

SEVEN LETTERS



Lessons from the General Epistles

By R. Herbert

A Living Belief Book

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General Epistles**

By **R. Herbert**

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INTRODUCTION

As a Christian who may study the Scriptures regularly, what are the New Testament books that you read least often? Chances are, they are the mysterious book of Revelation and the seven letters that come directly before it – James, First and Second Peter, First, Second, and Third John, and Jude. If that is the case, you are not alone – and that is why this book is for you.

Seven Letters

The “General Epistles” – so-called because they are not usually thought to have been written to specific individuals or groups (though this is not exactly the case, as we will see below) – are among the least well-known books of the New Testament. Many Christians focus on the Gospels, Acts, and the epistles of Paul and tend to avoid the letters of James, Peter, John, and Jude with what appears to be their focus on false teachers, wrong doctrines and Christian persecution.

Yet the relatively short General Epistles (combined they account for less than ten percent of the total New Testament) are of immense importance to Christianity and to you personally. They were composed by the leading apostles of the early Church and significantly affect our understanding of Christian doctrine as well as being filled with a great deal of practical advice in Christian living. They also provide important background for better understanding the epistles of Paul, so there are many good reasons to study these epistles carefully.

Although it is often regarded as a General Epistle, the letter to the Hebrews is not discussed in this book. Unlike the seven letters of James through Jude, Hebrews is far more like the epistles of Paul in its approach and needs to be studied in that context.

Additionally, the content of Hebrews is quite different from the kind of material found in the other letters we refer to as the General Epistles. For this reason, biblical scholars sometimes refer to “Hebrews and the General Epistles,” and this book focuses only on the seven letters that have a great many characteristics in common.

In most modern translations these seven letters are found between the book of Hebrews and the book of Revelation. But that was not their original placement in the New Testament. When the Christian Bible was first organized, the General Epistles were placed immediately after the book of Acts and before the Epistles of Paul. There was good reason for this. To be properly understood, the writings of Paul often require a doctrinal context that the General Epistles help provide. Modern Bible translators have rearranged this original order to accomplish a chronological sequence for the New Testament books.

The Authors

While the Pauline Epistles and the book of Hebrews are titled in our Bibles according to their audiences, the General Epistles are titled according to the names of their authors. As far as we can tell, they are the work of the apostles James (the brother of Jesus – Galatians 1:19), Peter (Matthew 4:18-20), John (Galatians 2:9), and Jude (another brother of Jesus and of James – Jude 1:1).

There is much scholarly debate regarding the authorship of a few of these epistles – especially 2 Peter and some of the other shorter letters, but there are no overwhelmingly compelling reasons to believe that they were not all written by the apostles to which they are linked in these books and by tradition. For example, a few scholars of the early Church expressed uncertainty about the authenticity of 2 Peter, but it is known that false teachers of that time circulated a number of letters as though written by the apostle, so the Church was understandably cautious under these circumstances. Nevertheless, the fact that 2 Peter was accepted into

the New Testament writings in spite of that caution argues strongly for its authenticity.

The order of the General Epistles in our Bibles follows that in which the apostle Paul listed the chief apostles when he met them in Jerusalem: “James, Cephas [Peter] and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised” (Galatians 2:9).

Paul’s statement regarding the agreed areas of missionary work also gives us a substantial clue as to the intended audience of the General Epistles.

The Audiences

Although the seven General Epistles are traditionally said not to have been written to specific audiences and are thus “general” in terms of their readership, this is not exactly the case. The opening verse of the first letter – the book of James – clearly states to whom the letter was sent: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations ...” (James 1:1). This audience may have been scattered, but it is clearly composed of the members of the Church in Jerusalem that was scattered when persecution occurred, as we are told in Acts 8:1.

The apostle Peter writes to this same audience in specific locations: “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1). Second Peter was written to this same audience (2 Peter 3:1).

The first epistle of John is addressed only generally to “My dear children” (1 John 2:1), but it seems clear that John knew his audience and they knew him. Second John is written to the “elect lady,” a title which could apply to an individual such as one of the women who supported Christ’s ministry, and possibly even Mary the mother of Jesus who was entrusted to John’s care. Alternatively, the title may be used metaphorically of the Church in a specific

area. Third John is clearly addressed to a specific individual: “Gaius.”

So most of the General Epistles do name specific audiences, though these may sometimes have been broader than single congregations – as was the case with some of Paul’s epistles (Colossians 4:16). Many of the original readers of these letters seem to have been Christians converted from Judaism, although some probably were not of Jewish origin.

The Background

The General Epistles reflect a difficult time in the history of early Christianity. The Church was threatened from the outside by social problems and persecution and on the inside by divisions and false teachings. Each letter reflects a slightly different situation within this background framework – though some, like 2 Peter and Jude, address nearly identical problems.

While the epistle of James was written in a time when many Christians faced problems such as widespread economic abuse by the rich and powerful, Peter, writing later, speaks more of problems associated with religious persecution. Mistreatment and execution of Christians occurred in Rome starting with the persecutions carried out by the emperor, Nero, around AD 64, but persecution had already begun to occur elsewhere in New Testament times as we see in the book of Acts (Acts 5:17-42).

Much of what Peter, John and Jude wrote about is also in relation to erroneous teachings that were beginning to influence Christianity. The Greco-Roman world in which Christianity was born contained a number of “mystery religions” which claimed to impart “truth” and “light” or hidden knowledge to their followers. Many of these religions – such as the Gnosticism which became widespread after New Testament times – taught the concept of dualism which claimed that matter was evil and only spiritual things were good and that matter and spirit were entirely separate.

These teachings affected many who were weak in Christianity and who accepted the idea that what was done in the body could not affect the spirit. As a result, sexual immorality and other sins were accepted as being purely of the flesh and not affecting the spiritual life of the individual. According to this view, all that mattered was for the believer to come to know the “light” of secret knowledge which would bring salvation.

These and similar errors were addressed by the writers of the General Epistles. For example, John repeatedly stresses the importance of the light and truth of God as opposed to false “truth.” Jude speaks of “people who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality...” (Jude 1:4) and the importance of maintaining “the faith once delivered” (Jude 1:3 ESV). Peter attacks a number of the pagan-originated doctrines directly. In 2 Peter the apostle contrasts the darkness of false knowledge with the light of God’s truth in the first chapter and then continues in the second chapter to denounce the heresies and immorality of the false teachers who were affecting Christianity. Jude goes a step further by actually quoting (Jude 1:9, 14-15) two non-biblical books that were popular among the false teachers and skillfully using these quotes to condemn the false teachers themselves.

The Themes

As is the case with many books of the Bible, the General Epistles exhibit clear themes. In addition to the themes of combating oppression, persecution, and false doctrines, the epistles of James, Peter, and John are often said to respectively stress the themes of faith, hope, and love. But while this idea is true to a point, it also misses many of the other major themes in each of the apostles’ letters.

When we look at the epistles of Peter, for example, we do find verses dealing with hope, which is mentioned a total of five times in the apostle’s two letters. By contrast, “hope” appears only once in each of John’s three epistles, and not at all in the epistle of James.

But while hope is certainly a theme in Peter's letters, it is not the only theme or even the most important one. If we look at other words regularly appearing in 1 and 2 Peter, we find an even greater emphasis on love (which is mentioned some twelve times – more than twice as often as hope). Love is mentioned nine times in Peter's first epistle alone – significantly, in every one of the letter's chapters.

Such basic "statistics" show some general tendencies in the writings of the different apostles and allow us to see important themes that the individual authors dwelt on. The following chapters of this book look at the three most significant themes found in the writings of each of the apostles James, Peter, John and Jude. Interestingly, although each apostle develops one or two unique themes, all of them develop the theme of love. But each of these authors looks at a different aspect of love, and so the following chapters explore not only the most important unique themes of the writers of the General Epistles, but also the unique way in which each of them preached the universal doctrine of Christian love.

PART ONE:
JAMES –
FAITH, WISDOM, LOVE

1. WHY JAMES DOESN'T MENTION JESUS

Who wrote the epistle of James? The fact that the author of this letter states only that he was “James” – without telling his audience *which* James he was – indicates, just as early Christian tradition affirms, that he was James the brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55). This was the James who, after his conversion, became chief apostle of the New Testament Church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:17-19; etc.). But some critics have claimed that because Jesus is not mentioned anywhere in this epistle beyond its initial greeting, it could hardly have been produced by Jesus’ own brother.

Ultimately, if we believe in the inspiration of the Bible, it does not really matter which James wrote this letter, but the idea that it could not have been written by Jesus’ brother is based on a lack of understanding of the epistle itself. The fact that its author is clearly an important figure in the early Church, but one who modestly avoids a direct statement of which of the numerous individuals named James he was, suggests the likelihood of his relation to Jesus, and the epistle’s avoidance of mentioning Jesus directly can be seen from this same perspective.

In any case, although Jesus is not named specifically throughout the letter, his presence is clear within the epistle, nonetheless. James presents his readers with some 60 requirements for right behavior in the space of the 108 verses in his short letter – more than one moral principle for every two verses. Where do these exhortations come from? Almost all of them come directly from the teachings of Jesus himself.

Interestingly, James focuses most on the teachings Jesus gave in the Sermon on the Mount. Almost half the material in his epistle shows similarities with almost half the verses in Jesus’ mountain-top sermon. Consider the clear similarities in the following statements by Jesus and by James (ESV cited throughout):

Oaths

Jesus: "... I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King... Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Matthew 5:34-37).

James: "... do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation" (James 5:12).

Fruits

Jesus: "You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?" (Matthew 7:16).

James: "Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? ..." (James 3:12).

Trials

Jesus: "Blessed are those who are persecuted ... Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:10-12).

James: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds" (James 1:2).

Gifts

Jesus: "Ask, and it will be given to you... If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:7-11).

James: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him... Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:5, 17).

Treasures

Jesus: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal” (Matthew 6:19).

James: “Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded ... You have laid up treasure in the last days...” (James 5:2-3).

These few examples show the amazing level to which the words of Jesus are found in the epistle of James. But we should notice that not a single one of the examples we have given has identical wording that would show direct borrowing from the Gospel accounts of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) or the parallel Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49). Rather, the words of Jesus in James indicate the reporting of someone who knew Jesus and his teachings well, but who – as would be the case with James the brother of Jesus – was not present to hear the Sermon on the Mount itself (John 7:5).

Far from not being found in the epistle of James, the presence of Jesus is seen throughout this important letter in the words and core teachings of Christ that James knew and recorded.

2. FAITH IN DIFFICULT TIMES

The historical background to the book of James can help us understand a great deal of what the apostle wrote – and why he wrote it. We know from the first-century Jewish historian Josephus that James was martyred about AD 62, and the situation we find reflected in his letter fits well with the years leading up to the Jewish rebellion against Rome in AD 66.

But it is vital that we understand that the Jewish rebellion was not just about religious or political independence. In the century before that war Judea had come under Roman control and increasing change. Roman policy had left many Jews landless, and the exorbitant taxes imposed by the puppet king, Herod the Great, had driven much of the country into decline. The only people who profited under these conditions were the rich landlords of the aristocratic and priestly families who helped keep the nation subservient to Rome and who controlled the Judean people with economic and even physical brutality – to the point of sometimes hiring thugs and assassins to “soften up” or even eliminate those who owed them money or who were not compliant.

Even within the priesthood the aristocratic ranks began to withhold tithes from the lower levels of the priests, and widespread corruption further widened the gap between the rich and the poor at every level. Poverty became widespread and massive amounts of resentment and hatred of the rich began to build within Jewish society. These conditions were not limited to Judea – many of them were common in large areas of the Roman Empire through which many Christians had spread (Acts 11:19). But in Judea, where the resentment against Rome and those who grew rich under its rule became most intense, these conditions would soon lead to war. When the revolt finally broke in a rebellion of the poor, it was the priests and the Roman soldiers on the Temple Mount who were massacred first.

This was the difficult situation that James, as “Senior Pastor” of the Jerusalem Church, addressed in his letter. When he begins his epistle with the statement: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds” (James 1:2), it is easy to think of spiritual “trials” and temptations, but the Greek word, *peirasmos*, that he uses can mean any kind of adversity, and the trials James actually addresses in his letter are primarily those of poverty, oppression and the natural human temptation to strike back in some way at the oppressor.

As a result, the rich are mentioned more in James than in any other New Testament epistle, and there is more about them – and responding to their misdeeds – than almost any other subject he addresses. The apostle speaks out strongly against the pride of the rich, making a point which is hammered home repeatedly and in every chapter of his letter (1:9-11; 2:1-9; 3:13-18, 4:13-16, 5:1-6). He speaks specifically of the oppression of the poor by the rich (2:6-7; 5:4-6), and the dozens of verses that focus on the rich are clearly a major theme of this epistle. Not surprisingly, it was the rich and powerful high priest Ananias II who had James executed – probably as much for his vocal criticism of the abuses by the rich as for any perceived religious threat against Roman stability.

But James’ letter does not stop with a critique of those who misuse riches and abuse the power they hold. He focuses just as much on the reaction of those oppressed and affected by the rich. James discusses many of the ways we might respond to such mistreatment, and when we understand this underlying theme with which James is working, we are able to see the clear connection between the problems he lists and the reactions they cause.

For example, directly after his words on the evils perpetrated by the rich, James addresses the temptation to retaliate to economic and social oppression with violence (2:11; 3:14; 4:2). Interestingly, the *zelos* of which James warns in 3:14 is the “zeal” from which the name of the Zealots, who called for a violent end to Judea’s problems, was based. He also warns against responding with judgmental words and curses (1:19-20, 26; 3:1-12; 4:11-12; 5:9),

with anger (1:20) or envy (3:14), or conversely with favoritism to gain the favor of the rich (2:1-9). James calls upon the oppressed not to respond according to any of these ways of the flesh, but to respond spiritually, with faith in God's power over the apparent supremacy of the rich (1:6-8; 2:14-26), with trusting patience and endurance (5:7-11), and with care and support for those even poorer than themselves (2:14-16).

As we read James with this understanding, we see that rather than simply stringing together unrelated "proverbs" or words of "wisdom," as is often said of this epistle, he alternates between what the rich are doing and how the poor must react, and between social and economic problems and Christian responses. Although the overarching theme of the book is certainly faith, it is not abstract faith or belief, but living, working examples of everyday faith in response to the physical difficulties of life.

In this sense, the message of James' letter reaches far beyond the situation in first-century Judea to every society where there is oppression, poverty, injustice and inequality. But James addresses any and every kind of adversity that may come upon us, from social injustice to sickness, from problems we may experience at work to difficulties we may face in making rent or mortgage payments. James speaks directly to every Christian who experiences the fact that in this life we may suffer at the hands of the world.

Yet James does not simply critique. He names the problems for what they are and holds up a better way of response – the way of faith and trust in God's unmovable purposes. James stressed this way of restraint in a time of escalating hatred that led to eventual violence and ultimately to the destruction of Judea in AD 70. His message is one that is just as meaningful today: despite the evils of the world and the corruption of society, do not become embittered, but be patient and have faith. Tradition tells us that James was greatly loved by many of the people of Jerusalem, and especially by the poor. There is every reason to believe that. James offered – and still offers – all of us, and especially the weak and vulnerable, guidance in responding faithfully in difficult times.

3. ASKING FOR WISDOM – WISELY

“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you” (James 1:5).

This is a verse many of us know and love. It seems to promise unbounded wisdom and that if we just ask for it, God will generously give it to us. Certainly, it is in God’s power to grant unbounded and universal wisdom to anyone he wishes, but does God really work that way – is that what this verse really means?

Wisdom is an important theme in the epistle of James, but we must understand what the apostle meant by the concept and how he says we can receive it. Today, we tend to think of wisdom as being synonymous with great knowledge or deep understanding, but for James wisdom is quite different – it is primarily our right response to problems, difficulties, and to life itself. Notice how he contrasts that kind of wisdom with false, wrongly-oriented wisdom:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts ... Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice (James 3:13-16).

Wisdom, for James, clearly has to do with our way of life rather than what we know. In fact, James continues his thought on this by saying:

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere (James 3:17).

It is this kind of “wisdom” – the basis of wise living rather than knowledge and understanding – that “comes from heaven” that James is telling us God will give to us if we ask.

Once we realize this, we can better understand what James means about how we ask for wisdom and how God grants it. Do we just ask for wisdom in general and God then gives us wisdom regarding anything and everything? Put the question in human terms. If you walk into your local bank branch and tell the manager “I want a big loan; just give me money” – is the banker likely to help, or will he or she ask: “How much do you need and for what purpose?”

In the same way, what we often miss in James’ words on asking for wisdom is their context. If we look carefully at the immediately preceding verses, we see James is writing about a very specific situation. He says:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1:2-4).

James’ immediate context is one of persecution. He tells believers that trials can bring about spiritual maturity in which we do not lack anything needed to deal with such problems (vs. 4). But if we do lack wisdom – implying wisdom in dealing with matters of persecution and patience – James says we can ask God and he will help us.

Consider another example of this principle – that of the story of God granting wisdom to King Solomon. When God appeared to Solomon and offered him anything he wanted, Solomon did not simply ask for wisdom. Notice his request to God:

... give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours? (1 Kings 3:9).

Because Solomon asked for wisdom in a specific context – to do the work of ruling Israel – God was well pleased and granted him great wisdom in many areas (1 Kings 3:12, 28) as well as other blessings.

But we should remember that Solomon asked for the wisdom he needed in a specific situation. So it is perhaps not surprising that in the compositions believed to be written by Solomon, he often ties wisdom to particular contexts. Notice the wording of just one example:

Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure (Ecclesiastes 8:5).

Here, we see wisdom relating to “proper times” and “procedures,” and in many of the proverbs of Solomon, wisdom is tied to specific needs and circumstances in this same way.

So when we consider the wider biblical context, the words of James regarding wisdom become clear. *God rarely, if ever, gives unneeded gifts.* If we desire wisdom, his word indicates we should not ask to be given wisdom for its own sake, without specific purpose. But we can humbly take our needs to God and ask for wisdom in the areas of life where we need it in order to best fulfill his will and our calling – and then, as James affirms, God will be most pleased to give it to us.

4. HOW LOVE WORKS

When we think of the epistle of James, we usually think of the theme of faith – and perhaps, if we know the book well, the theme of wisdom. But there is a third theme in this epistle: that of love. While it is not as noticeable, the theme of love nevertheless underlies a great deal of what James says from the beginning of his letter to its end.

Sometimes the concept is there before us, but we may not see it because the exact word “love” is not used. Take this well-known verse as an example:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (James 1:27 ESV).

Although we do not find the word love used directly here, this verse actually summarizes James’ teaching on love of others (exemplified by “visiting orphans and widows”) and love of God (exemplified by “keeping ourselves unstained from the world”). These two applications of love – toward God and toward others – are stressed repeatedly in the course of the apostle’s letter:

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him (James 1:12, and see also James 2:5).

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right (James 2:8).

But love for God and neighbor is more often implied in what James writes than spelled out verbally. We must look for the love in James’ message – and when we find it, it is usually an aspect of one of the

other themes he speaks about. This is not because love is secondary in James' mind, but because he is showing us, in fact, how love works.

Take the example of faith itself. Because faith is the leading and most obvious theme of this epistle, we do not always notice that James' words on faith also teach a lesson about love. Consider what the apostle says in regard to faith without works:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (James 2:14-17 ESV).

Here, it is easy to be so focused on what James says about works being the necessary expression and fruit of faith that we forget these are works of love that he is talking about. In fact, whenever James speaks of works, he is speaking of works of love – rather than simply works done out of duty or in an effort to earn salvation – and when we realize this, we see that his whole discussion of faith is relevant to our understanding of love.

This principle holds true of much of what James says on other subjects. To take another example, look at what he says about the tongue:

... no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God (James 3:8-9 ESV).

Here we see that the twin aspects of love of God and love of neighbor cannot be separated. James' warning regarding the

misuse of the tongue is framed in terms of the fact that we cannot both love (“bless”) God and not love (“curse”) people.

Consider a final example which is all the more important because it forms the closing statement of James’ epistle:

My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins (James 5: 19-20).

This conclusion of James’ letter provides yet another example of his stress on love. The kind of love that seeks to help the “lost sheep” is the same kind of love Christ himself exhibited in his teaching, his life, and his death.

So, although the word “love” may only appear a few times in this epistle, the call to love is central to its entire message. James teaches us how love works. No other book in the Bible makes it clearer that love is an action, not just an attitude. The greatest love is recognized not by what we feel, but by what we do because of what we believe.

In reality, the epistle of James calls us to a life of love just as much as it calls us to a life of faith – a life where faith and love are inseparably combined. James teaches us that faith accomplishes the most when it produces the fruit of love, and love accomplishes the most when it proceeds from the root of faith.

PART TWO:
1, 2 PETER –
HOPE, KNOWLEDGE, LOVE

5. A LIVING HOPE

Peter and James both address “trials” in their epistles, and if we read the first letter of Peter directly after the epistle of James we might think that there is some overlap between these two books. But Peter’s readers faced a very different situation from the one described by James. While James was concerned with the proper response of Christians to difficult socio-economic conditions, Peter speaks to his readers about how to respond properly to the official persecution of Christianity that developed in the decades after the founding of the Church.

At the time Peter wrote, Christians were caught in the dilemma of whether or not to obey the government that persecuted them, and also of how to be a light to others while dealing with their rejection and abuse by the society around them. That is why Peter addresses his first letter to Christians as “exiles” or “pilgrims” who lived in the world yet were estranged from it (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11).

Despite these great difficulties, there is no hint of discouragement anywhere in Peter’s letter. His message is not one of gloom, but of real hope in the face of suffering – hope strong enough to support his readers in their own lives and even enable them to confidently carry the truth to others. The apostle does this by stressing the “living hope” that every Christian has:

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, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade...* (1 Peter 1:3-4, emphases added here and below).

What is this “living” hope Peter speaks of? It is likely that there are several meanings to the expression. First, Peter makes it clear that the hope is living in the sense of being alive and active. It is not

something we must try to work up out of hopelessness – but rather something we are given (vs. 3) and which lives within us.

Peter also shows us that our living hope is based on both the past resurrection of Jesus and the future inheritance of the Christian who has become one with the death and resurrection of Christ. He expands on this repeatedly throughout his letter by stressing both the resurrection and the return of Christ:

... set your *hope* on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming ... Through [Christ] you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and *hope* are in God (1 Peter 1:13, 21, etc.).

So the hope Peter speaks of is not just “living” in the sense of being alive and active, it is hope based in life itself – the life of the resurrected Christ and the future life to be given to the believer at his return.

But Peter’s message of hope is not simply about positive ideas that might strengthen us in difficult times – it is, in fact, equally about using our hope to help others. That is why he writes:

... Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the *hope* that you have... (1 Peter 3:15).

In this way, Peter’s letter not only offers hope to Christians undergoing persecution by guiding them with practical instruction on living life in the midst of suffering, but also by turning the dark reality of persecution into an opportunity for evangelism – of reaching enemies despite their attitude toward us. But Peter shows that in such times of persecution our witness may not always be one of words. Instead, he is very clear as to how we can often influence others in these difficult circumstances:

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God ... (1 Peter 2:11-12).

Peter tells us that our living witness is rooted both in turning from sin (as we see in vs. 11, and in other verses such as 1 Peter 2:24), and also in our “honorable deeds” – our doing good – which he stresses throughout his letter (1 Peter 2:15, 20; 3:6, 17; etc.).

We can find shining examples of the effect of this kind of hope in the lives of many persecuted Christians and modern-day martyrs such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who had a tremendous effect on those who guarded him.

There are perhaps no greater lessons in this epistle: even in the worst of times we can portray hope in our lives, and even in the most difficult circumstances we can do the work of God by proclaiming the truth through our conduct. The witness of our own lives is perhaps the ultimate reason that the hope of which Peter speaks is a *living* hope.

6. A LESSON ABOUT KNOWLEDGE

While the first epistle of Peter deals with problems facing Christianity from the outside, his second letter deals with problems on the inside. False doctrines were beginning to be accepted by many in the Church so in his second letter Peter has much to say about the importance of true as opposed to false knowledge. As a result, the second epistle of Peter has sometimes been called the “knowledge” epistle of the New Testament. The apostle’s short letter speaks of “knowing” and “knowledge” eleven times – five times in the first chapter alone – and focuses on the importance of what we know more than any other section of the Christian Scriptures. Notice how Peter begins his epistle directly after addressing his readers:

Grace and peace be yours in abundance *through the knowledge* of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life *through our knowledge* of him who called us by his own glory and goodness (2 Peter 1:2-3, emphases added).

In contrast with the false teachers of that era who taught that true knowledge was hidden and only attainable by a few, Peter stresses that ultimately, true knowledge is knowledge of God and his Son, and that we all have access to everything we need through the knowledge that God openly gives us.

After this introduction, Peter goes on to describe what we might call a “spectrum” of spiritual qualities:

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, *knowledge*; and to *knowledge*, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love (2 Peter 1:5-7, emphases added).

This “spiritual spectrum” ranges from faith to love with the “hope”-related quality of “perseverance” or “endurance” at the center. As such, we can see that Peter’s list is an expansion of the three qualities of faith, hope, and love we know so well from Paul’s writings (1 Corinthians 13:13).

But notice something else about this “spectrum.” If we look carefully, we see that Peter sets these qualities off in groups of two: faith/goodness, knowledge/self-control, perseverance/ godliness, mutual affection/love. When we consider these pairs closely, we see that the first quality of each pair represents a mental attitude and the second quality involves a practical application. Faith, knowledge, perseverance (or hope), and mutual affection are all aspects of our own minds, whereas goodness, self-control, godliness, and love are all things we do – that we apply in life.

So the “spiritual spectrum” that Peter gives helps teach us that we must have action as well as knowledge. Peter summarizes this fact when he tells his readers later in his letter that we must “... grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18) – we must have positive change in our lives along with the growth of knowledge or we will fail to grow spiritually as we should.

The pairs of qualities Peter gives us deserve some meditation. How do the qualities relate? What is the connection between each of them? Perhaps above all, Peter’s list shows us that a feeling of affection is not love – that we may have good feelings toward others without really loving them. Mutual affection, Peter’s list shows, is an attitude; love is an action – something we actively do for others.

It is only as we grasp and apply this fact that we will be using the knowledge God gives us as he intended. Peter himself tells us, directly after listing the qualities of his “spiritual spectrum”:

For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:8).

7. A POWERFUL MESSAGE

The theme of power – God’s power – is an important one in the epistles of Peter. The apostle knew a thing or two about that power, of course. He had witnessed the power of many of Christ’s miracles, and he was there when Jesus was revealed in all power in the transfiguration to a select group of disciples (Mark 9:1-3; 2 Peter 1:16). Peter had also witnessed the power of the resurrection first-hand, and he was there when Christ told his disciples the power of God would come on them, too (Acts 1:8).

So it is perhaps not surprising that the book of Acts records numerous instances of Peter using the power of God in dramatic healings and other works (Acts 3-9), and that his own letters place a particular emphasis on that power. In fact, we find two Greek words for power in Peter’s epistles: *dunamis* (“active power” – from which we get the English words “dynamic” and “dynamite”) and *exousia* (“authoritative power”). These are the same two words that are used in the Gospels when we are told that Jesus sent out the disciples and gave them “power and authority” (Luke 9:1).

However, Peter mainly uses the word *dunamis* – the word that most implies power in the sense of the ability to do something. We see this meaning of the word in Jesus’ Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14–30), for example, where the servants are given wealth based on their *dunamis* or their “ability” to handle it. Peter refers to this powerful ability that we are given by God to use in two areas of life in particular, and we can see this by looking at two key verses in his letters – one in each of his epistles.

In 1 Peter the apostle speaks of our use of God’s power in serving others – doing the work God has given us to do:

... If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength [*dunamis*] God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ... (1 Peter 4:11).

In 2 Peter the apostle speaks of our use of the power of God in living our own lives – in living according to God’s will:

His divine power has given us everything that we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness (2 Peter 1:3).

These two uses of God’s power are themes that run through Peter’s letters – serving by God’s power, living by God’s power – and it can be a useful study to read his epistles from this perspective in order to see the promise of the great power that can be placed within us. But it is easy to read these verses, to be encouraged by them, yet still to miss an important part of their meaning – the “message beneath the message” in what Peter is telling us.

We tend to read these verses out of context – in terms of God’s powerful help being available to us under normal circumstances. Doubtless they do apply in that broader way, but Peter was not speaking about normal everyday circumstances. He was writing about God’s helping power in a time of persecution – as we know historically and from what the apostle himself says. That is why Peter wrote of persecuted Christians:

who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:5).

Although Peter stresses the power of God’s protection here, he also confirms – in the very next verse – that even with that protection Christians will often still suffer:

... though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials (1 Peter 1:6).

Peter knew that God has the power to completely protect Christians from suffering whenever he deems it necessary, but his message

about God's power does not offer false expectations or guarantees – it stresses that God's power often shields us *in* rather than *from* persecution.

And when we read, as we did above, the apostle's statements that we can serve by God's power (1 Peter 4:11) and live by God's power (2 Peter 1:3), we should remember that Peter is primarily talking about serving and living within a time of persecution, not peace. When we keep this context in mind we see how powerful his message is. It is all too human to want to "lie low" or "go off the radar" in times of persecution or even of social rejection of Christianity. Peter's message reminds us that the God of all power promises us the ability to continue to live his way and to serve him and others with the power he provides, no matter what the circumstances.

That is why Peter could preach about the power of God so confidently to those enduring opposition and oppression, and why he could confirm that:

... 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. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 5:10-11).

8. A LESSON LEARNED ABOUT LOVE

It is almost impossible to read the epistles of Peter and not to see the importance of the theme of love. Love is mentioned nine times in the first epistle alone – significantly, at least once in every one of the letter's chapters.

Peter's stress on love is doubtless biographical in reflecting the apostle's own experience. Every reader of the Gospels remembers the post-resurrection incident in which Christ asked Peter three times "Do you love me?" This pivotal event of Peter's reinstatement and recommissioning after his triple denial of Jesus doubtless had a tremendous impact on the apostle:

... Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

It is often pointed out that while in his first two questions Jesus used a form of the word *agapé* – godly, unconditional love – Peter replied with a form of the word *phileó* – meaning brotherly love or affection. We can paraphrase the question and answer: "Do you have love for me?" "Yes, I have affection for you." In his final question (vs. 17) Jesus lowered the level of love and asked, "Do you have affection for me?" to which Peter replied "...you know I have affection for you."

Peter did have great affection for Christ, of course, and that affection had been the basis of Peter's rash promise that he would

never forsake Jesus (Matthew 26:35). Unfortunately, Peter had to learn that human love has little depth compared to the love God wants us to develop, and his human affection was not enough to keep him from forsaking Christ and even denying him three times.

So it is possible that in Peter's reinstatement by repeating his question three times Jesus was subtly reminding Peter of his three denials. But it is clear that Peter, in his shame, could not bring himself to say he loved Jesus to such a high level as unconditional godly love, only to the lesser degree of affection – to which Jesus finally lowered his question.

Yet while the element of shame may have affected Peter's answers at that moment in time, the apostle's letters make it clear that he had learned from the incident and moved beyond his mistake of thinking that humanly-generated affection is enough. Peter not only talks frequently about love in his epistles, he also specifically addresses the difference between human affection and godly love. In two extremely poignant scriptures, Peter tells us that we too must move beyond the love that is human affection:

Now you have purified your selves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love [*phileó*] for each other, love [*agapé*] one another deeply, from the heart (1 Peter 1:22).

add ... to godliness, mutual affection [*phileó*]; and to mutual affection, love [*agapé*] (2 Peter 1:7).

Although these two verses are worded slightly differently, Peter's point is clearly identical in both: already having human love, we must learn godly love (1 Peter); having human love, we must add to it godly love (2 Peter).

It is doubtless significant that Peter included this thought in both of his epistles: we must move beyond human love to a godly love that is both deeper and higher than human affection. That would certainly seem to be the lesson Jesus was teaching Peter in his reinstatement. Peter had learned the hard way that human love –

even love between the closest friends – is not enough to fulfill God's law of love. It is a lesson that Peter's letters show he had clearly grasped. That is why he wrote so adamantly:

Above all, love [*agapé*] each other deeply, because love [*agapé*] covers over a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).

PART THREE:
1, 2, 3 JOHN –
TRUTH, OBEDIENCE, LOVE

9. LESSONS IN FELLOWSHIP

It is often said that there are three major lessons or themes in the epistles of the apostle John: love, truth, and obedience. Some verses in these letters even mention all three themes together, directly or indirectly. Consider an example (emphases added here and below):

And this is *love*: that we walk in *obedience* to his commands. As you have heard [the *truth*] from the beginning, his command is that you walk in *love* (2 John 1:6).

These three themes certainly are the most noticeable and frequently mentioned in John's letters, and each theme appears in all three of his epistles. But there is also another theme that serves as a thread connecting the apostle's themes of love, truth, and obedience. That connecting thread is the theme of fellowship with God and with his people.

Today, when we hear the word "fellowship" we tend to think of things like church socials and informal get-togethers with friends. But the Greek word *koinonia* used by John primarily means a deep sharing or "communion" based on the fact that through God's Spirit Christians share or partake of the mind of God and Christ and share that communion of mind with one another. This theme of spiritual fellowship is found in all three of John's epistles (1 John 1:6-7; 2 John 1:9-11; 3 John 1: 5-10), and John (who uses the word *koinonia* over half of the times it occurs in the New Testament) repeatedly stresses the things that develop or destroy that shared oneness God desires us to have with him and with others.

Fellowship Based on Obedience

We find the first part of John's message about spiritual fellowship stressed in his first letter: we cannot have true fellowship with God

and others if we are not living according to God's way of life. Unrepentant sin cuts us off from God, and eventually from others:

If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:6-7).

John stressed this same relationship between obedience and fellowship when he wrote:

We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands ... Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did (1 John 2:3, 6).

Fellowship Based on Truth

In John's second epistle he stresses another aspect of fellowship – that it can only exist in the presence of truth, especially the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ:

Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work (2 John 1: 9-11).

Here John looks at two sides of this spiritual reality – first, that only the one who has truth (“continues in the teaching” of Christ) has fellowship with God, and second, that we ourselves must not extend fellowship to those who do not have the truth. This is not talking about perfect agreement on every aspect of doctrine we may

hold, of course, but about the basic truth of the gospel. This is a spiritual reality that John had begun to discuss in his first letter:

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3).

Fellowship Based on Love

John's third and final letter preserved in the New Testament stresses the role of love in true fellowship:

Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love... We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth. I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us. So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us. Not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church (3 John 1:5-10).

In this detailed discussion, as he did in his second letter, the apostle looks at two aspects of spiritual fellowship. First, he links the Christian's works – “what you are doing for the brothers and sisters” – with our love for others and for God. Next, he gives a practical example where those who do not express love are devoid of true fellowship and even try to withhold fellowship from others. John shows that such behavior is not only the very opposite of fellowship, but it is also the opposite of love.

The Apostle of Fellowship

When we remember that, of all the apostles, John probably had the closest fellowship with Jesus (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20), we should consider carefully what he stresses regarding the role of fellowship in the Christian life. Biblical evidence and historical tradition agree that John was the last surviving apostle; his letters represent distillations of what is most important in the Christian faith by one who not only knew Jesus closely, but also had a long life to ponder and summarize his Master's teachings.

For John, love, truth, and obedience were the ultimate principles of the Christian way of life, but he knew that these great principles do not exist in a vacuum – he makes it clear that all of them exist and have their being in our fellowship with God and, when it is available to us, with other believers. These are John's greatest lessons: without love, truth, and obedience we cannot have true fellowship. And without true fellowship we cannot have love, truth, or obedience.

10. HEARTS SET AT REST

The first epistle of John displays a unique writing style. One of the most characteristic aspects of this apostle's letters is the way in which he frequently compares or contrasts spiritual situations. In 1 John 1:9-10, for example, he contrasts "If we confess our sins" with "If we claim we have not sinned." As we continue through his letter we find that he compares "Whoever loves his brother" with "whoever hates his brother" (1 John 2:10-11 ESV); "The one who does what is right" with "The one who does what is sinful" (1 John 3:7-8); "Every spirit that acknowledges ... Jesus ..." with "every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus" (1 John 4:2-3), and so on.

The use of this kind of comparison or contrast lends a dynamic force and clarity to what John writes, but sometimes the lesson behind the comparison is not quite as easy to see, and we may miss it if we do not keep an eye open for occurrences of the pattern. A good example of this is found in the third chapter of John's letter:

This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God ... (1 John 3:19-21).

The immediate contrast between "If our hearts condemn us" and "if our hearts do not condemn us" is clear enough, but the lesson John points to here is perhaps not as obvious. At face value it might seem that John is simply saying if our hearts or "consciences" condemn us, God is greater than our hearts (vs. 20), but what does that mean?

To understand the contrast John is making we must widen our view to look at the context in which these verses appear. Beginning in verse 10 of chapter 3, all the way up to verse 19 where John begins to talk about our consciences condemning or not

condemning us, John speaks continually about whether we love one another or not:

This is how we know who the children of God are ... Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister. For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another... We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other... Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:10-18).

It is after these words about love that John then states, as we saw: "This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest ..." (vs. 19-20). Knowing that "we belong to the truth," as John puts it, is not always a result of our hearts condemning or not condemning us – because we cannot always trust our own conscience to be a judge of our behavior (Jeremiah 17:9). Rather, John refers to what he has just said: that we love others in our behavior and in truth (vs. 18), and to what he says after this verse, that we have confidence before God because we keep his commands "... to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us" (vs. 23).

The underlying theme of love is really the main point of what John says in his third chapter and his entire letter, and this immediate context allows us to paraphrase the point of 1 John 3:19-21 like this:

... because we demonstrate our love for one another in actions and in truth, we know that we are the children of God and this sets our conscience at rest... Even if our conscience sometimes causes us to doubt our standing before God, we know our conscience is not the final judge and that God, who sees the love he has placed within us, accepts us and hears us – for

ongoing love of others in our lives is the proof that God does not reject or condemn us, and that he hears us.

We all occasionally groan under the weight of conscience and in our most discouraged moments we may wonder if we are really a child of God or if God hears us. But John's message shows us that the outgoing and ongoing love God places in us through his Spirit is the proof that we are indeed his children. It's a tremendously encouraging lesson that can give us great spiritual confidence and truly "set our hearts at rest" (1 John 3:19), but – like many of John's lessons – it is one we can only see properly when we consider the context of what he says about love.

11. A LETTER ABOUT LOVE AND TRUTH

Despite its diminutive size, the shortest book in the Bible – the third epistle of John – carries a powerful message. On the surface, the epistle is a short exhortation from the apostle to the believer Gaius encouraging him to give hospitality to another believer, Demetrius (who may have carried this letter as an introduction), because a powerful local church leader, Diotrephes, was forcibly denying hospitality to members from outside his congregation.

This is perhaps all that we might expect to see in a “book” that is only 14 verses long, but Third John nevertheless carries a simple but profound underlying message. This “message beneath the message” has to do with the interaction between the Christian qualities of love and truth – which are mentioned (often in combinations such as “love and truth,” “love in the truth,” “truth and love,” etc.) ten times in this letter’s fourteen verses.

Beginning in the first verse, John salutes Gaius as someone “whom I love in the truth” (3 John 1:1), setting the theme of his message. In the following verses there are other indirect correlations between the qualities of love and truth, such as verse 8 where hospitality and truth are related. As we saw in chapter 9 (Lessons in Fellowship), John then uses the unhospitable Diotrephes as a negative example of the failed connection between love and truth by writing:

... Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us. So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us ... (3 John 1:9-10).

While it is easy to miss the connection here, we should read the statement in the context of John’s stress on love and truth throughout the letter. Diotrephes’ failed love – his love of self and

self-aggrandizement – is paired with his failed truth – his spreading of malicious lies. This pattern is repeated when John then writes:

... he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church (3 John 1:10b).

Here John shows Diotrephes' failure of love has a direct connection to his subsequent failure of truth in twisting doctrine so that true members of the faith are expelled.

Next, John says, "Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good" (3 John 1:11a), and he then gives the example of the faithful Demetrius who is to be imitated. In this case, John says, "Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone—and even by the truth itself" and "We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true" (3 John 1:12). In other words, Demetrius is clearly liked and loved as a result of his behavior – his love – and the result is his right relationship with the truth.

So, in the course of his short letter, John repeatedly shows that we cannot express – or fail to express – love without it affecting the truth in our lives. Conversely, he tells us, we cannot express – or fail to express – the truth without it relating to the love we show. This is a principle that extends far beyond the particular circumstances in which this little letter was written – one that applies to all of us in every aspect of our lives. John tells us that love and truth are interconnected: we cannot weaken or strengthen one without the other being weakened or strengthened also.

12. WHAT IS THE APOSTLE JOHN'S “NEW COMMANDMENT”?

“... I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and in you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining” (1 John 2:7-8).

In his first epistle, the apostle John tells his readers that he is writing an “old” command to them, and also a “new” command. But when we carefully read what he says, we realize that John does not actually specify what either the old or the new command is in these verses.

John does tell us that the old command is one “which you have had from the beginning” (vs. 7), but what is that command? The answer, in this case, is fairly easy to find. In the following chapter John specifically writes: “For this is the message you heard from the beginning: ‘We should love one another’” (1 John 3:11, and see also 2 John 1:5 where the apostle says the command from the beginning is to love one another). This “old” command was, of course, found in the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:18) and expounded in the teachings of Jesus.

But what is John’s “new” command? Many readers of the epistle presume 1 John 2:8 gives the answer, but there is nothing in this verse, or the following ones, that can be read as a command – we are not told to do anything, simply that whatever the command is: “its truth is seen in him and in you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.”

The clue to the nature of the new command is found in verse 8, however. In writing “its truth is seen in him and in you,” John indicates this new command is one which applied to Jesus and to his followers and should be evident in both. That leads us to John’s

Gospel where he tells us that at the end of Jesus' ministry, as he was about to be taken from his disciples, Jesus told them:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another (John 13:34).

Jesus had clearly taught that we must love our neighbor as ourselves during his ministry (Matthew 22:39), so his new command was not simply to love our neighbor as much as ourselves, but to take that love further, to love one another as he loved us. This is sacrificial love that puts the other person not just as equal with self, but before self.

Returning now to John's epistle, we see that in the chapter after he mentions the "new" command, John wrote:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters (1 John 3:16).

In other words, this is exactly the same sacrificial love Christ had taught as his "new" command. The "new" command of John, and of Jesus, and of God the Father, are the same – as John himself states:

And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us (1 John 3:23).

When we strive to love others to the extent Christ showed love to us, then we mirror his true sacrificial love and – as John says – his "new" commandment "is seen in him and in you" (1 John 2:8).

PART FOUR:
JUDE –
MERCY, PEACE, LOVE

13. WHO WAS JUDE?

The identity of the author of the epistle of Jude has often puzzled students of the New Testament. The epistle itself simply calls him “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James” (Jude 1:1). But who was this Jude and what can we learn from his identity?

First, we should realize that the name Jude is just a shortened form of the Jewish name Judah – or, as it was written in Greek, Judas. So it is not difficult to see why modern translations of the Bible call the author of this epistle “Jude” rather than “Judas” in order to differentiate him from Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus.

Some have thought that this righteous Jude was the same person as the other individual called Judas in the lists of the twelve disciples. Although the King James Version calls that apostle “Judas the brother of James” in Luke 6:16, this is based on a mistranslation. The word “brother” does not appear in the Greek of the verse and virtually all other translations call this individual “the son of James,” as the expression should be rendered.

Another idea is that Jude was one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus – the one called Thomas. The reason for this is interesting. The Gospel of John calls him “Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve” (John 20:24) and a few early Christian manuscripts actually refer to Thomas as “Didymus Judas Thomas.” But while this might seem like a reasonable possibility for the identity of Jude, it is an unlikely one for a number of reasons.

The letter of Jude itself suggests that Jude was neither the apostle called Judas or the one called Thomas. If Jude had been one of the original disciples, there would be no reason why he would not have introduced himself in his letter as the apostle Jude. Even more importantly, the author of Jude specifically does not include himself with the apostles when he wrote: “But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold” (Jude 1:17) – which we can contrast with the nearly identical statement of Peter (who does call himself an apostle) when he says:

... be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior” (2 Peter 3:2 NKJV).

It is much more likely that when Jude writes simply that he is “a brother of James,” he is referring to James the half-brother of Jesus and author of the epistle of James. This identification has the weight of a great deal of Christian tradition and of scripture itself behind it. Matthew 13:55 records the names of two of the brothers of Jesus as James and Judas, and very early Christian writings state that Jude was that same Judas, the brother of Christ.

Neither of these brothers of Jesus – James and Judas – was among the original disciples who became apostles, and the New Testament tells us, in fact, that they rejected Jesus and his teachings (John 7:5; Matthew 13:57; Mark 3:21; etc.). It was only after the resurrection that Jesus’ half-brothers came to believe and then became important members of the early Church, with James becoming the virtual leader of the Jerusalem Christians (Galatians 1:18-19). In stark contrast to the Judas (Iscariot) who appeared to accept Christ’s teaching at the beginning, but who betrayed him at the end, the Judas who wrote our book of Jude may have rejected Christ at first yet eventually, like James, he became a fervent believer and upholder of the truth.

In writing to many people he did not know personally, it is inconceivable that the author of the epistle of Jude would simply say he was “Jude the brother of James” unless everyone knew which Jude and which James – the brothers of Jesus – that would be. This puts the first verse of Jude in clear perspective and provides one of the most impressive examples of deep humility in the whole New Testament.

Jude was one of the most important people in the early Church, yet his description of himself as simply “the brother of James” is an amazingly humble one. How many people, if they had been the brother of Jesus, would not have introduced themselves that way?

Yet humility was one of the greatest traits of Jesus (Philippians 2:7) and one which Jude and the other brothers of Jesus had witnessed frequently.

Jude knew that Jesus had described himself as a servant (Matthew 20:28), and in describing himself not as the “brother of Jesus,” but as “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ” (Jude 1:1), Jude begins his letter by stressing that first and foremost he was simply the servant of a servant. This may not tell us what made Jude important, but it tells us exactly who he was.

14. TRIPLETS IN JUDE

One of the first things you may notice as you read the epistle of Jude is that the apostle loved triplets! We are not speaking about triple babies, of course, but about groups of three related things. If you look for them, you will see these verbal “triplets” throughout Jude’s letter. Take the first two verses as an example:

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James, To those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ: Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance” (Jude 1:1-2).

In these two verses alone we have three triplet sets: Jude - Jesus - James; called - loved - kept; mercy - peace - love. Once we see the pattern it is hard to miss, and we come to realize that there are groups of three in almost half the verses in this epistle!

The obviously conscious structuring of the epistle around these “triplets” seems to be a unique “literary device” that Jude utilized to present his material in a concise and memorable way. They certainly help us to see the flow of what he is saying and provide mini-summaries of the different sections of his message.

For instance, a large part of Jude’s letter is concerned with apostasy and error that were occurring in the Church in his day, and he summarizes these problems in carefully selected sets of three easily memorized examples. In verse 4 Jude tells us the individuals causing these problems:

... are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord (Jude 1:4).

Here we see three clear forms of wrongdoing affecting the Church. In verses 5 through 7 Jude lists three groups that are Old Testament

examples of judgment for wrongdoing: Israel in the wilderness - the angels who rebelled - the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. And in verse 11 he follows these broader examples with three specific individuals who were punished for wrongdoing: Cain - Balaam - Korah; while in verse 8 he gives three characteristics of these apostates: they defile the body - reject authority - blaspheme.

In continuing his description of those who had fallen from the faith or who were perverting it, in verses 12-13 Jude has a *double* triplet telling us that these people are like: submerged rocks - shepherds who feed themselves - clouds without rain; and that they are like: dead trees - waves of the sea - wandering stars. Finally, on this theme Jude tells us in another clear triplet:

These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit (Jude 1:19).

At first sight some of these threefold descriptions may seem more poetic than instructive, but they are carefully chosen. If we think about them, we see similarities between the items in each group of three that help us understand the problems Jude is portraying. In this way Jude sometimes even breaks the individual elements he is describing into three further divisions. For example, the dead trees he mentions in verse 12 are said to be “autumn trees” – in other words, trees that have died back for the winter. They are also “without fruit and uprooted” so that they are in effect: dead trees - dead fruit - dead roots. It would be hard to produce a more thorough description of the spiritual deadness of the individuals Jude describes!

But if these examples are all from the negative warnings of Jude’s letter, there are many more triplets that give the positive side of his message. Despite all the problems Jude felt compelled to address, he stresses that if we do our part, God will do his – and God’s will *will* prevail. This tremendously encouraging instruction is summarized in a vital triplet toward the end of Jude’s letter:

But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life (Jude 1:20-21).

These three spiritual exercises: building up our faith - praying - keeping ourselves in God's love (through obedience, as John so clearly shows in his letters) are our part, Jude tells us, in combating the evils that were already assailing the Church in his day. And they are just as necessary in any age. If we do these things, Jude affirms, then God will do the rest in bringing us to eternal life.

Jude foreshadowed that truth at the beginning of his epistle (Jude 1:1) and he concludes the thought in the great doxology or praise that he offers (with double triplets!) at the epistle's end:

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy (Jude 1:24).

If we are doing our part, Jude concludes, God will fulfill his purpose in us, which is why Jude triumphantly exclaims:

To the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen (Jude 1:25).

Jude clearly saw the problems of the time in which he lived, but he held out confidence in God's controlling power for all three reaches of time: before all present time, for now, and forever.

15. LEARNING FROM BAD EXAMPLES

“Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion” (Jude 1:11).

Like 2 Peter, the epistle of Jude was largely written to combat problems within the Church itself; but while Peter mainly addresses the problem of false teachers, Jude draws our attention to the problem of individuals exhibiting uncorrected human nature within the body of believers. He gives three Old Testament examples of what such individuals are like and draws important conclusions from them.

If Hebrews 11 is the Bible's “Hall of Fame” because it lists the outstandingly faithful individuals found in the Old Testament, then the first chapter of Jude contains what must be the Bible's “Hall of Shame,” listing examples of extreme sinfulness. Jude mentions Cain, the murderous son of Adam and Eve who gave an inferior offering (Genesis 4); Balaam, the prophet who lured ancient Israel into sexual licentiousness for personal gain (Numbers 22-24); and Korah, the would-be priest who rebelled against Moses and God (Numbers 16).

But Jude does not simply list these individuals as bad examples from the past. He holds them up as instances of problems that were afflicting the early Church in his time and that could occur in any age. If we look back to the beginning of Jude, we find that he alludes to these sins as being present in his own time:

For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a

license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord (Jude 1:4).

Although Jude is talking in the present tense about individuals who “have secretly slipped in among you,” the problems he lists also clearly reflect the errors of the three arch-apostates of the past. “They are ungodly people” certainly reflects the attitude of Cain (1 John 3:12). Those “who pervert the grace of God into a license for immorality” likewise reflect the successful attempts of Balaam to seduce the Israelites through sexual immorality (Numbers 25:1-9; 31:16). The fact that the false teachers “deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” can be seen to be parallel to the way in which Korah acted as a leader of rebellion, elevating himself above Moses and ultimately, above God himself (Numbers 16:1).

So Jude’s choice of the three individuals Cain, Balaam, and Korah is not an arbitrary one. The problems of these individuals are potentially recurrent ones that had infiltrated the early Church in the form of individuals who were “wolves in sheep’s clothing” – people who were in the Church, “among” the believers, but were not really believers themselves.

But we should not imagine that the false Christians of Jude’s day were actually murdering, seducing the congregation, or rebelling outwardly against God as Cain, Balaam and Korah had done. Rather, Jude points out the subtler ways in which the attitude of these individuals was being expressed.

He tells us that such individuals “slander whatever they do not understand” (vs. 10). They are “shepherds who feed only themselves” (vs. 12), they are “... grumblers and faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage” (vs. 16), and finally, they are “... the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit” (vs. 19).

These characteristics sound much more like those we might, unfortunately, sometimes experience today, and Jude’s warnings are, in fact, as valid now as they were two thousand years ago.

Today, just as in the past, in extreme cases we can experience false worshippers whose heart is not in their worship (like Cain), false believers who collaborate with the enemies of God (like Balaam), and false leaders who instigate division (like Korah).

We too, of course, can fall victim to these same attitudes expressed in everyday ways if we are not careful. We may not be rebels, but do we grumble? We may not be licentious, but does our speech sometimes lack purity? We may not try to hurt others for our own gain, but do we boast, or flatter others for our own advantage? We may not be heretics, but are we not always faithful to what we know is true?

This is Jude's point. He does not simply preach a history lesson to show how bad people can be; he uses historical examples to show us how we too can be – even within the Church itself – if we are not aware of the possibility and alert to our own inherent nature. Jude knew that “those who do not remember the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them.” He helps us remember that the examples in God's word – even the bad examples – are there to help us be better individuals within a better Church.

16. MERCY, PEACE, AND LOVE

In the time of Jesus – as they still do today – Jews often greeted each other with the expression “*shalom*” or “peace,” and many letters dating to the first century begin with this simple greeting.

The apostle Paul added another word – “grace” – to this standard greeting, and we find “grace and peace” in every one of his letters. This additional word summarized as well as any other the gospel of salvation by grace that Paul preached tirelessly (Ephesians 2:8-9, etc.), and it was a fitting greeting to his readers.

Jude, in the introduction to his epistle, also expands the basic expression of “peace” by adding two more qualities: “Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance” (Jude 1:2). While it is easy enough to read over this greeting, we should not. Just as the aspect of the gospel that Paul stressed was summarized in that apostle’s “grace and peace,” we can see a similar situation in the “mercy, peace, and love” found in the epistle of Jude, where this expression actually represents three underlying themes of his letter.

Jude’s threefold greeting forms a three-note chord, as it were, providing harmonious notes that recur throughout his epistle. This is important because if we read his epistle without keeping this background theme in mind, it is easy to see only the many verses speaking of troubles, errors and problems in the Church. In fact, some commentaries stress the “Seven Negatives of Jude,” listing the evils of ungodly acts and words, the people who are grumblers and fault-finders, who follow their own evil desires, who boast and flatter others.

Jude does say that “These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit” (Jude 1:19), but his characterization of problems faced by the early Church is not the point of his letter. His whole epistle, just like his initial greeting, focuses not just on the apostle’s concerns, but on his response to these negative issues.

Mercy

Just as Jude begins his letter with the greeting of mercy (Jude 1:2), we find that he draws it to a close by reminding his readers of God's mercy to us and our responsibility of mercy to others. "... you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life" (Jude 1:21), he writes, and follows up by reminding us of our responsibility to:

Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh (Jude 1:22-23).

Jude did not just catalog the Church's problems; he focused his readers' eyes on the mercy that God is willing to show us if we come out of those problems, and the mercy that we in turn must sometimes show others.

Peace

Just as Jude stresses the outcome of mercy in his epistle, he also stresses the peace that his readers can find in the knowledge of God's final outworking of history. While he does not use the word "peace" directly, this assurance is clearly what lies behind the beginning of Jude's wonderful doxology:

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy (Jude 1:24).

Jude puts his readers' minds at rest regarding the turmoil of false doctrines and dispute in the Church by looking past the problems of the present in a peace-providing reminder of God's ability to preserve his readers from the errors that surround them.

Love

Even before he includes love in his opening greeting (Jude 1:2), Jude stresses love from the first verse of his letter:

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James, To those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ (Jude 1:1).

It is precisely because they are loved by God, Jude tells his readers, that they will be able to survive the evils that surround them and be kept for the return of Christ. Jude's stress on God's love is paralleled at the end of his letter by his stress on our responsibility to keep ourselves in God's love. In fact, the closing words Jude gives to his letter directly parallel his initial greeting of mercy, peace, and love. Jude tells his readers:

keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life (Jude 1:21).

Reversing the order of his initial greeting, Jude speaks of love, mercy, and the peace that he urged his readers to have – despite the difficulties they faced day to day – in the hope of eternal life.

So Jude begins and ends his short epistle with a tremendously positive theme that overrides the “negatives” which he must catalog in the Church of his time. For those of us who read his letter today, it is easy to misunderstand and to see it as an epistle of “doom and gloom” based on the problems Jude feels he must identify.

But the purpose of Jude's letter is far more positive than that. It looks beyond the evils that afflicted the early Church – and which can still affect us now – to the eventual outcome of which Jude assures us. Rather than an epistle of problems, errors and difficulties, Jude is indeed an epistle stressing a message of good things – of love, mercy, and peace.

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