

How to Study the Bible

Lesson #3—Interrogate and Investigate

Detective at Work

If you have ever watched those true crime stories on shows like *Dateline* or *20/20*, then you have seen detectives in action. These shows provide a window into the unseen world of investigators and interrogators. After a crime has been committed, the key suspect is quickly taken in for “questioning.” But during this process, a lot more than questioning is going on.

What do the detectives do? First, they put their suspect in a tiny room, almost like a cell, with no windows. There, the suspect is left waiting, sometimes for hours. But the detectives are not busy with other things; they are watching the suspect all along. Through cameras, they observe the suspect already for signs and clues. Are their arms folded, or not? Are they shaking? Are they tapping their feet? Are they nervous and sweating? Are they biting their nails? Are they crying and distraught? Or are they calm, cool, and collected? Are they detached?

After a time of observation, the real interrogation begins. Detectives cover the whole gamut of the who, what, where, when, why, and how. These questions are exhaustive. Often, they even ask the same question in different ways and at different times, to see if they can catch the suspect in some inconsistency. These questions are also prepared. The detectives approach the suspect with a list in hand, ready to get some answers.

And even while the questioning takes place, observation continues. Are there any signs that the suspect is lying? When asked where they were at the time of the crime, do they squirm in their seat? Sometimes, although subjective, detectives even consider whether or not a person simply looks or seems guilty. After the interrogation is over and the suspect is released, then comes the work of investigation and interpretation. The detective must pursue the facts and use them to interpret the answers and observations given by the suspect during questioning. The suspect’s story will be upheld or torn down and either way, the truth will be revealed.

As you can guess, Bible study is a lot like this. You are the detective, the text is your suspect, and it is your job to find out the true story. You are not interested in surface appearances, but you want to get to the bottom of the truth. To do this, where do you start? Well, last time, lesson 2 covered the basics of praying and simply reading the text. After this, however, like the detective, your next move is to interrogate and investigate the text. That is the focus of this lesson. You will learn how to make acute observations and how to ask revealing questions of the text. Then, you will proceed to do some digging and find the facts. This will be covered in lesson 4. With facts in hand, you will then move into interpretation, aiming to find out what the text really means. This will be explored in lesson 5.

Step #3—Familiarize

Before getting to the question-asking and observation-making tasks, it's helpful to familiarize yourself with some background information. Like the detective, you first want to run a background check before the interrogation to see what you can find out. You want to have a summary of the suspect's life so that you can get to know them in a general sense before digging deeper. Likewise, with Scripture, before digging deeper into a text, it's helpful to get the big picture story of the book of the Bible you are in. Often times, what you discover in a simple background study will help guide your interrogation and investigation of the text.

To start this familiarization step, do your own work. Do not jump to your study Bible right away, but first read through the book several times and try to identify the **author** and **audience** of the book. Yes, God is the author of Scripture, but He used individual men with unique styles and vocabularies to transmit His word, so you need to take the author into account. Also, yes, the church today is the audience of Scripture, but the books of the Bible were initially written to a very specific audience for a very specific reason, and this too must be accounted for.

Next, try and pinpoint the **aim** of the book, namely why the author is writing to his audience. What is his purpose in writing? What is his main point? There may be several answers to this question, but try and narrow in on the primary focus. Also, sometimes there are specific verses where the author himself pinpoints his basic aim (e.g. 1 John 5:13). Try and find these. In discerning the aim of the book, it is helpful to also uncover key **themes**. Are certain words or concepts used several times in a special way? Finally, do your best to formulate a simple **outline** of the book. Can you spot the flow and progression of thought through the chapters?

Becoming familiar with the author, audience, aim, themes, and outline of your book takes time and thought. Read your book over and over, each time trying to understand the overall message. Do the best that you can without any resources and don't feel the need to rush.




After you have taken a stab and produced some notes, now would be a good time to compare your notes against a good study Bible or Bible background resource. These resources will help fill in any gaps you have as well as supply you with some information that requires much extensive research to find (e.g. date, historical setting). If you discover something that you missed, read through your book again to pick up on it.

Special Case Study—Ephesians

- Author—the apostle Paul
- Audience—Christians at the church of Ephesus
- Aim—to encourage and admonition the saints to remember their high calling in Christ and to live accordingly
- Themes—the church; unity; holiness; grace; mystery; the Trinity
- Outline—the Christian's calling (ch 1-3); the Christian's conduct (ch 4-6)



Online Toolbox

-  <http://www.biblica.com/niv/study-bible/>
Excellent intros to every book of the Bible; from the NIV Study Bible
-  http://www.blueletterbible.org/study/intros/esv_intros.cfm
Brief, but good, intros to every book of the Bible
-  <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/berkhof/newtestament.toc.html>
A more advanced and technical intro to every NT book; by Louis Berkhof

Step #4—Organize

Briefly, here is one more step of preparation before digging in. You need to get organized. Soon, you will be amassing lots of information and you need some way to keep track of it all. The detective needs pen and paper in hand to formulate questions, note observations, and stay on track. So do you.

How exactly you organize your notes and research is up to you. Any system that works best for you is the right one. As a suggestion, get a notebook or create a word document. Then create one page (or more) for each of the following items:

- Questions
- Observations
- Key Words
- Outline

Then as you progress through this guide, you can fill out each corresponding page. This notebook will be expanded as time goes on.

Step #5—Question

Now is the time to start interrogating and investigating your text. Understand that step #5 (question) and step #6 (observation) are more concurrent steps than consecutive steps, meaning in practice, you will be forming questions and making observations at the same time, not one only after the other. Still, if you're having trouble getting going, a good way to start is by asking questions.

Approach your text and start compiling a list of every question you can think of. This may seem a bit tedious at first, but with time you will learn how to ask the right types of questions. This is both an art and a science. Get creative, spend time, and think. You can't rush the process of good question asking, especially at first. And don't worry about asking obvious or "dumb" questions; later you will go through your list of questions and choose the really good ones to take further.

Begin with observation questions. These are simply asking, "What does the text *say*?" Think of the typical who, what, where, when, why, and how questions. Asking these questions will help you get situated in the text. Write down everything that comes to mind.

Next, move on to interpretation questions. These are asking, "What does the text *mean*?" Remember, you are searching for the authorial intent to the text, which is the meaning God intended through the original author. Now is not the time to ask, "What does the text mean *to me*?" Before you can get to present day application, you must always first find the author's meaning for the original audience. Also, remember that you are still just asking questions; you don't need to worry about the answers yet. Ask away, regardless of how challenging the questions might appear.

Lastly, as you go through your text and its near context asking questions, you will start identifying key words that seemingly need further study. You might question their basic meaning or their greater significance. Either way, start compiling a list of key words that merit further study. Look for words you don't understand or for pregnant words—words that seem to be packed with meaning (e.g. justification).

Step #6—Observe

Now that you have a good list of questions compiled, it's time to start making a list of observations. Start with your text itself and just spend time observing everything that you can. Here is a short list of some things you can look for (this list is not exhaustive):

- Key words, phrases, or concepts
- Repetition of words, phrases, or concepts
- Interesting or unique sentence structure
- Key prepositions, conjunctions, and adjectives
- Parallelism
- Comparisons or contrasts
- Commands
- Verbs
- References to time, people, places, or events
- References to God the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit

Once you feel like you have a solid list of observations from your text, repeat this process for your text's near context. You don't have to be as extensive here, but look for anything that is relevant to your text. Identify key words or thoughts in the context that also appear in your text. Observe the flow of thought from the preceding verses to your verses.

Keep in mind, again, that you are still in the observation stage, not the interpretation stage. Even here, you aren't worrying about what your text means per se, but rather what it says, or seems to say. Getting to the right interpretation or meaning of your passage will come a little later. This process of asking questions and making observations will seem rigid at first, but with time will become more fluid. Most people are accustomed to skimming Scripture and it takes time to adjust your eyes to see the underlying layers. Use these training wheels for now; everything will seem more natural as you practice.

Finally, if you feel like you hit a wall in observation-making, try some of these suggestions:

First, reference your list of observation questions and see if you can already answer some of your own questions through observation. If so, cross off these questions.

Second, look up some cross references to your passage and search for significant links. For example, if you looked up the cross-references for the word "well-pleasing" in Titus 2:9, you would observe that this word is always used in reference to God. This might help you later in unpacking its meaning in Titus 2:9. Avoid the pitfall of over cross-referencing though. This whole process of Bible study is like mining for gold, so learn to dig through the dirt and find only what's relevant.

Third, pull up multiple translations of your passage all on the same screen. This is a great tool for making observations and identifying important areas of study. Since you don't know Greek or Hebrew, reading several different English translations can help you identify translation issues, which will point you to further study. Look for meaningful differences in the way your passage is translated, if there are any. Sometimes, your passage may be relatively straightforward in translation. By way of example though, look up multiple translations of Titus 1:6 and notice the differences. All the while, make observations and notes for further study.

Special Case Study—Titus

Using the book of Titus, do steps five and six as described above. With blank sheets of paper in hand, read through Titus several times and list as many good questions and observations as you can. In this instance, go through the entire book, not just one small passage.



Online Toolbox

Cross References Help

 <http://www.biblegateway.com/>

Small number of cross references listed. Click on the upper-case letter next to a given word.

 <http://www.blueletterbible.org/>

After searching for a text, click on the “K” icon next to the verse you’re studying.




This takes you to a resource called the Treasure of Scripture Knowledge (hereafter TSK). It’s based on the KJV translation and gives cross references for key words in a given text. Look under the “Correlating Verses” section for the cross references. For more help on using TSK, go here: (<http://www.blueletterbible.org/help/tsk.cfm>)

 <http://www.openbible.info/labs/cross-references/>

This also references TSK cross references, but might be easier to use for some people. The references are not categorized though.

 <http://www.dynamicbible.com/>

This is really an exhaustive concordance tool. It also references the KJV translation, but it’s suitable for cross referencing and word look-up. After typing in your passage in the search bar, you’ll see that some words are underlined. Click on one of them and on the right-hand side of the window, it will list every other verse where that word or a variant of that word is used.

 E-Sword

This program is the easiest to use for cross references. Just click on a verse, click on the TSK tab in the Commentaries window, and it will show you all the cross references.


Parallel Translations Help

 <http://net.bible.org/>

This is probably the best and easiest tool for looking up a verse in parallel translations. Simply navigate to your verse and click on the “Parallel” tab in the top left. This website has a good and solid selection of parallel translations.

 <http://www.blueletterbible.org/>

Here, after searching for your text, click on the “V” icon this time.

 E-Sword

Click on the “Compare” or “Parallel” tabs in the Bible window to see parallel translations. E-Sword is limited here in that you have to pay for certain translations, like the NASB.