

## **CONTEND FOR THE FAITH: LESSONS FROM JUDE**

### **Week One: Opening Exhortation (Jude 1:1-3)**

*Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James, to those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ: mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance. Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. (Jude 1:1-3)*

Jude, one of the physical brothers of Jesus Christ, was troubled when he wrote this epistle. He appreciated and valued the joys of salvation in Christ, and was excited about describing them to his friends. In fact, the wording used in the original text suggests that Jude was in the act of writing a quite different letter, when he realized the need to write instead the epistle that we have in our Bibles. The more he thought about the church, and the more he realized the dangers it faced, the more he realized that the Holy Spirit wanted to move through him, to warn believers of danger and to call them to action.

Like Jude, we would much rather enjoy talking about all the benefits of salvation and all the things that we share together in Christ. Indeed, we ought to enjoy this much more than talking about dangers and concerns. But the faith that has been entrusted to us is not only a blessing, but also a responsibility. Jude reminds us that there is only one version of the truth, but (as he will describe next) human beings all too frequently apply their ingenuity and effort to concocting alternate, false versions of the truth. Jude wrote his epistle to remind us that God expects those of us who accept his truth to make the effort to stand up for the truth in our lives.

The epistle of Jude can be outlined as follows: Jude first tells us the problem, namely, that ungodly persons, wishing to distort the truth so that it will serve their own desires, have slipped in among those who want to worship God in spirit and in truth (verses 1-4); he then reminds us that this is a recurring problem that has often come up before, and that God has dealt with it before (verses 5-11); he describes the many other sins that accompany those who follow God only to have their desires met (verses 12-19); then describes some important principles that believers must keep in mind in order to contend for the faith (verses 20-23); and finally the letter closes with a heartfelt statement of praise to God (verses 24-25). Thus Jude is able to close his letter where he wanted to begin: a celebration of salvation in Christ.

Keep in mind Jude's purpose and plan as we study the epistle over the next few weeks. As we study Jude, we should take to heart his warnings so that we will not fall victim to the deceptiveness of the devil, who has pulled so many away from the truth, and so that we will never miss out on the great blessings that we have in Jesus Christ.

*- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, (revised) July 2003*

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### **Week Two: Warning About A Common Problem (Jude 1:4)**

*For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord. (Jude 1:4)*

As we noted last time, Jude was compelled by the Holy Spirit to write to his friends to urge them to contend for the faith that was entrusted to God's people. In telling us to contend for the faith, he gives a call to do more than simply acknowledge God and his Word. We are called to make efforts, to strive, and to be watchful on behalf of the truth.

Jude warns here of a fundamental problem that takes many forms (as he will detail later on), and that requires us to be strong in response. There are persons who claim to be God's people, yet who are using God's grace as an excuse to follow their own will instead of God's will. They have taken truths about God out of context, and have used them to defend and pursue their own desires, thus denying Jesus as Lord and Savior. As many of us know from our own experience, this problem is certainly not limited to Jude's lifetime. It is an unfortunate feature of human nature that we all too often take grace and forgiveness for granted, and serve God only insofar as he gives us what we desire.

There are at least three reasons why it is vital for each member of the church of Christ to be aware of this problem and to study Jude's letter. First of all, each of us must guard his or her own heart, so as not to become like these godless false teachers. The more we serve God, the easier it is to become convinced that we are too strong to fall, and yet as long as we live in this world, our flesh will seek for ways to gratify itself. As long as we learn to recognize the symptoms of rationalization and rebellion in our hearts before they harden, we shall remain faithful. But we must always be careful and must realize our vulnerability to sin.

We must also be alert that such problems do not demoralize us, either as a church or as individuals, and that they do not distract us from seeking God and his will. Strong-willed and self-indulgent false teachers can produce insecurity, frustration, and confusion among sincere believers who are not completely fortified against such problems. Indeed, these kinds of attacks can often be more effective than direct temptations to sin. So we should remind ourselves that God is strong enough to protect his church even from the most threatening of attacks.

Then too, we must be ready to deal with such problems for the sake of those who do not yet know God. Most of the world never appreciates the truth about God, and so humans are always creating idols and human-made religions that they prefer. The New Testament stresses that God's people must take pains to put forth an image of the church of Christ that combines genuine love, faith, and purity so that those people in the world who do want to seek God can see the truth. Everyone we meet has been exposed to a constant and bewildering stream of teachings about God, most of them false. We should resolve that no one will ever hear anything but the truth from us.

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### Week Three: Living For Selfish Desires is Futile (Jude 1:5-7)

*Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe. And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home - these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire. (Jude 1:5-7)*

Having described the problem of those who misuse God's grace as a license for sin, Jude now reminds us that this, like all spiritual problems, is not a new disorder. This is an important point, because sometimes we become so discouraged by our own troubles that we think we're the first ones to have them, that our problems are unique, and that God has never had to deal with them before. But nothing that happens in our lives and ministries - no struggle, no temptation, no frustration - is new to God. He has seen all the problems before, and has helped his people through them before.

Jude gives three specific examples. First, he reminds us that after God's miraculous deliverance of his people from Egypt, many of them doubted him and rejected his plans for them. When they hardened themselves too many times, he punished them by denying them entry into the Promised Land. Second, he reminds us that even the angels who strayed from God's will were punished and put in chains (see also 2 Peter 2:4). Third, he recalls what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah. Their people lived only to satisfy their selfish urges, not caring for the truth, and so they were destroyed by God.

Notice what all of these examples have in common. They all describe persons who had every reason to believe God, to follow him, and to accept the truth. But in each case, they chose instead to follow their own wills and desires, thinking that they could not be punished for so doing. But God did not overlook their rebellion, and none of them "got away with it". Think about these examples from God's point of view - what he did in each case was to simply to give these individuals what they wanted. They chose to reject God's will in their lives, so God withdrew his blessings and protection from them. We must always remember that humans can never generate any true or lasting blessings from their own goodness, wisdom, or effort.

Giving in to our own desires does not bring lasting joy; submitting our hearts to God does. When we follow our own stubborn wills, when we use what we know about the Bible only to justify our own actions and the decisions we have already made in our hearts, when we delude ourselves into believing in a "Santa Claus" God from whom we expect to receive only blessings without any responsibility, we are then denying what God has done through Jesus Christ. Living this way does not bring lasting happiness, because it causes us to miss the truest blessings of grace.

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### Week Four: False Vs. Genuine Understanding (Jude 1:8-10)

*In the very same way, these dreamers pollute their own bodies, reject authority and slander celestial beings. But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to make a slanderous accusation against him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!" Yet these men speak abusively against whatever they do not understand, and what things they do understand by instinct, like unreasoning animals - these are the very things that destroy them. (Jude 1:8-10)*

In these few verses, Jude shows us two of the essentials that we need to contend for the true faith: humility and understanding. Those who do not have these qualities will live recklessly and irresponsibly. Those who have them will guard their hearts against many of the temptations and traps about which Jude is warning us.

Jude uses an example of humility to help us to see the depth of restraint that God calls for in believers. Even when confronting the devil himself, the archangel Michael did not lose control. (Note that the details of the confrontation - which comes from an ancient non-biblical work called the "Assumption of Moses" - are not important. The reason why Jude mentions the event is to provide an example of wise, humble self-restraint.) We should consider Michael's restraint, and compare it to the way we deal with those whom we think or know to be in the wrong. Michael shows that it is possible to stand for the truth without giving in to anger or frustration. If Michael did not give in to anger, self-righteousness, or frustration in dealing with the devil himself, then you and I do not have any reason to become frustrated or irritated when we correct or instruct each other.

Then we see a further characterization of the self-willed person who does not submit to God's wisdom. The description is familiar - someone who has something to say about everything, but none of it is edifying. Those who have a lot of opinions generally have little understanding. They will in the long run be destroyed by the few things they can understand - namely, their own urges and desires.

The Bible teaches a different kind of knowledge and wisdom than the world does. Worldly "experts" tend to accumulate a large arsenal of facts, figures, and debating tricks with which they can manipulate the truth in order to prove their opinions or to justify their actions. But God's idea of a wise person is one who has learned to understand, to use what God has said in the way and context which God intended, and to accept that the goal of knowledge and understanding is to glorify God, not the human who possesses it.

God does not appreciate those who store up a lot of facts that they just use to win arguments or to prove their own intelligence. Nor does God or his Word approve of those who are not willing to devote themselves to learning things that are important, and who then want to use God's superior wisdom as an excuse for their lack of effort. God calls for a balance of knowledge with humility.

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### **Week Five: Selfishness Hurts Others (Jude 1:11-12a)**

*Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion. These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating among you without the slightest qualm - shepherds who feed only themselves. (Jude 1:11)*

Jude is also concerned that we understand the ways that self-willed believers cause difficulties for others. It is important to understand that the decisions do not only affect ourselves. God's plan is for the body of believers to be one in spirit and purpose, and this means that we must be aware of the ways that what we do and say can affect others.

We are given three examples from the Old Testament. Cain saw that God preferred his brother's sacrifice. Instead of learning from Abel how to worship God more genuinely, he killed his brother out of jealousy. Balaam (see Numbers 31, especially verses 8 and 16) earned profit and popularity by luring God's people into sin. Korah (see Numbers 16) felt that he, not Moses, should have been leading God's people, and his attitude eventually brought death to many others in addition to himself.

The church of Christ is made up of humans. They are forgiven humans, but still humans with weaknesses and fleshly desires. It should not be a surprise that from time to time there will be those who seek to use the church as a means to get their own needs met. Even believers are sometimes jealous like Cain, and cause strife, or are manipulative and crafty, like Balaam, and cause mischief; or are ambitious like Korah, and think that they should have power and authority. Naturally, we do not want to be like any of these bad examples, so the point is to see such things in our hearts before they go too far. Remembering the harm caused by the likes of Cain, Balaam, and Korah should help motivate us to purify our hearts of sins like envy, deceit, and selfish ambition.

But most of us will never cause such problems ourselves. Instead, we must sometimes endure the trouble caused by those who follow in these paths, and as a result we can become discouraged or confused. In such times, God calls us to stand firm in our faith and in what we know to be true. If we have problems in our fellowship, it does not necessarily mean that we did something wrong. Instead of being overcome by frustration or doubts, we should take confident action to protect the unity of the Spirit. If we are willing to put time and effort into fighting for the faith, these problems do not have to derail us.

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### Week Six: The Importance of Having a Purpose (Jude 1:12b-13)

*They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted - twice dead. They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness is reserved forever. (Jude 1:12b-13)*

Jude now gets to the heart of the problem with these erring believers: they have lost sight of their purpose. Every human was created to seek and know God. Whenever a human imagines a different purpose, be it to accumulate wealth, to earn praise from other persons, to live a life of ease, or any other, his or her life becomes pointless and futile. Living for the wrong purpose cannot bring anything in the long run but frustration and insecurity. This is the heart of the fight that God has called us to join - an eternal conflict between those who accept that, because God made us, his wisdom is supreme, and those who know that God created them, but who think that they (or some other humans) know better than God.

Jude illustrates this using metaphors from nature that show the futility and disorder that come when anything or anyone rejects its purpose. The illustrations warn us that we too, if we lose sight of who we are, become aimless and irrelevant. For example, a tree that loses its roots and does not bear its fruit in season is a pointless object - it is twice dead, because it cannot nourish itself or others. This tree, unfortunately, is representative of too many believers. Many believers will not grow roots through diligent prayer, Bible study, and fellowship. So they cannot bear fruit that will last, although they may (like the rocky soil) show some short-term results.

Then we have the example of a star or planet that leaves its proper orbit, and thus wanders off into the darkness forever. Celestial bodies have all been put in their own place (by God, of course) and given their designated orbit. It would be unnatural and incomprehensible for one of them to choose to wander off on its own. It is just as inappropriate for humans to think that they have better plans for their lives than God does, since God also created humans and "determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live" (Acts 17:26).

We are called to accept our position as having been created by God. He knows us better than we know ourselves, he knows what we need and how best to supply our needs. It is dangerous to think "I know what's best for me", because we usually don't, whereas God always does. Thinking that we can go off on our own will result in insecurity and darkness; accepting God as Creator and Master will bring the truest rewards of God's grace.

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### Week Seven: The Certainty of Judgment (Jude 1:14-16)

*Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men: "See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him." These men are grumblers and faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage. (Jude 1:14-16)*

Jude follows his description of these trouble-making false teachers by emphasizing the certainty of God taking action against them. As we contend for the faith, it is of great value to know that our God and Savior has foreseen all events, and has plans for everything that may arise. Unlike the earthly causes that so many persons fight for, ours is guaranteed to be a winning cause. Even though you or I may suffer in the battle, we shall be the winners when Jesus returns. (Note that the quote in this verse comes from the ancient book of Enoch, which is not part of the Bible, but which was familiar to the Jews and Christians of Jude's day. It is the reference he had in mind in verse 4 when he said "written about long ago".)

Jude presents us here with a vision of the future that will make us look ahead with joy, if we are devoted to seeing God honored by his creation. The day will come when Jesus himself will come, not only to be revealed, but also to set everything right. All the ungodliness that we have to endure, all the evil deeds that seem to go unpunished, all of these will be revealed for what they are when Jesus returns. And if Jesus himself can wait for many years until his Father tells him it is time to return, so that he can at last receive the praise that is due him, then surely we can endure for our short lifetimes as we wait for Jesus to be revealed to the world.

Connected with these thoughts is Jude's criticism of the self-indulgent practice of habitual grumbling and faultfinding. The original text makes clear that they do not just criticize from time to time, as we all have a tendency to do, but that they are always actively looking for things to criticize. While there will be times when we will have to correct someone or point out a shortcoming, we should avoid habitually having a list of criticisms for the church or its members, since that risks falling into the ungodly behavior that Jude criticizes here.

As this verse points out, the ungodly will also misuse their tongues in other ways (see also James 3). Speech is one of the gifts God has given us - let's make sure to use it, not to satisfy ourselves, but to edify others and to praise God.

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### **Week Eight: A Battle of Wills (Jude 1:17-19)**

*But you, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires." These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit. (Jude 1:17-19)*

Having warned us against following our own will rather than God's, Jude now starts to turn to the right things to do, think, and say. First of all, he asks us to remember that God foresees all of our problems and has everything under control. No matter how unsettled we may become by the disruptions caused by the rebellious, God is not surprised, nor is he incapable of responding. God wants us to know that he has always known the fight we would face, and he also foresaw the specific problems.

The quote here (which can be compared with 2 Peter 3:3) focuses once more on the fundamental causes of so many difficulties - the feeling, common to so many self-deluded persons, that one's own will is superior to God's. This mistaken perspective leads inevitably to the spirit of hardness and mockery that Jude describes. Because so many persons erroneously think that it is refined or sophisticated to be mocking and cynical (when, in fact, it actually betrays deep insecurity), this is a common problem that Christians have to endure from those around them. The point here is not just to critique the erring, but to reassure us that even this kind of opposition cannot defeat God.

It is helpful to try to understand why God permits such attitudes to last as long as they do. Surely God does not enjoy the way that humans mock him and his plans, since we know from many Scriptures how much it hurts and disappoints him that most human beings won't follow him. It is important for us to try to adopt God's own perspective on this matter. To God, two things override any anger or any desire to punish such individuals immediately. First, his love for these persons themselves makes him reluctant to do anything to harm them (consider, for example, Jesus washing Judas's feet right before Judas handed him over to death). And second, the joy that God gets from those who genuinely seek him, even if they are very few, so outweighs the rebellion of all the others that God loves his entire creation on their account.

In the following verse (verse 20), we are given both the antidote to the problems caused by mockers (and the other straying believers we have met in Jude's letter) and also the way to keep ourselves from ever becoming like them. Staying in God's love is the best way to avoid the pain that selfish persons cause to others, and also to avoid the insecurity and emptiness that they inflict on themselves. Jude next continues by elaborating on how we can remain in God's love.

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### **Week Nine: Keeping Ourselves in God's Love (Jude 1:20-21)**

*But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray 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 1:20-21)*

Jude continues to encourage us to build secure foundations that will enable us to contend fearlessly for the faith. And what a lot of wisdom is contained in just a few words! We could study for many months about the advice in verses 20 and 21 alone. Note that all the specifics are tied together by the direction to keep ourselves in God's love. Knowing that we have security in our relationship with God, knowing that we have the forgiveness of our sins as a guarantee, and knowing that God's love for us is based not on our own actions or knowledge, but on God's own perfect character, all of this helps us to be able to conduct our lives and ministries in a constructive way. So Jude gives us some direction on remaining in God's love.

We see first that we are to build ourselves up in our faith. It is important to view our faith as continually growing and maturing, instead of thinking that once we have become Christians we have a sufficient degree of faith. Christians must constantly be striving for deeper understanding, more reasons to trust God, new ways to express our faith and hope. Our faith will never stay the same; it will either grow or shrink (which is one reason why Jude urges us to contend for it).

We then see an exhortation to pray, and specifically to pray in the Spirit, who helps us in our prayers. God sent his Holy Spirit as a sign and promise of his presence. The Spirit lives in our hearts now, to guarantee us our home with God forever. Our prayers are an important part of contending for the faith, but prayer is alien to our fleshly nature, because talking to someone who has no physical presence seems unnatural. Even to many believers, prayer is either just a game or a good luck charm without deep meaning. So the Holy Spirit has been sent into the heart and mind of each believer, to help him or her to overcome the flesh's resistance to communicating with a spiritual being.

Finally, we are given a vision of the goal that lies ahead. No Christian can fight joyfully for long without remembering where we are all going, and the joy that we shall then have. We now taste a small portion of the things God has prepared for us, when we have the chance to share in spiritual blessings here on earth. We should make sure to consider the greater fulfillment of our spiritual needs and desires that we shall have in heaven. Remember that if we hope in Christ for this life alone, we are to be pitied (1 Corinthians 15:19). Always keep in sight the Day when we will be with God forever.

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### Week Ten: Some Practical Wisdom (Jude 1:22-23)

*Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear - hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh. (Jude 1:22-23)*

Having given us some solid foundations to help us contend for the faith, Jude now turns to how to contend for the faith in certain specific situations. In particular, he wants us to think about the most godly ways to deal with the humans around us. Our goal in this spiritual fight is not to take prisoners or to conquer territory. Nor will our strategy and tactics be the same in all situations. We find here, once again, a great deal of practical wisdom compressed into a couple of verses. Here and elsewhere, we see that contending for the faith involves wise and sensitive treatment of others, whether they are on "our" side or not.

We are to show mercy to those who doubt, just as Jesus did: "a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Matthew 12:20). Doubters are not our enemies; the devil who is causing them to doubt is. So it is unreasonable and short-sighted to be harsh or unforgiving towards weak believers, no matter how much we who are "strong" may be exasperated by their lack of faith or trust in God. In the gospels, Jesus dealt gently with those who knew they were "weak", but firmly with those who thought they were "strong". As a church, do we emulate Jesus, or do we have it the other way around?

Next, we are urged to save anyone whom we can snatch from the fire (this can refer both to believers and to unbelievers). One of the keys to putting this into practice is to see the situation just the way Jude describes it - that is, having the perspective of pulling someone away from a deadly peril. A literal fire, of course, always provokes prompt action, but we often see spiritual threats (even in our own lives or in our own congregation) as less important.

We are also alerted that there will be times when our mercy will have to be combined with fear. Remember that when Jesus sent out the Twelve he told them to be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16). Nowhere does God ask that his believers be easily fooled or easily taken advantage of. We must be aware of the nature of the world we live in, and of the evil that lives in human hearts. Notice, though, that God doesn't say to combine our mercy with hate, or with self-righteousness, but simply with an intelligent fear, that is, an awareness of the true nature of the opposition we face.

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### **Week Eleven: God Can Do It (Jude 1:24-25)**

*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy - to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forever more! Amen. (Jude 1:24-25)*

At last, Jude gets to close his letter about contending for the faith with what he wanted to express all along - praise for God and his salvation. There are some wonderful things waiting for us after we have finished our struggles on this earth, and there are some wonderful assurances that we can have with us now. We will someday enjoy God forever, and even now, as we struggle through our earthly lives, we can rejoice in knowing him.

God assures us that he does have the power to keep us from stumbling. This is meant to address some of the fundamental insecurities that Christians have. Many believers spend a lot of time trying to convince themselves that they themselves have the power (through good character, knowledge, or hard effort) to keep themselves from falling. They try hard to be able to say "I can do it! You can do it! We can do it!" None of this is true, and so the attempt to believe that we are strong in ourselves leads to nothing but more insecurity and doubt. We ought instead to base our confidence on God's power, God's nature, and God's wisdom. God can do it!

When we take the center of attention off of ourselves, and begin to study and examine God's character and his ability to protect us, we realize how many reasons we have to be confident. If believers would spend a little less time analyzing their own character and behavior, and would spend a little more time thinking and studying about God's nature and character, they would find a lot more reasons to be confident and joyful in their lives and ministries.

So, in Jude's letter we see a balance. Remember that he started out wanting to do nothing but rejoice in salvation, but he realized that first he needed to alert us to some serious problems. So it was (and is) necessary to study and to deal with the problems that human weakness causes for the church. We have to be aware of the problems we will face, where they come from, and how to respond to them. But in so doing, let us always, like Jude, never lose track of the positive things to which we are looking forward when we are done. Let us keep coming back to the glorious character of our God, to the wisdom and majesty of his purposes and plans, to the perfection of all his ways, and to the joy in which we shall all share when we go home to be in his presence forever.

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