

Feeding on God's Word

How to study the Bible: Part II

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Observation

Before you can swallow and use the food you're eating you must first chew it into bite-size sections. In fact, the better you chew your food the more you will benefit from it. Someone once said we suffer from "habit-focus," we see only what we have seen before. That is where the work part of Bible study comes in. You must train yourself to see what you haven't seen before. A doctor will closely examine you, gather facts, and ask questions before interpreting them and coming up with a plan of action. Likewise a detective needs to look for things that aren't at first obvious. The same is true of a scientist. For all of these, the final application will only be as good as the early observation. The better the discovery period, the more accurate and helpful the conclusion. The same is true in Bible study. Too often we skip the observation period and right away try to find out what it means and how it applies. This always leads to shallow, surface results that leave us thinking we can't get anything out of the Bible. Dig!

So then, how are we to observe the Bible as we study it? Here are some steps:

1. Look at the whole

The first thing you do when food is placed before you is to look at the whole and get an overview of what is there. When you feed on God's Word, do the same thing. Read the passage or book through in one sitting. Do this several times for a short passage. Don't do anything but read it over and over. Do this for several days. It's like looking at a favorite picture or listening to a favorite song, you seem to notice new things each time. You never get it all the first time.

2. Write down questions

When you first see that table of food you ask yourself what you like, how was it made, is it good for me, etc. The same with Bible study. As you read keep a paper and pencil handy. After the first few times questions will start coming to mind, things you don't understand and would like answers for. Write them down! In fact, try to write down as many questions as you can. Don't worry about answering them now; most will answer themselves as you go along. However if you don't ask the question you will never notice the answer when it comes floating by and will miss it. You won't answer questions you haven't asked, so make sure you are thorough, creative, and patient in writing down questions. Ask yourself, "If Jesus were here, what would I ask Him about this word/verse/passage?" I cannot overemphasize the importance of developing well the skill of asking the right questions. However, don't let your questions get in a rut either. They should include the following types of questions:

- *Definition:* What does a word or phrase mean? "What was a deacon?"
- *Reason:* Think in cause-effect terms. Ask WHY something happened. "Why did Jesus come to earth?" Lk. 19:10
- *Process:* Ask HOW it happened. "How do we know about God's power?" Ephesians 1:19-20
- *Description:* Collect details about an attribute, person, place or idea. "What was Isaiah like?"
- *Comparison:* Look for differences or similarities between people, objects, events or aspects of the verse. "What is the difference between law and grace?" John 1:17 Beware of quick, standard answers. Dig deeper. Probe!

- *Classification*: Put ideas, events, attributes, etc., into categories. "What kinds of people followed Jesus?"
- *Persuasion*: Analyze a point of view and give proofs for or against it. "Why do you believe Jesus is God?"

3. Divide it into parts

After you look at the whole and start asking questions (keep adding questions the whole time, you never stop writing them down) then divide it into parts. From the food on the table, divide it into portions and put some on your plate. You further divide that into portions to eat – forkfuls. You can't shove it all into your mouth at once. With your Bible passage start breaking it into major sections. These can then be broken into subsections. Eventually you will come up with a rough outline. This will be constantly changing and being improved, but now is the time to start it. An outline gives you word labels to make large sections easier to grasp and manage. It forces you to think through the flow of the passage and discover the relationships of the various parts. It makes you read between the lines, thus improving your observation. Of course, you keep adding to your list of questions through all this.

5. Look carefully at the details

Now that you have the food broken down on your plate and are starting to eat it, you must make sure you chew it thoroughly. Neither chewing too little nor chewing too much at once chewing gets the best results. Like with food, you will have to learn how much to chew each mouthful of Scripture you work with. Don't try to put too much in your mouth at once – that is why it is good to outline and break it down into smaller segments. Thoroughly work each small segment, looking closely at everything. Let me make some suggestions to help you here. Try to look at it as if you are seeing the passage for the first time. Suppose you never read a Bible before, or a missionary just brought you one, or you are a child who doesn't have training in the Scriptures. Pretend you are teaching this passage to a group of new believers, what questions would they ask? This will add freshness to your study. Another way to accomplish this is to rewrite the passage in your own words. This can be extremely helpful, for it will quickly show you how much you don't know about the passage. But remember, until you discover what you don't know (write those questions down!) you won't be able to come up with answers for it. You won't get all of them answered – no one does. However, as your study continues you will find the answers to most of them just come as you study. Today I'll give you helps on how to find answers to questions that need outside resources (history, culture, background, etc.). Be patient. Think of a child learning to eat. He doesn't do it perfectly the first time and neither will you – just don't give up. When you're at home after this weekend, try to spend even a few minutes a day at it and you'll be amazed at the results!

Butterfly's and bees both live off pollen. The butterfly just dusts the surface of the flower while the bee digs his tentacles in deep. When winter comes the butterfly dies, but the bee has a supply to last through the winter. Be a bee – dig deep!

In your Spiritual Journal:

1. Now practice what you have just read. I think it will be very beneficial for you all to study the same passage together and use and abuse your small group discussing it. Let's study Mark 14:3-11.
2. Follow today's lesson on observation in studying Mark 14:3-11. Be careful not to jump ahead to interpretation and application. All I want you to do is list questions and the other things previously mentioned in today's lesson. And remember, ALWAYS remember to pray before starting!!

3. Be prepared to share your list of observations with the rest of the group.