



HOW TO
STUDY YOUR

BIBBLE

A RESOURCE FOR WOMEN

STUDY GUIDE #1: OBSERVATION



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Overview of Study Guide #1
- Lesson 1
- Lesson 2
- Lesson 3
- Lesson 4
- Observation Practice

OVERVIEW:

Observation: What Does the Text Say?

Before interpretation or application, the first and most important question to ask is: **What does the text actually say?**

This step is all about gathering the facts—just the facts! Be curious. Be slow. Be thorough.

How to Observe Well

- Pray first – Ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to see God’s truth.
- Read, read and read again – Repetition increases clarity.
- Ask the 5 W’s – Who? What? When? Where? Why? (and sometimes How?)
- Identify the genre – Is this passage a narrative, law, poetry, epistle, etc.?
- Mark it up – Make lists. Circle repeated words. Note tone, commands, contrasts, and promises.

Word of Caution

It’s tempting to rush through observation or skip it altogether, but interpretive dangers await the impatient reader. **Shallow observation leads to sloppy interpretation.** Don’t miss what God is saying because you skimmed too quickly.

Helpful Hints

- Visual learner? Grab some highlighters or a Scripture journal to color-code and annotate.
- Short on time? Listen to the passage on audio as you drive, walk or clean.
- Key reminder: The more you read, the more you’ll notice. Repetition leads to revelation.

YOU TRY!

Exercise #1: Read *Philippians 4:10-13* and make a list of **25 observations**.

- Don’t interpret. Just observe.
- What do you see? Who is speaking? What words are repeated? What ideas are emphasized?
- Use the Study Tools Guide if you need extra help.



LESSON 1: THE METHOD

Observation: Where to Begin

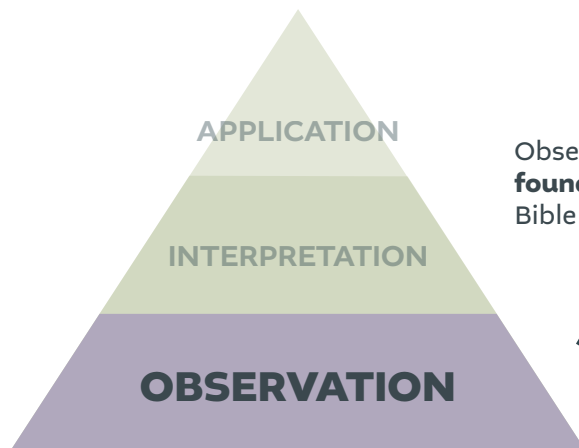


Step 1: Observation

Observation is the careful reading and examination of a passage to discover exactly what it says—pulling out the facts (and only the facts).

Watch:

[This video](#) offers a simple example of how observation works in action.



Observation is a critically **foundational step** in effective Bible study.

The Importance of Observation

When observation is rushed or undervalued, interpretation often slips into our own opinions, feelings, or experiences—opening the door to multiple, subjective meanings. And when that happens, we risk missing or even denying the absolute truth found in God’s Word.

REFLECTION QUESTION:

Do you truly believe the Bible is the very Word of God?

Reread **Psalm 19:7-14**, and spend some time praying for a deeper conviction and commitment to the authority of Scripture.





The Purpose of Observation

The goal of observation is to discover the author's original meaning to the original audience.

Every book of the Bible was written by real people, inspired by the Holy Spirit, in real times, facing real circumstances, in a very real world. As we study Scripture, our aim is to understand what the author intended to communicate to those first hearers—before we apply it to ourselves.

Will this take time? Absolutely.

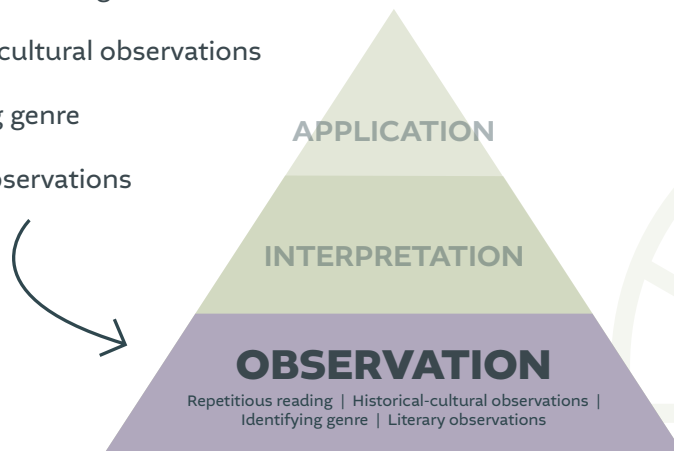
Is it worth it? Without a doubt.

Good observation is essential for good Bible study.
When observation is lazy, interpretation becomes sloppy.

The 4 Key Elements of Good Observation

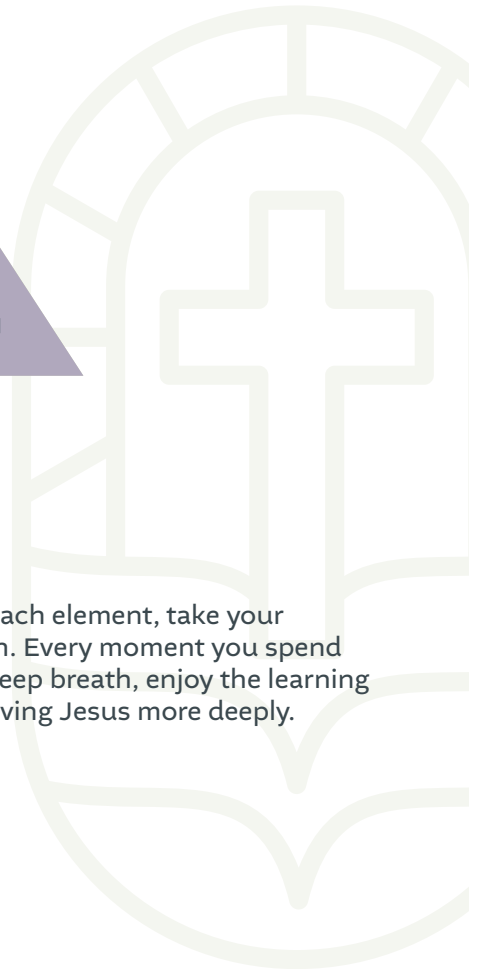
Good observation involves **slowing down and paying attention** to what's in the text.

1. Repetitious reading
2. Historical-cultural observations
3. Identifying genre
4. Literary observations



Feeling a little overwhelmed?

No need to worry—we're in this together. As we walk through each element, take your time and go at your own pace. This isn't a race or a competition. Every moment you spend reflecting on these truths can be an act of worship. So take a deep breath, enjoy the learning process, and remember: the true destination is knowing and loving Jesus more deeply.





LESSON 2: OBSERVATION STEPS 1-2

Observation: Step 1 Read and reread ... and read again

Good observation starts with reading the text—and then reading it again. The more we read a passage, the more we notice. Repetitious reading is one of the most effective tools in Bible study. **Don't rush it—slow down, stay with the text, and let it speak.**

Observation: Step 2 Ask the five “W’s”

Imagine walking into your kitchen and finding it completely covered in flour. It's everywhere! Total chaos. And the worst part? You didn't see it coming. You have no idea how it happened. But one thing's for sure: you're going to investigate and figure it out.

What would your first questions be?

- WHO?
- WHAT?
- WHEN?
- WHERE?
- WHY?

The 5 “W” Questions

These questions help us make historical-cultural observations—one of the core elements of good observation.

After reading a passage multiple times, slow down and ask: **Who? What? When? Where? Why?**

Use a study tool when needed, and don't forget to check out the Study Tool Download available in the toolkit for extra help.

WHO?

- Who is the author?
- Who is the author writing to?

Sometimes the answers are clearly stated in the text; other times, you may need to do a little digging using a study tool. But every book of the Bible—Old Testament included—had a real, original audience.

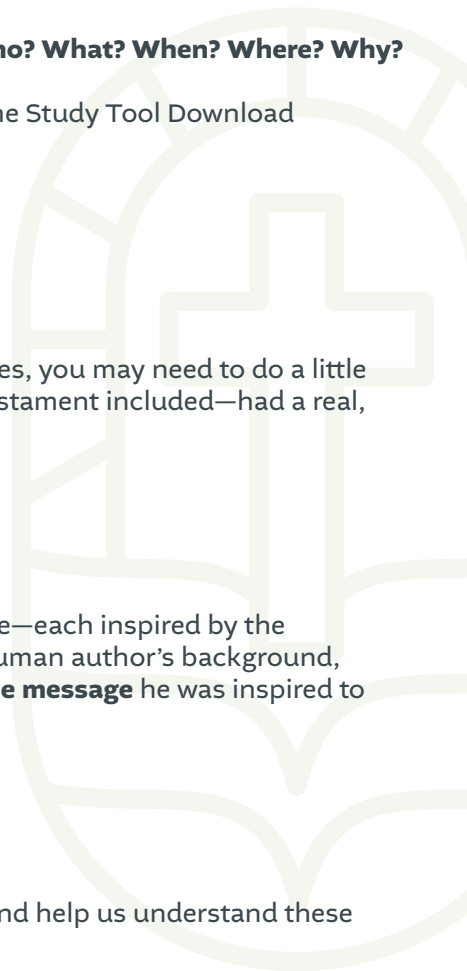
WHAT?

- What was the author's background?

God is the ultimate author of Scripture, but He used real people—each inspired by the Holy Spirit—to write His Word. The more we know about the human author's background, experiences, and perspective, the better we can **understand the message** he was inspired to communicate.

YOU TRY!

Read **1 Timothy 1:12-17**. How might knowing Paul's background help us understand these verses more?





WHAT?

- What kind of relationship did the author have with the audience? (How does he know them?)
- What kind of relationship did the audience have with one another, or with others?
- What was their relationship with God?
- What were the circumstances the audience was facing?

Understanding the audience's situation helps clarify why a letter was written, a narrative was shared, or a warning or judgment was given.

WHAT?

- What was happening historically or culturally at the time this was written?
- What is the genre of this passage?
Don't worry, we'll delve into genre more thoroughly in a later section.

WHEN?

- When was this written?
Exact dates aren't always possible or necessary, but identifying the general timeframe can help you better understand the context.

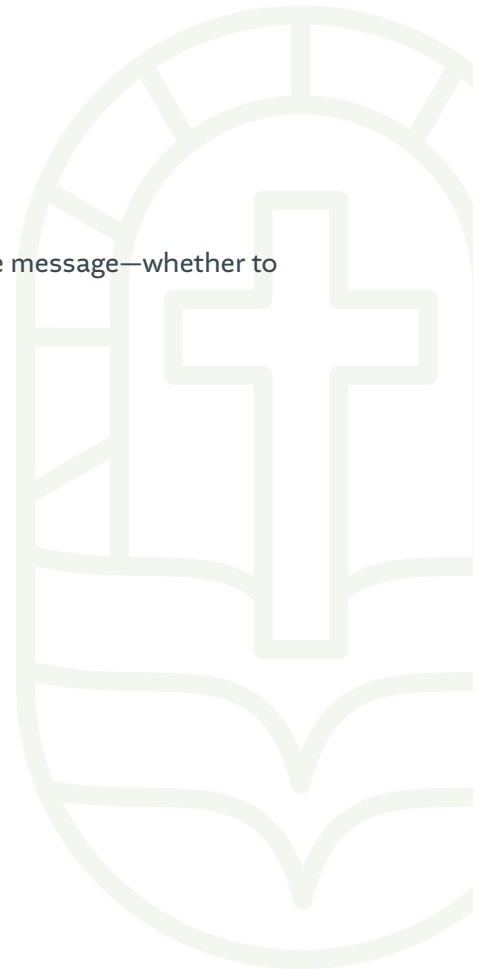
WHERE?

- Where was the author when he wrote this?
- Where was the audience located?

WHY

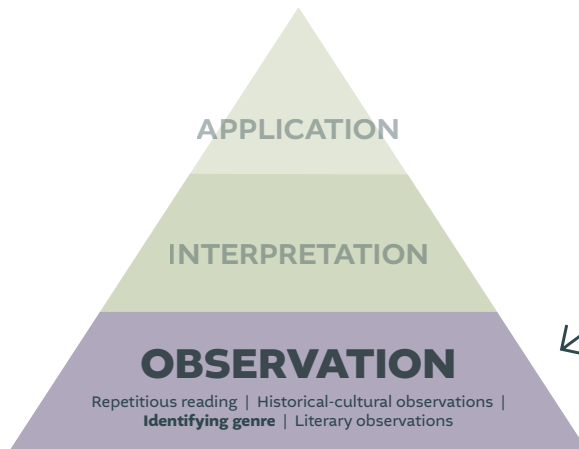
- Why was the author writing?

Understanding the “why” can uncover the **purpose** behind the message—whether to encourage, correct, warn or instruct.



LESSON 3: DETERMINE THE TYPE

Observation Step 3



The third key element—and an important part of understanding the historical and cultural context—is identifying the **genre, or type of literature**, of a passage. Each genre comes with its own set of **guidelines** for how we interpret and understand the text.

You’ve probably noticed that you can’t interpret the Gospels the same way you would the later chapters of Daniel or Revelation.

Recognizing the genre helps us follow the roadmap more accurately and interpret Scripture faithfully.

Here is a quick reference guide for finding genre. Be aware that some books of the Bible contain multiple genres such as wisdom books that are written in poetic form.

NARRATIVE	LAW	POETRY	WISDOM	PROPHECY	GOSPEL	EPISTLES
Joshua Judges Ruth 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther	Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Psalms	Job Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Solomon	Old Testament Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel Hosea Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habbakuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi New Testament Revelation*	Matthew Mark Luke John Acts*	Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 Thess. 2 Thess. 1 Timothy 2 Timothy Titus Philemon Hebrews James 1 Peter 2 Peter 1 John 2 John 3 John Jude





Next, we're going to walk through a few **key principles for reading each genre of Scripture**. This will just be a starting point. We're only scratching the surface. If this topic sparks your interest, we highly recommend diving deeper with *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Fee and Stuart.

Narrative

A biblical narrative is a true story told by a narrator and shaped with literary elements like setting, characters, plot and resolution.

- **Principle 1** – Every narrative fits within its immediate context (the book it's in) and the larger story of the Bible.
- **Principle 2** – God is always the central character, even when He isn't named directly.
- **Principle 3** – Narratives are retellings of real events—not fiction or myth, but purposeful accounts of what actually happened.

Law

A significant portion of Israel's story is shaped by the Law—God's instruction given through a **covenant relationship** with His people. Obedience to the Law brought blessing; disobedience brought consequences. But more than rules, **the Law revealed something deeper**: the heart and character of God.

- **Principle 1** – The Old Testament Law was a covenant between God and Israel.
- **Principle 2** – The Old Testament Law was a blueprint of worship to YAWEH for Old Covenant believers.
- **Principle 3** – The requirements of the Old Testament Law were fulfilled in Christ; the heart of it re-stated in Christ.
- **Principle 4** – The Law ultimately points to Jesus, the perfect lamb, priest and king.

“All of the Old Testament law is the Word of God for us even though it's not the command of God to us.”

-Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 169.

Poetry

Biblical poetry is a unique form of literature marked by short refrains, parallelism and vivid imagery. It gives voice to a wide range of human emotions—from sorrow and repentance to joy and celebration.

- **Principle 1** – Biblical poetry was often sung in worship by its original audience.
- **Principle 2** – Biblical poetry expresses raw, honest emotion. It's not a theological treatise, but a window into the human heart before God.



Wisdom Literature

Wisdom books offer **practical guidance** for living a life that honors God. They help us navigate real-life situations with discernment, humility and faith.

- **Principle #1** – Wisdom literature presents principles, not promises. These are general truths about how life works, not guarantees.
- **Principle #2** - Proverbs - Offers the general rule: live wisely and life will go well.

The Big Picture: 4 Wisdom Books in the Old Testament

- **Proverbs** – Offers the general rule: live wisely and life will usually go well.
- **Exception #1 – Job:** A righteous person may still suffer deeply.
- **Exception #2 – Ecclesiastes:** Wisdom alone can't give life meaning—knowing and fearing God is what truly matters (Eccl. 12:13).
- **Exception #3 – Song of Songs:** Highlights the beauty, mystery, and even irrational joy of love and marriage—something not captured in Proverbs' practical advice.

“Wisdom literature contains the rule (Proverbs), and also includes the exceptions (Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs).”

J. Scott Duvall & J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 390–91.

Prophecy

Biblical prophecy is a unique form of literature that **proclaims God's message**—often warnings of judgment—through His chosen spokespersons, the prophets.

- **Principle 1** – Most Old Testament prophecy addressed the immediate future of Judah, Israel and surrounding nations—not distant end-times events.
- **Principle 2** – The prophets spoke on behalf of God, often confronting sin and calling people back to covenant faithfulness.

“Less than 2% of Old Testament prophecy is messianic [about the coming of Jesus]. Less than 5% specifically describes the new-covenant age. Less than 1% concerns events yet to come in our time.”

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014]), 182.

Gospel

The Gospels aren't full biographies of Jesus' life, but they are biographical in nature—telling the story of who He is, what He taught, and why He came.

- **Principle 1** – Each Gospel writer wrote with **intentionality and purpose**, shaped by a specific audience and theme.
- **Principle 2** – The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are not contradictory but complementary, offering **different perspectives** on the same events.



The Gospel of Matthew

- Primary Audience: Jewish readers familiar with the Old Testament
- Main Theme: Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the promised King

Gospel of Mark

- Primary Audience: Gentiles in the Roman Empire, unfamiliar with Jewish history
- Main Theme: Jesus, the Son of Man, is the Suffering Servant who came to redeem the world

Gospel of Luke

- Primary Audience: Gentiles
- Main Theme: Jesus Christ is the Redeemer of the world

Gospel of John

- Primary Audience: Unknown
- Main Theme: Jesus is the Son of God

Epistles

Epistles are letters written in the New Testament to address specific situations or problems related to the audience and/or the author.

They were meant to be **read often**—and usually all **in one sitting**—so the message could be fully understood and applied as a whole.

Acts

The book of Acts is a narrative—the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. While the Gospels focus on who Jesus is, **Acts tells the continuing story**: the birth of the Church, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the spread of the gospel to the nations.

Acts is primarily **descriptive**, not prescriptive. Luke records miraculous events and movements of the early Church that were unique to that moment in redemptive history—events ordained by God for the launch of the church and the advance of the gospel.

Revelation

Revelation is one of the most unique books in the Bible because it combines three literary forms, which can make it feel strange or difficult to read at first.

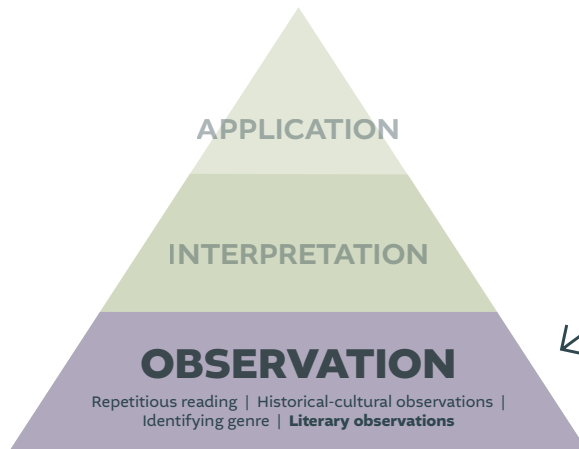
- **It's a letter** – In the opening chapters, we see that John is writing to real churches, addressing their specific situations and challenges.
- **It's prophetic** – John receives a message (a revelation) from God through an angel—he's instructed to write it down and deliver it.
- **It's apocalyptic** – This genre uses vivid imagery and symbolism to reveal divine truth, often centered on God's coming victory over evil.

Tips for Reading Revelation:

- Always **remember the original audience**. Start by asking, “What did this mean to them?”
- Keep the main message front and center: **God wins**.
- Read with humility. There's mystery here, and not every image has a clear explanation.

LESSON 4: MARK IT UP!

Observation: Step 4



After exploring historical and cultural context, the next key element of good observation is **literary observations**. Like historical observations, these often require you to look beyond the main text for additional insight.

There are many types of literary features to pay attention to, and it can get complex quickly. So for our purposes, we'll focus on some of the most common types you'll encounter.

If you'd like to dig deeper, grab a copy *Grasping God's Word* by Duvall & Hays.

HELPFUL TIP

If the idea of writing in your Bible makes you cringe, here are a few alternatives:

- Use a notepad and write out the passage by hand
- Print the passage with double spacing for easy note-taking
- Try a Scripture journal (you can find them on Amazon for as little as \$5)

Literary Observations

One way to grow in your observation skills is to look for literary features the author uses to communicate meaning.

Repetition

Look for words or phrases that **repeat**—this often signals emphasis or a key theme.

YOU TRY!

- **Read John 15** and underline any repeated words.





Conjunctions

Identify **connecting words** like and, but, or, therefore, if–then, etc. These help **tie together** thoughts and show logical relationships.

YOU TRY!

- **Read Hebrews 12:1-3**
What is the conjunction?
What is the “therefore” there for?
- **Read Colossians 3:1**
What is the conjunction?
What prefaces the command to seek the things that are above?

Contrast

Are there differences or distinctions being drawn between ideas, individuals or items?

YOU TRY!

- **Read Galatians 5:16-24**
What is being contrasted?
How are they different?

Comparison

Are there similarities being drawn between ideas, individuals or items?

YOU TRY!

- **Read Psalm 1:1–3**
What is being compared?
How are they similar?

Lists

Are two or more items **grouped together** in a sequence?

YOU TRY!

- **Read Ephesians 6:10-20**
What is this a list of?
List the connected items.





Imagery

Is the author using **vivid images** to convey a deeper idea or truth?

YOU TRY!

- **Read Psalm 23**
What is the primary image presented?
What does this image reveal about the Lord?

Question and Answer Dialogue

Is a question being asked and then answered?

YOU TRY!

- **Read Romans 8:31-39**
What are the questions?
What are the answers?

Actions

Pay attention to **what God does** in the passage, and **what people do**.

- What are God's actions or roles?
- What are people's actions or roles?
- Is there a connection between the two?

YOU TRY!

- **Read Genesis 15**
What does God do in this passage?
What does Abram do?
Is there a connection between their actions?





Do You Remember the Key Steps of Observation?

- Read, read, read ... and read again
- Ask the five “W’s”
- Determine the type (genre)
- Mark it up!

READY TO TRY IT ON YOUR OWN?

OBSERVATION PRACTICE

Use study tools as needed (Study Bible, Bible Dictionary, Blue Letter Bible, etc.)

Old Testament Exercises

EXERCISE #1: PSALM 23

- Read the passage slowly and thoughtfully
- **List 25 observations** from the text: imagery, word choices, themes, repeated ideas, and the tone of the psalm

EXERCISE #2: NUMBERS 21:4-9 OBSERVATION WALKTHROUGH

Step 1:

- Read Numbers 21:4-9
- Write down **10 observations** you see in the text

Step 2: Ask “Who?”

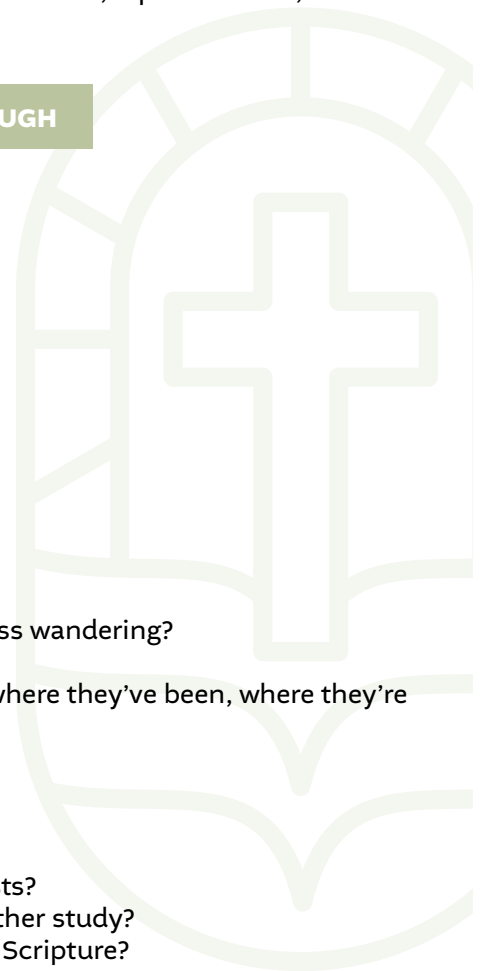
- Who is writing?
- Who is being written about?
- Who are the key characters in this scene?

Step 3: Ask “When?”

- When does this story occur in Israel’s 40 years of wilderness wandering?
- Where are the Israelites at this point in their journey?
- What historical or cultural context is important to know (where they’ve been, where they’re headed)?

Step 4: Ask “What?” and Dig Deeper

- What is the genre of this passage?
- Are any words repeated? Are there comparisons or contrasts?
- Are any people, places or objects mentioned that need further study?
- Are these people, places or events referenced elsewhere in Scripture?





Step 5: Final Observation List

- Reread Numbers 21:4-9
- Make a **list of 25+ observations** based on all your study so far

New Testament Exercises

EXERCISE #1: JOHN 15:1-11

- Read the passage carefully.
- **List 25 observations from the text.** Focus on what you see: repeated words, key themes, contrasts, commands and word pictures.

EXERCISE #2: PHILIPPIANS 4:10-20 OBSERVATION WALKTHROUGH

Take this passage through several rounds of observation to dig deeper:

Step 1:

- Read Philippians 4:10-20
- Write down **10 initial observations** from the text

Step 2: Ask “Who?”

- Who is writing?
- Who is he writing to?
- Who is specifically referred to in Philippians 4?

Step 3: Ask “When?”

- When was Philippians written?
- Are there any important historical or cultural factors to know?

Step 4: Ask “Where?”

- Where is the letter being written from?
- Where is it being sent?

Step 5: Determine the Genre

- What type of literature is Philippians?
- What situation or issue is the author addressing in chapter 4?

Step 6: Mark the Text

- Reread Philippians 4:10-13
- Mark any **repetition, contrasts, or important words**
- Look up the meaning of any key words for clarity

Step 7: Final Observation List

- Compile everything into a **list of 25+ observations** from Philippians 4:10-13
- Include insights from previous steps

