



Digging Deeper

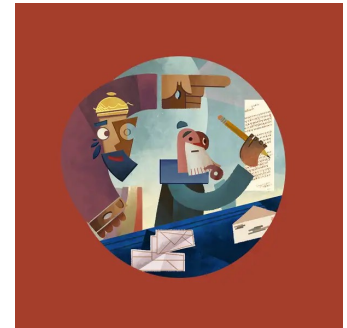
4/26/26

New Testament Letters



By bibleproject.com

How do we read the New Testament letters, also known as the epistles? The letters are small books written by apostles to early Christians all over the Roman world. These books are seen as accessible and practical—but are we missing the point when we ignore their context and literary form?



Letters are Personal: How to Study the New Testament Letters

By simplybiblestudy.org

Grab a Bible.

Whether new to the Bible or have been reading this book for years, I'd like to remind us of what we hold.

The Bible contains a collection of 66 books written by about 40 authors in three different languages on three different continents over the span of 1600-plus years. The Bible claims to be inspired and inerrant, meaning the Bible claims to be from God and without error in everything it says.

The Bible includes different genres of writing such as poetry, narrative, history, law, prophecy and more. The Bible contains

the words of God and how to apply the words of God to life. The Bible contains wisdom and truth and has been verified throughout history as accurate. Archaeology routinely backs up the accuracy of events recorded in the Bible.

The Bible is divided into two parts: The Old and New Testament. The Old Testament starts with the beginning of mankind and includes God's story before the arrival of Jesus Christ. The New Testament begins with the birth of Jesus Christ and ends in prophecy about His eminent return. Put together as a whole, God uses the Bible as a revelation or a window into His character so that we might know and engage with Him personally.

WE CAN PERSONALLY KNOW GOD!

Understanding God's word, His grace and His love has incredibly, indelibly and immensely impacted my life. It's changed the lives of countless others over the course of time. It's a gift to hold this book! In case you couldn't tell, I get a little riled up about the Bible! And yes, I'm excited to study the epistles of I & II Peter with you this fall! Epistle is a fancy word for letter.

The New Testament (the second part of the Bible with its emphasis on Jesus Christ) is largely comprised of letters. Twenty-one in total! Letters distinguish the New Testament from all other sacred and religious writings of the world. Why? Because letters are personal.

For example, somewhere downstairs in my basement sits a red box of love letters between my husband and I. These letters are personal. I would not share these! They're none of your business. The Bible is unique to include the genre of letters. Letters offer direct and personal messages written for a specific purpose. IF LETTERS ARE SO PERSONAL, HOW AND WHY DO WE STUDY THEM?

Let's discuss the "how" first.

We can use the same systematic process of "inductive study" found in all of the Simply Bible studies. The term "inductive study" may sound scary, but every one of us automatically uses "inductive" reasoning all day long, every day without thinking twice about it:

We observe and notice what's happening around us. We interpret and understand these happenings. And then we apply the information to our lives.

CONSIDER DRIVING A CAR.

While driving, we observe all the other cars and people around us. We notice the types of vehicles, the colors, the speed and where the cars are going. We ask questions that our brains simultaneously answer. Is the driver going fast? Yes. Does he see me? No. Is a collision about to happen. Yes. Thus we apply the information and make a quick lane change.

Daily we use inductive reasoning to drive cars, perform work, manage our homes and our relationships. We can use this skill in Bible study. If you've already completed a Simply Bible study, you know this to be true.

For any text, we follow three basic steps:

OBSERVE. We read and ask questions. We notice details in the text.

INTERPRET. We answer the questions we asked. We want to understand what did Peter mean? How did his hearers understand this letter?

APPLY. How do Peter's words relate to my own daily life?

That's inductive Bible study.

But whatever the genre of Scripture, there are always some specific rules to keep in mind. If you studied Genesis with me last year, you might remember the three simple rules we followed for studying Old Testament narrative:

God is always the Hero.

Read literally.

Look for the spiritual lesson.

So how do we study a New Testament letter?

TO BEGIN WE NEED TO LET GO OF ASSUMPTIONS AND CHURCH TRADITIONS.

I call it taking off our "21st century glasses" and putting on our "1st century glasses." We seek to look at the world through the eyes of Peter and his hearers. Peter's letters are special occasion documents written at a particular time, to a particular people for a particular purpose.

For example, picture baptism. Personally, I picture the baptismal pool in our church sanctuary. I also picture a pastor sprinkling heads with water from a previous church tradition. Baptism looked completely different to Peter and his hearers. We want to see it through their eyes to better understand

Peter's message. BEYOND THIS, HERE ARE THREE SIMPLE RULES TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN STUDYING NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS:

Understand their problem. This can be tricky. Peter addresses a problem, but the problem of the scattered church is not always specified. We hear only Peter's side of the conversation. It's similar to listening to only one side of a phone conversation.

Think paragraphs. Find the main point. Don't take verses out of context. That's dangerous! For example, I Peter 3 begins with "Wives be subject to your own husbands." Does that mean, "Do whatever your husband says?" Um... no. When studying New Testament letters, look at the paragraph as a whole. Understand the content. What is Peter's main point?

Find the lessons that transcend culture. Las Vegas has a slogan: "What happens here stays here." Ugh! I despise the context surrounding that idea, but the concept works for us: What belongs to 1st century culture stays in the 1st century. Instead we look for the lessons that surpass culture and are for all time. There's a song in Beauty and the Beast called "Tale as old as time." Those are the lessons we're after.

BOTTOM LINE? USE COMMON SENSE.

A text could never mean what it could have never meant to its author or reader. (How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth, p.77.) Whenever we share similarities with the 1st century hearers, God's Word is the same to us as His Word was to them. When Peter speaks of "living hope," his message is a good word for us, too. If all this sounds complicated, don't worry! These concepts make more sense as we study. For now, remember the "why." Peter wrote to a real people who had real problems. By understanding their problems, we better understand and learn to follow Christ in our everyday lives. Even more importantly, Peter walked with Jesus. He ate with Him. Talked with Him. Followed Him. He personally related with Jesus. That's what we're after! Inductive Bible study is about relationship.

Several years ago, my youngest daughter met a young man for coffee. An hour went by and I thought, "She'll be home soon." Two hours went by and I thought, "Hmm, that's a long coffee." More than three hours later she arrived home. She walked in and looked at me wide-eyed and just said, "WOW!" Two seconds later, she exclaims another, "WOW!"

My stomach did a flip-flop because I remember meeting my own husband and thinking "WOW!" I wondered, "What just happened, Lord?" Well, what happened is they got a taste and wanted to know more. Now imagine if this young man and woman simply presented each other with a questionnaire? Here. Answer the following questions and fill in the blanks. Would that have led to a "WOW" moment? Would it have led to an eventual marriage?

God is a Person.

When we study the Bible inductively, we spend time with Him in His Word. We ask Him questions. We seek to understand and know Him. In the process, He shares His heart with us and we begin to share our heart with him. **THAT'S OUR GOAL! OUR MISSION IS TO LOVE JESUS.**

If you are new to Simply Bible, please don't get hung up on filling in all the spaces or thinking you need all the right answers. We won't have them all. The goal is to know Jesus, to enjoy a relationship with the Living Hope.

This week as we begin to dig into Simply Bible I & II Peter, we will look at a few encounters between Jesus and Peter to get a better feel for the author himself. If nothing else, ask this ONE question:

"What does this passage say about WHO You are, Jesus? I want to know You."

Lord, that's our prayer. We want to know You. Give us eyes to see.