

Week 7:

**The General Letters (James, Hebrews, 1 Peter,
2 Peter and Jude, and 1-3 John)**

A Chronology for the General Letters:

James - Early AD 40s

Hebrews - Late AD 60s

1 Peter - AD 67-68

Jude - AD 50s into the 60s

2 Peter - AD 68(??)

1-3 John - AD 90

The Eschatological Hope of the General Letters:

1. Eschatology is the study of end times.
2. "Eschatological hope" is the encouragement and life-giving power that we derive from our confidence that we know how we will end and how the world will end.

3. **James** exhorts us to cast all our hardships in the context of the coming of Jesus.

"Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand." - James 5:7-8

4. **1 Peter** reminds us that our hope, in the midst of suffering, isn't deliverance in this life. Our hope is in the resurrection of Jesus and our resurrection on the Last Day.

"According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls." - 1 Peter 1:3-9

5. **Jude** and **2 Peter** remind us that in the last days, God will judge the world, so we can be content in this world and put our hope in eternal life.

"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. . . . Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." - 2 Peter 3:9-13

6. **1-3 John** make the reality of our glorification our motivation for righteousness.

"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." - 1 John 3:1-3

Introduction to Hebrews:

Authorship: The author of Hebrews is hotly debated by New Testament scholars. The book is technically anonymous, and by the end of the work, it is obvious that the recipients know who the author is and he knows them well. The structure and theological argumentation is very Pauline, but the writing style is dramatically different than the writing style of the apostle Paul, leaving scholars to produce a number of theories (e.g. that it was written by Paul in Hebrew and then translated by someone else into Greek, that Luke wrote it under the supervision of Paul, etc.). Early church tradition names Paul as the author more than they name anyone else, but even the early church expresses their uncertainty as to the authorship of Hebrews.

Date: Since Hebrews addresses both Timothy and "second generation" Christians and the letter is clearly referenced by Clement of Rome in 96, a date for Hebrews must be between about 45 and 96. It is also most likely that the letter was written before the Jewish wars and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD70. The content and argument of Hebrews is sophisticated and represents wide-spread knowledge of developed Christian theology, thus a date in the mid-to-late 60s is probably the best.

Provenance: Since Rome is most likely the letter's destination (Heb 13:24), the letter was most likely not written *from* Rome. Beyond that, there is nothing in the letter to indicate from where it originated.

Purpose: A close reading of Hebrews reveals that a group of Jewish Christians, probably in Rome, were in danger of slipping back into Judaism, at least in practice, to avoid the persecution Christians were facing. They justified their decision by arguing that all of the "Jewish stuff"—prophets, angels, sacrifices, Moses, feast days, temple, etc.—was biblical after all. The author of Hebrews, however, encourages them to stay faithful to Christ and face the coming hardships. He does this, not by bashing Judaism and all the Old Testament references. He does this, rather, by exalting Christ, and showing how Christ is better. Christ is better than Moses and angels. His priesthood is better than Aaron's priesthood. His new covenant is better than the old one. His temple is more enduring.

Outline of Hebrews:

Hebrews follows a typical Pauline outline. He begins with a doctrinal discussion and ends with exhortation to godly Christian living. What makes Hebrews unique, however, is that its text is interspersed with stern warning passages directed at Christians who so easily walk away from Christ when the going gets tough. The outline looks like this:

- Ch. 1 Christ is better than the Prophets.
- Ch. 1–2 Christ is better than the Angels.
(First Warning Passage)
- Ch. 3–4 Christ is better than Moses.
(Second Warning Passage)
- Ch. 4–10 Christ is better than Aaron.
(Third and Fourth Warning Passages)

Ch. 11	The Life of Faith
Ch. 12	(Fifth Warning Passage)
Ch. 13	Conclusion

Hebrews Chapter by Chapter:

Heb 1 - Introduction; Christ is better than the prophets.

Heb 2 - Christ is better than the angels; first warning passage.

Heb 3 - Christ is better than Moses; Jesus is the rest God promised his people.

Heb 4 - Second warning passage

Heb 5 - Christ is a better high priest than Aaron.

Heb 6 - Third warning passage

Heb 7 - Christ is a priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Heb 8 - Christ is the mediator of a better covenant than Aaron.

Heb 9 - Christ is a better temple than the Jerusalem temple or the Old Testament tabernacle.

Heb 10 - Christ is a better sacrifice; fourth warning passage.

Heb 11 - All of the Old Testament saints had faith and endured hardship, and to them Christ was far off. Now that Christ has come, and you know him, you should, with even more faith, endure hardship and remain faithful.

Heb 12 - Living the life of faith; the fifth warning passage

Heb 13 - Practical advice for living the life of faith; conclusion

The Meaning of Hebrews:

At first glance it is difficult for us to relate to the Hebrew Christians who make up the audience for Hebrews. We are not in danger of slipping back into Judaism, at least in practice, to avoid the persecution. Most of us didn't come to Christianity from another religion, and most of us are not suffering persecution. Hebrews, however, is more than that. It stands as a glorious exaltation of Christ and a reminder that he is better. Christ is better than Moses and angels. His priesthood is better than Aaron's priesthood. His new covenant is better than the old one. His temple is more enduring. Christ is also better than money. He is better than your career aspirations. He is better than your marriage, your kids, your leisure, and your retirement. Being in Christ is better than being an American. It is better than the sin that you love so much. Being in Christ is better than a life of ease that is free from persecution. Now that Christ has come, and we know him, we, of all people should be the most faithful and endure hardship with the greatest joy.

Introduction to James:

Authorship: The author of James is James (*Jacob in Greek and Hebrew*) the half-brother of Jesus and Jerusalem pastor. Some scholars raise doubts as to the authenticity of the letter, because the author writes in a relatively elegant style and quotes the Greek translation of the Old Testament. These doubts, however, fail to take into account just how Hellenized Palestinian Jews had become, even in the early first century.

Date: James was most likely the first book of the New Testament written around AD 44. In James there is no reference to gentile believers, and in James Jewish believers are still meeting in the synagogue (James 2:2). This indicates an extremely early date.

Provenance: James is traditionally associated with the city of Jerusalem. He was one of the elders in the Jerusalem church and served alongside the Apostles there. James, along with Peter and Paul, led the church through the difficulties surrounding the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).

Purpose: James is a letter of exhortation written by their former pastor to Jerusalem Jews who had been scattered outside of Palestine. James gives them both encouragement to Christian maturity and rebuke for their immaturity. The letter stands as an open call to all Christians everywhere to grow in Christ.

Outline and Chapter Content of James:

The five points in the outline of James' letter correspond to the five chapters of James. Each chapter deals with a different issue of Christian maturity. The outline looks like this:

- Chapter 1 - Pursue Christian Maturity
- Chapter 2 - Pursue Christian Virtue
- Chapter 3 - Control Your Tongue
- Chapter 4 - Adjust Your Attitude
- Chapter 5 - Endure Until the Lord Comes

The Meaning of James:

James stands within the canon of Scripture as a powerful exhortation to Christian maturity. James pulls no punches as he pushes us to endure trials, obey the Scripture, and control our tongues. He challenges our faith and lays all of our wars and fights at the feet of our ungodly attitudes. James concludes by encouraging us all to wait with faith and hope for the return of our Lord. The return of Jesus, more than anything else, is our encouragement to persevere in maturity.

Introduction to 1 Peter:

Authorship: Some modern scholars have their doubts as to the authorship of 1 Peter, preferring to deny the evidence of history in favor of modern skepticism. They argue that the language is too lofty, the theology too Pauline to be from the hand of Peter the fisherman. The objections against Petrine authorship, however, are not overwhelmingly convincing. Because there is no convincing argument against Petrine authorship and no convincing reason for why an author would use his name considering the nature of the letter, it seems best to side with history and to see it as an authentic letter of Peter.

Date: The letter of 1 Peter makes an interesting reference to Rome, calling it Babylon. Peter was most likely in Rome in the mid-to-late 60s, making a date in the late 60s probably best for 1 Peter. It is possible, however, that the letter was written four or five years earlier, late during the Neronian persecution.

Provenance: If the suggestions given above for author and date are correct, then 1 Peter was most likely written from Rome.

Purpose: Christians in the ancient world suffered persecution for a host of reasons. They were considered unpatriotic, because they wouldn't declare that "Caesar is Lord." The superstitious Romans also believed that the impiety of the Christians was the cause of many natural disasters. Christians were seen as disloyal to the city, unprofessional, and disruptive to family gatherings. The church of Jesus was turning society upside down, and the Romans saw it. Peter wrote 1 Peter to a people who were facing persecution, to give them power to live in this world, and Peter centers their hope in the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Outline and Chapter Content of 1 Peter:

Peter speaks to a church that is facing persecution and calls them "foreigners" and "temporary residents." He roots their existence as the people of God in the Old Testament, and rests their hopes in a future resurrection. The outline looks like this:

- I. Greeting (Chapter 1)
- II. The People of God (Chapters 1–2)
- III. The Responsibilities of the People of God (Chapters 2–4)
- IV. The Responsibility of a Church and its Elders (Chapters 4–5)
- V. Final Exhortations and Greetings (Chapter 5)

The Meaning of 1 Peter:

The reality that the people of God don't belong in this world is, ironically, a reality that we must understand in order to truly find our place here. The fact that in this world we are temporary residents should keep us from establishing deep roots. We should not be surprised when persecution comes, nor should we be devastated. We are only here temporarily, and then, by the resurrection power of Jesus at his return, the Kingdom of God will arrive. When our King is here, then we will belong.

Introduction to Jude and 2 Peter:

Authorship: Jude was written by Jude, the brother of James and the half-brother of Jesus. Jude was also a pastor in the church in Jerusalem. 2 Peter was written by Peter the Apostle. Some modern scholars doubt the genuineness of the authorship of 2 Peter. The objections against Petrine authorship are not overwhelmingly convincing, so it seems best to side with history and to see it as an authentic letter of Peter.

Date: Both Jude and 2 Peter were probably written into or before the late 60s. Peter was nearing the end of his life (2 Peter 1:15), and both letters were written during a time when false teachers, beyond the Judaizers, were becoming a threat to the church. Many scholars prefer a date for Jude about a decade earlier than 2 Peter.

Provenance: There is little to suggest where Jude was written from, aside from Jude's connection to the other Jerusalem apostles. Likewise, 2 Peter is thought to be written from Rome because of the reference to Rome in 1 Peter. Beyond that, everything else is guessing.

Purpose: Jude and 2 Peter were written both to encourage the church in the face of and to prepare the church for false teachers. In Jude the false teachers are already in the church. In 2 Peter the danger of the false teachers is still future. Jude is far more direct than Peter. Jude warns the church about how to spot the false teachers, and he is very frank about the doom that awaits them. 2 Peter is more instructive. He warns about the heretics, but he also teaches his recipients sound doctrine to combat them.

Outline and Content of Jude and 2 Peter:

Jude is only a single chapter, the bulk of which is taken up with describing the false teachers in Old Testament terms. The outline is something like this:

- I. Greeting (v.1-2)
- II. Warning about false teachers (v.3-4)
- III. A description of the heretics (v.5-13)
- IV. The doom of the false teachers (v.14-16)
- V. Final exhortations to persevere in faithfulness (v.17-25)

2 Peter both warns the church against false teachers and instructs the church in sound doctrine.

- I. Greeting and encouragement to growth in godliness (Chapter 1)
- II. Condemnation of false teachers (Chapter 2)
- III. Teaching on the last days (Chapter 3)

The Meaning of Jude and 2 Peter:

Both Jude and 2 Peter give a clear description of false teachers. They are carnal. They are proud. They murder and hate, and their teachings are completely empty. Jude exhorts us to make a clear distinction between the false teachers and those who have been duped by their teachings. Peter explains that while we are awaiting Christ's

return—God is delaying his judgment because he is merciful—these false teachers will continually plague the church. We should not be lured away by them. Rather we should, with faithfulness and patience, wait for the Lord's return. Our job is to protect the church from false teachers. It is God's job to ultimately judge them.

Introduction to 1-3 John:

Authorship: All three of the short epistles named 1, 2, and 3 John were written by John the Apostle, the same John who wrote the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation.

Date: 1, 2, and 3 John tell a single story, and it appears that the text of 1 John assumes a knowledge of the Gospel of John. Because of this scholars generally date the writing of these letters to as late in John's life as possible. In or around AD 90 seems to be the best fit.

Provenance: Early church testimony has Ephesus as the place from which John did his writing. The author's familiarity with the churches there is obvious in the first three chapters of Revelation.

Purpose: The Asian churches were apparently in crisis. There were false teachers within the churches until a great schism occurred. The heretics left, but they left a divided and hurting church in their wake. These false teachers denied that Jesus was the Christ. They denied Jesus came in the flesh, and they brought hatred, not love with them. When these false teachers left, many of the Christians that stayed were left wondering who was right. They wondered even how one can know if he is saved. John writes these three letters to condemn the false teachers and to encourage the churches that they were right, that they knew the real Jesus.

Outline and Chapter Content of 1-3 John:

1 John is designed to condemn the false teachers and to encourage the churches that they were right, that they knew the real Jesus. John gives these struggling Christians three tests so that they might know that they were right, they knew the true gospel, and they were in the true faith. The outline looks like this:

- I. Prologue (Chapter 1)
- II. Overview (Chapters 1-2) – Introduction to the three tests
 - #1 - Believe Jesus came in the flesh
 - #2 - Live righteously
 - #3 - Love other Christians
- III. Living as a Christian (Chapters 2-3) – Focus on test #2
- IV. Right doctrine (Chapters 4-5) – Focus on tests #1 and #3
- V. Epilogue (Chapter 5)

2 John is a personal letter written to "the elect lady and her children" (probably a reference to a specific church congregation) in order to further encourage this specific church to continue walking in the truth of Jesus.

- I. Introduction (v. 1-3)
- II. Body (v. 4-11)
 - Walking in truth & love (v. 4-6)
 - Guarding the truth about the Son (v. 7-11)
- III. Conclusion (v. 12-13)

3 John is also a personal letter, addressed to a man named Gaius, John's "dear friend." He is sending this letter as a letter of recommendation against those who had pegged Gaius as a "bad guy" for personal gain.

- I. Introduction (v. 1-4)
- II. Body (v. 5-12)
 - Commendation of Gaius' behavior (v. 5-8)
 - Condemnation of Diotrephes' behavior (v. 9-10)
 - Commendation of Demetrius (v. 11-12)
- III. Conclusion (v. 13-14)

The Meaning of 1-3 John:

Many preachers have misunderstood John's intentions in 1-3 John. They take John's "tests" and beat congregations over the head with them, leaving them wondering if they really are Christians. John's tests are not challenges; they are encouragements. All of us have struggled with assurance of our salvation. John reassures us that if we believe that Jesus is the Christ (the sacrificial son of God who died for our sins), and if our beliefs push us in the direction of righteousness (however imperfectly), and if we have love for other Christians, then we are in Christ. Ultimately our assurance doesn't rest with us. We can't live up to any standard set by God. Our assurance rests on Christ's shoulders, and he is sufficient to save all who believe.