

The Six Steps

A working companion for any passage · from "How to Study the Bible Without Guessing (The 6 Steps I Use)" · Bible Connections with Joseph

This is the process I run every passage through before I teach it. It takes longer than you expect: you will not run six steps on a passage in the ten minutes before small group. Work it in order — it is the order I use.

One rule before you start: keep your own Bible open. This companion deliberately does not print the passage for you. Step one is your work, and a page that does it for you has already taken the most important part away.

Passage and setup

◆ What passage are you working on?

◆ Who are you teaching it to, and when?

◆ Before you study anything: what do you already think this passage means? Write it down now, honestly, so you can catch yourself later.

1 · Read It — the passage and what's around it

The text itself, slowly, before anybody's opinion gets layered on top — including yours and mine. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you through the passage and show you what he wants to show you there. Read it three times. Once for the shape of it, once out loud, once looking for anything you skipped.

Then read what is around it — and if you can, the whole book in one sitting, even if it takes an hour. When I've gotten a passage wrong, it has usually started with a verse removed from its literary context, missing the verses around it.

◆ Can you say what the passage is doing, not just what it says? Is it a promise, a warning, a story, a psalm, a piece of somebody's mail? Put it in your own words in one sentence.

◆ What is the sentence before this passage, and the sentence after? Do they change how it reads?

◆ Is there anything here you skipped because you already knew it? Go back to that part.

2 • Cross Over — who wrote it, to whom, and what was happening

Now into the world it was written in. You are not guessing here — this is research, and most of what you need is in a study Bible's introduction to the book. Who wrote it. Who received it. What was happening to them. What kind of writing it is, because a psalm and a legal code and a letter do not make promises the same way.

◆ Who wrote it? To whom?

◆ What was happening to those people when it landed in their hands? What pressure were they under?

◆ What kind of writing is this — narrative, poetry, law, letter, prophecy, wisdom? And what does that genre do with promises?

◆ What contextual knowledge did they have that you and I never once thought of?

3 · Stand in Their World — hear it the way they heard it

This is different from step two. Crossing over is gathering the facts; standing in their world is feeling them. Try to feel what they felt. A passage opens up once you have some sense of what it cost to hear it the first time.

◆ You are in the room when this is first read aloud. What do you feel?

◆ Who in that room would find this hard to hear, and why?

◆ What would they have assumed that you do not?

4 · Verify It — hold it up against the fullness of Scripture

Now test it. Hold your reading up against all of Scripture, because a reading that sounds right on its own and falls apart next to the whole Bible was never the right reading. Scripture interprets Scripture, so be ready to let it rework your first reading. This is where a good commentary or a trusted pastoral voice helps greatly.

Two honest cautions. First, do not go looking only for verses that agree with you — that is how proof-texting works, and it feels exactly like study. Second, a cross-reference that shares a word is not the same as one that shares an idea. Check the idea.

The hard version of this step: try to find the passage that makes your reading difficult. If you cannot find one, you probably have not looked. Write down what you found even if it complicates things — especially then.

◆ What else in Scripture says something similar? Give the reference, and say what it adds.

◆ What in Scripture makes your reading harder? Name it.

◆ Is this passage contested? Do careful readers disagree about it? If so, what are the positions — and are you about to teach one of them as settled?

◆ Make no assumptions. What did you assume going in that the text does not actually say?

5 • Come Back — put what you found into today's language

Bring it back in plain language. Everything you found over there — the history, the culture, what the Greek or Hebrew suggest — has to come back across in words a person can actually use. No jargon. If you still cannot apply it well in someone's life, you are not finished with this step. This is where a trusted pastor, teacher, or mentor can help you make the connections.

If you looked at the original language, hold it lightly. The Greek suggests. The Greek does not prove. One word does not settle a passage, and a word study used as a trump card is the fastest way to teach something confidently wrong.

◆ Say what this passage means in one sentence, in words you would use with a friend who has never been to church.

◆ What did you believe about this passage before you started that you no longer believe?

◆ Compare this to what you wrote at the very top. What changed?

6 • Carry It Home — what it asks of you, and how it points to Jesus

This is the goal of the process: how does what you have learned change how you live, or how you teach the word to others? Ask two questions. The first turns study into obedience. The second keeps that obedience anchored in Jesus instead of your own strength.

◆ What does this ask of you, specifically, this week?

◆ And how does that point you to Jesus?

◆ If you are teaching this: what is the one thing you want the room to leave with?

◆ What will you NOT say, because you cannot support it?

Before you teach it

Read your one-sentence answer from step five out loud. If it sounds like something you would have said before you studied, go back to step four — you may have confirmed yourself rather than checked yourself. The steps do not make you right every time. You may still get one wrong — I do.

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. Use whatever translation you already read. Bible Connections with Joseph • bibleconnectionswithjoseph.com