Passages of Scripture must be examined, searched and inspected. It is a common error when reading the Bible to skip the step of observing the text and move directly into interpreting the text. It takes time, energy, and patience to slowly go through the observation process so that all information presented in the passage will be noticed. Failing to observe the text thoroughly has the potential to lead to a faulty interpretation. On the other hand, observing all the details can greatly increase your understanding of the passage.

“Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.” – Psalm 119:18

Definition – Observation has been called “the art of awareness,” or the “act of taking notice.” Look, look, and look some more. At this point, you are not looking anywhere else but the text itself. Stare at it; examine it; careful uncover every detail of it.

Key Question – The key question to ask in this stage is, “what does the text say?” or “what do I see?” Do not answer what the text means (interpretation). If you jump to a conclusion (interpretation) prematurely, you will miss the author’s intent of the text.

The Goal – The goal is to become fully saturated with the text. You should nearly have it memorized because of how much time you have spent observing it. If you close your eyes, you should be able to picture each word, phrase and paragraph of the passage.

Never – Never, never, never say, “I already know that”. You may understand the obvious meaning, but you may not grasp all of the implications. There is always more to be gleaned from a passage of Scripture. If you assume you already understand the passage at first glance, you will inevitable read your presuppositions and biases upon the text.
I. OBSERVATIONS STEPS

A. Text – Spend ample time immersing yourself in the text. Soak, saturate and marinate yourself with the passage.

1. Read – Enjoy this part of the process. Take your time getting acquainted with the passage. Ask God to give you His eyes to see what He wants you to see.

   - Read the passage repeatedly – Be patient and do not assume that you already fully understand the text or you will never understand it.

   - Read the passage slowly – Read with emotion and passion, putting emphasis on particular words.

   - Read the passage aloud – When you hear yourself read the text out loud, some aspects of the passage may stand out to you that you did not initially notice. If you have an audio version of the Bible, listen to the passage read to you.

   - Read the passage verse-by-verse – Read each verse thoughtfully. Attempt to correlate each verse to the next verse and to the previous verse.

   - Read the passage in CONTEXT – It is extremely important to know what came before the passage you are focusing on and what comes after. This will take time but is absolutely necessary. For example, consider how you read a letter from a loved one or special friend. You pour yourself over every detail of the letter. You do not just read the third paragraph of the letter and ignore the context. Likewise, examine the context of the passage. If we fail to look at the context, we may…

     • Misinterpret the authorial intent of the passage – The original author had a very specific meaning in mind when he wrote the text.

     • Read back meaning into the passage – If we do not read the context of the text, then we may assume a wrong context to the text. We may make assumptions about the passage that are not true.
Exercise – Reading

Spend a few minutes reading this passage of Scripture repeatedly, slowly, aloud, and verse-by-verse.

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”

– Psalm 1:1-3

Spend a few minutes reading the passage in context.

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

– Psalm 1:1-6
2. Notes

- Write down your observations – Do not try to be insightful or profound. Be simple and thorough. Do not write down what the text means but what the text says. Here are some ideas of observations to write down.

  - Observe significant words – There will be some key words that unlock the meaning of the text. Do not begin interpreting the text but takes some notes on these important words. Be sure to understand the full meaning of a word. Define these words and even come up with synonyms for them. Consider looking to a dictionary to more fully define these words.

  - Observe the major themes – These can often be found by looking for repeated words or phrases. Look for concepts or topics that are stressed in the passage.

  - Observe the emotion – Feel the emotion of the author. Do you hear the tender heart of a shepherd or the stern rebuke of a prophet? Do you sense joy or heartbreak in the author’s voice?

  - Observe the flow of thought – Try to track with where the author is headed in his reasoning. You need to get a feel for his logical line of reasoning.

  - Observe the textual breaks – Look for areas in the text where the author changes directions in his flow of thought. The author may spend a few verses talking about one topic and then switch to another topic to either further his argument, clarify his argument or contrast his argument.

  - Observe the context – Although you may be focusing on a couple of verses, it is imperative to put your verses in context. Make some notes about what is discussed immediately before and after the passage you are studying.

- Organize your observations – Put your thoughts into some sort of order that make sense to you. There is no right or wrong way to do this. For example:

  - Number your observations in a sequential order.

  - Group your observations by concepts or topics.

  - Outline your observations from most important to least important or from major point to supporting points.

- Mark up the text – Print out the passage that you are studying. Underline, circle and insert arrows to connect thoughts in the passage.
Exercise – Notes

Spend a few minutes taking notes this passage of Scripture.

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, 

nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; 

but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. 

He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, 

and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”

– Psalm 1:1-3

Initial observations:

Organize observations:

Mark up the text (above):

Define words:

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3. **Question** – Ask the text questions. Most likely you have some questions about the text that need to be answered. Some of these questions you may already be able to answer. Other questions may need to be answered when you start the *interpretation* process. Here are some questions that you should be asking the text.

**Who**
- Who is the author of the passage (book)?
- Who is the author writing to (recipients)?
- Who or what is the author talking about?

**What**
- What words or phrases are repeated? (note: A repeated idea normally signals the author’s main point or idea.)
- What seems to be the *main idea* of the text?
- What kind of literature is this passage (see genre section)?
- What are the major events and themes of the book?
- What is the passage *not* saying?

**When**
- When is the passage being written?
- When are the events or topics said to take place that the author is writing about (past, present, timeless)?

**Where**
- Where is the author writing?
- Where are the people whom he is writing to?

**Why** (Do not answer the why questions. These are to be answered in the *interpretation* process. In the observation process, simply come up with some why questions that you want answered later.)
- Why is the author writing about this particular subject?
- Why is the author highlighting or emphasizing a particular topic or concept?
B. Grammar – Do not overlook any word in the text. Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 3:16 that “all of Scripture is breathed out by God.” Every single word of Scripture helps us understand God’s intended meaning.

1. Subject – The subject is the person who is performing (or receiving) the action. Here are some ways to find the subject of the text.
   - Look for names or titles (ex. Paul, Jesus, the church, the man, etc.)
     “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God…” – Eph. 1:1
   - Look for pronouns (I, me, we, us, you, he, she, they, etc.)
     “For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints…” – Eph. 1:15

2. Verb – The verb is the word that expresses the action of the sentence. Verbs carry most of the meaning of the text. It is imperative for you to look carefully at how each verb is being used.
   - What is the tense of the verbs (past, present, future)?
     “Now if we have died (perfect – past-like) with Christ, we believe (present) that we will also live (future) with him.” – Rom. 6:8
   - What is the voice of the verb (active, stative, or passive)?
     “And do not get drunk (active) with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled (passive) with the Spirit,” – Eph. 5:17
     “Do not be conformed (past, passive) to this world, but be transformed (present, passive) by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (stative).” – Rom. 12:2
   - Does the verb express continuing action (like –ing verbs)?
     “For the grace of God has appeared (main verb), bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ…” – Titus 2:11-13
   - Is the verb an imperative (command)?
     “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” – James 4:7
3. Object – The object is the word that receives the action of the verb. It is what or whom the verb is performing the action upon.

“For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints…” – Eph. 1:15

4. Modifiers – Modifiers are descriptive words that enlarge or enhance the meaning of the words they modify. Adjectives add meaning to nouns. Adverbs add meaning to the verbs.

“to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.” – Eph. 1:6

5. Conjunctions (a word that connects) – These words provide clues into how the subject and verbs relate to one another. It allows you to connect, compare or contrast thoughts in the passage.

- Coordinating: (and, or) – Contrasting: (but, yet)
- Sequential: (next, then, now) – Summarizing: (therefore, so, thus)
- Comparison (like, as) – Subordinating: (because, for, since)

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us…” – Eph. 2:4
Exercise - Grammar

Spend some time discovering the grammar of the passage.

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”

– Psalm 1:1-3

Subject(s): Write down the subject(s) of the passage

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Verb(s): Write down the verbs of the passage and the tenses and voices of each of the verbs.

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Object(s) – Write down the object(s) of the passage.

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Modifiers – Write down the modifiers (adjectives and/or adverbs) that enhance the meaning of the passage.

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Conjunctions – Write down the conjunctions that you observe in the passage. Make a comment as to why each conjunction is significant.

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C. **Structure** – You are attempting to understand the flow of thought. Ignore the verse and chapter markings as well as the section headings in your Bible (note – these are not part of the original text.). Here are some things to look for that will help you structure and outline the passage.

1. Observe *paragraphs* – A new paragraph is an indication that the topic of the passage is changing.

2. Observe *topic changes* – It may seem like a passage of Scripture is random and disorganized. However, keep in mind that this author is being divinely guided by the Holy Spirit to write this passage. Make notes about the various topic changes and suggest possible reasons for topic changes.

3. Observe *cause and effect* – There are numerous statements in Scripture that are based upon a condition being fulfilled. It is crucial for us to understand the required condition (i.e. obedience, disobedience) and the subsequent result of the condition (i.e. blessing, honor, curse). Some clues for conditional statements are the conjunctions “if” (cause) and “then” (effect).

   "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” – 2 Chron. 7:14

   "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” – 1 John 1:6-7

4. Observe *lists* – Whenever we see a list of terms in Scripture, we must take careful notice. A list is often observable because of multiple paralleling terms or ideas separated by commas. Do not quickly read over the list but ask yourself some questions like: Is there an intentional order? Are the terms grouped together for a particular reason? Is this list exhaustive or incomplete? Write down each term in the list and define it.

   "Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine…” – 1 Timothy 1:8-10
5. Observe *whys* and *hows* – Many times we read Scripture just looking for the things we must do. As a result, we overlook *why* and *how* of a command. The *whys* and *hows* give insight into God’s heart behind the command and God’s help in the command. Clues to finding the *whys* and *hows* of a passage are words like: for, because, since, for this reason.

“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” – Phil. 2:12-13

6. Observe *illustrations* – An author often uses a word picture to expand and enrich the main point of the passage. These illustrations are found in the form of metaphors, similes, stories and parables.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” – Matt. 5:13-16

7. Observe *contrasts* – An author of a passage often highlights his point by contrasting statements. These contrasts are often easy to observe because of the use of the conjunction “but”.

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.” – Galatians 5:16-23

8. Observe *comparisons* – There are times when an author compares a difficult spiritual truth to something easier to understand. A complicated concept becomes comprehensible because of the use of metaphors or synonyms.

“If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.” – James 3:3-6
Psalm 1 (NASB)

1 How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!

2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night.

3 He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers.*

4 The wicked are not so, But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.

5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

6 For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, But the way of the wicked will perish.*
D. **Genre** – Genre is another name for literary form. We interpret everything we read through our understanding of the genre it belongs to, whether we realize it or not. If we were to pick up a newspaper, we would instinctively read a front-page story differently than we would read an editorial; we would also read the comics with different expectations than we would read the classifieds. Each of these types of writing are different literary genres, and we understand (because of the culture we live in) how we ought to read each of them. Similarly, the Bible is full of many different genres of writing, which must be taken into consideration when we interpret Scripture. Different genres require different types and styles of reading and we must understand and appreciate that if we will ever be able to study our Bibles in the way God designed it.

1. **Narrative** – This genre is typically story format in which themes are conveyed through characters and events. Here are some characteristics of narrative literature.
   a) Types of Narrative Literature – stories, parables, historical accounts, biographies and genealogies.
   b) Truth is Communicated Indirectly – Look for the “moral” or the “message” of the story.
      • Descriptive *not* prescriptive – The author is typically *describing* what took place not necessarily *prescribing* certain behavior.
   c) Narrative books in the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, 1 Samuel, the Gospels, Acts, etc.

2. **Teaching** – This genre is predominately instructional. It includes many commands communicating what to do or not to do; to say or not to say, to think or not to think. Here are some characteristics of teaching literature.
   a) Types of Teaching Literature – sermons, speeches, arguments, instructions, and commands.
   b) Truth is Communicated Directly – Look for the commands or imperatives that are communicated as a verb.
      • Prescriptive *not* descriptive – The author is typically *prescribing* something to be observed and is not as concerned about *describing* the details of the situation.)
   c) Teaching books in the Bible – Leviticus, Deuteronomy 4-30; 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, 1 Timothy, etc.
3. *Poetry* – This genre of literature uses imagery and symbols to convey the spiritual meanings. Here are some characteristics of poetic literature.

a) Types of Poetic Literature – prayers, poems, dreams, visions, etc.

b) Truth is Communicated Pictorially – Look for metaphors, analogies, illustrations, hyperboles and generalities.

c) Poetic books in the Bible – Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs

4. *Prophetic* – This genre of literature uses declarations of God’s will through warnings and blessings through prophetic voices.

a) Types of Prophetic Literature – dreams, visions, “thus says the LORD” statements.

b) Truth is Communicated Symbolically – Look for symbols or symbolic references that uncover the meaning of the passage.

c) Prophetic Books of the Bible – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Revelation, etc.

**Resources Consulted**

- *Grasping God’s Word*, by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays
- *Basic Bible Interpretation*, by Roy B. Zuck
- *Living by the Book*, by Howard G. Hendricks and Williams D Hendricks
- *Bible Study Methods Syllabus* for Eternity Bible College by Doug Main and Scott Mehl
- *Bible Study Methods and Rules of Interpretation*, by Dennis Mock