

CHAPTER 38: General Epistles

Hebrews thru Jude

The General Epistles were hand-written letters that were penned by various people not named Paul – James, Peter, John and Jude. We don't know who wrote Hebrews. The writer of James was NOT the Apostle James who was one of Jesus's disciples. This is another James, the half-brother of Jesus. He wrote to a group of Jewish Christians scattered due to persecution. The Apostle Peter wrote two letters, First and Second Peter, also to persecuted believers. All three of the Apostle John's letters were written to Christians he knew personally or second hand. The epistle of Jude was a circular letter written by another half-brother of Jesus named Jude to encourage believers. The last of the General Epistles we will deal with is Hebrews. Though its writer is unknown, it is often associated with Paul. It is very Paul-like in its argument, but the style of Greek is totally different from Paul's. Most Bible scholars believe that Hebrews was written by one of Paul's close associates – someone who would have been strongly influenced by Paul's theology.

JAMES

This letter gets its name from its author, James, who was the younger half-brother of Jesus. He was sometimes referred to as "James the Just" to distinguish him from James the Apostle. He became a Christian when he saw the risen Lord. James writes to Jewish Christians who had been scattered due to growing persecution. His letter was penned shortly after Claudius, the Roman emperor, had driven the Jews out of Rome and out of their homeland of Palestine (between 45 and 50 A.D). This makes James the first of the New Testament books to be written. The Early Church was a persecuted church. If life was tough for the Jews, it was doubly tough for Jewish Christians. Faced with discouragement, fear, uncertainty, problems, and temptations, James offers his readers much-needed words of encouragement.

The basic question in James is this: "How can I tell if my faith in Jesus is genuine or not?" In other words, how do I know that I'm truly saved? It is an important question. James proposes a series of self-tests (principles) to get his readers thinking about the validity of their salvation. Is real faith merely believing the right stuff or is it more?

The first test: How do I handle life's trials and adversities?

The testing of your faith produces endurance. Happy is the one who endures testing, because when he has proven to be genuine, he will receive the crown of life that God promised to those who love Him. (James 1:3, 12)

The second test: How do I respond to God's Word?

But be sure you live out the message and do not merely listen to it and so deceive yourselves. But the one who peers into the perfect law of liberty and fixes his attention there, and does not become a forgetful listener but one who lives it out – he will be blessed in what he does. (James 1:22, 25) Don't just read it, but do what it says.

The third test: Do I demonstrate love to others?

But if you fulfill the royal law as expressed in this scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show prejudice, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as violators. (James 2:8-9) Does my life demonstrate a love for other people?

The fourth test: Does my life generate any good works?

Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their misfortune and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (James 1:27) So also faith, if it does not have works, is dead being by itself. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith without works and I will show you faith by my works. (James 2:17-18) Our faith ought to produce good works.

The fifth test: What does my everyday speech sound like?

If someone thinks he is religious yet does not bridle his tongue, and so deceives his heart, his religion is futile. (James 1:26) With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse people made in God's image. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. These things should not be so, my brothers and sisters. (James 3:9-10)

The sixth test: Do I make wise decisions? **But if anyone is deficient in wisdom, he should ask God, who gives to all generously and without reprimand, and it will be given to him. (James 1:5) We ought to make wise decisions since we have access to divine wisdom. Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct he should show his works done in the gentleness that wisdom brings. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, accommodating,**

full of mercy and good fruit, impartial, and not hypocritical. (James 3:13, 17) The decisions we make reflect our conduct and our attitudes.

The seventh test: Where is my focus? Is it on the things of this world or the things of God?

Adulterers, do you not know that friendship with the world means hostility toward God? So, whoever decides to be the world's friend makes himself God's enemy. So, submit to God. But resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and make your hearts pure, you double-minded. (James 4:4, 7-8)

The eighth test: Am I persevering in my faith, staying the course? **And let endurance have its perfect effect, so that you will be perfect and complete, not deficient in anything.** (James 1:3-4) **Think of how we regard as blessed those who have endured. You have heard of Job's endurance and you have seen the Lord's purpose, that the Lord is full of compassion and mercy.** (James 5:11) Job stayed faithful to God even though he was suffering and didn't understand why.

The ninth test is: How is my prayer life?

Is anyone among you ill? He should summon the elders of the church, and they should pray for him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up – and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. So, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great effectiveness. (James 5:16)

The tenth test: What does my character look like?

Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters! Let every person be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. For human anger does not accomplish God's righteousness. So put away all filth and evil excess and humbly welcome the message implanted within you, which is able to save your souls. (James 1:19-21)

Let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" be no, so that you may not fall into judgment. (James 5:12). Be a person of your word. Am I a person of integrity? Am I Christ-like in my attitudes? Am I compassionate? Do I have a servant heart?

The big takeaway from James is that a believer's behavior DOES matter to God. God wants us to be top line as we have discussed in the story. If the way we are living does NOT line up with the teachings of Scripture, then it is bottom line and we would be well-served to step back and reconsider the validity of our salvation. That is one thing you really want to be sure you get right!

FIRST PETER

The Apostle Peter was the leader of Jesus' original twelve disciples. He often served as their spokesman. Peter is a prominent figure in the Gospels and he's mentioned a lot in the Book of Acts. Peter penned this letter to scattered groups of Christians in the Roman provinces which covered the greater part of modern-day Turkey. Peter is most likely in Rome at the time. He is accompanied by John Mark and Paul's companion Silvanus (called Silas in the book of Acts). There is increasing persecution of Christians, though the Roman emperor Nero's empire-wide ban of Christianity would come later. For believers in Jesus, persecution took the forms of slander, riots, police action, beatings, imprisonment, and being ostracized by society. It is against this hostile backdrop that Peter writes a warm pastoral letter to comfort his brothers and sisters in Christ. His goal is to strengthen and sustain them. He encourages his readers to rejoice in the midst of their various trials, to stand firm in the faith and to live above reproach.

Peter begins by praising God for our salvation. **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By His great mercy He gave us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, that is, into an inheritance imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. It is reserved in heaven for you.** (1 Peter 1:3-4) This salvation that we now enjoy in Jesus is something the Old Testament prophets did not fully comprehend. They foresaw a future Messiah, but didn't know who He was. They could see that there was a future kingdom. They realized that God's grace would come someday. But they didn't know when. All of that was for some future for them. Peter says, "It was for US."

They [the prophets] were shown that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things now announced to you through those who proclaimed the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven... (1 Peter 1:12) And then Peter adds this deep thought: **...things angels long to catch a glimpse of.** Even the angels are aware of God's gift of salvation, but none of them have ever or will ever experience it for themselves. They can only catch a glimpse of the immense miraculous salvation that is ours. Amazing!

We Christians realize how important Jesus is. We see His great worth. But not everyone feels that way. Peter quotes from Psalms and Isaiah to describe those who do not see Jesus as we do: **So, you who believe see His value, but for those who do not believe, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, and a stumbling-stone and a rock to trip over. They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.** (1 Peter 2:7-8) They refused to believe that Jesus was the Messiah King that the Old Testament writers talked so much about.

For those of us who believe in Jesus and recognize Him as the Messiah, Peter offers this description by way of contrast: **But you are a chosen race, a royal priest-hood, a holy nation, a people of His own, so that you may proclaim the virtues of the One who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. You once were not a people, but now you are God's people. You were shown no mercy, but now you have received mercy.** (1 Peter 2:9-10) Having seen the light of God's truth and been shown mercy, it is our responsibility to tell others so that they too can be saved.

Peter talks about having a Christ-like mindset. **Finally, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, affectionate, compassionate, and humble. Do not return evil for evil or insult for insult, but instead bless others because you were called to inherit a blessing.** (1 Peter 3:8-9) In other words, we Christians should be like Jesus.

Noah, the ark and the worldwide flood (Genesis 6-9) provide us with a picture of salvation in Jesus Christ. The ark was God's means of deliverance from that terrible flood. The ark carried Noah and his family to safety during God's watery judgment. It saved the lives of those inside and carried them to a brand-new life. And so it is for those who are in Jesus Christ. In Noah's day millions of people perished in the flood. But they didn't have to. For years, while the ark was being built, Noah preached a message to the people that God's judgment was coming. He told them what God had told him: "I'm about to flood the earth and everything on the earth will die." But God delayed His judgment for 120 years while Noah built the ark. In the end the flood did come but only 8 people believed and were saved. Those eight survived because they heeded Noah's message of judgment and entered the ark.

So, how does God save us today? By our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We believe the Gospel message that is preached to us, we believe and get on board, so to speak. All who are in Jesus Christ will be saved from the wrath of God's judgment. But for those who choose to remain outside of Him, as it was with the people in Noah's day, so too it will be for them. They will have to face God's judgment.

Peter has a direct word for the persecuted, suffering saints to whom he is writing. **So, since Christ suffered in the flesh, you also arm yourselves with the same attitude, because the one who has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin, in that he spends the rest of his time on earth concerned about the will of God and not human desires.** (1 Peter 4:1-2) Jesus physically suffered while He was on earth. So then, we believers, His followers should also expect to suffer here.

Dear friends, do not be astonished that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as though something strange were happening to you. (1 Peter 4:12) Peter goes on to say that some of his readers might even be forced to give their life for their faith. In

our day and time the suffering we experience as Christians might exist in a somewhat different form. It is nonetheless very real. Christianity, moral virtues and the God-ordained family unit are under direct attack today by much of our culture. As Christians living in an unchristian world, we need to develop the same attitude toward all of this that Jesus possessed. His focus was on doing His Father's will, not His own. We also must also focus on doing God's will in our remaining time on earth. God's will might be for us, as it was for Jesus on occasion, to speak out against evil whenever it confronts us, to take a stand for God.

Peter ends this letter with this great exhortation for all believers: **Clothe your-selves with humility toward one another, because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. And God will exalt you in due time, if you humble yourselves under His mighty hand by casting all your cares on Him because He cares for you. Be sober and alert. Your enemy the devil, like a roaring lion, is on the prowl looking for someone to devour. Resist him, strong in your faith, because you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are enduring the same kinds of suffering.** (1 Peter 5:5-9).

SECOND PETER

About three years after his first letter Peter wrote a second letter to the same group of believers. He is keenly aware that his death is not far off. The place of writing again is Rome where Peter will soon face martyrdom. At this point in history, the Early Church is beset and confused by false teachings about Christian behavior and about Christ's return. Peter knows he doesn't have much longer to live and so he addresses these important issues.

He begins by addressing our behavior as believers. **His divine power has bestowed on us everything necessary for life and godliness. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith excellence, to excellence, knowledge; to knowledge, self-control; to self-control, perseverance; to perseverance, godliness; to godliness, brotherly affection; to brotherly affection, unselfish love.** (2 Peter 1:3, 5-7) Peter says that all these are ours right now. **They will keep you from becoming ineffective and unproductive in your pursuit of knowing the Lord Jesus Christ more intimately.** (2 Peter 1:8)

Peter says that there have been some false claims out there that he and the other apostles have concocted various tales and myths about Jesus. These claims dispute the power that Jesus had. They even deny that Jesus is coming back. Peter basically says, "I can tell you these reports about us are absolutely NOT true. I was an eyewitness to the splendor and glory of Jesus. I was up on the holy mountain the day

Jesus was transfigured before us. I heard with my own ears our Lord tell us that after He left, He would come again. He promised us that! Everything we apostles have told you about Jesus Christ – what He said and what He did – IS TRUE. We're not just making this stuff up!"

Not only do you have the words of Jesus that we've passed on to you, but you also have the O.T. prophecies. They are reliable. They reveal God's truth. **Moreover, we possess the prophetic word as an altogether reliable thing. You do well if you pay attention to this as you would to a light shining in a murky place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.** (2 Peter 1:19) That phrase "the morning star rises" is a reference to the return of Jesus Christ anticipating the Second Coming. **Above all, you do well if you recognize this: No prophecy of scripture ever comes about by the prophet's own imagination, for no prophecy was ever borne of human impulse; rather, men carried along by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.** (2 Peter 1:20-21) This speaks to the inspiration of Scripture.

In Chapter 2 Peter makes his position about false prophets and false teachers very clear. They have been around ever since the evil serpent tempted Eve. They were around back in the days of those Old Testament prophets. Peter mentions Balaam from the book of Numbers. Remember him? He was the one with the talking donkey and is the classic example of a false prophet. Peter says that false prophets have now infiltrated the Church and introduced destructive heresies. They deny that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. They deny the One who died to redeem them. These false teachers slander us apostles and they pervert the truth that we have been preaching. They live sensual, ungodly lives. They are motivated only by greed. Sadly, many people have believed their lies and followed them. But rest assured – their way only leads to destruction!

In speaking of God's destruction of sinful humanity Peter brings up a story from Genesis that we did not cover. Let me summarize that story. Peter mentions **Lot, a righteous man** (2 Peter 2:7) who was Abraham's nephew. Both men were shepherds. They lived and worked alongside each other for a while. But at a certain point their flocks grew too large and conflicts developed between the two groups. Abraham realized that they needed to part ways. He allowed Lot to choose where he would live and then Abraham went the other direction. Lot headed toward what appeared to him be the best place to live, near the city of Sodom. As it turned out Sodom and the neighboring town of Gomorrah were extremely wicked cities. They were so evil, in fact, that God decided He was going to wipe them out. Before He did, however, He sent His angels to warn Lot and his family about what was going to happen and led them out of Sodom. Then God's judgment came. The wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were turned into ashes as fire and brimstone rained down on them. Their utter desolation serves as a reminder to future generations of what awaits the ungodly. Only Lot and his

family survived. Peter says all this to make a point. When God does eventually destroy this world, He will spare the righteous just as He did Lot and his family and as He did Noah and his family before that.

OK, so let's go back to those false teachers. In Peter's day they are denying the Lord's return but Peter says that they don't know what they're talking about. They are like animals who don't think rationally and they don't reason. They just operate on their built-in instincts. Their false voices blaspheme about matters of which they are ignorant. They are causing destruction by the heresies they are spreading. They practice their sensuality and exhibit their greed in broad daylight. As Peter stated before, God will punish them severely.

In closing Peter answers the question many believers were asking about why Jesus delays His return. His answer to this question harkens back to the picture we were left with in the previous story about Lot. The judgment that God sent upon Sodom and Gomorrah is going to be repeated, but this time on a global scale. **But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, by being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.** (2 Peter 3:7) We will talk about this later in the story.

Now, dear friends, do not let this one thing escape your notice, that a single day is like a thousand years with the Lord and a thousand years are like a single day. The Lord is not slow concerning His promise, as some regard slowness, but is being patient toward you, because He does not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:8-9). When the Day of the Lord finally does come, it will be like a thief, happening when we least expect it. The heavens will pass away with a horrific sound. The elements will be destroyed with intense heat. The earth will be burned up. We'll talk more about all of these events later. The return of Jesus and God's judgment which follows ARE coming. For now, God is exercising patience, keeping the door of repentance open just a little longer.

FIRST JOHN

The writer of these next three letters – 1st, 2nd and 3rd John – never identifies himself by name. In this first letter he says that he physically heard, saw and touched Jesus. In his second and third letters he refers to himself as “the elder.” The Early Church recognized all three letters as being authored by the Apostle John, and for good reason. The language and terms used in each one are similar to those used in the Gospel of John. These letters were written with the authority of an apostle, but also with the warmth of a pastor – John was both. The long-recognized date of their writing, late

First Century, which makes John the elder statesman of the church and the sole-surviving apostle.

In First John, the Apostle John writes to a group of people whom he identifies as his “little children.” This is John’s favorite term for believers in Jesus Christ. This letter is probably a circular letter that was passed around among several house churches in the Roman province of Asia. This is the province where Ephesus, John’s home church at the time, is located. John is familiar with his target audience. In order to protect them from Roman persecution, he does not identify them by name. The biggest problem, however, was not persecution. It was that false teachers had infiltrated the Church on a wide scale. Some denied the incarnation of Christ, that He appeared in human flesh. Some drew a complete distinction between the spiritual, which they consider to be pure, and the material, which they see as evil (Gnosticism). This letter counters these heresies. John reinforces his own theological position about Jesus, that He is both human and divine.

In Chapter 1 John says that, if we are going to be able to have fellowship with a holy God, we Christians need to be able to deal with our sin on a regular basis. **But if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we do not bear the guilt of sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous, forgiving us our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.** (1 John 1:7-10)

John urges believers in Jesus to stop loving this evil world and all the vain things that it contains. The world system as we know it opposes God. **Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him, because all that is in the world (the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the arrogance produced by material possessions) is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away with all its desires, but the person who does the will of God remains forever.** (1 John 2:15-17)

When Jesus came the first time, He came **to take away sins, and in Him there is no sin.** (1 John 3:5) At the cross Jesus completely dealt with man’s sin problem. So then, those of us who know Jesus will not make a habit of sinning. Instead, we will adopt a lifestyle of righteousness. There are those out in the world who are trying to deceive you into believing that sinning is perfectly normal and natural. They conclude, therefore, that it is acceptable. John says, “Let me make something very clear...” **Little children, let no one deceive you: The one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as Jesus is righteous. The one who practices sin is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. For this purpose the Son**

of God was revealed: to destroy the works of the devil. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are revealed: Everyone who does not practice righteousness – the one who does not love his fellow Christian – is not of God. (1 John 3:7-8, 10)

Believe, love and obey. This is what a true believer in Jesus Christ does. **Now this is His commandment: that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as He gave us the commandment. And the person who keeps His commandments resides in God, and God in him. Now by this we know that God resides in us: by the Spirit He has given us. (1 John 3:23-24)**

How can you identify a false prophet? John says you can identify them by asking three questions. This is in Chapter 4. First question: What do they say about Jesus? Anyone who denies that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who came in human flesh is not from God. Second question: Are they Spirit-filled? A true prophet of God has the evidence of God on their life. Third question: Does the message they give agree with what we apostles taught you?

[False teachers] are from the world; therefore, they speak from the world's perspective and the world listens to them. We [apostles] are from God; the person who knows God listens to us, but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit. (1 John 4:5-6)

John talks a lot in this letter about Christian love – both for God and for people. **We should love one another. We know that we have crossed over from death to life because we love our fellow Christians. Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue but in deed and truth. (1 John 3:11, 14, 18) Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God. (1 John 4:7) In the very next verse John says, God is love. (1 John 4:8)**

Dear friends, if God so loved us, then we also ought to love one another. And we have come to know and to believe the love that God has in us. God is love, and the one who resides in love resides in God, and God resides in him. We love because He [God] loved us first. (1 John 4:11, 16, 19) By this we know that we love the children of God: whenever we love God and obey His commandments. (1 John 5:2)

John closes with these words: **The one who has the Son has this eternal life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have this eternal life. I have written these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:12-13)** This sounds very much like John's purpose statement at the end of his Gospel (John 20:31).

SECOND JOHN

This letter is addressed **to an elect lady and her children.** (2 John 1) John has never met this woman but has been made aware of a situation she is involved in by her sister who likely resides in Ephesus where John is living. During the First Century, church leaders and their close associates often traveled from town to town helping establish and teach in various house churches. Many of these churches did not have their own pastors. These traveling missionaries depended on the hospitality (lodging and food) being extended to them by fellow believers in the various places. Some false teachers pretended to be true prophets and took advantage of this Christian hospitality. They then proceeded to teach their false ideas in the various house churches.

As he did in his first letter, John links truth, love and obedience. They're essential in a Christian's life. John is very concerned that this "elect lady," whoever she is, and her family have been extending Christian hospitality toward evil false teachers. **If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house and do not give him any greeting, because the person who gives him a greeting shares in his evil deeds.** (2 John 10-11) John exhorts this woman to recognize these false teachers for who they are and then to stop helping them. It's like she is aiding and abetting the enemy! John says, "Remember, flock, those wolves are NOT your friends."

THIRD JOHN

This is a short personal letter to a man named Gaius. John knows Gaius likely from having mentored him at some point in the past. Once again truth, love and obedience are central in John's message. In this letter John commends Gaius for the hospitality he has shown to brothers and strangers and encourages him in his Christian life. The brothers that John refers to were strangers to Gaius – probably traveling missionaries sent by John's church at Ephesus. By contrast, another man in Gaius' church, Diotrophes, a church leader, is denounced partly for his unloving treatment of these very same brothers. John calls him out as one who does not reflect God's values.

Gaius on the other hand is put forward as an example of one who follows Christ and who shows love to others. **Dear friend, you demonstrate faithfulness by whatever you do for the brothers (even though they are strangers). They have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. Dear friend, do not imitate what is bad but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does what is bad has not seen God.** (3 John 5-6, 11) Basically John is encouraging Gaius to keep doing what he's doing.

JUDE

This letter was written by Jude to a group of Christians living in an undisclosed location toward the end of the First Century. Jude is the half-brother of Jesus and brother of James (who penned the letter of James covered earlier). At this point Christianity is about 60 years old. There is widespread persecution against Christians across the Roman Empire. Most of the original apostles and many of their second-generation disciples have either died or are well advanced in years. False teachers have slipped into the various house churches and are beginning to spread various heresies. This is causing division and turmoil within the Church. Jude's letter is a blunt and powerful treatise denouncing these false teachers. He exposes them for who they are. His intent is to warn believers about the danger of associating together with these individuals. Jude exhorts believers to stiffen their resistance against them.

Jude is a strongly worded letter to say the least. Just listen to how Jude describes false teachers: **These men are dangerous reefs at your love feasts, feasting without reverence, feeding only themselves. They are waterless clouds, carried along by the winds; autumn trees without fruit - twice dead, uprooted; wild sea waves, spewing out the foam of their shame; wayward stars for whom the utter depths of eternal darkness have been reserved.** (Jude 12-13) They have infiltrated the Church! **These people are grumblers and faultfinders who go wherever their desires lead them, and they give bombastic speeches, enchanting folks for their own gain. These people are divisive, worldly, devoid of the Spirit.** (Jude 16, 19) Jude warns to avoid such people.

He then exhorts believers to remain faithful. **But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith, by praying in the Holy Spirit, maintain yourselves in the love of God, while anticipating the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that brings eternal life.** (Jude 20-21) As you have been shown mercy by God, show mercy to others.

Jude's letter closes with this great doxology: **Now to the One who is able to keep you from falling, and to cause you to stand, rejoicing, without blemish before His glorious presence, to the only God our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time, and now, and for all eternity. Amen.**

HEBREWS

This letter is addressed to a primarily Jewish audience. This is evident by its title (Hebrews being another name for Jews). It is also evident by its contents. It references a lot from the Old Testament Scriptures. Though the specific location of the letter's targeted audience is not identified, this group obviously had a good understanding of the Old Testament and the practice of Judaism. They were quite familiar with the Mosaic Law, the teachings of the Psalms and Prophets, Jewish history and the details of the Levitical sacrificial system. The writer of Hebrews, also not identified, contrasts the old covenant of the Law with the new covenant in Jesus Christ.

The writer gives a **message of exhortation** (Hebrews 13:22) to his Jewish brothers and sisters. To the many believers who are a part of this community he encourages them to stay the course and not turn back. He says, in essence, "You're on the right path. You're part of a new and better covenant." But there are some unbelievers in this same community. To them the writer explains how the new covenant in Jesus is better than the old covenant in the Law. He exhorts these Jewish unbelievers to embrace Christ. He makes his arguments point by point from the Old Testament Scriptures. Why was there a need for a new covenant? **For if that first covenant had been faultless, no one would have looked for a second one.** (Hebrews 8:7) But the old covenant of the Law WAS incomplete and lacking; thus, the need for a new covenant.

The writer's theological position is that Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets. He conquered sin. His death as our Passover Lamb (John the Baptist called Jesus the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world") provided the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Faith in what Jesus did provides eternal life. This message, however, was difficult for many Jews to accept. It is different from what they had been taught their whole life. Although the Jews had looked for their Messiah for centuries, they had become deeply entrenched in their way of thinking and worship in traditional forms. Following Jesus – this so-called king who was executed by the Roman government – would be to turn their back on their heritage. As a result, many Jews who heard the Gospel rejected it. They saw it as heresy and tried to eliminate it (this is how the Apostle Paul started out viewing it). Those Jews who DID accept Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah often found themselves slipping back to the old and familiar due in large part to peer pressure from their Jewish community. This letter establishes the superiority of Jesus. He is superior to angels, to Moses, and to the Old Testament priesthood. The writer makes his case that Christianity surpasses Judaism because it is based on a better covenant, a better sanctuary, and it has a more sufficient sacrifice for sins.

Listen to the way the writer of Hebrews describes how Jesus is at the same time both our sacrifice for sins AND our high priest: **But now Christ has come as the high**

priest of the good things to come. He passed through the greater and more perfect tent not made with hands, that is, not of this creation [in heaven], and He entered once for all into the most holy place not by the blood of goats and calves but by His own blood, and so He Himself secured eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a young cow sprinkled on those who are defiled consecrated them and provided ritual purity, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our consciences from dead works to worship the living God. (Hebrews 9:11-14) What Jesus did fulfilled the Law. He rendered it obsolete (Hebrews 8:13).

So, there you have a summary of the 21 New Testament letters. There is so much more we could say about them. They are filled with the important theology of the Early Church. They have been preserved by God Himself through the centuries to keep the Church on course in carrying out the Great Commission. These letters serve as a spiritual prism taking the bright light of God's truth revealed in the Old Testament and the Gospels and refracting that light into vibrant colors of life-changing messages.

Believe it or not these 21 letters are NOT the only letters in the New Testament. There are actually seven more letters that were dictated to seven churches by Jesus Himself. Needless to say, these are very important letters for all believers. Jesus has something to say to all who will faithfully follow Him. We will look at these letters next in the book of Revelation.