

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 –

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 –

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

Hermeneutics –

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 | 1:8-12 | 1:13 -15:33 | 16:1-27 |
| 1 Corinthians | 1:1 | 1:2 | | 1:4-9 | 1:10 – 16:14 | 16:15-24 |
| 2 Corinthians | | 1:1 | 1:2 | 1:3-5 | 1:6 – 13:10 | |
| Galatians | 1:1 | | | X | 1:6 – 6:17 | 6:18 |
| Ephesians | 1:1 | 1:1 | 1:2 | | 2:1 – 6:20 | 6:21-24 |
| Philippians | 1:1 | 1:1 | 1:2 | 1:3-11 | 1:12 – 4:19 | |
| Colossians | | 1:2 | 1:2 | | 1:21 – 4:6 | 4:7-18 |
| 1 Thessalonians | 1:1 | | 1:1 | 1:2-4 | | 5:25-28 |
| 2 Thessalonians | 1:1 | 1:1 | 1:2 | 1:3-12 | 2:1 – 3:15 | |
| 1 Timothy | 1:1 | 1:2 | 1:2 | X | | 6:21 |
| 2 Timothy | | 1:2 | 1:2 | 1:3-5 | 1:6 – 4:18 | 4:19-22 |
| Titus | 1:1-3 | 1:4 | | X | 1:5 – 3:14 | 3:15 |
| Philemon | 1:1 | 1:1-2 | 1:3 | 1:4-7 | | 1:23-25 |
| Hebrews | X | Postscrip | X | X | 1:1 – 13:19 | |
| James | 1:1 | 1:1 | | X | | X |
| 1 Peter | 1:1 | 1:1-2 | 1:2 | | 1:6 – 5:11 | 5:12-14 |
| 2 Peter | 1:1 | 1:1 | | 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 | | 1:4-12 | 1:13 |
| 3 John | | 1:1 | X | | 1:3-11 | 1:12-14 |
| Jude | 1:1 | 1:1 | | X | 1:3-23 | |

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 –

Galatians 1:6-9 –

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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?

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

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 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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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.

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