

“The General Letters”

Hebrews-Jude; Hebrews 9:24-28 ¹

This morning we turn our attention to the eight documents known as “The General Epistles,” or “The General Letters.” Although the distinctions are not iron-clad in either case, Paul’s letters were mostly written to individual congregations, while the General Letters were mostly intended for more than one congregation.

As we noted last week, these twenty-one letters make up 78% of the New Testament, and, as was the case with Paul’s letters, reading the General Letters is a bit like listening to one-half of a telephone conversation, in that much of what’s going on has to be inferred. Sometimes the author and recipients are stated, sometimes not. There is no date written at the top of each letter as we might do, so we have to deduce the time of writing from clues given in the letter. Sometimes important clues about what’s happening on the recipients’ end come at the conclusion of the letters, so we do well to read a letter completely before beginning to make deductions.

A theme that becomes prominent in the remaining New Testament books is that of persecution directed toward followers of Jesus, together with the question of how Christians should respond to such persecution. While it seems clear that Christians were on the receiving end of coordinated Roman persecution during the reign of Emperor Diocletian two hundred years later (ruled A.D. 284-305), persecution during the New Testament period appears to have been much more localized.

A similar situation pertains today with respect to persecution of Christians by Muslims around the world. While there is a great deal of such persecution, and much of it is horrific, there is at the same time no global Islamic policy that Christians are to be persecuted and killed. And today, even as in New Testament times, the question of how Christians should respond to such localized but virulent persecution remains a burning ethical issue.

I’m going to summarize the eight General Letters in the order in which they were written rather than the order in which they appear in our Bibles; and, as is true for each message in this series, I’ll post a great deal more material online this afternoon than I have time to present here.

JAMES

The first of the General Letters was actually the first of all the letters to be written, preceding all the letters we have from Paul. Its author, James, was a half-brother of Jesus, as was Jude, whose letter we’ll come to later, and it is of no small significance that two of Jesus’ four half-brothers became believers in His divinity and in His saving power.

James’s letter was written to Jewish Christians scattered across the Roman Empire after the persecution that followed the Day of Pentecost. It seems clear that James’s audience is experiencing both persecution and poverty, and as a result of those troubles, some of the churches have splintered into warring factions. Beyond this, some believers have fallen into a worldly lifestyle (1:19–27, 4:4), with the result that they have become “double-minded,” wavering between God and the world (1:8; 4:8).²

Unfortunately, it’s still true today that, when we experience conflict with persons more powerful than we are—such as our employers—we frequently go home and pick fights with our

¹ A sermon by David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on September 1, 2013.

² *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway, 2008), p. 2387.

own family members rather than engaging in what we consider to be the more dangerous conversations that are needed at work. It was so for those early Christians, as well.

When they found themselves on the receiving end of persecution at work or in the world, those early believers frequently vented their frustrations on each other at home and at church rather than dealing more directly with the external dangers facing them. Another common response to persecution was to shift into a posture of “go along and get along”; and these themes of congregational conflict and cultural accommodation both receive considerable attention in the General Epistles, even as they did in Paul’s letters.

James’s letter is a collection of wisdom sayings on various themes, reminiscent of the Book of Proverbs. James is big on action, and the theme of the letter is powerfully stated in 1:22: “Do not merely **listen** to the word, and so deceive yourselves. **Do** what it says!” James expounded on this theme in what is probably the best-known teaching in his letter (other passages will be online):

James 2:14-17

¹⁴ *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?* ¹⁵ *Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food.*

¹⁶ *If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?* ¹⁷ *In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

1 & 2 PETER

The two letters we have from Peter appear to have been written to churches in what we know as that part of Turkey generally north of the Taurus Mountains, and the theme of how to respond to persecution looms large in these letters. Peter encouraged his readers—mostly Gentiles—to endure suffering and persecution (1:6–7; 2:18–20; 3:9, 13–17; 4:1–4, 12–19; 5:9), remaining faithful in times of distress, knowing that God will vindicate them and that they will certainly inherit the salvation that the Lord has promised. Peter affirmed that, just as Christ suffered and then entered into glory, so, too, His followers may expect to suffer before being glorified.³

First Peter moves back and forth between the **riches** believers have in Christ and the **responsibilities** that attend those riches, even under persecution. The letter is urgent and intense, with vivid imagery and an average of one command in every three verses.⁴ It was from Peter that we received one of the primary texts related to the doctrine of “the priesthood of the believer,” as well as several memorable texts about suffering for Jesus:

1 Peter 2:9-10

⁹ *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

¹⁰ *Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

1 Peter 4:16

¹⁶ *However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.*

1 Peter 5:8-9

⁸ *Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for*

³ ESV, p. 2403.

⁴ ESV, p. 2403.

someone to devour.⁹ Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

Second Peter, written several years later, and probably to the same churches, is the last writing we have from Peter's pen, even as 2 Timothy is the last writing we have from Paul's.⁵ While 2 Peter gives significant attention to false teachers who have infiltrated the churches, this short letter also provides memorable statements about the characteristics of a godly life, about the inspiration of Scripture, and about how to understand the confusing delay of Jesus' return:

2 Peter 1:3-8

³ His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. . . . ⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. ⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 1:20-21

²⁰ Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. ²¹ For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 3:3-14

³ Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. ⁴ They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation. . . . ⁸ But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

JUDE

This short letter was written by another of Jesus' half-brothers, about whom we know virtually nothing beyond his name. The letter combines warning about false teachers with the exhortation to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people" (1:3).

The second chapter of 2 Peter is very similar to Jude, and this probably indicates that Jude's letter preceded Peter's. It may be that Peter included Jude's well-known words in his own letter, much as I included Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech in my *Laptop* this week, but we don't know for sure. The letter ends with one of the most beautiful benedictions in the New Testament:

Jude 1:24-25

²⁴ To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—²⁵ to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

⁵ Tradition has it that Peter was martyred in Rome by Nero in the mid 60's. According to the tradition, Peter was crucified upside down, considering himself unworthy to die in the same fashion as his Lord had done.

HEBREWS

Although the book of Hebrews is one of the most important books in the New Testament, we know neither who wrote it nor to whom it was written.⁶ The letter appears to have been written prior to the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, since mentioning that destruction would have been central to the author's argument had it already occurred.

Hebrews doesn't begin as a first-century letter usually began, but it does seem to end in that fashion. The letter actually has the carefully-crafted feel of a sermon, and some have suggested that the best way to think about Hebrews is to think of it as a sermon in the form of a letter (have you ever gotten one of those?).

While the themes of persecution and faithfulness certainly appear in Hebrews, its central focus has to do with the superiority of the New Covenant that came through Jesus over the Old Covenant that came through Moses. The central motif of the book is "better," with the words "better," "more," and "greater" appearing twenty-eight times.⁷ I'll illustrate this point with two slides here, but there will be many more in the online version this afternoon:

Hebrews 1:1-4

¹ In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. ⁴ So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

Hebrews 9:24-28

²⁴ For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. ²⁵ Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. ²⁶ Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

²⁷ Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, ²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

And it is from Hebrews that I take the benediction I offer on most Sundays. The version I use is from an earlier edition of the New International Version. This is the latest one:

Hebrews 13:20-21

²⁰ Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, ²¹ equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

1, 2 & 3 JOHN

The last four books of the New Testament to be written were all written by John, who we think was the only one of the Twelve to die a natural death, and who was at this point probably

⁶ Origin (d. c. A.D. 254) noted that "Who actually wrote the epistle, only God knows" (cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.25.14). See the discussion in the *ESV Study Bible*, p. 2357.

⁷ *ESV Study Bible*, p. 2359.

the only one of the Twelve remaining alive on earth. We look today at those letters we call 1, 2, and 3 John, holding the last, John's Apocalypse, for another day.

First John covers a number of topics in a pattern more circular than linear. The letter has actually been called "symphonic," in that John "states themes, moves away from them, and then revisits them with variations."⁸ The "main theme of 1 John is *tests by which we can know if we are in Christ*—beliefs and attitudes that authenticate one's claims to be a Christian."⁹ We'll return to some of these in a moment.

Like 1 John, 2 John was probably written in the vicinity of Ephesus near the end of the first century and near the end of John's life. The letter is addressed to "*the lady chosen by God and to her children, whom I love in the truth*" (v. 1), but there are several reasons why this is probably an unusual way to refer to a congregation rather than to an individual person.¹⁰ The focus of 2 John is living in the love of God in accordance with the truth of Jesus Christ:

2 John 1:4-6

⁴ It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us. ⁵ And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. ⁶ And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.

Third John is a short personal letter written to someone named Gaius, encouraging him to be steadfast in the face of opposition he was facing in his congregation. It has been suggested that 2 and 3 John "were originally preserved because they were part of a single packet containing all three Johannine letters. On this view, **3 John** was a personal letter to Gaius commending the courier of the shipment, Demetrius (v. 12); **2 John** was to be read aloud to Gaius's church; and **1 John** was a sermon for general distribution and not a letter in the strict sense."¹¹ Whether this was actually the case cannot be determined, but it provides an interesting framework for understanding these three brief letters.

HOMILY

Well, after this quick overview, what might be the key insight from the General Letters? While many things might be suggested, it seems to me that one central issue in the General Letters has to do with proper understanding of who Jesus is, and that three sentences from 1 John crystalize this concern:

1 John 4:2-3

*² This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ **has come in the flesh** is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.*

⁸ *ESV Study Bible*, p. 2426.

⁹ Under that umbrella, subordinate themes appear: Christology (doctrine about the person and work of Christ); walking in the light; love; and the need to reject fallen, worldly culture (*ESV Study Bible*, p. 2428).

¹⁰ "This more likely refers to a congregation than to an individual, because much of 2 John is written in the second-person plural. It is also questionable whether John would write to a female Christian that he and she should 'love one another' (v. 5); the phrase makes better sense if addressed to a church.

"There are three additional reasons why 'elect lady' may refer to a whole congregation. First, the word 'church' in Greek is feminine in gender, and 'lady' would go along with that. Second, the church is depicted as 'bride' elsewhere in John's writings (Rev. 21:2, 9; 22:17). Third, the Greek word *kyria* ('lady') referred to a social subunit in the Greek city-state. John may use this word for a local congregation instead of the more common feminine word *ekklēsia*. Finally, v. 13 suggests that John writes to one congregation from another, which he terms 'your elect sister'" (*ESV*, p. 2439).

¹¹ *ESV Study Bible*, p. 2441.

1 John 4:15

¹⁵ *If anyone acknowledges that Jesus **is the Son of God**, God lives in them and they in God.*

1 John 5:1

¹ *Everyone who believes **that Jesus is the Christ** is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.*

Here's why those sentences are important. The first sentence affirms that Jesus of Nazareth is **God in human flesh**, as hard as that is for us to imagine. The second sentence affirms that Jesus of Nazareth is the **Son of God**, which is an affirmation of God's Trinitarian nature, which is even harder to imagine. And the last sentence affirms that Jesus of Nazareth is **the Messiah whom God promised**, beginning all the way back in Genesis 3:15.

Each of those affirmations has to do with an essential dimension of Who Jesus Is, and it is this same Jesus who meets us now as we come to the Table He has prepared for us