

The Four Questions Sheet

Step 2 of the six, in depth · four questions to run on any passage · Bible Connections with Joseph

Four questions, one verse at a time. These are the four questions from step 2 of the six — Cross Over — with a page each: where each answer is usually found, and room to write. It closes with Verify It and Carry It Home, steps 4 and 6, so the work gets tested and taken home. The Six Steps companion runs all six; this sheet works step 2 in depth. Built to run on one passage in one sitting.

Before you start: pick the verse, then read the whole paragraph it sits in, then, if you can, the whole book in one sitting. That's step one, Read It. It isn't historical context — it's just reading, and it does more than the four questions combined. Then ask what kind of writing you're holding. A letter, a poem, a law code and a proverb don't work the same way, and no amount of background fixes reading one as another.

An honest word about effort before you begin. Questions 1, 2 and 3 you can finish tonight with nothing but the book itself and a study Bible introduction. Question 4 is the one that changes verses, and it's the one where you'll want help. A cross-reference Bible does the first half of it for you. The free public-domain commentaries do much of the second half. You do not need a Hebrew lexicon on night one.

Pick your verse

◆ Write the verse out, from your own Bible, and name the translation. Not a hard passage — your favorite one. Do this when you're on steady ground, not in the middle of the thing that made you need it.

◆ Before you research anything: what do you currently believe this verse means, and where did you get that? Be specific. A card, a sermon, a friend, a song. This line is the whole point of the exercise — you cannot tell what context changed if you never wrote down what you started with.

Question 1 · Who wrote it?

Where to look: the first few verses of the book, which very often say so outright. Then a study Bible's book introduction. If the author is disputed, find out why rather than picking a side.

Be willing to end with a shrug. Sometimes the honest answer is that nobody knows — Hebrews is the obvious case, and that is a fact about the letter rather than a gap in your study. What you're really after isn't a name anyway. It's a situation.

◆ **Who wrote it, and how do you know? If it's disputed, write down what the disagreement is about.**

◆ **What situation was the writer in? Prison, exile, leadership, grief, a fight he was losing?**

Question 2 · To whom?

Where to look: the opening and closing sections, and then the whole book — reading only for what the writer assumes about his readers. Not what he tells them. What he takes for granted.

This is the question that's usually answerable and usually skipped. You're after four things, and all four are normally reconstructible from the text itself without a single outside source.

◆ **Who were they? Where were they? What did they already believe? And what was it costing them?**

◆ **Find one thing the writer assumes his readers already know and never explains. What does that tell you about the room?**

Question 3 · What was happening to those people when it landed in their hands?

Where to look: a book introduction for the dating and setting, then the text itself for the crisis. Most biblical books tell you what their crisis is if you read the whole thing in one sitting.

You're looking for things that change what a sentence could have meant to the person hearing it. Not colour. Not trivia. And if the occasion is genuinely unknown, write that down — it's a finding, not a failure.

◆ **What was going on around them — politically, economically, religiously — while this was being written?**

◆ **Does anything in the passage turn on that situation? If nothing does, say so. Background that doesn't change the reading is decoration.**

Question 4 · What contextual knowledge did they have that you and I never once thought of?

Where to look: a cross-reference Bible for the quotations. The public-domain commentaries — Matthew Henry, Adam Clarke, John Gill, Barnes, the Pulpit Commentary, Calvin on the Psalms — for the conventions. All free. For the third kind there is no shortcut; that one comes from reading the book twice.

Three kinds, and they're worth learning to spot. First, quotations you didn't notice — the New Testament quotes the Old constantly, often without announcing it. Second, conventions: a legal act, a greeting, a farewell formula, a way of addressing a superior. Third, what didn't need saying — the hardest to spot, because it's an absence. A letter that never argues for something its readers clearly already accepted. A warning that assumes a shared memory.

◆ **Kind one — quotations. Run the cross-references. Is your verse quoting or echoing something older? Write down what, and what the older passage was doing.**

◆ Kind two — conventions. Is there a phrase here that was a normal form of words in that world rather than an invention of this writer? Check a commentary before you decide it isn't.

◆ Kind three — the absence. What does this passage never bother to explain? What shared memory or shared belief does it assume?

Now compare

◆ Go back to what you wrote on the first page — what you believed the verse meant, and where you got it. What changed?

◆ One of two things happened. Either the verse survived and now you know why, or it turned out to be doing something different than you thought. Which was it? Write the verse's meaning again, in your own words, with your reasons this time.

Verify It · step 4 of the six, run on what you just wrote — hold it up against the fullness of Scripture

Make no assumptions — including on these four questions. Step 4 holds your reading up against all of Scripture: an interpretation that sounds right on its own and falls apart next to the whole Bible was never the right interpretation. Then check the context work itself. Three ways it goes bad, and every one of them is easy to fall into.

One, using context to make a passage say what you wanted. Context is supposed to constrain you. If your historical background consistently produces the reading you already preferred, that's not research, that's decoration. The test is whether it has ever cost you a verse you liked.

Two, background that isn't actually established. There's a lot of confident historical colour in circulation that turns out to be one commentator's guess repeated for a century. If you can't say where a claim comes from, don't pass it on.

Three, and this is the one to watch if you teach: context doesn't settle every dispute, and pretending it does is worse than not doing it. Some passages are genuinely argued after all four questions are answered. Romans 7 is. Hebrews 6 is. The right move is to name the positions and say plainly that it isn't resolved.

◆ **Where did you get each claim you're now relying on? Write the source next to each one. Not for scholarship — so that when somebody asks you, you can tell them, and so that when you turn out to be wrong you can find the mistake.**

◆ **Has this method ever cost you a verse you liked? If not yet, that's worth noticing.**

Carry It Home · step 6 of the six — what it asks of you, and how it points to Jesus

And if you teach: do this before you teach, not after somebody in the group asks. The difference between a leader people trust and one they're careful with is usually just whether the homework got done first.

◆ What does this passage ask of you this week? And how does that point you to Jesus? If you teach: who are you going to tell about this verse, and what will you say?

The verse you wrote at the top of this sheet was written to somebody. Go find out who.

Open your own Bible for every passage — this companion quotes only a short line where a point turns on the wording, and leaves the rest to you, because reading it is your step. Scripture references from the Berean Standard Bible where quoted. Bible Connections with Joseph · bibleconnectionswithjoseph.com