Introduction

Lesson 4 will guide us through the process of observing a single Bible passage. The process is similar to the macro-observation process we studied in Lesson 3. The major difference is that because we focus on a smaller portion of Scripture, we observe it more closely and ask a few different questions of it in our micro-observation study. Macro-observation gives us a telescopic view of a whole book, and micro-observation gives us a microscopic view of an individual Bible passage.

Macro- and Micro-Observation

After completing Lesson 3 of our Bible Study Basics course you are familiar with the six questions we use to observe a portion of the Bible. But there are some differences as we move to a more in-depth observation of a specific Bible text. The differences are minor, but they matter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scope</th>
<th>Macro-Observation</th>
<th>Micro-Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole book</td>
<td>Individual passage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who</td>
<td>Author and recipient(s)</td>
<td>All characters named in a passage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What</td>
<td>Major idea(s) of the book</td>
<td>Big idea of an individual passage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How</td>
<td>Outline of the book</td>
<td>Structure and/or outline of a specific passage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When</td>
<td>Time the book was written</td>
<td>Timing of events that occur or are mentioned in a passage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where</td>
<td>Are the author and readers?</td>
<td>Describe places mentioned in a passage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why</td>
<td>The book was written</td>
<td>This passage was written</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Historical, Grammatical, Literary, and Cultural Study of a Bible Passage

We use macro- and micro-observation as the first steps in a historical, grammatical, literary, and cultural study of a Bible passage in its context. That approach to Bible study begins with careful observation of a text’s details. And doing micro-observation includes a few more steps than macro-observation.

Historical Study

Each Bible book has a historical setting. But as we explore individual texts within a book, we find that many of these texts have a different historical setting than other texts in the same book. Genesis 12–50, for instance, covers a span of about 350 years and moves us from Mesopotamia to Canaan to Egypt. First and Second Kings records many different historical realities as it tells the stories of Israel’s and Judah’s kings. So as we observe any particular passage in a book we must identify and describe the specific historical details of that passage.

Cultural Study

Observing cultural norms and laws that shaped family structure, community relationships, agrarian practices, pace of life, and Jewish laws and customs is a crucial component to accurate interpretation of a Bible passage.

Literary Study

To do a literary study of a passage we must identify its genre, or literary style. In our macro-observation we note the genre of a book. The poetry books are obviously written as poetry and we correctly assume that narrative books contain narrative and the prophets contain prophecy. But most Bible books contain more than one style of writing and switch from one genre to another without announcing that switch. So in our micro-observation step we have to note the specific genre or genres of any passage we study.
Grammatical Study

We must always observe a passage’s grammar. The Bible is written in language and language is based on grammar. To understand a passage’s meaning we have to identify and explain how the author used nouns, pronouns, adjectives, direct and indirect objects, and other basic grammatical constructions. The more skill we develop in observing specific grammatical details, the better we will be at studying our Bibles.

Key Terms

When we do micro-observation we give special attention to “key terms.” Not all observations “weigh” the same. A term is “key” because it makes an unusually important contribution to accurately interpreting our passage. Terms like, “but,” “therefore,” “that,” “so that,” may be missed when we list our “who, what, where, when, how, why” questions. It is important to note the role these key terms play. Often a term or phrase you identified through your six questions will also be a key term. A term that is repeated or that, in your opinion, the writer uses in a significant way becomes a key term. Include these terms in your list of observations.

How Do We Do Micro-Observation?

When doing a micro-observation on a Bible passage we use the following guidelines to focus our study.

We Must Prepare to Observe a Bible Passage

1. Read the portion of Scripture a number of times. Like we did for a whole Bible book in our macro-study, we read our Bible passage a number of times without taking any notes so we become familiar with that whole text.

1. Prayerfully meditate on the text you are observing. In 1 Corinthians 2:12 Paul informs us, “What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given
Ask God’s Holy Spirit to teach you what’s in the passage you’re studying.

**We Must Concentrate to Observe a Bible Passage**

1. Identify the passage’s genre. It is absolutely essential that we read each passage in a way that conforms to the author’s style of writing. Even though we identify a book’s major genre through macro-observation, we must observe each passage’s genre as well. Even though you may not have the details listed below available for each character, as much as possible.

   - **Narrative** – We focus on the five observation questions so we can interpret the point of the story in each narrative portion of a book.
   - **Epistle** – We read the epistles like we would read a letter. We usually find the author, the recipient(s), and the purpose stated early in the letter. Focus especially on the opening and closing verses. We often discover a great deal about the recipients by carefully observing the issues and questions the letter discusses.
   - **Prophetic** – These books are a combination of narrative stories and proclamations. Most prophetic books include poetic sections as well. The key to reading these prophetic books is to observe when the writer is describing historical facts and when he switches to recording a prophet’s sermons.
   - **Parable** – These stories are found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And it’s crucial that we shift gears when we begin reading one. Matthew, for instance, is telling us something true when he says that Jesus told a parable. BUT what Jesus said inside the parable is a made-up story. We must observe that fact as we read.
   - **Poetry** – The key to reading Hebrew poetry is to understand its parallelism. Poetic verses include lines that work together to create the meaning. The lines in some poetic verses repeat the same idea in different words. In other verses the second line begins with the word *but* and we find the verse’s message in the contrast between the lines. In a third type of parallelism, the second line completes the thought that is started in the first line. As we read Hebrew poetry, we always ask how the
lines in a verse relate to each other.

- Apocalyptic – Found in Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation, this genre presents its message in imagery.

God reveals His future plans through dreams of unreal creatures and strange symbolism, events, and numbers. Because of its indirect manner of revelation these passages are often difficult to navigate.

2. List all persons named or implied in the passage and identify who each pronoun (he, her, you, them, etc.) refers to (the pronoun’s antecedent). Describe the characters in one or two sentences each. Even though you may not have all the details listed below available for each character, as much as possible our description should include:

- Name
- Age – usually a general description like “child,” “adult,” “aged”
- Sex
- Culture
- Religion
- Position (wife, husband, apostle, official, etc.)
- Influence the person has on understanding the purpose and meaning of the text
- Reason the person is in the text
- The specific role the person plays in the text
- Anything else that’s relevant to the person

Identify God’s role in the passage. The Bible tells many stories about people, but the major character in any passage is God. The Bible isn’t just about people, it’s about God’s role in people’s lives.

3. Prioritize all characters in order of the importance of their role in the passage.
4. List any objects or animals named in the passage and define how they relate to the passage's theme.

5. List and describe the significance of any geographical places named in your passage. Include any countries, regions, cities, buildings, or other locations named.

6. List any year, month, time of day, holiday, or feast day listed and describe its significance.

7. State the timing of events in the lives of individuals: early, middle, late, after their death, etc.

8. State where in the book the verse, chapter, paragraph or paragraphs you’re studying occur and describe what significance the location has, if any.

9. Any of this information we can’t find in our immediate passage or in our macro-study of the book we should find in whatever study tools we have available:
   - Other books in the Bible
   - Online or library resources
   - Concordance
   - Bible dictionary
   - Bible encyclopedia
   - Bible handbooks
   - Old or New Testament introductions
   - Commentaries

10. Summarize the passage’s meaning or idea in a single sentence.
11. Explain what the passage contributes to the book’s theme or purpose in one paragraph.

Conclusion

An important note to remember is that not every passage will contain all of this information. You are checking your passage to find as much of it as possible, but don’t try to “fill in the blanks” of this micro-observation step every time you study a passage of Scripture.

When you finish the macro- and micro-observation steps you will have thoroughly observed your text and constructed a working knowledge of its details. You are now ready to prayerfully move to the Interpretation step of Bible study. Completing the observation steps takes by far the most time in our Bible study. But the more time we invest here, the better equipped we are to interpret and apply what God actually said when He inspired His human authors to record His divine messages to us.