

**Observation** is not just seeing but perceiving what one sees, so that one becomes mentally aware of what one observes. We live in a fast paced society and honing the vital skill of observation is not the natural inclination for most of us. We want answers fast (How many times have you heard someone say "Just Google it"? ) and are loathe to linger too long observing a section of Scripture. But frankly, what better object to linger upon lovingly and long, than the eternal Word of Truth, the very revelation from the Creator to His creatures! We dare not let His precious Word "bore" us! And so we need to learn and practice the art of observation for as **Yogi Berra** once said...

***You can see a lot just by looking.***

The Bible is unlike any other book for it is essentially a "love letter" from God to mankind. Stop for a moment and ponder this awesome truth. You have probably received a letter from your sweetheart when you were dating or courting. Do you remember how you responded when you received that letter? First, you were eagerly anticipating it. And when it did come, you blocked out everything, opened the envelope and devoured every word, every nuance, every innuendo, as you read the letter from your

beloved...and you read it not just once but over and over and over. You were far more focused on observing and interpreting what the the love of your life had written. Is not this the approach we should take to "the letter" called the Bible written by the One Who "demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Ro 5:8)?

## **TWO PREREQUISITES For Productive Inductive Bible Study**

- (1) Willingness to slow down
- (2) Desire to carefully observe what the passage is literally saying unbiased by prior experience

**A T Pierson** a well known 19th century preacher once wrote this comment regarding a passage he was studying, "When I read this passage for the 100th time, the following idea came to me...."

So here we see this great seasoned student of the Scripture saying "I've got to read it repeatedly and the more I read it the more I observe." That's the genius of the Word of God and why it is unlike any other book.

## **BEGIN WITH PRAYER**

Begin with and maintain an attitude of prayer. Go to the Author of the Book before you go to the Book. And think about this - **How many books have you ever read where you had the benefit of the author's presence to help you discern his original intent?!**

The Bible is not men's truth but God's special revelation of Truth. We must always begin by conversing with the Author, beseeching Him to open the eyes of our heart to see, understand (put together the pieces so to speak) and illuminate His supernatural "love letter" to us (see Col 1:9, 10, 11f, Ps 119:105, Ep 1:17; Ep 1:18, 19).

The psalmist recognized his dependence on the God of the Word for illumination of the Word of God and cried out

**"Open my eyes, that I may behold  
wonderful things from Thy law."  
(Ps 119:18)**

**R. W. Dale** noted that "study without prayer is atheism, and prayer without study is presumption."

**Luke** teaches that after His resurrection Jesus **opened** [His disciples'] minds to **understand** the Scriptures. (Lk 24:45, 44, 46, 47, 48, 49, Ex 4:11)

Here Luke uses the Greek word for **understand** which describes the assembling of individual facts into an organized whole, as collecting the pieces of a puzzle and putting them together.

**Martin Luther** wrote the following on our desperate need for prayer when we study God's Word...

You should completely despair of your own sense and reason, for by these you will not attain the goal...Rather kneel down in your private little room and with sincere humility and earnestness pray God through His dear Son, graciously to grant you His Holy Spirit to enlighten and guide you and give you understanding...

As you begin your inductive adventure through the Bible, may a determined effort to stick close to the Author with an attitude of prayer.

## ESTABLISH THE CONTEXT

Begin your study by careful **observation** with the goal being to establish the context which will lay the foundation for accurate **interpretation**. Accurate interpretation is almost certain to be compromised if one fails to carry out careful (accurate) observation. The English word "context" is derived from two words, **con** = with and **texo** = to weave. Thus even the derivation gives us a picture of the value of context in accurate interpretation -- it "weaves" the text together in an orderly, logical flow, a flow inspired by God intended to convey His message.

**Context** is the setting in which a passage occurs or simply what precedes and what follows the **text** you are studying. Thus **context** includes those verses immediately before and after the passage, then the paragraph and book in which the passage appears, then other books by this author, as well as the overall message of the entire Bible. Picture a set of concentric circles with the text you are observing in the center and surrounded by the next circle which is the paragraph or subdivision in which that text "lives." Next, you encounter the "circle" of the book in which that text is found and finally the "circle"



of the entire Bible. Never observe a passage without looking at the "circles", especially the immediate paragraph, which means you need to not rush, but be willing to take a moment and do some more reading. (see Interpretation).

**Establishing the context** forces the reader to examine the biblical writer's overall flow of thought. The meaning of any passage is nearly always determined, controlled, or limited by what appears immediately beforehand and afterward in the text. Context is "king" in interpretation. Since context always "rules" in interpretation and Scripture must always be interpreted in light of its context, the first step in the study of any book of the Bible is to get an **OVERVIEW** of the book you are studying. Why? Because when you get an **overview** of the entire book, it will help you discover the **context**.

Everything in a given book must be considered and analyzed within its setting, which means we can never isolate one verse or portion of the book from the rest of what is written. Setting is context and context is central if you are to arrive at a correct understanding of the text.

**Two other sources of context** to always consider and which may shed significant light on the understanding of a passage are the **cultural** environment when the passage was written and the **historical** when the passage was written (e.g., what does the text teach about what it was like to be a believer in that specific culture and how does that influence what the author is writing in a specific book).

Most misinterpretation (and subsequently misapplication) of Scripture is the result of taking the text out of its proper context. So the first task is to carefully observe the passage to establish the context. The natural tendency for most of us is to take a verse or verses out of context in order to support some point of view that we espouse or favor. This is called "proof-texting" and represents our attempt to make the Bible say what we want it to say or what we want to hear, rather than letting the Scripture say what God intended the passage to communicate. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that the most common failure in interpretation is to violate basic principle of allowing context to control how the passage is interpreted.

**If context is so important, how does a person proceed to establish the context?**

The simple answer is that one needs to read, re-read and carefully observe the text for repeated facts and truths. As one observes what is said, giving special attention to repeated words, phrases, or ideas, he or she should begin to understand the context.

**It sounds easy doesn't it?**

But careful observation is "easier said than done" for we live in a society which continually promulgates "instant gratification" and the "natural" approach to studying Scripture is to want to know immediately "What is in it for me?" or "How can this passage benefit me?" That's why one of the main prerequisites to productive inductive study is a willingness to slow down and to observe carefully.

Since most of us don't really know the **basic principles of observation**, we may read through the chapter or book without truly "observing" the text. How many times have you read a chapter in the morning and by noon you can barely remember what you read? The Bible is meant to be bread for daily use, not cake for special occasions. We must approach God's Word as if our lives depended on

it--because they do (cp Deut 32:46, 46, Job 23:10, 11, 12-Job 23:10, Joshua 1:8-note). Be encouraged beloved for you will find that if you persevere in this critical stage of inductive study, the passage will begin to open up to you as never before.

So from a practical standpoint, how should you begin to establish the context? Simply reading and re-reading a text could become very boring and non-productive. So let's look at some basic principles that will help us achieve our goal of determining the context...

- First, read the text with the goal of looking for the things that are OBVIOUS.
- PEOPLE, PLACES, and EVENTS are the most obvious facts. In the epistles observation of the facts about the author and the recipients is a good place to begin to establish context.
- As you read through the text observe the facts that are obvious by virtue of being REPEATED.
- After you read through these notes on establishing context, take some time to practice establishing the context of a single chapter.

Have you ever put together a jigsaw puzzle? How do you usually begin? Which pieces do you try to find first? Don't you look carefully for the most obvious pieces, the corner pieces. Which pieces do you try to identify next? The next most obvious pieces are those with straight edges. Can you see how this analogy relates to the study of a book of the Bible? Once you have connected all these puzzle pieces together, you have a framework or "**context**" in which to place the less obvious pieces of the puzzle. You will find that by beginning to observe the obvious, then the things within a book that are not easy to see or understand will eventually become clearer, "rising" to the surface even as you focus on those things that are obvious. And as you begin to grasp the context of the book, it will help you in your interpretation of the difficult, unclear or obscure parts of the book. But even as you have to invest some time to find the obvious pieces to establish the context of the puzzle, so too

you will usually need to read a book or chapter several times in order to begin to see the context and to begin to understand what the author is repeating or emphasizing.

**So remember, in your initial study of a passage, chapter or book...**

## "Focus On The Obvious"

Read through the book or chapter you are studying, observing for the **obvious** facts, details, events or ideas, those things which are usually repeated. As already stated, the three things that are usually most obvious and easiest to see are **people, places and events**. Please do not be distracted by minute details, by verses you do not understand or by your favorite passage. Remember that you are attempting to establish the **context** and you do so by observing and marking the most obvious facts. Let the acronym **F.O.T.O.** be your watchword as you begin to study any passage, chapter or book. Resist the temptation to look at the study notes of you Bible, especially if the passage is unclear. You do not want to spoil the priceless joy of self-discovery.

Remember that once you begin to observe and identify the **OBVIOUS** facts, then those facts and truths that are not as easy to see or understand will begin to become clearer, "rising to the surface" so to speak. Please do not be discouraged or frustrated, for if you persevere in reading and re-reading the text with a specific purpose (e.g. "What does this section say about the author?"), you are in the process of establishing the **CONTEXT** and this background will aid and guide your interpretation of the difficult, unclear or obscure passages.

As you begin your journey in inductive Bible study, seek to have the mindset of an **explorer** searching diligently for priceless, hidden treasures ([Ps 119:127](#), [Ps 19:10](#)).

If we do not carefully observe the Bible noting "what it says", taking time to carefully establish the context, we may misunderstand "what it really means" and worst of all we may misapply our misunderstanding with potentially calamitous results.

## MARK KEY WORDS & PHRASES

What are **key words** or **key phrases**? Think about the keys to your car or house. What is their purpose? What happens when you misplace them? By analogy, in simple terms **key words** or **phrases** function like keys to help the reader "unlock" the meaning of a passage, a paragraph, a chapter or a book.

**How do we go about identifying these crucial words and phrases?** First, we need to understand a few more details about the "keys" and then we can take "action".

Similar or recurring ideas and words will guide you to the author's main idea. The study of key words and phrases will help you discover the author's logic and flow of ideas. In other words, as you observe

key words/phrases you will begin to understand the author's intended message or purpose (and how he will accomplish his purpose.) Don't become frustrated at this point. Remember that you are reading and re-reading in order to establish the context (which is crucial for arriving at an accurate interpretation). The process of identifying, marking and interrogating the key words/phrases is vital in order for you to firmly grasp the context. After several readings of a section focusing on author, recipient (these first two are only found in epistles), key words and key phrases, you will begin to understand what the **main subject(s)** are, which in turn will reveal the **theme** (unifying idea repeated or developed throughout a work) of the chapter or book you are observing.

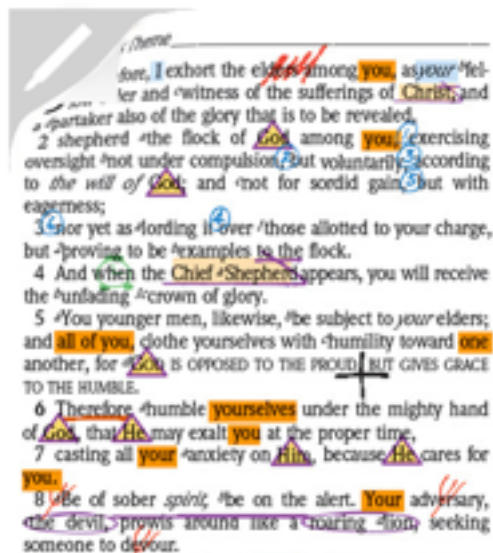
KEY WORDS & PHRASES	ACTION POINT - WHAT DO I DO?
Are usually identified by the fact that they are repeated	Read the text taking special note of those words or phrases which the author uses repeatedly (e.g., What is repeated in Proverbs 118 times in 915 verses and at least once in every chapter?)
Are vital to the understanding of the text and cannot be removed without leaving the passage devoid of meaning.	Applying the "rule of removal" helps determine whether a repeated word is truly a key word. If you can remove it from the text, it is not a key word and is not crucial to the overall meaning of that passage, chapter, etc.
May include pronouns, synonyms, closely related phrases	Be alert to the fact that the author may use synonymous words or phrases in lieu of the more obvious key word or phrase and these synonyms can be subtle and more difficult to identify, especially in the initial reading of a passage. In general, the more one reads a given passage, the more obvious the subtle synonyms will become!
May be key only in a paragraph, in a chapter or throughout the entire book	For example you may identify a key word/phrase in one chapter which may not be found anywhere else in the book. In that case it is key for that chapter and serves to help understand the main point of the chapter. Another chapter will have a different key because the main point is different. Does that make sense?
Always answer one or more of the <b>5W/H</b> questions.	Always pause and ask as many of the <b>5W/H</b> questions as common sense and context allow. Do not panic if you cannot ask all 6 questions. The skill of asking questions of the text takes practice, but is one of the most fruitful skills you can develop. Never read Scripture without asking one or more of the <b>5W/H</b> questions. In time you this questioning mindset will be "second nature."
Should be marked in a unique way using symbols and/or colors.	Pause and place a symbol (+/- color) over the key (see next section) to aid it's identification and to get a sense of its relationship to the section as a whole. Mark this same key word the same throughout your Bible.
Often form the basis for making a list.	In the margin of your observation worksheet, make a list of the truths you glean by interrogating the key words or phrases.



**Mark** each "key word" in a distinctive way, using **symbols** and/or **color coding**. Once you determine a symbol for the key word or phrase, it will be helpful to use this marking system throughout your Bible to facilitate quick recognition.

Here are some examples of how you might mark some common **key words** (place **symbol** over the key word):

KEY WORD	COLOR	SYMBOL
GOD or LORD	Purple	Triangle
JESUS, CHRIST	Red	Cross
HOLY SPIRIT	Blue	Dove
TIME PHRASES	Green	Clock
GOSPEL	Red	Megaphone



## WHY MARK AND/OR COLOR THE TEXT?

**Marking** helps make the Scriptures your own because it helps remember the text. As discussed elsewhere, as a general rule we recall 10% of what we read, 20% of what we hear and 50% of what we read, hear and see. In addition (as with all of the Inductive "techniques") marking the text tends to slow us down, which is our desperate need. Marking in a sense helps us "be still" (Ps 46:10KJV) so that we might hear the still, small voice of the Spirit of the Lord speaking to us personally through the Holy Scriptures (1Ki 19:12KJV).

**Marking** allows one to quickly scan the page and see the key words that are emphasized in that section. Use the same symbols for key words from Genesis to Revelation as this will facilitate recognition throughout the Scriptures.

Avoid the temptation to "speed read" a passage and seeking to mechanically mark each occurrence of a **key word** (or reference to Author or Recipient if you are reading an epistle).

And don't forget that each encounter with a **key word** (fact about author or recipient) should stimulate a **5W's and H** question (next section). **Why** is this used here? **How** does it impact the flow of thought? **Who** does this relate to? **When** did this occur?, etc. The more you practice this valuable skill, the more "sophisticated" your questions will become and the more profound will be the insights that the Spirit illuminates. And don't worry, for you can never run out of questions for the Word of God because it is a living Word!

As you seek to establish the context of the chapter or book, continually reading with a "marking, interrogating mindset", you will find yourself engaging more and more in active (versus passive) reading. Active reading not only stimulates your thinking and interaction with the text, it also slows you down. Active reading engages you in conversation with the Author. In a sense, by reading actively you are practicing the essence of the all but lost art of **meditation** on the Scriptures. Yes, marking and interrogating will slow you down somewhat, but you will gain so much more from the passage than if you had simply read through it in obedience to your "read through the Bible in a year" schedule.

Don't try to identify, mark and interrogate every **"key word"** in the first reading of a paragraph, chapter or book. A recommended approach is to read through a section marking and interrogating a single **key word**. Then read through the same chapter again and mark another key word. To reiterate, "God", "Jesus", "Christ", "Lord" and "Spirit" are always "key words" and therefore should generally always be marked, unless they are so concentrated that marking them would make it difficult to see other key words in the text.

As you read and reread a chapter making observations on the key words, you will notice that you are beginning to understand and establish the **context**, which as "king" in the interpretation.

## THE "5W'S & H" - INTERROGATE

**Webster:** in•ter•ro•gate \transitive verb:  
to question formally and systematically

The Bible is not like any other book, for as believers we possess within ourselves the Holy Spirit, the Author of the Book. And thus as we prayerfully, humbly, thoughtfully, meditatively, yea even as a little child interrogate the "living and active" **Word of Truth** (Ps 119:43, 2Co 6:7, Col 1:5, 2Ti 2:15, James 1:18, see also Jn 8:31,32, 17:17), our Teacher, the Spirit, in some very real (albeit to me still mysterious) way interacts with us, illuminating the inspired Word and leading us into all Truth, even as Jesus promised (John 16:13, Jn 14:16, 26, 15:26, 16:7 1Jn 2:20,27).

### THE 5W/H QUESTIONS:

#### Who? Where? Why? When? What? How?

The more you practice interrogating the text, the more the text will be opened to you by the illuminating ministry of the Spirit. Below are some suggestive questions, but remember to allow the text (and especially the context) to guide your specific questions...

**Who** is speaking? To **whom** and/or about **whom** is he speaking? **Who** are the main characters? **Who** is mentioned in the book (Why? What do we learn about them?) (In the epistles ask) **Who** is writing (author)? **Who** receiving?

**Where** did (or will) this happen (Why? When?)? **Where** was this said/written (where is the author) (Why?)?

**Why** was this written (What purpose?)? **Why** is this said? **Why** is he there?

**When** is this written (When in Biblical history - where on the timeline? When in the author's life)? **When** did/will this happen? **When** did he say/do it?

**What** is the author doing? **What** are the main events? **What** are the circumstances? **What** is the historical/cultural setting (as determined from the text)? **What** is the main subject of the chapter/book?

**How** will/did something happen? **How** is the truth illustrated?

Do not panic if you cannot ask every **5W/H** question. And remember that these questions should be asked not only when you encounter **key words** or

**key phrases**, but every time you identify one of the other Observation "**code words**" -- **Contrast**, **Conclusion** (and **terms of explanation** such as "**for**"), **Comparison**, **Chronology** (time phrase), etc. Every encounter with one of these "**code words**" is an opportunity to hone (sharpen) your skills of observation. Yes, it does take time and practice to train yourself to employ this "questioning mindset." (As an aside, questioning the text does not mean that one questions the inerrancy, plenary inspiration or authority of God's Holy Word!).

**Learning to interrogate the Scripture with the 5W/H questions yields a number of dividends such as...**

# 1

It will force you to slow down and will "counteract" the tendency to "speed read" the Bible. This travesty is especially common when one falls behind schedule on their "Through the Bible in a Year" reading program! Here is a little test you can perform today.

Assuming you began today with the "breakfast of champions", the pure milk of God's Word (1Pe 2:2), ask yourself several times during the day, "What did I read this morning? What did it teach me about God? What did it say about me? How have I applied this Truth?" Beloved, God's desire is that His book be our real time instruction manual for living, whether we are at home, at school or at work!

# 2

It will engage your heart and mind with the text (and especially the Author of the text), forcing you to to read **actively**, more like an "**explorer**," rather than **passively** like a "**tourist**". The old adage "Stop and smell the roses" surely applies to acquisitively taking in the beauty of all of our

Father's "good words" ([Joshua 23:14](#), [21:45](#)).

# 3

It will create a "meditative mindset", as you pause and ponder the passages, chewing them like a cow chews cud, mulling them over in your mind, constantly seeking to ask the probing 5W/H questions. You will begin to gain insights into the Scriptures that you simply could not have been gleaned from a superficial, passive, unengaged reading of the Holy Word. You will begin to experience the joy of self discovery as your Teacher, the Spirit, illuminates and applies God's Truth to your life. In a very real sense, you will be

learning how to meditate on the Holy Scriptures, a discipline which God promises to greatly bless (Read His promises which are applicable *to you* in Psalm 1:1, Psalm 1:2, Psalm 1:3 and Joshua 1:8).

**We interpret the Bible properly when we learn to ask the right questions of the text.** The problem is that many people do not know the "right questions" to ask or are either too lazy or too rushed to practice them! Imagine if God were to beckon you to come into His presence. Would you want to leave or would you linger? In His living and abiding Word, the Father has called us into His very presence, into communion with Himself, through the ministry of His Spirit and His Son, our Great High Priest, the Incarnate Word. May this transcendent truth motivate in all of us a continual "Mary like" attitude, so that we too would sit quietly at our Master's feet, lingering, listening, and learning the **one thing** that is really **necessary** (Lk 10:38 [39](#) [40](#) [41](#) [42](#))!

Learning to ask the right questions, to discern the answers and to carefully observe the text demands discipline, diligence and doing ("Just do it!"). If I were the Devil, that one who does not stand in the Truth (Jn [8:44](#)), I would do everything I could to discourage the saints from learning now to carefully observe the Word of Truth for themselves, for fear that they might become equipped to fend off the fiery missiles of deceit filled lies leading to doubt, discouragement and despair. Had Eve been a better "inductive student", one wonders how events would have progressed on that fateful day in the Garden when our Adversary hissed those words calculated to generate doubt "Yea, *hath God said...*?" (Ge [3:1](#)). So dear saint, let me encourage you to persevere in practicing the principles of Inductive Bible Study, for the reward you will experience in personal discovery and penetrating understanding of the Word of Life will eternally far outweigh your investment of time today (Ep [5:16](#)KJV-note, [1Ti](#) [4:7](#), [8](#)-note)!

In short, the importance of a questioning mindset cannot be overemphasized as the answers to the 5W/H questions form the basis for every aspect of Inductive Bible Study - astute observation, accurate interpretation and appropriate application.

**Warren Wiersbe** phrased it this way...

If we speak to the Lord about the Word, the Word will speak to us about the Lord!

**If you don't talk to your Bible,  
your Bible isn't likely to talk to you!**

Most students of Scripture do not see the "gold nuggets" of truth in passages and paragraphs, because they do not know **what to look for**. One way you will learn what to look for is by **asking the right questions**. Questions will bring details to our attention. The following story from the secular classroom setting illustrates this point.

## PROFESSOR AGASSIZ'S INDUCTIVE TEACHING STYLE

The essence of the inductive method was aptly illustrated by the experience of a student at Harvard who took a zoology course under professor **Louis Agassiz**, the renowned nineteenth-century naturalist. For the assignment Agassiz gave the student a pickled fish, a haemulon, which was to be the sole source of his observations over the next several days. For three full days the student observed the haemulon in order to gain a thorough understanding of the fish. And what did Professor Agassiz's advise him to do?

### LOOK! LOOK! LOOK!

How else would the student master his subject? He was also instructed to draw out what he saw for as Agassiz reminded him **"THE PENCIL IS ONE OF THE BEST EYES."**

Finally, he was instructed to recognize the parts of the haemulon in their orderly arrangement and relations to each other, for *"facts are stupid things until brought into connection with some general law."*

Was Agassiz's inductive method successfully inculcated into his student? By the student's own testimony "To this day, if I attempt [to draw] a fish I can draw nothing but haemulons."

The ability to correctly observe is a skill which must be perfected by practice and perseverance as illustrated in this true "fish story."

***As an interesting aside, this renowned Harvard scientist steadfastly (his entire life) resisted the propagation of Charles Darwin's theories on evolution! May his tribe increase. Amen! (Louis Agassiz - Short Biography).***

## OBSERVE CONNECTING WORDS

Small words, big blessings! **Connecting words** (conjunctions) join clauses, passages, paragraphs and chapters, linking the writer's train of thought into a cohesive unit. Someone has said that "conjunctions are important gap-fillers, the cartilage at the joints of speech." These small but vital connectors include words and phrases such as **therefore, for, because, since, as a result, so, so that, at that time, then, now, when, for this reason, etc.** Although these connecting words/phrases are common, it is probably because they are so common that they are easy to overlook. However, once your eye is trained to recognize them, they function like "**keys**" which serve to unlock and shed light on the meaning of a passage, paragraph or chapter. Proper utilization of most of these connecting words will force you to examine the **context**, which is always valuable to enhance the accuracy of one's interpretation! I would be so bold as to say that if you learned to observe and interrogate even just one term (e.g., the conjunction "**for**"), it would radically change the way you read ALL of God's Word (because there are over 9000 uses of **for** throughout the Bible)!

While there can be overlap in the meaning of these three **terms**, below are the general descriptions of each group, with a Scriptural **example** and a sample **question** prompted by use of that term. Before you look at the sample **question**, practice interrogating the passage yourself (your question may be much better than the one recorded!).

**(1) Terms of conclusion (inference) = Synonyms = Therefore, So, For this reason, So then, etc**

- (a) Identifies a logical consequence or conclusion
- (b) Identifies a statement which summarizes what was previously stated
- (c) Identifies a deduction from (usually previously stated) facts, propositions, experience, reasoning, etc
- (d) Sums up a preceding argument.

**Ex:** "**Therefore** do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts." ([Ro 6:12](#)).

**Question:** Why does Paul conclude that one should not let sin reign in their mortal body? To answer you will be forced to review the prior verse [Ro 6:11](#) and even the prior section [Ro 6:1-10](#) (the foundational facts that allow Paul to issue the command in [Ro 6:11](#))

**(2) Terms of explanation = For, Because** (for the reason explained next), some uses of **since** (e.g., [Dt 15:4](#), [16](#), [Heb 13:3](#))

- (a) Give the reason for something, making it plain or understandable
- (b) Give reasons why it is true or why it occurred
- (c) Used to express cause, to explain (to give the reason for or cause of)
- (d) Simply adds additional information.
- (e) **HINT** -- A rule of thumb is that if you can substitute the word "**because**" in place of a "**for**," that is good support that the **for** is functioning as a **term of explanation**.

**Ex:** "**For** I am not ashamed of the Gospel, **for** it is the power of God **for** (notice this "for" is used as a preposition, not a conjunction and thus not a term of explanation) salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." ([Ro 1:16](#))

**Question:** What is Paul explaining? Why is Paul not ashamed of the Gospel? What effect does this have on Paul? How does this impact Paul's boldness to proclaim the Gospel? (See [Ro 1:15](#)).

**Ex:** "**For** God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ([Genesis 3:5](#))

**Question:** Who is speaking? To whom is he speaking? What is he explaining? What is he arguing? What is his goal? Is his explanation truthful? **Comment:** Notice how focusing on only one **for** prompts a veritable barrage of questions and greatly increases our insight into this important passage!

**(3) Terms of purpose/result = So that, In order that, That** (Not all uses of "**that**" but often those at the beginning of a sentence or clause)

- (a) Indicates the intended goal of an idea or action.
- (b) Indicates the end; effect; aim; design; consequence, good or bad.
- (c) The reason for which something is done.
- (d) So that = for the purpose of ([1Cor 10:33](#))

**Ex:** For (term of explanation) I long to see you **so that** I may impart some spiritual gift to you, **that** you may be established. ([Ro 1:11](#))

**Question:** What is the purpose of Paul's longing to see the saints in Rome? What is the purpose of his imparting a spiritual gift to them?



Terms of Conclusion	Therefore, For this reason, So then
Terms of Explanation	For, Because, Now
Terms of Purpose or Result	So that, In order that, In order to, That, Then, Therefore, Thus
Terms of Comparison	As, Also, Just as, Like, Likewise, More, More than, So as, So also, Too
Terms of Continuation	And, Either, Neither, Nor, Or
Terms of Contrast	Although, But, Except, Even though, However, Much more, Nevertheless, Only, Otherwise, Whereas, Yet
Terms of Emphasis	Indeed, Only
Terms of Location or Position	At, In, On, Over, Where, Wherever
Expressions of Time	After, As, Before, Now, Then, Until, When, While

Train your eye to observe the text carefully for these strategic words. Consider marking them in some distinctive manner (underlining, boxing, using a symbol). What is the likelihood of encountering one of these terms in a chapter or paragraph? If you have ever rock climbed, you know that you are observing carefully for a ledge, outcropping, crack or crevice which you can grasp or in which you can plant your foot. The goal is to keep moving upward. How careful do you think you would be if you were several stories high on a large rock? The answer is obvious...very careful! While the analogy is imperfect, the rock climber's observations clearly determine the outcome of the outing (going up or down!). What would happen to our observation skills in reading the Scripture, if we approached the text like rock climbers, observing carefully for these

strategic terms (conclusion, explanation, purpose/result)? Clearly each encounter could increase our level of understanding, firmly grounding us on the truth. And as we train our eyes to spot these strategic terms, we also begin to train our minds to ask as many of the 5W/H type questions as we can muster. The more skilled rock climbers becomes at identifying strategic rocks, cracks and crevices, the higher they are able to ascend. In the same way, as we practice and become proficient at observing and questioning these strategic Scriptural terms (of conclusion, explanation, purpose/result), we will be enabled (by our ever present Teacher the Spirit of course) to probe deeper into the meaning of a passage, paragraph, chapter or book. And over time observation for these terms will become our reflex response.

## FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

### "A picture is worth a thousand words."

**Figures of speech** ("picture talk") are colorful expressions used for literary effect which may be a word or a phrase that departs from straightforward, literal language. Figures of speech are used for emphasis, freshness of expression or clarity. However, clarity may suffer if the figure is not properly interpreted. A picture can be worth a thousand words, unless we let our imagination run wild and come up with a thousand possible interpretations! Remember that all Scripture has a single intended meaning. Note how much more vivid the description of the **wicked** man is when linked with a picturesque simile...

*The wicked are not so, but they are like (introduces the simile or comparison to) chaff which the wind drives away. (Psalm 1:4)*

To the student trained in the art of observation, it is readily apparent that this passage calls for several interactions and interrogations, all of which serve to slow you down, to actively engage your mind (and heart) with the text (and ultimately the Author of the text) and to aid personal (self) discovery of precious pearls of wisdom in the passage (cp Pr 2:3-5 6-8).

**Clinton Lockhart** (Principles of Interpretation, 1915) has a simple rule for determining what is **literal** and what is **figurative** language in the Bible...

If the **literal** meaning of any word or expression makes good sense in its connections, it is literal; but if the literal meaning does not make good sense, it is **figurative**....Since the **literal** is the most usual signification of a word, and therefore occurs much more frequently than the **figurative**, any term should be regarded as literal until there is good reason for a different understanding.

**Robertson McQuilkin** explains that...

Figurative language refers to any words that are used with a meaning other than their common, literal sense. When **dog** is used of a human being (e.g., [Php 3:2](#)), the ordinary, literal designation of an animal is not intended... All human languages are filled with talk that is not literal, but Eastern languages are especially full of **figures of speech**. Since those languages are foreign to us, that is all the more reason to work hard at understanding exactly what the author had in mind. There is the hurdle of distance in language and culture, and there is also the hurdle of figurative language. Consider the plight of a foreigner seeking to understand the English word hang. A literal definition is easy to come by, but what is he to think when he hears, as a foreigner, that he has many hang-ups; that he should indeed hang loose and allow his true feelings to hang out? If he searches out those idioms carefully, he still may be at a loss to know why someone is absent because of a hangover, or when he is told, in spite of all the obstacles to understanding, that he should not only hang on, but hang in there....

Picture talk is one of the greatest problems of interpretation. To treat figurative language as if it were literal and to treat literal language as if it were figurative, constitute two of the greatest hindrances to understanding the meaning of the Bible (Robertson McQuilkin - Understanding and Applying the Bible)

In other words, while figures of speech can be enlightening, they can also be misleading if one mishandles them and uses them as an excuse to look for "hidden meanings" (See Discussion of **allegorizing** in section on Literal Interpretation) As

discussed more in the section on interpretation, we must assiduously avoid all attempts to "go behind" the text. Instead, our continual quest should be to seek to carefully observe and accurately interpret what God's penman meant by what he wrote, for all Scripture has only one correct interpretation.

**Roy Zuck** gives a number of advantages of **figures of speech**...

- (1) **Figures of Speech Add Color or Vividness**
- (2) **Figures of Speech Attract Attention**
- (3) **Figures of Speech Make Abstract or Intellectual Ideas More Concrete**
- (4) **Figures of Speech Aid in Retention**
- (5) **Figures of Speech Abbreviate an Idea**
- (6) **Figures of Speech Encourage Reflection**

It is also important to remember that figures of speech although "figurative" are always intended to convey literal truth. As discussed below the **literal meaning** of a **figure of speech** is critically dependent on an analysis of the **context** in which it is used. Let's take a non-Biblical example of the figurative use of a word like "crown". If someone declares "I am going to crown you" the literal meaning of this figurative use will depend on the **context**. And so it could mean:

Below are several rules to keep in mind when evaluating figurative...

- 1) **Clearly, one rule of thumb is to always read the passage for its literal sense unless there is some good reason not to.**
- 2) **Some passages use language that clearly identifies the use of a figure of speech.**
- 3) **In some passages a literal interpretation makes absolutely no sense, thus forcing the reader to interpret it as a figure of speech.**
- 4) **It should also come as no surprise that when you are "figuring out the figurative", one of your best guides is the context.**