

CALVARY BIBLE CHURCH

How to Do an Overview Observation: What do I see?

Steps for completing an Overview of an entire
book of the bible

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The basic first steps for studying a book of the Bible (other than historical books) is to complete an Overview of the entire book in order to establish context. This booklet contains the basic steps for completing an Overview. An Overview can be basic or it can be very thorough, depending on the time allotted for study and the needs of the bible student. Establishing context, understanding background information about the book and the writing of it, and examining any pertinent historical and cultural background in order to interpret the scriptures within that context is the goal of the Overview.

How to Do an Overview

Observation is the Key: What do I see?

Pray before beginning each day and ask for the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit to see clearly what God's holy words of Scripture actually say. Pray for better observation skills: "Open my eyes, that I may see wonderful things in your law," Psalm 119: 18 (NIV).

Useful hint: If you are not provided with a working copy, make your own. Copy and paste the biblical text from an online bible site such as biblegateway.com and make a working copy with wide margins and double-spacing. Or use a software program that allows you to mark up a text on your computer. Marking the text allows you to write what you see as you see it.

Why complete an Overview?

Scripture should be interpreted according to its context, not by pulling out random verses in order to "interpret" them according to our own intentions. The context of each verse, paragraph, and chapter must be determined in order to make correct interpretation. We must put each verse within the context of its paragraph, each paragraph within the context of its chapter, each chapter within the context of the book, and each book within the context of the events surrounding its writing and the historical and cultural events which also served as the catalyst or background information for the writing. Following a method of study steps done in a certain order helps us to guarantee that we interpret according to context.

What is the foundation of an Overview?

"The more time you spend in **observation**, the less time you will need to spend in interpretation, and the more accurate will be your results. The less time you spend in observation, the more time you will need to spend in interpretation, and the less accurate will be your results."¹

Thorough Observation is the key to establishing context. To do this ask **who, what, when, where, why,** and **how** of the text both during Step One: The Overview and during Step Two: The Chapter Study. Always look for the obvious. Slow down to see what is actually there in the text, not what you *think* is there. Repeated significant words and phrases which are key to understanding the text are always important. A key word or phrase is one that is crucial to what the author is communicating and unlocks the meaning of the text.

Historical/Biblical Setting: Though it is tempting to find this background information in a reference tool, it is far more useful and will be retained in your memory better if you do the work of discovery yourself by focusing on the people mentioned in a letter/epistle. Think of it

¹ Howard G. & William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 43.

as an intriguing mystery which you must solve. Examining all the cross references of each person mentioned, including the author and/or specific recipients, will usually reveal to you the historical/biblical setting or background of a book. This is one of the first tasks we will complete in the Overview.

Geographical & Cultural Background Information: As you complete any of this investigation, if it becomes obvious that you need to know some cultural or geographical information in order to understand what is going on in the passage, then pause to examine reputable reference material about cultural, extra-biblical, and geographical background information which affects this particular book. Compare this with what you find as you make your own observations. Good sources: “The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia,” Eerdmans and “The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary,” Moody Press.

Determine the type of Literature: History, Poetry, Prophecy, Letter, Biographical, Doctrinal, or a combination of several of these. To find how the type of biblical literature you are studying is classified use a bible reference tool if you are unsure. A handy reference tool is “How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth,” by Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, or “The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Abridged Edition,” Zondervan, Barker & Kohlenberger III.

To Begin: First reading of the book. Read thoughtfully. Read like you’ve never read it before. Use the margins.

1. **Read through the entire book thoughtfully and determine what the key words and phrases are for the entire book.** A key word or phrase is one that is crucial to understanding the meaning of the text. It is usually repeated in the book. Jot down key words in the margin as you come to them.
2. **Also notice the people mentioned and make note of them in the margin.**
3. During this initial reading of the book, **write your questions to investigate further in the margins.**
4. **Notice things you want to study in greater detail later and make a note in the margin.**
5. **(See the information on outlining, pg. 5)**

Now, take apart the text further to observe more. Your focus: What do I see?

_____ **Mark people with unique marks for each person or group of people**

- **Read through the entire book again and as you do mark specific people, each in a separate way**
- What people? Who is the author? Who are the recipients? Are some people praised (the “good” guys)? Are there people in opposition (the “bad” guys)?
- Write these people in your notebook or in the margin of your working copy with space to make a list about them

_____ **Make a simple list of all you observe about each person**

- These lists should include chapter and verse for future reference
- Examine other places in scripture that these same people are mentioned. Use a concordance to find them. Add this to your information about each person. This helps you determine the biblical/historical context of the book.
- What do you already know about the people mentioned?
- Is there any instruction given to a person that tells more about the purpose of the letter?

_____ **Mark Key Words**

- **Read through the entire book again and as you do mark key or significant words or phrases, each in a different way**
- What key or significant words? Repeated words or phrases you noticed which are significant or very important for understanding the meaning of the text and are used throughout the entire book. These repeated ideas, words, or phrases will tell you the theme the author intends to get across in the book. Determine what the most important terms and concepts are.

_____ **Make a simple list of all you observe about each key word**

- These lists should include chapter and verse for future reference
- Identify teaching (doctrine) from these lists and note the doctrinal sections in the margin of text, or in your notebook, for future study.
- Always jot down any possible application to your own life to investigate further.

Organize your thoughts:

_____ **Assign preliminary Chapter Titles to each Chapter.** These can contain as few or as many words as are necessary for you to feel you can look at the title and know what is contained within that particular chapter. You can alter these titles after you actually study each chapter.

_____ **Assign a Theme which summarizes the entire book.** This can be a few words, or as long as a paragraph and should include the author's intended theme or purpose. The key words you discovered should help you figure out the key theme of the book.

_____ **Organize all your work on the Overview by summarizing the book**

- Make a section in your notebook listing:
 - The theme of the entire book
 - The theme of each chapter
 - Author – what you learned about him
 - Key Words
 - Purpose of the book
 - Historical Setting of the book
 - Section Themes: In your own words a summary of the theme of each section of larger books.

- **Outline:** Some people find that making an outline opens the text up for them. A simple outline based on your Chapter Themes/Titles could be made at this point.
 - **Some find it helpful to complete a word-for-word outline of each chapter as they move through each chapter study.** If you are the type of person who benefits from this type of structural work, prepare this initial outline skeleton by filling in the theme of the entire book with your assigned themes for each chapter as Roman numerals under the theme of the entire book. Then you can add each chapter word-for-word under the Romans numerals, with each new paragraph being categorized by a letter of the alphabet.
 - **Other people find that it helps them to break down the text from the first day they begin to study a book or section of the Bible.** Experiment with outline forms or simply breaking down the text in a way that makes grammatical structure more obvious to see if this helps you.
 - **Example:** Acts 1:8 (NIV)
 - But you will receive power
 - when the Holy Spirit comes on you;
 - and you will be My witnesses
 - in Jerusalem,
 - and in all Judea
 - and Samaria,
 - and to the ends of the earth.

Wrap it up and head into the individual chapter studies:

Examine references such as bible dictionaries or commentaries for additional historical and background information about the book. Do not examine interpretative information or commentary on the meaning of the text at this point in your study, instead only verify the historical and background information you were able to discover in your Overview, and gather any additional information you find helpful.

This completes Step One: The Overview. You are now ready to move on to Step Two: The Chapter Study. You will complete a Chapter Study of each chapter, beginning with observation of that particular chapter while keeping in mind the framework and context established during the Overview. This will then move you on to Interpretation within the context of the book and its setting.