

A man in a suit is sitting at a desk, looking down at a document. He is holding a magnifying glass over the document. The desk is cluttered with papers, a pen, and a small container. The background is a window with a view of a city at night.

## Session 3

# Observation

## Learning to See What Is Actually in the Text

Most of us have clicked "I agree" without reading what we agreed to. We signed up for social media, scrolled past dense legal language, and clicked accept without hesitation. Months later, many were surprised to learn their photos could be used in ways they never consciously approved. The clause was always there. The problem was not deception. The problem was speed.

# What Is Observation?

**Observation is the disciplined practice of slowing down and paying attention to the details God has already placed in the text.**

It is not academic. It is attentional. It does not require advanced degrees, original languages, or special tools. It requires patience, humility, and restraint.

## Most Neglected

Observation is the most neglected step in Bible study

## Most Important

It determines the quality of everything that follows

## Most Foundational

Interpretation rises or falls on observation



## The Governing Principle

**You can't understand  
what you haven't first  
observed.**

When observation is weak, interpretation becomes guesswork and application becomes preference. When observation is strong, clarity begins to emerge without being forced.

# Observation Is a Skill We Already Use

Observation is not a new skill. It is something we practice every day when accuracy matters.



## In Conversations

We listen for tone, repetition, pauses, emotional cues, and what is left unsaid



## While Driving

We observe traffic signals, speed changes, lane markings, and patterns that signal danger



## In Text Messages

We notice word choice, punctuation, timing, and context



## In Legal Documents

We slow down to read definitions, conditions, exceptions, and sequence

# The Same Thing Happens with Scripture

We rush to the promise. We rush to the application. We rush to what we think the passage means. Later we are confused or frustrated because Scripture does not seem to do what we expected.

Not because God's Word failed us, but because we never slowed down long enough to see what was actually there.

## THE CORE PROBLEM

**Before we ask what a passage means or how it applies, we must first learn to see what it actually says.**

# The Real Challenge

**Observation is not difficult. Observation is inconvenient.**

We already possess the skills needed for careful observation. What we lack is not ability but patience. The challenge is not learning something new but slowing down long enough to apply what we already know.

## The Truth

Speed is the enemy of observation

# The Training Passage

Philippians 2:1-4 (NIV)

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.



## Step 1: Read Slowly and Repeatedly

This step exists because speed is the enemy of observation. Most people believe they are reading Scripture when they are actually recognizing it. Familiar words create the illusion of understanding. Because a passage sounds known, the reader assumes it has been seen.

Reading slowly and repeatedly exposes that assumption and forces us to confront how much we thought we knew before we actually looked.

# The Diagnostic Question

## Imposing My Pace

Rushed reading that skips observation



## Allowing Text to Set Pace

Careful observation before interpretation

## Have I allowed the text to set the pace, or am I imposing my pace on the text?

If the answer is that we are rushing, then observation has not yet begun. Everything that follows will be distorted, because interpretation will be built on incomplete seeing.

# We Already Know This Principle

In everyday life, we understand this instinctively. When something is truly important, we slow down.

## **Medical Instructions**

We reread because dosage matters

## **Legal Agreements**

We reread because missing a clause  
can cost us

## **Emotional Messages**

We reread because tone is not always  
obvious

Slowing down is not a lack of intelligence. It is a recognition that meaning takes time to surface.

# What Happens When We Read Slowly

01

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## Notice Structure

We begin to notice sentence length and structure

03

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## Expose Assumptions

We become aware of where our assumptions were filling in gaps

02

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## See Repetition

We see repetition that was invisible before

04

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## Distinguish Truth

We distinguish what the text says from what we've always heard

# What Belongs in This Step

## Include

- Multiple readings of the same passage
- Attention to sentence length, rhythm, and flow
- Noticing repeated phrases without explaining them
- Awareness of where familiarity replaces attention

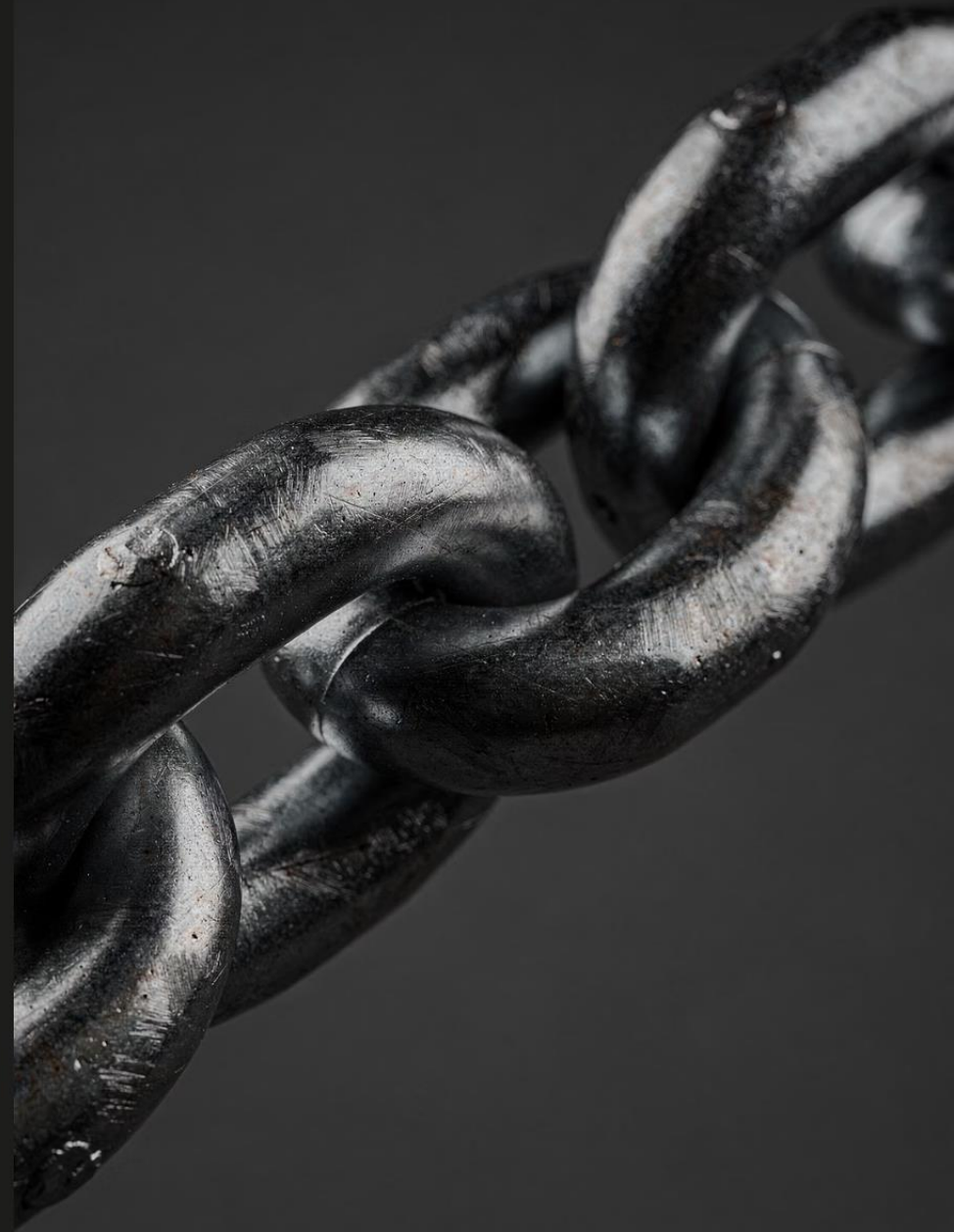
## Exclude

- Defining meaning
- Explaining theology
- Drawing conclusions
- Making application

This step protects interpretation by ensuring that interpretation is built on what is actually present in the text, not on memory, tradition, or assumption.

## Step 2: Pay Attention to Connectors and Transitions

This step exists because biblical authors think in complete arguments, not isolated sentences. Connectors and transitions are the signals authors use to tell us how ideas relate to one another. Ignoring them guarantees misunderstanding, no matter how sincere the reader is.



# The Diagnostic Question

**What logical relationship is the author signaling between ideas right now?**

If we cannot answer that question, then we are not yet observing carefully. We are reading content without tracking thought.

In everyday life, we already depend on connectors constantly. Words like because, but, therefore, however, so that, and if change how we understand everything that follows.

# The Sleep Illustration

**Imagine someone says, "I didn't sleep last night. Therefore, I called in sick."**

If you ignore the word "therefore," you might think these are two unrelated facts. The connector tells you that the second statement is the result of the first.

Without paying attention to the connector, you misunderstand the relationship. Biblical texts use connectors in exactly the same way.



# Common Connector Categories



## Conclusion

therefore, so, for this reason



## Cause

because, since, for



## Contrast

but, however, yet



## Purpose

so that, in order that



## Condition

if, unless



## Sequence

then, now, when

# Observing "Therefore" in Philippians 2:1

**Therefore** if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.

The word therefore immediately tells us three things through observation alone:

- 1** This passage is not starting a new topic. It is continuing a thought already in progress.
- 2** The author believes something previously said now requires a response.
- 3** We are not allowed to interpret this passage correctly without looking backward.

# A Faithful Observation Statement

□ Paul begins the passage with "therefore," indicating that the instructions that follow are a conclusion drawn from earlier material and cannot be understood apart from what precedes them.

Notice what that statement does not do:

- It does not explain unity.
- It does not define humility.
- It does not apply the passage to church life.
- It simply states what the connector tells us about how the passage functions.



# Step 3: Observe What Comes Before and After

This step exists because meaning is shaped by placement. Many readers believe they are observing Scripture when they are actually isolating it. They read a paragraph, feel confident they understand it, and never ask how it fits into the surrounding argument.

# The Diagnostic Question

**Where does this passage sit in the author's flow of thought, and what role does it play there?**

If we cannot answer that question, then we are not yet observing fully, no matter how familiar the passage feels.

**Scripture was not written in fragments. It was written as connected conversation.**

# The Overheard Conversation Illustration



Imagine overhearing someone say, "So I finally told him no."

Without knowing what led up to that decision or what followed it, you cannot accurately understand the statement. Was the refusal reasonable? Was it overdue? Was it impulsive? The sentence itself does not tell you. The surrounding context does.

Scripture works the same way.

# What Comes Before Philippians 2:1–4

In Philippians 1, Paul emphasizes partnership in the gospel, shared suffering, and unity of purpose. He speaks about standing firm together, contending as one for the faith, and facing opposition without fear.

The dominant themes are communal identity and shared mission under pressure.

**Partnership in the Gospel**

**Shared Suffering**

**Unity of Purpose**

**Standing Firm Together**

# What Comes After Philippians 2:1–4

Beginning in Philippians 2:6, Paul presents Christ's humility, obedience, and self-emptying. This section is widely recognized as one of the most theologically rich portions of the letter.

At the observation stage, we do not explain Christology. We simply observe that this example follows directly after the instructions in verses 1–4.

# The Bridge Function

## Philippians 2:1-4

Acts as a bridge calling for unity and humble regard.

## Communal Struggle

Recognize tensions and shared weakness in the community.

## Christ's Example

Model of humility that resolves division and inspires unity.

Philippians 2:1–4 sits between a discussion of communal struggle and a presentation of Christ's example. That placement alone tells us something important through observation: this passage is functioning as a bridge.

It connects lived experience in the church with the model of Christ that follows.

# A Faithful Observation Statement

- This passage follows Paul's discussion of unity and shared struggle and precedes his presentation of Christ's humility, suggesting it functions as a transition between communal experience and Christ's example.

Notice how restrained that statement is. It does not explain why humility matters. It does not define unity. It does not tell anyone what to do. It simply states where the passage sits and what role it appears to play.



## **Step 4: Identify Repetition and Structural Patterns**

This step exists because authors repeat what they want readers to notice. Many readers assume repetition is accidental or stylistic. In reality, repetition is one of the clearest signals of emphasis an author can give.

# The Coach Illustration



Think about a coach addressing a team before a game. If the coach says, "Protect the ball" once, it is advice. If the coach says it five times, it is the point.

No player walks away wondering what mattered most. Scripture uses repetition in exactly the same way.

# Observing Repetition in Philippians 2:1–2

Therefore **if** you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, **if** any comfort from his love, **if** any common sharing in the Spirit, **if** any tenderness and compassion, **then** make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being **one** in spirit and of **one** mind.

## Four "If" Statements

Creates deliberate rhythm and signals building argument

## One "Then"

Establishes conditional structure moving from condition to response

## Repeated "One"

Narrows focus toward unity: one spirit, one mind

# The If–Then–One Structure

These repeated elements form a clear if–then–one structure. That is not interpretation. That is observation. We are naming what the text is doing before we ask why it is doing it.

## **Observation Statement**

The passage is structured around a repeated series of "if" statements followed by a "then" conclusion and reinforced with repeated "one" language, indicating a tightly organized argument.

# Step 5: Trace Logical Flow and Contrast

This step exists because biblical authors often teach by movement, not by definition. Many readers assume that meaning is found primarily in isolated statements. As a result, they read commands without noticing how the author arrived there.



# The Driving Instructor Illustration



Imagine a driving instructor saying, "Don't slam the brakes at high speed. Ease into them smoothly."

The instruction only makes sense because of the contrast. If you isolate either statement, you miss the full meaning. Scripture frequently teaches in the same way.

# Observing Contrast in Philippians 2:3–4

**Do nothing** out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. **Rather** in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests **but** each of you to the interests of the others.

1

## Absolute Prohibition

"Do nothing" leaves no room for exception

2

## Contrast Word

"Rather" signals replacement, not addition

3

## Parallel Phrasing

Selfish ambition vs. humility; own interests vs. others' interests

# A Faithful Observation Statement

- The author moves from an absolute prohibition against selfish ambition to a contrasting command that replaces it with humility and concern for others, using parallel language to reinforce the contrast.

Notice what that statement does not do. It does not explain why humility is better. It does not tell the reader how to practice it. It simply describes how the author constructs the instruction.



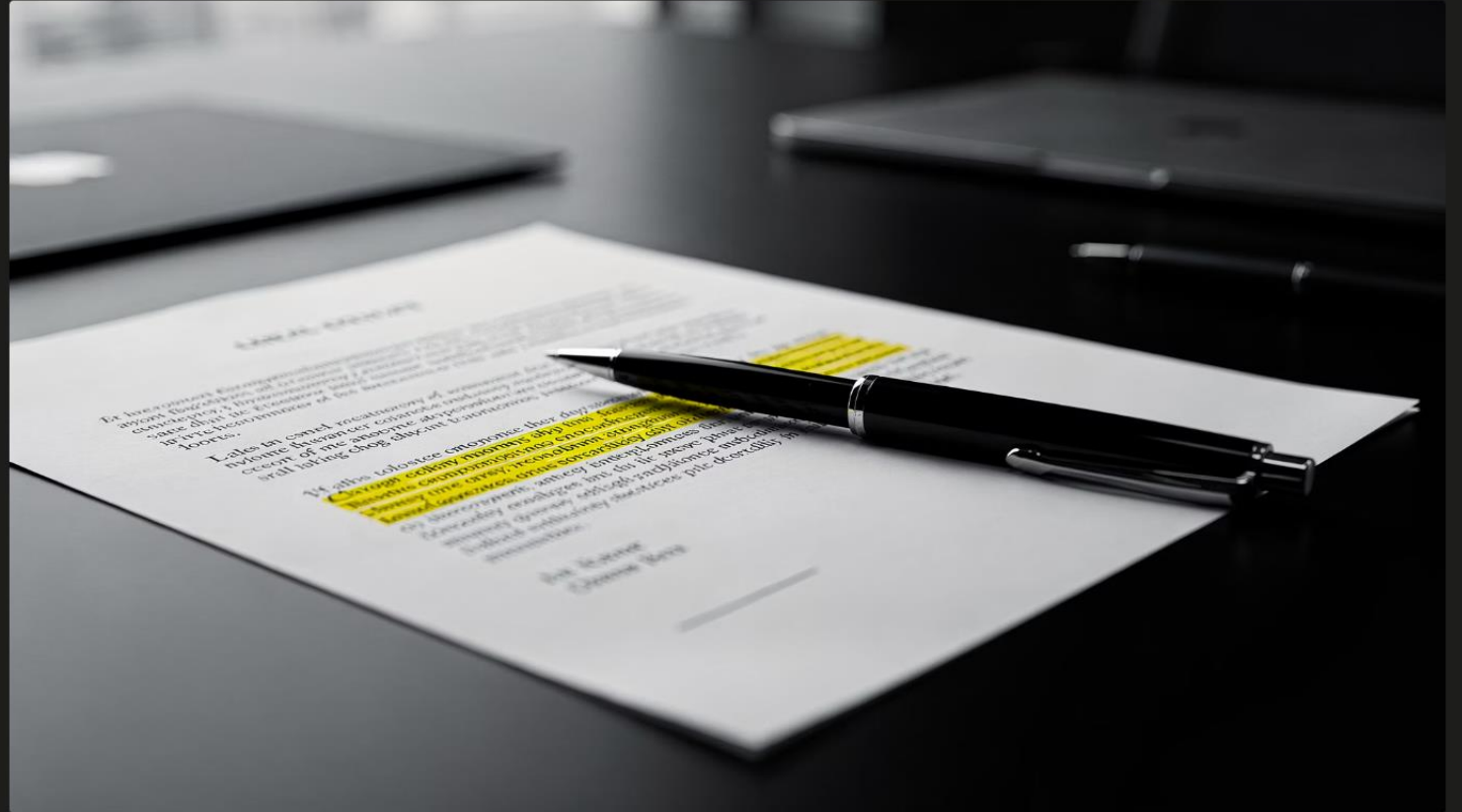
## Step 6: Notice Key Words and Their Function

This step exists because not all words carry equal weight. Key words are the terms an author relies on to carry meaning, connect ideas, and advance the argument. When readers fail to notice key words, they often miss what the author is actually emphasizing.

# The Contract Illustration

Imagine reading a contract where the word "unless" appears in the middle of a paragraph. Everything before that word sounds promising. Everything after it changes the conditions.

If you miss "unless," you misunderstand the entire agreement. Scripture uses key words in the same way.



# Key Words in Philippians 2:1–3



## Sharing (Koinōnia)

Refers to participation or shared life, not surface-level connection. Paul's appeal is rooted in something believers already share.



## Like-minded (Phroneō)

Refers to one's orientation or way of thinking. The unity Paul calls for is internal before it is external.



## Humility (Tapeinophrosynē)

Literally refers to lowliness of mind toward others. The contrast Paul introduces is about posture, not self-worth.

# A Faithful Observation Statement

- ❑ The passage relies on key relational and mindset terms such as sharing, like-minded, and humility, indicating that the author's concern centers on internal orientation and communal posture rather than isolated actions.

Notice what that statement does not do. It does not define Christian humility in detail. It does not explain how to practice unity. It simply states which words carry the argument and what role they appear to play.

## Step 7: Ask the 5 W's and 1 H

This step exists because unasked questions quietly turn into assumptions. Many readers move into interpretation too quickly, not because they are careless, but because they stop asking questions as soon as a passage feels familiar. When curiosity shuts down, assumptions take over.



# The Accident Investigation Illustration



When an accident occurs, investigators do not begin with conclusions. They begin with questions. They reconstruct reality before explaining responsibility.

Scripture observation requires the same patience. We are reconstructing what the text is doing before explaining what it means.

# Why Ask Questions?

## **Diagnostic Question:**

Have I asked enough questions to actually see what is happening in the text, or am I satisfied too quickly?



### **Avoid Assumptions**

Unasked questions quietly turn into preconceived notions, filling gaps with prior knowledge or instinct.



### **Remain Learners**

This discipline helps us stay in the learner phase longer, resisting the urge to jump to conclusions.



### **Reconstruct Reality**

Like investigators, we aim to reconstruct what the text *\*is doing\** before explaining what it *\*means\**.

When curiosity shuts down, assumptions take over. By diligently asking questions, we ensure our observations are based on the text itself, not our own interpretations.

# WHO Questions



## Observe Participants, Relationships, and Scope

WHO questions train us to observe participants, relationships, and scope. They are crucial for understanding the context of any text.

- Who is speaking or writing?
- Who is being addressed directly?
- Who is included in the instruction?
- Who is present but not addressed?
- Who benefits from what is being said?
- Who bears responsibility in the passage?



## Preventing Misapplication

These questions protect us from assuming that every passage speaks to everyone in the same way, preventing misapplication of the text.



## Applying WHO Questions to Philippians 2:1

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ...

- Paul is the speaker.
- The audience is believers in Philippi.
- The instruction is communal, not individual.
- The focus is on relationships within a church context.

At this stage, we have not applied the text to modern church conflict. We have not preached unity. We have simply identified who is involved.

# WHAT Questions

WHAT questions train us to observe actions, commands, prohibitions, and issues. They help us understand the explicit instructions and problems addressed in a passage.

- What is happening in the passage?
- What is being commanded?
- What is being prohibited?
- What problem is being addressed?
- What responses are expected?

These questions push us beyond surface-level reading to pinpoint the specific directives and concerns of the author.

## Applying WHAT Questions to Philippians 2:3–4

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves...

- What is prohibited? **Selfish ambition** and **vain conceit**.
- What is commanded? **Valuing others in humility**.
- What issue is being addressed? **Relational self-centeredness**.

At this stage, we are still observing. We are not explaining why selfish ambition is wrong or why humility is good. We are simply identifying what the text explicitly states.

# WHEN Questions

WHEN questions train us to observe timing and sequence, helping us understand where a passage fits within the author's overall message and what events or arguments precede and follow it.

1

When does this instruction appear in the book?

2

When does this occur in the author's argument?

3

What has just happened?

4

What will happen next?

These questions help us map the textual landscape, ensuring we understand its context before moving to interpretation.

## Applying WHEN Questions to Philippians 2:1–4

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ...

- This instruction appears **early in the letter**.
- It follows Paul's discussion of **gospel partnership and suffering**.
- It precedes the presentation of **Christ's humility** as the ultimate example.

This observation places the passage within the letter's chronological and logical flow, without yet explaining its meaning or application.

# WHERE Questions



## Observe Setting & Scope

WHERE questions train us to observe the setting and scope of the text. They help us understand the situational context and intended audience.

- Where is this taking place geographically?
- Where is this happening relationally?
- Where does this instruction apply within the community?

These questions help us ground the passage in its original environment, preventing us from imposing our own context too quickly.



## Applying to Philippians 2:1–4

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ...

- This instruction is not tied to a specific geographical narrative.
- It is set within the **relational life** of a local church.
- The scope primarily concerns **communal life** among believers.

At this stage, we are simply clarifying the boundaries and environment of the passage without yet interpreting its implications.

# WHY Questions

WHY questions train us to observe purpose and strategic intent without prematurely explaining motives. They help us understand the author's choices in presenting the material.

- Why is this being said now, at this particular point in the text?
- Why does the author place emphasis on this specific point instead of another?
- Why does the author structure the argument or passage in this particular way?
- Why are certain elements included or excluded?

These questions help us uncover the author's strategic choices and underlying motivations, moving beyond superficial reading to grasp the deeper purpose behind the text.

## Applying WHY Questions to Philippians 2:1–4

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ...

- Paul appeals to shared spiritual realities and blessings before issuing commands or instructions.
- He emphasizes unity among believers as a foundational principle before presenting Christ's ultimate example of humility.
- He structures the passage to strategically move from an appeal based on shared experience and divine reality to practical instruction and ultimately to Christ's supreme model.

This observation reveals the strategic and persuasive structure Paul employs, highlighting his carefully planned approach to encourage a specific response from the Philippian church.

# HOW Questions

HOW questions train us to observe the author's **method** and **persuasion**. They reveal the author's choices in presenting ideas and influencing the audience.

- How does the author make the appeal?
- How is the argument structured?
- How does tone function in the passage?

## Applying HOW Questions to Philippians 2:1–4

- Paul reasons **relationally** rather than coercively.
- He motivates obedience through **shared experience**.
- He uses **conditional language** followed by direct commands.

These observations highlight the author's strategic approach, focusing on \*how\* the message is delivered to achieve its intended effect.

# What Belongs and What Does Not

Now we must clarify what belongs in this step and what does not, because this is where readers often drift into interpretation.

## What Belongs in This Step

- Asking structured questions
- Listing observations under each category
- Noting patterns that emerge from the questions

## What Does Not Belong in This Step

- Explaining theological meaning
- Applying the text to modern situations
- Drawing moral conclusions

The goal of this step is not answers. The goal is clarity through disciplined questioning.

# STEP 8: SUMMARIZE OBSERVATIONS

This crucial step determines if your observation process truly succeeded or if interpretation quietly intervened. Many mistake familiarity for careful seeing, leading to premature conclusions.

Summarizing forces us to prove whether we have truly observed the text or already crossed into explanation, theology, or application.

## The Diagnostic Question:

**"Can I restate what the text says without explaining what it means?"**

If the answer is no, then observation is incomplete, regardless of perceived understanding.



# Integrating Observations: A Faithful Statement

This crucial step disciplines us to remain in reporting mode. To summarize observations well, it's essential to understand what truly belongs in an observation summary and what does not, as this is where the tendency to drift into interpretation is highest.

## What Belongs in an Observation Summary

- The flow of thought in the passage
- Repeated words, phrases, or structures
- Logical connections such as if-then relationships, contrasts, or progression
- Who is speaking and who is being addressed
- Where the passage sits in its immediate and broader context

## What Does NOT Belong

- Doctrinal conclusions
- Moral judgments
- Application to modern life
- Explanations of divine intent
- Statements that begin with "this means" or "this teaches us"

By adhering to these guidelines, we ensure our summaries are faithful to the text itself. Now, we're ready to revisit the passage with these distinctions in mind.

# Integrating Observations: A Faithful Statement

**The passage involves Paul addressing a believing community, issuing communal instructions about relational behavior, positioned early in the letter, functioning within church life, structured to motivate obedience through shared experience, and delivered through logical appeal rather than command alone.**

This comprehensive statement synthesizes the insights gained from asking WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY, and HOW questions, providing a rich, descriptive understanding of the text without yet delving into its interpretative meaning or application.