

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 | 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 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						

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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 –

Galatians 1:6-9 –

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 1st 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?

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 2nd John and 3rd John.

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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.

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?

 - b. What is the writer's attitude?

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

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

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.

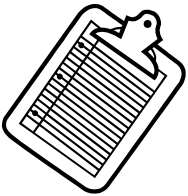
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2. Show how each part of the book fits into a flow of ideas. Always look for logical connectors between logical divisions.

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