

# Inductive Bible Study

By David L. Miner

Twenty-first Century Believers are so fortunate! We have 2100 years of thought, research, study, and analysis behind every minute spent in Bible reading and Bible study. We have entire books written on almost every thought and verse in the Bible. But that is often a problem for us, too.

Few Believers today can read a verse of Scripture without seeing that verse in the light of all that thought and analysis. Few Believers today can read a verse of Scripture without hearing the many sermons we have already heard preached on that verse.

Few Believers today can read a verse of Scripture and see what that verse states without it being colored by what they already believe.

***Inductive Bible Study*** is a method of seeing what is there on the page without all the interpretations we have already heard on that passage. ***Inductive Bible Study*** is a process of reading what is in Scripture, NOT what we believe is in Scripture.

I cannot tell you how many discussions in which I have participated where one or more of the participants will “quote” from Scripture a passage that does not exist. The participant did not intend to invent a passage, but instead quoted what he or she believed Scripture meant. What they “quoted” was really what they believed about what Scripture meant. They could not read what was there without it being colored by their doctrinal views. And the more important to them their doctrinal view being discussed, the more that view was colored the words they saw in Scripture.

We have all heard from others, or even experienced for ourselves, that Scripture is a matter of interpretation, or that there are as many interpretations of any specific passage as there are people in a discussion of that passage.

***If there are multiple interpretations of a specific Scripture passage, then most of those interpretations are wrong.***

And where there are multiple interpretations of a specific Scripture passage, it is almost always a result of the participants *NOT* seeing what is there, but instead, of participants remembering what they have been taught that passage means.

**Inductive Bible Study** is a method of getting around what we have heard about a passage and instead, seeing what that passage actually says. It is only after we have seen what a passage says that we can then arrive at what a passage means. And it is only after discerning what a passage means that we can apply that passage to our lives.

There can be many ways to apply a passage to our lives, but there should only be one interpretation of what a passage means.

And there is a clear and often astounding benefit of first seeing what is there, and that benefit is the ability to see and hear what the original people listening to that passage saw and heard. This will give us such a deeper insight into the passage that the meaning of Scripture will impact on us in a deeper way than we ever imagined. We will gain insight into what the writer of Scripture intended us to see and hear; insight that will affect our lives and our walks with God in more powerful ways than expected.

I am not saying that what you have heard in the past is wrong or bad. I am merely saying that it is far more important that we hear what Scripture actually says than it is for us to hear what others tell us it means.

No matter how diverse the group, every Inductive Bible Study in which I have participated has resulted in all participants agreeing with what Scripture actually says. And unity in the discernment of what Scripture says is an important accomplishment. It is the first step in discerning what a passage actually means.

Each book in Scripture was written as a book or a letter - a document complete in itself. There were no chapter and verse designations; they were added a few hundred years later. The document was intended to be read as a book or a letter. For an example, the Gospel According to Mark was probably the first of the books to be written in what is now our New Testament, and was written about 20 years after Jesus died. When it was completed, there were no other New Testament books to be used as a cross reference. When those people read the Gospel of Mark, there were no libraries to consult filled with books, articles and encyclopedias intended to interpret what Mark meant. There was only the Gospel of Mark. And Mark was completed and in circulation when many of the people mentioned in the book were still living. These people clearly knew what happened when Jesus wandered around the Middle East teaching and working wonders.

When the people began reading what Mark wrote, they had only two sources of input: the words Mark wrote, and the responses of the witnesses to what Mark wrote about. What the early Christians heard and read from Mark is a strong indication of what Mark meant when he wrote it. So we want to be very aware of what they said and how they responded, especially those in the book itself.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Let's look at the boat ride taken by Jesus and his disciples, as recorded in the last part of the fourth chapter of Mark.

**Mark 4:35-41 (NASB)**

*On that day, when evening came, He said to them, "Let us go over to the other side." Leaving the crowd, they took Him along with them in the boat, just as He was; and other boats were with Him.*

*And there arose a fierce gale of wind, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up. Jesus Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?"*

*And He got up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Hush, be still." And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm.*

*And He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They became very much afraid and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?"*

What we see here is a simple story of people in a boat during a storm. Any of you who have been in a small boat when a serious storm struck know the feeling of powerlessness and fear that are so difficult to resist. And the disciples were normal people like you and me.

The storm struck and the boat was being tossed around by the choppy seas, and it began to sink. Many of the fishing boats of the villagers these men knew had sunk in the Sea of Galilee, and they were certain this fate awaited them. Yet Jesus was asleep in the stern of the boat. The disciples woke him and rebuked him for his apparent lack of concern. Jesus responded by rebuking them for their lack of faith.

If you have been a Christian for more than a week, you have almost certainly heard a number of sermons on this passage. I would be willing to bet at least 25 cents that the sermons you heard dwelt on the power that Jesus has over nature as Creator of the universe, or the need to trust Jesus with all aspects of your life.

But is this what the story is about?

Does Jesus rebuke the disciples because they did not believe he had power over storms in particular or over nature in general? If you think this, then point out the passage in Mark that states Jesus has power over storms in the Sea of Galilee, or over nature in general. If Jesus had told them of this power, then he would naturally rebuke them for not believing he had this power.

But up to this point in his ministry, Jesus never explained that he had power over any aspect of nature at all.

What had Jesus in his early ministry taught them or displayed for them? Well, he taught that the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah actually referred to Jesus himself. And he taught how the O.T. prophecies about the Son of Man also referred to Jesus himself. In addition, he demonstrated that he could heal all sorts of diseases, including demonic possession. And when Christ's family wanted to take him away from the crowd because they thought he was insane, he taught that anyone doing God's will was to be considered kin to Jesus. But not once had he taught or demonstrated that he had power over nature.

Jesus would not have rebuked his disciples for not having faith in his power over nature if he had never told them he had power over nature. No one can have faith in something about which he or she knows nothing. One can only have faith in something that one knows or have been told.

***The failure of the disciples was to believe that what Jesus said he would do, he would actually do.***

Jesus had said, "Let us go over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee." The storm came up and took the attention of the disciples off what Jesus said he would do and placed that attention on the storm that seemed to be in the way of Jesus doing what he said he would do.

This story was about believing in Jesus and what he says no matter what life throws at you.

And this story is just as relevant and just as important to us today as it was to the disciples at that time. No matter what you are facing in life, there is a passage in the Bible that tells you what God wants you to believe. Look for that, believe it, live like it is true, and you will see victory.

But don't look for a promise that doesn't apply to you and then claim it as yours, because God has absolutely no obligation to honor that promise for you. And, NO, not every promise in the Bible is given to you.

***Now, notice what I did there.***

First, we looked at what was actually there in the Bible. Then we saw what was NOT in the Bible. Then we saw what the disciples needed to do but did not do. Last, we saw we need to do and what we do not need to do. This is ***Inductive Bible Study***.

So let's take a detailed look at the presuppositions and the procedures that make up what is called ***Inductive Bible Study***.

## **Basic Assumptions**

### What it is:

- The Word of God is inspired by God
- The Word of God is intended to inform us about God, about mankind, and about the relationships between both
- The Word of God is intended to teach us (that means change us)
- The Word of God is physically written by different individuals, reflecting their different viewpoints and personalities, all based on the same message
- The Word of God is required to understand the Word of God

### What it is NOT:

- The Word of God is not a history book, although it is historically accurate
- The Word of God is not a text book, although several generations of Americans have been taught to read and write using the Bible
- The Word of God is not an owner's guide, although it tells us how to live and how to relate to others and to God
- The Word of God is not a positive mental attitude message, although a belief in what the Bible says will improve one's attitudes
- The Word of God is not designed to make you feel good, although if you believe the Bible you will feel so much better about yourself
- The Word of God is not an investment guide, although about one-third of Christ's teachings was about money and finance

## **Basic Methodology**

- **Observation**
  1. observe what is actually stated in the text (**not** what you have always thought this passage meant, **not** what others have said about this passage, **not** what commentators and teachers have said about this passage. . . )
  2. consider word usage, imagery, analogies, parables, etc.
  3. imagine what those who were hearing or seeing or reading this for the first time, what **they** understood this to mean
  4. ask "WHY?" often
    - . . . Why were those **specific** words used?
    - . . . Why did the people react that way?
    - . . . Why was there not more information given?
  5. look for patterns, repetition, sequential or episodic teaching

- **Interpretation**
  1. What other passages from earlier in this book can add meaning to this passage?
  2. What Old Testament passages can add meaning to this passage?
  3. What historical events and social issues or customs of that time can add meaning to this passage?
  4. What did those 1<sup>st</sup> century people understand this to mean?
  
- **Application**
  1. How can I apply this passage to my life?
  2. How can I apply this passage to my relationships with others?
  3. What should I change about my life?
  4. What new insight into God can I get from this passage?
  5. In light of what I have learned from this passage, are there any beliefs or doctrines should I change?

## **Basic Rules**

- don't read ahead
- don't use other books of the Bible that were not written before the book you are studying
- don't use other people's teachings until you see and understand what is there
- don't let that which you do not understand confuse that which you do understand.
- IT'S OKAY TO NOT UNDERSTAND SOMETHING!

## **Basic Goals**

- to understand what God meant for those who actually saw or heard this passage in real life to understand
- to understand God, and understand oneself, and understand the relationship between the two better
- to understand how God wants me to apply this to my life today (or maybe soon...)

**Inductive Bible Study** is the best method to understand what Scripture actually means. If properly followed, **Inductive Bible Study** will almost always lead people to see and understand what Scripture in general, and any given passage in particular, actually means. **Inductive Bible Study** will result in the vast majority of readers coming to the same conclusion about specific passages and what they mean.

There may be many different applications to any specific Scripture passage, but there should be only one meaning to that passage. After all, Scripture is not a matter of one's own personal interpretation.

***Inductive Bible Study*** suggests many applications of a single meaning.

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