

# THE GENERAL EPISTLES

James ■ First and Second Peter  
First, Second, and Third John ■ Jude



Mark Strauss



## *introduction*

How to Read the Bible

# The General Epistles

**O**f the **twenty-seven books** in the New Testament, twenty-one are letters or “epistles.” Of these, thirteen were written by the apostle Paul, one has unknown authorship (Hebrews), and seven were written by others. These seven are known as the “General Epistles.” “General” refers to the fact that they were written to more general audiences rather than to a single church or individual.

The Pauline Epistles were named after the churches they were written to (ROMANS, 1–2 CORINTHIANS; GALATIANS; EPHESIANS; PHILIPPIANS;

COLOSSIANS; 1–2 THESSALONIANS) or their individual recipients (1–2 TIMOTHY; TITUS; PHILEMON). Hebrews is named after the ethnicity of its recipients (Jewish Christians). The General Epistles are named after their authors: James; 1, 2 Peter; 1, 2, 3 John; and Jude. Two of these authors—Peter and John—were members the Twelve, the apostles Jesus chose and commissioned as his closest disciples. The other two—James and Jude—were half-brothers of Jesus who assumed leadership roles in the church after Jesus’ resurrection.

The two most prominent themes in the General Epistles are *external* challenges to the church—trials, opposition, and persecution—and *internal* dangers—the increasing threat of false teaching. While 1 Peter and James have a greater focus on external pressures, 2 Peter, 1–3 John and Jude deal with the growing threat of heresy from within.

Some of the greatest theological themes and most exalted prose in the New Testament are found in these letters. In the chapters that follow we will take a closer look at the authors, purposes, and themes of the General Epistles.

*Mark Strauss*

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one

# Faith That Works: James

**T**he state of Missouri in the U.S. has an unofficial slogan that appears on its license plates: “The *Show-Me* State.” This is meant to describe the character of Missourians, who are conservative, cautious, and unwilling to believe without adequate evidence. If there is a “show me” epistle in the New Testament, it is James. James says, “Don’t just tell me about your faith, *show me* by your actions.” True faith is more than just saying you believe. It is a heartfelt trust in God that results in a transformed life.

## Who Was James?

The author of this letter identifies himself by the Greek name *Iakōbos*, which is translated in our

versions as “James.” There are a number of people named James/Jacob in the New Testament:

**(1) James the son of Alphaeus** was one of Jesus’s disciples (MATTHEW 10:3, MARK 3:18, LUKE 6:15). But since this James is never mentioned except in the lists of disciples, he is unlikely to be the author of this letter.

**(2) James the son of Zebedee** and the brother of John was one of the “inner circle” of Jesus’s disciples and much more prominent than James the son of Alphaeus. But this James was martyred by Herod Agrippa (ACTS 12:2) around AD 44, probably too early to be the author of this letter.

**(3) The most likely candidate for the author is James, the half-brother of Jesus.** No other James in the New Testament was well known enough to be identified simply as “James” (1:1). According to Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3, Jesus had four brothers, James, Joseph, Jude and Simon, and at least two sisters. James, like his brothers, did not believe in Jesus (JOHN 7:5) until after the resurrection (1 CORINTHIANS 15:7). But James quickly became a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church. He was visited by Paul on Paul’s first trip to Jerusalem after his conversion (GALATIANS 1:18–19), and it was James who pronounced the decision at the Jerusalem Council that Gentiles were saved by faith alone, rather than through circumcision and keeping the Law (ACTS 15:12–21). Because of his piety James became known as “James the Just.”

We know very little about James’s later ministry, but we do have an account of his martyrdom from the Jewish historian Josephus. Josephus reports that

during the interim between the Roman governorship of Festus and Albinus (around AD 63), the newly appointed Jewish high priest Ananus saw a chance to move against the Jerusalem Christians. He had James and some other leaders arrested, tried before the Sanhedrin, and stoned to death. Ananus's unlawful actions disturbed many of the more moderate Jews of Jerusalem, who respected James for his piety. They complained to the governor Albinus, who deposed Ananus as high priest (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1).

## Audience and Purpose

James addresses his letter to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (1:1). The “twelve tribes” is almost certainly a reference to Jewish Christians. James writes to the “true Israel”—those Jews who have accepted Jesus as their Messiah. But what is the “scattering” or *diaspora*? In the book of Acts, Luke reports that following the stoning of Stephen (ACTS 7), “a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria” (8:1). James, as the leader of the Jerusalem church, continues pastoral care over this flock, encouraging them to authentic Christian living.

The book of James has sometimes been called the Proverbs of the New Testament because it contains short proverbial sayings for godly living like the Old Testament book of Proverbs. Another characteristic of James is its many parallels with the teachings of Jesus, especially those found on the Sermon on the Mount. Compare the following passages:

TOPIC	James	Jesus
<b>Joy &amp; blessing in trials</b>	<p><b>James 1:2, 12</b>  <i>Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds . . . Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial, because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life . . .</i></p>	<p><b>Matthew 5:11–12</b>  <i>Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven . . .</i></p>
<b>Producing fruit</b>	<p><b>James 3:10–12</b>  <i>Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be . . . can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.</i></p>	<p><b>Matthew 7:16–18</b>  <i>By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? . . . A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.</i></p>
<b>Peace-makers</b>	<p><b>James 3:18</b>  <i>Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.</i></p>	<p><b>Matthew 5:9</b>  <i>Blessed are the peace-makers, for they will be called children of God.</i></p>
<b>Oaths</b>	<p><b>James 5:12</b>  <i>Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple “Yes” or “No.”</i></p>	<p><b>Matthew 5:34–36</b>  <i>But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.</i></p>



While the wording is seldom identical, the concepts are strikingly similar, showing that James was very familiar with Jesus's teaching.

## **Some Key Themes in James**

### ***Wisdom to Face Trials with Joy* (1:2–18; 3:15–18).**

The scattered people of God were experiencing persecution and trials, something not uncommon for those who have had to flee their homes. James calls his readers to an attitude of joy in suffering (1:2). Joy doesn't mean being happy all the time; it is rather a deep contentment that comes from trusting God.

Trials can be joyful because they have a purpose, which is to develop perseverance. Perseverance, in turn, develops Christian maturity, which enables believers to face new trials with success (1:3–4). Persevering through trials requires wisdom, the ability to make good and godly decisions. James says God will give his people this wisdom if they simply ask in prayer, that is, depend on him for it. But they need to ask in faith, without wavering (1:5–8). The wisdom that comes from God, James says, results in an attitude of humility and actions that are not selfish or envious, but rather pure, peace-loving, considerate, merciful, impartial and sincere (3:15–18).

***Riches and Poverty* (1:9–11; 5:1–12).** Many of the trials James's readers were experiencing apparently came from the disparity between the rich and the poor. James warns against the danger of riches and of treating the poor with contempt. God will exalt

the humble and will bring down the proud (1:9–11). James warns of coming judgment against the rich who oppress the poor: “You have hoarded wealth in the last days... You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter...” (5:1–6). He encourages the poor to be patient in the face of suffering, because God’s judgment is coming (5:7–8).

***Showing Partiality*** (2:1–13). Economic disparity can result in an attitude of favoritism. There is a tendency to honor the rich and powerful since they can provide favors, and to despise the poor and powerless. James affirms that God shows no partiality and commands his readers to treat one another with the respect due those created in the image of God.

***The Destructive Power of Words*** (1:19–20, 26; 3:1–12; 4:1–12). Like a wildfire, words of gossip and slander can do great damage. James warns believers to be careful what they say, since the tongue can be a deadly weapon (3:3–4). Teachers are especially accountable (3:1), since their words can lead people to truth or grave error. The antidote to harmful words is to be “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (1:19–20).

***Faith and Works*** (1:6–8; 2:14–26; 5:14). As a book of wisdom, James calls his readers to walk faithfully with God and make good and godly decisions. In line with this, James says it’s not enough just to *say* you believe. That faith must be backed up by a change in

lifestyle. “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (2:17).

Some have suggested that James here contradicts Paul, since Paul so strongly asserts that we are justified by faith alone, apart from works (ROMANS 3:28). But there is no contradiction here, since James and Paul are addressing different situations. James is using the word “faith” in the sense of mere profession (“if someone *claims* to have faith...”; 2:14). It’s not enough to say you believe, he says, true faith will result in a transformed life. By contrast, faith for Paul means trusting in God alone for salvation, rather than trusting in one’s own merit, ancestry, position, or status.

Paul and James also use the word “works” differently. When Paul says, “by the works of the law no one will be justified” (GALATIANS 2:16), he is referring to pre-conversion works, attempts to earn salvation on your own. When James speaks of works, he is referring to post-conversion works, the evidence of salvation in a changed life. Paul would certainly agree with James that true salvation will show itself in behavior (SEE EPHESIANS 2:8–10).

Finally, the two authors use the word “justify” differently. For Paul justification is a legal term, meaning that God, the righteous judge, *declares us to be righteous* on the basis of Christ’s death on the cross (ROMANS 3:24). For James, “justify” means to “prove righteous.” Abraham’s faith was justified, or shown to be authentic, by his actions (JAMES 2:21).

So Paul and James are dealing with two different situations in the church. Paul is responding to those

who are claiming that salvation comes through one's own good works or through the works of the law, meaning Jewish identity markers like circumcision and keeping the Sabbath. "Absolutely not," Paul says, "salvation comes through Christ's work alone." By contrast, James is dealing with complacent Christians who are saying that once they make a profession of faith, they can live any way they want. "Absolutely not," James says, "authentic faith will result in a changed life."



*two:*

# The Suffering People of God:

## 1 Peter

**H**ope is a powerful thing. People can endure almost anything if they can see the light at the end of the tunnel. A marathon runner, exhausted and on the verge of collapse, rounds the last bend to see the finish line in the distance. A surge of adrenaline takes over and with new energy he pushes through to the goal.

It is the same with the Christian life. We can persevere through the greatest challenges if we keep our destination in sight. In this letter, Peter writes to Christians who are suffering and even dying for their faith. As a fellow-sufferer with them, Peter assures and encourages them that, though in this life they could lose everything—possessions, family and friends, even one's own life—they have a sure inheritance that is “kept in

heaven for you,” one “that can never perish, spoil or fade” (1 PETER 1:4). The sure hope that we have is that the trials of this life are a mere flicker of a candle compared to the incalculable glory of eternity with God.

## Who Was Peter?

The author’s given name was Simon, or Simeon. He and his brother Andrew were fishermen from Galilee. Andrew had been directed to Jesus by John the Baptist (JOHN 1:35–39), and then Andrew introduced Simon to Jesus, who nicknamed him “Peter” (Greek) or “Cephas” (Aramaic), meaning “a rock” (JOHN 1:40–42).

Peter became the most prominent of Jesus’s disciples. He always heads the lists of disciples. We know from the gospel accounts about Peter’s personality: rash, impetuous, wavering in commitment. It was Peter who denied he knew Christ three times and who repeatedly failed when challenged to greater faith (MATTHEW 14:31; 16:23; 26:34, 40). But Jesus saw in him great potential. It was Peter who confessed Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” and in response Jesus entrusted to him the authoritative “keys of the kingdom” (MATTHEW 16:13–20). This pastoral and leadership role was confirmed following the resurrection when Jesus commissioned him to “feed my sheep” (JOHN 21:15–17).

After the resurrection Peter assumed the leadership role that Jesus had predicted. He preached the first sermon on the day of Pentecost (ACTS 2) and opened the door of the gospel to the Jews (ACTS 2:14–41) and to the Gentiles (10:1–48). He stayed in Israel for the early years of the church and was active in the Jerusalem Council’s decision concerning the salvation of Gentiles (ACTS 15).

What do we know about Peter's later life? From his own writings and from Paul we know he traveled with his wife (1 CORINTHIANS 9:5) throughout Asia Minor (1 PETER 1:1) and eventually to Rome (called "Babylon" in 1 PETER 5:13). Tradition tells us he was crucified upside down in Rome during the persecutions instigated by the emperor Nero (about AD 65).

## Peter's Audience

Peter addresses this letter to "God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1:1). These Roman provinces make up much of modern Turkey. These believers were experiencing increasing opposition and persecution (1:6, 3:13–17, 4:12–19). In the Greco-Roman world Christians were increasingly viewed with suspicion because they had different moral values, did not take part in pagan festivals, and refused to worship the gods of Rome or to participate in emperor worship. This last in particular was viewed as unpatriotic. Persecution increased dramatically in the 60s of the first century, especially sparked by the Emperor Nero's state-sanctioned persecution of the church in Rome.

## Why Did Peter Write?

Though many theological themes are woven throughout the letter, the one that the author repeatedly returns to is standing firm in the face of suffering and persecution. Every chapter has references to suffering: 1:6–9; 2:19–25; 3:8–22; 4:1–2, 4:12–19. Peter's purpose may be seen in 1 Peter 5:12: "I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God.

Stand fast in it.” The ultimate example of righteous suffering is Jesus himself: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (2:21).

## Key Themes in First Peter

***The Value of Suffering.*** Peter affirms that for believers, suffering is a part of their calling in Christ (2:21; 4:12–13) and produces spiritual growth and maturity (4:1, 14). As believers “he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade” (1:3–5). We can endure suffering, knowing it is temporary (1:6). Suffering has great value because it proves our faith is genuine and brings glory to God (1:7).

***The Believer’s Identity.*** Believers suffer because they are foreigners and strangers in this world (1:1, 17; 2:9, 11). The identity of believers is another major theme in 1 Peter. There are many parallels drawn from the Old Testament people of God. Believers are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession” (2:9). In light of this status as God’s special people, believers are to live lives that are set apart by their positive example. Peter urges believers to, “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (2:11–12).

First Peter is a reminder that although my passport may say I’m a citizen of United States, or China, or Mexico, or Ethiopia, or wherever, my ultimate citizenship is in heaven and my ultimate loyalty is to the kingdom of God.





*three*

# Wolves in Sheep's Clothing:

## 2 Peter and Jude

**'ve heard it** said that the best way to identify counterfeit money is to become thoroughly acquainted with real money. If you know the real, you can quickly identify the fake. This is very much the message of 2 Peter and Jude.▀ The best way to identify counterfeit religion is to get to know the real thing. Knowing sound doctrine drawn from the Word of God is the best defense against false teaching.

### 2) **The Relationship of Second Peter and Jude**

*We are treating 2 Peter and Jude together in a single chapter because of their close relationship. Second Peter 2:1–3:4 is strikingly similar to Jude 4–18. Most scholars think there must be some relationship between the two: either Jude borrowed from Peter; Peter borrowed from Jude; or both used another source or sources. Some scholars claim that Peter wrote first, since Peter places the coming of false teachers in the future (2 PETER 2:1), while in Jude they are already present (V. 4). The majority of scholars today, however, believe that Jude wrote first and Peter borrowed from him.*

*Some wonder why Peter, one of the twelve apostles, would borrow from Jude, a relative unknown. But Jude, like his brother James, was an apostle (one who had seen the resurrected Christ and was commissioned by him) and a respected leader in the church. There is no reason Peter would not borrow from an authoritative source like this to address a similar problem.*

## **Second Peter**

If 1 Peter concerns external pressure on the church from persecution and trials, 2 Peter concerns internal pressure from false teachers within the church.

**The Author.** Of all the books in the New Testament, 2 Peter is perhaps the most questioned in terms of its authenticity. The letter was not widely quoted in the early church and the style is significantly different from 1 Peter. Some scholars think it was written after Peter's life and is pseudonymous, falsely attributed to Peter. Others claim that the letter was written by

his close disciples after his death as a “testament” honoring Peter.

While it is true there are some significant differences between 1 and 2 Peter, these could be attributed to Peter’s use of a scribe or editor (known as an amanuensis) for one or both letters. There’s actually some evidence for this since, at the end of 1 Peter, the apostle says that he has written the letter “with the help of Silas” (5:12). So perhaps the differences in style are attributed to Silas’s input, as Peter dictated the letter to him. In any case, the differences in style and theology do not seem significant enough to overrule centuries of church tradition affirming the letter’s identification with Peter, nor the testimony of the Holy Spirit as to the book’s inspiration and authority.

***The Purpose and Key Themes of 2 Peter.*** Peter’s primary purposes in the letter are to encourage these believers in godly living and to warn them against false teaching. The first chapter focuses on authentic Christian faith. Believers can stand firm against false doctrine by holding firm to the message passed down by the eyewitnesses and confirmed by the prophets, and then by putting it into practice through godly living. Through his divine power, God has given us everything we need for a life of faith and godliness through our knowledge of him (1:3). “Make every effort” Peter says, “to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control,

perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love” (1 PETER 1:5–7).

Chapter 2 has the primary warning against false teachers. While Peter does not specifically identify these false teachers, he describes them as immoral, arrogant, deceptive and greedy, exploiting people for their own gain. Their judgment by God is certain.

Chapter 3 focuses on the second coming of Christ. Evidently some false teachers were denying Christ’s return, mockingly saying, “Where is this coming he promised?” (3:4). Peter responds, first, by pointing out that God does not track time the way we do.

“With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day” (2 PETER 3:8). Second, Peter says the delay does not point to God’s failure, but to his patience and mercy: “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” (3:9). In the end, God will be vindicated on the final day of Judgment, when “the day of the Lord will come like a thief” (3:10). Peter’s application is that in light of God’s coming judgment, “You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming” (3:11–12).

## The Letter of Jude

**Who was Jude?** The author of this letter identifies himself simply as “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James” (JUDE 1). This is almost certainly

James, the half-brother of Jesus, a key leader in the early church, and the author of the New Testament letter of James. This would mean that Jude is another half-brother of Jesus and that we have two letters in the New Testament written by Jesus's brothers.

We know almost nothing about Jude except a few sparse facts gleaned from the New Testament. Like his brother James, he did not believe in Jesus during his public ministry (JOHN 7:5). From Paul's report in 1 Corinthians 15:7, we know that James saw Jesus alive after his resurrection and we can assume that the other brothers did as well. In 1 Corinthians 9:5 Paul also speaks of "the Lord's brothers" as traveling preachers, so Jude probably was an itinerant evangelist.

**Why Did Jude Write?** At the beginning of this short letter Jude claims that he originally planned to write about "the salvation we share" (v. 3), but because of an urgent situation, he felt compelled to write instead about contending for the faith against false teachers: "For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you" (v. 4). So like 2 Peter, Jude was written to defend against false teachers.

As in 2 Peter, the specific identification of the false teachers is not given, but based on the descriptions, it seems to have been some form of antinomian Gnosticism. Antinomian means "opposed to the law" and so refers to immoral behavior. Gnostics believed the material world was evil and salvation came through higher spiritual "knowledge," or *gnosis*. Some Gnostics

used this denial of the material world as an excuse for sexual immorality, claiming that what they did to their bodies made no difference spiritually. Jude says that these false teachers “pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (v. 4).

In the end, Jude calls his readers to counter this false teaching by living out an authentic Christian life: “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 20–21). Faith, hope and love—centered on Christ and his Word—is the answer to all the counterfeits the world has to offer.

***Jude’s Citation of Other Works.*** One somewhat controversial aspect of Jude is the fact that twice he quotes from non-biblical Jewish writings. Verse 9 alludes to a story about Michael the archangel that scholars believe comes from an intertestamental Jewish work known as the *Assumption of Moses*. And in verses 14–15, Jude quotes from the Jewish apocalyptic work known as *1 Enoch*.

Yet the fact that Jude quotes from these works does not mean that he viewed them as inspired Scripture. While Paul occasionally quotes Greek writers (ACTS 17:28; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:33; TITUS 1:12), he does not present them as authoritative or inspired by God.

What is actually more surprising than Jude’s citations here is the fact that virtually every other

quotation in the New Testament comes from the Old Testament. This is especially significant in light of the popularity in the first century of other Jewish writings like 1–2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Ben Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon. Despite their widespread use, *none* of these apocryphal writings is ever cited in the New Testament as authoritative Scripture. The few extrabiblical passages quoted by Jude and Paul would seem to be exceptions that prove the rule.



*four:*

# Living In the Light: 1, 2, and 3 John

**“Y**ou must be a Strauss!” I’ve heard that said many times in my life. What usually follows is, “You look like your . . .” (father, mother, brother). You may have heard something similar, because families often resemble one another.

The letters of John are about family resemblance. False teachers had arisen in John’s churches, provoking doubts among some in the church. John seeks to dispel those doubts, pointing out that you can tell who the true people of God are because they resemble



their heavenly Father. They love God and love one another; they hold to the true teaching of Jesus and the apostles; and they keep God's commandments. The false teachers, by contrast, shared none of these family traits. Instead, they resembled their father the devil; they hated God's people, rejected the truth, and disobeyed God's commands. It's these family resemblances, John says, that separate the lies of the false teachers from the true people of God: "This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister" (1 JOHN 3:10).

## First John

**Who Was John?** These letters have traditionally been ascribed to John the apostle, the disciple of Jesus. He was the brother of James and the son of Zebedee (and Salome), a prosperous fisherman in Galilee (MARK 1:19–20). Jesus nicknamed James and John "sons of thunder" (MARK 3:17), which may have been because of their fiery personalities (SEE MARK 10:35–39; LUKE 9:49, 54). James and John, together with Peter, were part of the "inner circle" of disciples, who experienced such events as the raising of Jairus's daughter (MARK 5:37) and the transfiguration of Jesus (MARK 9:2).

John is also identified as the enigmatic figure referred to as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (JOHN 13:23; 20:2; 21:7, 20), whose eyewitness testimony stands behind the fourth gospel (JOHN 21:24). Church tradition tells us John spent his later years in and around Ephesus

in Asia Minor and from there he wrote the gospel and the three letters that bear his name. John was exiled at some point by the Emperor Domitian to the island of Patmos, and from there he experienced the visions recorded in the book of Revelation.

***The Occasion and Purpose of 1 John.*** At some point John became aware that false teachers were influencing the churches he oversaw, causing some believers to doubt their faith. The situation is described in 1 John 2:18–23:

*Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. . . . They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.*

It's clear from these verses that these false teachers had once been part of the church but had now left and were teaching false doctrines. From the letter we can piece together some of their beliefs:

- *They claimed to know Jesus, but in fact they were part of the evil world system.*
- *They claimed to be sinless, but they broke God's commands.*
- *Instead of loving fellow believers, they hated them.*
- *They denied that Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God.*

- *They denied his true incarnation, that God himself had come in the flesh.*

Since these secessionists had evidently once been leaders in the church, some of the remaining church members were confused and wondering about their own salvation. John views the situation as critical, and fires back, even calling these opponents “antichrists” (2:18). He responds in two ways: (1) Positively, he assures the church members of the authenticity of their faith. (2) Negatively, he refutes the false claims of the heretics.

***The Tests of Faith.*** Throughout the letter John gives three key tests or evidences of authentic faith. They are:

- 1. Love for fellow believers:** *“We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other” (3:14). “Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness” (2:9; CF. 2:10–12; 3:10–18; 4:7–5:3).*
- 2. Obedience to God’s commands:** *“We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person” (2:3–4; CF. 1:5–2:6; 2:29–3:10; 3:22–24; 5:4–21).*
- 3. Belief that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God:** *“If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God” (4:15). “Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ.*

*Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son” (2:22; cf. 2:18–28; 3:23–4:6; 4:14, 15; 5:1, 5).*

While these are the external evidences of faith, ultimately, we know we are in the truth because of the confirmation by the Holy Spirit. 1 John 2:20 reads, “But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth.” What is this anointing? The next chapter makes this clear: “And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us” (3:24).

## **Second John**

Second and Third John are the two shortest letters in the New Testament. Second John is addressed to the “lady chosen by God and to her children,” which is probably a symbolic way of referring to a church and its members. At the end the author sends greetings from “the children of your sister, who is chosen by God.” This likely refers to the members (“children”) of John’s church, the “sister” of the church he is writing to.

The central theme of this short letter is to call the readers to stay faithful to the message of salvation that was passed down from Jesus and the apostles. As in 1 John, the author encourages them to love one another and to obey his commandments.

He also warns them not to support itinerant teachers who do not hold to the truth. Evidently, some of the church members were supporting teachers who were spreading false doctrine and stirring up dissension

in the church. As in 1 John, he refers to these false teachers as “antichrists” (2 JOHN 7) because they deny the true person and work of Christ.

## Third John

Third John deals with the issue of hospitality for traveling teachers, an issue touched on in 2 John 7–11. As they traveled from place to place, early Christian missionaries depended on the hospitality of Christians. When they entered a city, town, or village, they would seek out Christians to stay with. Hospitality was (and is) a very high value in the Middle East, so it was normal and expected to welcome guests into your home. As far as the advance of the gospel was concerned, it was an essential ministry. While 2 John 7–11 warns against giving hospitality to false teachers, 3 John encourages hospitality for authentic preachers and evangelists.

The letter is written to a church leader named Gaius (v. 1), who evidently leads a house church. John writes to encourage and affirm Gaius for providing hospitality to traveling missionaries (vv. 5–8). He also criticizes and condemns a certain man named Diotrephes for his abuse and failure to provide such hospitality (vv. 9–10). Outside of this letter, we don’t know anything about Diotrephes, but he was likely an overbearing and controlling leader in one of the churches of Asia minor, who was abusive towards these itinerant teachers. John also commends to Gaius a man named Demetrius, who is likely the one carrying the letter (v. 12).

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## Conclusion

Like all the New Testament letters, the General Epistles are occasional, written to specific people to address specific issues, questions, and needs. Their occasional nature means not every command or injunction is given directly to us. It's not necessarily mandatory, for example, to "greet one another with a kiss of love" (1 PETER 5:14), to forbid the wearing of gold jewelry (1 PETER 3:3), or to anoint the sick with oil (JAMES 5:14).

Yet as the Word of God, these letters provide timeless wisdom for believers of every generation. They reveal God's will and purpose in the world and the heart and soul of the Christian message. They provide wise guidance for living lives of joy, peace, and righteousness. They teach us to face trials with joyful contentment and to persevere and grow through difficult circumstances to spiritual maturity. They teach us to discern truth from error and provide us with the strength and courage through the Holy Spirit to stand firm on the truth. May the Lord richly bless you as you open your heart and mind to God's inspired Word!



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