

New Testament Survey #5

GENERAL EPISTLES

The last eight letters of the New Testament received the name of the General Epistles because they were written for a general audience. They are also known as the “Catholic” Epistles (a word that means “to the whole” or “universal”). All these terms, General, Catholic or Universal confer the idea that these epistles were written for a broader audience, rather than to a church in a specific location.

JAMES

1. Authorship

According to church tradition and internal evidence, the author of the epistle of James was James, the half-brother of Jesus.

- He was not a believer during the earthly ministry of Jesus (John 7:5), but was converted by a post-resurrection visitation from the Lord. (I Corinthians 15:7)

- He became an apostle and one of the “pillars” of the church. (Galatians 1:19, 2:9)
 - James was in the upper room before Pentecost. (Acts 1:14)
 - He quickly grew to prominence and was probably the senior leader of the Jerusalem church. (Acts 12:17)
 - He presided over the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:13) and probably penned the letter sent to the churches.
 - He was still the leading elder in Jerusalem during Paul’s last visit. (Acts 21:18-25)

- The Jewish historian Josephus recorded that he was stoned by the Sanhedrin for being a transgressor of the Law.

His personal piety and strict adherence to the Judaic traditions earned him the nickname “James the Just” and a position of influence among the Jews of his day.

- Internal evidence and church tradition dates the letter to be in the mid to late 40’s, making it one of the earliest New Testament documents.

2. Original Audience

- James's original audience was primarily Jewish Christians who lived outside of Palestine.

...To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations (1:1)

...Believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ (2:1)

- The book of James is an encyclical letter written to Jewish believers scattered throughout the Roman Empire.

In the wave of persecution following Stephen's martyrdom, members of the Jerusalem church were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

3. Purpose and Distinctiveness

- James wrote his epistle to encourage and guide his audience as they faced “trials of many kinds” (1:2). He wants his readers to mature in their faith in Christ by living what they say they believe.
- The Epistle of James resembles wisdom literature -- both in form and content.

James links his wisdom very closely with the teaching of Jesus.

- James's close ties with the wisdom literature make its focus on conduct more than creed. His writing is authoritative, concrete and direct.

The tone of the epistle is the most authoritative in the New Testament with 54 imperatives in 108 verses. James avoids abstractions or mystical meanings, and presents plain everyday concerns in a straightforward manner.

HEBREWS: The Book of Better Things

1. Authorship

- The authorship of Hebrews is one of the great mysteries of the New Testament. Even though we may not be able to determine the identity of the author, we know his profile by his writing.

- The author was probably a Hellenistic Jew who had become a believer. He was highly educated and well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures (LXX).
- He was probably a second-generation Christian (2:3).

Among the names that have been suggested as possible authors are Paul, Apollos, Barnabas, Luke, Silas, Stephen, Mark, and even Priscilla and Aquila.

- Hebrews was likely written after 65 and before 70 AD.

By the time Hebrews was written Timothy had been imprisoned and released (13:23). This means the book of Hebrews must have been written after Paul's death (A.D. 65). The author uses the present tense to describe the sacrificial duties of the high priest. We know that the sacrificial system ended in A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem.

- Hebrews was written to a local congregation of Jewish Christians who had faced persecution in the past and were facing it again. They were in danger of drifting away from their faith in Christ.

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings... (Hebrews 2:1)

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. (He. 3:12)

2. Style

- Hebrews is more like a sermon than a letter.
I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. (Hebrews 13:22)
- It is characterized by a series of periodic exhortations which are consistently translated, "Let us..." (4:1, 11, 14, 16; 6:1; 10:22,23,24; 12:1, 28; 13:13, 15)
- It is filled with quotations from the Old Testament.

There are 29 direct quotations from the Old Testament and 53 allusions to other passages.

3. Purpose and Themes

- Hebrews was written to exhort a church to remain faithful to Jesus in the midst of opposition and persecution. To accomplish his purpose, the author offered a series of comparisons of the old covenant with the new followed by an exhortation to persevere, forming an interplay of exposition and exhortation.
- The general theme that predominates the book of Hebrews is the unfathomable supremacy of Jesus Christ, supremacy announced in the Old Testament and now revealed to us.

Hebrews 1:2, 3

...in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

- One of the great themes of the book of Hebrews is the need to persevere in the faith.

The exhortations to perseverance include warnings of judgment against apostasy. In his calling to perseverance, the author of Hebrews uses positive and negative motivation. The main positive motivation is the reminder of the supremacy of Christ. We ought to persevere first and foremost because of the greatness of Christ and his reward.

- Hebrews provides us with a more clear view of the “better” new covenant.

The New Covenant believer has a better mediator (1:4), a better hope (7:19), a better covenant with better promises (8:6), a better sacrifice (9:23), and a better provision (11:40).

I PETER: Hope for a Suffering Church

1. Authorship

- The author identified himself as "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ" (1:1), and describes himself as "a witness of Christ's sufferings" (5:1)
- Peter probably used Silvanus (Silas) as his amanuensis when he wrote this letter because the Greek is very eloquent—better than a fisherman from Bethsaida would be expected to use!

1 Peter 5:12

With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly...

- Peter says he is in "Babylon" when he writes this letter (5:13), probably referring to Rome.

Rome is called "Babylon" in Revelation (Rev. 17:5,9). Mark, who was with Peter when he wrote this epistle, is known to have been with Paul in Rome (Col. 4:10; Philemon 1:24).

- This letter was written to Christians in five Roman provinces of Asia Minor, between 62 and 64 AD.

1 Peter 1:1: "...To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen"

- **The believers in these churches were probably not Peter's converts because he refers to "those who preached the gospel to you." (1:12)**
- **Most of his recipients were from a pagan background. The reference in 1 Peter 1:18 to "the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers" and the sins listed in 1 Peter 4:3 seem to refer to pagans.**
- **Peter has a two-fold address for the Christians he is writing to. He calls them God's chosen and elect, and also strangers and exiles in the world.**

2. Purpose and Themes

- Peter wrote his letter to encourage believers who were experiencing persecution and suffering to stand firm in their faith. This letter is filled with so many promises for those who endure.

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6, 7)

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:12, 13)

Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. (1 Peter 5:9, 10)

- Three main themes emerge from Peter's encouragement to those experiencing persecution:
 - **Hope:** Peter turns the eyes of his readers from their trials to the joys and glories of their eternal inheritance (1:3, 13, 21; 3:15).

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (1 Peter 1:3)

- **Holiness:** Peter instructs the church to trust and obey in the midst of undeserved suffering.

...like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:15-16)

- **Grace:** The word "grace" is used in every chapter in this epistle.

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will

himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. (1 Peter 5:10)

II PETER & JUDE: Destructive Heresies

There is a clear relationship between this letter and Jude.

JUDE		II PETER
1:4	The false teacher's "condemnation" from the past	2:3
1:4	Deny the Sovereign [and] Lord	2:1
1:6	Angels confined for judgment	2:4
1:7	Sodom and Gomorrah as examples of gross evil	2:6
1:8	Reject authority / despise authority	2:10
1:9	Archangel Michael did not condemn him for slander / angels did not heap abuse	2:11
1:12	[The false teachers are] blemishes	2:13
1:12	Clouds without rain, blown by the wind / springs without water, driven by a storm	2:17
1:18	Ungodly desires / evil desires	3:3

II PETER

1. Authorship

- Peter wrote this epistle around 65 or 66 AD, when the time of his execution was approaching.

I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. (2 Peter 1:13-14)

- The audience of II Peter is the same as his first epistle.

This is now my second letter to you. (2 Peter 3:1)

2. Purpose and Themes

- Peter's main purpose is to strengthen the faith of his readers so that they could detect and combat spreading heresies.

Peter says he wants his letter to serve as a reminder of the truth they already know. He highlights the importance of memory; both in the sense of remembering and not forgetting the fundamental truth of the faith.

*I have written both of them [letters] as **reminders** to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. (2 Peter 3:1)*

*I will always **remind** you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your **memory** as long as I live in the tent of this body. (2 Peter 1:12, 13)*

*Do **not forget** this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. (2 Peter 3:8)*

- While Peter's overall purpose is a positive one of encouraging spiritual maturity and growth, the letter is dominated by negative descriptions of false teaching.

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. (2 Peter 2:1)

- In light of heresy that is already there or on the way, Peter exhorts the church to spiritual growth and maturity. That is how they will combat these powerful influences.

In his introduction and his conclusion, he urges the believers to make every effort to grow in their faith. He knows that is the solution to these destructive heresies.

*For this very reason, **make every effort** to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge... (2 Peter 1:5)*

II Peter 3:14

*So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, **make every effort** to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.*

- The primary way they will mature is through grace and knowledge. That is why he frames his letter with references to both.

***Grace** and peace be yours in abundance through the **knowledge** of God and of Jesus our Lord. (2 Peter 1:2)*

*But grow in the **grace and knowledge** of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen. (2 Peter 3:18)*

- Another argument Peter uses to encourage the persecuted church to stand fast to their faith is the assurance of Jesus's return to reign.
 - The expectation of Christ's return should move Christians forward in their spiritual growth. The certainty of his return is affirmed by the eyewitnesses of Christ and by the Scriptures.

JUDE

1. Authorship

Jude was the half-brother of Jesus and the brother of James.

- Jude identifies himself as the brother of James, since James was a well-known figure in the church.
- Jude's decision not to mention his familial relationship with Jesus, and instead present himself as "a servant of Jesus Christ" shows his humility and devotion.

2. Background

- The error Jude confronted is similar to what Peter confronted. The heretics had a strong antinomianism.

Jude 1:4

...ungodly persons who turn the grace of God into licentiousness...

Jude is noteworthy for its use of Apocryphal materials. The use of such materials shows Jude's desire to appeal to their readers in terms familiar to them, and does not imply neither the inspiration nor the accuracy of those writings.

3. Purpose and Themes

- Jude plainly states his purpose for writing: He wants to summon the believers to battle heresy.

Jude 1:3

"Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."

- Jude's strategy to confront spiritual error is:
 - Remember God's Word (17),
 - Grow in the knowledge of Christian truth: "build yourselves up in your most holy faith" 1:20.
 - Bear a firm witness for the truth "contend for the faith" Jude 1:3.
 - Seek to reclaim those whose faith was wavering: "snatch others from the fire" 1:23.
 - Guard yourself: "hate even the garment polluted by the flesh." 1:23

- Jude gives a great promise to those who guard the truth.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy.
(Jude 1:24)

Christ guards us, but He wants us to guard the truth.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. James emphasizes that true faith bears the fruit of good deeds. How can you encourage others to strive for obedience to Christ without falling into a theology of "works righteousness"?
2. What principles can you learn from Hebrews to encourage and help Christians to remain faithful to Jesus?
3. How can Jude's strategy in confronting heresy help you fight spiritual error?

HOMEWORK

1. First Peter contains one of the most comprehensive descriptions of our inheritance in the Bible (1 Pet. 1:3-13; 3:7; 4:13-14; 5:1, 4, 6, 10). Read those passages and write in your own words a description of that inheritance