

Studying a Book

So far in your study, you have focused on several rather short and easy passages in order to learn some of the skills in observation and interpretation. Remember that one of the aims of this resource is to introduce these steps in Bible study slowly so that you will not become frustrated in the process. For persons who have not done much Bible study, frustration can lead to discouragement. I hope you have developed enough skill in observing and interpreting that you are ready for our next phase in this study, the Expanding Phase in which you study a book. You will continue to develop the techniques you have already learned, but new ones will be added.

We shall study the book of James because it is a short book and does not contain too many difficult theological problems. It is very practical in its approach. When you are developing skills, it is best not to become involved with difficult theological passages such as we find in some of Paul's letters. While your focus will be on the content in the book of James, the main purpose will be to perfect your skills in studying. You will not be able to analyze and interpret all that is in the book. But through the process, you will discover its main message and many of its teachings.

Observe the Whole Book

When you begin to study a book in the Bible, the first thing you should do is read the entire book quickly to get an overview of its contents. Then you study it by sections.

Each writer of a book in the Bible had a specific purpose for writing what he did. He had certain facts and truths which he desired to convey to his readers. His purpose determined the content of his book—which ideas and facts to include and which to omit. His purpose also determined the structure of his book—the way in which he arranged his material. Historical events and situations governed some of the content and approaches used by the author. His own personality and background influenced his literary style.

As you read through a book, here are some major things to observe:

PURPOSE: What is the author's purpose for writing this book?

CONTENT: What are the major truths and ideas which he is presenting in order to accomplish his purpose?

STRUCTURE: How has he arranged his material to emphasize his purpose?

LITERARY FORM: What literary forms does he use to bring out his message: prose, poetry, discourse, parable, drama, apocalyptic? When is the terminology literal and when figurative?

ATMOSPHERE: What is the underlying tone of the book? Or parts of the book?

Seek to Discover the Writer and His Purpose

As you read through a book the first time, focus on the writer and his purpose. Remember that he had a reason for writing what he did. He had some ideas, some experiences, or some convictions which he wanted others to know.

No book will carry a detailed description of the writer, but sometimes he will say things about himself, such as Paul often does in his epistles. You can gain insight into a writer's purpose and even into his personality by noting the things he emphasizes—his admonitions, his convictions, his concerns, his illustrations. He also reveals his purpose in the way he structures his book, the amount of space he gives to certain topics. This is especially true with the narrative books of the Old Testament, the Gospels and Acts in the New Testament. The writer of the book of Genesis uses 11 chapters to discuss beginnings and 39 chapters to discuss the story of a few persons. By the very structure of the book, one can assume that the purpose of the book of Genesis was to relate a story of a family and not the beginnings of mankind.

As you read, try to picture the person who wrote the book. Try to recreate in your mind what he had experienced or was experiencing at the time he was writing. What had he seen? What had he heard? What were his feelings and convictions which prompted him to write as he did?

Seek to Discover Facts About the Readers

In some instances, the biblical writers had specific readers in mind. This is especially true of the New Testament epistles. As you read a book the first time, try to discover the kind of persons to whom the author was writing. What seemed to be their problems and characteristics? Sometimes the writer specifically states the problems, and sometimes he implies their problems by the things he emphasizes and the admonitions he gives. Try to identify with these persons who

would receive this letter. How would you feel as you read or heard someone else read this letter? In order to identify with the persons, you may need to know more about the historical background and culture of their times.

Observe the Structure of the Book

Also in your first reading, see if you can discover something about the structure of the book. You may have difficulty doing this. Some books do not have as definite a structure as others. But keep on the alert for the way the chapters are grouped together according to content. Usually in the epistles the first chapters focus on doctrine and the last ones on practical living.

There are a variety of ways a writer can organize his material. Note the following list. A book may reflect several of the kinds.

BIOGRAPHICAL: in terms of the lives of people. The Book of Genesis is an example in which the material is organized according to the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

HISTORICAL: in terms of succession of events. The Book of Exodus is an example in which the material is organized according to the experiences of the Children of Israel as they traveled from Egypt to the Land of Canaan.

CHRONOLOGICAL: in terms of the time when events happened. Both Genesis and Exodus are also examples of this type of organization in that the story is told in chronological order.

GEOGRAPHICAL: in terms of the places where the events happened. The Book of Exodus is also geographical in arrangement in that the places as well as the events are emphasized.

LOGICAL OR IDEOLOGICAL: in terms of the ideas themselves. The prophetic books and the epistles are examples of these types of arrangements. The Book of Romans is logical in structure, whereas the Book of Philippians is ideological, organized according to ideas but not in logical sequence.

Focus on Smaller Sections

After you have read the entire book, begin to focus on one section at a time. Usually you begin with the first paragraph of the first chapter. But wherever you begin, it is important that you see the section in the context of the whole book. That is the reason for reading the entire book first, even though you read it very quickly. Then you are able to analyze the one section in the context of the entire book.

For these suggestions to have value, you need to begin to practice them with the book of James.

Practice A – Read the Book of James

1. Observe the writer and readers.

Before you begin to read the book of James, divide a sheet of paper in half. Entitle the left half of the sheet, *The author: his characteristics, convictions, and concerns*. Entitle the right half, *The readers: their characteristics, problems, concerns*.

As you read, jot down things you learn about the author and his readers from what the author says and the things he emphasizes. Don't go into too much detail. Write down some of the obvious things. This is your first time through the book, and you are to gain just a brief look at the author and readers. If there are several of you in your study group, you might divide the chapters. All of you should read the entire book, but each would be responsible for one chapter in terms of what you learned about author and readers. Afterwards, you are to share with each other what you discovered in your first reading.

2. Summarize purpose.

After this first reading, try to summarize in a few statements what you think is the author's purpose for writing this book.

3. Consider the structure of James.

The book of James is not written in a logical order such as Paul writes many of his epistles. There seems to be no pattern, just a series of ideas like beads on a string. Someone has said that the book of James was more like a sermon, the kind that was preached in his day. Some scholars suggest that it might first have been a sermon and later put into writing. It has the quality of a spoken sermon. As you read the book, you can sense the changes in the mood of the "preacher" from pleadings to stern admonitions. Sometimes you can almost imagine him shaking his fist at his audience as he reprimands them for some of the things they have been doing.

4. Consider the author.

There are varying opinions as to the identity of the author of the book of James. Some claim he was the brother of Jesus. Others say he was one of the apostles. Read in a commentary or Bible dictionary the various views as to the authorship of James.

Practice B – Observe Details of James 3:6-12

1. Review.

You have already had several practices in observing the details in passages. You are to continue to develop these skills in this practice.

In our study of the book of James, we shall begin with one of the paragraphs in the center of the book, James 3:6-12. We begin with this paragraph because it is an easy one to analyze. It focuses on only a few concepts.

In your previous studies, you were introduced gradually to some of the techniques of observation. Usually you were directed as to what to look for. Now you are to put into practice all the things you have been learning about observation. Review the suggestions on how to observe—the short list in Chapter 3 and the more detailed in Chapter 4.

In order to help you review the ways to observe, we shall describe in detail how you might begin your study of this section.

2. Read thoughtfully.

As you begin to study this passage, you should read it prayerfully and thoughtfully—praying that the Holy Spirit would guide you in your reading and thoughtfully noting the words of the passage. Let us consider the first verse and the way you might think about it as you read.

“And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell” 3:6.

As you read the words in the first sentence, you note that the key words are *tongue* and *fire*. You note that this is a comparison, the tongue is called a fire. Also you note that the verb is present tense. As you make note of these things, you might begin asking yourself some questions: “Why does he call the tongue *a fire*? Any significance in the present-tense verb?” As you read on, you note that he calls the tongue something else: *an unrighteous world*. Again you might say to yourself, “What does he mean by that phrase?” Reading on, you note other statements describing the tongue, words and phrases about which you may wonder, such as *staining, cycle of nature, set on fire by hell*.

As we have said before, this process of wondering about the meanings of words and phrases is a natural process of the mind. When a person begins to think about a portion of writing, the normal action of the mind is to observe key words and phrases and begin to question meanings. Bible students have often stopped at that point, just as the mind was beginning to function. They may see so many terms they do not understand that they close their Bibles and say, “What’s the use?” But the process of questioning reveals that the mind is warming up to enable the student to find solutions to his questions. Remember that the questions you are asking yourself are *I wonder questions or questions for understanding*.

3. Observe and record deliberately.

You can continue to study this section of James, observing words and phrases and wondering about meanings in a hit-and-miss fashion, or you can proceed in a logical and deliberate pattern, disciplining yourself to concentrate on the words you observe and to ask questions for understanding. The best way to study is to record your observations and questions on paper.

Take a sheet of paper and divide it into three equal sections. Use your paper horizontally so as to get sections as wide as possible. Entitle your sections as follows:

<i>Observations</i>	<i>Scripture Passage</i>	<i>Questions for Understanding</i>
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In the *center section* write down portions of the Scripture passage in sequence. It is best to copy parts of a verse at a time, rather than a whole verse, but always include a unit of words such as a phrase or clause which has a unified idea. Note how the Bible passages are arranged on page 54.

In the *left section* record your observations. In the *right section* record the questions which you ask yourself about meanings. Remember that the purpose for asking yourself questions is to help yourself note the areas which may need special interpretation. You are trying to determine what the author meant by his words.

Note the *Example* on page 54. When recording observations, it is sometimes helpful to underline words and phrases taken from Scripture. The words which would be underlined are in italics. You will note that in the example, the observations are much more detailed than you have previously done. Now you are being encouraged to be more detailed in your observations. At first, you may have difficulties in knowing what to say about words and phrases, but practice will develop your powers of observation. The example focuses on 3:6-8. You continue with 3:9-12.

Practice C – Seek to Know Meanings

1. Select some key questions

After making a thorough study of James 3:6-12, you may have asked many more questions than you may have time to answer—or are even relevant to the message of the passage. Select just a few which you feel are relevant to understanding the passage. If there are several in your study group, each of you can take one verse and make a more thorough interpretation of it.

2. Interpret some of your questions

Review Chapter 6 on interpretation, especially the section on *how* to record interpretations (page 47). Follow those suggestions as you seek to interpret some of the words or statements in this passage.

Example

Observations	Scripture Passage	Questions for Understanding
<p>6. <i>tongue</i> and <i>fire</i>—key words. comparison—tongue with fire. <i>is</i>—present tense verb second comparison—<i>tongue</i> with <i>world</i>; <i>is</i>—another present tense verb; <i>unrighteous</i> describes the kind of world; <i>among our members</i> describes place. <i>staining</i>—shows action of tongue. <i>whole</i>—describes the extent of influence of body. <i>setting</i>—another action of tongue. <i>cycle of nature</i>—describes what is set on fire. Note change in verb—<i>set</i>, past tense; the tongue is acted upon. It sets things on fire and is set on fire—reveals source of fire.</p> <p>7. <i>for</i>—key connective, implies a reason. Introduces an illustration. <i>every kind</i>—all inclusive, all kinds of animals mentioned. <i>can be tamed</i>—implies possibilities. <i>has been tamed</i>—describes what has happened in past.</p> <p>8. <i>but</i>—key connective, brings out contrast as to what man can do with animals, even savage ones, but not with his tongue. Again emphasis on word <i>tame</i>. Note descriptive words about tongue, words which can be used to describe animals.</p>	<p>James 3:6 And the tongue is a fire.</p> <p>The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members.</p> <p>staining the whole body,</p> <p>setting on fire the cycle of nature</p> <p>and set on fire by hell.</p> <p>For every kind of beast and bird or reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind.</p> <p>8. <i>but</i> no human being can tame the tongue—</p> <p>a restless evil, full of deadly poison.</p>	<p>Meaning of <i>tongue</i>? Why is the tongue called a fire? Does the present tense verb imply tongue always is a fire? Why didn't James say "like a fire"? Would meaning be the same? Meaning of <i>unrighteous world</i>? Meaning of <i>among our members</i>? Significance of word <i>staining</i>? How can the tongue stain the whole body? Meaning of body? Meaning of <i>cycle of nature</i>? How can the tongue influence the cycle of nature? Significance of this statement? Does James really mean that the tongue is set on fire by hell?</p> <p>Why this illustration? Why such an all inclusive statement? Meaning of word <i>tame</i>? Significance of word <i>humankind</i>?</p> <p>Significance of word <i>human being</i>? Does this imply that God can do what mankind cannot do?</p> <p>Significance of these descriptive words? Relationship of verses 7 and 8 with verse 6?</p>

As reminders, here are some things to do:

- a) STATE YOUR QUESTION.
- b) DEFINE SOME KEY WORD.
- c) READ TRANSLATIONS: record parts of the translation which give you insight into meanings.
- d) LOOK UP SEVERAL CROSS-REFERENCES. Copy down those verses which seem to provide additional insight.
- f) STUDY OTHER RESOURCES. Possibly, you will need to read a commentary to see what is meant by some of the statements.
- g) WRESTLE WITH MEANINGS AND SUMMARIZE. Do some personal wrestling with what you have been learning through these processes and formulate a statement summarizing what you think the author means by what he was saying.

Practice D – Personalize Biblical Teachings

We can all easily identify with some of the things which James says about the tongue. We have experienced its power to *burn* and *destroy* but also its power to *bless*, *affirm*, and *encourage*. Consider ways in which you might personalize the truths in this passage.

Evaluation

Is this description of the tongue a true description? What is the significance of the present tenses of the verbs? Do we always have the power to choose what our tongues will do?

Application

Complete some of these statements:

- a) One time when I experienced the power of the tongue to *bless* or to *burn* . . .
- b) One time when I learned how the use of my tongue can “defile my body” . . .
- c) The greatest difficulty I have with my tongue is . . .

Actualization

- a) Discuss how the use of your tongue can help or hinder the relationships in your study group.
- b) Use your tongue to *bless* by sharing with the other members one thing you admire about each one.
- c) Share any problems you may have with your tongue and invite the others to pray with you about the use of your tongue.

Practice A – Observe and Record Details

After you have completed a study of James 3:6-12, then do a similar study of James 3:1-5. Divide a sheet of paper in three sections as you did for 3:6-12. Entitle your sections as follows:

Observations	Scripture Passage	Questions for Understanding
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In the center section, copy units of thought from James 3:1. Record your observations in the left section and your questions about meanings in the right section. In this passage note the admonitions, warnings, reasons for doing things, conditional clause and results, illustrations, comparisons, emphatic statements. Also note carefully the verb tenses.

If there are several in your group, you might divide the verses: James 3:1-3; 4-5 or James 3:1-2, 3-4; 5. It is best if several can work on the same verses so that there can be greater sharing of insights.

Practice B – Seek to Know Meanings

Try to interpret the verses which you observed, following the same pattern you used in the study of James 3:6-12. Record your findings.

1. Select some of your key questions.
2. Define some of the key words.
3. Compare translations.
4. Study cross-references, noting especially Luke 6:43-45.
5. Consult some resources to learn more about the position of *teachers* in the days of James.
6. Wrestle with the meanings of some of the comparisons made and summarize your conclusions.

Practice C – Personalize Biblical Teachings

You need to consider James 3:1-5 and 6-12 together because they really are a unified thought. James' emphasis is on the serious responsibility of being a teacher. In that day Christianity was in its infancy and was spread through teaching. No doubt there were many who wanted to be known as the "teachers of faith," some who may not have been very sincere in their motives. James is warning them about the dangers of being a teacher, because they are subject to greater judgment from both God and men. The tongue is a vehicle of communication but a dangerous member of our body which can do more damage than any other part of the body if it is not controlled.

Evaluation

Consider what James is saying about the tongue and persons in leadership. How do you react to the following statements:

1. Persons in leadership are subject to greater judgment and criticism;
2. If a person can control his tongue, he can control his whole body.

Application

How would you apply Luke 6:43-45 to James 3:1-5? How can our tongues be controlled?

Creative Expression

Meditate on the insights you have gained through this study on the tongue (James 3:1-12). Reflect one of your insights in some creative way: make a poster illustration; make a montage of pictures; write a poem, song, prayer, or devotional; or something else that you would like to do. You may do this individually or with several of your group members. Share what you do with the rest of the members.