

LESSON TWENTY-TWO:

Messages to Believers

Well-grounded in the Hebrew Bible

Hebrews, James, & Jude

Introduction:

These three Epistles or Books of the Bible are usually listed among those called the *General Epistles*, meaning: not written by Paul. There is disagreement among students of the Bible as to whether the Book of Hebrews was written by Paul or not. I shall later give my reasons for placing Hebrews outside of those books written by Paul.

These books have in common the fact that they all assume an extensive knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, though they were not written exclusively for the Jews. Like the rest of Scripture, they were written for all of God's children, Jews and Gentiles alike; but they were apparently written to deal with problems peculiar to the Jewish believers of the First Century, though quite useful, as well, to non-Jewish Christians.

What Do We Find here?

HEBREWS:

A Call to Perfection through Faith in Christ, Not through the Law

In many respects the author is dealing with the same problems Paul dealt with in writing to the Galatians and to some extent to the Romans; namely, the threat or danger of returning to the Law rather than continuing in faith in Christ, as they moved toward the goal of perfection to which God has called all believers. However, the author of Hebrews is not addressing Gentiles who have been subjected to such erroneous teachings, but Jews — those of the Hebrew background — who are most likely to follow that error and move away from faith in Christ. He wastes no time in getting into the subject, plunging immediately into a contention for the unity and consistency of the revelation of God through the Old Testament Scriptures and through His Son, Jesus Christ.

1. *The Unity of God's Message and Superiority of the Messenger (1:1-5:14)*

In this first section of the Book of Hebrews, the author stresses the importance of realizing first of all who the messenger of the gospel, Jesus, really is; then, what is unique about his message; and finally, the urgency of believing that message. We shall, therefore, adopt that outline in our study that follows.

a. *The identity of the messenger of the gospel (1:1-14)*. The author makes quite clear at the onset of his writing that the God who spoke of old through the prophets and *the messenger of the gospel*, Jesus Christ, are one and the same (1:4). Jesus is heir of all things and creator of all things. He is, therefore, the Lord who, according to Genesis 1 and 2, created the worlds in the beginning and who later called Israel to be His inheritance (vs.1,2). He is equal in glory to God and, having His very substance, is equal in power. For this reason, He can only be called God Himself (v.3). This gives to Him a name above every name in heaven and on earth! (v.4). The names by which Jesus Christ, the messenger of the gospel, is called in the Old Testament bear this out: He is called the Son of God whom all the angels of God are to worship (vs.5-7); He is called God (vs.8-9); and He is also called Lord (equivalent to the Hebrew personal name for God: Yahweh) (vs.10-14).

b. *The uniqueness of the message about Jesus Christ (2:1-18)*. The author expresses his chief concern in writing this letter, at the beginning of chapter two: concern that the readers, Jewish Christians, may drift away from the message of Jesus Christ, back to the Judaism from which they had departed (2:1). The consequence of their neglecting that gospel, the only way of salvation for any man, is that there is no escaping God's wrath if they do (v.3).

The gospel of which he speaks, he tells the readers, is one which the author has come to know through being taught by the apostles who received the message from Jesus Christ, first hand (vs.3,4). It is because of this statement that I cannot reckon this epistle to have been written by Paul. What Paul said in his letter to the Galatians is quite different from what the writer of this letter is saying here; namely, that Paul

received the message directly from the Lord, as did the rest of the apostles, and not through men. It seems evident, then, that the author could not have been Paul; Paul would never have written the words of 2:3. The identity of the author is a matter of speculation. He obviously had a style very much like Paul's. His Greek was excellent and his knowledge of Scripture was outstanding. My guess is Apollos, who certainly fits that description; but it is only a guess and is not original with me.

By the gospel message, we learn that what God has purposed for His children is accomplished by the humility and exaltation of Jesus Christ (2:5-9; see also Phil 2). Quoting from Psalm 8, the author shows that the subjecting of all under the feet of man was accomplished solely by the suffering and glorification of Jesus, who, in his trials, suffered on their behalf — on behalf of those who have believed his gospel (vs.9).

Thus Jesus, who became man with flesh and blood, suffered and died in their place in order that he could defeat Satan and thereafter comfort and aid those tempted and tried (2:10-18). His point is that by Christ's being their substitute in suffering and death, he defeated Satan, their great enemy (vs.14,15; cf. Gen 3:15). By this he set them free from the bondage to sin and, as a faithful high priest at God's right hand, is able to intercede for them continually. Christ assures them of a continuing source of strength in all of their life to enable them to endure all suffering and temptations and to triumph through his strength (vs.17,18).

This makes his message unique, for it is a message of what God has accomplished through Christ on our behalf. It is a message of victory already, over the enemies who plague us in this life: sin, death and the devil.

c. The urgency of the necessity of believing that Gospel (3:1-5:14). The readers are called to hold fast to that gospel, being bold to continue in Christ by whom they have been delivered from death to life. If Christ is the source of their life in the first place, then they must boldly invest that life in continuing confidence in him and not begin to turn to their flesh or to dependence on their own strength to keep the Law and to bring them to

that perfection which the Lord desires in all of His children (3:1-11). The author, quoting from Psalm 95, shows that many in Israel of old, having begun in confidence in the Lord, departed from Him and displeased the Lord who had brought them out of Egypt. Moses gave the Law; but Christ gave to men citizenship in heaven, not because of their ability to keep the Law but because of his strength to do what they could not do.

The author, therefore, calls upon his readers to be careful, lest any depart from dependence on Christ to dependence on self which leads to sin without repentance (3:12-4:15). He calls that desire to accomplish God's will — perfection, completion of spiritual growth — by any other means than by faith in Christ an evil heart of unbelief (3:12). It matters not that one has made a profession of faith in Jesus as Savior, if he does not continue to believe in Jesus (v.14). Many professed belief in God in the wilderness, but they soon turned from dependence on the Lord and proved to be unfit to enter into the rest which God had prepared for them in Canaan (vs.15-19). What hindered them was unbelief (refusal to continue to believe in the Lord).

The author likens their Christian pilgrimage in this world to the wanderings of Israel in the wilderness (4:1-13). Those who depended on the Lord were able to enter into that rest in Canaan after forty years. But many did not enter in because of unbelief; that is, they trusted in themselves to have strength to go in on their own initiative, though they were not able to leave Egypt by their own strength. Their unbelief was foolish. Likewise, these Jewish people who have professed faith in Jesus Christ are in danger of doing foolishly if they suppose that after Jesus has set them free from sin and death they can, by their own strength, go on to that perfection to which the Lord calls His children (4:1,11ff.). God's Word is penetrating in its scrutiny of the hearts of men. If, deep in their hearts, the Word finds unbelief, such men will not be accepted by the Lord, no matter what profession of faith they may have made (vs.12,13).

They must, then, hold fast their profession of faith; this is the sole evidence of their persevering in the faith. It is the only way they can grow spiritually. It is the only way that it can be known that they are God's children (vs.14,15). Jesus knows full well all of their trials and temptations and is fully able to meet their every need if they continue to trust in him and to depend on him, who began a good work in them, to complete that work with their final perfection — being all that the Lord desires His children to be. It is grace through Christ and not the works of the Law that will accomplish this.

The author, therefore, calls the readers to go boldly to the throne (source) of grace — to Christ — who will deal with them in mercy and, by grace, give to them the strength they need (4:16-5:10). Christ Himself, as their high priest in the world, took their place and through his years on earth suffered all temptations and hardships. Through them all, he proved perfect in God's sight (5:5-9). He, therefore, is eminently qualified to bring them from death to life and to final perfection (vs.9,10).

This section closes with a wish by the author to go on from the basics of the gospel to matters pertaining to growth toward perfection in Christ; however, he is hindered by their slowness to grasp even the first principles of the gospel; namely, the necessity to continue in faith in Christ and not to turn back to reliance on their own strength to obey the Law, as the means to their perfection (5:11-14).

2. The Source of Perfection: Not the Law but Faith in Christ (the Gospel) (6:1-10:39)

a. The futility of dependence on the Law for spiritual growth to perfection (6:1-8). The author first expresses his desire to leave behind, in this epistle, any further discussion of the basics of the gospel (6:1-3). The reason is that those who professed faith in Jesus but then showed by their lives that they were not really trusting in him, but rather in themselves, cannot be renewed (vs.4-8). It is like a charcoal brick. If there is some fire in it, then it can be renewed to a blaze by fanning it; but if there is no fire there, all the fanning in

the world will not renew it. So a church member who professes faith but has never been born again, and never has believed in Jesus Christ, cannot be urged to further faith in Jesus and to spiritual growth. He is a dead coal with no hope in him. All the exhortation in the world to call him to rise and walk in the spiritual walk will be to no avail. This passage does not teach that one born again may subsequently die spiritually; it does teach that it is futile to treat one who is not born again as though he were born again.

b. The superiority of the gospel of Christ to the Law in attaining God's goal (6:9-10:18). It seems clear that the author is addressing specific Jewish Christians whom he has known and about whom he has specific knowledge (6:9-12). He is confident that these are not among those who have rejected dependence on Christ in preference to dependence on the Law (as was exemplified by those who caused great trouble in Galatia). He calls his readers, therefore, to imitate those who live by faith and not by the confidence in the flesh.

He reminds them that among those who had no confidence in the flesh, but rather in the Lord, was Abraham himself. He took refuge in the Lord and was assured *both* by *God's promise* to bless him and by *God's oath* to undergird that Word of promise (6:13-19). God's Word is unchangeable (immutable) and His oath is immutable. What greater assurance could they have if they have taken refuge in the Lord and wholly depend on him and not on themselves for every spiritual blessing? We know that no blessings from God are earned but all are by grace through faith (v.18).

The author shows that Melchizedek, who conveyed these promises to Abraham from God, was a type of Christ and that Abraham's response to him — to give the tithe to him — was an act of faith in the promise and not a means to his receiving the promise, so that the giving of the tithe that day, and thereafter in the Levitical Law, was not a work of merit but an expression of gratitude to God for what God has already given (7:4-10). Jews, therefore, who conceive of the giving of the tithe as a work deserving of reward from God totally misconceive its meaning!

Furthermore, those who look to the Levitical Law as the means to perfection (circumcision, tithing, sacrifices, etc.) are wrong (7:11-25). The Law, dependent on the carnal (fleshly) strength of man, could not lead to life. Therefore, it cannot be the means to continuing life in Christ either (vs.11-16). Instead, we have the power of endless life through faith in Jesus Christ (vs.16). The Law made no one perfect, having no power to give life (vs.18,19); therefore, we need and have in Jesus Christ a far better covenant than the one that depended on man's continued obedience to the Law. By his covenant, Christ is able to save completely (from new birth to perfection) those who trust in him (vs.22-25). They who trust in Christ cannot fail to be all God wants them to be because Christ, at God's right hand, continues to intercede for them without ceasing (v. 25).

From this point (7:26), the author of Hebrews shows that all that was taught by the old covenant (the Levitical Law, the Tabernacle, its furniture, etc.) was simply a pattern of what God intended to accomplish in Christ. When we studied the Books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, we noted how Christ was the fulfillment of all that was taught there and how God taught them to trust in Christ through these visible patterns. This is the point of what the author says in the section from 7:26 to 10:18. We do not have space in this lesson for any detailed study of these truths, but if or when we return to this section at another time, we shall give more attention to it.

c. The call to continue to grow spiritually through the source of life: Jesus Christ (10:19-39). They who have believed in Christ have the greatest privilege known to man: the privilege of coming into the very presence of God through faith in Jesus, assured that he will continually cleanse them and enable them to grow spiritually into what the Lord desires them to be (see Eph. 1:4). They must, therefore, hold fast their confession of faith in Christ and go about doing good as Christ has given them example and strength to do (vs.23,24). It is also imperative that they see their individual spiritual growth in the context of the fellowship of believers. This is why the

congregating of believers in worship is vital to spiritual growth (v.25).

The writer warns that if one turns willfully from faith in Christ (this is apparently the sense of continually sinning willfully), then there is no sacrifice for sin (outside of the gospel which he has rejected) (10:26-31). It does not mean that sins are unforgivable after one becomes a believer or that one can lose true salvation, but it means if one *willfully despises and rejects* the gospel, there is *no alternative* way of forgiveness and acceptance with God! (cf. our discussion of Matt. 12:31 and read I John 1:5-10;2:19). *Our only hope* is through the death of Jesus Christ. To abandon the once-for-all sacrifice for sins is to abandon any and all hope of salvation. The only other eternal end one may expect is divine judgement and fire that will consume all of God's enemies (v.27).

The call to these readers, therefore, is that they consider how the Lord has begun to do a good work in them by grace through their faith and that they continue to have their confidence in the Lord, so that they be not counted among those who turned from the gospel because of unbelief (10:32-39). Evidences of their true faith are the fruits of the Spirit already seen in them (vs.32-34). Quoting from Habakkuk, as Paul also had done (vs.37,38), the author concludes with a final appeal for faith that saves completely rather than unbelief (return to dependence on the Law) which leads to perdition (v.39).

3. The Challenge to Perfection through Faith in Christ (11:1-13:17).

In this last section of Hebrews, the author is able to realize that which he had hoped to accomplish in this letter; namely, to challenge them to spiritual growth by remaining in Christ.

a. Faith was the way of all Old Testament Saints (11:1-40). First, the author carefully defines faith in terms which are familiar to us from a study of the word "to believe" in the Old Testament usage (see our discussion in the Old Testament Survey). We understand that faith is assurance (certainty) about what cannot now be seen but which we depend upon because

of God's Word and promise (11:1). He shows that this was the way all Old Testament saints lived: in faith in the Lord, not seeing the promises fulfilled (11:2ff). His thesis is succinctly stated in verse 6: "Without faith it is impossible to please God." That is the only way one can come to the Lord.

Then, from verse 4 to the end of the chapter, he shows how those who believed in the Lord in Old Testament times continued to trust in Him in spite of the fact that in the world they never saw the promises fulfilled and never were free of suffering and hardships.

Those who lived before Abraham — from Abel to Noah — were saved by faith alone and lived by faith alone (11:4-7). You may recall that in studying about godly men of that period of history, we noted that they walked by faith and were saved by grace, not by their works.

Abraham and the patriarchs, likewise, were saved by faith and lived by faith in the Lord, not depending on their own strength but the promises of God (vs.8-23). We saw how Scripture explicitly speaks of God reckoning Abraham's faith to him for righteousness; we noted also that Jacob was pleasing to the Lord only when he had been humbled and had learned to depend on the Lord and not on himself.

Even Moses, the giver of the Law, was a man of faith, not depending on his own works (vs.24-30). Thus, the giving of the Law through Moses was never intended as a new way to be saved or a new way by human strength to please God. Faith was always the only way!

Even Rahab, the harlot Gentile, was saved by faith alone and joined to the people of God solely because she had faith in the Lord God of Israel (v.31).

Even many whose faith was weak, were nevertheless saved and acceptable to God solely on the basis of their faith, certainly not based on their works (vs.32-40). Innumerable, unnamed people are mentioned in these verses, indicating that the author has not intended to make an exhaustive list but has given some specific examples of Old Testament saints who did not receive the promise but, by faith, lived in

anticipation of God fulfilling all that He had promised to them (vs.39,40).

Notable among the things said in this section is that Abraham and all of the saints of the Old Testament understood that the promises were not to be fulfilled in this life but that God had for them a home and an inheritance beyond this world and this life — one that would not fade away, prepared by the Lord for His children (11:13-16). This is in full harmony with the Old Testament promises of the New Jerusalem from above and the New Heavens and New Earth which God has prepared when the old is passed away. It is also in accord with what Christ said in John 14:1ff., concerning the place he is preparing for his own. Thus, like the words of Paul to the Galatians (Gal. 4:25ff.), these words warn the believers not to put any hope in the Jerusalem of this world, in the Judaism of this , or in any conception of a return to rule by the Law on earth as the means of pleasing God.

b. They can see their faith move toward perfection through Christ's help (12:1-13). In the light of the foregoing testimony from the Old Testament saints, the readers must learn to lay aside the burden of keeping the Law as a means of attaining perfection, which simply frustrates men by its cycle of Law-Sin-Failure to grow (12:1). Instead, they need to run the race of spiritual growth with full and sole faith in Jesus Christ, looking to him to enable them to attain perfect faith and a perfect life (vs.1,2). The writer here is simply summarizing what he has been saying about the need for continuing dependence on Christ and His Spirit to accomplish in them all that they ought to be as God's children. This is precisely what Paul said he was doing when he wrote to the Philippians (Phil. 3:8-16).

In the process of their spiritual growth by continuing in utter dependence on the Lord, they have Christ as their example who suffered greatly on their behalf and did not faint (v.3). So, when they do fall short of God's will, and are chastened (corrected) by the Lord, they should not complain of such suffering, knowing that Jesus suffered much more than they shall ever suffer. Their suffering by being chastened and corrected by the Lord is for their own good and in the

end, will bear fruit in their lives (12:4-13). This clearly implies that if they do grow spiritually by faith alone, it does not mean that they will be without sins and failures; but they will be in a context of grace by which they will learn from their failures and be able gradually to be more and more what the Lord would have them to be.

c. It is important not to be discouraged but to keep on striving for that goal: their perfection in Christ (12:14-29). He calls this goal their sanctification, which is as much a part of their salvation as is their rebirth (v.14). They must examine themselves constantly to be certain that they live by faith and not by human strength (vs.15-17). Their Christian experience is so much greater than the experience of those who, in the wilderness, came to Sinai, from which place God gave to them the Law. They have come to the very city of God, the new Jerusalem, of which they are citizens (vs.18-22). They are counted among those who are enrolled in heaven, where God is and where Jesus is, who is their Saviour (vs.23-24).

In the Old Testament, those who disobeyed God and turned from the Law, cut themselves off from God and were punished. Much more, if anyone now turns from the Gospel of grace to self-reliance, he cannot hope to escape God's wrath (vs.25-29).

d. Immediate goals in their striving for that perfection in Christ (13:1-17). As Paul has shown, love is the first fruit of the Spirit in God's children and they must be certain that they love one another (vs.1-3). That love must be shown in the home and context of marriage as well as outside the home (v.4). But love of money must be shunned (vs.5,6). He is showing, here, what our Lord taught earlier; namely, that one cannot love God and mammon.

It is also important that in the church the believers respect and follow their spiritual leaders, knowing that the sound doctrine they teach will not be supplanted by another, better doctrine; that is because Jesus Christ does not change, his teaching and gospel do not change either (vs.7-14). Those who insist on returning to confidence in the Law and do not continue in grace through Christ, will not succeed in pleasing

God (profit) (v.9). He likens the Israelites taking the dead carcasses of sacrificed animals outside of the camp to burn, to Jesus' own rejection and death by the Jews (vs.11,12). Our altar is where Christ died, not the Old Testament altar to which unbelieving Jews cling (vs.10,13). Again, the author rejects any hope in the Jerusalem of this world with all of its Law and tradition (v.14).

Likewise, their sacrifice which is pleasing to God is the profession of their faith in Jesus Christ, coupled with good works done in his name and strength (vs.15,16).

In the world, too, believers ought to be examples of obedience to those who have authority over them, whether masters of slaves or governmental authorities (v.17).

In these ways, the one who relies on Christ and not on his own ability to obey the Law, shows that he truly believes and is living by the grace of God.

Closing exhortations. After asking for their prayers (vs.18,19), once more the author assures them of Jesus Christ's complete sufficiency to make them perfect in all things by his working in those who trust in him (vs.20-21). The final words are personal requests and greetings (vs.22-25).

JAMES:

The True Faith Contrasted with Counterfeit Faith

The Book of James complements Hebrews quite well because it defines for the readers what is true faith and what is not. The author, James, identifies himself as a servant of Jesus Christ. It is generally believed that this James is the one who was head of the church in Jerusalem and who presided at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). He is further identified by Paul as the brother of the Lord (Gal. 1:19) and presumably was, therefore, one of Jesus' brothers, a son of Mary and Joseph, who is mentioned in the Gospels (Mark 6:3). After a brief salutation, he moves immediately into the body of the letter.

1. *The definition of true religion: faith that really works (1:2-2:26)*

James was writing to Jewish Christians who were apparently confused about true religion. (Is it free of any good works and just “believing in Jesus,” or does it depend on good works being done to become pleasing to God?) Knowing the tendency of men to twist all the truth that is taught by God, we can see how, after reading Paul’s letters and the Book of Hebrews, one might assume that since it is all by grace, men do not have to be concerned at all about doing good works. James wished to show that the faith and religion called for by himself and others is not a dead faith (“just believe”) but a living and vital faith that produces good works. Of course, Paul had said this and certainly the writer to the Hebrews said the same thing; but men are dull of hearing and try to twist the truth into a lie.

James, first of all, calls the readers to patience in the times of trial. It is essential that their faith be tried to be certain that it is genuine (1:2-4). Like the writer to the Hebrews, James calls them to the perfection of their faith. This can only come as they live in this world for God, having that faith tested constantly (even as Abraham’s faith was tested).

But the goal of perfection — even as the writer to Hebrews said — is attainable only by asking in faith (vs.5-8). By wisdom, James means the fruition of faith — a life that glorifies the Lord. Later on, James defines this wisdom more fully (3:17,18). As we saw in Hebrews 13:5ff., the believer cannot please God (attain this goal) by a double mind — dependence in part on God and in part on something else.

James makes a careful distinction between the trials of their faith, which the Lord allows in believers and the *inward temptations* to do evil, which are not from God but from their own sinful hearts (1:9-18). The distinction is as follows: God, in the trials that beset believers, is seeking for the genuineness of their faith (that it be shown to be genuine faith); on the other hand, inward temptations to do evil are based on a desire in men’s hearts, or in Satan, to lead them to do what is evil. They all face trials (temptations) in the

world; some do so in the context of a lowly life (having very little of this world’s goods); others are tempted by the very riches they possess (vs.9-12). Therefore, he who is poor must bolster himself against the temptation to do evil by remembering the high estate to which the Lord has called him in his spiritual life. On the other hand, he who is rich must bolster himself against the temptation to have confidence in his riches, by realizing that in order to become a Christian, he had to deny confidence in the flesh and the world and be humbled and brought low before Christ and before his fellows, spiritually.

The point is *to endure* such trials, no matter what estate one has come into this world, knowing that one can endure such trials *only* by relying on the Lord and not on himself (1:12-18). To blame God when one yields to sin is folly (v.13). All desire to sin (turn from faith in God) comes from sinful hearts — hearts where sin reigns (v.14). The only source of victory and a good life that pleases God is by continued dependence on Christ, from above (vs.16-18).

What is required, then, in those who would attain to that perfection to which we are called is to gain it by meekness and humble reliance on Christ who works in us through the Word (1:19-27). This means that we must learn from that Word how better to please the Lord daily. *It means* more than merely hearing what God has to say in His Word; *it means* taking that Word seriously and seeking to apply it to our daily lives (vs.21-25). *It means* living lives that truly reflect the love and compassion of God who lives in our lives, giving to us a desire to meet the needs of those more wretched than ourselves and the desire to be without blemish in the world — as the Lord has called us to be (vs.26-27; cf. Eph. 1:4).

It is not true faith to do good only to those we are pleased to favor. The requirement of God that we love demands that we love all men, not just those we are pleased to love (2:1-13; cf. Eph. 1:4).

Neither is it true faith merely to mouth a profession of faith in Christ (2:14-26). Even demons can do that; but it will not save them; neither will it save any man simply to say that he believes (vs.14-20).

Using two Old Testament examples: Abraham and Rahab (one the very head of the family of believers, one a Gentile), James shows that we know that their faith was genuine by the changed lives that were seen in them. What they did in faith showed that they were true believers (vs.21-26). This is nothing different from what the author of Hebrews said in Hebrews 11.

2. *The definition of true wisdom: a changed life (3:1-18)*

Earlier, we noted that James speaks of the life that pleases God as *a life of wisdom*, in accord with the Old Testament teaching that wisdom means more than merely *knowing* what God has taught, it includes an application of that teaching to one's life, i.e., knowing how to apply God's Word to life (see 1:5ff).

James shows that the Word of God is not to be lightly taken. Those who presume to teach it had better be certain that, as they use their tongues to teach God's Word, they do not, in turn, use those same tongues to speak what is evil. To do so is to corrupt the truth and to bring confusion in the hearts of men (3:1-12). Wisdom isn't shown merely by reciting with the tongue what God's Word says; it's learning to live a holy life in God's sight by being taught by the Word from above (v.13). Factions and jealousy in men's hearts, expressed in their words, lie against the truth they profess (v.14). As James said earlier (1:17), every good gift — including the gift of wisdom (a life pleasing to the Lord) — comes only from above, i.e. by the strength of Christ in us. It does not come by our own attempts to obey the Law in our own strength (vs.17-18).

What James describes here as the good life is the same that Paul called the fruit of the Spirit (see Gal. 5:22,23). That is the perfect life to which the readers, as believers, are to aspire; and that life cannot be gained merely by seeking to conform to the Law of God in their own strength. It can come only as they abide in Christ and His Word abides in them and as the Holy Spirit enables them increasingly to apply God's Word to their lives by the strength Christ gives to them through His Spirit.

3. *The Source of trouble in the Church: The presence there of those who are not living by true faith (4:1-5:6)*

The source of trouble in the church is because some, not relying on the Lord, have sought to live by their own strength after professing faith in Jesus. They are known as Christians in the community, but they certainly do not live as Christians. Their lustful flesh wins out every time over their ability to live rightly (4:1-5). But, there is a better way — by depending on God's grace, in humility before God (4:6-10). Therefore, men must stop relying on their own strength and come humbly before the Lord, depending on him to give them strength against Satan: then, they can resist the devil and he will flee (vs.7-10).

They have been living like the world, not as true believers: speaking evil against one another, making daily plans without any thought to the Lord's will for them, depending on their riches to see them through, and glorying in those riches to acquit them of every crime they have perpetrated against their brothers (4:11-5:6). But they cannot continue to live that way and hope to be numbered among the children of God.

4. *Final exhortations in the light of these truths (5:7-20)*

James had said that they must be patient (1:3). They can become all that the Lord wills them to be only by Christ's strength. That will be fully realized only when Christ returns (5:1-11). In the meantime, they must not make commitments which they intend to fulfill in their own strength, by verbalizing promises they cannot keep (v.12: cf. Matt. 5:34-37). They must also be aware of the needs of others in the fellowship of believers: praying for one another, ministering to the needs of one another (5:13-18).

Finally, if any one of them is able to bring a brother back from error (departure from reliance on Christ to depend on his obedience to the Law to commend himself to God), then, he has saved a soul; for one who professes faith but does not live in faith, is not saved.

JUDE:

A Call to Contend for the Faith

This brief letter was written by Jude, presumably the brother of Jesus, as was James (Matt. 13:55). After a brief salutation he moves into the heart of the letter. What he says complements what Paul had written to the Ephesians about the Christian warfare (Eph. 6:10ff). It is a call to Christian war. Jude gives to the readers five reasons why they ought to contend.

1. Because of certain threats to the true gospel (3-4)

He had intended, apparently, to write to these readers (knowledgeable in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the apocryphal books) something about their common faith, perhaps similar to Romans; but (by the Holy Spirit) he was overruled and constrained instead, to write to them to contend for the faith (v.3). There was a pragmatic reason as well why he wrote to them at this time: some ungodly men were entering into the churches, bringing in heretical teachings and practicing horrendous deeds, denying Christ, the heart of the gospel (v.4).

2. Because such threats are exemplified in the Scriptures and other Hebrew writings (5-16)

Jude gathers together a number of Old Testament and extra-Biblical illustrations to make his point of the reality of the struggle and the threat of heresy in the church.

First, he notes the incident in the wilderness when the Lord destroyed many who came out of Egypt, not allowing them to enter into Canaan because of their unbelief (v.5). Paul had made a similar point in writing to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 10:5-10). The point here is that such an action on God's part is the basis for discipline in the church and shows that unbelief must be dealt with, lest it destroy the whole church.

Next, Jude speaks of the casting down of rebellious angels (v.6). The concept of fallen angels is more implicit than explicit in Scripture. It is possible that the prophecy in Isaiah 14:12ff., refers, in part, to the casting down of Satan and those rebelling with him, though this is not certain. You may wish to compare Luke 10:18.

The next reference is to Sodom and Gomorrah (v.7). God's judgment on these cities, filled with homosexuals and fornicators, is given in Scripture as an example to warn all men of the *sureness of God's judgment on evil doers*.

Thus, three clear examples: judgment of sinners in Israel, judgment of rebellious angels, and judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah all exemplify how God feels about sinners.

Jude continues by identifying those causing havoc in the church in his day as like those whom God has already judged (vs.8-16). Their behavior is like the behavior of those described by Paul (Rom. 1:24-32). Mention of Michael's contending with the devil seems to be a reference to an incident recorded in one of the apocryphal books, "The Assumption of Moses." The story would have doubtlessly been familiar to the readers. A problem arises in the minds of many as to why Jude should make reference to an apocryphal book (non-canonical book; see our discussion in the Old Testament Survey, lesson one) as well as quote from a pseudepigraphal book later (Enoch, v.14). It may be answered by reference to Paul's message at Athens when he was preaching to the Greeks, when he quoted from one of the Greek poets (Acts 17:28) or to Paul again when he quotes an unnamed Cretan prophet in Titus 1:12. In none of these incidents, from either Paul or Jude, are we to assume that since they quoted from an extra-Biblical source, that source is therefore canonical or authoritative. We do not determine which books of the Old Testament are canonical on the basis of which have been quoted in the New Testament. Many Old Testament canonical books have not been referred to in the New Testament at all. They are no less authoritative. Conversely, just because a book is quoted is not proof that it is canonical. Canonicity, as we noted earlier, is based on the fact that the Holy Spirit had made its divine origin known to the recipients of that revelation, *when it was given*. From that time on, it became authoritative for all of the people of God, then and forever. However, those portions quoted become authoritative for us, just as the

rest of Scripture, since the Holy Spirit led the writers to include those particular statements in Scripture.

Resuming his catalogue of examples of evil, Jude compares these troublers of the church in his day to Cain, Balaam, and Korah (v.11), thus noting their murderous tendencies, their riotous nature, and their gainsaying (verbal opposition to the righteous).

Such people, if allowed to remain in the church, are like hidden rocks to a ship, like shepherds who feed on the sheep instead of protecting them, like clouds which carry no water for the thirsty ground of the farmer, like trees from which the farmer expected fruit, only to find that the trees are dead, like wild waves of the sea to a ship in distress, like wandering stars by which one could never gain a sure bearing (vs.12,13).

He quotes from the book of Enoch (a pseudepigraphal writing accepted as canonical only by the Ethiopic church). The book of Enoch is known in its entirety only in the Ethiopic version (Ge'ez), which was itself a translation from an original Greek version (vs.14-16). Many of the sins noted in the quotation reflect the same truths that are found in Paul's writings and the Book of James.

3. Because of the warnings from the Apostles about these threats (vs.17-19)

The words to which he refers from the apostles deal with the certainty that in the last times there will be such mockers who will walk after their own evil lusts and cause many churches to be divided. He has reference perhaps to II Peter 3:3; I Timothy 4:1 and II Timothy 3:1ff.

4. Because of their obligation as believers (vs.20-23)

Jude reminds them of what the other apostles had taught concerning their obligation to grow spiritually into the fullness of God's purpose for them, as they depended, not on themselves, but on God's mercy through Jesus Christ, by which they would grow in that eternal life which he has won for his own who believe in him (vs.20,21).

He shows them that they, too, must in turn reflect the mercy of God in their own dealings with

others. Some will be in doubt, and will need their merciful patience and help in coming out of their doubts to certainty (v.22). Some around them will be in the very fire of judgment — among them, those about whom Jude has been writing. Such must be saved by being literally snatched from the fires of God's judgment (through repentance and believing in the gospel); but these readers are not themselves to become defiled by the evils of those to whom they witness and whom they snatch from hell (v.23).

5. Because the certainty of triumph in such warfare (contending for the faith) comes from Christ who will not fail (vs.24,25)

Christ can keep us from failing and enable us to arrive ultimately before his glory without spot and without blemish (see Eph. 1:4 again) in great joy. Therefore, on the basis of God's majesty, dominion and power for time and eternity, they have a sure mission without fear of failure to which they can give full attention and full measure.

What Additional Information is Helpful?

Because Judaism plays such an important part in the letters before us, it will be helpful to make a few observations about Judaism as it existed in the First Century. What we find is the culmination of a long period of development in the history of Judaism which began during the time of the Babylonian exile.

Jewish tradition points to Ezra as the beginner of Judaism. It was he who called the Jewish people back to the Torah (The Law of God contained in the first five books of the Old Testament). We read in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah something of Ezra's activities. The Jews insist that from the earliest time the Torah included not only the written Word of God but also a body of *Oral Torah* (laws, statutes, and legal interpretations not recorded in the written Torah) which was just as authoritative. As they understand it, the synagogue began to be put into use as a place of assembly for the Jews while in exile and afforded a way they could hear the Torah read and explained.

Gradually, a whole long oral tradition of interpretations of the Word came into existence alongside the written Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy). Those primarily responsible for doing the teaching were called *sopherim* (scribes); Ezra himself is called a ready scribe in the Torah of Moses (Ezra 7:6). Therefore, in Jewish tradition, later written down, Ezra ranks as second only to Moses himself. The principle of such tradition was that the Jew was to be completely guided in his life by the Torah (written Law and oral traditions).

In one place (Ezra 7:10), we are told that Ezra set his heart to *seek* the Torah (teaching) of the Lord. The term “seek” was from a Hebrew word *darash* and later Jews developed from it the method of interpretation called the *Midrash* (that which is sought or deducted) i.e. the interpretation of Scripture.

Jewish tradition also teaches that Ezra was responsible for establishing an assembly of scholars of the Torah called the Great Assembly; and later tradition taught that as Moses had received the Torah from God, he, in turn, handed it down to Joshua and he handed it on to the elders of Israel who passed it to the prophets who gave it over to the men of the Great Assembly — thus establishing an authority for the traditions that later arose in Judaism from God, through a chain of descent, to the final written form of these traditions (which began in the Second and Third Centuries after Christ).

The basic concept of this Great Assembly, according to Jewish tradition, was to make a fence around the Torah, meaning, to interpret it in such a way that it would not become obsolete. See Mark 7:1-13 for an example of this as well as what Jesus thought of the Scribes’ Oral Torah.

Gradually, two schools of thought developed in Judaism in the centuries prior to Christ’s coming: the school of the Pharisees who gave to the people a large number of observations (Oral Torah) which were not written in the Law of Moses; and the Sadducees who held that the sole authority was the Mosaic Law and

that all traditions, *as well as other written portions of the Bible*, were not authoritative.

Contemporary with Jesus was a leading teacher of Judaism, Hillel, who was from Babylon but came to Jerusalem to teach. He greatly defended the traditions of the fathers and sought to make them an integral part of the Scriptures with equal authority.

A whole new group sprang up around Hillel called the *Tannaim* (Teachers). Hillel and those around him recognized that life was ever changing and conditions for the Jews of these centuries (First through Third in particular) was an ever-changing situation. He believed that the Oral Torah allowed a freedom of interpretation of the Written Torah (Hebrew Scriptures) which could circumvent Laws of Moses which would be very difficult to obey in their modern world. He and his followers then applied themselves to the task of interpreting the Law of Moses by means of the Oral Tradition. Gradually, this teaching of the *Tannaim* led to the written *Mishnah* which was put in written form during the 3rd Century A.D. Later, another layer of interpretation was added to that of the *Mishnah* called the *Gemara* and eventually the *Talmud* developed (a combination of the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara*). This was, of course, many centuries after Christ, nevertheless, its teachings reflect much of what was to be found orally at the time of Christ and the First Century Christians.

From this we can see why the Jewish Christians would be reluctant to move away from such a heritage of teaching and how the reintroduction of that heritage would greatly affect the gospel that such Jewish Christians would preach. This helps us to understand why these letters we have just studied were so very necessary — to lead those of Jewish background no longer to rely on their Jewish interpretations of God’s Word, lest they become manipulators of the Scriptures and pollute the true gospel.