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HOW TO
STUDY
YOUR
BIBLE



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HOW TO STUDY YOUR BIBLE

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Acknowledgments



Although this book bears my name, it is a team effort. My original work, begun in the 1970s, has been edited, supplemented, polished, and refined by Precept Ministries' Training Team. This dedicated team of men and women, along with our Precept Trainers worldwide, bring to this book years of experience. Together they have trained thousands of people from all walks of life to study the Bible using the Precept Upon Precept method of inductive study. In fact our Precept Inductive Bible studies are in approximately 70 languages and used in about 150 countries.

People who never graduated from high school as well as seminary graduates have said over and over that the **Precept Training Workshops** and/or the doing of a **Precept Course** taught them more than they had ever experienced before, or in many cases, more than they thought they could ever learn.

Thus this book is a combined effort of people from across this nation, Canada, and many parts of the world who have the same passion—to establish God's people in God's Word as that which produces reverence for Him (Psalm 119:38). That group of people also includes every one of Precept Ministries' home-base staff of more than 100 men and women, who each in their faithfulness to their task have contributed in their own valuable way.

And for that reason this book is dedicated...

- to Precept's Training Team at the home base,
- to our Precept Trainers who live across this nation and in various parts of the world and who travel wherever they're sent (even to Siberia),

- to every faithful Precept Leader here and around the world who spends hours each week studying God’s Word so that others might know Him, and,
- to our beloved staff who “stand by the stuff” day in and day out working unitedly for the glory of One and One alone, our head, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We all do this joyfully, grateful to God for His calling, for we know and believe that “the people who know their God will be strong and do exploits” for Him (Daniel 11:32b)—and that is what our world desperately needs more than anything else.

To each of you, Beloved, I say,

*May the Lord reward your work,
and your wages be full from the Lord, the God of Israel,
under whose wings you have come to seek refuge.*

RUTH 2:12





If You Want to Know God's Word...



Beloved,
Do you realize that you are about to learn a method of Bible study that could be your launching pad to a life of new vision and renewed hope? Throughout the ages, God has raised up men and women, ordinary people like you and me, and used them to accomplish great works for His kingdom. As you begin, my prayer for you is that through the study of His Word, God will let you see the vital significance of your life. I pray that you will persevere and not lose heart. Greatness is never achieved nor dreams realized apart from great discipline.

In 1969, my husband, Jack, and I returned from the mission field because of an illness I had. He became the station manager for a Christian radio station. I was asked to teach a Bible study with 250 women every week in Atlanta, Georgia. The hunger these women had to know God's Word and apply it in a deeply personal way to their everyday lives touched me.

The first draft of *How to Study Your Bible* was four pages long, printed on a mimeograph machine. My heart's cry to God during those years was "Lord, when you call me to leave Atlanta and these 250 people, will they be able to feed themselves?"

Out of that experience, Precept Upon Precept Inductive Bible Courses were born, and the class in Atlanta grew from 250 to 1700. Over the years, this nondenominational Bible study ministry has helped hundreds of thousands of men and women in the United States and about 150 countries learn to study the Bible inductively, "precept upon precept," through classes and seminars.

While learning in a group setting is extremely valuable to most people, there are others who want to learn to study the Bible on their own. That is the purpose of this book.

If you long to know God, if you yearn for a deep and abiding relationship with Jesus Christ, if you want to live the Christian life faithfully and know what God requires of you, you must do more than merely read the Bible and study what someone else has said about it. You must interact with God's Word personally, absorbing its message and letting God engrave His truth on your heart and mind and life. That is the very heart of inductive study: seeing truth for yourself, discerning what it means, and applying that truth to your life.

The accuser of the brethren, the devil, will seek to discourage you on every hand (John 8:44; Revelation 12:10), especially if you have tried studying the Bible before and failed. He will attempt to persuade you that it is just too hard for you, that you will never get it, that it is useless to try.

How I wish I could talk with you face-to-face so I could encourage you, challenge you, and support you—so that you can discipline yourself for the goal of godliness. These are critical times, and I know that only those “who know their God will be strong and do exploits for Him” (Daniel 11:32b kjv). What an hour for the church to hold forth the Word of life in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

May God grant you a vision of what He can do in your life through inductive Bible study, and may you persevere until that vision becomes reality. God bless you. May He use you far beyond your wildest dreams!

—*Kay Arthur*



The Joy and Value of Inductive Study



The Bible was written so that anyone who wants to know who God is and how they are to live in a way that pleases Him can read it and find out.

God wants to bring us into intimacy with Himself. He wants to be a Father to us. In order to have that relationship, however, God has to talk to us. He wants to explain to us who He is and how we can be brought into a close, wonderful relationship with Him. He also wants us to understand the blessings of a life of obedience to His Word and the consequences of disobeying Him. And He wants us to know the truth about life and what is going to happen in the future.

The Bible tells us everything we need to know about life. That, my friend, is why you need to study it for yourself.

There are many ways to study the Bible, and there are many excellent study aids available to help you with specific books of the Bible. But the most important thing you need to remember is that to find out what the Bible says, you need to read it yourself in a way that will help you discover what it says, what it means, and how you are to apply it to your life. And the best way to do this is through the process called inductive study. Inductive study doesn't tell you what the Bible means or what you should believe. Instead, it teaches you a method of studying God's Word that can be applied to any portion of Scripture at any time for the rest of your life.

The main requirement in learning to study the Bible inductively is the

willingness to slow down and really look at what the Scripture is saying. That may not sound too difficult, but in times like ours it is probably the most difficult part of the entire process. And to be honest, my friend, don't you sometimes wonder if our busyness—even for God—isn't often what's keeping us from being what God wants us to be?

Inductive Bible study uses the Bible itself as the primary source of information about the Bible. In inductive study you personally explore the Scriptures apart from conclusions Bible scholars and other people have drawn from their study of the Word. Though their labors are valuable, research has shown time and time again that people learn more and remember better when they enter into the process of discovery for themselves. In inductive study, commentaries, books, tapes, and other information about the Bible are consulted only after you have made your own thorough examination of the Scripture. These, then, can serve as a sounding board for your own observations and conclusions.

Actually, you may already be familiar with some of the principles of inductive study. For example, if you have ever taken any biology courses, you have studied frogs, and you have probably done so through observation.

To thoroughly study the frog, you first go to a river or creek bank where frogs live. You watch their eggs hatch and the tadpoles emerge. You see their back and front legs develop and grow, until they look like frogs and leave the water. After observing how the frogs respond to their new life on land, you catch one and observe it more closely. Eventually you take it to the biology lab where you dissect it to see how it looks on the inside. Afterward, you read what other biologists have learned about frogs to see if your conclusions match.

Inductive study of the Bible involves the same process: You begin with the Bible, observe it in its environment, and then take it apart so that you understand it firsthand. Then, when you've seen or discovered all you can on your own, you compare your observations with those of godly men and women who have written about the Word down through the ages.

Now, it would be much easier to just sit down and read a book about frogs in the first place and forget about traipsing through the marsh, wouldn't it? But you would end up with only secondhand knowledge. You would know what others have said about frogs, which might be interesting and—you hope—true. But you never would have had a personal encounter with a frog.

Inductive Bible study draws you into personal interaction with the Scripture and thus with the God of the Scriptures so that your beliefs are based on a prayerful understanding and legitimate interpretation of Scripture—truth that transforms you when you live by it.

If you will study inductively, the benefits will be beyond anything you have ever hoped could happen in your own personal understanding of the Word of God. As a result of incorporating the principles of inductive Bible study that we present in this book, you will

- be equipped to study God’s Word on your own
- be independent of relying only on another’s interpretation
- increase your knowledge of God and His ways
- be greatly strengthened in your personal faith
- recognize the authority of the inerrant Word of God in your daily walk
- become increasingly aware of all that it means to be in Christ.

Well, my friend, that is what this study guide is all about. It’s a manual designed to help you know and understand the Bible—to study it so you can see for yourself what it says about God, what it says about you, and what it says about becoming part of God’s forever family.

Beginning with the Basics

Inductive Bible study consists of three component parts, which we will look at separately, but which frequently overlap in practice. These three parts are observation, interpretation, and application.

OBSERVATION Observation answers the question: *What does the passage say?* It is the foundation which must be laid if you want to accurately interpret and properly apply God’s Word. Have you ever read a book, chapter, or verse of the Bible and five minutes later been unable to remember anything you have read? So often we read the Bible with our eyes but not with our mind. There are several reasons for this. Either

- we think God’s Word will magically make an impression on us without any effort on our part, or

- we don't really believe we can understand what we've read, or
- we are waiting for the pastor to teach on this section of Scripture so we'll know what to believe.

Often, however, we forget what we have read simply because we don't know what to look for in the text. Therefore, in the first part of this book you are going to learn what to look for when you read your Bible.

Because observation is discovering what the passage is saying, it requires time and practice. You'll discover that the more you read and get to know a book of the Bible, the more its truths will become obvious to you. You'll be awed at the wealth of spiritual riches contained in even the shortest books of the Bible—and you will have discovered it yourself! You will know that you know!

INTERPRETATION

Interpretation answers the question: *What does the passage mean?*

And the basis for accurate interpretation is always careful observation. Interpretation is the process of discovering what the passage means. As you carefully observe Scripture, the meaning will become apparent. However, if you rush into interpretation without laying the vital foundation of accurate observation, your understanding will be colored by your presuppositions—what *you* think, what *you* feel, or what *other people* have said, rather than what God's Word says.

Interpretation is not necessarily a separate step from observation, for often, as you carefully observe the text, at that very moment you begin to see what it means. Thus, interpretation flows out of observation.

However, interpretation can also involve separate actions or steps that go beyond merely observing the immediate text. One of these exercises is investigating cross-references. First and foremost, let Scripture interpret Scripture. You may also use other helps, such as word studies or the evaluation of resources such as commentaries and Bible dictionaries to check your conclusions or to supplement your understanding of the historical or cultural setting of the text.

What we are going to do is to give you principles of interpretation and offer special sections to guide you in handling different types of writing, including figures of speech, parables, and allegories. We'll also show you how to do word studies and how to use Bible study tools that will greatly enhance your learning. It's going to be exciting—and so enlightening!

APPLICATION

Application answers the question: *How does the meaning of this passage apply to me?* Usually this is the first thing we want to know when we read the Bible, but proper application actually begins with belief which then results in being and doing. Once you know what a passage means, you are not only responsible for putting it into practice in your own life, but accountable if you don't! Ultimately, then, the goal of personal Bible study is a transformed life and a deep and abiding relationship with Jesus Christ.

Application is not a third step in the inductive process. Rather, application takes place as you are confronted with truth and decide to respond in obedience to that truth. The basis for application is 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

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. To be equipped for every good work of life—totally prepared to handle every situation in a way that honors God—is not only possible, it is God's will. And that's what you will learn how to do if you will apply these study principles. Oh, the hundreds of stories we could tell you about what God has done because people disciplined themselves to know His Word in this way. It would thrill your heart! But right now stories aren't our purpose; getting you into the Word inductively is! Then, friend, you can tell your own story! We'd love to hear it!

*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.*

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.

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.

Through a diligent study of God's Word, under the guidance of His Spirit, you'll drop a strong anchor that will hold in the storms of life. You will know your God. And when you know your God, not only will you be strong, but you will do great exploits for Him (Daniel 11:32).



Part One

 **OBSERVATION** 

Discover What It Says!

The Rule of Context— Context Rules!



Now, let's sit down and begin. And where do you begin? You begin by observing the text as a whole. By the text we mean whatever portion of Scripture you want to study. We suggest you study the Bible book by book, because each book of the Bible is a complete message in and of itself that in turn relates in a special way to the whole Word of God. So choose your text—a book of the Bible—and then keep the following principles before you.

❁ STEP ONE ❁

Begin with Prayer

You are about to learn the most effective method of Bible study there is. Yet apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, that's all it will be—a method.

John 16:13-15 tells us that the One who guides us into all truth, the One who takes the things of God and reveals them to us, is the Holy Spirit, our resident Teacher. So ask God, by His Spirit, to lead you into all truth and to open your eyes that you may behold wondrous things out of His Word (see Psalm 119:18 κϒν). Begin with prayer—and continue with an attitude of prayer.

❁ STEP TWO ❁

Identify the Context

Inductive study begins with a thorough evaluation of the context.

One of the most important principles of handling the Word properly and studying the Bible inductively is to interpret Scripture in the light of its context. Why? Because *context always rules in interpretation*.

The word *context* means “that which goes with the text.” In general, then, context is the environment in which something dwells, the setting in which something exists or occurs. Remember the tadpole in the creek? Context is the creek!

In Bible study, context is the words, phrases, and sentences surrounding a particular word, phrase, or sentence. This context gives meaning to the particular word, phrase, or sentence and helps you understand what the author is saying. Context can also be expanded to paragraphs, chapters, books, and eventually the whole Bible. Because context rules in, or determines, the interpretation of the passage, it is important for you to know the context of any passage that you’re studying.

To illustrate how context gives meaning to words, let’s look at the word *trunk*. Suppose someone were to ask you, “What does the word *trunk* mean?” How would you respond? Well, if you were going to give a helpful as well as an accurate answer, you would first have to ask, “How is the word used?” because the word *trunk* can mean different things.

A trunk could mean the luggage compartment of a car, the flexible snout of an elephant, a large rigid piece of luggage used for transporting clothing and personal effects, the main stem of a tree, or shorts worn for swimming.

Therefore, the only way to know the intended meaning of the word *trunk* is to examine the context in which the word is used. The environment (the surrounding text) in which the word appears will show you which of these possible meanings is intended.

For instance, what would the word *trunk* mean in the following account from a trip to Africa?

I remember seeing this huge trunk appear before the window of our car. We had been informed to always line up our car in the same direction in which the elephant was

going, in case he charged at our vehicle. As we saw this trunk swinging back and forth and the elephant’s face coming closer, we knew it was time to leave!

Since context is “that which surrounds or goes with the text,” what information in this passage gives us a proper understanding of the word *trunk* as it is used here?

Well, we see that the word “elephant” appears twice, and the trunk is described as “huge” and “swinging back and forth.” By examining the context, therefore, we discover the facts that surround the use of this word and can determine that in this particular passage the word *trunk* means “the flexible snout of an elephant.”

In inductive study, context is determined or identified in the same way—by carefully observing what is repeated in the text and seeing how it all relates. If you observe what is said and pay attention to the repeated words, phrases, or ideas, you’ll clearly see the context in any book, chapter, or passage that you’re studying.

Context is determined or identified by thorough, careful observation of the text. Therefore...

❁ STEP THREE ❁

Observe the Obvious

When you observe the text, *begin by looking for things that are obvious—in other words, things that are easy to see.*

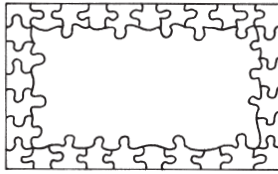
Facts about people, places, and events always capture our attention; therefore, people, places, and events are easy to see. Since these kinds of facts are often repeated, this also makes them easy to see.

If you keep your focus on the obvious, you will discover significant or repeated ideas; these will, in turn, show you the context of the book, chapter, passage, or verse you are studying.

For example, if you decide to put together a rectangular jigsaw puzzle, where do you start? Which pieces do you look for first? The four corners, of course! Why? Because they are obvious: There are only four of them, and they are easy to find because they have two straight sides.



Once you identify the four corners, what do you look for next? Naturally, you look for the next most obvious things: the straight edges. Once again, they're the easiest pieces to find because each has one straight side!



By the time you have connected the straight edges, you have an outline or framework within which to put the other pieces together. You have established the context for the puzzle by looking for the obvious.

In a similar fashion, looking for the obvious facts, details, or ideas establishes the framework in studying a book, chapter, or passage of the Bible. So to put together a framework for the text, begin with the things that are obvious in that book.

As you observe the text and discover the context, however, you must always...

❁ STEP FOUR ❁

Deal with the Text Objectively

In other words, let the text speak for itself. Observing the text in order to establish context must be your primary objective, so let the text itself show you its repeated emphasis.

So often I fear our only reason for being in the Word is subjective—we simply want to get something for ourselves. To look for something that

“ministers to our heart”—or to find a verse we can use to help someone or set someone straight.

How grievous this must be to God, who wants us to truly know Him and to be sanctified (set apart) by truth—and His Word is truth (John 17:17). Therefore, our primary goal—our driving passion—should be to know truth and then adjust our beliefs and our lives accordingly.

Now granted, certain portions of any book you are studying might minister to you more than other portions, but the truth and context never change. The message of the book itself will always be the same. It is truth—absolutes on which you can stake your life, your character, and your life-style.

So first, look at the Word objectively.

Yes, God’s Word will minister to you personally. It will! It’s a living Word. But to discover the context, you must first look at the text objectively to discover the repeated emphasis of the author. Then, when you personalize the Word, you’ll know you are applying it correctly. And that’s imperative.

Now as I say this, I must also caution you not to fail to look at Scripture subjectively as well. When you pause to reflect on what God is saying and how it applies to you, that is when God the Holy Spirit quickens His Word to your heart; that is when you know He has a message especially for you at a specific point in your life.

At the same time that you study the Bible inductively, read it devotionally. By devotionally I mean with a heart that wants to hear what God is saying to you. God speaks to us personally through His Word. Therefore, as you read and as you study, don’t fail to take time to listen to your God.

❁ STEP FIVE ❁

Read with a Purpose

Reading with a purpose is accomplished by asking questions of the text. You must interrogate the text as a detective would a witness.

To get the whole story—all the details—journalists are taught to ask the “5 W’s and an H” (*who, what, when, where, why, and how*) in their reporting.

If you are going to read the Bible with purpose—to get all the details—you must ask the 5 W's and an H. Therefore, as you read, ask...

Who wrote it? *Who* said it? *Who* are the major characters? *Who* are the people mentioned? To *whom* is the author speaking? About *whom* is he speaking?

What are the main events? *What* are the major ideas? *What* are the major teachings? *What* are these people like? *What* does he talk about the most? *What* is his purpose in saying that?

When was it written? *When* did this event take place? *When* will it happen? *When* did he say it? *When* did he do it?

Where was this done? *Where* was this said? *Where* will it happen?

Why was there a need for this to be written? *Why* was this mentioned? *Why* was so much or so little space devoted to this particular event or teaching? *Why* was this reference mentioned? *Why* should they do such and such?

How is it done? *How* did it happen? *How* is this truth illustrated?

When you ask the 5 W's and an H of the text, and when you let the text provide the answers, you'll be amazed at what you learn. These questions are the building blocks of precise observation which, remember, lay a solid foundation for accurate interpretation.

Many times Scripture is simply misinterpreted because the context isn't carefully observed. Accurate answers from the text to the 5 W's and an H kinds of questions will help assure correct interpretation.

Let me illustrate this by simply using one verse:

“After these things Jesus was walking in Galilee; for He was unwilling to walk in Judea because the Jews were seeking to kill Him” (John 7:1).

As we interrogate the text with the 5 W's and an H, we discover that...

“Jesus” answers the question, “*Who* is this about?”

“Was walking” answers the question, “*What* was He doing?”

“In Galilee, not Judea” answers the question, “*Where* was He walking?”

“Because the Jews were seeking to kill Him” tells us, “*Why* was He not in Judea?”

“After these things” tells us, “*When* was this action taking place?”

“*What* things?” The things that took place in the previous verses.

That is how you use the questioning technique of the 5 W’s and an H. And the more you do it, the more it will become a habit, until asking these questions becomes second nature to you as you study God’s awesome book.

Now, and this is important, don’t think you have to find all 5 W’s and an H every time you question a passage, because they’re not always going to be there. For example, the verse above, John 7:1, did not answer an “H” question.

Simply read the text and answer all the 5 W’s and an H questions you can.

Remember, every part of the entire process of inductive Bible study is based on asking who, what, when, where, why, and how kinds of questions. This is how vital the 5 W’s and an H are!

Now, my friend, that you know the principles behind observation, let’s move on to the process of observing the text. As you begin to do this, you’re going to be excited by what you learn. And you’ll probably find yourself saying, “I can’t believe what I’ve seen all by myself!”



