

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

How to Study the Bible



SESSION 4
Observation

NOTICE TO CLT PARTICIPANTS AND EDUCATORS

This is a contract. By using these materials you accept all the terms and conditions of this Agreement. This Agreement covers all Leader's Guides, Student Guides, and instructional resources included in the Continuing Lay Training (CLT) website.

Upon your acceptance of this Agreement, Continuing Lay Training grants to you a nonexclusive license to use these curricular materials provided that you agree to the following:

1. USE OF THE MODULES.

- You may distribute educational materials in electronic form to students or other educational providers.
- You may make and distribute electronic or paper copies to students for the purpose of instruction, as long as each copy contains this Agreement and the same copyright and other proprietary notices pertaining to the Module. If you download the educational materials from the Internet or similar online source, you must include the CLT notice for the Module with any online distribution and on any media you distribute that includes the educational content.
- You may translate, adapt, and/or modify the examples and instructional resources for the purpose of making the instruction culturally relevant to your students. However, you must agree that you will not sell these modified materials without express, written permission from CLT.

2. COPYRIGHT.

The material is owned by CLT and is protected by United States Copyright Law and International Treaty provisions. Except as stated above, this Agreement does not grant you any intellectual property rights in the Module.

3. RESTRICTIONS.

- You may not sell copies of these educational materials in any form except to recover the minimum reproduction cost of electronic media or photocopy expense.
- You may not modify the wording or original intent of the educational material for commercial use.

THANK YOU

Continuing Lay Training would like to thank Clergy Development for granting permission to modify and adapt their course of study materials for our educational purposes. Their willingness to partner with us is sincerely appreciated.

Observation: An Overview

SESSION OVERVIEW

Things to Look for in General

Things to Look for in Bible Stories

Things to Look for in Biblical Poetry

Read, Re-read, Underline

Conclusion

Application

Exam – Session 4

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should be able to:

- recognize how important careful observation of Scripture can be
- make more informed observations of the biblical texts
- list some things you will be looking for as you read Scripture

Observation: An Overview

INTRODUCTION

The second component of effective Bible study is Observation. This is simply a matter of paying close attention to what is going on in the passage we are reading. It requires being alert to the many clues biblical writers have given us about what they intended to communicate. In some ways, we must play the role of a detective who notices things that might otherwise be overlooked.

The task of Observation can be compared to a trip to New York City. The city is filled with so many sights, sounds and smells that a visitor could easily miss some of the most important places in the city. If they do not pay close attention, they could walk right past the Empire State Building, Madison Square Gardens, or even Times Square and not notice.

The same is true of the Bible. We can miss some of the most important things in the Bible unless we develop some skills in Observation. This lesson will help us become more attentive to the text.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN GENERAL



NOTES

Writers used a number of techniques to communicate their message. One most frequently employed by biblical writers was repeated words and ideas. They tended to come back to the same idea several times, often using the very same words. This was not because they did not know what else to say. It was because they wanted make sure they made their point and that people remembered it.

In the ancient world, few people could read or write. So most early believers could not pick up a scroll and read what a prophet had spoken, what Jesus had done, or what Paul had written. In order to help their “readers” hear the word of God, biblical writers frequently repeated their thoughts. If you think you have seen a word or phrase more than once within a particular chapter of the Bible, you are probably right. By underlining or circling those words, you will likely discover what the Bible writer felt was most important.

Another technique used in Scripture is lists. Often Bible writers listed items in order to make their message more memorable. For example, Paul identified the fruits of the Spirit as “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” in Galatians 5:22-23. While these lists can identify several different aspects of an idea, often they were simply meant to clarify the meaning of one idea by using different words. For example, Moses asked what God required of people, and then he proceeded to list five things: “fear God,” “walk in obedience to him,” “love him,” “serve the LORD,” and “observe the LORD’s commands” (Deuteronomy 10:12). These are not five different activities but rather five ways of saying the same thing. This is what loving God with all of one’s heart looks like.

As attentive students of the Bible, we will also want to notice things that are contrasted. This technique of the biblical writers enabled them to heighten the meaning of an idea. For example, Paul stated that “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life” in Romans 6:23. One outcome is earned while the other is given. Paul accentuated the gracious gift of salvation by contrasting it with the idea of earning wages.

One other item to be looking for is conditional sentences. Bible writers frequently used these to point out interdependence between thoughts. For example, in 1 John 1:9, the Apostle John writes, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins.” By setting up the conditional relationship between confession and forgiveness, John clarified their close connection.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN BIBLE STORIES



NOTES

A large portion of the Bible contains stories. While stories in some ways interpret themselves, we can gain a lot more if we remain attentive to the techniques good storytellers typically use. Since biblical writers excelled in relating stories, they spent time carefully developing the settings, characters, and plots of their stories.

The effective study of Bible stories will pay attention to descriptions of the setting, such things as where and when events happen as well as what else is happening at the same time. This is the context in which the biblical author wanted his audience to understand the story. For example, the story of Ruth is introduced with the sentence, “In the days when judges ruled, there was a famine in the land” (1:1). This statement provides information about the time period as well as the immediate circumstances related to the story. From there the storyteller conveys information about geography and the family situation that explain the dilemma of Ruth and Naomi.

In addition to details about the setting, we will also want to take notice of what biblical authors tell us about the characters in their stories. Sometimes they will do this through direct description of actions or characteristics. But more often the personalities of characters come through in dialogue. The Bible regularly lets us listen in on the conversations of characters. Questions that characters ask, in particular, are almost always significant. They often reveal the key point of a story.

In the story of Ruth, we learn about her character mostly by what she says and what others say about her, as well as by what she does. The Bible writer never comments on her integrity or faith, but we hear her say, “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God” (1:16). We also hear the words of Boaz about Ruth, “All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character” (3:11). The Bible writer also tells us how Ruth stayed with her destitute mother-in-law, left her homeland, worked hard in the fields in order to earn food, and eventually married a good man named Boaz.

The third element to observe in stories is the plot, the movement of action toward a climax. By noticing how the action develops with its conflicts, suspense, and resolution, we can gain insight into the purpose of the story. The storyteller sets up the conflict in Ruth’s story immediately by relating the deaths of her father-in-law, her brother-in-law, and her husband. Three widows must try to



survive in a land of famine without a male protector. The move to Bethlehem provides hope but also further suspense. Will anyone help these poor women? The conflict is resolved when Boaz gains permission to marry Ruth and continues the line of descendants that would eventually include David.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN BIBLICAL POETRY



NOTES

About twenty-five percent of the Bible is poetry. Most of this is contained in the latter half of the Old Testament beginning with Job through Malachi. But there are also many other poetic lines elsewhere in Scripture.

We will understand this poetry better if we take notice of the techniques biblical writers employed. Typically they liked to use word patterns, word play, and figures of speech in order to convey messages. They seldom used rhyme like we often do in our poetry. These tools made their messages pleasing to read and memorable but also allowed them to emphasize important points.

Therefore, as we read poetic lines in the Bible, we will want to notice word patterns, such as parallel lines and chiasm. Biblical poets often echoed their key ideas in successive lines, either by repeating, contrasting, or expanding the thought of the first line. They also frequently built up to a point step-by-step and then moved away from it in reverse order. This we call chiasm. Proverbs 12:2 illustrates all three of these elements at work. It reads, “A good man obtains favor from the LORD, but the LORD condemns a crafty man.” The thought in the second line about what the LORD condemns contrasts with the key thought in the first line about what the LORD favors. In addition the two lines are laid out in a chiastic structure. The first line starts with a reference to a certain kind of “man,” then talks about what “the LORD” will do. The second line starts with what “the LORD” will do, then identifies the other kind of “man.”

We will also want to appreciate how biblical poets often begin or end successive lines with the same word or phrase in order to make a point. The first three lines of Psalm 29, for example, read like this: “Ascribe to the LORD, you heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness” (vv. 1-2). The repetition of “Ascribe to the LORD” at the beginning of the first three lines builds intensity to the command to worship God.

Biblical writers also liked to use word pairs that naturally go together, like “sun” and “moon” or “day” and “night” in Psalm 121:6. These convey a sense of completion or wholeness. Biblical poetics used many other kinds of word play that are only evident in the original languages of the Bible. These include alliteration, sound clusters, and puns. Such elements are difficult to translate into another language, so we cannot observe these very easily.

 **NOTES**

One other important feature of biblical poetry to notice is figures of speech like metaphors and similes. These give us pictures of the Bible writer's points so we can visualize what is being said. When these come up, we will need to ponder how one thing is like another. For example, we might consider how God is like a "shepherd" in Psalm 23 or a "rock" in Psalm 62.

READ, RE-READ, UNDERLINE



NOTES

In order to make these observations, we will need to read the passage we are studying several times. We might read it through rapidly at first. Then we should read it slowly, making ourselves pause at each period, comma, and semicolon. We might underline, highlight, or circle things that stick out to us, with different colors, if possible.

Often it is helpful to read a passage in different translations. One translation can alert us to things we may not have noticed in another. It can be helpful to read a passage in a literal translation like the English Standard Version or New American Standard Bible as well as a paraphrase like the Message. Adding a translation or two, like the New International Version or the New King James Version, can provide additional insight as well.

CONCLUSION



NOTES

The kinds of observations we might make about a Bible passage are almost limitless. We have only touched on some of the most important elements. As we become more intentional about developing our skills of observation, we will also discover a deeper richness in the Bible passages. This will allow us to focus on the most important messages and not become distracted by our personal agendas. We certainly do not want to miss God's mission for us because we were only focused on our immediate desires or needs. Studying the Scriptures carefully and fully will lead us into a profound encounter with our Savior and Creator of the Universe. That encounter is well worth all the effort we give it.

APPLICATION

**NOTES**

1. Look at the learner objectives for this session. Can you:
 - recognize how important careful observation of Scripture can be
 - make more informed observations of the biblical texts
 - list some things you will be looking for as you read Scripture
2. Read Psalm 19:7-14 and notice the pattern in each verse. How many different words are used to describe Scripture? How many ways does God's Word impact the life of the psalmist?
3. Reflect on Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37. How does Jesus describe the setting and each character? What are the main components of the plot?

EXAM - SESSION 4



NOTES

1. The reason Observation is so important for Bible study is that it _____.
 - A. helps us focus on the most important things in the Bible
 - B. enables us to appreciate the rich texture of the Bible
 - C. keeps us from missing what the Bible intends to communicate
 - D. all of these
2. A technique that Bible writers often use is _____.
 - A. misspelled words
 - B. encrypted code words
 - C. repeated words and ideas
 - D. sarcasm
3. Biblical writers sought to make their messages memorable because _____.
 - A. people got tired of reading the same story all the time
 - B. few people could actually read or write in biblical times
 - C. people in biblical times had really bad memories
 - D. all of these
4. Things we might notice in Bible stories are _____.
 - A. setting
 - B. characters
 - C. plot
 - D. all of these
5. One of the most common ways for Bible writers to develop personality in the characters of their stories is through _____.
 - A. dialogue
 - B. direct description of their character
 - C. explanations of one character about another
 - D. all of these
6. We should pay close attention to the questions characters ask in Bible stories because they often contain the main point of the story.
 - A. True
 - B. False

**NOTES**

7. Poetic elements that most characterize biblical poetry are:
- A. rhyme
 - B. word patterns
 - C. word play
 - D. figures of speech
 - E. B, C, & D
8. In order to observe closely the features of a Bible passage, we need to _____.
- A. read the Bible passage several times
 - B. mark things that we notice in the Bible passage
 - C. read the Bible passage in different translations
 - D. all of these

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

**NOTES**

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor:

1. Why is the skill of observation so important for studying the Bible?
2. What kinds of things should we look for in most Bible passages?
3. What things should we particularly notice about Bible stories?
4. What are some features of biblical poetry that we can notice when reading?
5. How should we read a Bible passage in order to observe its features?