

Feeding Yourself From the Word of God: Workshop#3: Observation (D. Parlett)

Welcome to Workshop #3:

The principles in these workshops are the exciting "first steps" of Bible study. But the skill of studying the Scriptures is one that is developed over a lifetime. Be patient. Increasingly you will be able to glean the "food" that your heart needs to have to be strong and vibrant.

Review:

In Workshop #1, we looked at the prerequisites of Bible study. Do you remember them?

And we learned about the Foundations of Bible Study. Have you been able to apply all three of them to any part of your study?

In Workshop #2, we looked at Bible study tools. Did any of them seem helpful to you? How so? Do you plan to buy or borrow any of these tools?

In this workshop, we will cover:

Observation

Introduction

Remember, the whole point of our Bible Study is to apply the Bible to our lives: to get some real spiritual nourishment; to hear from God. So, of course, we first have to know what it says - that's **Observation**. Then we need to understand what it means - that's **Interpretation**. And finally, and most importantly, we need to let the truths we discover have a real effect on our personal lives – that's **Application**.

In this workshop, we will look at the first step of our three key foundational steps - **Observation**. Our goal is to take a careful, thoughtful and analytical look at the verses we are studying. What is it really saying? Rarely does the first glance tell us enough about a person does it? Same with the Scripture.

Many of these observational techniques we will look at in this workshop are ways of taking a closer look. As a result you will see things that you did not know were there; things that we trust will be a blessing to your heart. Finally, we will take a more detailed look at a particular and powerful observation technique known as the *Syntactical Outline Method*. As you will see, there are many ways to do observation but what ever we do, there is always a first step we want to take. Let's begin by looking at that.

A. The First step of Observation: *Learning about the background:*

Learning the historical, geographical and cultural background of a book is very important if you want to have full understanding of what the author is saying. The things that were going on both regionally, locally and in that body of believers had an effect on what he wrote about and why. One of the chief advantages of those Bible study tools is the ability to easily find out this background information of the book or passage you are studying. (Most study Bibles have a good little introductory section that gives the background of each book. Commentaries are also a good source.) So then, a serious study of Scripture should begin with some general background notes. Here are some of the most basic questions you should try to answer when you are doing your background check of a Biblical book:

Feeding Yourself From the Word of God
Workshop#3: Observation (D. Parlett) (page 2)

Who wrote it?

Where were they and what was going on when they wrote it?

To whom was it written?

Where was the audience? What was going on when they received it? We want to try and find out what was happening historically; politically; socially; culturally or 'people of God'-wise at a regional or local level: whatever applies. Were there particular issues that they were dealing with at the time (e.g. heresy)?

As I said before, you should try to answer the above questions. Don't be worried if you cannot. For some books of the Bible even experts are not sure about the background information.

Later on in your study you may come across references to customs or figures of speech that you will need to learn more about to understand your text. But for now the key is just to get the big picture concerning the context of your book of study.

Also, one of the best ways to understand the background of your book is to be familiar with the whole Bible and how your section of study fits into it. This implies that we should not only be doing an in-depth, analytical study of the Bible, like we are doing here, but we should also be reading through large chunks of both the Old and New Testaments in a more casual and relaxed manner. There are a number of Bible reading schedules that will help you read enough each day to get through the Old Testament, the New Testament, or the entire Bible in a year. Of course, it takes time to become familiar with the whole Bible so don't worry if you're not there yet.

B. Further steps of Observation: A variety of techniques:

"Look at your fish!" Do you remember that story? (If not, see Solid Food Article in appendix to Workshop #1) Did you notice that so many more details came to him the more he looked at the fish. It is the same with Scripture. One read through a passage rarely surrenders the truths we need. You should use a number of techniques to dissect a passage and you may invent some of your own depending on what you are studying.

Below are several examples for you to try. The point is this: there are many ways to do observation and you will eventually learn which ones work best for the particular part of the Bible you are reading. Read through these and pick two or three to use on your particular book or passage.

Observation techniques:

1. **Pray for insight and understanding:** Try to sense that God is there with you eager to show you truths that will set you free. Trust that the Spirit will work through your own thoughts and efforts. A prayerful, expectant attitude will invite Christ to be your teacher. What better technique is there than that?

2. **Repeated Readings:** Try reading your passage many times. I know someone who read the book of Philippians every day for a month. Boy, did that book become familiar and precious to them. Do new things come to you each time you do this? Is the literary structure becoming clearer? Are you eager to dive into specific sections for closer study and application?

Feeding Yourself From the Word of God
Workshop#3: Observation (D. Parlett) (page 3)

3. **Asking Questions:** Ask questions that you will try to answer later. For example: Why does Paul say this? Is this command for everyone? How much is a bushel? What does that word mean? Is that saying we might lose our salvation? You will often find that your questions get answered later in the passage or book. For others you might have to look at other parts of the Bible. Some will require extra research and some you will never answer. But, asking questions means you are thinking.

Exercise: Let's look at the Beatitudes in Matthew 5: 1-10. Ask questions about them. Share your questions and possibly some conclusions with someone else.

4. **Repeated words or ideas:** Look for repeated words or ideas. This will often give you valuable clues about the passage. Sometimes not.

Exercise: Look at Romans 6:15-23. What are repeated words? Does this help us get the theme of this passage?

5. **Narrative Techniques:** (for use on books that tell stories such as the first five books of the Old and New Testament).

Note: characters, places, events and conversations.

Ask: What is the main point of this scene? Often the author was trying to illustrate something specific. For example, in the book of John, one can identify different scenes that build to present a defense of Jesus as the Son of God or the Messiah.

The six reporter questions: What? When? Where? Who? How? Why?

Is the example being shown to be imitated, avoided, or neither? Is the example prescriptive or not? For example in Nehemiah, chapter 5, Nehemiah, the leader of Jerusalem, takes some deliberate steps to confront a problem in his city. Should his method of confronting also be ours? Why or why not?

6. **Connectors:** Look for connecting words. Words like "and, as, but, for, since, therefore (when you see a "therefore" ask what it's there for!), when, then, after" and others will often give you the meaning of the section you are reading. Think about John 3:16. Do you know why it starts with "For"? Go back and see what Old Testament event this popular verse is based on.

7. **Make a chart:** Sometimes the nature of the passage makes it easy to make an analysis of the content. For example there may be a comparison or contrast. There may be a list or a logical sequence of ideas. Perhaps a number of examples with similar elements to be noted.

Exercise: In 2 Timothy 2:4-6 Paul gives three examples. Make a chart comparing these. What characteristics do these points have in common? What do you learn?

8. **Additional Observation Techniques:** I'd like to suggest a few more ways to observe a passage. Remember, as you read through a section you should begin to get a feel for which techniques are going to help you the most.

Feeding Yourself From the Word of God
Workshop#3: Observation (D. Parlett) (page 4)

Things to look for in a passage: (For a more in-depth discussion of these types of Application, take a look at Workshop #6, Section A, "See It")

- Is there a truth to believe?
- Is there a promise to claim?
- Is there a command to obey?
- Is there an example to follow/avoid?
- Is there a prayer to pray?
- Is there a sin to confess?

What do I learn about God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit)? What do I learn about myself? Others?

9. Write your own Paraphrase: This technique really makes sure that you understand what's being said. It's a simple idea but not easy to do. Still, the rewards are worth it. Rewrite your section using your own words.

10. Syntactical/Grammatical analysis: There are many fun things to try above but for in-depth Bible study it's hard to beat some kind of outline method. I'd like to teach you a method I use. This method is a great tool for looking at the core of each sentence and putting ideas into the proper relationship to each other. If you remember all that grammar you learned in school, then you can just go for it. Otherwise, the rest of us normal people can review the key steps of this method. In the separate section that follows I will try to give you some guidelines and examples of how to do this. But really this is a "practice-makes-perfect" kind of thing, so give it some time.

C. Syntactical Outline Method:

Syntax describes the ways words and phrases go together. By studying the syntax we can get an idea of the structure of ideas in a passage.

1. Please note: There is no set way to do the Syntactical Outline Method. As you get familiar with the technique you will be able to adapt it to your own style. Some people are very detailed and analytical about their outlines. Others are looser. Also, not all passages are presented in a clean analytical way with three points and a conclusion. Sometimes the thoughts of the author jump around or go on tangents. So, as they say, you just need to "Go with the flow!"

2. General techniques:

1. *Verse by verse:* Starting at the beginning go verse by verse through a short passage.

2. *Idea chunks:* As you go through the passage, divide your sentences into "idea" chunks. You are looking for a group of words that express one idea. Sometimes these chunks are indicated by prepositions, adverbs, conjunctions and so on. Take a look at the examples if that helps.

3. *Relationship:* Next, you want to indicate how these chunks relate to each other. Are they just separate little ideas or do they modify or shed light on ideas that have gone before or that are yet to come? You need to have a way to show this relationship and you can develop a your own way to do that. But, some typical ways are arrows or indentation. Find out what works best for you.

4. *Sections:* As you do this, you will find that groups of these chunks fall naturally into sections or groups. (Often these sections will be similar to your paragraph divisions in your Bible although not always). You will want to begin to discern the theme for these sections. You can often do this by identifying the key sentence or idea. This would be the one to which all the other ideas are related. Or you could refer to it as the subject line of the paragraph.

Feeding Yourself From the Word of God
Workshop#3: Observation (D. Parlett) (page 5)

5. *Outline:* Try to construct an outline from your analysis. Generally your key ideas are the framework upon which other ideas are hung. As well, as you transition into the Interpretation step you should “major on the majors”. In other words, you should first wrestle with and apply the main points of the passage. If you have more time you can apply the details.

6. *Application:* Once you have an outline you can use that for your own application or for leading a Bible study or teaching a group. Make sure you move on to Interpretation and Application. Sometimes we can be so pleased with our outline that we forget to go on to the next steps.

D. Examples: Ephesians 5:15-21 and Psalm 1: See Appendix to this workshop.

E. Goals for this workshop:

1. Choose a short section to study.
2. Figure out a way to learn about the Background of the book you are studying. What Bible Study Tools might help with this?
3. Try a few different techniques to become familiar with a part of all of your section. My favorite: Outlining and paraphrasing.

F. Next Workshop:

1. Interpretation: A Brief History of Interpretation
2. The Foundational Rules of Hermeneutics

G. Workshop #3: Questions / Exercises:

There are a number of exercises in the text above. If you haven't attempted any, go back and try some.

1. **Continue studying your passage or book:** Make sure you have done a background study. Then begin to study the first section of your passage using some of the observation techniques mentioned in this lesson.

2. **Background exercise:** When I studied the book of Hebrews I was constantly thinking about what was going on with the audience. What was going on? The book of Hebrews contains some verses that seem to come close to saying that we can lose our salvation such as 6:4-6 and 10:26, 27. Can you find something about the background of Hebrews that might explain why there were strong warnings like this?

3. **Reading the Bible as a whole:** In this article, we discussed the idea that knowing the Bible as a whole is very helpful for putting your book of study into context. Can you commit to a regular schedule of reading through various parts of the Bible? There are reading schedules available that give you readings in both the Old and New Testament that will allow you to read through it in a year or other amounts of time. You don't have to go that fast but it's good to have some concrete goal.

Feeding Yourself From the Word of God
Workshop#3: Observation (D. Parlett) (page 6)

4. Asking questions:

Here's another good section to ask questions on because it's not totally clear what kind of person the author is talking about. Romans 7:14-15. Generate a list of curious questions. See if any questions are answered with in the passage. Can you answer any yourself (at least your opinion)? Try asking someone with some Bible study experience how he might answer some of your questions. If you have access to a commentary you can consult that also. But remember, the point of this exercise is to ask questions. It's a good habit to get into even if you cannot always get answers.

5. Repeated words: Read Hebrews 7:11-19. Note how many words refer to priests, the priesthood, or things that priests do like serving at the altar. Based on this, can you give a title to this passage?

6. Cultural Background:

Look at Galatians 4:21-31. What might help us understand this passage better? In Mark 7 Jesus comes down hard on the Pharisees. In verse 11, he refers to Corban. Can you figure out what this means? How does an understanding of Corban help you understand what Jesus was trying to say here?

7. Outline: Have you tried outlining your chosen passage? If you haven't yet, give it a try. If you are having trouble, be sure to look at the examples provided.

H. Key steps so far:

1. Choose a section to study.
2. Learn about the Background of the book you are studying.
3. Observation: Try different techniques to become familiar with a part or all of your section.

Feeding Yourself From the Word of God
Workshop#3: Observation Techniques (D. Parlett) (appendix 1)

Syntactical Outline Method example 2: Psalm 1

1. Syntactical Outline.

- v. 1) Blessed is the man <= idea chunk
 who <= let's learn about the Blessed Man.
 does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
 or stand in the way of sinners
 or sit in the seat of mockers. } what he avoids: the influence of ungodly people
- v. 2) but his delight is in the law of the LORD
 and on his law he meditates day and night. <= what he does: enjoys and studies the law of God
- v. 3) He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
 which yields its fruit in season
 and whose leaf does not wither
 Whatever he does prospers. <= the way he benefits: he thrives and prospers
- v. 4) Not so the wicked! <= the contrast to the Blessed Man: the wicked Man?
 They are like chaff that the wind blows away. <= his usefulness: NOT!
- v. 5) Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. <= his standing before God: he will be judged
- v. 6) For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous <= the reason for blessing: God watches over the righteous
 but the way of the wicked will perish. <= the reason wickedness fails

2. Possible Outline (for personal use or teaching):

- A. The Blessed Man:
1. He avoids ungodly influences.
 2. He enjoys and studies the Word of God.
 3. He thrives and prospers.
- B. The Wicked Man: (The Depressed Man? rhymes with blessed)
1. He is ultimately useless.
 2. He will be judged by God.
- C. The Reason for the difference:
1. God watches over the righteous (blessed man).
 2. The way of the wicked ultimately fails.

Feeding Yourself From the Word of God
Workshop#3: Observation Techniques (D. Parlett) (appendix 1) (page 2)

3. Questions that might help you make Interpretation/Application of these truths:

Are there ungodly influences that I need to avoid? People? Family members? Internet? Movies & TV? Books?
Other media?

Do I enjoy my time in the Word? Do I really want to get to know God better? Do I spend more time in front of the TV
than in my Bible? Do I know how to study the Bible for myself?

What is evidence that God has already blessed me, made me thrive and prosper? Count my blessings.

Are there seemingly "successful" 'wicked' people? How should I view them?

Am I tempted to use a wrong method to get something good?

Do I believe God is watching over me? Do I trust Him especially when things seem to be going wrong or not according
to my plans?

Do I believe that God is just and that ultimately everyone will get what they deserve?

Feeding Yourself From the Word of God
Workshop#3: Observation Techniques (D. Parlett) (appendix 2)

Syntactical Outline Method example 1: Ephesians 5:15-21

1. Syntactical Outline: There is a "then" in the first sentence. We want to see what that refers to. In the paragraph before, Paul, seems to be talking about living as children of light and what that consists of. But just before our passage he talks about how Christ's light will shine on you. You might be anticipating a Son tan but actually he says that "everything exposed by the light becomes visible." So this light will shine on our lives and everything will be seen. Yikes! So then...

v. 15) Be very careful, **then**, how you live <= an idea chunk (a command or encouragement)
Not as unwise <= modifies how we are to live
But as wise <= the parallel thought

v. 16) Making the most of every opportunity, <= modifies how to live wisely
Because the days are evil. <= gives a reason for making the most of our opportunities

v. 17) Therefore, <=(in light of the need to live wisely)
Do not be foolish <= an idea chunk (a command or encouragement)
But understand what the Lord's will is. <= the parallel thought

v. 18) Do not get drunk on wine <= further idea on how to live wisely
Which leads to debauchery. <= the consequence of getting drunk
Instead, be filled with the Spirit. <= contrast to being filled with alcohol

v. 19) Speak to one another, <= evidence of being Spirit-filled (corporate)
With psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. <= how to "speak" to one another
Sing and make music in your heart <= evidence of being Spirit-filled (internal)
To the Lord. <= the focus of the music in our heart

v. 20) Always giving thanks to God the Father <= evidence of being Spirit-filled (internal)
For everything <= what we give thanks for
In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. <= how we give thanks

v. 21) Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. <= evidence of being Spirit-filled

Paul then goes on to give three examples of mutual submission in Christ: husbands / wives, owner / slave, father / child.

2. Possible Outline (for personal use or for teaching):

Living wisely means: 1) Making the most of every opportunity, 2) Understanding the Lord's will, and 3) Being spirit-controlled.

Evidence of a spirit-filled life: 1) Encouraging one another, 2) Rejoicing in the Lord, 3) An attitude of thankfulness, and 4) Mutual submission.

Feeding Yourself From the Word of God
Workshop#3: Observation Techniques (D. Parlett) (appendix 2) (page 2)

3. Questions that might help you make Interpretation / Application of these truths:

Do I know what it means to live wisely? What is my source of wisdom?

Am I making the most of every opportunity? What about in how I spend my time, my money and my possessions?
How do I waste opportunities? Is there a particular area that I need to maximize? Is there also a time and a place for play and rest when trying to make the most of every opportunity?

How do I know what is the Lord's will? The Holy Spirit? The Word? Circumstances? Peace in my heart?

Am I Spirit-filled? What does that mean and look like? Why do I not give Him control?

How can I encourage (speak to) others?

Do I have inward rejoicing? Why? What would help me rejoice? What can keep my mind on the Lord throughout the day?

Am I thankful? What am I thankful for? Am I thankful for tough things?