Summer in the Word: New Testament

Hebrews and General Letters
Hebrews & General Letters

Book Titles

- Hebrews
- James
- 1 Peter
- 2 Peter
- 1 John
- 2 John
- 3 John
- Jude
General Letters

Distinctives

- Paul’s letters and Hebrews take their titles after the addressees.
- James-Jude are called **catholic epistles**, meaning they are “general, universal” because these letters don’t indicate that they are addressed to one single locality or group of people.
Agenda

Studying Hebrews & General Letters

- What was the general or specific situation of the audience that prompted the author to write the letter? (Historical Context)

- What is the author’s main message and exhortation to the audience about their situation? (Pastoral/Theological)
Hebrews

Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens. Hebrews 8:1
The Letter to the Hebrews

Historical Situation

- Author unknown
- Written to a group of Christians (Jewish background, possibly mixed Jewish & Gentile) who were tempted to revert back to Judaism due to enduring social ostracism and persecution from non-Christian Jews.
- They as possibly a group of Christians of a house church who broke away from the main group of Christians in their locality, who are tempted to lapse back to Judaism to avoid persecution
The Letter to the Hebrews

Theme & Purpose

- To guard and prevent from apostasy (to depart, renounce, or reject the faith) and to encourage believers to persevere
  - Danger: “neglect so great a salvation” (2:1)
  - Warning against unbelief: “Take care, brethren, that there not be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,”...for we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.” (3:12-14)

- To urge and empower to look ahead towards heavenly promises
  - “And we desire that each of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” (6:11-12)
Main Message(s)

Jesus is the Son of God and eternal high priest who is greater than all Old Testament figures (Hebrews 1-7):

- Old Testament prophets
- Angels
- Moses
- Joshua
- Aaron
- Melchizedek
Jesus is the Son of God and eternal high priest who is greater than OT Prophets:

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they. (1:1-4)
The Letter to the Hebrews

Main Message(s)

Jesus is the Son of God and eternal high priest who is greater than Joshua:

For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. (4:8-13)
The Letter to the Hebrews

Main Message(s)

Jesus is the eternal high priest who is greater than Aaron and the sons of Aaron, and Melchizedek (priest of the Most High God in OT):

The former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing, but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever. (7:23-28)
The Letter to the Hebrews

Main Message(s)

- **Jesus is the merciful high priest.**
  - For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (4:15-16)

- **Jesus was made perfect through suffering.**
  - Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation. (5:8-9)

- **Jesus is mediator of the new covenant**
  - But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. (9:11-12)
Read Letter to the Hebrews

Suggestion for Reading

- To understand how Jesus redeems us from sin through death & resurrection
- When you struggle with shrinking back to your old life due to opposition
- When you need encouragement that Jesus is the author and perfecter of your faith
- To understand the role of suffering in the Christian life
But someone may well say, “You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” James 2:18
James’ Letter

Who is James?

- Half brother of Jesus, who came to belief when he saw the risen Jesus (1 Cor. 15:7)
- Became a prominent leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15)
- Don’t get confused with other Jameses in the NT: James the son of Zebedee, James the son of Alphaeus
James’ Letter

Historical Situation

- Written to Jewish Christians living outside of Palestine
- The believers already have a foundation of faith. They don’t necessarily need teaching on doctrine, although James emphasizes the importance of Law.
- They need clarity and instructions for Christian conduct and life.
James’ Letter

Proverbial Nature and Style of James

- Paraenesis: a text that strings together admonitions or general ethical content; lacks continuity in thought, repeats same motifs in different places, and contains material that is applicable to a wide variety of circumstances and readers.
James’ Letter

Main Message(s) - The Role of Works in our Faith (1:19-27)

19 This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. 22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; 24 for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. 25 But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

26 If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.
James’ Letter

Main Message(s) - The Role of Works in Our Faith (2:14-26)

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

But someone may well say, “You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,” and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.
James’ Letter

Main Message(s) - James 2:21-24 compare with Romans 4:1-4

Romans 4:1-4
1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” 4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.

James 2:21-24
21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? 22 You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,” and he was called the friend of God. 24 You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.
James’ Letter

Theme & Purpose

- James exhorts growing believers to live out an undivided life where their speech and action, confession of faith and works, are not divided.
  - Trials: persevere, ask God for wisdom, and believe He will give wisdom
  - Wealth
  - Speech
  - Faith and Works

- James in relation to Paul (Romans 3:21-4:9) regarding salvation:
  - Two sides of the same coin of salvation:
    - Paul: You are saved by the free gift of grace through faith, not by works.
    - James: You must show the genuineness of your faith and transformation through good works.
Read James’ Letter

Suggestion for Reading

● To grow in living an undivided life with an undivided heart (prevent yourself from living in hypocrisy)
● To grow in the discipline of obeying God’s Word
● To grow in the discipline of prayer
If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 1 Peter 4:14
Simon Peter

Peter’s transformation & leadership

- Pre-Resurrection Peter: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” (Luke 22:31-32)
- Post-Resurrection Peter: “a fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ and a partake also of the glory that is to be revealed.” (1 Peter 5:1)
- Gift of Exhortation
Peter’s First Letter

Historical Situation

- Gentile Christians who are scattered and reside as foreigners in Asia Minor
- Facing persecution for their faith through slanderous occasions, social ostracism
- Peter writes to console and comfort them in their unjust suffering
- Silvanus is the carrier of this letter
Peter’s First Letter

Theme and Purpose

- To exhort the believers that the future of a glorious heavenly inheritance through Jesus Christ makes present hardships and persecution endurable
Peter’s First Letter

Main Message(s)

Identity as Christians

- Newborn Babies (2:2)
- A living stone (2:4) - built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ
- Aliens and Strangers (2:11)
- You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light, for you once not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (2:9-10)
Peter’s First Letter

Main Message(s)

- Jesus is our perfect example of enduring unjust suffering and we who follow Him follow Him in His footsteps. Suffering comes before glory.
  - “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth, and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.” (2:21-24)
Peter’s First Letter

Main Message(s)

● In light of future glory, conduct yourself excellently while you live in an unbelieving society.
  ○ Among Christians, love one another
  ○ Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation. (2:12)

● Consider it a blessing to suffer for His name’s sake.
  ○ “But even if should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled.” (3:14)
  ○ “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation.” (4:12-13)
Read Peter’s First Letter

Suggestion for Reading

- To have a biblical perspective of your current trials (unjust suffering) in light of your living hope
- To understand in depth the example of Jesus with regards to unjust suffering
- To understand how God wants us to conduct ourselves towards outsiders so that we can be a faithful witness and bear the likeness of Christ in our actions
2 Peter

But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. 2 Peter 3:13
Peter’s Second Letter

Historical Situation

- Rise of false teachers in the church
- False teachers: at once confessed their faith, but deviated to introduce destructive teaching into the churches
  - But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. (2:1-3)
  - Deny that God will in the future judge people for wickedness (both Christians and non-Christians)
  - The day of judgment and Jesus’ glorious return is a fabrication of the apostles and prophets
  - They are driven by greed and despise authority. Their denial is a way to justify that they can live freely to indulge in immoral ways
  - Result of false teaching - stumbling and destruction faith (different from erroneous teaching)
Peter’s Second Letter

Theme and Purpose

- To give a defense for Christian orthodoxy
Main Message(s)

- To teach the certainty of the Day of Judgment for all believers and people
  - Peter witnessed with his own eyes and ears Jesus teaching about his return in glory (1:16-21). His return is not a devised tale.
- With certainty of Jesus' second coming, see it as a grace to draw near to Jesus. Live a life that is consistent with their future destiny, and pursue virtuous life of faith and love.
- Mockers will continue to mock and false teachers will continue to arise, be aware of them, but also know that they will be judged.
Read Peter’s Second Letter

Suggestion for Reading

- To become familiar with one of the main tenets of our faith (Jesus’ Glorious Return, second coming, final judgment)
- To grow in your love for truth
- To hold fast to the certainty of Jesus’ second coming
- To become aware that in our day there will be false teachers who deviate from orthodoxy and mislead Christians
- To reflect on how you want to be found when you meet Jesus, how do you want to finish well
Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy. Jude 24
Jude’s Letter

Historical Situation

- Jude, brother of James (leader of Jerusalem church), also Jesus’ half brother
- Letter is only 25 verses
- False teachers have penetrated the church but his letter does not give particular details about the heresy, only what they do
  - For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Jude 4)
  - These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted. (Jude 12)
Jude’s Letter

Theme & Purpose

- Jude describes the wickedness of false teachers and emphasizes their doom.
- To urge believers to contend vigorously for the truth of their faith because of the increase of false teachers and to also snatch other believers from out of the fire.
- To urge believers to resist false teaching which could corrupt faith, morals, and the community of faith
  ○ “I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.” (Jude 3)
Jude’s Letter

References

- Generation of Israel in the wilderness (Korah’s rebellion)
- Sodom and Gomorrah
- Fallen Angels
- Cain
Jude’s Letter

Main Message(s)

Jude teaches the believers how to cope under the influence of false teaching and avoid its influence

- **20** But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, 
- **21** keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life. 
- **22** And have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh. 
- **24** Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, 
- **25** to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.
Read Jude’s Letter

Suggestion for Reading

- To have an honest reminder that all of us could turn the grace of God into a license to indulge in sinful desires
- To be reminded that you were saved by grace to live for God
- To grow in your love for truth
See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. 1 John 3:1
John’s First Letter

About John

- Writing from Ephesus at an old age
- No introduction, but often says, “I write to you” and “My dear children” displaying his affection as a father to a limited group of Christians that he is acquainted with in Asia Minor and surrounding areas of Ephesus
John’s First Letter

Historical Situation

- Early Gnosticism and Docetism were seeping into the church
  - dichotomy of spirit (good) and flesh/matter (evil)
  - attack on Christology, particularly Jesus’ humanity
  - due to heresy, morals become lax
  - precursors of the antichrist

“They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.” (2:19)
John’s First Letter

Theme and Purpose

● To emphasize and claim the reality of Jesus’ incarnation. He did come to humanity as fully human (flesh)
● To instruct believers how to discern 3 criteria for genuine Christian faith:
  ○ righteous living
    ▪ If we say we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. (1:6)
  ○ love for other believers
    ▪ The one who loves his brother abides in Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. (1:10)
  ○ belief in Jesus as the incarnate Christ
John’s First Letter

Main Message(s)

- **Righteous Living**
  - Sinlessness? No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. (3:6)
    - Does not denote flawlessness
    - More to emphasize those who abide in God do not lead a life characterized predominantly by sin, but they will sin
    - John wants believers to be aware that they do sin because “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (1:8)
    - John emphasizes that those who live righteously take their sin to Jesus for forgiveness and cleansing. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1:9)
  - Keep and love His commandments
    - By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep His commandments (2:3)
    - But whoever keep His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked (2:5-6)
Read John’s First Letter

Suggestion for Reading

● Great for Scripture memorization
● To learn another important tenet or doctrine of our faith, that Jesus is fully man and fully God. He redeems spirit and body.
● To learn the depth of God’s love
  ○ See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. (3:1)
● To learn guidance for overcoming sin and pursuing righteous living
2 John
John's Second Letter

Main Message(s)

● “Elder” to “chosen lady and her children”
  ○ Greeting (1-3)
  ○ Exhortation to Christian Love (4-6)
  ○ Warning Against False Doctrine and Hosting False Teachers (7-11)
    ■ 10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; 11 for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.
  ○ Hope to Come for a Visit and Greeting (12-13)
3 John
John’s Third Letter

Theme and Purpose

- Written to Gaius
  - to commend Gaius for being hospitable to itinerant ministers who “went out for the sake of the Name” (7)
  - to make mention of Diotrephes’ lack of obedience of apostolic authority and lack of hospitality (9-10)
  - to recommend Demetrius (12, probably the carrier of the letter)
Read 2 & 3 John

Suggestion for Reading

- To grow an appreciation to spiritual leaders in our lives
- To serve those who are itinerant workers for the gospel and to practice hospitality towards them
REVIEW: Letter Title, General Theme:

- Hebrews: Christ’s Superiority
- James: Salvation by Works
- 1 Peter: Salvation & Suffering
- 2 Peter: In Defense of Orthodoxy
- 1 John: Fatherly Instructions to “Little Children”
- 2 John: Fatherly Instructions to Christians
- 3 John: Fatherly Instructions to Christians
- Jude: Danger! False Teachers!
Questions for Discussion

1) What is one thing you learned about Hebrews or the General Letters?
2) What is one historical situation from the letters that you see our present day church facing?