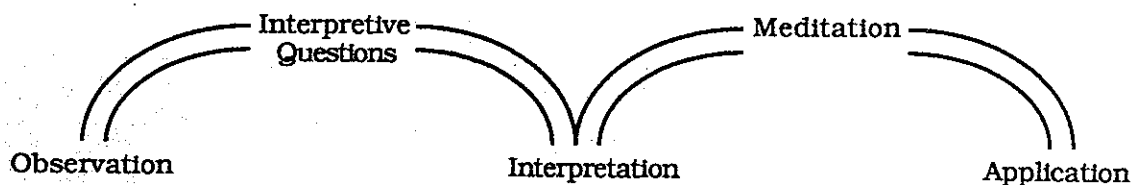


# How to Study

When we read anything, be it a newspaper story, novel, automobile manual or the Bible we seek to comprehend the author's original message. The goal for Bible study, however, goes one step further. For if the biblical authors recorded the unique intent of God for people, then by its very nature the Bible requires a response from us. Bible study, therefore, involves the two-part process of *comprehending* the author's message and *applying* that message to our life.



These two parts of the study process can be broken down further into three steps connected by two bridges.



## **OBSERVATION:** The literary styles

As we read the Bible we find a great diversity of literary styles. Jesus, for example, often taught through parables while Paul used discourse. An understanding of these styles will help us comprehend the message communicated within them. The styles fall into two categories: *indirect story forms* or *direct teaching forms*.\*

*Indirect story forms*, found in *narrative, parable* and *apocalyptic* passages, allow the author to stand in the background. Instead of coming right out and saying "you should believe this or do that," he teaches indirectly through the reaction of story characters to each other, events and circumstances. When studying story forms train yourself to *look for the most important interaction(s)* in the event described.

*Direct teaching forms*, found in *discourse, poetry* and *wisdom* passages, teaches through *main statements*. The author may state a direct command: "Do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Eph. 4:26); a passive command: "Let us love one another" (1 John 4:7); an indirect appeal: "Love is patient" (1 Cor. 13:4) or even a factual statement: "The Lord is my shepherd" (Ps. 23:1). The author's main statements are then supported by evidence and illustrations -- *secondary statements*. When studying direct teaching forms train yourself to *look for the main statement(s)* in the train of thought.

\*The Bible Study Roadshow, Part I focuses on narrative passages. The Part II seminar highlights the different styles of Scripture and focuses on discourse passages.

**OBSERVATION: The approach**

Begin by reading and even rereading the passage to be studied to gain some general impressions. If necessary, give a tentative title to each scene or section. Then proceed by asking the "W questions."

Who is involved? When did it happen? Where did it take place?

These questions help you see the setting or context of the event. The *who* includes the characters involved along with their descriptions. If you are studying one of Paul's letters, the *who* would even include the readers since it is their problems that Paul is addressing.

The *when* includes historical references and cultural features. Use a *Bible Dictionary* to look up key historical and cultural references since these details may add significant meaning.

The *where* involves the location of the event. Use the maps in the back of your Bible or a *Bible Atlas* to look up geographical references. In many cases where a passage comes in terms of its literary context also adds a significant dimension to its meaning.

**Digging Deeper**

What happened? How did it happen?

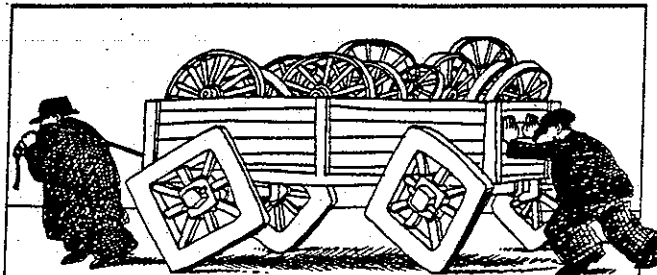
The *what* and *how* questions help you focus on the main interaction (if you are studying story forms) or the main statement (if you are studying teaching forms). Asking these questions involves identifying "the parts" of the story or teaching and determining how they fit together.

**The parts      The relationship of the parts to each other**

WORDS: Cite key words (theological terms, verbs, etc.) which need further clarification or definition.

SENTENCES: Identify connective words (therefore, if/then, because, etc.) that reveal how one sentence supports or is supported by the next.

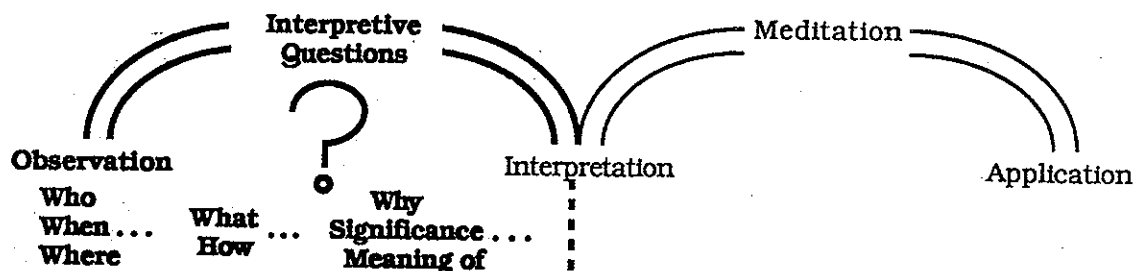
PARAGRAPHS: Determine the laws of composition (contrast, progression, climax, etc.) which provide the framework of the story or teaching.



"We'll never get anywhere if you keep asking so many questions, Harry!"

## INTERPRETATIVE QUESTIONS: The first bridge step

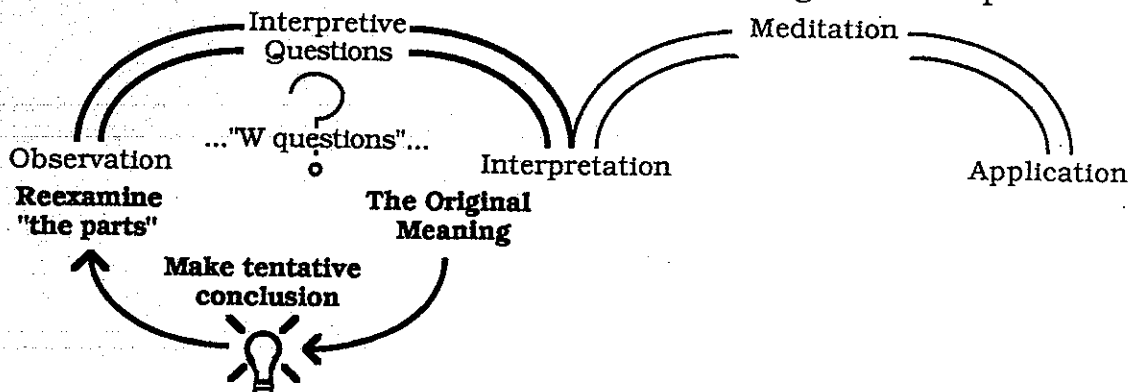
Think of studying the Bible like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. You have observed some of the pieces -- who, when, where, what and how ("the parts"). Now fit them together into a coherent picture ("the whole") by asking the last "W question," *Why*. The *why* questions raise lots of interpretative issues: Why did Peter do/say...? What is the significance of/meaning of/relation between...?



When piecing together a puzzle you might ask: Is this blue piece a part of the river or of the sky? How does it best fit into the picture? The key here is simply this: ask, ask, and when you're finished asking, ask again! As you begin to find answers, you are entering the process of discovery that makes Bible study so enjoyable.

There is one notable problem in the jigsaw analogy. Unlike a jigsaw puzzle, when you study a passage of Scripture there is no picture on the front of the box. Consequently, as you see the puzzle pieces of a biblical passage fitting together, be ready for a "light blub experience." In other words, somewhere along the line your mind will be triggered as to what the whole picture (the meaning of the passage) looks like. Your first inclination may be correct but hold it with some skepticism -- as a *tentative conclusion*.

You may tentatively conclude, for instance, that the puzzle scene pictures a gentle, winding stream. But is this initial thought a complete reflection of all the significant pieces? Look again at the puzzle with that picture in mind. Now you notice a rather turbulent waterfall in the background of the picture. Your reexamination of the picture, or in our case, the biblical passage, has led to a slightly corrected understanding from your initial conclusion. The following diagram outlines the *tentative conclusion* process of finding the main point.



**INTERPRETATION:** The original meaning

After a number of reexaminations of the parts based on your tentative conclusions, you are in position to make a final (most probable) conclusion about the author's original message. You should then complete the sentence: *The author's main point in this passage is. . . .*

Finding the main point can be likened to exploring a special cave which has a huge diamond embedded in the wall at its end. Upon entering the cave you notice the walls seem to sparkle. As you move down the tunnel you spot a number of small sapphires, emeralds and rubies. Naturally you stop periodically and examine some of the stones, removing them for your own possession. But you keep moving down the tunnel, searching for the diamond.

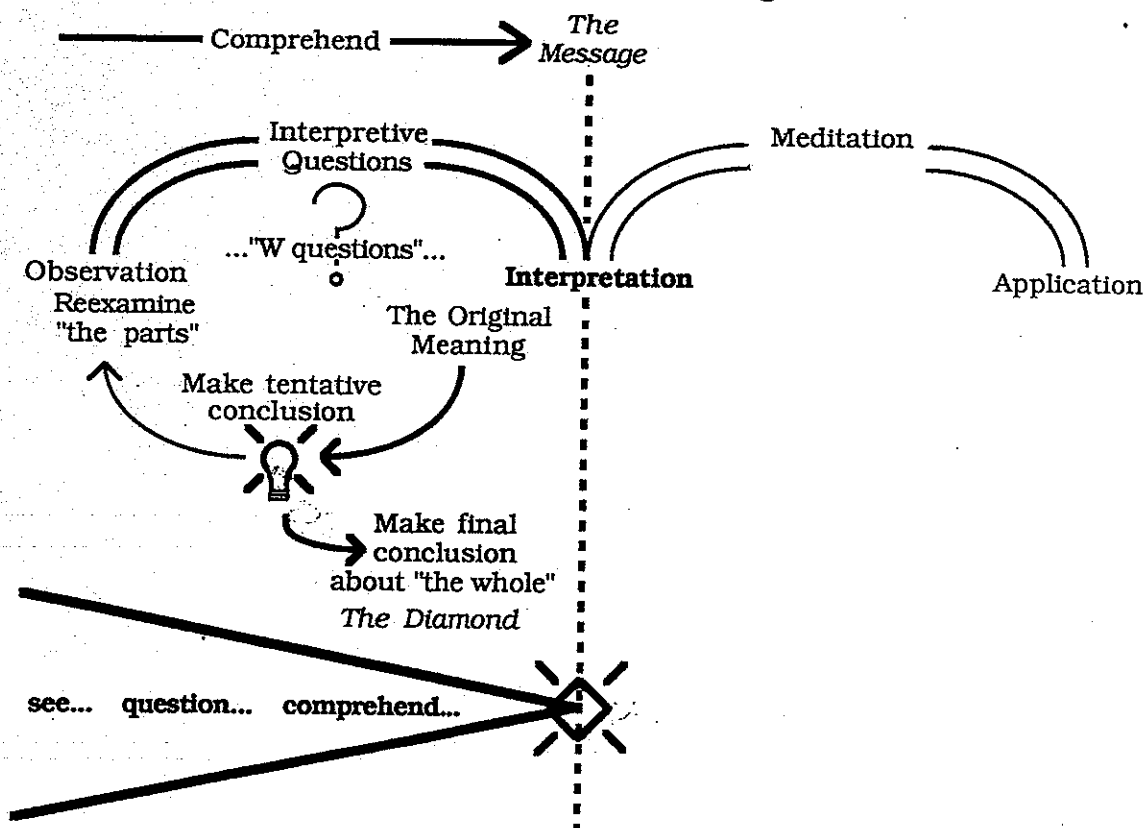
The smaller gems are important but not prized. These are the secondary points an author makes along the way. Stop, examine and even take some of these gems but don't neglect your ultimate goal -- finding the passage's main point -- *the diamond* at the tunnel's end.

Whereas an *observation* states a visible and explicit fact of the passage (or what is omitted from being said)...

an *interpretation* is not found in the text but based on (induced from) observations...

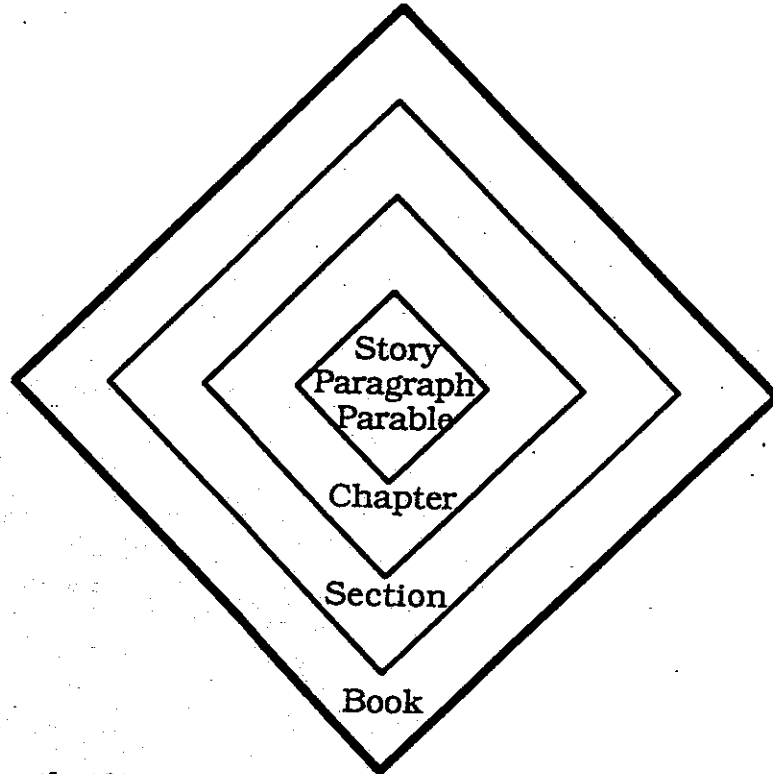
*Interpretative questions* thus compel the reader to give an explanation of what the observation means (its interpretation).

We began with a broad set of facts to *observe*, used *interpretative questions* in the sifting process of comprehension and now end at our destination with a single *interpretation* as the diagram below indicates.



The *diamond* is the meaning of a passage. Distinguishing where one diamond stops and another begins can at times present a challenge. As a general rule each narrative story (or series of complimentary narrative stories), each paragraph (or series of complimentary paragraphs) and each parable contains one main point -- *one diamond*. This fact simply reflects how authors organize their thoughts.

The *diamond* constitutes the smallest unit of coherent thought. The *diamond* within a story, paragraph or parable will usually be encased by a larger thought unit, the *chapter diamond*, which is encased by a still larger *section diamond*, encased by the largest diamond of them all -- the book, gospel or letter itself.



At times your theological persuasions may "take a beating" in the light of serious Scripture study. Be prepared for that! At other times you may miss what was obvious to the original readers and come away confused as to the author's point. That's okay too. But be assured the author has a point he is trying to communicate and is making every effort to help his readers understand that point. So make a stab -- subject to revision -- at what you think his point is.

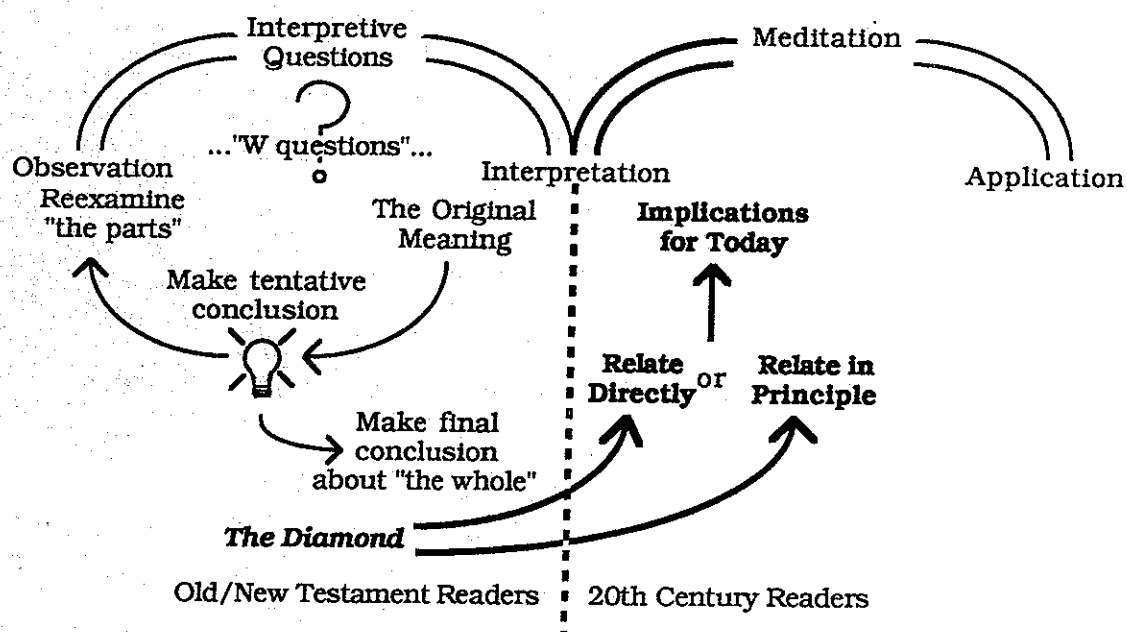


## INTERPRETATION: Implications for today

Having found the *diamond*, you have discovered what the passage *meant when it was written*. Now you are ready to think through what it *means in today's world*. But to do so you must cross a challenging line from the passage's original Old or New Testament context to its modern 20th century one. You are reading "over the shoulder" of someone else and need to be aware that the message was initially addressed to their unique problems and concerns.

Many passages relate directly to us: "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:16-18). Others are situation or cultural bound and may relate in principle: "Brothers pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss" (1 Thess. 5:25-26). How you distinguish between the two (or the shades in between) is not always easy and requires care. Common sense questions will help:

- What in the passage relates only to its original readers?
- What in the passage relates directly to its modern readers?
- What (if anything) in the passage conveys an underlying principle to its modern readers?



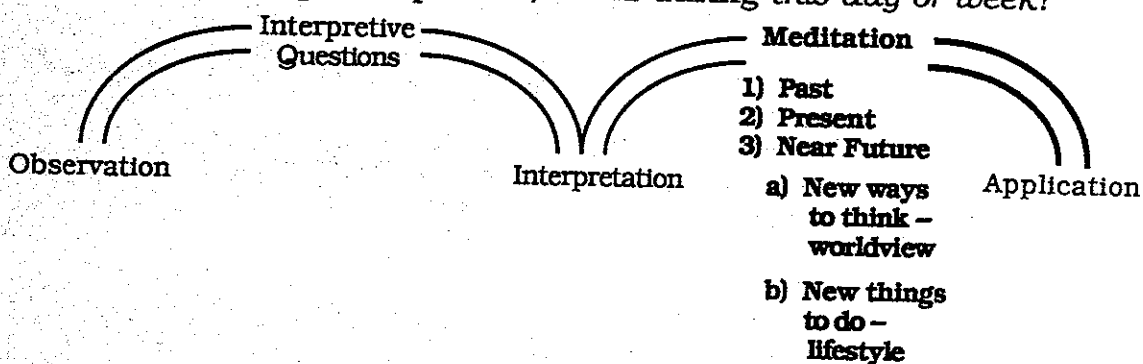
Scriptural *implications* from a passage are more general than applications: How could people, in general, apply this? Sermons often end with this broad perspective. Applications, on the other hand, become much more personal and specific: How could I personally apply this? Before you get too specific, however, start by considering the passage's more general implications: What does the text imply about the depth of God's love, the Church's task in world missions, our society's view of evil, a Christian's response to suffering, etc.

## MEDITATION: The second bridge step

After considering how a passage relates in general, it is time to "get personal." Personal application begins with the reflective process of meditation. To meditate in eastern religions is to transcend the level of conscious thought by emptying the mind. Often this process involves the repetition of a religious word or phrase. Biblical meditation, unlike its eastern counterpart, necessitates a conscious process. The mind actively focuses on God's person and his work through his Word. To meditate is to *prayerfully reflect* on Scripture with the goal of putting its teaching into practice.



As you meditate, you may find it helpful to think in terms of the *past, present and near future*. Such thinking will vividly remind you that God's work reaches back before and out beyond this present moment. If your Bible study has emphasized the call to be hospitable as Jesus' followers, ask yourself: In what ways has God helped me to grow in being hospitable in the *past*? How would he have me think about/pray for this quality *now*? And in what way is God calling me to show hospitality to my spouse/parents/friend during *this day or week*?



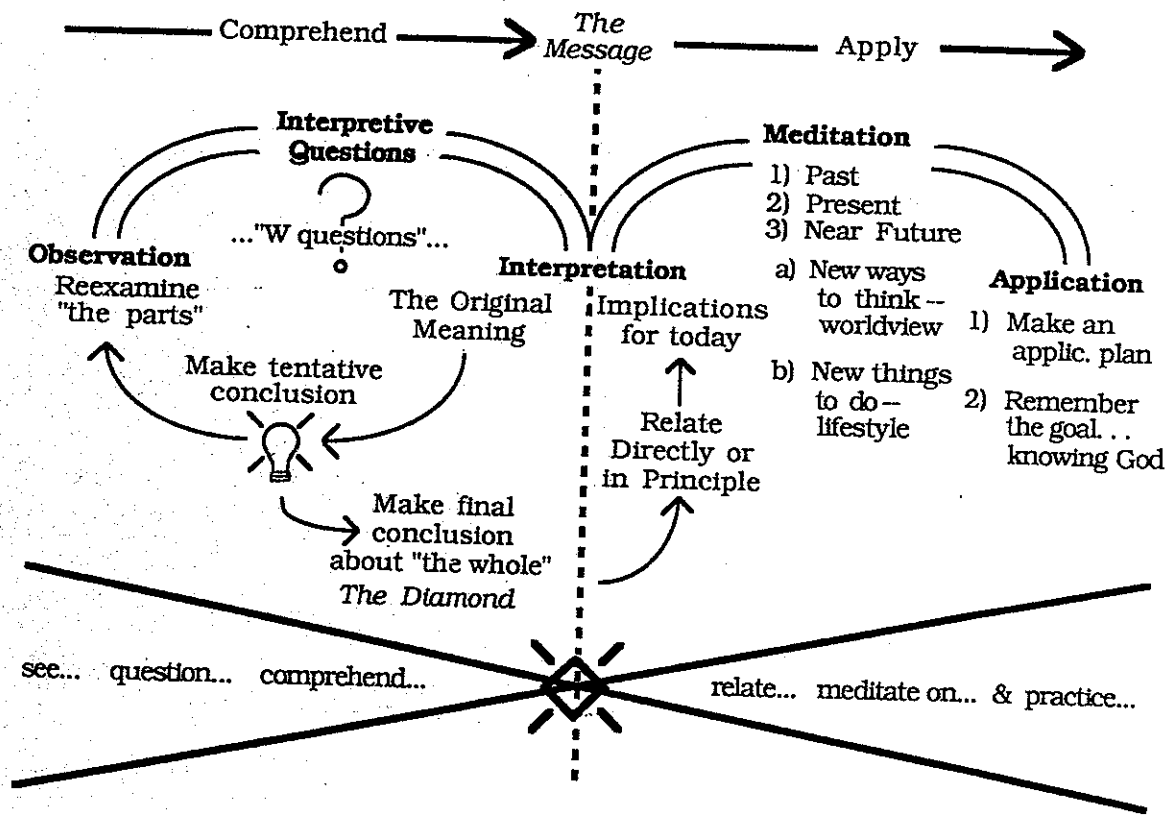
The first area for reflection involves how we *think*. Paul exhorts the Christians at Rome to be "transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). Essentially we have to "think Christianity" before we can "do Christianity." What, according to the passage, am I constrained to believe? How is my view of God shaped? How is my understanding of the seriousness of sin expanded? What promises are there on which to stake my security?

The second area for reflection involves how we *live*. James exhorts his readers to "be doers of the Word, and not hearers only" (James 1:22). Our Lord wants to make a difference in our use of time and money, our attitudes, our lifestyle and relationships. A quiet time of reflection will open our lives to his wisdom and instruction.

**SUMMARY:** Observation, Interpretation & Application

The diagram below visualizes the three steps and two bridges of inductive Bible study. Upon reading a passage you begin on the left with a great amount of facts to observe. Those facts are sifted for meaning with a series of "W questions." When the "light comes on" as to the point of the passage, test that tentative conclusion until you are reasonably certain about the passage's interpretation -- its "diamond."

Now your study comes to the crossroads and enters into the 20th century. One basic interpretation opens up to a myriad of potential implications and applications based on the passage's main point. You then conclude your study with personal reflection as to how the passage should affect your own faith and life. All that is left is actually carrying through on your application!



The written Word of God, when effectively studied and applied, opens up transforming dimensions of life in God's kingdom. As we step out onto this new landscape, we do so at the invitation of the living Word of God, even Jesus Christ himself. He will be our guide on this grand adventure.