

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 26 – Jude

Jude was a brother of James, another half-brother of Jesus, and like James was also converted sometime after the resurrection of our Lord. He with so many others probably witnessed His resurrected body. If Jude's ministry was to the Jewish churches of Palestine, this letter must have been written prior to the fall of Jerusalem, though he may have ministered elsewhere and written it later. We do not know a great deal about Jude, his life and death, but there are two things that should be pointed out regarding this present letter at the outset:

(1) Jude alludes to the *Assumption of Moses* (v.9) and the *Book of Enoch* (vv.14,15), both of which were noncanonical books. This does not elevate those books to canonical status, nor does it bring into question the inspiration of Jude. Paul also quoted a pagan poet from Athens (Acts 17:28) and made reference to another pagan writer from Crete (Titus 1:12). These extra-biblical references are made because it was thought that these quoted excerpts would carry weight, not because these pagans could be believed in everything they expressed.

(2) There are unmistakable similarities between this letter of Jude and 2 Peter 2:1-3:3. Jude had intended to write "concerning our common salvation" (v.3), but changed his mind, possibly when he read from 2 Peter and recognized that the false teachers which had been predicted were already present. Thus, he found it more urgent to write this letter and exhort his readers "to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."

Reference has already been made in some of the other epistles to the heresy of Gnosticism, a growing and quickly spreading problem in first century churches. This was a heresy which denied some of the core doctrines of Christianity, as we have seen, but it should also be noted that it was antinomian, or lawless, in its approach to life. Because it viewed the body as evil and essentially irrelevant, something for the spirit to escape in order to live a life of its own, it did not regard any activity of the flesh too promiscuous or licentious to be practised but viewed all such lewdness as an acceptable way of life and fully immune to any threat of future punishment. Such was the apostasy against which Jude calls believers to contend earnestly for the apostolic faith.

Jude illustrates what these false teachers and corruptors of moral principles were like by drawing on three very different examples from the Old Testament. First, there were the Israelites who were saved from Egypt but were later destroyed in the wilderness as a result of their unbelief (v.5). The lesson here is that such evil influencers can be found, not only in the world but within the covenant community itself, the local church, yet they also are condemned. Second, there were the fallen angels who were cast out of heaven. Not only men, in other words, but even a great number of angels have fallen and are now “reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment” to come (v.6). And third, there were the people of Sodom and Gomorrah who gave themselves over to sexual immorality and are now an example of those “suffering the vengeance of eternal fire” (v.7). This last example is particularly pertinent because of the hedonistic antinomianism that was spreading in so many churches at that time.

Jude then goes on to give three further but very familiar Old Testament examples, pointing out that a) “they have gone in the way of Cain” (v.11). Cain is remembered for offering his own kind of sacrifice; b) they “have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit,” Balaam who was self-serving and unwilling to sacrifice worldly gain; and c) they have chosen their end, to perish “in the rebellion of Korah.” Korah would not submit to authority, to the God-appointed authority of Moses. It is most helpful to look back on these tragic figures from the past and to ask this obvious and very penetrating question: If God did not spare those wicked men, how can I expect Him to spare me if I live and do as they did?

The Lord’s Supper was often preceded by a meal in apostolic times, a meal called a love feast, and it was at these love feasts especially that the false teachers revealed the true colours of their unfettered hypocrisy. Jude calls them “spots” (blemishes) in the fellowship of true believers (v.12). They were “clouds without water” drifting about but with no purpose; they were trees which are “twice dead,” unfruitful and uprooted from the ground; they were “raging waves of the sea,” waves which produce nothing but the foam of their own thrashing about in shame (v.13); and they were “wandering stars,” stars which have deserted their proper orbit only to be lost in “the blackness of darkness forever.” What powerful descriptions these are of deadly plagues upon the Church even today!

Jude further describes these evil workers as people who make great claims for themselves, who complain or flatter to gain advantage over others, but let us make no mistake as to their real motive; they are egotistical, self-serving parasites. His readers are reminded that they have been warned of them before (see 2 Peter 3:3). The time of their appearance has arrived. These believers need to watch out for them, therefore, and learn to recognize them for what they really are, namely, sensual (not spiritual) people who breed division (vv.16-19).

Jude does not leave the matter there but exhorts these believers to respond appropriately, which they are to do in two ways. On the one hand, they are to build themselves up in their most holy faith, which means that they are to acquaint themselves as fully as they can with all that they have in Christ. This is important if they are to defend themselves against the trickery of men. It will involve praying in the Holy Spirit – progressing in love by waiting on God the Father to work in them to will and to do His good pleasure – and looking ahead for the mercy that has been secured for them in Christ (vv.20,21). On the other hand, they are to show compassion to the deceived in order to win them to Christ – that is right, compassion not hatred – and they are to show compassion even to the deceivers themselves in order to win them also, but being especially careful in doing so not to be taken in by them (vv.22,23).

The letter ends with one of the greatest doxologies in all of Holy Scripture, and, oh, what a fitting conclusion it is to all the New Testament epistles! It praises God that the salvation of His people is entirely of the Lord Himself from start to finish, a salvation for time and eternity. At the same time, it celebrates the hope the believer has because it is of God, our faithful Creator and sovereign Redeemer, that they are saved by His grace and kept by His power. Having loved His people, He loves them to the end and will never cast them out (vv.24,25).

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