

Interpreting a Biblical Passage

Genre – Letters

NT Letters are **occasional** documents, meaning they are addressing **specific** issues between the sender and recipient, and reveal only **one side** of that **two-sided** conversation.

Letters in the Greco-Roman period typically took on a particular form:

- *Letter Opening:*
 - From ‘A’ (sender) to ‘B’ (recipient)
 - “Greetings” (Greek: *chairein*)
 - Wish for health and prosperity
- *Letter Body: the content of the letter*
- Letter Closing:
 - Personal remarks
 - Wish for health
 - Farewell

Paul’s letters **modify** the typical letter form:

- *Letter Opening:*
 - From ‘A’ (sender) to ‘B’ (recipient)
 - “Greetings” – Paul changes the typical Greek greeting *chairein* into the similar sounding Christian word *charis* – “grace,” and adds to that the typical **Hebrew** greeting “peace” (*eirene*). So instead of “greetings,” Paul’s letters begin by appealing to “Grace and Peace”
 - ~~Wish for health and prosperity~~ – in place of a health wish, Paul introduces a “thanksgiving” section where he “gives thanks” to God for his recipients. Often, the thanksgiving anticipates many of the themes Paul will deal with in his letters.
- *Letter Body: the content of the letter*
 - Paul’s letters often involve an **extended argument** – watch the connecting words (“therefore,” “thus,” “so that,” *etc.*) to trace the argument as a whole
 - Paul’s **argument** often ends with a section devoted to **ethical instructions**
- Letter Closing:
 - Personal remarks – often naming several individuals both in Paul’s company and in company of the recipients
 - Wish for health – often Paul includes a **benediction** (e.g., 1 Cor 16.23) or **doxology** (e.g., Phil 4.20)
 - Farewell

Reading a Letter

- **Who?** – Who is writing to whom? What is the **relationship** between the sender and the recipients?
- **Why?** – Why is this **occasional** letter being written? What’s the letter’s **purpose**? Is the purpose **stated** or **implied**? What is the letter’s **tone**: is it friendly? corrective? teaching?
- **How?** – Identify how this letter fits into the typical (or Paul’s modified) letter form. In what section of the letter does your passage occur?
- **When and Where?** – Identify historically particular references, whether particular to the sender or recipients *specifically*, or to the time-period and/or location of the letter *generally*.
- **What?** – What **argument** does the letter make? Use **paragraphs** to trace the **logical flow of thought**:
 - Write a **summary statement** for each paragraph
 - Look for **connecting words** (“for”, “therefore”, “so that”, *etc.*)
 - Produce an **outline** to show how all the paragraphs in the letter fit together.

OUTLINE OF LETTER STRUCTURE

	<i>1 Thessalonians</i>	<i>1 Corinthians</i>	<i>2 Corinthians</i>	<i>Galatians</i>	<i>Philippians</i>	<i>Romans</i>
I. SALUTATION						
A. Sender	1:1a	1:1	1:1a	1:1-2a	1:1	1:1-6
B. Recipient	1:1b	1:2	1:1b	1:2b	1:1	1:7a
C. Greeting	1:1c	1:3	1:2	1:3-5	1:2	1:7b
II. THANKSGIVING						
	1:2-10					
	2:13	1:4-9	1:3-7	None!	1:3-11	1:8-17
	3:9-10					
III. BODY						
			1:8-9:14 (letter incomplete)			
	2:1-3:8 (possibly 3:11-13)	1:10-4:21	10:1-13:10 (letter fragment)	1:6-4:31	1:12-2:11 3:1-4:1 4:10-20	1:18-11:36
IV. ETHICAL EXHORTATION AND INSTRUCTIONS						
	4:1-5:22	5:1-16:12	13:11a (summary)	5:1-6:10 6:11-15 (letter summary)	2:12-29 4:2-6	12:1-15:13 15:14-32 (travel plans and closing paraenesis)
V. CLOSING						
A. Peace Wish	5:23-24	—	13:11b	6:16	4:7-9	15:33
B. Greetings	—	16:19-20a	13:13	—	4:21-22	16:1-15(?)
C. Kiss	5:26	16:20b	13:12	—	—	16:16(?) (see note 22 above)
Apostolic Command	5:27	16:22	—	6:17	—	—
D. Benediction	5:28	16:23-24	13:14	6:18	4:23	16:20(?)

Calvin J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*, 2nd ed.
(Westminster/John Knox, 1982), p. 40.