

The Joy and Value of Inductive Study

from *How to Study Your Bible*

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The Bible was written so that anyone who wants to know who God is and how they are to live in a way that pleases Him can read it and find out.

God wants to bring us into intimacy with Himself. He wants to be a Father to us. In order to have that relationship, however, God has to talk to us. He wants to explain to us who He is and how we can be brought into a close, wonderful relationship with Him. He also wants us to understand the blessings of a life of obedience to His Word and the consequences of disobeying Him. And He wants us to know the truth about life and what is going to happen in the future.

The Bible tells us everything we need to know about life. That my friend, is why you need to study it for yourself.

The main requirement in learning to study the Bible inductively is the willingness to slow down and really look at what the Scripture is saying.

There are many ways to study the Bible, and there are many excellent study aids available to help you with specific books of the Bible. But the most important thing you need to remember is that to find out what the Bible says, you need to read it yourself in a way that will help you discover what it says, what it means, and how you are to apply it to your life. And the best way to do this is through the process called inductive study. Inductive study doesn't tell you what the Bible means or what you should believe. Instead, it teaches you a method of studying God's Word that can be applied to any portion of Scripture at any time for the rest of your life.

The main requirement in learning to study the Bible inductively is the willingness to slow down and really look at what the Scripture is saying. That may not sound too difficult, but in times like ours it is probably the most difficult part of the entire process. And to be honest, my friend, don't you sometimes wonder if our busyness—even for God—isn't often what's keeping us from being what God wants us to be?

Inductive Bible study uses the Bible itself as the primary source of information about the Bible. In inductive study you personally explore the Scriptures apart from conclusions Bible scholars and other people have drawn from their study of the Word. Though their labors are valuable, research has shown time and time again that people learn more and remember better when they enter into the process of discovery for themselves. In inductive study, commentaries, books, tapes, and other information about the Bible are consulted only after you have made your own thorough examination of the Scripture. These, then, can serve as a sounding board for your own observations and conclusions.

Actually, you may already be familiar with some of the principles of inductive study. For example, if you have ever taken any biology courses, you have studied frogs, and you have probably done so through observation.

To thoroughly study the frog, you first go to a river or creek bank where frogs live. You watch their eggs hatch, and the tadpoles emerge. You see their back and front legs develop and grow, until they look like

frogs and leave the water. After observing how the frogs respond to their new life on land, you catch one and observe it more closely. Eventually you take it to the biology lab where you dissect it to see how it looks on the inside. Afterward, you read what other biologists have learned about frogs to see if your conclusions match.

Inductive study of the Bible involves the same process: You begin with the Bible, observe it in its environment, and then take it apart so that you understand it firsthand. Then, when you've seen or discovered all you can on your own, you compare your observations with those of godly men and women who have written about the Word down through the ages.

Now, it would be much easier to just sit down and read a book about frogs in the first place and forget about traipsing through the marsh, wouldn't it? But you would end up with only secondhand knowledge. You would know what others have said about frogs, which might be interesting and—you hope—true. But you never would have had a personal encounter with a frog.

Inductive Bible study draws you into personal interaction with the Scripture and thus with the God of the Scriptures so that your beliefs are based on a prayerful understanding and legitimate interpretation of Scripture—truth that transforms you when you live by it.

If you will study inductively, the benefits will be beyond anything you have ever hoped could happen in your own personal understanding of the Word of God. As a result of incorporating the principles of inductive Bible study that we present in this book, you will

- be equipped to study God's Word on your own
- be independent of relying only on another's interpretation
- increase your knowledge of God and His ways
- be greatly strengthened in your personal faith
- recognize the authority of the inerrant Word of God in your daily walk
- become increasingly aware of all that it means to be in Christ.

Beginning with the Basics

Inductive Bible study consists of three component parts, which we will look at separately, but which frequently overlap in practice. These three parts are observation, interpretation, and application.

OBSERVATION – Discover What It Says!

Observation answers the question: What does the passage say? It is the foundation which must be laid if you want to accurately interpret and properly apply God's Word.

Have you ever read a book, chapter, or verse of the Bible and five minutes later been unable to remember anything you have read? So often we read the Bible with our eyes but not with our mind. There are several reasons for this. Either

- we think God's Word will magically make an impression on us without any effort on our part, or
- we don't really believe we can understand what we've read, or
- we are waiting for the pastor to teach on this section of Scripture so we'll know what to believe.

Often, however, we forget what we have read simply because we don't know what to look for in the text. Therefore, in the first part of this book you are going to learn what to look for when you read your Bible.

Because observation is discovering what the passage is saying, it requires time and practice. You'll discover that the more you read and get to know a book of the Bible, the more its truths will become obvious to you. You'll be awed at the wealth of spiritual riches contained in even the shortest books of the Bible—and you will have discovered it yourself! You will know that you know!

INTERPRETATION – Discover What It Means!

Interpretation answers the question: What does the passage mean? And the basis for accurate interpretation is always careful observation. Interpretation is the process of discovering what the passage means. As you carefully observe Scripture, the meaning will become apparent. However, if you rush into interpretation without laying the vital foundation of accurate observation, your understanding will be colored by your presuppositions—what you think, what you feel, or what other people have said, rather than what God's Word says.

Inductive Bible study consists of three component parts, which we will look at separately, but which frequently overlap in practice. These three parts are observation, interpretation, and application.

Interpretation is not necessarily a separate step from observation, for often, as you carefully observe the text, at that very moment you begin to see what it means. Thus, interpretation flows out of observation.

However, interpretation can also involve separate actions or steps that go beyond merely observing the immediate text. One of these exercises is investigating cross-references. First and foremost, let Scripture interpret Scripture. You may also use other helps, such as word studies or the evaluation of resources such as commentaries and Bible dictionaries to check your conclusions or to supplement your understanding of the historical or cultural setting of the text.

What we are going to do is to give you principles of interpretation and offer special sections to guide you in handling different types of writing, including figures of speech, parables, and allegories. We'll also show you how to do word studies and how to use Bible study tools that will greatly enhance your learning. It's going to be exciting—and so enlightening!

APPLICATION – Discover How It Works!

Application answers the question: How does the meaning of this passage apply to me? Usually this is the first thing we want to know when we read the Bible, but proper application begins with belief which then results in being and doing. Once you know what a passage means, you are not only responsible for putting it into practice in your own life, but accountable if you don't! Ultimately, then, the goal of personal Bible study is a transformed life and a deep and abiding relationship with Jesus Christ.

Application is not a third step in the inductive process. Rather, application takes place as you are confronted with truth and decide to respond in obedience to that truth. The basis for application is 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

When you know what God says, what He means, and how to put His truths into practice, you will be equipped for every circumstance of life. To be equipped for every good work of life—totally prepared to handle every situation in a way that honors God—is not only possible, but also God’s will. And that’s what you will learn how to do if you will apply these study principles. Oh, the hundreds of stories we could tell you about what God has done because people disciplined themselves to know His Word in this way. It would thrill your heart! But right now stories aren’t our purpose; getting you into the Word inductively is! Then, friend, you can tell your own story! We’d love to hear it!

How Observation, Interpretation, and Application Relate to Each Other

Accurate interpretation and correct application rest on the accuracy of your observations. Therefore, it is vital that you develop observation skills, even if at first they seem time-consuming or you feel less than adequate and even awkward doing them. Studying inductively is a learning process that does not happen overnight. It happens by doing—doing over and over again, until the doing becomes almost a habit, and a wonderful one at that.

As you go through the inductive process, you’ll sometimes find observation, interpretation, and application happening simultaneously. God can give you insight at any point in your study, so be sensitive to His leading. When words or passages make an impression on you, stop for a moment and meditate on what God has shown you. Bring the plumb line of truth against what you believe and how you are living.

When you know what God says, what He means, and how to put His truths into practice, you will be equipped for every circumstance of life. Through a diligent study of God’s Word, under the guidance of His Spirit, you’ll drop a strong anchor that will hold in the storms of life. You will know your God. And when you know your God, not only will you be strong, but you will do great exploits for Him (Daniel 11:32).