

How to Understand and Apply the Bible

Michael Cranford

Interpreting the Epistles

Challenges understanding and applying the epistles:

1. The epistles are letters written to specific people for specific reasons. Look for clues in the text!

The epistles resemble the many (thousands of) historical letters we have from ancient times.

- Name
- Recipient
- Greeting
- Prayer wish or thanksgiving (sometimes missing)
- Body
- Final greeting and farewell

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. (1 Thes 1:1-2)

2. The epistles are written in a cultural context very different from the one we live in. We need to unpack the cultural dimension so that we can determine the big idea. Some passages will have more relevance to us than others—that's okay!

Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. (2 Tim 2:3)

When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments. (2 Tim 4:13)

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. (1 Tim 4:13)

Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses. (1 Tim 5:23)

From interpretation to application:

1. Epistles are written to Christians in the church age—the same age we’re living in today as we wait for the return of Christ. This means, when we have comparable life situations, the epistles express truths we can apply directly.

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Col 3:12-14)

Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph 5:1-2)

2. If there are cultural factors that are different than us today, we need to diagnose the cultural context and determine the underlying principle behind the writer’s words to the original hearers.

I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you. But 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. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head. (1 Cor 11:2-6)

3. The meaning of the text is what the author meant when he wrote it to the original readers. The author assumed they would understand him. Therefore, the text cannot mean something the author and readers could not have understood.

For we know in part and prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away with. (1 Cor 13:9-10; NASB)

4. Once we isolate the principle behind the text, we can start to ask the question what the principle means to us, and how we can act on it. That principle can give rise to many applications that are specific to our culture.

Reading the epistles and listening to the Spirit

1. When you study the epistles, it's helpful to use two translations—one with formal equivalence (i.e., word-for-word, like the NASB) and one with dynamic equivalence (i.e., concept-by-concept, like the NIV). This is because many of the epistles are written in Greek, which has flexibility in how it is translated into English. English is much simpler than Greek.
2. Read the epistle as a whole, to get a sense of the big picture. Then read it in chunks (i.e., paragraphs). As you read, apply the following two ideas:

TRUTH

What truth does the author want his readers to know/remember/accept?

and/or

What falsehoods or lies does the author want his readers to reject?

BEHAVIOR

In light of the truth, what behavior does the author want his readers to adopt?

and/or

In light of the truth, what behavior does the author want his readers to avoid?

3. Try to read individual verses in light of the larger context (e.g., read them in line with the whole paragraph or section) to derive the correct principle. (Don't necessarily regard chapter breaks as too important.)

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. (Phil 4:13; NASB)

Not that I speak from need, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with little, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my difficulty. (Phil 4:11-14; NASB)

Canon

Canon means *rule*. All the books currently included in the New Testament were the ones almost everyone thought were inspired Scripture, from the earliest time. The books not included were ones almost everyone thought should not be included (though some were popular and sometimes quoted). All of them exist today to make our own determination, if we have any doubts. Any sense that there was a big battle at the point the official New Testament canon was finalized is incorrect.

Primary “rule”: Apostolic authorship.

“Disputed” books: Hebrews, James, 2 & 3 John, 2 Peter, Jude, Revelation

Sample Passage: Ephesians 3:14-4:5

¹⁴For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

²⁰Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Eph 3:14-21)

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:1-5)

The Epistles

The epistles are collected in two groups and ordered from longer to shorter in each collection: Those written by Paul (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon) and those not written by him, also known as the Catholic or General Epistles (James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, Jude). In between lies the epistle to the Hebrews.

Romans

Written from Corinth where Paul is spending the winter of AD 56 during his third missionary journey (Acts 20:2). He's never been to this church, but he knows many people there (Romans 16:1-15) and would like to make a visit on his way to a possible missionary trip to Spain (Romans 15:23-24).

Paul apparently has heard that those who oppose his ministry to the Gentiles (as Gentiles) have made inroads to their fellowship, so he writes a lengthy and well-argued defense for his gospel, which is that Gentiles do not need to come under the law to be part of the people of God. This is the same problem addressed in Acts 15:1-29 and in the earlier letter to the Galatians, who apparently were greatly influenced by those who thought this way.

Key verse:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” (Romans 1:16-17)

In other words, the law adds nothing to salvation; Paul argues throughout the letter that God's people (while strictly identified as Jews under the old covenant) have always been saved by faith alone. The law was added to instruct them in holiness, but it failed in that regard, and is now superseded by the indwelling Spirit of God. This implies that ethnic Israel (identified by the law) is no longer to be confused with the people of God, but all is not lost—Israel will one day be saved (chapters 9-11).

Applying this book: It's a dense theological book that is centered on a 1st c. religious problem (see Acts 15) that doesn't specifically exist today, though this book was applied and used by Martin Luther to criticize Roman Catholicism during the Reformation (Luther directly connected “works of the law” to Catholicism's sacraments). As you read it, focus less on the big picture and more on paragraphs and what each of Paul's arguments teaches you about the need for salvation in light of sin, life according to the Spirit, and salvation by faith vs. superficial religion, legalism, and confidence in one's cultural religious identity.

1 Corinthians

Paul wrote this letter during the years he was ministering in Ephesus, on his third missionary journey. It's a letter of correction—a response to a letter he received (7:1) and reports he received (1:11; 5:1), addressing at least eleven different problems in the church he founded (he spent 1 ½ years there on his second missionary journey; Acts 18:1-17).

- The problem of divisions in the church (1:10-4:21)
- The problem of the incestuous man (5:1-13)
- The problem of lawsuits among believers (6:1-11)
- The problem of sexual immorality (6:12-20)
- About behavior within marriage (7:1-24)
- About virgins (7:25-40)
- About food sacrificed to idols (8:1-11:1)
- The covering of women's heads in worship (11:2-16)
- An abuse of the Lord's supper (11:17-34)
- About spiritual gifts (12-14)
- The bodily resurrection of believers (15:1-58)
- About the collection (16:1-11)
- About the return of Apollos (16:12)
- Concluding exhortations and greetings (16:13-24)

Key verses:

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. (1 Cor 1:10)

Do everything in love. (1 Cor 16:14)

Applying this book: A subtitle for this book could be, *Problems Stemming from Spiritual Arrogance*. Paul argues that humility and love are the basis for true spirituality. Try your best to understand the cultural issues behind each problem before thinking about a principle that makes sense of our Christian walk today.

2 Corinthians

Some commentators think this book could be two letters combined into one (chapter 1-9, 10-13). It's a follow-up to 1 Corinthians, written not too long after, probably from Philippi (Acts 20:1), so that they will have the collection ready when he gets there (Acts 20:2-3; 2 Cor 8-9), and to defend himself against the allegations of some false apostles (10-13). We believe that at least one letter written before this (and after he wrote 1 Corinthians) has been lost (it's mentioned in 2 Cor 2:3-4), which makes this one harder to piece together.

Key verse:

Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace. (2 Cor 1:12; see also 3:4; 4:7-9)

Applying this book: Try to look beyond the painful, personal dimension of this book, where Paul defends his apostleship, to understand what it reveals about God's grace and power at work in those who serve him despite human frailty and life's challenges.

Galatians

There is debate about when this was written, though we know it was shortly after Paul visited them (Gal 1:6), and we know he visited them several times (Acts 13:51-14:24; 15:41; 16:6; 18:23). There is debate over whether this was written before the events in Acts 15, but either way, the issue and application is the same that Paul addresses in Romans (see above). Paul seems more upset in this epistle because he personally founded the Galatian churches and can't believe they would turn to a false gospel (i.e., that salvation is only for those under the law) shortly after his visit.

Applying this book: See Romans.

Ephesians

This was written while Paul was in Rome under arrest. It's thought to be a circular letter (one meant to be read at many different churches in Asia, of which Ephesus is the largest) since Paul doesn't assume he knows the people who will hear it (see 1:15; 3:2). Tychicus, who is delivering this letter, is also carrying two letters to Colossae (Colossians and Philemon; see Col 4:7-9).

To better understand Ephesians, read Acts 19 (which describes Paul's ministry there). Paul was able to perform miracles there and dealt with evil spirits (vv. 11-12). Ephesus was a stronghold for the demonic (vv. 13-16) and sorcery (vv. 18-19). People identified themselves with local cults. In the end, the church grew because the name of Jesus was held in higher honor (v. 17). Power, magic, mystery, and wisdom were important to the Gentiles of this region. These are the key themes interwoven in Ephesians:

1. Believers have a new identity: they are "in" Christ (note the repetition of "in him" and "in Christ" in 1:3-14). He goes on to explain this as the creation of a new humanity comprised of both Jews and Gentiles (2:11-18), new citizens and components of a holy temple in which God dwells (2:19-22), a mystery (known as the *church*) revealed as divine wisdom to the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (3:1-13).
2. Being in Christ means we are children of God, and provides access to God's grace, forgiveness, will, love, and (importantly) power (1:19-20; 3:14-21). This salvation

separates us from the influence of the demonic (2:1-2) and gives us access to true grace, purpose, and new life (2:3-10).

3. Because we have a new identity, we should therefore live differently—in *unity and love* with one another as God’s children (4:1-16; 5:21-6:9), in *contrast* to the evil and darkness of the Gentile world (4:17-32; 5:1-20), and in *opposition* to the demonic (6:10-20).

Applying this book: We aren’t tangled in sorcery, but we sometimes falsely identify ourselves by the “wisdom” of the world we live in. Ephesians reminds us that we have a new identity in Christ, and that includes blessings, love, and power that the world can’t touch. These are essential in our battle against the evil one.

Philippians

Sometimes classified as a letter of friendship, this was written by Paul while under house arrest (Acts 28:30-31; Phil 1:12-14) to the church in Philippi, to thank them for a gift delivered by Epaphroditus (2:25-30; 4:14-19) and let them know, in turn, he was sending Timothy to them (2:19-24). It provides a chance for Paul to give them an update on his condition (1:12-26), encourage them to remain faithful against opposition and united in love (1:27-2:18; 4:1-3), and reflect on his personal testimony (3:1-21; 4:4-9) as an example for them to follow.

Key verse:

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. (Phil 4:9)

Applying this book: Paul reflects a life of pursuit for Christ, love for others, and reliance on God alone. This is what it means, in practical terms, to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. As we read Philippians, we should think about our own testimony and how to find ourselves on the same track as the apostle.

Colossians

Also written during the time of Paul’s house arrest (like Philippians, Ephesians, Philemon). He’s never been to Colossae (Col 2:1) but has heard about them from his coworker Epaphras, and is responding to something he’s been told—namely, someone is opposing the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ and is advocating what sounds like a spiritualized version of Judaism. It resembles what he wrote to the Ephesians (it has the same three essential points) and has some of the strongest words in support of Jesus’ divinity in Paul’s letters.

1. Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the supreme head over all creation who provides salvation to those who continue in their faith (1:15-20); in him is all wisdom, knowledge, and power (1:28-29; 2:1-5)

2. The church is Christ's body, a mystery also described as "Christ in you," into which they have been added through the "circumcision" of Christ and by association with him through baptism (1:21-27; 2:9-14), bringing victory over the demonic (2:15).
3. Since they have a new identity, they should resist hollow and deceptive philosophies (2:6-8) that advocate legalism (2:16-23), and instead live in opposition to the world's values (3:1-11) and in unity and love with one another (3:12-25; 4:1-6).

Applying this book: Similar to Ephesians, we possess a radically new identity due to our association with Christ, and that means we shouldn't let worldly approaches to life define us or tell us how we should live.

1 Thessalonians

This is probably the first of Paul's letters and was written while Paul was ministering in Corinth (Acts 18) in the last phase of his second missionary journey. Thessalonica is in Macedonia; Paul had founded the church earlier on this same journey but was forced to flee due to fierce opposition (Acts 17:1-10)—opposition they are still dealing with, apparently.

Paul reflects on his time with them (1:2-10; 2:1-7), his love for them (2:8-16), and desire to see them again (2:17-3:13). He then encourages them to continue to resist worldly behavior (4:1-8) and remain united in love (4:10-12). He then transitions to a discussion of those who have died; apparently, they wondered what would happen to brothers and sisters who died before the Lord could return. Paul assures them that when Jesus returns, the dead will be raised before those who are living are caught up together with them (4:13-18). They should therefore live watchful and sober lives, and not be caught off guard by the return of Christ (5:1-11).

Applying this book: This book is a reminder that sometimes things go wrong, but that doesn't mean God's plan has failed or that we should throw in the towel and live like everyone else. Rather, we should continue to live in holiness and mutual love in expectation of the day we'll be with the Lord.

2 Thessalonians

Written soon after 1 Thessalonians, this letter seems to be a response to the idea that the Day of the Lord has already come (i.e., that their suffering meant Jesus had returned but left them behind; see 1 Thes 4:17). Paul sets this straight by telling them that the Day of the Lord isn't something they could miss; Jesus will come in a blazing light (1:3-12) and the Day will have some conspicuous precedents that include the revealing of the Man of Lawlessness (i.e., the Antichrist) (2:1-12). They should therefore stand firm to the teachings Paul has previously given them (2:13-17) and live holy and productive lives (3:1-15).

Applying this book: In addition to some helpful information about the kind of out-of-control world Jesus will return to, this book reminds us not to be reactive and not to be fearful of world events, but to live in constant holiness and anticipation of the day Jesus will return.

1 Timothy

Paul writes this letter after the events of the book of Acts, so we cannot pin down a timeline. But Timothy is now leading the church in Ephesus and is dealing with false teachers and a group of young widows who have followed them. Paul has presumably been released from house arrest in Rome.

Notice that Paul predicted these problems when he addressed the Ephesian elders at Miletus, years earlier (Acts 20:29-30). The false teaching seems to be rooted in Judaism (1 Tim 1:7-11) but includes appeals to genealogies (1:4) and old wives' tales (4:7). Paul identifies the false teachers as conceited, greedy, and quarrelsome (6:3-5). He gives instructions for appointing moral people as leaders, calculated to root out the offenders (1 Tim 3:1-13). He makes a strong appeal not to let women speak in church (2:11-15) but this is likely because some of the younger widows are at the root of the false teaching (5:11-15), having been persuaded by the chief offenders (see 2 Tim 3:6-7).

Key verse:

But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. (1 Tim 6:11-12)

Applying this book: First, give thanks you're not in Timothy's shoes. His church isn't the only one that has let myths, greed, legalism, and conflict disrupt the ministry. Consistency starts with each of us, so as you read, think about Paul's challenge as if directed at you. What message comes through your life, and how can you remain on-course in a world of morals that undermine faith in Christ?

2 Timothy

Paul is writing to Timothy to bid him to come to him (4:9) because he thinks he's at the end of his life (4:6). He's in chains in Rome (2:9) and was deserted by many at his first hearing (4:16). He notes that only Luke is with him (4:11). The remainder of the letter is a personal appeal for Timothy to embrace persecution and remain strong, and continue to deal with the problem of false teaching.

Applying this book: As you read, think about the kind of person God wants you to be in the worst moments in life, and where you want to be with the Lord when you draw close to the end.

Titus

This is a letter much like 1 Timothy and was written about the same time. Titus was left on the island of Crete to manage the church there, and Paul gives him general instructions to manage the potential for the kinds of problems Timothy was dealing with in Ephesus.

Applying this book: Same as 1 Timothy.

Philemon

Paul is writing this while under house arrest in Rome, at the same time as Ephesians and Colossians. The purpose for this letter is to secure forgiveness from Philemon, a Gentile believer in Colossae, for his slave, named Onesimus (who had probably run away). Onesimus is returning to Philemon as a convert to Christianity and being accompanied by Tychicus, who is bringing letters to the church from Paul to them (Colossians) and other churches in Asia Minor (Ephesians). The gospel unites not only Jews and Gentiles as brothers, but also slaves and masters.

Slavery in Paul's time was based on economics and birth, not race. Most slaves were at the lowest social status. Slaves had no rights under Roman law and could be killed for abandoning their servitude. But Paul convinces Onesimus to return, and he appeals to Philemon to receive him on the basis of the gospel. Apparently, Paul's message to Philemon struck home. Tradition has it that Onesimus was freed and ended up as the bishop of Ephesus.

Applying this book: This book is a reminder that the gospel of Jesus Christ obliterates not only ethnicity and gender, but social status. Loving one another as brothers and sisters is the first step in finding true justice and equality in this world. As you read, think about the captives who need freedom in Christ.

Hebrews

We don't know who the author is, but he identifies himself as someone who heard the message of salvation from the original apostles (2:3). He seems to be a highly educated Greek Jew who came to Christ and is an expert with the Old Testament (possibly Apollos?? See Acts 18:24-26). He appears to be writing to believers who are facing pressure to revert to a more basic Jewish faith, perhaps as a result of persecution. His letter is an extended argument that rests on Jesus' superiority:

- The superiority of Jesus Christ as the divine Son (1:1-3)
- The superiority of Jesus Christ above the angels (1:3-14), yet one with humanity (2:1-18)
- The superiority of Jesus Christ above Moses (3:1-19) and Joshua (4:1-13)
- The superiority of Jesus Christ over the Jewish sacrificial system; Jesus is the perfect high priest who offers a lasting sacrifice in the heavenly tabernacle (4:14-10:18)

It's because of these scriptural truths and our personal encounter with Christ and the Holy Spirit that we are warned not to fall away (5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:18-29) but rather respond in faith (11:1-12:3), endure suffering as discipline (12:4-13), and live holy lives (12:14-13:18).

Applying this book: This book is clearer if you understand that it is one extended argument. The author uses some of Jesus' favorite teaching methods: from the lesser to the greater (e.g., if something is true of *a*, how much more so of *z*) and wordplays (e.g., sabbath as rest/heaven as rest, but only for those with faith). He reminds us that suffering in this life is expected; turning away from Jesus to make things easier can't be an option, if we truly have faith in him. That's a reminder we need to have in front of us when the world caves in around us and we're in a bad spot (which is inevitable).

James

James is probably the earliest book written in the New Testament. It takes the form of wisdom literature, covering a series of topics relating to true religion outlined in 1:2-18. It's a practical book to encourage and challenge Jewish Christians who have been forced out of Jerusalem. (James is the half-brother of Jesus and was the head of the church in Jerusalem after Peter left.) Some think the book is a hodgepodge of ideas, but I see a clear development in his argument (not as clear as Hebrews, but it's there). Much of this makes even better sense in light of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), which we assume James witnessed, as he makes several allusions to it. His book emphasizes the values of the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed.

Unlike Paul, James is not concerned about a false gospel. Rather, he's concerned (like the author of Hebrews) with people who claim to have faith but don't live it out, probably because of persecution (1:2-18). His big point is that true faith is active, and he uses the specific illustration of how the rich treat the poor (those who suffer—the poor in spirit of Matt 5:3) as a test of the legitimacy of their faith (1:19-2:26). Faithful people shouldn't misuse their speech to create divisions in the community but rather remain humble (3:1-4:12) and not be boastful (4:13-17). Rich people, in particular, have more to worry over than brag about (5:1-6). The rest of us need to be patient in our suffering and remain prayerful until the Lord returns (5:7-20; see Matt 6:9-10).

Applying this book: We sometimes, like the recipients of this letter, take our faith for granted and don't live out the principles of the kingdom in everyday life, with love for others first among them (2:8; Matt 5:43-45). The kind of faith that matters to God shows up in how we treat others, how we pursue holiness, and how we direct our speech.

1 Peter

Peter is writing from Rome, near the end of his life, to a series of churches in the north part of what is modern-day Turkey. He might have founded those churches. They are mostly Gentile Christians who are facing extreme trials for their faith. Peter's goal is to get them to change their perspective and see their suffering as part of God's plan on the way to "an inheritance

that can never perish, spoil or fade” (1:4). Peter characterizes them as foreigners and exiles in this world (1:1; 2:11), a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, and the people of God (2:9-10). They should therefore live differently than the world around them, pursuing holy lives as God’s people (1:13-4:11). In this way, they participate in the sufferings of Christ (4:12-5:10).

Applying this book: Peter knew what it was like to fail and experience suffering. Jesus changed his perspective and called him back to a life of sacrifice and service. Peter offers the same to the Christians to whom he is writing. As you read, think about what it means for you to live as a child of God in this world—how you respond to difficulties and pressures. Do you remain faithful and courageous? Are you committed to holiness? If you feel out of place in this world, Peter is letting you know—you’re in good company.

2 Peter

This was probably written right after 1 Peter, shortly before his death under Nero. It’s not as clear to whom he’s writing, but it’s a specific group of believers that he knows well. His purpose is clear: he is writing to encourage them in the faith and leave them with a final reminder before his death (1:12-14). In some ways, he points us ahead to the events of Revelation.

Peter encourages them to confirm their salvation by living in a godly manner (1:3-11), trusting in the message he brought to them (1:12-21). In contrast, he warns them about false teachers (2:1-22), which leads him into a description of the kind of world Jesus will one day return to—a world filled with immorality and doubt over his return (3:1-10). But in light of this, they should live holy lives in anticipation of that day (3:11-18).

Applying this book: Some of the images in chapter 2 are very strong, but this reminds us that, as dark as this world is, it will one day stand accountable before God for its sin. If we don’t lose hope and stay watchful, we won’t be like those to whom sin means nothing and think they have all the time in the world. Knowing that God will judge the world with fire should impact us in the present.

1 John

The author is John, the apostle. This epistle (like the gospel and Revelation) was probably written later in the first century to the church in or around Ephesus. He follows a similar approach to the opening to his gospel (1:1-4), but the point of application is to the personal lives of believers (2:12-14). His point is threefold: We show we are God’s children by obeying his message; the message he gives us is to love one another; and we confirm our salvation and the presence of the Holy Spirit within us by accepting his message and not continuing in sin. In contrast, John talks about false prophets who recently left the community (2:19) and apparently deny that Jesus is the Christ (2:22), continue sinning (3:7-9; 5:18), hate others (3:15; 4:20), don’t have pity on others who need help (3:17), deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (4:3), and deny Jesus is the Son of God (5:10).

Applying this book: Be especially on the lookout for what John says about false prophets—they are the key to understanding the positive injunctions in the book. John’s point is clear, similar to his gospel (John 13:35): You can tell who is and who is not a true follower by their fruit. In this letter, it’s our love for others, holiness, and right-thinking about Jesus. As you read, think about negative influences in your life (and how to address them) as well as positive encouragement over the fruit God has produced in your life so far.

2 John

This short letter is addressed by John to a “lady,” which could be someone who hosts a house church or else a local congregation (i.e., the word “church” is a feminine word in Greek). It’s in every other way a snapshot of 1 John, so refer to what I wrote above!

3 John

This short letter (the shortest book in the Bible) is addressed by John to Gaius, a friend of his who lives in a different town. John is thanking Gaius for his hospitality to some people who were sent to minister in his town (“the brothers and sisters”, v. 5) and to rebuke someone named Diotrephes, a leader who did not respond with hospitality and seems opposed to John’s authority (vv. 9-10). He also praises Demetrius, who is probably the one carrying this letter (v. 12). So in other words, John is commending Demetrius so that Gaius will welcome him.

This gives us a glimpse of how the gospel was spread in the first century; people didn’t have television or email. The gospel (including stories about Jesus, the plan of salvation, etc.) was carried by approved ministers who traveled around from church to church. John had sent some of them out from Ephesus, but in this case, they weren’t welcomed by a man in Gaius’s church.

Applying this book: Welcoming people and providing hospitality to approved ministers of the gospel is something we should still do, as Christians. How we treat one another is a testimony to the world. Think of hospitality as a sub-theme related to what John writes in 1 John. Christians need to work together as a witness and to achieve Christ’s purposes.

Jude

Jude identifies himself as the brother of James, which means he was also the (half) brother of Jesus. This was probably written to a church of Jewish Christians somewhere in Palestine. He’s warning them about false teachers that have wormed their way in and who live immorally and deny that Jesus is Sovereign and Lord (v. 4). (It’s reminiscent of the false teachers in 1 John and 2 Peter.) The middle part of the letter is a commentary on various Old Testament passages and, interestingly, Jude quotes two apocryphal sources: 1 Enoch (vv. 14-15) and the Assumption of Moses (v. 9). Keep in mind that Paul quoted pagan poets (Acts 17:28); sometimes elements of familiar cultural reference can be used for inspirational effect.

Applying this book: Think in similar terms to what John writes in 1 John about false teachers, combined with what Peter writes in 2 Peter.