

## Epistles

The study of epistles is a more technical process than the study of other types of New Testament literature. The technical nature of epistles can prove to be intimidating for most people, but with a clear understanding and practical steps to follow, anyone can learn how to faithfully study epistles.

Unlike narratives, epistles exist for the expressed purpose of instruction in the doctrines of God. Oftentimes an epistle will include practical applications and exhortations that are personal in nature, but they are primarily written to explain and teach a specific set of truths from God. It is for this reason that we must take our time and patiently observe, carefully interpret, and faithfully apply the truth of what we discover in them.

Prior to applying the steps of Bible study to a specific passage of the book you are studying, take the time to immerse yourself in the overall context of the entire book. Read the entire book, twice, in two different translations (ESV and NLT). Also take some time to research some background information about the book by reading a Study Bible introduction or a Background Commentary. It would also be beneficial to either print or purchase a scripture journal that you will use for the observation stage of your study. Refer to the “Resources” section of this document to find a link for purchasing a scripture journal.

### Observation

1. Pray
  2. Read: the entire chapter, two times (ESV & NLT), from start to finish, uninterrupted.
  3. Places: identify the different places in the chapter.
  4. People: identify who the different characters (God and people) in the chapter are, and what they do or say.
  5. Words/Phrases: identify words and phrases that are confusing, theologically significant, and ones that mark transitions in the text. Transition words usually occur at the start of a sentence or paragraph (Examples: and, but, now, therefore, then, so, for).
1. Questions: write down all your questions.

### Interpretation

1. Pray.

2. Prepare: copy and paste the ESV version of the passage that you are studying into your word processor, removing all formatting (paragraph breaks, section headings, etc) from the text.
3. Complete thoughts: break the passage into the complete thoughts, one per line, in your word processor. A complete thought is not a sentence per se, because sentences can be made up of many complete thoughts.
4. Outline: all the complete thoughts in the passage. Start at the beginning of your passage with the first complete thought you come across and leave it at left most margin of your document. Continue to the very next complete thought. At this point ask, "Does this second complete thought support/define/explain/modify in some way the previous complete thought?" If the answer is yes, then indent it to show the supporting relationship to the previous complete thought. If it does not support/define/explain/modify the previous statement, then you leave it directly under the previous one, but not indented. This simply shows that the second statement simply carries on the flow of thought and is not modifying the previous one.

As you outline and make decisions as to the relationships between the complete thoughts, make sure that you strive to define the meaning of each one. Usually the defining of each complete thought takes place as you consider what each individual complete thought says, and how it relates to the others around it.

During the outlining process, it is very important to return to those transition words that you marked earlier during the observation step. Identifying the purpose of each transition word can greatly help you determine how each complete thought relates to the others around it. Here are some helps:

- “And” This means that the new material is simply being added to the previous material. (Normally do not indent)
  - “But, Now” These words signal a new related point to the theme line that has already been established. (Normally do not indent)
  - “Therefore, Then, So” These words continue, in some way, the main point that was already stated by introducing a response or action to be taken. (Normally do not indent, but certain contexts can support the use of these words as supportive or descriptive of the previous content)
  - “For” This word signals that the material that follows it is still part of the same point previously mentioned and it merely strengthens it in some way. (Normally indent)
5. Step away and pray: in order to develop the principle well, it is advised that you take some time away from the formal process of bible study in the passage (from a few hours to even one day). Reread the passage again in a different translation than the one you outlined it in (NLT, NIV, etc). See if this “fresh” reading helps you to better grasp the overall flow of the passage in relationship to your outline. Pray specifically for God to give you insight and direction in summarizing the meaning of the passage. Pray for clarity of thought as you seek to re-express the meaning of the passage in terms of its ultimate purpose in your life.
  6. Main Principle: develop a main principle from the outlining of the complete thoughts. A biblical

principle by definition is a fundamental conclusion that connects or is demonstrated by the flow of thought in the text. Discovering and expressing these principles in the passage will come as you reflect on and summarize the conclusions from your outline. In every portion of scripture there is a main principle or conclusion but there can also be various secondary principles as well. Note: The main principles throughout the book will ultimately connect to develop the overall flow of the book.

Here are a few practical questions that you can ask to help uncover the principles of a passage:

- Looking at your outline and seeing the relationships of the complete thoughts in it, which complete thought seems to be the main ones?
  - Do most of the complete thoughts modify or explain one main one?
  - How could you restate a summary principle with consideration to the most important complete thought and the major supporting ones?
7. Study Worksheet: is a summary of the outline, principle and other conclusions you have made about the passage you are studying. It should include these items:
- Finalized outline.
  - Main Principle.
  - Support. List any support in the passage and outside the passage for your conclusion of what the main principle is.
  - Context. Note any observations or considerations of how this passage connects to the previous context or passage in the book of the Bible that you are studying.
  - Mission. Explain how you see the principle of the passage in relationship to the mission of God.
  - Inconsistencies. Write down specific areas of your thinking and lifestyle that are inconsistent with the main principle that the passage is addressing.

## **Application**

1. Consider areas of your thinking that contradict with the principles you have uncovered.
2. Consider areas of your lifestyle and actions that contradict with the principles you have uncovered.
3. Consider avenues of change that you could embrace which would better align your thinking and actions with the principles you have uncovered.