



How to Read Epistles... and Understand Them

What is an Epistle?

You might be sitting there asking yourself this question. What is an **Epistle**? In the simplest answer I will probably ever give you, an Epistle is a letter. Now, an **Epistle** is not just your every day, garden-variety letter or e-mail you might receive from a friend. It involves a whole lot more.

A Letter With a Purpose

Epistles (or at least the ones we know of and recognize as such) were typically written with a direct purpose in mind. A lot of the time they were written to address a problem the author saw in a church body he either saw in person or heard from others within that body. Sometimes they were written to a specific person like in **1 & 2 Timothy**, which were largely written to help Timothy as a pastor. There were all kinds of reasons for which the Epistles were *originally* written. Remember that we need to look first at why it was written in the first place.

Remembering why we wrote what we wrote when we wrote it...

Here we find a few other items of which we need to be aware when we attempt to read and study the Epistles.

Types of Letters –

Letter writing was a lot different in the ancient world than it is now. Now we jot off an e-mail like it was nothing. Back then there was a lot more formal pomp and circumstance to it. There were several different types of letters that would have been written back then, so let's look at a few types.

- ⇒ The “Contract Letter” – this was a letter which detailed an agreement between two parties
- ⇒ The “Friendship Letter” – a letter from one friend to another which contains language such as “longing to see you”

- ⇒ The “Epideictic Letter” – A letter of praise or blame to an individual or a group.
 - (Serving to show forth, explain, or exhibit; -- applied by the Greeks to a kind of oratory, which, by full amplification, seeks to persuade.)
- ⇒ The “Protreptic Letter” – a letter which actually presents an argument meant to sway the opinion of the reader toward the writer’s perspective.
- ⇒ The “Paraenetic Letter” – a letter containing moral and ethical teaching.
- ⇒ The “Letter of Recommendation” – a letter carried by one being recommended by the third party.

A lot of the time in Scripture, we will encounter a blending of these different styles, thus making them “Blended Letters.” Let’s take a few minutes and see if we can figure out what kinds of letters these (handouts) are. {Letter #2 – Romans 1.8-12 Letter #3 – Romans 1.18-23 Letter #4 – Revelation 3.1-6}

We also need to do our best to get at what was originally wrote about and why. Here is a small exercise.

Read 1 Corinthians 11.2-16:

²*I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you.* ³*Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.* ⁴*Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head.* ⁵*And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved.* ⁶*If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head.* ⁷*A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.* ⁸*For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; ⁹neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.* ¹⁰*For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.*

¹¹*In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.* ¹²*For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.* ¹³*Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?* ¹⁴*Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, ¹⁵but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering.* ¹⁶*If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God. (NIV)*

Now, do you see anything we are doing wrong today based upon this passage? How can we know why what was originally written? There is a lot of cultural distance here alone. Not to mention that there might have been a problem happening at the time in the local church being written to concerning the men not behaving as they should, and the women doing the same.

There are a lot of things to consider here, such as the original language, the situation at the time, and the cultural issues which were important then.

Coming Attractions

Next week we will be getting an overview of Romans as a whole book, so make sure to bring a Bible with you. It's gonna be great.



Letter # 1

Festívus,

Here is my slave Tibus. He has served me well over the years and I am sending him on to you. He will serve well in your employ and will be more than adequate to fill the needs you have now. Enjoy him, and treat him well, so that he will be of as much use to you as he has been to me.

Claudíus



Letter # 2

Friends in the Church,

I thank God through Jesus for every one of you. That's first. People everywhere keep telling me about your lives of faith, and every time I hear them, I thank him. And God, whom I so love to worship and serve by spreading the good news of his Son--the Message!--knows that every time I think of you in my prayers, which is practically all the time, I ask him to clear the way for me to come and see you. The longer this waiting goes on, the deeper the ache. I so want to be there to deliver God's gift in person and watch you grow stronger right before my eyes! But don't think I'm not expecting to get something out of this, too! You have as much to give me as I do to you.

Paul



Letter # 3

Stephen,

God's angry displeasure erupts as acts of human mistrust and wrongdoing and lying accumulate, as people try to put a shroud over truth. But the basic reality of God is plain enough. Open your eyes and there it is! By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes as such can't see: eternal power, for instance, and the mystery of his divine being. So nobody has a good excuse. What happened was this: People knew God perfectly well, but when they didn't treat him like God, refusing to worship him, they trivialized themselves into silliness and confusion so that there was neither sense nor direction left in their lives. They pretended to know it all, but were illiterate regarding life. They traded the glory of God who holds the whole world in his hands for cheap figurines you can buy at any roadside stand.



Letter # 4

Sardis,

I see right through your work. You have a reputation for vigor and zest, but you're dead, stone dead.

"Up on your feet! Take a deep breath! Maybe there's life in you yet. But I wouldn't know it by looking at your busywork; nothing of God's work has been completed. Your condition is desperate. Think of the gift you once had in your hands, the Message you heard with your ears--grasp it again and turn back to God.

"If you pull the covers back over your head and sleep on, oblivious to God, I'll return when you least expect it, break into your life like a thief in the night.

"You still have a few Christians in Sardis who haven't ruined themselves wallowing in the muck of the world's ways. They'll walk with me on parade! They've proved their worth!

"Conquerors will march in the victory parade, their names indelible in the Book of Life. I'll lead them up and present them by name to my Father and his Angels.

"Are your ears awake? Listen. Listen to the Wind Words, the Spirit blowing through the churches."