



GCI
60 SECOND
SERMON

Reading the Epistles

There is no shortage of books, podcasts, and other resources that provide insight into scripture. This month, our 60 Second Sermon will provide a guide for reading through the Epistles.

Before we dig into the Epistles, let's take a moment to reflect on what the Bible is and what it isn't.



The Bible is a....



Love letter – God's love letter to us. He's not only telling us how he feels about us, but who he is. Perhaps like an eHarmony profile of someone you're just meeting.



Library – The Bible is introductory not a book, but a library of different kinds of literature. It includes history, poetry, personal letters, political satire, and several other forms of writing. It's vital to keep in mind that the authors wrote for a specific purpose to a particular group – a situation that formed the content of the letter.



Living literature – The Bible speaks in two moments: then and now. For example, 1 Corinthians is a letter written to the first-century church in Corinth (a city in Greece). The letters written to the Corinthians are also “living literature” of Scripture and express truth that has transformed the church through the centuries and can transform our individual lives today. The Word of God is “living and active” (Hebrews 4:12).



The Bible is not a...



Code book – The Bible is not a code book of riddles and ciphers that will help us unlock the future. This kind of approach to Scripture has caused several problems throughout history.



Chicken Soup for the Soul – The Bible is not a feel-good, self-help book designed to enhance our lives. It is God's revelation of himself, not for us to wrestle into our own situation or disregard if we don't think it "applies."



A la carte – The Bible is a coherent whole, compiled by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16). Taking verses out of context is dangerous and wrong-headed. Each verse is affected by its situation, author, and the other verses in the context.

Now let's get into our overview of the Epistles.

What is an Epistle?

The Epistles are scriptures that were originally written as a letter to a particular people. Epistles make up a majority of the New Testament, twenty-one of its twenty-seven books.

What is the format of the Epistles?

Each epistle begins with an introduction identifying the author and the audience. Like letters we write today, a greeting is included followed by the body of the letter. Frequently, the closing includes a blessing.



How are the epistles categorized?

Pauline Epistles

Written by Paul.

Written to a specific church:

Romans
I Corinthians
II Corinthians
Galatians
I Thessalonians
II Thessalonians

Prison Epistles - Written to a specific church while Paul was on house arrest in Rome:

Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
Philemon

Pastoral - written to ministers whom Paul had given charge over local congregations:

I Timothy
II Timothy
Titus

Non-Pauline Epistles

Written by James, Jude, Paul, Peter, or John.

Written to a specific church:

Hebrews

General - written to a universal audience rather than one specific church:

James
Jude
I Peter
2 Peter
I John
II John
III John



What are some things to consider when reading the epistles?

Remember these are “occasioned texts.” The circumstances around which they are written are important for understanding their meaning.

Questions to consider:

Context – How did this sound to the first readers?

- What was happening in and around the writing of this letter?
- What was the location and culture of the audience?

Conversation – How does this apply to God?

- How is God described in the verses?
- To whom or what does the writer emphasize or focus on?

Connection – How do we apply ourselves to this?

- How does my current and cultural context affect my interpretation of these verses? What are the similarities between my context and the context in which the scripture was written?
- Did I experience God in a new way through reading these verses? Is there an implication or impact on my response to God because of this revelation?



What are some helpful resources for reading the bible?

The Bible Project - free Bible videos, podcasts, blogs, classes, and educational Bible resources to help make the biblical story accessible to everyone everywhere.

New Testament: Introductions and Outlines - a nondenominational Bible-based site with Bible Study tools and resources.

Expository Bible Study Notes - commentary on all 66 books of the Bible in web-based format.

Exploring the Word of God: The Epistles of Paul - Grace Communion International (gci.org) - a series of articles with commentary on the Pauline Epistles.

