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# A DETAILED STUDY OF A PASSAGE

## PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATION

### A STUDY UNIT

A passage as a study unit should be a natural unit of thought or a compositional unit. The chapter divisions as you find them in the English translations do not always constitute a compositional unit except in the Psalms. It is well to remember that the chapter, paragraph, and verse divisions are purely editorial for the sake of convenience and are not found in the oldest manuscripts. However, a paragraph in the NASB, in general, is a unit of thought and very often two, three, or more paragraphs are grouped together as a unit by some idea, topic, or event. For the best results, a study unit should consist of not more than three or four paragraphs.

### THE STUDY TOOLS

The following tools are a must:

- Bible (more than one translation)

- Pencil, colored pencils, paper
- Unabridged English dictionary
- Bible dictionary
- Bible commentaries.

#### THE STUDY METHOD

There are various methods to study the Bible. Each method, without question, has its own merit. However, the method adopted here is called the “analytical-synthetic method” (inductive Bible study). As the term suggests, this method begins with a detailed analysis of the passage with the intent to discover what the author actually wrote, and then continues with a *synthesis* of the parts to determine the message that the author is conveying. There are at least two important reasons for using this method.

- *It is objective in its approach.* It demands that one must first examine the details of the passage before drawing any conclusions.
- *It is impartial in its conclusion.* It demands that one’s conclusion must be based on the facts (or evidence) discovered within the passage.

#### SUGGESTED PROCEDURE

There is no set pattern or procedure in this study method. Each individual should develop the kind of procedure that is best suited to him. However, one needs to be reminded that whatever study procedure

one develops, it must be characterized by order, logic, and thoroughness. The following suggested steps serve as a guideline. (For those desiring to do a more exhaustive Bible study, consult *Methodical Bible Study: A New Approach to Hermeneutics* by Robert A. Traina.)

#### BECOME ACQUAINTED WITH THE PASSAGE

Read the passage over and over again until you are thoroughly familiar with its content.

#### RECOGNIZE THE LITERARY FORM OF THE PASSAGE

It is essential that you recognize the literary form of the passage at the outset. As you know, there is a variety of literary types represented in the Scriptures. Therefore, recognizing the literary form is a prerequisite to understanding the message of the passage. To quote Howard T. Kuist, “Form is the key which unlocks the door of content and discloses the essence of subject matter.”<sup>1</sup> Generally, you will find the following literary forms in Scripture:

- *Historical narrative*—the gospels, Acts, Genesis, Joshua, Samuel
- *Discourse literature*—discourses of Jesus, epistles, and sermons
- *Parabolic literature*—the parables of Jesus
- *Poetic literature*—the Psalms, the Song of Solomon
- *Apocalyptic literature*—Revelation, parts of Daniel.

Keep in mind that, occasionally, you will find that various types of literature are combined together in a passage. In that case, literary form cannot be easily determined until the whole passage has been examined.

#### ANALYZE THE PASSAGE

According to Webster, to analyze “is to separate or break up (any whole) into its parts so as to find out their nature, proposition, function, and relationship.” One of the best ways to analyze is to diagram the passage. Diagraming the passage has many advantages.

1. It enables you to see the passage as a whole and its grammatical structure.
2. It enables you to see not only what is said but how it is said.
3. It enables you to see the progression (or digression) of thought or events.
4. It enables you to see things that normally you would have missed.

In diagraming you must follow the text closely, proceeding from paragraph to paragraph. Since it is a recast of the text, you must copy word for word (use the NASB). *Never paraphrase it!* Read the following instructions carefully.

1. Take a sheet of paper and write the Scripture reference of the passage at the top.
2. Read a sentence at a time and identify the core

(a core consists of the main subject, verb, and object). Copy the core at the left side of the paper preceded by the reference.

3. Place the rest of the sentence, such as modified phrases and clauses, under the words or characters they describe.
4. Always place the connectives, such as conjunctions, by themselves in capital letters, so they may stand out.
5. Organize your diagram in such a way that when it is complete, the main ideas are all lined up.
6. Go over the diagram. Use graphic aids, such as underlining, arrows, circling, and boxing with colored pencils to indicate repetition, contrast, or comparison.

#### OBSERVE THE PASSAGE AND RAISE INTERPRETIVE QUESTIONS

According to Kuist, observation is “the art of seeing things as they really are.” It entails seeing “impartially, intensely and fearlessly.”<sup>2</sup> The importance of observation cannot be overemphasized because it is basic to understanding. One cannot understand what the given passage means unless one knows what the passage says. Charles R. Eberhardt rightly points out, “The aim of interpretation is re-creation of the author’s intentions, and the first requirement, if this goal is to be achieved, is absolute mastery of the *form* and *content* of the rec-

ord or composition” (italics added).<sup>3</sup> The mastery of content is possible only through minute observation, and this requires time and discipline. Again, read the following instructions carefully.

*Observe the passage.*

1. Use another sheet of paper and divide it into two columns. On the left hand column write “Observation” and on the right “Interpretive Question.”
2. It is very important that you observe the passage as if you are seeing it for the first time.
3. Observation must begin with a clause as a whole, move to its various parts, and then its particulars.
4. Observation, in a sense, is “facts-hunting.” Things you are to look for can be classified as follows:
  - a. Pertaining to basic information—
    - Who?—characters
    - What?—events, sayings
    - When?—time
    - Where?—geographical location
    - How?—means.
  - b. Pertaining to grammar—
    - Verb—tense? mood?
    - Pronoun—which person? singular or plural?
    - Conjunction?

- c. Pertaining to compositional features—
  - Repetition?
  - Comparison?
  - Contrast?
  - Progression or digression?
  - Cause and effect?
  - Question and answer?
- d. Others—
  - Atmosphere?
  - Illustration?
  - Idiomatic expression?
  - Figures of speech?
5. The best way to observe is by asking yourself questions like those listed above. That, of course, does not imply that the preceding list of questions is exhaustive, nor does it suggest that all the questions are applicable to every given passage indiscriminately. You must take the nature of the passage into consideration and exercise your own judgment.
6. Record your observations in the left-hand column of the paper. Always indicate the references. In regard to recording, two things need to be mentioned at this point. First, you should only record observations that are noteworthy rather than ev-

ery particular of the passage. Second, you should learn to organize your observations in such a way that they will be meaningful and useful to you in the future.

*Ask interpretive questions.*

1. As you proceed in observation, it is inevitable that you will raise many questions concerning the things you have observed—questions pertaining to meaning, reason, relationship, and implication. Those are questions for understanding, and are called “interpretive questions.”
2. If your observation does not trigger questions in your mind, then you should learn to ask yourself questions. In fact, asking yourself questions will increase your power of concentration and will also make you think seriously about the meaning and implication of words, phrases, and clauses of the passage.
3. Learn to ask significant questions that will help to unlock the meaning of the words or sentences, and eventually the meaning of the passage. Bear in mind that observation and the raising of interpretive questions are not an end in themselves, but rather a means to an end; namely, to determine the message of the passage and to discover the intent of the author.
4. Record all the interpretive questions you asked

yourself in the right-hand column of the paper corresponding to the particular observation on which the questions were raised. Those questions are significant, for they function as a bridge between observation and interpretation.

5. Do not attempt to answer interpretive questions while you are doing observation. Learn to distinguish observation, interpretation, and application. Discipline yourself to do one thing at a time.
6. Try to classify the questions. It will help you to see in which areas they need clarification. You will notice that those questions generally fall into the following categories:
  - Definitive—pertaining to meaning
  - Rational—pertaining to reason
  - Structural—pertaining to relationship
  - Implicational—pertaining to things implied
  - Theological—pertaining to doctrine
  - Historical and Cultural—pertaining to background information.
7. Remember that the questions you raised vary in importance. Some questions may overlap and others may be found to be unanswerable. In general, the following kinds of questions should be omitted:
  - Questions that will lead to speculation

- Questions that are legitimate in themselves, but are not relevant to the passage under study.

INTERPRET THE PASSAGE: ANSWER THE INTERPRETIVE QUESTIONS

After you have completed a minute observation of the passage, you are ready to make the transition to the interpretative stage of your study. Interpretation that logically follows observation is an attempt to discover meaning the author intended to convey.

It is natural that your concerns, at this point, should be how and where to find answers to the interpretive questions that arose out of the observation. However, you need to be reminded again that to answer those questions is not an end in itself. Rather, it should be a means whereby you may gain deeper insight into the meaning of the whole passage.

The following factors and principles must be observed and conscientiously applied, if you are to interpret the author's words correctly and understand his message accurately.

*Subjective factors.*

1. Spiritual sensitivity—In the interpretation, the divine illumination and one's spiritual sensitivity are closely related. The indwelling and illumination of the Holy Spirit are essential to spiritual understanding. Yet the degree of spiritual under-

standing depends upon one's spiritual sensitivity. Spiritual insensitivity is one of the obstacles to spiritual insight. It is only when that obstruction is removed that one can see and perceive. For that reason, preparation by prayer is an absolute necessity in the interpretation of the Scriptures. You must be willing to take time to pray and to meditate. In childlike humility, with a receptive heart, pray and trust the Holy Spirit for the following:

- To open your eyes and give spiritual insight (Luke 24:31)
  - To open your mind to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45)
  - To open the Scriptures to you (Luke 24:32).
2. Intellectual honesty—One must remember that interpretation is *ex*-egesis and not *eis*-egesis. Exegesis is approaching the passage with no preconceived notions of what it might mean or ought to mean, and bringing out the meaning that is native to the text. In other words, one must not read into the text (*eisegesis*) what it was never intended to mean. In the light of that, it is necessary that one should honestly examine his presuppositions and preconceptions before the interpretation. It is only with an open and unbiased mind that one can be true to the intent of the author.

*Objective principles.*

1. Consider the author's purpose—Interpret the passage in the light of the author's purpose and plan.

**Suggestion:**

To discover the purpose of a book is not always easy, since the majority of biblical writers did not state explicitly the purpose of their writings. However, a survey of the book (consult chapter 3, "A Survey of a Book") plus a careful study of its plan (or structure) should enable one to grasp the author's intention. Also, you may find this information in the introduction to the book in a Bible dictionary or commentary.

2. Consider the context of the passage—A passage must be interpreted in the light of its immediate and remote contexts. The importance of contextual interpretation is evident in the oft-quoted axiom, "A text without a context is only a pretext."

**Suggestion:**

The context of a passage will be more easily identified if one is familiar with the overall content of the book. Review the outline of the book.

3. Consider the literary form—In the interpretation, one must recognize the literary form of the

passage (including figures of speech) and interpret it accordingly.

**Suggestion:**

Books on biblical interpretation are an essential tool. Study "special hermeneutics."

4. Consider the historical-cultural setting—A passage must be understood in the light of the historical, cultural, social, political, and geographical setting in which it was composed. It is inevitable that all those factors had their influences on the writings.

**Suggestion:**

Good Bible commentaries, Bible dictionaries, a good Bible handbook, and a Bible history atlas are valuable sources of information.

5. Consider cumulative revelation—Since truth is many-sided, one must consider the total teaching of Scripture on the particular subject being interpreted. In other words, one must avoid drawing a final conclusion based on an *isolated text* (whether a verse or a passage), lest it result in extreme or one-sided views.

**Suggestion:**

Familiarize yourself with the Bible itself. Topical Bible references and cross-references are very helpful.

6. Compare Scripture with Scripture—Let the Bible be its own interpreter. Always interpret an obscure passage in the light of a clear one and not vice versa. Since divine revelation is self-consistent, one passage may shed light on another.

**Suggestion:**

Cross-references and a concordance are very helpful in this regard.

7. Seek the author's own interpretation—Look for Scripture's own interpretation. In the four gospels, Jesus and the writers often interpret their own words.
8. Follow the literal meaning—Take the words literally unless the context indicates otherwise. Remember that the Bible is much more frequently literal than figurative. Do not look for hidden meanings. Follow the advice, "If the literal sense makes good sense, seek no other sense, lest it result in nonsense."

**Suggestion:**

Generally speaking, one's common sense with the help of the context should be able to tell him whether the word is to be taken literally or figuratively.

9. Study the key words—The key words are impor-

tant clues to the message of the passage. In studying a word follow these steps:

- a. Find its various meanings, including the root meaning, in an unabridged English dictionary or lexicon.
- b. Tentatively decide on the meaning that best fits the context in which the word is found. Always relate that chosen meaning to the text itself and see whether it gives insight into the passage.
- c. Investigate how this word is used in other passages, especially by the same author. Study also the parallel passage. Use a concordance.
- d. Finally, determine the meaning of the word.

**Suggestion:**

An unabridged English dictionary, a lexicon, a concordance, and books on word study are invaluable tools. Also compare and contrast various translations which give different shades of meaning.

10. Consult commentaries—In the interpretation, outside aids such as commentaries are both desirable and necessary. In fact, they are invaluable tools if used at the proper time. One must avoid the pitfall that C. H. Spurgeon aptly observed. He said, "Two opposite errors beset the student of Scripture, the tendency to take every-



thing second hand from others, and the refusal to take anything from others.” He is also reported to have said, “It seems odd that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to them should think so little of what He reveals to others.” Remember commentaries are a tool—not a crutch!

*Points to be considered.*

1. The principles listed above are by no means exhaustive. Since biblical interpretation is such an important subject, one should make an effort to study this subject further.
2. Not all these principles must be taken into consideration in the interpretation of every passage. The nature of the passage being interpreted should dictate which principles are to be employed.
3. Even though these principles are individually listed, one will discover that some of them are interrelated.
4. It is not to be assumed that, even when one follows all of these study procedures, he will necessarily find the answer to all his questions or that he will always arrive, with certainty, at the meaning of the passage.
5. In regard to interpretive questions, do not try to answer each one of them. Use your own judg-

ment to select the kind of questions that, when answered, will give you insight into the message of the author.

6. Record the answers and interpretations on another sheet of paper. Leave enough space for additional notes later.

**SYNTHESIZE THE PASSAGE AND SUMMARIZE ITS MESSAGE**

One real danger in a detailed study, as discussed above, is that one might fail to see the forest for the trees. There is danger of getting lost in details and never coming to grasp the message of the passage as a whole. For that reason, it is both necessary and logical that synthesis and summary follow interpretation and precede application.

*Synthesize the passage.* Synthesis, the opposite of analysis, is “to put together parts or elements so as to form a whole” (Webster). In order to avoid the afore-said danger two things are necessary: First, you must always consider the passage as a whole, remembering that the detailed analysis, minute observation, and careful interpretation are but a means to an end—to understand the message of the passage. Second, you must develop the ability to combine and to integrate your findings into a whole. Consider the following steps:

1. Determine the central teaching of the passage. Make it a habit always, at the end of Bible study, to ask yourself, “Why did the author select this

particular portion of material?” “What message did he try to communicate?” or “What would have been missed if this passage had been omitted?” With those questions in mind, go over your analysis of the passage carefully. Determine what you think to be the central message, and state it in your own words in a full sentence. The statement must be definite, precise, and accurate to the intent of the author.

2. Gather the supporting points. Try your best to form the habit of thinking by points. This will help you to think clearly and logically. Go over the analysis of the passage again. Gather the facts (details) that bear upon the central teaching, then organize these facts into supporting points and list them in a logical sequence. Perhaps the best way to do that is to study the structure of the passage carefully and take note of how the author arranged his material; how he developed his thought and accomplished his aim.

*Summarize the message.* To summarize is to present the teaching of the passage in a brief form. That can be done in various ways. For the sake of space, only the outline form will be discussed here.

1. Outline—A summary by means of outline is highly recommended because it shows in skeleton form the major teachings of the passage. There are two types of outlines:

- a. Topical—In this outline each point listed is directly related to one topic. All the points are more or less parallel in nature.
  - b. Logical—In this outline the points are listed in natural logical sequence in which one point leads to another.
2. Headings—The heading for each point should be brief, suggestive, and easy to remember. The headings may be:
    - a. Descriptive—This type of statement is more or less based on observation. The words are often taken from the text itself.
    - b. Interpretive—This type of statement is interpretive in nature. It is based on the interpretation of the text.
  3. Construction—The literary construction of the headings should be parallel.

Remember, a good summary should also reveal both the content and the structure of the passage.

#### MEDITATE UPON PERSONAL APPLICATION

One of the most common failures in much of Bible study is found at this point—the lack of emphasis on personal application. It has already been pointed out that the Bible was not given primarily for our information, but for our transformation. It is not just for study-

ing; it is for living. So keep in mind that the final purpose of Bible study is not the acquisition of Bible knowledge, but the application of that knowledge. Observe the following steps in the process of application:

*Assess the relevancy of the passage.* Since each individual Bible passage varies in the degree of pertinence, it is necessary that you decide when, where, and for whom this particular passage is applicable.

*Distinguish the timeless universal principle from the local practice.* The principle may be stated explicitly or only implied in the text. The knowledge of the historical situation of the passage is essential in this regard.

*Meditate over the newly discovered principle (or truth) until it becomes a personal conviction.*

*Think through thoroughly the personal application.* Determine the area(s) of your life in which the principle is relevant.

*Make one specific resolution.* Concentrate on one application at a time.

*Pray for the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to bring about the change needed in your life.*

*Keep a record of your personal application.* For the details consult chapter 2, "Ezra, Our Model."

In summary, a proper, sound Bible study demands the involvement of the total person: mind, heart, and will. Truth requires not only an intellectual assent to its teaching, but also an obedient response to its mes-

sage. It is required that the truth objectively perceived must be subjectively applied. Remember, as someone has aptly pointed out, light obeyed increases light, but light rejected brings night.

## NOTES

1. Howard T. Kuist, *These Words Upon Thy Heart* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1947), p. 92.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 79 (John Ruskin as cited in Kuist).
3. Charles R. Eberhardt, *The Bible in the Making of Ministers* (New York: Association, 1949), p. 184.