

Observation & Comprehension

Once you have gained some understanding of the context of the book, you are ready to jump into the text. The first step of the inductive method is comprehension or observation. In the comprehension phase, you are asking the question, "What does the text say?" In this initial phase, your goal should not be to determine the meaning of the text or to determine how it applies to your own life but simply to understand the basic line of thought of the text by observing details in the writing.

One of the most helpful and most difficult parts of the comprehension phase is that it forces us to slow down. It can be easy to quickly read through a passage of Scripture, decide what it means, and apply it to our own lives, believing that we know what it says and what it means. However, when we take the time to carefully observe what is going on in the text, we see things we would not be likely to notice in an initial reading. Being good stewards of God's Word by carefully working through the text helps us to understand the Scripture more clearly and more fully know the God whom His Word reveals.

As you approach the comprehension phase, work through the following steps:

1. Read the text in its entirety from start to finish at least once.

The books of the Bible, with the exception, perhaps, of the Psalms and Proverbs, were intended to be read as a whole. If you were to pick up a book or a letter, choose a line in the middle, and try to find something meaningful for your life, it would likely not make much sense. You have to read what comes before and after in order to understand what that line really means. The same applies for the books of the Bible. Reading the text as a whole helps reveal the overarching flow of thought in the book, which in turn gives light to the meaning of individual passages and verses.

2. Read the text repetitively.

The Bible was written in times, cultures, and languages that are very different from our own, so you might not catch everything that the author is trying to communicate on the first read. Repetitive reading also helps us to hide God's Word in our hearts, a practice that transforms us to look more and more like Jesus. Listening to the text while you are getting ready in the morning, driving to work, or doing the dishes is a great way to read repetitively.

3. Read back through smaller portions of the text and mark it using a system that works for you.

Work through the book verse by verse, studying a chapter or a section of verses or depth before moving on to the next section. It is helpful to periodically read or listen through the entire book again in order to remind you of the context of your current set of verses. Bible marking pens and highlighters from The Daily Grace Co. are great tools for annotation. If you don't like to mark in your Bible, print out a copy of the text from a website like www.biblegateway.com. You can copy and paste it into a word processor and double space the text to give yourself plenty of room to annotate.

Mark the following elements in the text:

Key or repeated words or ideas, key themes, transition words (Ex. therefore, but, before, if/then, likewise, ect.), lists, comparisons and contrasts, commands, unfamiliar words (look up in the dictionary) , questions you have about the text

As you carefully read and annotate the passage, you should begin to understand what the author is communicating. As tempting as it may be, do not skip this step. The knowledge you gain from this step will ground and enhance your interpretation and application of the text.

Interpretation

After you answer the question, “What does the text say,” you are now ready to enter the interpretation phase of the inductive method where you will ask the question, “What does the text mean?” As you are studying, ask the question, “What would the text have meant to the original audience?” before you even begin to ask what it should mean for your life. The background information you read will be very helpful in answering this question. Complete the following steps to help you understand the intended meaning of the passage.

1. Read the text in other versions.

Because the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek of the Bible do not translate perfectly into English, reading different translations of the Bible can help you gain a better understanding of the nuances of the text. Remember that no one translation of the Bible is perfect except the original language. Be careful to use translations of the Bible rather than paraphrases, like The Message, that act as commentaries.

2. Read cross- references.

Cross-references may take you to other passages of Scripture that speak on the same subject and can provide you with a fuller understanding of that topic. Cross references may also take you another book of the Bible. Seeing how the same verse appears in more than one part of the Bible gives light to the meaning of both passages. One of the most important hermeneutical principles is that Scripture is the best interpreter of Scripture. The 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament are all the Word of God, and therefore all work together without contradiction to tell the story of God’s redemption. Cross-references are incredible tools to help you apply this hermeneutical principle in your study time.

3. Paraphrase or summarize the passage.

You may feel confident in your understanding of a passage only to realize when you try to write it in your own words how much you do not understand. Paraphrasing the text forces us to stop and check for understanding rather than skipping over parts that may be confusing without even realizing that we are doing it. Don’t let this step be paralyzing; it is okay if your initial interpretation is wrong. You can always come back and rewrite your paraphrase as your knowledge and understanding of God’s Word grows.

4. Identify how the text reflects the metanarrative of Scripture, which is the story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

All of Scripture is God's story of redemption, and all of Scripture points to the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. When you study a passage, ask yourself how the smaller story you are reading reflects the bigger story that spans across the entire Bible. Ask yourself how Christ is the true and better version of those we see in the pages of Scripture, how the Old Testament prophets anticipate the coming Messiah, and how Jesus is the answer to the needs and problems we see arise in the Word.

5. Read trustworthy commentaries if you need further insight into the meaning of the passage.

It is important that you do not consult commentaries until after you have worked through the above steps in the comprehension and interpretation phases on our own. The Bible is the only inerrant book, and while commentaries can be extremely helpful, they do not have the same authority as God's Word. We need to practice studying and interpreting the Bible on our own so that we can confidently test other writings against the truth of Scripture.

Application

We have come to the final phase of the inductive method, which is the Application phase. Once we have worked to gain a better understanding of what the text says and what it means, we are ready to ask the question, "How should the truth of this passage change me?" Although our tendency is to quickly jump to this step, it is only after we have done the hard work of comprehension and interpretation to see who God has revealed Himself to be in the text that we can then see our own need for His transforming grace in light of that truth. Based on the information you gathered from previous steps, answer the following questions:

1. What attributes of God's character are revealed in the passage?

Look for places where the author directly states the character of God, as well as for ways that God reveals His character through His actions. Because God never changes, the truth about God in the Bible is just as true for us today as it was for the original audience. In the Old Testament when God describes Himself as merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and He will forever be so. When we see a God who delivers His people, Israel, out of slavery in Egypt, we can have confidence that the same God delivers us from the bonds of sin.

2. What do I learn about myself in light of who God is?

When we behold God for who He is, we can see more clearly who we are in relation to His holiness. When we see God's righteousness, love, grace we become painfully aware of our own sin, selfishness, and judgmental hearts. Like Isaiah, who upon seeing a vision of the Lord on His throne responds by saying, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips," so we, too, are humbled by our depravity in contrast to a glimpse of God and cry out, "Holy, holy, holy" (Isaiah 6)

3. How should this truth change me?

As we pray and reflect on how God is calling us to change in light of His Word, we should be asking questions like, "How should I pray for God to change my heart?" and "What practical steps can I take toward cultivating habits of holiness?"