

*Hebrews and the General Epistles***Introduction**

In this lesson we will survey the book of Hebrews and the General Epistles.

I. Hebrews

Hebrews, the first book we look at in this lesson, doesn't name its recipients, but its content indicates that it was written to Jewish Christians. The earliest manuscripts contain the title, "To the Hebrews," and the writer referred to Old Testament characters as "our fathers." He also made numerous references to Hebrew traditions and assumed his readers were familiar with them. It may be safely concluded that the letter was written to a specific congregation of Jewish Christians, perhaps in the city of Rome. Because there is no reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and its Jewish temple, the letter was probably written before AD 70. The writer doesn't identify himself. No names have been put forward with enough evidence to settle the question of authorship, and so the best answer to who wrote Hebrews is that we don't know.

The book's purpose was to persuade these Jewish believers to aggressively pursue their relationship with Christ and His way of life. Christians were being opposed and persecuted in the Roman Empire and that made life as a Christian difficult. But in addition to being persecuted by the Romans, these believers were facing opposition from their fellow Jews—and many of them apparently considered going back to Judaism.

Five different passages in Hebrews encourage these readers to remain faithful to their pursuit of Jesus Christ. After presenting an exalted view of Jesus as God's ultimate revelation of Himself in chapter 1, the writer warns that, "We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it" (see 2:1–4). There are four other warnings against abandoning faith in Christ located in Hebrews 3:12–14; 4:1–12; 5:11–6:8; 10:26–31. These passages provide insight into how concerned the writer was that his readers were not living as Jesus' followers. The book's big idea is that we must aggressively pursue

Christ because the life He offers is superior to any other option. To abandon Jesus for Judaism, or any alternate way of life, would be foolish and disastrous.

The writer confronted an unusual problem when trying to convince these Jewish Christians that they shouldn't go back to their former way of life. The Hebrews' former way of life was Judaism, and it had come from God. Jewish readers who abandoned Jesus would revert to a way of life that God revealed through the Law and the Prophets. The writer of Hebrews had to promote Christianity without in any way trashing Judaism. And that is exactly what he did. Hebrews' opening statement validates Judaism: "God, who . . . spoke long ago to the fathers through the prophets" (1:1 MEV). He said that what our Jewish fathers believed came from God. But then in verse 2 he also validated the Christian message by writing, "in these last days [He] has spoken to us in His Son" (NASB). So the same God who spoke to the fathers, spoke again. Then through the rest of the Hebrews, the writer shows that when God spoke again in His Son, He spoke a message that fulfilled the promises He had made when He spoke to the Jewish ancestors in the prophets. Judaism was God's revelation, and it contained many prophetic promises. Those promises were fulfilled when God spoke again in His Son.

Hebrews' argument is developed in three movements. First, it shows us that Jesus is superior in His Person (1:1–4:13). Second, He is superior in His work (4:14–10:18); and, third, He is superior in the life He offers (10:19–13:25). The writer felt a heavy burden as he saw his fellow Jewish believers struggling in their Christian life. Living as a Christian was hard, and they were in danger of giving up. But he encouraged them to aggressively pursue the life Christ offers because there is not only no better option, there is no other option at all.

Hebrews teaches us about Jesus' ministry as our High Priest and invites us "to draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (4:16 ESV). Hebrews also clearly explains why every Christian must aggressively pursue their relationship with Jesus Christ.

II. James

James is the next book in the New Testament and is the first of the General Epistles. The letter was probably written before the

Jerusalem Council in AD 50 and may be the earliest book in the New Testament. The weight of evidence says that the author is one of our Lord's brothers. This fact contributed to James' authority in the Jerusalem church, but his respect was based on more than his relationship to Jesus; it was based on his godly life. He was a deeply religious man of God. He presided at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–21) and was named by Paul as one of the pillars of the church (Galatians 2:9). His letter would have been read with great interest and respect. The letter is addressed to "the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" (1:1 KJV) and is obviously addressed to Jewish believers. The fact that they were scattered refers to the diaspora or the scattering of the Jews across the Roman Empire. Many of these scattered Jews had gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost, and three thousand had received Peter's invitation to receive Jesus as their Messiah. The diaspora would also include the scattering referred to in Acts 8:1 and 11:19 after the persecution related to Stephen's stoning in Acts 7. The early date for its writing is indicated by the distinctively Jewish nature of its contents, which suggests that the church was still predominantly Jewish.

James' purpose was to encourage his readers to exercise their faith in their daily lives. In 1:22 he urges us to act on what we know from God's Word. In fact, he claimed that it is a deception to believe that hearing (or reading) the Bible is all we need to do. He wrote, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (NIV). And in 2:18 he reemphasized the importance of a faith that produces action, "But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds." He stated seven times in verses 2:14–26 that a faith that doesn't produce action is a dead faith. The big idea in James is that faith that does not function is not real faith. He was aware of the fact that people who had exercised faith when they received Christ as their Savior were not living by that faith day-to-day. He knew that God never expected us to live up to the standard He set for us unless we drew on His power to live by faith. So James tells us to do what God's Word teaches and then reminds us that we can only do that by faith.

The book of James is almost impossible to outline, but the author does address different ways to apply our faith in specific situations. In chapter 1 he teaches us that faith must make a difference when we face life's pressures. In chapter 2 he tells us not to show favoritism and how our faith changes our view of

people. Chapter 3 teaches us how to apply faith in God's power and wisdom to our own inadequacies. We are unable to control our behavior and need to trust God's power to change us. In chapter 4 we learn how to apply faith in our relationships with others to avoid quarrels. And in chapter 5 he explains how faith keeps us from being disillusioned and discouraged by the injustices of our fallen world. James teaches that our quality of life depends on whether or not we are living by faith.

James' strong teaching on faith and works appears to contradict Paul's teaching that we are saved by faith and not by works. But Paul is talking about the role of faith in becoming a Christian. God saves us by His grace, and we cannot earn it by doing good works. James, on the other hand, is talking about the role of faith in being a Christian. You become a Christian by applying faith without works. But you cannot live as a Christian if you have a faith that does not work.

We use James today to teach us how to apply our faith in God's love and power to the daily circumstances of life. James' message is that exercising faith is not a one-time event we experience when we accept the gospel message. Exercising faith must be a constant reality for the Christian.

III. 1 Peter

Peter the apostle wrote the New Testament books of First and Second Peter. His apostolic title gave weight to his words, but he had more than a title to commend his instructions. He had preached the great sermon on the Day of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2 when three thousand people came to Christ. He had performed miracles through God's power. He was the man God chose to plant the first Gentile church (Acts 10–11). He was a key spokesman at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:7–11). His stature as a faithful man of God gave his letter honor and respect.

Peter addressed his first letter to "those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (1:1 ESV). He wrote to displaced Jews who lived in these Gentile cities. But statements in 2:10 and 4:3 clearly reference Gentile Christians as well. The believers were suffering, and Peter's purpose was to instruct and encourage them in their difficult circumstances. The letter was probably written in the early 60s when Nero's government was persecuting Christians. But in

addition to Roman persecution, Peter refers to the ostracism and verbal abuse these believers were enduring from neighbors and even family members. One of the three major sections of the letter is devoted to helping Christians endure suffering. Peter used Jesus' response to His suffering as a model and a reminder that suffering does not indicate God's displeasure.

The big idea of the letter is found at its beginning and is repeated at the end. After Peter referred to his audience as scattered aliens, he added, "who are chosen." Although they were suffering, he reminded them that they were God's people by His choice. Then in 1:2 he wrote a greeting that sounds ironic when written to suffering people, "May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure." Really? Really, Peter? Are you serious? Yes. Peter was completely serious, and his letter teaches us how to have grace and peace—and have it in the fullest measure even if we're scattered and displaced and suffering persecution. To reinforce his emphasis, he ended the letter with, "This is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it" (5:12 ESV). And his closing words, two verses later were, "Peace to all who are in Christ" (5:14).

Peter organized his instructions for suffering saints in four movements. First he taught us how salvation changes our life's commitments (1:1–2:12). Next he taught us about the essential role of submission in our suffering (2:13–3:12), and then he addressed the topic of suffering well as a Christian (3:13–4:19). He closed with instructions to those who shepherd God's flock (5:1–14).

When Christians suffer, or when we encourage others who suffer, 1 Peter is an essential tool. In this letter he teaches us how to do more than endure until the end. He teaches us how suffering can contribute to having God's grace and peace in the fullest measure.

IV. 2 Peter

Peter's second letter had to be written before 68, which was the year of his death. Like 1 Peter, this is a General Epistle and no specific church is mentioned. It is addressed to "those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours" (1:1 NASB). His theme is repeated from 1 Peter, "Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord" (2 Peter 1:2 NASB). Although the theme is similar, the purpose has changed. Since his first letter, the opposition he addressed there had moved from

outside the churches to inside, and he was writing this letter to help believers combat false prophets and teachers who had infiltrated the various congregations. He warned his readers that these false teachers “will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute” (2:1–2 NIV).

Peter stated his purpose in 3:1–2,

Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them *as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking*. I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles. (NIV, italics added)

Peter was convinced that the antidote to being deceived by false teachers was an aggressive pursuit of God’s true teaching. Scattered throughout this short epistle are statements affirming the truth and power of God’s Word and the need for His people to know it well. There are three movements in this short letter. Peter starts by affirming our confidence in the truth of God’s Word. In chapter 2 he describes the immorality of the false teachers and the dangers they present. Chapter 3 puts an eternal perspective on truth and error by focusing on Jesus’ return. He closes the book by telling us to “be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless” (3:14 NASB). Second Peter presents clear insight into how damaging false teaching can be and urges us to be diligent in studying God’s truth as protection against error. In the final chapter, Peter gives us much-needed perspective on truth and puts our focus on the hope of Jesus’ return.

V. Jude

Jude, the last book we survey in this lesson, is very much like 2 Peter. Evidence leads us to conclude that the author, like James, was one of Jesus’ brothers. Some date the letter as early as AD 65 and others as late as AD 80. We know little about Jude. If he was in fact Jesus’ brother, whose name was listed in Matthew 13:55, that is almost all we know about him, except that he wrote a New Testament book. John tells us that Jude and the rest of Jesus’ brothers did not follow Jesus during His ministry on earth (John

7:3–10). It's probable that he accepted Jesus' claims after His crucifixion and resurrection.

The letter is addressed very generally in verse 1, "To those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ" (NIV). There is no indication of their location or ethnicity, and the letter was likely addressed to believers everywhere. He opens with a simple greeting, "Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance." Jude's stated purpose is straightforward: "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people" (v. 3 NIV).

Jude was so concerned about the damage these false teachers could do that he "felt compelled" to urge his readers to contend for the faith. These false teachers had secretly slipped into the church and would wreak havoc if not confronted. His big idea is that the best way to confront error is to live the truth.

Jude opened his letter with a brief explanation of his purpose in verses 1–3. Then in verses 4–16 he described the danger heretics pose to the church. He closed in verses 17–25 with an exhortation, "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 NIV). Jude's advice, that the antidote to being crippled by error is to walk in God's truth, is crucial for any age. His great contribution to God's Word is his warning against doctrinal laxity.