

Observing the Bible

By Jerry Collins

- *What is the value of observation?*
- *How do we observe a passage?*
- *What do we do with our observations?*

There is a basic three-step approach to studying the Bible:

- (1) **Observation** focuses on the question, What does it say? Here we assume the role of investigator, no clue or detail is trivial while observing the text.
- (2) **Interpretation** deals with the question, What does it mean? Here our quest is to comprehend the author's meaning.
- (3) **Application** answers the question, What must I do? Here we determine to understand the Bible so that our lives may be transformed by its truth.

These three steps stand alone, yet may sometimes overlap.

Observation is essential because it forces us to learn what a passage is saying in order to understand what it means. Observation may be defined as taking notice of things the way they actually are. Observing is noticing. Observation moves from **analysis**, looking at the details, to **synthesis**, looking at the big picture.

Analysis

Noticing the Details

Asking Significant Questions

Who are the people involved? Identify who is in the passage, what is said about them, and what they say. For example, in Acts 1:8 we read, *But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.* The context tells us that the word “you” refers to the apostles (v. 2). We also observe that this verse is answering a question the apostles had asked Jesus. As we recreate in our minds who the disciples are, we learn that they are people who have heard Jesus’ teaching, seen His miracles, were chosen by Jesus and were anxious about His kingdom. At this point, we might want to consult other passages to learn everything we can about the relationship between Jesus and His disciples.

What is happening? What are the events? In what order? What happens to the characters? What is the argument? What is the point? What is the writing communicating? For example, we observe that Acts 1:8 is part of an answer Jesus was giving to the apostles’ question, *is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?* (v. 6). We notice that Jesus’ answer is part of a dialogue in which the disciples are asking questions and Jesus is answering them.

Where is it taking place? Where are the people going? Coming from? What is the geography? Are we studying a journey? Consulting maps and Bible atlases will be helpful here. For example, Acts 1:8 takes place in Jerusalem. This is where the apostles are to begin as witnesses of Christ. One thing we can observe about Jerusalem is that this is where the crucifixion took place and the apostles are known there. So a hostile environment is to be the starting point as Christ’s witnesses.

When is it taking place? When did the events occur in relation to other events? When was the writer writing about this? For example, we observe that the apostles’ question and Jesus’ answer in Acts 1:8 is in the context of Jesus’ ascension (vv. 9-11). Jesus’ answer, then, is His last words to His disciples before He ascends to heaven. Jesus, in effect, gives His disciples their marching orders and immediately leaves. Suddenly the apostles’ ministry begins.

Why is this here? Why is this included? Why does it follow what it follows? Why does it precede what it precedes? Why does this person say what he says? Why? (“Why?” is an observation question when the answer is stated in the text. Otherwise “Why?” would be interpretation.) For example, why is the Holy Spirit mentioned here? His coming describes the time the apostles would receive power because they initiated the conversation with a time question (v. 6).

Noticing Significant Terms

Is anything emphasized? The amount of space used, a stated purpose given, order of material and movement from lesser to greater, and vice versa indicate emphasis. For example, in Acts 1:8 Jesus emphasizes the places the apostles would be His witnesses by the order in which He puts them *Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, even to the remotest part of the earth*.

Is anything repeated? For example, the word you is repeated three times in Acts 1:8. The repetition of you raises the question, Who are these people?

Is anything contrasted? Contrast indicates a change in direction. For example, in Acts 1:8 the word “but” forces us to go back to the preceding context (vv. 1-7) to discover the reason for the change in direction with verse 8 and following.

Is anything compared? Comparison is the association of like things. For example, Acts 1:8 compares the power the apostles need to be Jesus’ witnesses with the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them.

Is anything related? Is there movement from the general to the specific? Questions and answers? Cause and effect? For example, Jesus says the apostles are going to receive power. That’s the cause. The effect is that they are going to be something, namely, “witnesses.” It is power and then witnesses, not vice versa.

Synthesis

Noticing the Big Picture

The next step in observation is to catalog and summarize what we have noticed. Here we ask and answer the question, How does this tie together?

Pay attention to the immediate context. Always consult the neighbors of the passage to find out what the broader context is. We have already seen the importance of context in our observations from Acts 1:8.

Evaluate the passage in light of the whole book. For instance, we have noticed that the apostles are to be Christ’s witnesses *in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth*. When we study the book of Acts, we discover that they did start out in Jerusalem (Acts 2), then Peter and John went to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:14), and Peter went to the Gentiles, beginning with Cornelius (Acts 10). As we fit these observations together, we discover that Acts 1:8 can serve as an outline for the book of Acts.

Review the historical context of the book. Where does this fit historically? When was it written? What is happening elsewhere in the world at that time? Where does this book fit in the flow of the Bible? Is it before, during, or after Christ? For instance, Acts covers 30 years of history after Christ, as it chronicles the expansion of the church from Jerusalem into the inhabited world. Rome, as the world power, is prominent throughout the book. Tensions mount between Jews and Rome, culminating in Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. These facts are significant to the commission to go into all the world.

Summarize your observations. We can label our observations and/or place them under different headings that group them together. For instance, at least two of our observations from Acts 1:8 could be labeled “future” (*you shall receive power you shall be My witnesses*) and grouped under that heading.

We can also use grid charts to summarize our material in a manageable way. For instance, Acts 1:8 provides a four-part outline using Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the remotest part of the earth as headings. Under each heading we could study the progress, occasion, and result of the Apostles’ witness in each region throughout the book of Acts.

Jerusalem

Judea

Samaria

Earth

Questions and Answers

Q: *What is the value of observation?*

A: It is the only way to discover what a passage is saying in order to understand what it means.

Q: *How do we observe a passage?*

A: Observation begins by **analysis**, noticing the details (Who? What? When? Where? Why?). Then **synthesis**, noticing the big picture.

Q: *What do we do with our observations?*

A: We use them for the next phase of study: interpretation.

*Some of the material in this short topic comes from the book “Living by the Book” by Howard and William Hendricks (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991). I highly recommend this book for the study of this subject.