

## **MEETING JESUS IN NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS**

*The aim of this session is to understand the literary features of New Testament letters and to identify and apply the key principles for interpreting New Testament letters.*

### **Recommended Reading**

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart. How to read the Bible for all its worth. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pp. 45-77.

## **A. CHARACTERISTICS OF NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS**

New Testament letters:

- Carry the authority of the Lord Jesus.
- Are occasional in nature i.e. written to address specific situations.

This implies:

- Christians are to hear, understand and obey what is written in the letters.
- Each individual letter should not be taken as a comprehensive statement on a particular subject matter.

## **B. THE FORM OF NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS**

New Testament letters typically consists of six parts:

- name of writer;
- name of recipient;
- greeting;
- prayer wish or thanksgiving;
- body or main points; and
- final greeting and farewell.

Example – compare the opening verses of Galatians 1:1-2, 1 Thessalonians 1:1 and Philemon 1:1-2.

Are these differences significant? What could account for the variations in Paul's opening statements? How could this help us better understand the individual letters?

Pay attention to the omissions and/or additions to the normal conventions in ancient letters since they can provide us with important clues on how to interpret the particular New Testament letter.

## C. HOW TO INTERPRET NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

### 1. Read the entire letter, as far as possible, in one sitting.

To make the most of **Step 1**, we can:

- Pay attention to the omissions/additions in the form of the letter,
- Look out for repetitions of key words, themes, and/or Old Testament allusions, and
- Trace in outline form the author's flow of thought.

### 2. Reconstruct, as far as possible, the historical-cultural context of the biblical writer and audience.

- Study tools such as Bible dictionaries, introductions or commentaries can provide vital information for this step.

Questions we can ask the text for **Step 2** include:

- Who was the author?
- When did he write?
- What kind of relationship did he have with his audience?
- Why was he writing?
- Who was his audience?
- What were their circumstances?
- What was happening at the time of writing?
- What other historical-cultural factors might shed light on the text?

### 3. Identify the similarities and differences between the biblical audience and the modern reader.

### 4. Isolate the theological principle in the text. (This theological principle should be the same for all God's people.)

Questions we can ask for **Step 4** include:

- Does the author state a principle in the text?
- Does the broader context reveal a theological principle?
- Why was a particular instruction given in its original context?

To test the validity of the theological principle, we can measure against the criteria below.

- The principle should be reflected in the biblical text.
- The principle should be timeless and not tied to a specific situation.
- The principle should not be culturally bound.
- The principle should be consistent with the rest of Scripture.
- The principle should be relevant to both the biblical and contemporary audience.

## **5. Apply the theological principle in the text to our situation.**

To help us with **Step 5**, we can:

- Identify the key elements in the original context and observe how the theological principle is applied to that situation.
- Find a parallel situation in a contemporary situation.
- Make the application as specific as possible in a real-life context.

## **EXERCISES**

For letters, it is important to trace the author's flow of thought. Sentences don't exist in isolation but in paragraphs that in turn are related to surrounding paragraphs.

Discuss the following questions to gain experience in tracing the author's flow of thought.

1. How does Philippians 2:1-4 relate to Philippians 2:5-11?
2. What is the connection between Ephesians 5:15-21 to Ephesians 5:22-6:9?
3. What role does 1 Corinthians 13 play in the larger unit of 1 Corinthians 12-14?

Take one of the following passages and work through the five steps outlined in this session.

4. Galatians 5:16-17; or
5. Colossians 3:1-4.