

Lesson 5 - Interpreting Your Observations

Finally! This week we move beyond making observations and asking questions about those observations. When most people want to know how to study the Bible, they often mean they want to know how to understand it. If we look at that same idea from the perspective of the inductive bible study method, they are wanting to know how to interpret what the Bible means. This week we will look at how to find the answers to our questions and then organize those answers so we can interpret the text itself.

Step 5 - Answer One of 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.

Let’s talk briefly about choosing a question. The question you answer may not in fact be a singular question. 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

Once you begin the work of answering one of your questions, you should consult several types of sources for your answers. Before we get into those various sources, let's talk about the most overlooked source - your prior thoughts. You may already have an opinion, or at least the beginning of one, on what the answer will be. Those thoughts may have come from a sermon you've heard in the past, doctrine you may have always been taught, whether intentional or not, or just your own thoughts on what "seems obvious".

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.

You can find websites that link together several types of useful references and resources, making your search much easier. www.blueletterbible.org is helpful site, providing links to information on the original Greek and Hebrew, concordance listings, and theological dictionary entries.

Keep the following things in mind when choosing a commentary. First, every writer will have a specific theological perspective. As you synthesize all the information you are gathering, it is important to know whether the writer is Calvinist or Arminian, Protestant or Catholic, Mainline or Evangelical, Charismatic or not. Second, the thoroughness of the commentary will vary, based on its purpose. An academic, critical, exegetical commentary will deal with the original language, critical issues regarding its source and authorship, and will address a wide gamut of related ideas for each verse in the book. Expository commentaries take each passage, verse by verse, and offer an interpretation. The thoroughness and details will vary by author. Some

will give details on how a verse is constructed and how it relates to its grammatical context. Others will give sparse details, with a minimum amount of explanation.

When you are searching for answers, do your research in this order: 1) if the question involves the meaning of terms, consult a 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 appropriate, 4) other places in Scripture, 5) how the word is used outside of Scripture, 6) other reference works maps, 7) other theologians, and finally, 8) commentaries.

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 does it mean to ‘work out your own salvation’ (Philippians 2:12)?”

Homework

This week, practice using the process modeled for you to answer this question: What does Paul mean when he says he wants to share in Christ’s sufferings (Philippians 3:10)?