

Discovering the Structural Building Blocks of the Epistle

One of the most exciting things in effective Bible Study is when we begin to discover God's thoughts and the wonderful way He communicates to us in His Word. Just as a building is built from the foundation up, layer by layer and floor by floor the Holy Spirit has used the structure of language to convey His message. Using a simple outline type of format we can begin to discover how God has built His message, thought block upon thought block.

We have read the Epistle many times and continue to read it daily. We have looked generally at the content and answered questions pertaining to the author, readers, etc. We have titled each chapter and paragraph. This has given us an overall understanding of the whole Epistle. Now we are going to study each chapter by its paragraphs and build the Epistle from the ground up. We will always keep in mind the whole Epistle by continuing to read it daily.

There are **two aspects of this rather extensive step in our study**. They are: the structural diagram of each paragraph and memorizing each paragraph using observational questions. As a result of the work we will do in this step we will be ready to do the evaluation, interpretation and application of each paragraph and chapter in the next step.

Our method for this step in our study will be to take one paragraph at a time beginning with Chapter one, paragraph one and bring each one to completion. This means doing a structural diagram of paragraph one, memorizing it with observational questions and then evaluating, interpreting and applying what we have learned.

With each passing paragraph we will be building the truths and content of the Epistle, keeping a journal of our work and disciplining ourselves to keep each discovery within the context of the whole Epistle. We will learn to allow each truth to take on its fullest God intended meaning always from a position of its placement within the Epistle and not standing on its own, as a single verse. As we study we will see the importance of this approach in safe guarding the Word of God as He has intended it to be presented.

Memorizing the Paragraph using Observational Questions

We will use the six faithful friends of Kipling:

I have six faithful serving men
that have taught me all I know,
they are who and what,
why and where and when
and sometimes how.

Write the paragraph out on a 3 x 5 card. It is shirt pocket size for ease of use. Keep it with you all the time. At any opportune time take the card out and read it aloud or quietly, stopping to ask yourself the above questions about each phrase and element of the text.

An example would be for the first phrase of Heb. 1.1-4:

1 God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; 3 who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

Who? What? Why? Where? When? How?

1 God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets,

2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; 3 who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

The main purpose for asking ourselves questions is to make ourselves think more seriously about the meanings, implications and relationships of words, phrases , clauses, sentences, paragraphs, chapters and books. We are trying to determine what the author meant or implied by the words he used.

Several kinds of questions:

1. *Explanatory*: What does the term mean? How can it be defined? Characteristics? Is there a deeper meaning in the idea than appears on the surface?
2. *Reason*: What is the reason for the term or idea? Why has the author used these particular terms? Would it make any difference if this idea were left out? Or stated differently? Could another term be used instead of this one? Would it change the meaning? Why is this term used in this particular place?
3. *Implication*: what is involved in the ideas presented? What do the various terms imply? What is the importance of the terms used or of the combination of ideas? What is the significance of the verb tenses, connectives, grammatical constructions? Significance of the literary patterns used such as comparisons, contrasts, logical arrangements?
4. *Relationship*: What is the relationship of words to other words? One part of the verse with other parts? Verses with verses? Paragraphs with paragraphs? Chapters with chapters? Relationship of the beginning and the ending of a chapter or a section?
5. *Progression*: Is there progression in the thought pattern? Does it move toward a climax? Is one idea built on another? In a series of words or ideas, is there any significance in the order?

The assignment then is to daily spend time reading the paragraph and asking yourself these type of observational questions. You do not need to answer them but just ponder, reflect, and delve into the passage. We are not really after memorizing the passage but trying to become so very familiar with it that it becomes a part of us and we know its thought and concept. We should be able to put it into our own words with the same understanding as the passage when we are done. We should also be able to see how it fits in to the whole of the Epistle and its relationship to the chapter.

As we memorize the paragraph we also will do the other aspect of this step and that is the Structural Diagram of the Paragraph. This may take one to two weeks for each paragraph, doing both the memorizing and the Structural Diagram.

Just by way of reminder you should be continuing to read the Epistle each day as time permits. This will keep you grounded in the whole Epistle and its message.

A presentation of the Diagram is next.

How to Observe Structure of Paragraphs

In order to see how material in a passage is arranged, you need to get the passage in front of you on one sheet of paper, if possible. There are several ways to record material so that you can best see how the ideas are arranged. We will use the following method.

Make a “Structural Diagram”

“Structural diagram” is a title given to a process in which you copy on a sheet of paper all of the words in a paragraph, but arrange the material in as graphic a way as possible.

Suggestions: (Note the example of a structural diagram of Hebrews 9: 11-14.)

1. Copy down the units of phrases and clauses; separate the units so that they will be most meaningful to you.
2. Line up major clauses and ideas so that key ideas can easily be seen.
3. Place modifying phrases and clauses under the words which they describe. Do not do this to the extent that you break up the thought pattern.
4. Place series of words, phrases, clauses, parallel thoughts and parallel constructions under each other. Sometimes it is helpful to bracket them.
5. Emphasize the important connectives such as, “but” “yet,” “for,” “therefore,” “then,” etc. Place them by themselves.
6. Arrange your diagram so the **KEY** words and **KEY** ideas stand out. This can be done by **CAPITALIZING** words and by underlying words and phrases. It is also helpful to use colored pencils to highlight ideas. For instance, you might encircle or underline in red the words that are repeated.
7. Analyze the passage which you have diagramed.
 - a. Study your verses and bracket those which seem to be on the same topic. Summarize the main thought in each grouping of verses and write your summary in the left margin. Try to summarize with one word or brief phrase.
 - b. Make note of commands, warning, conditional clauses, reasons and results, illustrations, etc. List comments in margin.
 - c. Use arrows and lines to show relationships, contrasts, comparisons and repetitions

Structural Diagram Example

Heb 9: 11-14

