

The General Letters

Series: The Bible

June 19, 2022

Thank you again for being part of worship today.

We are in our next to last week in our series “The Bible” as we look at the entirety of the Canon, recognizing the overarching themes and message of Scripture.

Here is our graphic representation of the Bible. Like a bookshelf, the Bible has many sections: Law, History, Poetry, the Prophets (both Major and Minor) are in the Old Testament. In the New Testament are the Gospels, a single book on Church History, then the Letters written by Paul, followed by General Letters, and concluding with the Book of Revelation.

Today, we are going to take a 30,000 foot look at the 8th section, The General Letters. We will ask three questions: What are the mega themes of the section? What is the key verse of that section? And how does it point to Jesus, the Son of God? I am so glad you have joined us on this spectacular journey!

As I mentioned last week, it’s amazing to note that one third of the New Testament content is letters. Twenty-one of twenty-seven books in the New Testament are epistles, 13 were written by Paul, and 8 more by others. And it is those final 8 we will look at today.

The General Letters get their name because they are... general. Hey, I never said the names of the Books of the Bible were very creative. They are general in that they are not addressed to any particular church, but to the “general” church. This meant they were intended to be circular letters; that is, they were circulated between a number of churches. One would read it, then pass it along to the others. 1st Peter is addressed to believers in five provinces in Asia Minor, what is now Turkey.

Though these letters constitute less than 10% of the New Testament¹, they make a vital contribution to Christian revelation, yet their study is often neglected by the average Christian. They give us a non-Pauline perspective of Christian teaching, complementary, yet unique. And other than James, which is considered to be one of the earliest books of the New Testament, the others are probably from 30-40 years after Jesus, thus addressing the need for unity in the midst of developing evil and false doctrine.

As far as the author of the books, we do not know who wrote Hebrews, except that Timothy is called a “brother.”² It was written to Jewish Christians, thus the name Hebrews. James was written by Jesus’ brother, who was the head of the Jerusalem Church. Again, it was written to early Jewish Christians. Then we have 2 letters written by the one and only Peter, followed by 3 letters written by his buddy John. And finally, we have the Book Jude, who called himself a “slave of Jesus Christ and a brother of James.”³ So, Jude was also a brother of Jesus, but he could not bring himself to say it.

They all were written to address the developing life and varied experiences of the early Christian Church. They were called forth by actual life situations and were

¹ Gospels (47%), Acts (13%), Pauline Epistles (26%), General Epistles (9%), Revelation (5%)

² Hebrews 13:23

³ Jude 1:1 (NLT2)

intended to meet real needs and answer vital questions in the lives of the believers to whom they were addressed.⁴

What are the mega themes of the General Letters?

First, Love.

You cannot read 1 John without realizing that its main theme is love. It has so many verses about love, loving other Christians, and love for God.

Christ's command is for Christians to love one another. This is the basic ingredient of true Christianity. This love is evidence that we are truly saved. God is the Creator of love; He cares that his children love each other. Love means putting others first and being unselfish. Love is action—showing others we care—not just saying it. To show love we must give sacrificially of our time and money to meet the needs of others.⁵ To obey Christ fully, we must believe His command to love others. Helping, giving, and meeting needs put love into practice.⁶

Second, Faith.

The 11th chapter of Hebrews is called “The Faith Chapter.” The first verse gives a definition of faith:

*Faith means being sure of the things we hope for and knowing that something is real even if we do not see it.*⁷

The chapter then highlights the examples of faith, beginning with Abel, Enoch, and Noah; continuing with Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph; then in Moses, the Israelites in the wilderness, and in a prostitute names Rahab; followed up by several of the judges, David, Samuel, and the prophets; closing with the glorious effects produced by it in the martyrs.

Faith is confident trust in God's promises. God's greatest promise is that we can be saved through Jesus. If we trust in Jesus Christ for our complete salvation, He will transform us completely. A life of obedience and complete trust is pleasing to God.⁸

As such, faith enables Christians to face trials. Genuine faith includes the commitment to stay true to God when we are under fire. Endurance builds character and leads to victory. We can have victory in our trials if we don't give up or turn our back on Christ. Stay true to Christ and pray for endurance.⁹

Third, Family and the Family of God.

Peter taught about family life. He urged all family members to treat others with sympathy, love, compassion, and humility. We must treat our families lovingly.

This leads into God's Family. We are privileged to belong to God's family, a community with Christ as the founder and foundation. Everyone in this community is related—we are all brothers and sisters, loved equally by God. Because Christ is the foundation of our family, we must be devoted, loyal, and faithful to Him. By obeying Him, we show that we are His children. We become God's children by believing in Christ.

⁴ “An Introduction to the New Testament: Volume 2 The Non-Pauline Epistles and Revelation.” D. Edmond Hiebert. Moody Press: Chicago. 1977. Page 23.

⁵ Life Application Study Bible, 1 John

⁶ Life Application Study Bible, 2 John

⁷ Hebrews 11:1 (NCV)

⁸ Life Application Study Bible, Hebrews

⁹ Life Application Study Bible, Hebrews

God's life in us enables us to love our fellow family members. How we treat others shows who our Father is. Live as a faithful, loving family member.¹⁰

Fourth, False Teachings.

Peter warned the church to beware of false teachers. These teachers were proud of their position, promoted sexual sin, and advised against keeping the Ten Commandments. Jude warns against false teachers and leaders who reject the lordship of Christ, undermine the faith of others, and lead them astray. John warned of those who taught that the physical body does not matter, who encouraged believers to throw off moral restraints. They also taught that Christ wasn't really a man and that we must be saved by having some special mystical knowledge.

These and others are apostasy—turning away from Christ. We are to remember that God punishes rebellion against Him. We must be careful not to drift away from a faithful commitment to Christ. Those who do not seek to know the truth in God's Word are susceptible to apostasy. Christians must guard against any false teachings that would distract them from the truth preached by the apostles and written in God's Word.¹¹

Fifth, A Living Faith.

James wanted believers not only to hear the truth but also to put it into action. He contrasts empty faith (claims without conduct) with faith that works. James 2:17-18 reads:

*So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.*¹²

Commitment to love and to serve others is evidence of true faith. Living faith makes a difference. We must make sure our faith is more than just a statement; it should also result in action, so seek ways of putting your faith to work.¹³

Sixth, Trials.

1 Peter 1:7 says:

*These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.*¹⁴

We should expect ridicule, rejection, and suffering because we are Christians. Persecution makes us stronger because it refines our faith. We can face persecution victoriously, as Christ did, if we rely on Him. Christians still suffer for what they believe. We should expect persecution, but we don't have to be terrified by it. The fact that we will live eternally with Christ should give us the confidence, patience, and hope to stand firm even when we are persecuted.¹⁵

In the Christian life, there are trials and temptations. Successfully overcoming these adversities produces maturity and strong character. Don't resent troubles when

¹⁰ Life Application Study Bible, 1 John

¹¹ Life Application Study Bible, Jude

¹² James 2:17-18 (NRSV)

¹³ Life Application Study Bible, James

¹⁴ 1 Peter 1:7 (NLT2)

¹⁵ Life Application Study Bible, 1 Peter

they come. Pray for wisdom; God will supply all you need to face persecution or adversity. He will give you patience and keep you strong in times of trial.¹⁶

Finally, Assurance.

God is in control of heaven and earth. Because his word is true, we can have assurance of eternal life and victory over sin. By faith we can be certain of our eternal destiny with him. Assurance of our relationship with God is a promise, but it is also a way of life. We build our confidence by trusting in God's Word and in Christ's provision for our sin.¹⁷

God will judge everyone with perfect justice. We all will face God. He will punish evildoers and those who persecute God's people. Those who love Him will be rewarded with life forever in His presence. Because all are accountable to God, we can leave judgment of others to Him. We must not hate or resent those who persecute us. We should realize that we will be held responsible for how we live each day.¹⁸

What is the key verse of the General Letters?

I debated on this one. 2 Peter 1:3 is quite good:

*By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence.*¹⁹

But in the end, I chose 1 John 1:9-10, 2:1-2:

*If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*²⁰

I like this verse for two reasons. First, even Christians sin. Sin requires God's forgiveness, and Christ's death provides it for us. Determining to live according to God's standards in the Bible shows that our life is being transformed. We cannot deny our sin nature, maintain that we are "above" sinning, or minimize the consequences of sin in our relationship with God. We must resist the attraction of sin, yet we must confess when we do sin.²¹

But the second reason I like this is that John wrote so that we do not sin. This is a call to holy living, to what we Wesleyans call sanctification. We are to grow in Christ so much that we approach the state of not sinning. That is our ultimate goal: to be like Christ.

How do the General Epistles point to Jesus?

First, Christ Is Superior.

Hebrews reveals Jesus' true identity as God. Jesus is the ultimate authority. He is greater than any religion or any angel. He is superior to any Jewish leader (such as Abraham, Moses, or Joshua) and superior to any priest. He is the complete revelation of

¹⁶ Life Application Study Bible, James

¹⁷ Life Application Study Bible, 1 John

¹⁸ Life Application Study Bible, 1 Peter

¹⁹ 2 Peter 1:3 (NLT2)

²⁰ 1 John 1:9-10, 2:1-2 (NRSV)

²¹ Life Application Study Bible, 1 John

God. Jesus alone can forgive our sin. He has secured our forgiveness and salvation by his death on the cross. We can find peace with God and real meaning for life by believing in Christ. We should not accept any alternative to or substitute for him.²²

Hebrews 1:3 reads:

*The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven.*²³

Christ is superior.

Second, Christ is our High Priest.

In the Old Testament, the high priest represented the Jews before God. In the General Letter of Hebrews, we learn that Jesus Christ is our priest. He links us with God. There is no other way to reach God. Because Jesus Christ lived a sinless life, He is the perfect substitute to die for our sin. He is our perfect representative with God. Jesus guarantees our access to God the Father. He intercedes for us so we can boldly come to the Father with our needs. When we are weak, we can come confidently to God for forgiveness and ask for his help.²⁴

Finally, Christ's Return.

One day Christ will create a new heaven and earth, where we will live forever. As Christians, our hope is in this promise. But with Christ's return comes his judgment on all who refuse to believe. The cure for complacency, lawlessness, and heresy is found in the confident assurance that Christ will return. God is still giving unbelievers time to repent. To be ready, Christians must keep on trusting and resist the pressure to give up waiting for Christ's return.²⁵

An author once told this story of an account he had with sea gulls: "Several years ago our family visited Niagara Falls. It was spring, and ice was rushing down the river. As I viewed the large blocks of ice flowing toward the falls, I could see that there were dead fish embedded in the ice. Gulls by the score were riding down the river feeding on the fish. As they came to the brink of the falls, their wings would go out, and they would escape from the falls. I watched one gull which seemed to delay and wondered when it would leave. It was engrossed in the fish, and when it finally came to the brink of the falls, out went its powerful wings. The bird flapped and flapped and even lifted the ice out of the water, and I thought it would escape. But it had delayed too long so that its claws had frozen into the ice. The weight of the ice was too great, and the gull plunged into the abyss."

How sad that even though the bird had plenty of time to fly away, because it delayed it paid the price. Now think of this story in terms of the Christian life. When we become overly enthralled with the things of this world, they can bring us down and cause our spiritual death. The finest attractions of this world become deadly when we become overly attached to them. If we cannot give up the things of this world and focus on Christ, we cannot be used by Him. Our eyes must be upward on Christ rather than downward on this world.

²² Life Application Study Bible, Hebrews

²³ Hebrews 1:3 (NLT2)

²⁴ Life Application Study Bible, Hebrews

²⁵ Life Application Study Bible, 2 Peter