

Observation – What does it say?

Look at the forest (Get the big picture).

This is the foundation for Bible Study. Spend most of your time with observations. Principles for reading:

1. Read telescopically.
 - a. Look for the connectives.
 - b. Pay attention to context.
 - c. Evaluate the passage in light of the book as a whole.
 - d. Look for the big picture or major thoughts of the passage.
2. Read repeatedly.
3. Read prayerfully (Ps. 119:18, 27, 33-36).

“Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law.” Ps. 119:18

A. The Art of Observation – What to look for

1. **Divisions:** When dividing the passage, look for obvious changes in thought or subject matter. Paragraph breakdowns can sometimes aid in locating divisions in the passage. Use the principles for reading here.
2. **Reasons for / Results of:** Look for key words such as because, therefore, in order that, and for. This type of speech indicates to us the motive we should have for doing something or a result we can expect from a certain type of action.
3. **Repetition of Thoughts or Words:** This type of observation should be made not simply to enumerate the frequency of the repetition, but to help in identifying the issues that are being addressed and how they relate to surrounding issues. Repetition reveals the author’s emphasis.
4. **Types of Statements:** Warnings, Commands, Promises, Exhortation, Rhetorical Questions, etc. Different types of statements help reveal the tone of the passage. Also, they are helpful in understanding how truths should be taken and applied.
5. **Descriptions:** Descriptions are usually made up of adjectives, listings of adjectives, or nouns that are used to describe a person, thought, condition, or way of life. Keep a sharp lookout for descriptions because God often uses them when revealing Himself.
6. **Comparisons and/or contrasts:** This type of speech can sometimes be identified by words such as: like and as (comparison), or but and however (contrast). Comparisons help us to understand the similarities between certain things or ideas, while contrasts aid us in seeing distinctions, differences, or opposites.

7. **Other:** The tone or atmosphere of the passage is very important. What is happening during a conversation or discourse? Is there a pattern or progression?

B. Recording Observations

When recording observations do so using a complete thought or sentence. Make sure your observation is complete and not just the tip of the iceberg (connected to other reasons, descriptions, etc). When this is done it will add significance to your observation. Record your observations in third person.

I. Examples

Incorrect way: Anxious used 5 times.

Correct way: “Five times Jesus commands or teaches against being anxious about earthly things.”

Better way: “Five times Jesus commands or teaches against being anxious about even the necessities of life (food, clothes, drink, tomorrow).”

C. The Big Idea

In one phrase or sentence, sum up the author’s main point in the passage. The most effective way to do this is to examine your divisions (A. 1 above) for a common thread.

Interpretation – What does it mean?

Look at the trees (examine up-close).

“The Bible does not give its fruit to the lazy.”

Interpretation is the re-creation process: Think as he thought, feel as he felt, and ask what it meant to the author before asking what it means to you.

Three Important Steps

1. **Ask a question.** Before you start you must have a question to answer. Ask lots of them. The time you spend in interpretation will be fruitless if you don’t. What is something you don’t understand? What is something you think you understand, but cannot adequately explain?

Example: What does it mean to be born again?

***** Reminder: You can ask questions during the observation phase, but do not attempt to answer your question until you have thoroughly observed the passage. The better you do at observing, the better you will be at interpreting. Observations are the foundation for good Bible study.