

General Epistles

by André van Belkum

The General Epistles get less attention than Paul's epistles, but they are an integral part of the Bible and contain vital information for Christians.

The early Church gave the title "General" (or "Catholic," meaning universal) to the seven epistles that bear the names of James, Peter, John and Jude.

The seven General Epistles are:

- James.
- 1 Peter.
- 2 Peter.
- 1 John.
- 2 John.
- 3 John.
- Jude.

An "epistle" is a literary letter intended to be published and read by individuals or groups of people.

The early Church included 2 and 3 John with the "General" Epistles, although these two appear to be personal letters addressed to individuals. Some contend that these two epistles were meant for the Church at large, but that John, in order to protect the members from persecution, addressed them to individuals. The *Davis Dictionary of the Bible* states: "The elect lady and Gaius, to whom 2 and 3 John respectively are addressed, were probably understood to represent the church universal" (p. 227).

On the other hand, it is also possible that these seven books were clustered together for the sake of convenience as they did not fit into any of the other major divisions of the New Testament books. The term "General" or "Catholic" was adopted by early Christian writers, and was not part of the original Greek text. As such, the term "General" may not be a completely accurate description of the seven epistles, and 2 and 3 John may well have been addressed to individuals.

Order of Christian attributes

The apostle Paul gives three Christian virtues in 1 Corinthians 13:13: faith, hope and love. These are reflected in the themes of the General Epistles:

1. James speaks of faith.
2. Peter speaks of hope.
3. John speaks of love.

James is placed first, as he writes about the basic principles of Christian living—faith being a notable cornerstone.

Background and overview of the book of James

There is some debate over who wrote the book, as there are a number of men in the New Testament with the name James. The consensus is that the author was the half-brother of Jesus to whom He made a special appearance after His resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7).

James later became the recognized leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18) and presided over the Council of Jerusalem, the meeting where the Church decided to not require circumcision of gentiles coming into the Church (Acts 15). Paul recognized James, together with Peter and John, as “pillars” in the Church (Galatians 1:18-19; 2:9).

Purpose

The scattered members were facing various trials and afflictions. James encouraged them to recognize trials and problems as opportunities to develop Christian character. The testing would produce patience (*hupomone* in Greek), which also means steadfastness, unswerving constancy and persistence. Doing this would make a Christian “perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (1:4).

Chapter 1

The letter is addressed to “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad,” described as “brethren” or Christians (1:2, 19; 2:1, 7). After acknowledging their trials (1:1-4), James encouraged readers to use wisdom and apply godly principles to derive benefits from these adversities (1:5-27).

Chapter 2

James encouraged brotherly love and avoiding snobbery, as this is contrary to the law that states, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (2:1-13). Both faith and works are important: “Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (2:14-26).

Chapter 3

Proper control of the tongue is important for spiritual growth (3:1-12), and James makes a distinction between worldly and godly wisdom (3:13-18).

Chapter 4

A number of subjects are covered, including the causes of war and conflicts. There are warnings against coveting and selfish desires, encouragement to resist the devil by drawing near to God, to not speak evil of others, and to not leave God out of future plans.

Chapter 5

James gives warnings about the pitfalls of riches and tells readers not to place all hope and desires on earthly things. Rather, he tells them, be patient and place your trust and confidence in Christ who will return to the earth to establish His Kingdom and reward His servants (5:1-11).

He also gives instructions to those who are sick (5:14-16) to exercise faith as Elijah did (5:16-18).

Overview and background of 1 Peter

Although some critics dispute it, the book tells us it is written by the apostle Peter (1:1). The book of 1 Peter is addressed to Christians located in the northeast corner of Asia Minor. Most of these people were gentiles with previous pagan backgrounds.

Purpose

William Barclay, in his *Daily Study Bible*, states: “It is written out of the love of a pastor’s heart to help people who were going through it [trials and persecution] and to whom worse things were still to come. The ‘key-note,’ says Moffatt, ‘is steady encouragement to endurance in conduct and innocence in character.’ E.J. Goodspeed wrote: ‘*First Peter* is one of the most moving pieces of persecution literature.’ To this day it is one of the easiest letters in the New Testament to read” (p. 138).

Peter’s first epistle centers on sufferings and persecution. In order to encourage Christians and give them direction, Peter focuses on the coming of Christ and their deliverance. This certainty of Christ’s return would provide a great source of hope and comfort, even as Paul encouraged the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

Chapter 1

Peter calls those to whom he writes the “elect,” especially chosen by God for the purpose of service. He refers to them as “pilgrims,” sojourners in a foreign country waiting for “an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away ... ready to be revealed in the last time” (1:2-5). What an incredible inheritance is reserved for true Christians!

With this great promise of eternal inheritance in mind, Peter, in the rest of the chapter, encourages Christian conduct, including such character traits as perseverance, obedience to the truth and “sincere love of the brethren.”

Chapter 2

Peter continues to admonish spiritual growth and development, the “laying aside” (2:1) of traits that are contrary to a spiritually healthy Christian. He ends the chapter by using the attitude of Christ as an example to emulate (2:21-25).

Chapter 3

Peter emphasizes conduct within the marriage and family (3:1-7), followed by further instruction in Christian living (3:8-22).

Chapter 4

Peter gives further instruction on overcoming human weaknesses by applying biblical principles of behavior, such as heartfelt prayers (4:7), “fervent love for one another” (4:8), hospitality and service (4:10-11). Readers should not be surprised if “fiery trials” overtake them, but remember Christ as an example of steadfastness in His sufferings (4:12-19).

Chapter 5

Peter gives guidance and instruction for the elders, including a warning about their adversary, the devil (5:1-9). In conclusion, Peter gives further words of encouragement (5:10-14).

Overview: 2 Peter

Main themes:

- Warning against false ministers, who appear to be within the Church.
- Remaining steadfast in the faith.

Chapter 1

Peter identifies his audience as those called by God and given knowledge of His ways, including “precious promises” to those who are “partakers of the divine nature” (1:1-4).

He encourages growth in the fruits of God’s Spirit and keeping these teachings in remembrance (1:5-15).

He explains that prophecies are certain, including Christ’s return (1:16-21).

Chapter 2

Peter gives warnings against false prophets and their ways of deception. These individuals will not go unpunished. This material is similar to the book of Jude.

Chapter 3

Christians must prepare and be ready for the return of Christ and be wary of mockers who scoff at His literal return. Christ's second coming is sure and will bring about huge changes to the world and society (3:1-10). This truth should motivate readers to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (3:18).

Overview: 1 John

Internal evidence in 1 John indicates a division was developing within the Church. Some members were splitting off from others and forming their own fellowship (1 John 2:19). They were trying to entice the rest of the membership to join them (2:26). Certain verses indicate that John is writing to believers (2:1, 12-14, 19; 3:1; 5:13).

Chapter 1

John stresses the importance of fellowshiping with fellow Christians (1:3-7) and the acknowledgement and confession of sins (1:8-10).

Chapter 2

John defines some of the main traits of true Christians: keeping the commandments (2:3-6) and not loving the world (society), as it is passing away (2:15-17).

Chapter 3

John gives several definitions: Christians are "children of God" (3:1-2) and sin is lawlessness or breaking the law (3:4). He also gives factors that define what true Christian love is (3:11-18).

He also discusses getting to know God through prayer and obedience (3:19-24).

Chapter 4

John gives warnings against false ministers and tells how to detect them (4:1-6).

He tells how to determine if someone has the love of God (4:7-10) and how to demonstrate the love of God (4:11-21).

Chapter 5

John again defines the love of God (5:1-3). He encourages us to overcome the evils of the world (society) through faith, love and obedience (5:4-10) and overcome trials through the power of God (5:11-20). He concludes with a warning against idolatry (5:21).

Overview: 2 John

Here's a brief outline of John's short second epistle:

- Salutation (1:1-3).
- Love is to "walk according to His commandments" (1:4-6).
- Be constantly on guard against "deceivers" (those who lead into error) and combat their deception by holding onto sound doctrine (1:7-11).
- Conclusion (1:12-13).

Overview: 3 John

In 3 John, the apostle John:

- Gives an exhortation to “walk in the truth” (1:1-4).
- Encourages hospitality (1:5-8).
- Names Diotrephes as a person desiring an office for selfish gain and advantage (1:9-10).
- Gives concluding remarks (1:11-14).

Overview: Jude

The main theme and purpose of Jude’s epistle is to counteract the threat of certain men who had “crept in unnoticed” into the Church and “were busily engaged in turning the grace of God into an excuse for open immorality and were denying the only true God and Jesus Christ the Lord” (verse 4) (William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible*, p. 158). Here is a brief outline:

- Greetings and purpose (1:1-4).
- Description and judgment of false teachers (1:5-16).
- Factors and traits that make true believers different (1:17-23).
- Conclusion (1:24-25).

Knock and you shall find

God, out of love and concern, has given us His Word, the Bible, to show the way out of troubles and hardships. He promises to reward those who seek Him with their whole heart (2 Chronicles 7:14). God says He stands at the door of our minds and is knocking (Revelation 3:20).

It is up to each of us to respond and to seek the truth that leads to eternal life.

For further study, read the articles in the section: “New Testament: Overview.”

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