



INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY:

Because the Bible is Better

When You Know What it Says

By Carol Peterson

You've decided to study the Bible? Good decision! Now, how do you do it? Sure you can flip open the Bible and see where you land. Or you can select a book from the Old or New Testament and dig in. Or you can start at Genesis 1 and read straight through Revelation 22. In fact, if you've not yet read the Bible from first to last, that is an excellent way to begin. It gives you an overview. Scripture never contradicts itself. In fact, the entire New Testament is a record of how the prophecies of the Messiah's coming set forth in the Old Testament have been completed through the arrival of the Jesus, the Christ.

However you plan to read scripture, the first step in bible study should always be prayer. Ask the Lord to reveal His truth to you through scripture. Remember, young Samuel? Think of him as you study, praying "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3:10)

Then apply a method to your study. There are many established methods out there. The "inductive" process is one of the most effective methods used for in-depth understanding. It consists of three logical steps.

- Observation: Look at the details. What do I see? What are the facts?
- Interpretation: What does it mean?
- Application: How does it work for my life?

OBSERVATION

*Open my eyes, that I may behold
wonderful things from Thy law. Psalm 119:18*

As you begin your study, put on your Sherlock Holms hat and think like a detective. Read the passage several times, keeping in mind the 5 W questions and the H that reporters use: *who, what, when, where, why, and how*. These questions will give you the content of the passage. For example, ask:

- Who is involved? Who is writing? Who is he writing to?
- What happened? What ideas are presented? What was the result or action taken?
- When does this take place in time, history and in relation to other events? What is the sequence?
- Where does this take place?
- Why did it happen?
- How are things accomplished?

Then begin to track what you observe. Use the chart at the end of this booklet or create one for yourself. Write down key words in the passage. These are words that:

- Are repeated. Include pronouns (*he, she, it, they*) and synonyms (*Christ, Savior*)
- Will answer one of the 5 Ws and H questions
- Reveal the subject and the book's theme
- Can't be removed without leaving the passage meaningless

Then note words of conclusion (*therefore, for, so that, for this reason, for this cause, consequently*). They make you look at previous passages for why the conclusion is stated here.

Next note words of contrast (*however, but, yet, nevertheless, on the other hand*), words of time (*then, after, until, when, now, soon*), words of comparison (two things alike or different), and figures of speech (attributing human qualities to God or things, exaggerations, cultural expressions, illogical statements, rhetorical questions). These point out what's important, show sequence of events and ideas, indicate what is being contrasted and why, and give change of direction.

Also observe sentence structure. Verbs tell what's going on and when (past, present, future). The subject and object answer who or what.

Note also what is emphasized as it will show what is important. Look for:

- Amount of space devoted to it
- A purpose stated outright
- Order or strategic placement
- Repetition of terms, names, incidents, patterns, quotes of Old Testament passages
- Things related, connected or that interact
- Movement from general to specific; questions and answers; cause and effect
- Things that are alike or unlike

Now summarize your observations on your chart.

- State the main point of the passage (its theme) in a few words.
- Note the people and places in the text.
- List your W and H questions and answers.

Now you're ready to interpret what you've observed.

INTERPRETATION

*All scripture is inspired by God
and profitable for teaching. 2 Timothy 3:16*

Through observation we saw the obvious and visually summarized those main points on our chart. In the interpretation process, we try to stand in the author's shoes and recreate his experience. Before we ask: "What does it mean to me?" we must ask: "What did it mean to him?" To interpret what it meant to the writer, we look closer at content, comparison, context, culture, and then consult extra biblical resources.

CONTENT of the passage: Look again at the key words and concepts listed on your chart and the W and H questions you asked. The more time you have spent observing the passage and completing your chart, the more obvious the results of your interpretation will be.

COMPARE related passages in the Bible. Use other scripture to explain the passage you are studying. To begin a comparison, look to see if the passage in your Bible is marked with a small raised letter. If so, locate that letter in the Bible's center margin or footnote. It will indicate a passage elsewhere in the Bible that deals with the same subject. Read those passages and see how they might explain this one.

Also read the passage with a view to its literary **CONTEXT**. In other words, look at the passage as part of a *larger piece of writing*—the chapter, the book, and the Bible as a whole. Look at what goes before and what follows the passage. Ask where the passage fits in with each of these parts.

Think also in terms of theology. Ask what the writer knew about God. What was his readers' relationship with God? How did people worship God then? What other religions and worldviews existed at the time that influenced the writer and his readers?

Look also at the structure of the passage. Look for key words *therefore, so, then, as a result* to see if one event, concept or action causes another. Does the writer move from specific to general or vice versa? Do events or ideas lead to a point? Are things presented as being alike (look for the words, *as, like, too, also*) or different (look for the words, *but, yet*)? Are ideas, events or purposes presented and followed by a clear explanation? What action and conversation occurs? Does the passage contain a sudden change of direction? How much time does the writer devote to a subject? Does the writer ask questions and then answer them?

The type of literature also shows its purpose. Although the entire Bible is God's Word, individual books are written as different types of literature. Some are biographies about individual people. Others present specific places or key events in history. Others are written to persuade. Still others contain poetry, wisdom, praise or parables to illustrate moral principles while prophecy, satire, and tragedy warn of the consequences of disobedience. By understanding the type of literature, we can glimpse its purpose. Understanding its purpose helps us interpret its meaning.

The passage should also be viewed in light of the **CULTURE** and historical background that led to it being written in the first place. Look at what was happening in the region and the world at the time, the setting, feelings and background of the writer, language and cultural barriers. These all affect how we understand key words.

In order to better interpret content, passage comparisons, context, and culture, **CONSULT** Bible study tools. The most important tool is a concordance, which is included in many Bibles (generally at the back). Use it to look up passages where a specific word or concept is used elsewhere in the Bible. Seeing it in a different scripture will help you understand the meaning and significance in the passage you are studying.

Other resources to consult include a Bible dictionary to give you background on specific words translated from the original languages in which the book was written (generally Hebrew for Old Testament books or Greek for New Testament books). It will also give you information on shades of meaning that may not be apparent in the passage.

For more in-depth study, consult atlases (for locations and topography), Bible commentaries (for scholarly analysis of passages), and Bible encyclopedias for

(information about culture and history). But your primary source of study should always be the Bible itself.

APPLICATION

Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins. James 4:17

After you have observed the passage and interpreted it, it's time to apply it. This, of course, is the most important part of the study because if you don't apply what God wants you to learn, how will your faith grow? How will your relationship with God deepen? Why bother doing all that terrific work? The application part of the inductive study method has four steps: KNOW, RELATE, MEDITATE, and PRACTICE.

KNOW the text thoroughly based on your reading, observation, and interpretation. Also know yourself. Understand your assets (what God has done for you) and liabilities (what God still needs to develop in you).

RELATE the passage to areas of your life:

- Relationships to God, yourself and other people.
- Exposing your sin
- Comfort—what to expect from God
- God's commands
- Examples of biblical characters

MEDITATE on the passage. Spend time considering the passage with a view to letting it help readjust your life. Memorization will help you meditate.

PRACTICE what you have learned. Ask questions to help you apply the passage:

- Is there an area of my life that needs this truth?
- How does the passage work for me? For others?

- Is there an example for me to follow?
- Is there a sin to avoid? A command to obey?
- Is there a promise to claim? God made some promises to specific people; not to all of us.
- Is there a prayer I need to be praying?
- Is there a condition to meet? (“If you...then)
- Is there a theological or doctrinal error I now understand?
- Is there a challenge to respond to in a problem, relationship, or habit?

SUMMING UP

Inductive Bible study involves observation, interpretation and application. Once you are familiar with the process, consider ways to improve your study.

Read. The more and better you read, the clearer it will become.

- Read actively as if you are part of the text.
- Read repeatedly and consider using different Bible versions, books on tape, reading aloud.
- Read patiently – relax and enjoy the process.
- Read prayerfully – ask: Lord, help me understand your truth. Turn scripture into prayer.
- Reflect on scripture while doing routine things.
- Read to understand the author’s purpose.

Use bible study tools. In addition to your concordance, consider using other tools. Here are some suggestions.

- Bible dictionaries. W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*; and J.D. Douglas, *The New Bible Dictionary*
- Atlases. *Moody Atlas of Bible Lands*; *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Atlas*; *Macmillan Bible Atlas*

- Bible commentaries to help you evaluate your own study. *Bible Knowledge Commentary; Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Expositor's Bible Commentary (12 volume)* by Dr. Frank Gabelein.
- Other: *Biblical Archeology Review; Alfred Edersheim's, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah; Bernard Grun's The Timetables of History; Eerdman's Handbook to the Bible*

The following chart can be used for your personal bible study. Or you might want to create your own. Or modify this one to suit your individual study style. However you do it, remember Samuel and his eagerness to listen and learn.

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

OBSERVATION CHART

Passage: _____ **Theme:** _____

KEY WORDS – (Check concordance/dictionary)

Repeated words/phrases (include pronouns and synonyms)		Conclusion (so that, therefore, for this reason, consequently)	
Contrast (but, however, nevertheless, yet, on the other hand)		Time (then, after, now, until, when, soon)	
Comparison (like, as)		Fig. of speech, cultural expressions, illogical statements, rhetorical questions, exaggerations	

5 W and H QUESTIONS

WHO?	Who was the writer? Who was he writing to? Who is involved?	
WHAT?	What's happening?	
WHEN?	When does it take place? Event sequence?	
WHERE?	Where is it happening?	
WHY?	Why is it happening? Why are the people acting as they are?	
HOW?	Cause and effect? How do the people react? How would I react to the situation?	

STRUCTURE

How this book relates to the rest of the Bible. How this passage relates to the book. Type of literature.	
Who's acting? What's he doing? Who or what is being acted on?	

MEANING & CONTEXT

What was happening in history? How do the writer, events, and this passage fit into that culture? Other questions?	
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Author's Note

Several years ago I wrote an inductive bible study guide to be used by the Men's Ministry at Adventure Christian Church, in Roseville, California. I have rewritten it here to reflect a more general appeal to a wider group of people.

It is my hope that you will use this guide however best it works for you so that you can explore the wonders, the truths and the majesty of God's Word in scripture. Scripture is His gift to us. This booklet is my humble gift to you.

May you be richly blessed as you read, study and seek to understand the greatest story ever told.

Clutching Jesus' hand as if my life depends on it—and it does,

Carol Peterson

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