



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

BIBLE FOUNDATIONS

COMA Bible Study Method

A Context-First Way to Understand and Apply Scripture Faithfully

The Short Answer

C - CONTEXT: Where does this passage fit, and what is happening around it?

O - OBSERVATION: What does the passage actually say?

M - MEANING: What was the biblical writer communicating through these words?

A - APPLICATION: How should this truth shape belief and life today?

COMA slows the movement from reading to application: CONTEXT → OBSERVATION → MEANING → APPLICATION. Instead of beginning with “What does this verse mean to me?” it first asks what the passage means in its biblical setting. The method does not replace prayer, the Holy Spirit, the local church, or deeper study. It provides questions that help readers approach Scripture carefully and faithfully.

Nehemiah 8:8 · Luke 24:27 · 2 Timothy 2:15 · 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Opening Memory Anchor

Before asking what Scripture means to the reader, ask what Scripture means.



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PART ONE

BEGINNER GUIDE

1. WHAT IS THE COMA METHOD?

- C - CONTEXT - Understand where the passage fits.
- O - OBSERVATION - Pay attention to what the passage says.
- M - MEANING - Determine what the passage communicates.
- A - APPLICATION - Respond faithfully to that truth.

The order matters. Application should grow from meaning. Meaning should grow from observation. Observation should take place within context. The goal is not simply to find something personally meaningful in a verse. The goal is to understand what Scripture communicates and then respond faithfully.

Memory Anchor

Context comes before conclusions.

2. WHERE SHOULD A BEGINNER START?

Begin with a short passage - usually a paragraph rather than an isolated verse. Before studying, pray for understanding. Psalm 119:18 provides a simple biblical prayer: "Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law."

Careful Bible study is not merely an intellectual technique. Christians believe that the Holy Spirit inspired Scripture (2 Peter 1:20-21) and helps God's people understand and live according to God's truth (John 14:26; 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:12-14). This does not mean every personal impression is automatically from the Holy Spirit. Interpretations should still be tested by Scripture.

Ask God for humility, wisdom, attention, and willingness to obey what Scripture actually teaches. Then read the passage slowly several times before beginning COMA.

Memory Anchor

Study carefully. Pray dependently.

3. WHAT DOES "CONTEXT" MEAN?

Context is the information surrounding a passage that helps explain what it means. Imagine overhearing someone say: "He finally did it." The words are understandable, but without context their meaning is uncertain. Who is "he"? What did he do? Was it good or bad? What happened before the statement?

A verse belongs to a paragraph. A paragraph belongs to a chapter or larger section. That section belongs to a biblical book. That book was written within a historical setting and forms part of the larger biblical story.

ZOOM OUT BEFORE ZOOMING IN. Begin with the immediate context: what comes before and after? Then ask what is happening in the chapter, who wrote the book, to whom, why, and what themes matter. Finally, when useful, consider historical and cultural background. Often Scripture itself supplies much of the context needed.

Memory Anchor

A verse belongs to a paragraph. A paragraph belongs to a book. A book belongs to the biblical story.

4. WHY DOES GENRE MATTER?

Genre means the kind of literature being read. The Bible contains narrative, poetry and Psalms, wisdom literature, law, prophecy, Gospels, letters, and apocalyptic literature. All are Scripture, but they do not communicate in exactly the same way.

A proverb generally expresses a wisdom principle rather than an unconditional promise. Poetry frequently uses imagery, parallelism, and figurative language. Narratives describe events, but not every action recorded is something readers are meant to imitate. Letters often develop arguments across several paragraphs. Prophetic books require attention to original audience, covenant setting, warnings, promises, and later biblical fulfillment. Apocalyptic literature frequently communicates through vivid symbols and images.

COMA does not require literary expertise. Simply ask: What kind of passage is this, and how does that affect the way it should be read?

COMA ACROSS DIFFERENT GENRES

Psalms: imagery, repeated ideas, emotion, parallelism, and worship. Narrative: characters, events, conflict, consequences, and narrator emphasis. Proverb: wisdom principle, not automatically an unconditional promise. Epistle: argument, commands, reasons, contrasts, connecting words. Prophecy: original audience, historical/covenant setting, judgment or hope, and legitimate later fulfillment.

5. WHAT SHOULD BE OBSERVED?

Observation asks: What does the passage actually say? Resist rushing to interpretation. Look for repeated words or ideas; commands; promises; warnings; questions; comparisons and contrasts; cause and effect; people and places; time references; connecting words such as "therefore," "because," "but," and "so that"; descriptions of God; human responses; changes in speaker or audience; and anything surprising or emphasized.

Ask: WHO? WHAT? WHEN? WHERE? WHY? HOW? Observation gathers the evidence from which interpretation will grow. A useful discipline is to be able to point back to the passage and say: "That observation comes from here."

6. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OBSERVATION AND MEANING?

OBSERVATION asks: What do I see? MEANING asks: What does what I see mean?

Read Mark 2:1-12. Observations include that Jesus first tells the paralyzed man that his sins are forgiven; some scribes question this because they recognize that forgiving sins belongs to God; and Jesus then heals the man physically. Meaning asks how those details work together. Jesus explicitly connects the visible healing with His authority to forgive sins.

Memory Anchor

Observation gathers the evidence. Meaning explains the evidence.

7. WHAT DOES "AUTHORIAL INTENT" MEAN?



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Authorial intent asks: What was the biblical writer communicating to the original audience? This does not require knowing everything happening inside the writer's mind. Examine what was actually written: the words used, surrounding argument or story, original audience, purpose of the book, historical circumstances when known, literary genre, and how the passage fits with the rest of Scripture.

The first interpretive question should therefore not be: "What does this verse mean to me?" It should be: "What is this passage communicating?" Once that is understood, the reader can responsibly ask how that biblical truth applies today.

8. CAN DIFFERENT BIBLE TRANSLATIONS HELP?

Yes. Trustworthy English translations sometimes use slightly different wording because Hebrew and Greek words, grammar, and sentence structures cannot always be represented identically in English. Comparing two or three translations can help readers notice repeated ideas, differences in wording, difficult phrases, and places that may deserve further study.

A difference between translations does not automatically mean one Bible is wrong. Often the translations express the same underlying idea in different English wording. When an important difference affects interpretation, a good study Bible, commentary, or original-language reference tool can help explain why. Beginners do not need to know Hebrew or Greek to study Scripture faithfully. Tools serve the text; they do not replace careful reading.

9. WHAT DOES A COMPLETE COMA STUDY LOOK LIKE?

Read Jeremiah 29:1-14. Jeremiah 29:11 is often quoted by itself as an encouraging promise. COMA demonstrates why reading the surrounding passage makes that encouragement clearer rather than weaker.

C - CONTEXT. Jeremiah writes to Jewish exiles carried from Jerusalem to Babylon. They are living under God's judgment following covenant unfaithfulness. False prophets are giving misleading expectations about how quickly the exile will end. Jeremiah tells the exiles to build houses, plant gardens, raise families, and seek the welfare of the city where they have been sent. Jeremiah 29:10 says the exile would continue for seventy years before God brought His people back. Verse 11 therefore was not originally a promise that every individual Israelite would immediately escape difficulty.

O - OBSERVATION. Jeremiah 29:10-14 shows that God has not forgotten His people; the exile will not last forever; God promises restoration according to His timing; the people will call upon God and seek Him; and God promises to be found when they seek Him wholeheartedly. The passage combines JUDGMENT, WAITING, FAITHFULNESS, HOPE, and RESTORATION.

M - MEANING. Jeremiah 29:11 is part of God's promise that judgment and exile would not be the final word for His covenant people. God remained faithful to His purposes during a long season of displacement. The promise belonged first to Israel's exilic situation. That context should not be erased. But neither should the passage's revelation of God's character be ignored.

A - APPLICATION. Jeremiah 29:11 should not become a blanket promise that every Christian will receive immediate success, prosperity, or relief from hardship. The passage teaches something deeper. God's purposes are not defeated by difficult circumstances. Waiting does not mean God has forgotten His people. Within the larger biblical story, God restored His people, preserved the covenant line, and continued His redemptive purposes that ultimately lead to Jesus Christ.

Memory Anchor

Context does not weaken a promise. Context tells us what the promise actually promises.

PART TWO

WANT TO GO DEEPER?

INTERMEDIATE

10. HOW DOES COMA WORK WITH POETRY?

A short example from Psalm 23:1-4 demonstrates why genre matters. Psalm 23 is poetry, so the reader should expect imagery and metaphor rather than treating every statement as literal description.

C - CONTEXT. Psalm 23 is a psalm of David. David describes the LORD using the familiar image of a shepherd caring for sheep. The psalm moves through provision, guidance, danger, protection, fellowship, and confidence in God's faithful care.

O - OBSERVATION. David repeatedly describes what the LORD does. He leads, restores, guides, remains present in danger, and comforts. The imagery moves from peaceful pastures and quiet waters to the threatening "valley of the shadow of death." Yet David's confidence in God remains.

M - MEANING. David is not claiming that God literally tends human beings as sheep in physical pastures. Shepherd imagery communicates God's personal care, guidance, provision, presence, and protection. The change from peaceful scenery to a dark valley also shows that God's care does not mean God's people never encounter danger.

A - APPLICATION. Psalm 23 invites God's people to trust His faithful care in both peaceful and difficult circumstances. Application does not require turning every image into a separate command. Some Scripture primarily calls readers to know God more accurately, trust His character, worship Him, and remember His presence.

GENRE LESSON: Poetry asks readers to understand what the images communicate - not merely what the images describe.

11. HOW MUCH CONTEXT IS ENOUGH?

Two extremes should be avoided. TOO LITTLE CONTEXT: a sentence is isolated and immediately applied. TOO MUCH DEPENDENCE ON OUTSIDE INFORMATION: a reader assumes Scripture cannot be understood without becoming an expert in archaeology, ancient history, Hebrew, Greek, and biblical scholarship.

Begin with Scripture itself: PARAGRAPH → SURROUNDING SECTION → BOOK. Historical background becomes especially useful when a passage assumes information its original readers would naturally have known. Study Bibles, Bible dictionaries, maps, and trustworthy commentaries can help. But outside resources should illuminate the biblical text - not replace reading it.

12. DOES A PASSAGE HAVE ONLY ONE MEANING?

A passage normally communicates a coherent meaning in context, but that truth may have multiple legitimate applications. For example, "Do not steal" has a clear moral meaning. Its applications may include refusing to take physical property, being honest in business, returning something borrowed, refusing fraudulent practices, and respecting another person's work.

Different applications do not require different meanings. Personal responses can vary. Biblical meaning is constrained by the text.

Memory Anchor



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One truth can produce many faithful applications.

13. WHAT IF THE MEANING IS NOT CLEAR?

Do not guess. Write: FURTHER STUDY NEEDED. Then investigate. Read the passage again. Read more of the biblical book. Compare translations. Look at cross-references. Identify the genre. Consult reliable study resources when needed.

Some passages are genuinely difficult, and Christians have debated certain texts for centuries. It is better to say, "This passage is not yet understood well enough to apply confidently," than to speak with certainty Scripture itself has not provided.

Memory Anchor

Uncertainty is an invitation to study - not permission to invent.

14. WHAT ARE COMMON COMA MISTAKES?

CONTEXT MISTAKE: Importing modern assumptions into an ancient passage rather than first asking what was happening in its biblical setting.

OBSERVATION MISTAKE: Interpreting too quickly. "This means..." is usually interpretation, not observation. First identify what the text actually says.

MEANING MISTAKE: Beginning with "What does this mean to me?" Personal significance matters, but it comes after understanding the passage.

APPLICATION MISTAKE: Turning every passage into a moralistic to-do list. Some passages call for action. Others call readers to believe, remember, worship, repent, trust, hope, or understand something more accurately.

OVERCONFIDENCE MISTAKE: Assuming the first interpretation considered must be correct. Faithful Bible study includes willingness to reconsider conclusions when the text provides better evidence.

Memory Anchor

Let Scripture correct the reader - not the reader correct Scripture.

15. WHAT IF CHRISTIANS INTERPRET A PASSAGE DIFFERENTLY?

Faithful Christians sometimes disagree. When interpretations differ, ask: Which interpretation best accounts for the actual words? Which best fits the immediate context? Which best fits the argument or storyline of the book? Which best fits the historical setting and literary genre? Which best fits the rest of Scripture? Does one interpretation ignore important details?

The goal is not to win an argument. The goal is to understand Scripture faithfully. Where Scripture is clear, believe it. Where interpretation requires inference, identify the inference. Where genuine uncertainty remains, hold conclusions with appropriate humility.

16. WHERE DO THE CHURCH AND OTHER CHRISTIANS FIT?

Bible reading is personal, but it was never intended to make each Christian an isolated interpreter. God gives teachers to His Church (Ephesians 4:11-16). Believers are also instructed to teach and admonish one another (Colossians 3:16). A difficult interpretation can therefore be discussed with mature Christians, pastors and teachers, Bible-study leaders, the local church, trustworthy biblical scholars, and insights preserved throughout Christian history.

Christian tradition is not equal in authority to Scripture. Pastors, teachers, commentaries, and historic interpretations can all be mistaken. But listening to other faithful Christians can expose assumptions, reveal overlooked questions, and prevent highly individual interpretations from becoming unquestioned conclusions. The final authority remains Scripture.

17. WHERE DOES JESUS FIT INTO COMA?

Every biblical passage belongs to the larger story that culminates in Christ. Jesus said the Scriptures testify about Him (John 5:39), and Luke 24:27 describes Him explaining what Moses and the Prophets said concerning Him.

A passage may connect to Jesus through promise, covenant, sacrifice, priesthood, kingship, kingdom, Exodus, temple, wisdom, judgment, grace, redemption, resurrection, or new creation. Sometimes the connection is explicit. Sometimes it emerges through the larger biblical storyline. Sometimes a direct connection should not be claimed. COMA helps guard against forced connections because it asks readers to understand a passage in its own context before tracing legitimate connections through Scripture.

18. HOW IS COMA DIFFERENT FROM SOAP AND SPECK?

SOAP: SCRIPTURE → OBSERVATION → APPLICATION → PRAYER. Especially useful for devotional reflection and prayerful response.

SPECK: SIN → PROMISE → EXAMPLE → COMMAND → KNOWLEDGE ABOUT GOD. Provides specific questions for identifying truths or responses in a passage.

COMA: CONTEXT → OBSERVATION → MEANING → APPLICATION. Places greater emphasis on interpretation before application.

The methods can complement one another. COMA can help establish what a passage means. SPECK can help identify particular truths within it. SOAP can help turn those truths into response and prayer. The acronym is never the authority. Scripture is.

19. WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS OF COMA?

COMA is useful, but it is still only a framework. Four letters cannot automatically resolve difficult historical questions, complex theological debates, original-language issues, textual variants, ancient cultural practices, prophetic symbolism, difficult poetry, or every question of biblical theology.

COMA also depends upon the quality of the reader's observations. Incorrect assumptions about context can produce incorrect conclusions about meaning. Faithful study therefore involves humility, continued learning, prayer, community, and willingness to reconsider an interpretation when Scripture provides better evidence. The method serves Scripture. Scripture does not serve the method.

20. WHAT IF COMA STARTS FEELING TOO TECHNICAL?

Return to four questions. C - What is happening around this passage? O - What do the words actually say? M - What is the writer communicating? A - How should that truth affect life?

A beginner does not need to master biblical scholarship to benefit from COMA. Some passages may take five minutes. Others may invite an hour of study. Others may remain difficult after years of reading. Faithful study is not measured by how quickly every question is answered. Keep praying. Keep reading. Keep learning. Keep returning to Scripture.

21. A SIMPLE COMA WORKSHEET

BEFORE READING: Choose one paragraph or short passage. Pray for understanding. Read the passage slowly at least twice.



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C - CONTEXT

PASSAGE: _____

What comes immediately before it? _____

What comes immediately after it? _____

Who is speaking or writing? _____

Who is the original audience? _____

What kind of biblical literature is this? _____

What is happening in this section of the book? _____

Is historical or cultural information needed? _____

O - OBSERVATION

WHO? _____ WHAT? _____

WHEN / WHERE? _____

WHY / HOW? _____

What words or ideas are repeated? _____

What commands, promises, warnings, contrasts, or connections stand out? _____

What does the passage say about God? _____

M - MEANING

What is the writer communicating? _____

How do the observations support that conclusion? _____

How do context and genre affect the meaning? _____

How does this passage fit within the larger biblical story? _____

Is the meaning clear? YES _____ FURTHER STUDY NEEDED _____

A - APPLICATION

What truth should be believed or remembered? _____

Is there something to obey, trust, confess, change, or practice? _____

What is one faithful response? _____

If no immediate action is required, what should be understood, remembered, worshiped, or studied further? _____

NOTES / CROSS-REFERENCES

QUICK COMA GUIDE

C - CONTEXT: Where does this passage fit? O - OBSERVATION: What does the passage actually say?

M - MEANING: What is the writer communicating? A - APPLICATION: How should this truth shape belief and life?

FINAL MEMORY ANCHOR

CONTEXT sets the scene.

OBSERVATION gathers the evidence.

MEANING understands the message.

APPLICATION responds faithfully.

FINAL TAKEAWAY

COMA is not complicated Bible scholarship reduced to four letters. It is a reminder to slow down. Before applying a verse, understand the passage. Before deciding what the passage means, observe what it says. Before interpreting those observations, consider their context and genre. And throughout the process, pray for wisdom and remain willing to learn from other faithful Christians.

The goal is not dependence upon a method. The goal is increasing confidence opening Scripture and asking careful questions. Nehemiah 8:8 describes God's Law being read clearly and its meaning being explained so the people could understand what was read. Second Timothy 2:15 calls believers to handle the word of truth rightly. Second Timothy 3:16-17 reminds readers why careful study matters: Scripture comes from God and equips His people for faithful living.

SEE THE CONTEXT. NOTICE THE TEXT. UNDERSTAND THE MEANING. RESPOND TO THE TRUTH.

And when the meaning is not yet clear: PRAY. KEEP STUDYING.

Scripture deserves the patience.

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