

The Inductive Bible Study Method

Learning to read and study Scripture is an important part of the Christian life. And while pastors and teachers are wonderful, individual Christians should also be able to pick up any passage and read it with basic understanding and application.

The inductive method is an investigative way of studying Scripture that can be used by both new and seasoned students alike. It's a powerful tool for those who want to learn how to study Scripture well.

When applied properly, the inductive method will provide a better overall understanding of a passage—what it says, what it meant to its original audience, and what it means today.

Inductive Bible study draws its conclusions from the text, not our assumptions.

When it comes to learning, we generally approach it from one of two directions. Either we: 1) bring our own assumptions and use them for guiding force behind our study, or 2) we begin with our subject and draw any conclusions based on what we learn from our study. The first method is called deduction and the second is called induction. In the realm of the general sciences, neither approach is better or worse than the other. Each has its pros and cons, and can be useful in different scenarios.

How Observation, Interpretation, and Application Relate to Each Other

Accurate interpretation and correct application rest on the accuracy of your observations. Therefore, it is vital that you develop observation skills, even if at first they seem time-consuming or you feel less than adequate and even awkward doing them. Studying inductively is a learning process that does not happen overnight. It happens by doing—doing over and over again, until the doing becomes almost a habit, and a wonderful one at that.

Anyone can use the inductive Bible study method by following three simple steps:

1. Observation
2. Interpretation
3. Application

As you go through the inductive process, you'll sometimes find observation, interpretation, and application happening simultaneously. God can give you insight at any point in your study, so be sensitive to His leading. When words or passages make an impression on you, stop for a moment and meditate on what God has shown you. Bring the plumb line of truth against what you believe and how you are living.

When you know what God says, what He means, and how to put His truths into practice, you will be equipped for every circumstance of life.

1. Observation: What Does the Text Say? -- What do I see in the text?

This phase isn't about interpretation. It's about observing exactly what the text is saying. Pretend you're an investigator and you're just gathering the facts. Ask yourself the five W's and H:

- Who? (Who is the audience, author, or main characters – who is speaking to whom?)
- What? (What are the main events going on in the verse and in the world around them?
(What is the topic or instruction?)
- Where? (Where did this event take place?)
- When? (When was it written? When did this take place or when will it occur?)
- Why? (Why was this written? Why did he say that, go there, or respond that way?)
- How? (How is this to be done -- or how did it happen?)

As you do, make note of:

- Words repeated multiple times in a passage
- Anything that can be put into a list
- Words that indicate a change in topic or time – transition words (But, Thus, Afterwards, So, Then, etc.)
- Words that contrast one thing against another
- Words that indicate cause and effect
- Figures of speech

It's critical at this stage not to add anything to the text or take anything away. Avoid the temptation to try to make the text "mean" anything just yet. Observe what's there, and document it.

Write it all down (take notes), and once you feel like you have a good idea of what's happening in the text, it's time to move on to the next step: interpretation.

Example for observation: Philippians 4:6-7 (NASB)

⁶ Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving

let your requests be made known to God.

⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts

and your minds in Christ Jesus.

2. Interpretation: What Does the Text Mean?

The observation phase was all about observing what the text says, but the interpretation phase is the next step. And it's in this phase we start to look at what the text means.

Your job at this stage is to discover what the author is trying to communicate. And to do this, you need to look at the context. Here are a few questions you can ask:

- What is the cultural and/or historical context of this passage?
- What else do I know about the book, author, and broader context of the passage?
- What other Scripture passages might help me better interpret this one?
- Have I overlooked anything or made any assumptions?
- What is the clearest meaning of this text?

There are a few essential rules to remember when attempting to interpret a passage:

- Don't "twist" Scripture—meaning, don't manipulate the text to get it to say something you'd like for it to say. This is a dishonest way to interpret the text.
- Look for the plainest interpretation first. Believe that the text means what it says. Sometimes there will be figurative language and confusing imagery, but don't start by looking for hidden meaning. Start with the obvious.

Old saying -- If the first sense makes common sense – seek no other sense

- Scripture interprets Scripture. Allow the Bible to help you understand other passages of the Bible. Where similar words are used, explore the context of each of those instances.
- Avoid basing important doctrines on obscure passages.
- Connect each passage back to the gospel and the broader message of the Bible.

Make sure you spend a good chunk of time with this phase. Ask yourself all of the important questions above, and answer them as honestly as you are able. Once you think you've done all you can here, it's time to move on to the final phase: application.

Example for interpretation: **Philippians 4:6-7 (NASB)**

⁶ Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

3. Application: How do I apply this to my life?

Now that we've observed and interpreted what the passage has to say, it's time to talk about what it means for us. How do we apply what we just learned to everyday life?

We don't study the Bible just to gain knowledge. We study to gain knowledge so we know how to live our lives in light of what we've learned.

Go back to your questions from the beginning and ask them again in light of what you've learned, and apply it to our context today.

Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

Based on what you've learned, what does this passage mean for you? If you've uncovered truth you've not known or understood before, what does it mean for your life, priorities, and decisions now that you do understand it?

Does this apply to you individually – or a group – or the church as a whole?

When are you to apply it?

What am I called to do with this?

Where should I do this?

Why should I do this? (ex -- Why are some sins more detrimental than others?)

How do we use this – how is this to change us?

Honest application of the text requires these kinds of questions and the wrestling of ideas when truth causes conflict. It might be tempting to stop at the interpretation phase, but you'll be selling yourself and Scripture short if you do.

Take the time to dive into the application step. It's worth it.

Example for application: Philippians 4:6-7 (NASB)

⁶ Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

One authors example -- An Example of Inductive Bible Study: Isaiah 55:8-9

What does the text say?

I first read Isaiah 55 in different translations. I chose HCSB, ESV, NIV, NLT, and The Message. I choose these translations because some are more word-for-word and others more thought-for-thought. Then I made some observations of the specific verses I was focusing on:

- **Repeated Words/phrases include:**
 - “My ways are higher than your ways and My thoughts are higher than your thoughts.”
 - The idea of returning to God repeats (His word and those who seek Him)
- **Figures of Speech:**
 - God compares His word to rain or snow that causes things to grow
- **Who?, What?, When?, Where?, Why?, How?**
 - Who God does most of the talking after Isaiah calls us to return to God.
 - What: God says his thoughts and ways are higher than ours.
 - When: Isaiah says to seek the Lord *while* he may be found and *while* he is near
 - Where: God’s word comes to the Earth. God is higher than the earth.
 - How: God’s word will do His will and prosper in what he sends it to do.
- **Transition Words:** For and so. It goes For this...and for that...So this...
- **Historical-Cultural Background**
 - Written by Isaiah the Prophet
 - Written to God’s people, the nation of Judah
 - Isaiah was writing to tell the people of Judah they had broken God’s covenant and needed to repent. But he also wrote of a hope that is beyond the judgment.
 - People at the time were living in sin and fear of the larger nations around them.

What does the text mean?

Taking all the observations into account I began to look for a universal principle.

I noticed that in Isaiah 55 God was calling the people to come and listen to Him. If they did so He would forgive them and establish a covenant with Him. This is only possible because God’s thoughts and ways are higher than humanity’s.

Thus, I concluded that the theological principle could be: God is higher than humans and thus able to save them.

How do I apply what I’ve learned?

- First, I applied the salvation and satisfaction today to Jesus. That is the [gospel](#) is the means to salvation.
- Secondly, we can claim the promise of assurance of salvation. In other words, because God is higher than us, our salvation in him is guaranteed.
- Third, we can believe the truths that God is higher than us. And he is a God of compassion.

Another passages for practice

Jonah 2:1-10