

Eleven Killer Questions to Ask of A Bible Passage

By Colin Adams

Questions are to bible study what the spade is to the archaeologist. They help us dig up hidden treasures. As we plant the shovel and find the gems, we should share the questions that aided discovery. These eleven questions have proved unusually fruitful in my study of Scripture.

1. Where does this book appear in the Bible's plotline?

This is the first question I use to orientate myself. As I parachute down into Bible terrain I try to look around and get my bearings. The initial question needs to be: *where am I?* Do I find myself in the Old or New Testament? More specifically: where exactly am I in either of those Testaments?

It will greatly aid our study to have an increasing grasp of the Bible's plotline. For the newbie, I would highly recommend *God's Big Picture* (Vaughan Roberts) or the two volumes by Mark Dever (*Promises Made; Promises Kept*). For a more advanced take on the plotline, check out Graham Goldsworthy.

2. Who was this book written to?

It is certainly important to ask: *who wrote* this book? Knowing the author can sometimes be decisive. The psalms of David, for instance, should be read in a certain way. These are not just songs and cries of *any* old believer; they are the songs and cries of a King who foreshadows the Messiah.

But the author isn't always so important. Some Bible books are formally anonymous, after all.

What often carries greater weight is the identity of the recipient. So, it helps to understand that the original audience of..

- the Pentateuch was the young Jewish nation, round about the time of entering Canaan...
- ...that the original audience of the Psalms were Jews, who sang these songs in a prophetic context...
- ...that Luke's gospel was written to a man who needed greater certainty about the Christian faith....
- ...that Revelation is being written to persecuted Christians in the first century...

If we forget the original audience, our interpretation will go skew-whiff.

3. What is the book's overall message?

We often forget to ask this vital question. Getting lost in our passage, we tend to lose sight of the overall thrust.

To uncover the overall message, we need to prayerfully read the entirety. We look for structures, developing themes and telling-statements. These in turn will lead us to the book's big theme. To give an example of why this matters, take 1st John. The overarching thrust is that *John's readers can have assurance of being genuine Christians*. John's recipients were living in the aftermath of certain people leaving their church. These leavers claimed to have superior spiritual knowledge, and those who stayed behind were left to question their own salvation. John assures his readers that they HAVE true fellowship with God. 1st John then, isn't so much a *challenge* to John's readers, as a comfort to them. Seeing this bigger point, will stop us from misapplying the letter in its details. We mustn't preach these passages as though they are frightening tests of assurance!

4. What is the wider context of each passage/verse?

The “promise box” approach to Bible study is still alive and well. People lift a Bible verse out of context and in splendid isolation ask, what does this mean? This can only lead us making up meaning!

Handling the Bible responsibly means examining each verse *in the flow of the passage*. So Paul’s claim that he can do *everything* through Christ’s strength (Phil 4: 13) is to be understood in the flow of what he’s said before (he’s been talking about contentment in circumstances of poverty). Paul isn’t saying that in Christ he can jump over tall buildings! He’s saying he can survive through times of want.

5. What is the passage structure?

Every Bible passage has some kind of structure. We discern the structure in different ways depending on the genre:

- If it’s a narrative...what are the turns in the plot? Where is the point of crisis? What is the great resolution?
- If it’s an epistle: What are the steps in the argument? What is the progression of logic from a to b to c?
- If it’s a psalm: what are the stanzas/verses? Is there a chorus line that’s repeated? Is there a chiasm? (where the main point lies in the middle, and parallel points lie to either side)

6. What is the surprise in the passage?

Dale Ralph Davis put me on to this one. The Bible is full of the unexpected, so we should be on the look out for it.

This is especially important when studying familiar passages. It was a surprise to me recently to notice that Elijah, in the contest at Carmel, set up what was essentially a ‘burnt offering’ (see Leviticus 1). I then started to notice other ways in which Elijah was calling Israel back to the law and old patterns of faithful worship.

7. What is the main message of the passage? (hint: this is usually a truth about God)

Even short passages can be packed with many truths. Take Mark 4:35-41. You’ve got the disciples obeying Jesus command; you’ve got Jesus sleeping on the boat; there’s the calming of the storm, and then the disciples being confronted for their unbelief.

But what is the main point of the story? To work this out we need to grapple with

- the overall message of Mark’s gospel (Jesus is God’s suffering servant),
- the context of the chapter (the early part of Mark emphasizes Jesus’ identity),
- the content of chapter 4 (which has a focus on God’s word)
- and the details of the story (Jesus controls nature with his word, and the disciples are left asking ‘who is this?’).
- Putting all these things together, we could say that the storm stilling story *reveals the God-man whose word controls creation.*

8. What was the application to the original readers?

Don’t immediately ask what a Psalm means to *you*. Ask what it would have meant to the Jew who first sung it? The songs of ascent (Psalms 120-134) meant something to the *Jews*. They sang Psalm 121 with a literal foreboding of being surrounded by enemies on every side. That original experience is not meant to be glossed over.

It is equally crucial to ask this of the New Testament. What would Revelation 12 have meant to 1st century persecuted Christians? A lot of zany interpretation about Revelation would be cured instantly if we recognized that many suggested interpretations would have made no sense to the original readers!

9. How does the passage relate to Christ and then the church?

A key question to ask if we're in the Old Testament. If I'm preaching on the temple-vision in Ezekiel (Ez 40-48) I need to think through how this is fulfilled in Christ (John 2:19) and then in the church (1 Cor 3:16). When viewed through the eyes of the NT, Ezekiel is not promising a literal, earthly temple. He is previewing a grander temple: Jesus Christ, and the church that is God's dwelling place.

10. What is the general application to a contemporary Christian?

Before we can extrapolate the nuances of application, we need to get clear the application generally. When preaching on [Leviticus 23 last Sunday](#) I said that the application of these festivals was to *rest and rejoice in Christ's work*. Of course, how that resting and rejoicing will play out will look different for a teenager than it does for a married man or an older person. But before we can delineate those application lines, we have to know the main thrust.

11. How does the passage reform me, my church and my world?

It might be helpful to think of three concentric circles: me, my church, and my world. Of course, if we are preaching we might want to expand these categories much further. But for personal bible study these will probably be enough. The latter two questions, especially, will help to push us beyond our usual individualism.