

Lesson 8 - Interpreting Your Observations

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You made it! You have made far more observations than you ever thought necessary. You did the hard work of pushing through those observations and asked a bunch of questions. You did even harder work to resist the urge to try and answer those questions as you went along. All that discipline will be rewarded this week as we move to the next step in our inductive study process - interpreting the text.

Answer Your Questions

After completing a book survey, a section survey, then a detailed observation, you will have compiled a very long list of questions. Some may seem trivial, such as “What is the meaning of ‘work’?” (Philippians 2:12-13), but when you consider the implications of that meaning and you apply it to your life, it suddenly becomes quite significant in matters of salvation. While you were repeatedly reading the book you were currently studying, questions naturally popped into your mind and you may have discovered those answers along the way through those repeated readings. This lesson is about how to answer those other questions.

If your goal was to complete a months (years?) long study of a particular book, you would endeavor to answer every one of those questions mentioned above. However, odds are that you are choosing to do a thorough study, but not quite that thorough. In that case, you have to select which questions to answer. Here’s an example. While doing a book survey of Galatians, you may have noted that Paul contrasts a life governed by obeying the law in Galatians 3:1 -5:12 with living in the freedom of the Spirit in 5:13 - 6:16. Using the recommended question stems provided in Lesson 2, you formed the following list of questions:

- What major differences between living by the law and living by the Spirit are emphasized by Paul?
- What is the precise and specific meaning of each of these differences?
- Why did Paul deal with the differences in this way?
- What are the implications of these differences?

You could approach answering those questions in any number of ways. You could simply choose one. You might decide that some form of each of these questions would be appropriate for your small group discussion. Or, what may happen more naturally is that as you do the work to

answer one of the questions on the list, answers to the rest are also determined in the process. But you have to start somewhere. Choose a question and go after it.

Where to Find Your Answers

Last week we discussed the various places and tools from which to find our answers. This week we will use those tools to actually formulate the answer. As a quick review, the tools we discussed were lexicons and dictionaries, commentaries, theology books, and sermons. In addition to using these tools as sources of information, we are also going to consult the text itself and our prior knowledge.

Two things to keep in mind about your prior knowledge. First, sometimes the best questions to answer are the ones you already know the answer to. This process will enable you to compile the evidence for your answer, shoring up your faith, its defense, and possibly your evangelistic efforts. Second, it's best to go ahead and acknowledge what you think the answer is, if you have one, and then honestly go through the process of finding all other evidence, whether they contradict or not.

So, where do we find the answers? Minimally, you are going to look in three places: the book itself, other books from the same writer, and other places in the Bible. A Bible dictionary would be appropriate. If you have access to their writings, you can consult great minds from the past, from the early church fathers, to the great theologians of the Reformation, the religious leaders of early modernity, even the great preachers of the last couple of hundred years to see what they have to say about your question. Finally, you'll probably want to consult at least one commentary, maybe two, three, or more.

Do your research in this order: 1) if the question involves the meaning of terms, consult a lexicon and/or dictionary (English, Greek, or Hebrew) for a preliminary definition, 2) the context of the verse from the book itself, 3) other writings by the same author if applicable, 4) other places in Scripture, 5) other reference works such as maps, etc. When appropriate, and 6) other theologians via commentaries, theology books, and sermons.

When searching for answers within the context of the passage, use your work from the book survey (Lessons 1 to 3), the section survey from where this passage came (Lesson 5), and the detailed observation you completed on the verse itself (Lesson 6). Search the context in reverse order of that work. Look in the detailed observation, then the section survey, then the book survey.

Organize Your Answers

Compiling lots of useful evidence to answer your question is worthless if it is not usable. The following method is just one way you can organize your findings. Do whatever works best for you. Start by stating your question at the top of the page. Writing your question helps keep you on track. Create a two column table. In the first column, list all the evidence you find. In the second column, interact with that evidence and list the inferences of that evidence, i.e. what it implies. In your table, complete your work according to the order stated above and summarize the evidence for each section.

An example of how this system looks has been given to you to answer the question, “What is meant by ‘guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 4:7)?”

Homework

This week, practice using the process modeled for you to answer this question: What does Paul mean when he tells the believers to “work out your own salvation” (Philippians 2:12)? Using all your prior work and the tools we’ve discussed, find the answer to that question in:

- A lexicon and/or dictionary. Find out what “work” means.
- Examine the context of this immediate passage of 2:12-13. What does this passage indicate Paul meant?
- Examine the larger context of 1:27 - 4:9. What clues to Paul’s meaning can be found in this larger passage?
- Review your book survey for *Philippians*. What do the recurring themes or grammatical structures of the whole book say about Paul’s meaning to “work out your own salvation”?
- Search in Paul’s other writings for similar statements or ideas to help answer the question.
- Where else in the Bible is a similar idea conveyed? How does that occurrence help you understand Paul’s meaning?
- Check out a few commentaries and/or sermons on the passage. What do they have to say about the meaning of “work out your own salvation”?