

HOW TO STUDY THE EPISTLES

What is an epistle?

A letter written by an apostle to instruct Christians in God-honoring doctrine and living.

What is the basic structure of an epistle?

1. Name of writer
2. Name of recipient
3. Greeting
4. Prayer wish or thanksgiving
5. Body
6. Final greeting and farewell

Why were the New Testament epistles written?

- To deal with particular situations in the life of the recipient(s)
- To give instructions for Christian living
- To apply the teachings and life of Jesus Christ

What sorts of hermeneutical principles do we need to know when studying an epistle?

1. Interpret the unclear by the clear. The New Testament epistles contain some of the clearest teaching in Scripture when it comes to instructing Christians what to believe and how to live. We often use the apostles' teaching to interpret the rest of Scripture, even the New Testament gospel accounts.

2. Interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament.

EXAMPLE:

- 1) Hebrews: Interpreting Old Testament ceremonies and historical people
- 2) Romans 3–11: Understanding God's grace and Old Testament narratives

3. Interpret historical narratives by the didactic.

EXAMPLE:

The Lord's Supper and 1 Corinthians 11

What sorts of things should we know to correctly interpret the epistles?

1. Historical context — The culture, customs, languages, beliefs, relationships, and history of the author and his original audience.

EXAMPLE:

- 1) Matthew 6: Jesus and appearance while fasting
- 2) Galatians/Romans/Acts/etc.: The Judaizing heresy in the 1st-century church

2. Literary context — The words, sentences, paragraphs, or chapters that surround and relate to a text.

EXAMPLE:

- 1) Matthew 7: "Judge not, lest ye be judged."
- 2) Ephesians 5 and "mutual submission"