

**HEBREWS, JAMES
FIRST PETER
SECOND PETER
FIRST JOHN
SECOND JOHN
THIRD JOHN
JUDE**



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Mosaic floor in early Christian monastery

In this lesson we will look at eight New Testament epistles. With the exception of the Book of Hebrews, all of these are very short letters. They usually deal with more general issues than the letters of Paul, most of which treat very specific issues. None of these eight letters was written to a specific congregation.

At the conclusion of this lesson you will have studied twenty-one New Testament letters. Write the names of these letters, in their biblical order if possible.

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HEBREWS

First of all let us turn to the Book of Hebrews. This work was written anonymously, that is, without any named writer. It was written to people who were thinking about giving up the Christian faith and returning or converting to Judaism. Thus the book is entitled “The Letter to the Hebrews.” The recipients of the letter were undergoing persecution in the Roman Empire. The writer speaks of “a hard struggle,” “abuse and affliction,” and “the plundering of property.” The community’s suffering has not yet led to martyrdom. The writer reminds the readers in Hebrews 12:4 that “in your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”

The intensified persecution of Christians was tempting many to take refuge in Judaism. Judaism, unlike Christianity, was legally recognized and protected in the Roman Empire.

The writer tries to get his readers to remain within the church and to remain faithful to Christ, in spite of the present suffering and persecution. The book presents an involved and elaborate argument to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. It does this by constantly appealing to Old Testament passages that are seen as predictions or declarations about Jesus, his life, death, and redemptive work.

We must remember that the Old Testament was the only Bible of the church at that time. The New Testament as a collection of authoritative writings did not yet exist. In arguing from the Old Testament the writer is appealing to Scripture. Thus the writer uses the sacred writings of one religion to prove the superiority of another religion.

The writer of Hebrews sets out to show that Jesus is superior to the angels and to Moses himself. Some of these arguments may seem a bit strange to us, but we must

remember that they were probably matters of very serious debate between the Jewish and Christian communities. The letter opens by contrasting the old ways of revelation with the new revelation through the Son. Read Hebrews 1:1-3.

HEBREWS 2-11

In proving Jesus' superiority in Hebrews 1-4, the writer stresses that God addresses only Jesus—not the angels nor Moses—as Son. God resurrected and exalted Jesus, who now sits at the right hand of God. God crowned Jesus with glory. We can see a good example of the writer's approach in Hebrews 2:5-8. Read these verses. In this passage, the writer refers to Psalm 8, which he understands to be a description of Jesus and his exalted status—a status not shared by any other.

Throughout Hebrews 4:14-10:18 the writer argues for the superiority of Jesus' priesthood and sacrifice over that of the Jewish levitical priesthood. These chapters depict Jesus as the great high priest who is sinless and also a blameless sacrifice. He functions as priest in the heavenly sanctuary, of which the Jerusalem Temple is only a reflection or model. Jesus' sacrifice—unlike that offered in the Temple—does not have to be repeated, but is a sacrifice offered once and for all. At the right hand of God, Jesus constantly intercedes for Christians, unlike the Jewish high priest who only enters the Holy of Holies once a year to intercede for the people.

In Hebrews 10:19-19:29 the writer tells his readers that because of God's revelation in Christ, they must hold all the more firmly to faith. Failure to do so brings fearful judgment. Chapter 11 describes the ancient heroes of faith and calls upon the readers to imitate these heroes and live by faith.

Read Hebrews 10:1-10, and answer the following questions.

a. According to Hebrews 10:1, why couldn't the law make those who approach perfect?

b. According to Hebrews 10:7, why did Christ come into the world?

c. By whose will are we sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus? (Hebrews 10:10)

HEBREWS 12-13

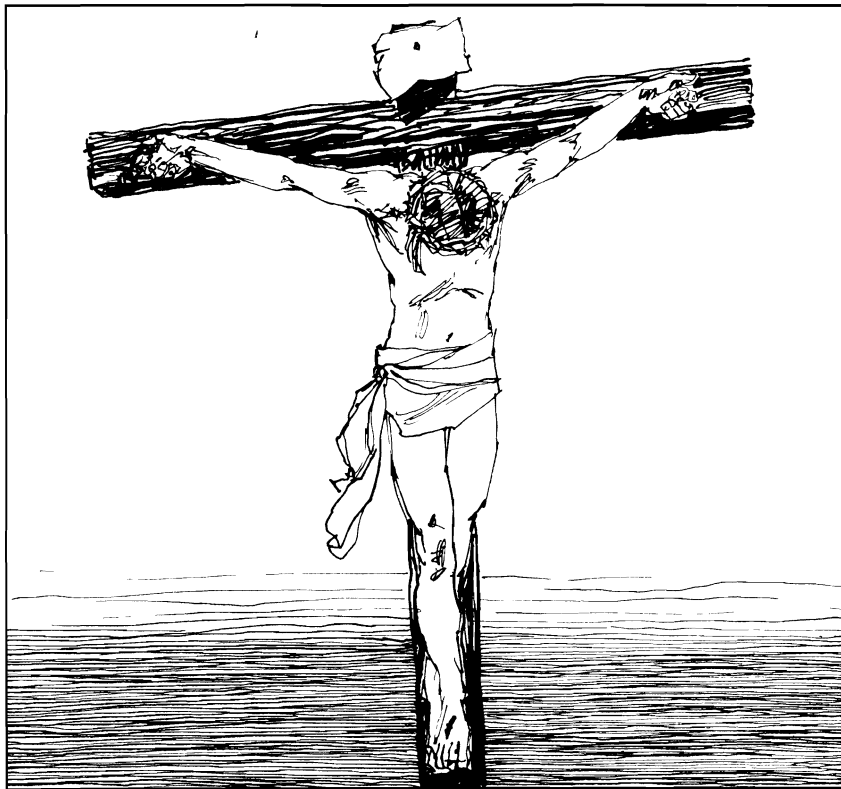
The writer challenges those who are persecuted and who are tempted to give up the faith to imitate Jesus and thus share in his suffering and eventually in his victory and triumph. Perhaps no passage summarizes this view better than Hebrews 12:1-2. Read these two verses.

The final chapter, Chapter 13, gives some practical advice while challenging the readers to live in imitation of Jesus with their eyes on the ultimate goal of the Christian pilgrimage. Read Hebrews 13:12-14.

The next seven letters discuss general issues and are addressed to the church in a general way. They are often called the catholic Epistles. These books bear the names of their writers or supposed writers.

JAMES

Now let us look at the Letter of James. Although the writer only speaks of himself as "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ," church tradition assumes that the letter was written by James, the brother of Jesus. Nothing in the letter itself suggests



Hebrews 10:12

or claims that the book was written by a brother of Jesus.

The book offers practical advice and wisdom on the art of living the life of Christian faith. In this regard it is similar to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount or the Old Testament Book of Proverbs.

Much of the letter is written in the imperative mood. The book's one hundred eight verses contain about sixty imperatives that admonish and exhort the reader. Unlike Hebrews the book does not have a central subject that it explores in depth. It moves from one topic to another.

One central emphasis that runs throughout the book is the stress laid on the need to express the Christian life in deeds and works. This emphasis is seen most clearly in James 1:22-25.

For the writer, "religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the

world." In Chapter 2 the writer compares faith without works to faith with works and concludes that "faith without works is also dead."

Read James 1:2-4 and 1:12-15 on trials and temptations. Then answer these questions.

- a. Why does James have such a positive outlook about meeting trials?
- b. Why can we not say that "I am tempted by God"?
- c. How then are we tempted?



Charles Shaw

Preaching the gospel

FIRST AND SECOND PETER

Two New Testament letters bear the name of Peter. Like the Book of Hebrews, First Peter was written to encourage Christians who were suffering persecution. The writer makes several points in offering hope to the readers. First, he reminds them that they possess “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.” Therefore they can endure the present sufferings and even view them as a good. Second, the writer stresses that “the end of all things is near,” and therefore, the suffering will soon end. Finally, we see a theme that characterizes much of the early Christians’ understanding of their persecution; namely, that Christian suffering is a sharing in the suffering of Christ. Such suffering is to be welcomed rather than avoided. Read 1 Peter 4:12-14.

When we turn to Second Peter a new issue emerges: the delay in Jesus’ return. False teachers and scoffers are challenging the idea of the return. Second Peter answers that God remains faithful to the promise and that the delay in the return is simply God’s desire to prolong the time people have for becoming Christians. The writer

reminds the readers that God does not calculate time in human terms (2 Peter 3:8).

Read 2 Peter 3:8-13 on Christ’s return, and answer the following questions.

a. According to verse 9, why does the Lord delay his return?

b. How will the day of the Lord come?

c. In Noah’s time the earth was destroyed by a flood. How will the earth be destroyed in the day of the Lord?

FIRST, SECOND, AND THIRD JOHN

The three short epistles of First, Second, and Third John were written to strengthen members in the faith and to warn against certain heretical teachings. For the writer, true believers are those who not only confess faith in Christ but also those who obey his commandments and love one another. In 1 John 2 the writer warns the readers against false leaders—called antichrists—who lead Christians astray. One of the heretical views these epistles denounce is what later came to be called Docetism. Docetists taught that Christ was not really human; he only appeared to be human. First John 4:1-3 shows how the writer warns against this view. Read these verses.

JUDE

Our final book for this lesson is the one-chapter Letter of Jude. This work, like several of the letters in this lesson, warns the readers against false teachers. The letter does not discuss the content of their

teaching so much as to characterize them as immoral, covetous, loudmouthed, and flattering.

1. Read 1 John 4:1-16, and answer these questions.

a. How can we know which spirit (prophet) is of God rather than the antichrist?

b. How can we know if a spirit (prophet) is of the antichrist rather than of God?

2. Read Jude 17-19. How will scoffers in the last time cause problems?

SUMMARY

These eight letters, which we have quickly surveyed, show how problems and issues developed in the early church. These problems and issues included persecution and suffering, the rise of heretical views, the clash of differing ideas, and the delay of the Second Coming. All of the letters attempt to defend what Jude calls “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.”

Five important parts of these letters are listed here.

- (1) The argument in the Letter to the Hebrews for the superiority of Jesus over Moses and the angels (Hebrews 1-4)
- (2) The list in Hebrews of the ancient heroes of the faith (Hebrews 11)
- (3) The concern in Second Peter of the delay of Jesus’ return (2 Peter 3)
- (4) The warning in First John about antichrists, or false leaders (1 John 2)

- (5) The further warnings in the Letter of Jude about these false leaders (Jude)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Chapter 11 of Hebrews lists great people of faith. After reading the chapter, discuss whose faith impresses you most. How does God challenge us by such examples of faith? What persons do you know who are examples of faith? What qualities make them examples for others?

2. Take a look at 1 Peter 2:4-10, noting particularly verse 9. (See also Exodus 19:5-6.) Where in our study have you confronted this idea before? These words were applied by the writer to Christians in the early church. How do they apply to us today? How does the idea of the priesthood of all believers affect our understanding, for example, of the role of women in the church today? Do you consider yourself to be among the priesthood of all believers? Why or why not?

3. The problem of false teachers (also called *antichrists* or *false leaders*) is frequently addressed in the letters we studied today. (See 2 Peter 2:1-3; 1 John 2:18-27; 4:1-3; and Jude 5-16. If these letters were being written in our time, what false leaders would the writers be warning us against? Be prepared to explain your answers.

DAILY READINGS FOR REVELATION

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| Day 1: | Revelation 1:1-20 |
| Day 2: | Revelation 2:1-11 |
| Day 3: | Revelation 4:1-11 |
| Day 4: | Revelation 13:1-18 |
| Day 5: | Revelation 15:1-8 |
| Day 6: | Revelation 21:1-14 |
| Day 7: | Revelation 22:1-21 |