

# Road Trip: Journey Into the Bible

## Midweek Part 6: How to Read the New Testament Epistles

### I. What are the Epistles?

The word Epistle comes from the Greek word meaning communication, message, or letter', and is simply another term for an ancient letter. These were letters written by leaders in the church and sent to churches, individual people, or written generally.

The New Testament Epistles make up 21 of the 27 books of our New Testament and are divided between 'Pauline Epistles' (letters written by Paul), and 'General Epistles' (written by other authors). In the Pauline Epistles, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are known as the 'Prison Epistles' since Paul was in prison while writing them. Also, 1,2 Timothy and Titus are known as the 'Pastoral Epistles' since they are addressed to leaders within the church.

The goal of Epistles is to address contemporary situations within the churches, establish and expound upon Christian teaching/doctrine, and convey various messages from author to recipient.

The Epistles in our New Testament are:

<u>Paul's Letters to Churches</u>	<u>Paul's Letters to Individuals</u>	<u>General Epistles</u>
Romans	1 Timothy	Hebrews
1 Corinthians	2 Timothy	James
2 Corinthians	Titus	1 Peter
Galatians	Philemon	2 Peter
Ephesians		1 John
Philippians		2 John
Colossians		3 John
1 Thessalonians		Jude
2 Thessalonians		

There were other letters that were written that we do not have (and God did not see fit to include):

- Paul wrote other letters to churches that are not included in the New Testament canon since he references them in his writings (1Cor 5:9; 2 Cor 2:3-4; Col 4:16).
- A letter was written by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem "to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia" (Acts 15:23).
- The believers in Ephesus wrote a letter for Apollos to the brothers in Achaia (Acts 18:27).
- Paul mentions a letter written by the Corinthian church asking him for clarifications regarding certain issues (1Cor 7:1).
- Paul references his plans to write a letter for those in Corinth who will take the monetary gift from the Gentile churches to the church in Jerusalem (1Cor 16:3).
- Finally, we read of a letter claiming to be written by Paul regarding the coming of Christ (2Thes 2:2).

Ancient letter-writing was often done using the help of a secretary. For example, we read, "I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord" (Rom 16:22). Apparently, it was Paul's normal practice to use an secretary. At times Paul makes it clear that he is writing instead of his secretary (1Cor 16:21; Gal 6:11; Col 4:18; 2Thes 3:17; Philemon 19; 1Pet 5:12). It was Paul's practice to write his final greeting with his own hand as a sign of the letter's authenticity (2Thes 3:17).

## Overall Themes:

- A heavy Christology and theology of the cross
- New Covenant identity of the believers in Christ
- Themes pertaining to the body of Christ as the church
- Themes pertaining to Jew and Gentile relations
- A working theology of the Holy Spirit
- Themes dealing with persecution and endurance
- Defense against false teachers
- Various theology worked out within the life of the church

## Brief Theme of Each Epistle:

- **Romans:** Explains the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel, emphasizing justification by faith and the transformative power of the gospel in the lives of believers.
- **1 Corinthians:** Addresses divisions, immorality, and issues in the church, urging unity and proper conduct within the body of Christ.
- **2 Corinthians:** Paul defends his apostleship and encourages the Corinthians to embrace weakness as the path to experiencing God's strength.
- **Galatians:** Paul confronts the Galatians about returning to the law, emphasizing freedom in Christ and justification by faith alone.
- **Ephesians:** Focuses on the unity of the church as the body of Christ and the spiritual blessings believers have in Christ.
- **Philippians:** A letter of encouragement and joy, urging believers to live in humility, unity, and perseverance in the face of opposition.
- **Colossians:** Warns against false teachings and emphasizes the supremacy of Christ and the fullness believers have in Him.
- **1 Thessalonians:** Encourages the church in their faith, love, and hope, and offers guidance on living in light of Christ's coming.
- **2 Thessalonians:** Clarifies misunderstandings about the Day of the Lord and encourages perseverance amidst persecution.
- **1 Timothy:** Provides instructions for church leadership and sound teaching, emphasizing godliness and order in the church.
- **2 Timothy:** Paul's final letter, urging Timothy to remain faithful to the gospel and his ministry despite suffering and opposition.
- **Titus:** Offers guidance on establishing church leadership and instructing believers in sound doctrine and godly living.
- **Philemon:** A personal appeal to Philemon to welcome back his runaway slave Onesimus as a brother in Christ.
- **Hebrews:** Exhorts Hebrew believers to persevere in faith, showing the superiority of Christ and the new covenant over the old covenant.
- **James:** Emphasizes practical faith, calling believers to live out their faith through good works and righteous living.
- **1 Peter:** Encourages Christians to stand firm in their faith and endure suffering with hope, as they live as foreigners in the world.
- **2 Peter:** Warns against false teachers and encourages growth in grace and knowledge of Christ as believers await His return.
- **1 John:** Assures believers of their salvation, emphasizing love, obedience, and the rejection of false teachings.
- **2 John:** Warns against supporting false teachers and emphasizes love and truth within the Christian community.
- **3 John:** Commends Gaius for his hospitality and warns against the disruptive influence of Diotrephes within the church.
- **Jude:** Urges believers to contend for the faith and warns against false teachers who pervert the grace of God.

## **The Genre of Epistles**

Epistles have a format that follows the basic form of a Greco-Roman letter, similar to our modern letters, including an introduction, body and conclusion.

- Name of Writer
- Name of Recipients
- Personal Greeting
- Personal Prayer, Wish, or Expression of Thanks
- Body of Letter
- Final Greetings and Farewell

Some of the NT epistles lack some of these elements. What they all have in common is that they are OCCASIONAL DOCUMENTS (i.e. arising out of and intended for a specific occasion/need). They were written out of the 1<sup>st</sup> century context of the author to the context of the original recipients. It is these two factors that most complicate their interpretation.

That the epistles are occasional letters means we have the answers but don't always know what the questions or problems were. We must try to reconstruct the occasion by using the content within the letter.

To do this we must start with questions:

- Who is writing the letter?
- Who is the audience of the letter?
- What could have prompted the writing of the letter?
- What situation does the author face while writing his letter?
- What problems does the author address in the letter?
- Does the writer state his purpose for writing the letter?
- What are the major themes, concepts, and words in the letter?

For instance, in Galatians, the problem seems to be with false teachers called Judaizers who tried to come into the church spreading false doctrine. Whereas in Timothy, there seems to be false teachers already within the leadership of the church, leading people astray (which is why there is such focus on the character of elders, etc.).

Their occasional nature also means that they weren't primarily written to be a 'Systematic Theology' textbook although we do find much rich theology in them. The New Testament epistles contain theology APPLIED to the life of the Church.

## **Principles on How to Interpret and Apply the Epistles**

1. It is important to note that when you are reading epistles, you are literally reading someone else's mail
2. When possible, read the entire epistle as a whole to get the overall message of the letter.
3. When interpreting, think 'paragraphs' and not 'verses' – this helps keep things in context
4. Epistles must be interpreted in light of their occasion of the whole letter and historical context.
5. We, at times, must distinguish between what is an eternal principle and a cultural application of the eternal principle. (ex: headship is the principle but head coverings are the cultural application)
6. A basic rule is that a text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or and readers.
7. The Epistles offer the clearest teachings of Christian doctrine as applied to the believer and the church, so where there are similar circumstances, God's word to them is God's word to us.
8. Don't always read epistles from an 'individualistic' standpoint, often times epistles are written in a corporate context of the whole body.