

MODULE TWO

OBSERVATION

This module deals with the first essential step in the *Searching the Scriptures* method. A successful, nourishing study of any passage begins with, and is developed from, careful observation:

Through observation, we discover what the Bible says. This part of the process is absolutely foundational. I go through this process every time I prepare any message, lesson, or sermon. Yes . . . every time.¹

Observation, then, is essentially *awareness* . . . the general function of observation is to enable one to become *saturated* with the particulars of a passage so that one is thoroughly conscious of their existence and of the need for their explanation.²

THE MIND-SET OF OBSERVATION

Think like a Detective

Detectives use their keen skills of observation to collect clues before they formulate a theory about a crime. When studying Scripture, we must think like a detective and notice every detail of a passage *before* formulating its meaning. Let's test your detective skills of observation in the following exercise.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

KEY THOUGHT

Careful observation will help you arrive at the best understanding of your chosen text.

WORDS

Work with the Words in Your Text

OBSERVE WORDS THAT ARE:

- Emphasized
- Repeated
- Related
- Alike
- Unlike

At the end of Module One, everyone was asked to select one of four short passages to observe in preparation for this session. It's important that we don't jump ahead or get offtrack, so consider your chosen passage *first* with reference simply to the words you find there.

Get in the habit of saying, "I notice that . . ."

DISCUSSION: Observing Words in Ephesians 1:3–14

- "Blessing" is strongly emphasized, repeated three times.
- Several words related to planning are used: "chose" (Ephesians 1:4, 11), "in advance" (1:5, 11), "plan" (1:9–11), and "purpose" (1:12).
- Three words related to being sure or secure occur toward the end of the passage: "identified" (1:13), "promised" (1:13), "guarantee" (1:14).
- "Grace" is repeated (1:6–7).
- "Inheritance" is repeated (1:11, 14).
- "Praise" and "glory" are repeated three times.
- There is a shift between "we" and "you" in 1:12–13.

KEY THOUGHT

We are not, at this stage, trying to make judgments about what the text means. We simply want to take note of the things we see. The more diligent we are here, the more confident we can be that we haven't missed anything important.

SENTENCES

Work with the Sentences in Your Text

Identify the components of the sentences: subjects, verbs, and objects. These components communicate the story, sequence, and logic of the passage. Pay particular attention to significant people, important events, and key truths.

Who?

See **Ruth 1:15–16; 1 Samuel 20:34; 2 Kings 5:9.**

This question identifies subjects and objects, such as the author, key players, and incidental characters.

What?

Compare **Matthew 12:3, 11** with **13:3, 10–13.**

This question identifies the verbs. The verbs communicate action.

When?

See **Ezekiel 33:21; Nehemiah 2:1.**

This question identifies time. Timestamps usually modify the main verb. They describe when the action took place.

Where?

See **Genesis 13:1–12; 1 Kings 18:17–19.**

This question identifies place. Geography, distance, and natural resources matter.

ASK KEY QUESTIONS

Who? Identifies subjects and objects

What? Identifies verbs

When? Identifies time

Where? Identifies place

ATMOSPHERE AND MOOD

Work with the Atmosphere and Mood in Your Text

Use your senses to engage the text.

USE YOUR SENSES

Sight: What do you see?

Sounds: What do you hear?

Smells: What do you smell?

Taste: What do you taste?

Touch: What do you feel?

Mood: What emotions do you sense?

Sight

Sounds

Smells

Taste

Touch

Mood

DISCUSSION: Observing Atmosphere and Mood in John 3:1–10

- **Sight:** It is night. There will only be moonlight or oil lamps. Nicodemus is a ruler and teacher, but he's "in the dark."
- **Sounds:** I hear a quiet conversation between two men, both teachers. Nicodemus is respectful, and his approach is polite, but his knowledge is incomplete. Leaves are rustling in the breeze.
- **Smells:** I smell the night. Fire smoke and lamp smoke are in the air, perhaps incense lingering on Nicodemus' robes. The breeze brings evening blossom. It's around the time of Passover, so spring flowers are in bloom.
- **Taste:** I taste nothing because no clues are given here . . . perhaps a few pieces of bread as they talk.
- **Touch:** I touch the door frame as I pause to step into the house. I feel the cool stone floor as I slip my sandals off at the threshold.
- **Mood:** I sense that Nicodemus was confident at first but quickly became confused and "out of his depth." Jesus was calm, deliberate, even teasing "the teacher." Jesus disoriented Nicodemus in his own area of expertise: "I know you are from God's kingdom, and yet you know nothing about God's kingdom."

STRUCTURES**Work with the Structures in Your Text**

Highlighting structural features of the biblical text gives clues to the author's main idea and purpose for writing.

Bookending (*inclusio*)

See **Isaiah 1:21–26**.

Pay attention to beginning and ending "flags" of a section. These flags might be repeated phrases or themes.

Mirroring and Inverting (*chiasmus*)

See **Proverbs 18:6–7; Amos 5:4–6.**

Notice the concentric arrangement of many sections of Scripture.

Parallelism and Its Variations

See **Proverbs 16:28; 18:20; 10:4; 10:7.**

Hebrew poetry in general is characterized by parallelism, the repetition of connected ideas or phrases in couplets.

Panelling and Duplication

See **Colossians 1:15–18, 19–23.**

Sometimes a passage falls into a pattern of repeated forms or themes. This is similar to *chiasmus*, but instead of a mirror image there is straight repetition.

MODULE TWO REVIEW

We have considered observation as the first critical step in effective study of the Bible. We have engaged with the Scriptures at various levels of observation.

- What words are in play?
- How do the words come together to form their argument?
- What is the mood or atmosphere of the passage?
- Are there any larger structural clues that we need to notice?

In all of this, we have been detectives, noticing everything but judging nothing as to what it means. We have been gathering various items of evidence *before* we start to make sense of the bigger picture. These habits of observation should become second nature since no serious study of the Bible can stand up to scrutiny if time has not been given to simply looking carefully at what it says.

MODULE THREE PREVIEW

Imagine reading the Bible for the first time. Some of the scenes are so foreign—so removed from us today in the twenty-first century—but other situations seem quite familiar to us. What would you like to know about the first audience's circumstances to understand the Scriptures in the way they were originally intended to be understood?

We are going to take off our detective's deerstalker hat and put on the archaeologist's fedora.

ASSIGNMENT

DISCUSSION: The Detective and the Archaeologist

Keep working with your chosen text, but this time ask yourself, *When this was first heard or read, what did the audience think it meant? What did it signify when it was written?*

MODULE TWO OBSERVATION

What Do I See?

“I notice”:

- This happened at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (context).
- This all happened in the village where Jesus grew up.
- This happened on a sabbath.
- This all happened in the setting of the synagogue (bookended).
- The atmosphere is neutral, calm, deliberate.
- He was in good standing, nobody objected. Jesus was qualified to read the Scriptures.
- There is concentric symmetry in the action:
 - Jesus stood up.
 - The scroll was handed to Him.
 - He unrolled the scroll.
 - The Spirit of the Lord sends good news to the poor.
 - Captives will be released.
 - The blind will see.
 - The oppressed will be set free.
 - The Lord’s favor has come.
 - He rolled up the scroll.
 - He handed back the scroll.
 - Jesus sat down.
- Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61:1–2a. He does not finish the quote, but leaves it dangling at “the time of the Lord’s favor has come.”
- There is a symmetrical structural focus on “the blind will see.”
- Everybody looked at Jesus intently (their eyes were fixed on Him).
- Jesus asserted that Isaiah’s words were fulfilled that day.