

What exactly is an Epistle?

Once we get through this lesson and the next lesson (Chapter 4), you will have the tools to be able to more thoroughly study and understand the bulk of the New Testament. We will be studying epistles in these two lessons. Let's start by defining that word:

Epistle – a type of letter intended to be read and understood by the public

As I said, epistles make up most of the New Testament. Circle the books below that are epistles.

Matthew	Galatians	Philemon
Mark	Ephesians	Hebrews
Luke	Philippians	James
John	Colossians	1, 2 Peter
Acts	1,2 Thessalonians	1, 2, 3 John
Romans	1,2 Timothy	Jude
1, 2 Corinthians	Titus	Revelation

This chapter is focused on learning how to exegete epistles. Let's define exegesis again:

Exegesis – to carefully study the Bible to determine its intended meaning to the original audience

The next chapter is focused on the hermeneutics of exegesis. Let's define hermeneutics again:

Hermeneutics – taking the intended message for the original audience and translating it to today's audience (you)

The diagram below illustrates exegesis and hermeneutics:



General Epistle Form

One of the interesting things about the epistles is that they are similar to letters today. Just like we start our letters with a greeting and end with a farewell, they did too. Let's look at the general form of epistles and then we will look at some examples from scripture.

1. Name of the writer
2. Name of the recipient (the intended audience)
3. Greeting – their way of saying hello

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4. Prayer wish or thanksgiving – a prayer for their blessing or a thanksgiving to God
5. Body of the epistle – this is the message of the epistle
6. Final greeting and farewell

Before we go to the next page, look for an example of each of these in 1 Peter

Book	Name of Writer	Name of Recipient	Greeting	Prayer Wish / Thanksgiving	Body	Final greeting / Farewell
1 Peter	1:1	1:1-2	1:2	1:3-5	1:6 – 5:11	5:12-14

The grid below shows how the twenty one epistles of the New Testament generally follow this format. The “X” indicates a book where the pattern is not followed. Fill in the blanks.

Book	Name of Writer	Name of Recipient	Greeting	Prayer Wish / Thanksgiving	Body	Final greeting / Farewell
Romans	1:1	1:7	1:7	1:8-12	1:13 -15:33	16:1-27
1 Corinthians	1:1	1:2	1:3	1:4-9	1:10 – 16:14	16:15-24
2 Corinthians	1:1	1:1	1:2	1:3-5	1:6 – 13:10	13:11-14
Galatians	1:1	1:2	1:3-5	X	1:6 – 6:17	6:18
Ephesians	1:1	1:1	1:2	1:3-23	2:1 – 6:20	6:21-24
Philippians	1:1	1:1	1:2	1:3-11	1:12 – 4:19	4:20-23
Colossians	1:1	1:2	1:2	1:3-20	1:21 – 4:6	4:7-18
1 Thessalonians	1:1	1:1	1:1	1:2-4	1:5 – 5:24	5:25-28
2 Thessalonians	1:1	1:1	1:2	1:3-12	2:1 – 3:15	3:16-18
1 Timothy	1:1	1:2	1:2	X	1:3 – 6:21	6:21
2 Timothy	1:1	1:2	1:2	1:3-5	1:6 – 4:18	4:19-22
Titus	1:1-3	1:4	1:4	X	1:5 – 3:14	3:15
Philemon	1:1	1:1-2	1:3	1:4-7	1:8 – 1:22	1:23-25
Hebrews	X	Postscrip	X	X	1:1 – 13:19	13:20-25
James	1:1	1:1	1:1	X	1:2 – 5:20	X
1 Peter	1:1	1:1-2	1:2	1:3-5	1:6 – 5:11	5:12-14
2 Peter	1:1	1:1	1:2	X	1:2 -3:18	X
1 John	X	X	X	X	1:1 – 5:21	X
2 John	1:1	1:1	1:3	X	1:4-12	1:13
3 John	1:1	1:1	X	1:2	1:3-11	1:12-14
Jude	1:1	1:1	1:2	X	1:3-23	1:24-25

Beyond a similarity in form, the epistles all have two traits in common. All were occasional pieces of literature. That means that they were written for a reason (an occasion) – something was going on that made the letter necessary. As an example, look at the following two passages and write down the reason that the book was written.

1 Corinthians 1:10-11 – Paul had heard from Chloe’s house that there were divisions in the church

Galatians 1:6-9 – The Galatians had begun to depart from the faith and follow heresy

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Some of the epistles do not clearly state the reason they were written; and it may be necessary to scour the entire letter to find the answer. Most of the epistles were written because of a need of the intended audience, even if they weren't always aware of their need. For example, 1 Corinthians was written in part to address the church's lack of willingness to practice loving discipline. The Corinthians were arrogant and felt that their actions were justified (1 Corinthians 5:2). The Holy Spirit (through Paul) felt otherwise.

We must also remember that each of the epistles was written to a first-century audience. They spoke a different language, had different customs, and lived in a vastly different culture. As we read these letters, we need to try to hear with their ears. When we understand the message from their perspective, we are ready to bridge the gap to our culture through hermeneutics so we can accurately apply it to our lives. We'll cover that in the next lesson.

A Study Method to Use on the Epistles

There are several study methods that can help you grow in your understanding of the Word. Some are better than others and all of the good ones have several things in common. The end result should be the same: understand what God is saying to the original audience.

A good study method will fulfill the following three goals:

1. **A good interpretation sticks to the book.** You shouldn't have to go outside the text to understand the point. This doesn't mean you can't use outside resources to understand the text. It just means that all the outside resources should do is help you understand what the text is already saying.
2. **A good interpretation is consistent with the logical argument of the passage and book.** Some people think the entire Bible is like the Book of Proverbs: a bunch of random verses without any logical order. That isn't the case. Proverbs is the only book like that and even Proverbs has some rhyme and reason to it.

The epistles are letters to churches and contain a logical thought flow and pattern. We need to study the Bible in a way that looks for this pattern because it is the key to correctly understanding the Scriptures. Look for logical connectors (because, therefore, if, and, etc...) for clues.

For example, how does Romans 12:20 fit into the flow of Paul's argument within Romans 12:14-21? **Paul had just told them to bless those that curse them. Romans 12:20 is a practical illustration of how to fulfill this commandment.**

3. **A good interpretation will make good sense of everything in the passage.** Let me provide an example. If you have ever played the Word Jumble game, you know that the goal is to use ALL of the letters provided to make a word. Try the one below:

I T E E S L P (EPISTLE)

You might be able to make a word with a few of the letters (i.e. slip, sit, or tie), but your solution is incorrect unless you use all of the letters provided. In the same way, a strong interpretation of Scripture will not discard portions of a text that are confusing, but will bring them together in a consistent and coherent manner.

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Historical /Literary Context Study

The following method of study provides a good foundation for interpretation if you take the time to do it. Like most new things, practice and repetition will be required. If you are diligent though, you will find that these things become second nature and will inform all of your reading of Scripture. This is the goal!

Our first step is to understand the context to which the writer is writing. Who are the recipients? What do we know about them? What is going on? Why is the author writing? This is called the “Historical Context”. The second step is to follow the writer’s train of thought as he addresses the audience. What is he saying and how does it all fit together? This is the “Literary Context”. Consider the method for addressing the Historical and Literary Context provided below.

1. Understand the Historical Context (Background)

- a. Use a Bible Dictionary, Commentary, or other resource to learn the background of a book
- b. Read through the letter in one sitting using an accurate version of the Bible you can reasonably understand (look back to Lesson 2). It often helps to read the letter through out loud. As you do this, jot down the answers to the following questions:
 - i. What do you notice about the people (or person) the letter is written to? (What nationality are they? Are they rich or poor? What are their problems and their attitudes?)
 - ii. What is the writer’s attitude?
 - iii. Are there any specific things mentioned about why the letter is being written (the occasion)?
 - iv. Write down the letter’s natural, logical divisions within the body.

2. Understand the Literary Context (what’s being said)

- a. Study each paragraph or logical section and briefly summarize the main point of each one.
- b. How does each paragraph or logical section fit into a flow of ideas? Write a brief sentence explaining how each one fits into the overall flow of the argument. Here is a hint: always look for logical connectors between logical divisions (words like therefore, henceforth, because, for, etc...).

Even though we can jot down a method for Bible study, remember that this is just a tool. Ultimately, the Spirit of God is our greatest teacher and the living author of these letters. If you are truly saved, He resides in you and will assist you in this task. Above all, remember to pray for insight as you seek to study the Word.

Before we try to apply what we have learned, let’s take a moment to talk about problem passage. There are definitely some passages that are hard to understand at first glance (i.e. 1 Corinthians 11:10). Here are a few things to consider:

1. Sometimes they are difficult because they were not written to us. We only know so much about the audience and their circumstances. It is hard to understand the answer if we don’t know the question.
2. Learn to distinguish between what you can be certain about in the passage versus what is uncertain.
3. Even if you can’t have full certainty, you can often still understand the main point of the passage.
4. Find and use a “good” commentary as a last step. Good commentaries don’t just provide an interpretation; they provide several interpretations so that you consider all perspectives.

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Now that you've seen the method, let's practice it a couple of times. The remainder of this lesson applies what we have learned to the books of 2nd and 3rd John.

Example One: 2 John

Historical Context (Background)

1. Use a Bible Dictionary or other resource to learn about the background of 2 John. Write down some of the important things you learn about 2 John.

2nd John is written by, "the elder". While some scholars question whether this is an elder named John, most agree this is the Apostle John. The primary reason is that the writing is so similar to the Apostle's other letters. This letter was probably written close around 90 AD from Ephesus.

2. Read through 2 John using a strong literal translation and answer the following questions:

- a. What do you notice about the people (or person) the letter is written to?

It is either written to either: 1) a saved woman with children (at least some of which were adults) who was held in high reputation by John and other Christians; or 2) a church that was held in high reputation by John and other Christians. I tend to believe it is written to an individual because to call a church "a lady and her children" would be unprecedented in the Bible and confusing.

- b. What is the writer's attitude?

John is very loving towards this woman and he mentions that he was pleased to see some of her children living in a way that corresponded with, "the truth". He takes on a tone of warning, out of concern for her spiritual well-being, but closes the letter warmly with a loving farewell and a desire to see her again. He appears to be with her nieces/nephews who send greeting.

- c. Are there any specific things mentioned about why the letter is being written (the occasion)?

It appears that the letter was written to give a good report about some of her children, but also to provide a warning about staying true to the message given to them and not to be deceived by deceivers, who could undermine the good that God has accomplished thus far in her life.

- d. Write down the letter's natural, logical divisions within the body.

Vs 1-3 – Introduction and Greeting

Vs 4-6 – Exhortation to Walk in Love

Vs 7-11 – Warning about False Prophets

Vs 12-13 - Farewell

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Literary Context (What is Being Said?)

1. Study each paragraph or logical section and jot down a brief summary of what each one is trying to say.

Vs 1-3 – Introduction and Greeting. The “Truth” is Christ, who lives in us and will be with us forever.

Vs 4-6 – John applauds her for raising her children in “the truth”, but reminds her to walk in love, which means obeying Christ’s teachings.

Vs 7-11 – The false prophets John is concerned about are those who deny Christ’s essential humanity. She should be careful not to fall into this lie or give any support to those who do. Those who have fallen into this doctrine were never saved to begin with. Anyone who blesses or encourages a false prophet participates in their evil.

Vs 12-13 – John says that he hopes to see her soon and is able to share more with her than he does not want to write. He states that her sister’s children (nieces/nephews) send her greeting.

2. Show how each part of the book fits into a flow of ideas. Always look for logical connectors between logical divisions.

She had been a faithful follower of Christ for years, raising godly children. However John must have heard something (perhaps from her children or nieces/nephews) that made him concerned that she might have a weakness for false prophets. He reminded her that walking in love means following Christ’s commands. That’s how John leads into his discourse on false prophets “for many deceivers...”. She needs to be careful of falling for the lies of the false prophets. Love for others does not compromise the teaching of Christ. He concludes by stating that he has more that he wants to share face to face. They were likely less pressing issues than this primary concern and perhaps of a more private nature. Her nieces and nephews sent their love.

One more question. Now that you have studied 2 John in some depth, consider the question of who the intended audience is. Was it written to an individual or to a church? What difference would this decision make in your interpretation?

Interpreting the audience as a congregation does not change the essential truths of the book, which are just as applicable to an individual as a congregation. However it would cause us to emphasize the application a bit differently. For example, verse 10 which states, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting” could be interpreted as not allowing this type of individual to be a part of the church, have an opportunity to teach or preach, or be given any support by the church. Also, interpreting the audience as a church would require us to assign allegorical meaning to the terms, “lady” and “children”. What distinction would we make and on what basis? There are several issues that would require some deeper thought.

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Example Two: 3 John

Historical Context (Background)

1. Use the supplement from a Bible Dictionary to learn about the background of 3 John. Write down some of the important things you learn about 3 John.

3rd John is written by, “the elder”. While some scholars question whether this is an elder named John, most agree this is the Apostle John. The primary reason is that the writing is so similar to the Apostle’s other letters. Also, this author implies apostolic authority in verse 10. This letter was probably written close around 90 AD from Ephesus.

2. Read through 3 John using a strong literal translation and answer the following questions.

- a. What do you notice about the people the letter is written to?

This is a personal letter from John to Gaius, one of John’s former disciples. Gaius was likely saved under John’s ministry and John may have brought him up in the faith. This would explain why he was called one of his “children”. Gaius was in a position to receive and provide for Christian missionaries. He apparently had already been faithful in doing this.

- b. What is the writer’s attitude?

John is very affectionate towards Gaius and is very pleased that he is walking in the truth and showing great love towards other brothers and sisters in Christ, especially those he does not know. He writes with a concern that Gaius not be swept up in the rebellion of Diotrephes and that good Christian hospitality for missionaries be diminished.

- c. Are there any specific things mentioned about why the letter is being written (the occasion)?

John is writing this letter to encourage Christian cooperation with missionaries and discourage selfish and sinful behavior, exhibited by those like Diotrephes. The focal point of John’s letter seems to be that we should hospitably receive and support those who truly come in the name of Christ.

- d. Write down the letter’s natural, logical divisions within the body.

Vs 1 – Introduction

Vs 2-4 – Greeting and blessing to Gaius

Vs 5-8 – Exhortation

Vs 9-10 – Warning about Diotrephes

Vs 11-12 – Exhortation and Endorsement of Demetrius

Vs 13-14 – Closing thoughts

Vs.15 - Farewell

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Literary Context (What is Being Said?)

1. Study each paragraph or logical section and jot down a brief summary of what each one is trying to say.

Vs 1 – John is writing to Gaius, one he loves in Christ

Vs 2-4 – John is very fond of Gaius, who is presumably a disciple or convert from his ministry. John delights to see him continue strong in the faith. John desires Gaius be blessed in all aspects of life.

Vs 5-8 – By generously supporting and encouraging other Christians who are serving the Lord, we please the Lord and become fellow laborers with them. It is an act of faithfulness to Christ when we do this, especially when they are strangers to us.

Vs 9-10 – Diotrophes is an example of how pride hurts the cause of Christ. Out of his desire for preeminence, he slandered other followers of Jesus and would not support or encourage others who came through the area. He also excluded those from local church fellowship who offered support to sound missionaries. John intended to exercise his apostolic authority to rebuke Diotrophes.

Vs 11-12 – Those who persist in sin do not know the Lord. Demetrius was someone who had shown a good example and many confirmed it, including John. John exhorts Gaius to provide support and lodging (perhaps) for Demetrius. In fact, this message may have been sent by Demetrius' hand.

Vs 13-14 – John hoped to relate some things to relate to Gaius face to face.

Vs 15 - Farewell

2. Show how each part of the book fits into a flow of ideas. Always look for logical connectors between logical divisions.

Much of 3rd John deals with loving the brethren. We can see John state his happiness at seeing Gaius have such a love for some missionaries passing through by providing support and perhaps lodging. He then goes on to explain how we become fellow laborers with other Christians when we support their ministries. John also gives an example of an individual who was not loving the brethren and hindering the cause of Christ. He states that those who persist in evil are not true believers, similar to a statement he makes in 1 John 3:6. John closes by commending a faithful brother, Demetrius, to Gaius. Apparently Demetrius would either soon be passing through or may have been the courier for this letter and John wanted Gaius to know that Demetrius was worthy of his support.