

Coffee & Conversations on the book of Philippians

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.

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

1. Observation
2. Interpretation
3. Application

Observation: What Does the Text Say?

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? What? Where? When? Why? How?

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
- Words that contrast one thing against another
- Words that indicate cause and effect

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 (Logos Bible Software can be a great help with this). 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.
- 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.

Application: What Does This Text Mean for Me?

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?

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.