

PART 2

Understanding What the Bible Is Actually Saying



WHEN I FIRST HEARD THE WORD *LISTICAL*, I thought it was referring to some uncomfortable disease. An editor for a website I was writing for had asked me to consider more listicals—“You know, articles you write in list form. Top ten ways to avoid anxiety . . . top five ways to move through transition.” She explained to me that the attention span of people is short, and by promising them a list, you hook them into reading all the way through the article. On one hand, I get it—I am that person with the short attention span. On the other hand, maybe a listical actually is an uncomfortable symptom of a real soul sickness.

Listicals are just one example of the quick-fix culture we are steeped in, impacting our ability to hang in there when information can't be distilled down to one bullet point. In this bite-size info world, some of the powers of observation and learning that we practiced in middle school have faded away, lost in the clamor and noise of clickbait information.

The Bible is not that.

The Bible is history, fine literature, poetry, memoir, letter. It is written with nuance and imagery. It is rich, but it can be an acquired taste. So what we want to do over the next five days is rediscover the powers of observation that we used to know—as kids or students—and apply that sharpness and wonder to God's Word. We are going to do that by using observation tools and taking our own notes—yes, making our own lists—and following those discoveries to truth. Later in the journal, we will put all of this together into a cohesive plan, but for now, let's just take it one verse at a time.

Remember that our Bible study method, the Alive Method, is a way of reading the Bible to understand our purposes in God's plan. We do that by reading the Word and applying the steps. Step 1 is “What does it say?” To really understand what it says, we want to look closely at each level of writing—sentences, paragraphs, and

larger sections of thought. We are going to start on the *sentence* level with the powers of observation that bring us closer to meaning. What we are doing here is not Bible-specific—this is literature-specific. We are applying the powers of observation that you probably learned in eighth-grade English. This is not the work of seminary students—this is the work of people who want to read for understanding. That means *we can all do it*. You don't need prior knowledge or experience or a bunch of scholarly books on your shelf. You just need the power of observation that God has already given you.

Okay! Here we go. Our new breath prayer for Part 2 is

*Jesus Christ,
Son of God,
Sharpen my mind
To receive your Word.*

DAY 6

TOOL # 1:

Make a List

Breath Prayer

*Jesus Christ,
Son of God,
Sharpen my mind
To receive your Word.*

Opening Thought

We've spent the last days building a firm foundation for the reasons to understand the Bible as well as doing a quick flyover of the Alive Method. Here is where we really get to work! Now we will turn to practicing the “easy win” of Bible study. We will be developing our crucial power of observation—turning our minds toward sharp thinking and relearning the fine art of asking questions for understanding. This is one of the most enjoyable components of discovery. By the end of this section, you are going to feel empowered to look at Scripture in a whole new way.

All of us use our observation skills every day. We use them to process whether to make a right on red, whether to choose the drive-through or go inside and take out. We use them to prioritize information and make decisions. These skills come in handy when we are just trying to process what a text says. My favorite list of observation skills comes from *Grasping God's Word*, a textbook often used

by Bible colleges and beginning seminarians. Let's start with three basic observation skills that help when reading the Bible:⁶

Repetition of Words

Look specifically at words (and phrases) that repeat, and then look around the section you are reading for the larger scope of that word repeating. Obviously, a word repeating gives us a clue that it's an important part of understanding the passage.

Compare/Contrast and If-Thens

Look for places where two items or ideas are placed in relationship with each other—either as similar or different. In a teaching passage from one of Paul's letters, it could be a comparison between two ideas. In a story, it could be a comparison between two characters. Also look for statements with an "if-then" in them, or phrases where you could add "if-then" to the sentence and it would make sense—an implied "if-then."

Imagery/Figures of Speech

Look for places where words are used in other than a literal sense. What pictures are being painted by the use of these figures of speech?

Let's get to work! We are going to apply these three skills, starting with this passage from 1 John:

⁷Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

¹¹*Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* ¹²*No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

1 JOHN 4:7-12

Okay, here's a softball: Repetition. Do you notice anything that this passage may be about—say, a word that repeats . . . a ton.

*I'll take an L, Pat.*⁷

Word is: L ___ !

Bonus Round:

How many times does that word repeat in the passage? _____

I think we get the message. This passage is obviously about love, and the writer of this passage has a few things to say about it. I mean, a lot to say. Didn't even know someone could use the word so many times in one place. Obviously, he wants us to grasp an important concept here. So let's look closer at the word.

Is *love* always used the same way? Does it always have the same recipient? Is it always paired with the same words? No, no, nope. There is so much here! When we begin to observe just this one word, we hit the jackpot. *Love* is used to describe multiple parties in this passage. It is used as a noun and a verb. There seems to be a relationship between love and other things—knowing God, our relationship with Jesus, and how we love one another.

So now let's look for word pairs—compare/contrast and if-thens.

Underline all the word pairs or phrases that go together that you can find in the passage. (*Hint: Look for “but” . . . and “also,” which is the writer's fancy way of linking a comparison.*)

What is the result of God's love for us (v. 11)?

So we know that love is used multiple ways, that it's linked to both receiving love from God and giving love to one another, and that there seems to be a process of understanding how we know God based on how we experience love—all that, just by practicing two skills of observation!

All right! You did it! Look what just happened over the last ten minutes. You read one passage of Scripture deeply. You probably read it over and over again to try and pull out these levels of understanding. Something else happened too, I bet: You see a lot of things you don't understand at a deeper level. There are words and phrases being used that aren't easy to grasp at first reading. It's not that you don't understand the words—it's just that the deeper meaning takes time and work to really comprehend. But here's the beauty of the Bible. Look at the first phrase, which feels, well, loving:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.

You could stop there. You could read that and walk away today with an important truth. But the richness of learning about this *God of love* comes from really understanding how the next few verses expound on what this love is, how it works, and how we experience it. It takes work, but it's worth doing. Way to go!

As we close today, check out this passage, full of imagery. (If it's easier to pay attention this way, underline the imagery that jumps out at you.) It's another familiar place where we learn of God's love and comfort:

¹*The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.*

²*He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,*

³*he refreshes my soul.*

*He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.*

*4Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.*

PSALM 23:1-4

Friend, so much to learn and understand! But go today in the knowledge that we are earnestly seeking the God of all love and comfort—our Good Shepherd, who leads us into rest, refreshment, and the comfort of his presence today.

P.S. I've marked up the 1 John passage for you with my own observations on page 184 in the back of this journal.