

# her·me·neu·tics

## HOW TO STUDY YOUR BIBLE

— an eight week course with pastor ben —

### Lesson 5 – Studying Letters

When Jesus ascended to heaven, He left the work of continuing and fleshing out His teachings to His apostles. These men, along with Paul and other close associates would come to have hugely important teaching and writing ministries. Over a period of 35-50 years, several different men would write letters to individuals, churches, and the Christian community as a whole working out what the gospel looked like and how it should be lived out in first century Rome. These writings have become recognized for what they always were – the living and inspired Word of God. Today we are going to see how it is we can profitably and accurately study them and know what they mean for us today.

#### Genre of Letters

- **New Testament Letters Focused on Logic**

The genre of letters tends to focus on rational thinking, logic, and persuasion more than most genres. This doesn't mean that other sections of the Bible are irrational or illogical, but rather that the main way they seek to impact us is not by carefully laying out arguments built on careful propositions. The letters explain, argue, discuss, and describe in clear, rational ways the truths of Christianity. This means that when we read them, we want to focus on the progression of ideas, the way a thought is developed, and how the author is building an argument.

- **What kind of letter are we working with?**

Even today, we recognize that there are different kinds of letters that we can write. The letter that you write to a congressperson will look and sound very different to a letter that a soldier would have written to his wife during World War 2. Similarly, not every letter in ancient Rome was the same kind of letter. Some were very formal, such as Cicero's letters, and were written more as a philosophical treatise in the form of a letter than as actual correspondence with a friend. Others were very personal, written to a close friend or

relative and written in a very informal way. The letters of the New Testament show a variety of degrees of formality. Letters like 2 or 3 John and Philemon tend to be more informal, whereas letters like Hebrews, Romans, or Ephesians tend to be a little more formal. Recognizing whether a letter was formal or informal can be helpful in studying the letter.

## Context of the Letters

- **Literary context**

We often read the letters of the New Testament very slowly, reading sentence by sentence, chapter by chapter, and preaching on only a few verses at a time. This isn't bad, but it can be distorting. Remember, these letters were not designed to be read one chapter at a time. They were meant to be read all at once. When Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians, he expected that it would be read out loud to the Philippian church in one sitting. Paul didn't expect the church at Philippi to say, "Okay, we got a letter from Paul. Today we will read the first two paragraphs. Come back next week and we will read the next two!" It's fine to at times break them down and read them more slowly, but to get the big picture of what's going on begin by reading them through in one setting, realizing that this is how these books were originally meant to be read.

- **Situational context**

The letters of the New Testament are typically put in two categories: the Pauline epistles and the general epistles. The Pauline epistles are given their name because they were written by Paul and include Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. The general epistles are given their name because they normally were addressed to a general audience, rather than a specific individual or church like Paul's letters are (2 and 3 John are the two exceptions to this rule). These eight letters include Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude. Also be aware that the general letters are sometimes called the "catholic (small c) epistles" because catholic in this sense means universal or general.

After grouping letters Paul wrote and letters written to a general audience, the letters are then generally organized from longest to shortest in each section, while keeping letters that are in a sequence together (e.g. 1, 2, 3 John are kept together). Understand that the letters in your Bible are not organized arbitrarily, but that at the same time they are not organized chronologically. Romans was written about halfway through Paul's writing career, yet it shows up first. Galatians was likely the earliest letter Paul wrote, but we put it fourth in our Bibles.

Let's work through a very brief chronology of the letters, giving their main ideas and when, where, and why they were written.

○ **Paul's Letters**

- **Galatians** – while debated, Galatians was probably the first letter of Paul to be written, and it would have been written after his first missionary journey to the churches he planted in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Paul argues vehemently against those who would try to add the law to the gospel as necessary for salvation.
- **1 and 2 Thessalonians** – written during Paul's second missionary journey from the city of Corinth. Paul had planted a church in Thessalonica but had to leave before he was able to make sure the church was established. Paul sent Timothy to see how the church was doing and was thrilled that they were doing well. Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians to prepare them for more suffering, to clarify Christ's second return, and to give some important ethical teaching. 2 Thessalonians was written especially to reiterate and further clarify confusion about the Lord's return and address some other ethical issues.
- **1 and 2 Corinthians** – Written from Paul, likely in Ephesus on his third missionary journey. Paul was in Ephesus for awhile, and during this time he corresponded at least 3 times with Corinth. Paul had written to Corinth, they had responded asking for clarification and perhaps at times challenging him. In response, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians dealing with a number of issues in the church. Paul's letter wasn't received well, and so he went to visit them personally, when that didn't go well he sent a harsh letter that succeeded in breaking the pride of most in Corinth. In response, Paul sent 2 Corinthians to address the now repentant believers, prepare them for an love offering he was preparing for believers in Israel, and speak stern words to those who still resisted his leadership.
- **Romans** – Written from Corinth at the end of Paul's third missionary journey when Paul was making one last loop of Greece before heading to Jerusalem to drop off the offering he had collected. Paul hoped to visit Rome and be helped by them on a missionary trip to Spain. Paul would visit Rome after his Jerusalem trip, but under the unusual circumstance of being a Roman prisoner coming before the emperor to appeal his case.
- **Philippians** – written from Rome while in prison, this letter thanks the church in Philippi for the gift they sent him and appeals to them to be unified in Christ.
- **Colossians** – also written from Rome while in prison, this letter was written to a church Paul had never visited but which had been started by one of Paul's converts. The church had begun to buy into a dangerous heresy that didn't see Christ alone as sufficient for salvation, and so Paul wrote confronting this wrong teaching and giving practical instructions for the Christian life.

- **Philemon** – also written from Rome, this letter was written to a Colossian church member named Philemon, asking him to forgive and accept back a runaway slave named Onesimus that Paul had led to the Lord.
  - **Ephesians** – also written from Rome, a letter written to a church Paul had spent a lot of time in that deals with many of the same issues as Colossians but from a broader perspective. Considers the work of Christ in uniting Jew and Gentile and eventually all creation under His reign.
  - **1 Timothy and Titus** – likely written after Paul was released from prison, these letters were written to two of Paul’s young proteges, giving them instructions on how to address the church problems they faced in Ephesus and Crete.
  - **2 Timothy** – the last letter Paul wrote. This letter was likely written from a Roman prison shortly before his execution. Paul’s final words to his closest follower are here recorded for us.
- General Letters
- **Hebrews** – probably written in the mid to late 60’s. Warns Jewish Christians against abandoning Christ and going back to the Old Covenant as a way of salvation.
  - **James** – no date given, but many think this may be the first letter of the New Testament written, being written as early as 40 A.D. Written by James, the brother of Christ and reflects much of the teaching of Jesus applied to the church community. Emphasizes the need for real, mature faith.
  - **1 and 2 Peter** – written to believers living in modern day Turkey, probably during the mid to late sixties. 1 Peter encourages Christians to suffer meekly and righteously as Christ did. 2 Peter focuses on the second coming of Christ and warns about false teachers.
  - **1, 2, and 3 John** – written by the apostle John, probably near the end of his life (85-90 A.D.). 1 John deals with assurance, how a believer can know they are saved. 2 John deals with how the church should respond to those who claim to know Christ but teach false doctrine. 3 John warns against those who use separation as a cloak for their own pride.
  - **Jude** – no clues for date given. Written by Jude, brother of Christ and James, and deals with the theme of false teachers and parallels much of what 2 Peter says.

## Observing the Details in Letters

- Ask what the goal of the author is in writing the letter.
  - Is he trying to rebuke the congregation for unrepentant wrongdoing?
  - Is he trying to comfort or encourage in the midst of suffering?
  - Is he trying to teach some truth they are missing or refute a heresy that are accepting?
- Trace the argument of the author.
  - Decide what the author is arguing about and if he is arguing for more than one thing.
  - Try to sum up the different steps the author takes in laying out an argument.

**Example:** Hebrews is making the case that Jesus is better than the Old Covenant system that preceded him. He does by getting specific: arguing that Jesus is better than angels, better than Moses, better than the priesthood, and better than the sacrifices. In Hebrews 1-2 we notice that the author is discussing that Jesus is better than the angels. We read through it several times and we come to this general flow of thought:

(1:1-4) Introduction to book and superiority of Christ

(1:5-14) Scriptural arguments that Christ is better than the angels

(2:1-4) Warning not to neglect the gospel since it was given by one greater than angels

(2:5-18) Explanation of humiliation – why then did Jesus take a place lower than the angels?

- **Pay attention to important cross-references**
  - Look up citations from the New Testament to see their Old Testament context. Honestly, the way the New Testament writers use the Old Testament has at times challenged even the most careful student of God's Word. However, knowing how and where these passages were used, while challenging, will often greatly aid in your understanding of the passage at hand.
  - Look up how similar language and ideas are developed elsewhere in Scripture, especially in the epistles. This will become easier the more you study and get to know different parts of Scripture. You will over time begin to find yourself saying more and more, "Wait, that reminds me of..."

## Outlining Letters

Modern day letters tend to have a certain form that is followed. Normally, we start with "Dear...." or "To whom it may concern" and conclude with a farewell such as "your truly" or "sincerely" followed by a signature. Ancient letters also had a generally recognizable structure. There was an

introduction, with generally recognizable patterns, and body of the letter, and then a conclusion. We will look at each of these individually.

- **Introduction**

There was a certain structure and formality that opened letters, especially private correspondence. This included the designation of the sender and the recipients, as well as a greeting and a prayer or a blessing for the recipient.

- **Sender** – most letters begin by stating who wrote the letter. This was common practice in Greek and Roman times and is the case in every letter we have except for Hebrews and 1 John, which seem to be more sermonic in form.
- **Recipient** – next, the author would state to whom the letter was being written. This could be an individual, a church, or a group of believers living in a certain location or simply all believers. Again, the only letters that lack this feature are Hebrews and 1 John.
- **Greeting** – The standard Greek greeting was *charein* (literally “to rejoice,” but often used as a simple way of saying “hello”) and this is how the letter of James starts (James 1:1). Paul and others replaced this standard greeting with a similar sounding Greek word *charis* (“grace”). The Hebrew greeting was *shalom* (“peace”) and Paul and others seem to pick up on this and include this greeting as well in their letters. We also have “mercy” being used in the introduction to a letter (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, 2 John) and Jude begins with the interesting combination “mercy, peace, and love.”
- **Thanksgiving/Prayer** – Many Greek letters would also began with a prayer to the gods, either thanking them for the recipient or praying for the recipient to have blessing.

Paying attention carefully to the introduction can be a help in getting a flavor of what the letter is going to be about. By comparing when and where the author deviates from the typical pattern or seeing what is emphasized more than usual we can have a better idea where the author is headed.

- **Body**

The body of the letters is normally the longest section and is the point of the letter. It is often in the body of these letters that are outlining skills are truly put the test! The principles we looked at in our previous lesson on outlining work especially well in the body of most of the letters. In fact, this type of writing is often the easiest to outline. Try to find the major seams of the letter, for example Ephesians and Romans both have a doctrinal section followed by a practical section, and 1 Corinthians works through numerous issues faced by the church at Corinth. Other letters are more challenging to outline, but careful attention to the flow of thought and the details will go a long way in helping you break the letter down into smaller, bite size pieces to study.

Here repeated words or key phrases can be a hint. Phrases like “finally,” “I want you to know,” “therefore,” “now concerning,” “brothers,” and other such words and phrases can be a hint that the author is moving on to a new point. Chapter breaks can be both a help and a hinderance. Chapter divisions are one person’s opinion where one idea begins and another begins. Chapter divisions are not arbitrary, but they are not always right. Use chapter divisions as a reference, realizing they are not inspired and could be wrong.

- **Conclusion**

When wrapping up a letter, there is no one single pattern like there is for the introduction of a letter. However, there are certain elements that show up repeatedly in different combinations at the end of the letters in the New Testament:

- **Travel Plans or Situation** – Letter writers would often let the readers know what they were up to and where they were planning on going next.
- **Greetings** – The authors of the letters would frequently say hello to people in the church he was writing to and mention people who were with him.
- **Benediction or Prayer**– The writers of the letters would sometimes end their letters with a prayer to God on behalf of those to whom they were writing or with a benediction praising God.
- **Prayer Requests** – Paul in particular would often ask his churches to pray for him for various things at the end of his letters.
- **Signature** – Sometimes Paul points out specifically that he is writing at a certain point in the conclusion of his letters. It is likely that Paul typically employed a secretary to write for him, and so it becomes significant when he himself picks up the pen to write.
- **Final instructions** – occasionally a letter will give some final instructions and exhortations somewhere during the closing.
- **Grace Blessing** – often there is a wish of grace upon the hearers (or, as in the case of 1 Peter, a wish of peace).

**Example: Romans**

- **Introduction (1:1-15)**
- **Body (1:16-15:21)**

- **Closing (15:22-16:27)**
  
- **Introduction**
  - **Author (1:1-6)**
  - **Recipient (1:7a)**
  - **Greeting (1:7b)**
  - **Thanksgiving and Prayer (1:8-15)**
  
- **Body**
  - **An Explanation of What the Gospel Is (1:16-11:36)**
    - Who Needs the Gospel: Everyone (1:16-3:20)
    - How to Get the Gospel: Faith (3:21-4:25)
    - What Results from the Gospel: Peace, Freedom, Righteousness, Hope (5:1-8:39)
    - Who Gets the Gospel: the Elect (9:1-11:36)
  
  - **An Exhortation of How to Live in Light of the Gospel (12:1-15:21)**
    - Overall Command: Be a Living Sacrifice (12:1-2)
    - Unity in the Body of Christ (12:3-21)
    - Submission to the Government (13)
    - Disputable Matters (14:1-15:7)
    - The Unity of Jew and Gentile (15:8-21)
  
- **Closing**
  - **Travel Plans and Situation (15:22-29)**
  - **Prayer Requests (15:30-33)**
  - **Greetings (16:1-16)**
  - **Final Instructions (16:17-20a)**
  - **Grace Blessing (16:20b)**
  - **Greetings (16:21-23)**
  - **Grace Blessing (16:24)**
  - **Benediction (16:25-27)**

### **Applying the Letters**

Application of the letters is normally straightforward, but at times it can be challenging. Because these letters were written to people living at a different time with different customs, some of what they teach will no longer apply to us today. The letters of the New Testament command that we greet one another with a holy kiss, and yet I have never obeyed that command when I walk into a church building on Sunday morning. So how do you respond when someone argues

that women should be allowed to pastor because Paul's command was addressing a specific situation in a culture that wouldn't accept women in ministry or that homosexuality today is okay because it's not the same as the homosexuality of the times of the Bible?

We realize that we must strike a careful balance here. Some will be over rigid in their application of these letters, drawing universal principles from specific commands given in specific situations. The far greater danger for many is that they will take the clear words of the apostle Paul and relegate them to a former era and try to explain why uncomfortable texts no longer need to be followed. Again, most of what we find in the letters is easily applicable, but let's give a few principles for those hot button issues that are more challenging.

**1. Seek to understand the original situation as clearly as possible.**

When Paul was discussing whether or not women should have their heads covered for worship, it's important to realize he is saying this to a culture where women were always expected to have their heads covered. We at least need to acknowledge in our interpretation of this passage that there are some major cultural differences, because for us today women don't typically cover their head in American culture.

When Paul says that it is best not to marry in 1 Corinthians 7, we have to realize that one of the factors that plays into this is the "present distress." Paul's instructions on how to care for widows was given at a time when there was no social security or retirement, so some of what he said may need to be modified. Obviously, churches should still desire to care for those widows who have lived lives of exemplary Christian conduct and have no one to care for them, but some of the details may be different.

At this point, we aren't deciding what should and shouldn't apply, we are just doing the study to see what situation Paul or some other author is actually speaking to. Once we've done that, we can more clearly begin to see how what is said applies today.

**2. Determine the principles behind the commands given.**

Paul's concern in 1 Corinthians 11 over the issue of women wearing a head covering clearly seems interested in gender distinctions and with both men and women accepting the role God has given them. Women in particular are to demonstrate that they are in submission to their husbands, and in Corinth not wearing a head covering during this time would be seen as bold, insubordinate, and even flirtatious. In 1 Timothy 2, where Paul instructs women not to teach in the church, Paul's concern is that women would demonstrate appropriate behavior by reflecting the beauty of femininity in their clothing, behavior, and decorum in the church. Both of these principles are as valid today as when Paul wrote them, which leads us to our final point...

**3. Determine how those principles apply today.**

Notice I did not say “if.” All of God’s Word is applicable to us today. It’s not a matter of if God’s Word applies, but how it applies. A principle may apply today the same way it did 2,000 years ago, but it might need to be applied differently in our current context. Again, many of these principles will apply the exact same way: “don’t gossip, don’t commit fornication, pray for your leaders, be unified.” What about our other two examples: head coverings and women in pastoral ministry?

When it comes to head coverings, Christians should believe that the principle of gender distinction and submission are valid principles today. But for a woman to wear a head covering does not communicate that to the culture, since our culture does not expect married women to wear a head covering. Women should be careful to appear feminine, and to in their behavior and demeanor show appropriate, godly submission to their husbands, but most don’t think that means she must wear a head covering, especially since Paul himself acknowledges the practice is a custom in his discussion.

But what does it look like to apply the principle that women are to reflect the beauty and submissiveness of femininity in their clothing, behavior, and in the church context? Has this changed because cultures changed? Does it look different in America now than it did in Ephesus? It’s hard to see how a woman could teach in a church setting and yet still be true to the principle of 1 Timothy 2 “But I suffer [allow] not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” We can see how the principle behind 1 Corinthians 11 concerning head coverings can be carried out differently in our modern context. But how could the spirit of this passage be applied while still allowing a woman to preach to men in a church?

Once again, this deals with some of the more difficult passages, but I hope it shows how to consistently understand them and apply them. These three principles are helpful in a number of passages, such as how we think about “greeting one another with a holy kiss” or as we saw in a previous lesson not letting false teachers into our house from 2 John.

Don’t forget that as we read these letters, while we want to be sure to obey these commands, God’s desire to change us goes deeper than just making sure we follow the commands. The letters, as with all of Scripture, are trying to give us a bigger picture of our God and to change the way we see him, ourselves, and our world. This will alter not just what we do, but also what we want and how we think. And in all of this, God is seeking to conform us more to the image of His Son in thought, action, and deed.