is profitable*. It’s profitable to you and me living here in the 21st century, not just to believers who lived two thousand years ago. Every book, every chapter, and every verse has a personal, applicable message for you and me. Sometimes it’s a challenge to see what that message is, but it’s there. We must find it!

Building Our Lives on the Rock

Jesus told a story once about two builders. Both constructed homes to live in. The difference was one built on rock and the other built on sand. Nothing is said about the beauty of these homes. Nothing is said of how many square feet the homes had, how many stories, how many rooms, etc. None of that mattered. One had a good foundation and the other did not. The home built on the rock stood up to the winds, rains, and floods that beat on the house. The other was destroyed (Mt. 7:24-27).

Jesus applied this story to two different kinds of hearers. The one who built on the rock is the student of Jesus who hears what he says and then obeys. The one who built on the sand is the student who only hears. He does not apply what he hears to his life.

“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (Jas. 1:22). It’s easy to be intoxicated by Bible knowledge. Like the Pharisees of old, we can become very proud of ourselves because we are teachers and know so much about the Bible (Mt. 23:6-7). There are many warnings about Bible knowledge and pride (1 Cor. 8:1; 13:2). We must be aware of this danger in Bible study.

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We can become so knowledgeable in the Scriptures that we feel secure in that. We deceive ourselves, as James said. We feel very religious because we can quote Scripture at the drop of the hat, but our religion is in vain because we don't practice those Scriptures we quote (Jas. 1:26-27).

The goal of Bible study is not observation, or even interpretation; rather it is application. The point is not to uncover every tidbit of information or to come up with the precise definition of every Greek word. The goal is application. Application is where the rubber meets the road. It's what the Bible is all about.

"But What Does This Have to Do With My Life?"

You may be thinking, "I agree this. I'm willing to apply the Bible, but what if I can't see what it has to do with my life?" Let's go back to Hebrews. Here's a book that has a specific application (don't go back to the Law) addressed to a specific group (persecuted Jewish first-century Christians). Is there a message in Hebrews for us?

I heard a lesson recently by Mark Roberts entitled, "Hebrews for Today" that was really helpful to me. It helped me, not only to see what Hebrews means for me today, but, more importantly, the way we have to study books like this. What he did with Hebrews is take a major theme that runs through the book, *discouragement*, and applied it to everyday situations today. We all get discouraged. It's a common problem, not just a first century problem or even a Jewish problem. The source of our discouragement may be different than our ancient Jewish brethren, but the effect is the same: we give up; we give in; we go back to old habits; old ways; familiar things; comfortable things... just like the early Jewish Christians! And not only is the effect of this problem the same, the solution is the same as well: look to Jesus! The Hebrew writer exhorted those discouraged saints to get their eyes back on Jesus. God wants to exhort discouraged saints to do the same today, and the book of Hebrews will do that if we are receptive and open to that message.

The same thing can be done with 1 Corinthians 8-10. Paul addresses questions

about meat sacrificed to idols. We don't have this problem, but we can use the principles of these chapters and apply them to our lives. Paul discusses the problem stumbling blocks, of the need to sacrifice liberties for the gospel, of the dangers of getting too close to sin, of the nature of sin and temptation, of having fellowship with sin, etc. We could list dozens of specific applications from these chapters.

What about Philemon? You've never owned a slave and never will, but there's a lot in this little letter for you. Lessons that will change your life! Principles that will change the way that you think and the way you interact with others (especially your brethren).

The same can be said about 1 John and the Gnostic situation. You're not a Gnostic. You've never met a Gnostic, but Gnostic philosophy comes in many forms. It's actually all around us. 1 John speaks to our situation today as well as any book in the Bible.

Application is not always apparent. There are times you'll read a passage and question if application is possible. But it's always there. How do I know? 2 Timothy 3:16 tells me that "**All** Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable."

Transforming Your Quiet Times of Study

It's your quiet time of study now. You sit down with your Bible and your notebook, eager spend time with God and His word. You begin to read through your text, pen in hand, writing down different observations along the way. You then begin to ask interpretive questions. You want to know exactly what the author meant. But this time is not just about academics. You've set aside this quiet time with a single purpose in mind. You want the message of the Bible to penetrate your heart. You are like a wet lump of clay ready to be molded by the Potter. You want God to change you and transform you. But how do you do that? How can you know what the text means to you? Here are some questions you can ask:

- 1) How does this passage apply to my life? How does it apply to my family, my job, my life in the community, and my other relationships?

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- 2) What changes must I make? In light of the truth in this passage, is there something I must start doing or stop doing?
- 3) How will I carry out these changes? What is my plan of action?
- 4) What will be my personal prayer about this truth?
- 5) What verse or verses in this section should I memorize?

Before the world was created God dreamed a great dream for you and me. It wasn't to make us scholars. It wasn't to make us walking concordances. God wanted to change us and make us into something beautiful and wonderful (Eph. 2:1-10; 3:14-21). God wanted to transform us into the image of His only Son (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18). A vital part of this plan was revelation. He supplied this by His Spirit through apostles and prophets. They wrote down this revelation and it's been

handed down from generation to generation for thousands of years. The message of the Bible has remained intact having survived a violent history by the hand of God. Think about this when you open up your Bible. Think about all God has done to give you this revelation. And then read with a passionate desire to understand the message God has for your life. Read with open eyes, an open mind, and an open heart!

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. James 1:22-25

Introduction to Lesson 10

- 1) What are the three questions we ask when studying a passage? Which one of those questions do we tend to forget?
- 2) Can you ever remember being in a Bible class where there was no application? Do you remember what you were studying? Did you enjoy the class or not? If not, why do you suppose you didn't enjoy the class?
- 3) Can you think of some books in the Bible or specific passages that are difficult to apply? What assurance does 2 Timothy 3:16 give us about those passages?

Building Our Lives on the Rock

- 4) Apply Jesus' parable in Matthew 7:24-27 to Bible study. Are we ever like the man who built his house on the sand? How so? Are we just rebellious, lazy, indifferent?
- 5) What is the deception James was referring to in James 1:22? What lie are we telling?
- 6) What was the problem with the Pharisees (Mt. 23:6-7)? What was the problem with the brethren in Corinth (1 Cor. 13:2, 4)?

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“But What Does This Have to Do With My Life?”

- 7) What is the unifying theme Mark Roberts drew out in his sermon on Hebrews? How does this help us see the message of Hebrews for us today?
- 8) What are some principles we can learn from Paul’s answers concerning meat sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8-10? Can you think of any specific applications to these principles?
- 9) Read the letter to Philemon (it’s a short book, only 25 verses). What are some principles we can draw from this letter? What are some specific applications we can make?

Transforming Your Quiet Times of Study

- 10) Look at the suggested questions in the lesson to help us apply passages. Why is it necessary to think about all the different relationships we have (ques #1)? Why is it necessary to write down the changes we should make (ques #2), write out a plan of action (ques #3) and then pray about it (ques #4)? What is the purpose of memorization (ques #5)?
- 11) Can you think of some other steps we can take in this process?
- 12) Rewrite the message of James 1:22-25 in your own words. Now apply it. Don’t talk about what “we” do or don’t do. Talk about “me.” What should you think or do differently?

Lesson 10

APPLICATION: OPENING OUR HEARTS (Exercises)

1 Corinthians 15 is a chapter that almost pleads with us to apply it. It's a carefully crafted sermon that logically lays a foundation of truth and then hits us hard at the end with a bold exhortation (v. 58). The obvious application comes at the end, but there are numerous other places in the passage where applications can be made.

Go through all of the questions below as you read through the passage. It's okay to make general application ("Because this is true, *we should...*"), but it will be more meaningful if you make this personal. What's going on in your life? How should this chapter influence the specific decisions you are facing? Are you struggling with anything? Are there any specific temptations you are dealing with? How should it affect your attitude toward situations you're facing?

- 1) How does this passage apply to my life? How does it apply to my family, my job, my life in the community, and my other relationships?

- 2) What changes must I make? In light of the truth in this passage, is there something I must start doing or stop doing?

- 3) How will I carry out these changes? What is my plan of action?

- 4) What will be my personal prayer about this truth? It's okay to write this prayer out before you pray it. Write it out first to get your thoughts clear and focused and then pray from the heart.

- 5) What verse or verses in this section should I memorize?