

# *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*

## Lesson 3: The Epistles: Learning to think Contextually



### *What exactly is an Epistle?*

Once we get through this lesson (Chapter 3) and the next lesson (Chapter 4), you will have the tools to be able to more accurately understand most of the New Testament. In the next two chapters we study epistles. Let's define that word:

**Epistle** – a type of letter that is 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	<b>Galatians</b>	<b>Philemon</b>
Mark	<b>Ephesians</b>	<b>Hebrews</b>
Luke	<b>Philippians</b>	<b>James</b>
John	<b>Colossians</b>	<b>1, 2 Peter</b>
Acts	<b>1,2 Thessalonians</b>	<b>1, 2, 3 John</b>
<b>Romans</b>	<b>1,2 Timothy</b>	<b>Jude</b>
<b>1, 2 Corinthians</b>	<b>Titus</b>	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 share some similarities with 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
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	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1 Peter	1:1	1:1-2	1:2	1:3-5	1:6 – 5:11	5:12-14

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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.

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 – something was going on that made the letter necessary. For a couple of examples, 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**

Some of the books aren’t so obvious in stating the reason they were written and you have to read more closely to understand their occasion.

Secondly, each of the epistles was written to a 1<sup>st</sup> century audience. Their lives were very different from ours and because of that, we have to bridge the gap through hermeneutics so we can accurately take the message to them and apply it to our lives.

### *A Study Method to Use on the Epistles*

There are several study methods that you can use to 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

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the text. It just means that all the outside resources do is help you understand what the text is already saying.

2. A good interpretation doesn't allow an interpretation that doesn't fit into the logical argument of the book.
3. A good interpretation will make good sense of everything in the passage

I think we need to spend a little time talking about logical arguments. Many people think that the Bible is like the Book of Proverbs, just a bunch of random verses stuck together in no logical order. However, that isn't the case. Proverbs is the only book like that and even Proverbs has some rhyme and reason to it sometimes.

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.

Let's look at Romans 12:14-21 as an example.

How does Romans 12:20 fit into the flow of Paul's argument?

**Paul had just told them to bless those that curse them. Romans 12:20 is a practical illustration of how to fulfill this commandment.**

### *Historical /Literary Context Study*

#### **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). 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 jot down a brief summary of what each one is trying to say.
- b. Show how each part of the book fits into a flow of ideas. Always look for logical connectors between logical divisions.

Now that you've seen the method, let's practice it a couple of times with the books of 2<sup>nd</sup> John and 3<sup>rd</sup> John.

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### 2 John – Example 1

#### Historical Context (Background)

1. Use the supplement from Nelson's Bible Dictionary to learn about the background of 2 John. Write down some of the important things you learn about 2 John.

2<sup>nd</sup> John is written by, "the elder". It is possible that this isn't the Apostle John, but an elder named John who was one of John's disciples. It was written close to the close of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, probably from Ephesus.

2. Read through 2 John using either a King James translation (KJV) or the New American Standard Bible (NASB) translation provided. Answer the following questions:

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

It is written to a church (elect lady) and her children (members). It doesn't indicate where this church is at.

- b. What is the writer's attitude?

John is very affectionate towards this church and he mentions that he was pleased to see some of her members living in a way that corresponded with, "the truth". He takes on a tone of warning, out of concern for the church's spiritual well-being, but closes the letter warmly with a loving farewell.

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

John writes this letter to encourage them to walk in love – by following Christ's commandments and to warn them against the teachings of false prophets or of participating in their evil doctrines.

- 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

#### 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

Vs 4-6 – John applauds them for sticking to, "the truth", but prompts them to move on to walk in love. Walking in love consists of being obedient to Christ's teachings.

Vs 7-11 – False prophets are those who deny Christ's humanity and existence. They should be careful not to fall into this lie. Those who fall into this were never saved. Anyone who blesses or encourages a false prophet participates in their evil.

Vs 12-13 – John says that he hopes to see them soon and teach them more. He states that their sister church (wherever he writes from – Ephesus?) greets them.

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

Part of walking in love is following Christ's commands. That's how John leads into his discourse on false prophets. They need to distinguish themselves from the false prophets in behavior and truth. That's why he starts off with, "for many deceivers..."

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### 3 John – Example 2

#### Historical Context (Background)

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

3<sup>rd</sup> John is written by, "the elder". It is possible that this isn't the Apostle John, but an elder named John who was one of John's disciples. It was written close to the close of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, probably from Ephesus.

2. Read through 3 John using either a King James translation (KJV) or the New American Standard Bible (NASB) translation provided. Answer the following questions:

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

John wrote this letter to Gaius, one of his former disciples. Gaius may have been saved under John's ministry and John brought him up in the faith. This would explain why he was called one of his "children".

- 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.

- 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 to Diotrephes

Vs 11-12 – Exhortation

Vs 13-14 – Closing thoughts

Vs.15 - Farewell

#### 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 – Introduction

Vs 2-4 – John greets Gaius and states how happy he was to hear that Gaius remained strong in the faith.

Vs 5-8 – By supporting and encouraging other Christians who are serving the Lord, we please the Lord and become fellow laborers with them.

Vs 9-10 – Diotrephes 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.

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. He therefore could be trusted

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

Vs 15 - Farewell

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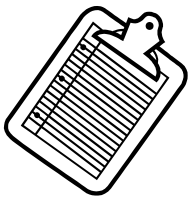
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2. Show how each part of the book fits into a flow of ideas. Always look for logical connectors between logical divisions.

Much of 3<sup>rd</sup> 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. 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 makes reference to a statement also made in 1 John that those who persist in evil are not true believers. John closes by commending a faithful brother, Demetrius, to Gaius. Apparently Demetrius would soon be passing through and John wanted Gaius to know that he was worthy of his support.

*Next week's assignment:*



- **1 John - Assignments**
  - Read 1 John all the way through in one sitting
  - Complete a Historical Context Study on 1 John
  - Complete a Literary Study for 1 John 1:1 – 2:14