

Bible Study # 43  
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### Introduction to the General Epistles

I want to **begin a new series. It will be a fairly short four-part series on the General Epistles.** I think it will serve to tie up material that we have covered. We went through the Gospels—the story of what Jesus Christ said and did—then we followed up with Acts, the actions of His original apostles. We have the emphasis on action—what was done by Jesus Christ and His disciples.

Now we come to what is next in the inspired order of the New Testament—the General Epistles. I'll explain to you, in just a few moments, as to why they would logically come next. We will focus a little bit on what these books contain because they have vital information.

When we finish this series, we are going back to the Old Testament and picking up some of the material we skipped over earlier. We covered the historical survey of the Old Testament in story flow, but there are many books that we did not touch upon. When we finish this series on the General Epistles, we will go back and pick up the Major Prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel—that I think will prove to be a very timely subject. Then we will go into the Minor Prophets. I think we will find that the timing of going into those books will prove to tie in very directly with the events that we will be going through in the course of the next year.

Let's focus this evening on the General Epistles—sometimes called the “catholic epistles.” That's right! You know why they are called the “catholic epistles”? The word “catholic” simply means “universal.” The term “catholic epistles” does not mean that they have any connection with the Catholic Church. We will notice a little later what the Catholic Church sought to do to some of these epistles. Some of the commentators use the term “universal” or “catholic” in the old sense of “universal” or “general.”

Many of the letters that Paul wrote were specific letters. He wrote a letter to the Church at Rome. He wrote a letter to the Church in Corinth, a letter to the Church in Thessalonica, a letter to the Church in Ephesus.

*The General Epistles are letters that were written, not to a specific church or to a specific*

*individual like Titus or Timothy or Philemon, but to a wide general audience.* They were not directed toward one specific congregation or one specific individual. That's why they are termed General Epistles.

In the order of the New Testament that the Greeks have preserved, we have, first, the Gospels and Acts. They were preserved in the order that we customarily find them. Next are the General Epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude. Paul's epistles come next in mostly the order that we now have. The only difference would be that Paul's letters to the seven Churches, Romans through Thessalonians, would follow in the order that we have them, but the book of Hebrews would be inserted in between II Thessalonians and I Timothy rather than coming after Philemon, as in our common English versions. *So, the inspired order is the Gospels, Acts, the General Epistles, Paul's epistles followed by the book of Revelation.* We are going to note that there were some reasons for this. As I said, this is the order that was preserved by the Greeks in their manuscripts.

*The order that is used in our English Bibles is what is called the Western order.* That is the order that was derived from the Catholic Vulgate—the Latin translation—that was the official version of the Catholic Church. They re-arranged the order of the books from that which the Greeks had preserved. When the translations were made from the Greek manuscripts, they rearranged the order of them to conform to that with which people were already familiar, which was the Catholic or Western order. The reason was that they didn't see what difference it made. They said, ‘it's all the same books; what difference does it make what order they are in? This is what people are familiar with, so this is what we will do.’ That's why all subsequent English translations have followed that order. To my knowledge, the only English translation that uses the original order is the Pannan translation of the New Testament. He didn't fully understand what the significance was, but he figured there must be one. So in doing his English translation, he followed the original Greek order.

We have the same thing with the Old Testament. The order that we have in our King James and all the English translations is a re-arranged order. It is not in the order that the Jews preserved the books. If you find a Jewish translation of the Old Testament, it will be in the inspired order, but any of the other English orders simply follow a

re-arrangement. The library in Alexandria, Egypt, didn't see any "rhyme or reason" to the order that the Jews had, so they re-arranged it—as librarians are want to do. They arranged it in the order that made sense to them—which missed the point—but they didn't understand the point. There are several reasons why God originally inspired that the general epistles come right after the book of Acts and why that was the first thing you would go into. One clear reason involves the subject matter of the books themselves. The subject matter contained in James, Peter, John and Jude is very basic.

Peter tells us about Paul's epistles.

II Peter 3:16, "as also in all his [Paul] epistles, speaking in them of these things hard to be understood, which those that are unlearned and unstable wrest and twist as they do also the other Scriptures." Peter recognized that Paul was a writer that you have to read very carefully. Paul was a deep thinker. He wrote very complex sentences. Any of you, if you were an English teacher, would have a great time trying to diagram one of Paul's sentences. Some of them take up almost two paragraphs. He wrote a lot of very complex thoughts. Because of his style of writing, you really have to carefully go through what Paul said. He was a very deep thinker; he expounded very many deep truths.

Paul is not for beginners in the sense that Peter said Paul wrote things that are hard to be understood. So that tells us you start with what's easy to be understood and progress to what's hard to be understood. If you start with what's hard to be understood, and you don't understand that, then you are all "balled up" by the time you come to something easy. Then the whole thing is a mess. It's kind of like starting with Algebra and then trying to work your way back to two plus two. That's not the approach to use. You start with the most basic and work up to what is more complex. Paul wrote things that were more complex. He wrote some very deep spiritual things.

When you go through the Gospels, you have what Jesus Himself said and did. When you go through the book of Acts, we find the continuation of the story of what the apostles said and did, but the emphasis is on action. When we come to James, Peter, John and Jude, there are basic things that are further developed. We will find what those things are in just a few moments. *The material is very basic and provides a proper prelude to the study of Paul's letters.*

The apostles who wrote the General Epistles are James the brother of Jesus, Peter who was the chief of the twelve apostles and John who was part of that inner circle of the twelve. He was the last of the original apostles left alive. Peter and John were basically responsible for the completion of the New Testament canon. James, of course, had died prior to the time the canon was completed. James died two or three years prior to the death of Peter. He was not involved in canonization of the New Testament. James the brother of John had died much earlier (Acts 12:2). He had been martyred much earlier.

In Galatians 2:9, Paul acknowledged James, Peter and John as being the pillars of the Church. Paul recognized and acknowledged them as such. James, as I said, was the brother of Jesus. He was the apostle who presided over the headquarters' Church in Jerusalem. Peter was the one that Jesus utilized as the chief of the twelve. John was a part of that inner circle of Peter, James and John. There are two James. You recognized that. James who wrote the book of James was not the James who was the brother of John (Acts 12:2). James who wrote the book of James was the son of Joseph and Mary; therefore, he was technically the half-brother of Jesus Christ. Jude was a younger brother of James and, therefore, also a half-brother of Jesus.

When we look at James, Peter, John and Jude, we are looking at the writings of apostles who were centered and had been focused there in Jerusalem. The apostles were, in the case of Peter and John, a part of the twelve; in the case of James and Jude, they were literal brothers of Jesus Himself.

Even though Jesus' brothers were not converted during His lifetime, you have to recognize the benefit they had. They had grown up with Him. They knew Jesus in a way that basically no one else did. They had grown up with Him and were with Him up until He was thirty years old when He left home to begin His ministry. They were at least in their mid-twenties by that time. They had been around Him; they had worked with Him; and they had associated with Him all their life. They knew how He thought. They understood a lot of things that they didn't fully grasp until they were converted. Once they were converted, they had that tremendous background of that intimate day-after-day exposure for years and years.

The exposure of the twelve apostles had been more limited to a three and one-half year period, but it was a very intense exposure. It was the time of Christ's ministry. It was a time when they

were more mature and more receptive—even though they weren't really converted and didn't really get the point of a lot of what Jesus said until after they were converted. Once these individuals were converted and really began to get the point, a lot of things came together.

*The greatest importance of the books of the General Epistles is the basic knowledge and warnings that they provide the Christians.* They give the knowledge about the real meaning of Christianity and the attempts that were being made to subvert and to corrupt it. There is a great deal of warning in these epistles concerning the apostasy, attempts to subvert the truth and to raise up what ultimately became the great false church.

It's interesting because there have probably not been any books of the New Testament that have been more objected to over the years than most of the General Epistles. In the early centuries, the church at Rome, Alexandria and Carthage rejected most or all of these books. The Catholic Church likes to claim the credit for having given us the Bible. That, of course, is not true. When you first come upon the early Catholic Church conference, the Bible, as we know it, was already in existence. The only thing they were arguing about was taking books out of an already existent canon. They were arguing about whether or not certain books should be included that were already included. We find something already extant, and we find individuals objecting to it.

The interesting thing is that when you look at the Churches that Paul raised up or the Churches that John administered in the latter years of his life, there was never any objection to the canon of the New Testament. When you look at the Churches in Asia Minor and in Judea, you don't find any record of any objection to these epistles or to any of the New Testament. There was never a question in the areas of Judea or the area of Asia Minor. There was never any objection from any of those Churches to the canon of the New Testament as we have it.

The only places objections came from were Rome, together with Alexandria, Egypt, which should tell you something. What did God ever do in Egypt, other than tell His people to come out of it? Rome is not where you look as the repository of truth. That is made plain and is one of the reasons they so greatly objected to the book of Revelation. You know, you don't even have to be really perceptive to read Revelation; by the time you get to Revelation 17, you come to this great city that reigns over the kings of the

earth that sit on seven hills. You don't have to scratch your head too long to figure out which one that is. There are not very many cities that will fit that definition—the great city of the ancient world that was very famous for being the city of seven hills. That, clearly, was the city that reigned over the kings of the earth. They didn't have to read too far. They could even figure out a few things and knew that it was directed at them—and they didn't like it.

The Churches in Syria and Jerusalem accepted these books from the earliest time. There was never a question in the Churches in Asia Minor. The real reason for the argument was a desire to discredit the instructions and the warnings that are contained in these books.

It's interesting that you can come all the way down to the Protestants and Martin Luther; Martin Luther didn't like these books, particularly the book of James. The Lutherans derive from Martin Luther. The German translation of the New Testament is based on Martin Luther's translation in the German language and is the equivalent of what the King James is in the English. It is kind of standard.

To this day in this German translation, there is a verse in Romans that is mistranslated because Martin Luther added a word in where it talks about being justified by faith. Martin Luther didn't think that was strong enough, so he added in "alone." So it reads, "justified by faith alone." Martin Luther referred to the book of James as "an epistle of straw." He didn't like the book of James because it talked about faith without works is dead. He called it "an epistle of straw."

Well, if you wait a few years, you will get to find out what James is going to call Martin Luther. We found what Martin Luther called James; wait a few years and you will get the rest of the story. We will hear what James calls Martin Luther, and I daresay James will have the last word. In the long run, his word is going to carry a whole lot more weight. The ways things are headed, you may not have to wait too, too, long to find out what James thinks on the subject.

Then we will see some of the scholars who want to argue about the Greek and the Hebrew. They can be arguing about it while the bombs are falling and the Germans are marching down the street. They can be arguing about how many people wrote Isaiah, that the Bible doesn't mean what it says and prophecy doesn't really tell about the future. We will just stick around for a few years and see who has what to say.

The objections to these books go back to certain areas. The objections to these books ultimately go back to the subject matter. These books were clearly written to encourage Christians during times of increasing stress and persecution, of increasing turmoil and dissensions within the visible Church. You have to get the picture. You have to realize a little of what was going on at the time.

The book of James and the books of Peter (certainly James and II Peter) were written within a five-year period prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. Both of the books of Peter were written within, let's say, a six- or seven-year period of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. John's books were written in the 90s, but James, Peter and Jude were written in the early to mid-60s A.D. II Peter was written perhaps around 67 A.D. What we are looking at is a time just a few years prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

You have to understand what that meant. From the time that the Church had its beginnings on the Day of Pentecost 31 A.D. up to this time, things had been centered in Jerusalem. If there were questions, controversies or problems, they could come up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders there, and the matter could be resolved.

Look at the case in Acts 15. It was clear that this is where the apostles were and where things centered. If there were questions, you go to Jerusalem and you get them resolved. The Jerusalem Church was the nucleus. Paul admonished the Gentile Churches to be followers of the Churches of God in Judea. Everyone was directed to look to headquarters, to Jerusalem, to the Churches in Judea because that was where the Churches had been established for the longest period of time. This is where the people who were the most deeply grounded in the Law and scriptures were. This was the logical place.

Even for the Jews who were converted, a great deal of their life revolved around Jerusalem and around the temple because the temple was the focal point for Jerusalem. Even those who were converted still went to the temple and viewed it. Jerusalem was a visible symbol of where God had been working, of God's work and what God was accomplishing and doing. There were many things that focused in on it.

It was very difficult for them to perceive of how things could go on with Jerusalem "wiped off" the map and with the temple "wiped off" the map, which meant of course that the headquarters Church scattered. There was a remnant that went

to nearby Pella, but they ceased to have influence. You have to realize the extent to which this was going to shake up people and the extent to which this was going to be a problem. These events would seem so drastic that those who had understood some of what Jesus said in Matthew 24 must have thought for something like that to happen, it would mean that the end was here—Christ was going to come back.

After all, didn't Jesus say in Luke 21:20, "...when you see Jerusalem encompassed about with armies..." They were going to perceive that.

Now there were things that had to be pointed out. That's part of why the General Epistles were written. Paul wrote Thessalonians right around the same time.

II Thessalonians 2:1-3, "Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition."

He was warning them. He said, 'You are going to see things going on and are going to scratch your head and say, "How can this be?"' Here are people introducing heresies, people who were doing and saying things. In some cases, whole congregations were being subverted.

Paul warned those in the Greek-speaking world in II Thessalonians 2:3 to understand that at the time of the end, that day shall not come except there was a falling away first and the man of sin was revealed—the son of perdition.

II Peter 3:3-4, "knowing this: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.'"

Peter wrote and explained, 'Don't think when you see things happening, and it doesn't happen on your time schedule, that God is slack concerning His promises or that God is careless or that God is not paying attention to things. Don't think that.'

Verses 8-9, God is not slack concerning His promises. God has a time plan; in God's plan, one day is representative of a thousand years. You draw the conclusion from that—a day is representative of a thousand years in God's plan. In Revelation 20:4-6, John makes plain that

period is a thousand years. We know that there is a Sabbath that God reserves to Himself at the end. That's made plain in the Major Prophets. Isaiah and others describe that God reserves a period of time. The time of the Messiah, the time of the Messiah's reign, is likened unto a Sabbath (Isaiah 14:7). John tells us in Revelation that that Sabbath will be a thousand years of duration. Peter tells us in II Peter 3:8 that a day is illustrative of a thousand years in God's time schedule. God is not slack, but He is on a time schedule. You begin to perceive a seven thousand-year plan—six thousand years allotted to man and the seventh thousand-year period, the millennial Sabbath, reserved for God. You begin to understand some of that, but it really doesn't become clear until these things were written.

One of the purposes of these epistles was to encourage Christians during the times of increasing stress and persecution, of increasing turmoil and dissension within the visible Church. There were going to be problems, things they were going to see. I think we have to understand that sometimes God allows things to take place. You think, 'Why would God allow this?' Well, God over the years has chosen to allow many things. What we have to do is stay close to God, walk with God and realize God has a plan and a purpose that He is working out.

God allowed some of these things; these epistles were to encourage them and to build them up during those times. It was to give instruction on points of basic Christian doctrine and Christian living. There are some very fundamental issues addressed in the General Epistles. We will see what those were in just a few moments. The most fundamental basic issues of Christian life were addressed here. These are things people needed to know.

The General Epistles serve to warn the people about the heresies that were increasingly rampant and to exhort them to continue in the faith once delivered. **Jude** exhorted the people *to contend for the faith once delivered* (Jude 3). Here was Jude writing in the 60s A.D., thirty to thirty-five years downstream from the Day of Pentecost (not even a full generation away from it). He had to tell the Christians of his day to really contend for the faith once delivered.

Other things were coming in—a little change here, a little watering down there, a little something here, a little something there. Heresies were coming in; various ideas and philosophies of people were coming in. Jude said, 'You have to honestly contend for the faith once delivered.

Contending for the faith once delivered is what we want, not the corruption that man has introduced or the customs and traditions that man has introduced. We want the faith once delivered.'

Too many times people look at a lot of books that come out. In many cases, they start from today's social customs, attitudes and ideas, and then they try to read some of those things back into the Bible. Well, you can't do that. That is not the perspective. What we have to contend for is the faith once delivered—not trying to read the attitudes of a liberal, permissive western society back into things that God had written almost two thousand years ago.

Let's notice a little bit of these individual books. Let's get the theme of these books and understand why they are so basic.

What did **James** talk about?

James 1:3-6, "knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting..."

Verse 12, "Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."

Verse 22, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."

James 2:1, "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality."

Verse 17, "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." He talks about *faith and works* throughout the remainder of Chapter 2. As you go through, James continues to address this subject of faith. When you look at the book of James, he addresses the subject of faith. He explains what living faith is. He explains that faith without works is dead, that the trying of your faith works patience. James is the one that addresses the subject of healing.

James 5:14-15, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." Again, the emphasis is on faith.

Verse 17, "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, he prayed earnestly that it would not rain;

and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months.” Elijah prayed the prayer of faith. Throughout the book of James we have an emphasis on faith. James explains what real faith is. *Real faith is living faith. It is faith that is mingled with actions.*

Now, this is the thing that Martin Luther objected to. It bothered him, and this is the thing that has bothered many about James’ writings. They consider James as too “Jewish” because he stressed the importance of what we do. Faith is not simply what you believe. Real faith carries over into action. I can say I believe something, but unless I act on it, I don’t really believe it very much. If you tell me this building is on fire, if I believe you, I will get up and get out. I can sit here all night, and say, ‘Oh, I believe you. I am sure you are right. I know you are telling the truth. I surely believe that.’ But if I don’t do anything, it is pretty evident that I don’t believe it too much. If I believe something, I am going to act on it.

That happens sometimes in a natural disaster. A hurricane is going to hit here, and you have people that aren’t going to believe it. They say, ‘Oh, I don’t think it’s going to be that kind of damage. I don’t think it will hit here. I’ve lived here for forty years. I don’t think I am going to leave.’ They don’t believe it. That’s the point! Because they don’t believe it’s going to happen to them, they don’t do anything. Others believe it and do something. They get up and leave. They do various things.

Faith! If we really believe something, we act on what we believe. The kind of faith that the Christian-professing world pays lip service to—the kind of faith they talk about—‘Oh, brother, do you believe?’ It is dead faith. If they really believed, they would act on what they claimed to believe. James tells us that faith without works is dead. If you believe something, you act on that belief. If you don’t act on it, you don’t believe it.

He tells us that our faith is tried so that we can build endurance. God does not just instantly answer or give us an instant response every time where faith is involved. If our faith were never tried, we would never learn to endure. Our faith is tried and tested when what we see and what God says contradicts. Then, which evidence do you believe? Do you believe what God says or do you believe what your eyes see? When the two are in contradiction, do you believe what the five senses discern or do you believe what God tells you? What do you believe?

Remember when Jesus was walking on the water and Peter said:

Matthew 14:28-31, “...‘Lord, if it is really You, tell me to come, and I’ll come, and walk on the water too.’” Christ said, ‘Come on,’ and Peter impulsively acted. He believed what Jesus said, and he stepped off the boat and started walking. Then all of a sudden, he started looking around and he said, ‘Wait a minute! I can’t do this. You can’t walk on water.’ And about that time, *glug, glug, glug*, down he went. Before we laugh too hard at Peter, we need to realize at least he took a few steps. He took a few more steps than any of us have taken, and few more than any of the other apostles took. He believed at least for a little while.

But what happened? What his five senses discerned and told him contradicted with what Jesus said. Jesus said, ‘Yes, you can—come on.’ While he believed and acted on it, he was fine. But as soon as he began to think, ‘Wait a minute, I can’t do this,’ when he began to notice and pay attention to what the five senses told him, faith “went out the window.” Faith and sight often contradict. The question comes: what do you believe? Do you believe what your five senses tell you or do you believe what God says? That is the issue of faith. James addresses faith. You can’t get much more basic than faith.

What does Paul tell us?

I Corinthians 13:13, “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” The things that are permanent abiding values are faith, hope and love. Those are the basic fundamental values that are necessary for the Christian life. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrew 11:6). Without faith you can’t please God because the very basis of our relationship has to be a relationship of trust. That’s what faith involves. It involves trust. James discusses the subject of faith. He goes through and expounds what real faith is. That is pretty fundamental.

Now guess what **Peter** talked about. **Hope!** We start out with faith and we get to hope. Guess what we are going to find **John** talks about? You guessed it. **Love!** John talks about love all through the books of I, II, III John.

I John 4:16 he talks about, “God is love.”

I John 5:3, “This is the love of God that we keep His Commandments.”

I John 4:20-21, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this

commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.” You can’t love God and hate your brother. It talks about all kinds of things about love.

It’s kind of interesting. You start out with one book of James, two books of Peter, and then three books of John. It’s kind of building up, step by step—faith, hope and love—and the greatest of these is love. Step by step it builds up. These are fundamental Christian doctrines. These are fundamental abiding Christian values.

We have gone through what Jesus said and did in His life, and what the apostles continued to do in the book of Acts. Then, we come to the epistles. They are not so much a story of the actions, but they now begin to explain certain concepts and principles in more detail. We start out with a focus on the fundamental Christian principal: faith, hope, and love. Jude primarily warns about apostasy and the need to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered (Jude 3). Then you go into Paul’s epistles.

At that point, with the background of the General Epistles, you are prepared for the book of Romans and for some of the things that Paul says there. Peter has already warned us that there are things that Paul wrote that are a little difficult to be understood. When you understand that Paul builds on what the others have said, you don’t go off the “deep end” when Paul talks about not being justified by works. James didn’t say we’re justified by works; he said faith without work is dead. Your works don’t justify you. But if you don’t have any works, you clearly don’t have any faith. So while it is your faith that justifies you, if your faith doesn’t have any works, then your faith is dead. A dead faith won’t save anybody.

You have to approach it step by step to really get the point or else you wind up where the Protestants are. Some of the Protestants have gone off the “deep end” because they have laid aside James, Peter, John and Jude; they jump directly into some of the great complex parts of Paul. ‘Well, all you have to do is believe.’ They don’t understand what kind of faith is living faith. They don’t understand the difference between a living faith and a dead faith. That’s right; faith is all you need, but it has to be a living faith and not a dead faith. What you need is faith and love. That’s right! But if you read I John, you’d know that.

I John 5:3, “This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments.” You’d know that love is the fulfilling of the law. You’d know what love is. We would understand these things.

What happens is the Protestant world skips over the General Epistles and jumps immediately into Paul’s epistles. Then they come up with a couple concepts: all you need is to believe and all you need is love. If you understand what is involved in belief and in faith, if you understand what’s involved in love, that’s right—that’s what you need. But those things involve a lot more than most of the Christian-professing world thinks they do.

Let’s notice here. James starts out with faith. Faith has to do with our relationship with God. It has to do with trust in God, with believing God, with holding onto the promises God makes. We build and develop our relationship with God as we go through certain things, certain trials and tests. It may be in regards to healing or jobs or family problems. It may be in regards to many different things. I think almost all of us look back at certain things in our lives. I can look in my life and can look at some things that I hope I never have to go through again. But I wouldn’t take anything for having gone through them, in the sense of what I learned and the fact that my faith was deepened as a result of it. What do you need over faith? Faith is fundamental. But hope comes in there. What does hope do?

I Peter 1:3, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

Verse 13, “Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” Peter talks about trials and the basis of surviving trials. The means of surviving trials is the reality of the hope that is before us.

I Peter 3:15, “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense [KJV, “an answer”] to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.”

Peter emphasizes the importance of that hope being real to us, of the hope of the resurrection being real to us, and the hope of the reward that God has in store for us being real. It is because that hope is real and because that hope is fixed in our minds that we are able to go through what we encounter here and now.

Brethren, we need to understand. We look at the things that are happening on the world scene, and we get excited about it. Well, we should in some ways. But we also need to be sobered by it

because if we are where we think we are, we haven't seen anything yet. You haven't seen anything yet. Jesus said very plainly that before He returns, there is going to be a time of tribulation that is going to be greater than anytime that has ever been on the earth until then (Matthew 24:21). When you look back and see some of the things that have happened, you realize that's going to be pretty bad. When you look at what has happened, Christ said there is going to come something that is going to pall all of the other things into insignificance. It's going to be so much worse. It's going to be so much greater. It's going to be the culmination. We are going to go through these things.

I know God holds out promises of a place of protection, a place of safety, a place where at least the Philadelphia era of the Church is going to be kept and protected for a time, times, and half a time—for three and one-half years—the period of the tribulation. I understand that. But how do you think that's going to be divided out? Do you think God's going to have an announcement made, 'All right, everybody who wants to be a Laodicean and go through the tribulation, would you please form a line over here on this side of the stage. And everybody who wants to be a Philadelphian and would like to be protected from the tribulation, please get over here and form a line. We are on our way.' You think that's the way it is going to be? No!

One of the things we are told about the Laodiceans is that they don't see themselves as they are. They think they are the ones in great shape. Do you ever think about that? They think they are rich and increased with goods. They have need of nothing; they are in great shape. They don't perceive themselves as Christ perceives them.

You know, we are in for a time of trial and testing in the Church, as well as in the world. I think God allowed us to go through things. Don't think all the time of trial and testing for the Church ended in 1979. Not that we will go through exactly the same things, but if we think that all of the trials and tests on the Church were over ten years ago and that it's just kind of "riding a greased sled" from now on into the Kingdom, I think we grossly deceive ourselves.

That's not what I read in the prophecies of the Bible. That's not what I read in Matthew 24 when it talks about people becoming offended and even hating and betraying one another (v. 10). It talks about love growing cold (v. 12) and about various other things. In other words,

brethren, we are going to go through and live through some very real events. Some have emphasized it in the context of watching world news. We most definitely need to watch *ourselves*. You know, God is on schedule. Am I? That's what I need to look at. God's plan, what God is doing and what God is working out in the world is on schedule. What about me? We need to take heed of ourselves to make sure that my life, my growth and my development is on schedule. That's the thing that I need to take note of. That's the thing in your life that you need to take note of.

Peter emphasizes the reality of the hope. The means of surviving trials is seeing the reality of the hope.

He tells us in I Peter 1:3-6, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible [this is what our hope is] and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials."

We go through a lot of trials, a lot of difficulties. He didn't say that we don't get "down" with things sometimes. He says we rejoice in hope. Not that we don't get "down" and discouraged by some of the many problems we encounter here and now. What we rejoice about is the fact that there is something on the other side. There are a lot of people that have gone through a lot of trials and tests, a lot of things a lot worse than any of us have encountered.

While the celebration was going on in Germany for the ending of the Wall, there was a very solemn occasion that was being noted in Israel—an occasion known as "Kristallnacht" which means "the night of glass." That was the night, approximately fifty-six years ago, that the Germans came through and broke all the windows in the Jewish shops and Jewish homes. It was the beginning of the end for the Jews. They called it the German term which meant "the night of glass" or "the night of broken glass." Here were people who saw everything that they had worked for, everything that they had built, destroyed by a mob. Over the next few years, in many cases, their lives, their families, everything was wiped out. They went through those things and they died. For many of them, they didn't

really have any practical hope. They didn't know what lay ahead.

The world is filled with people who have gone through suffering, whether it's been diseases, whether it's been terrible family calamities or various problems. The world is filled with people who have problems. We go through trials but trials are not unique to the Church of God—whether it is financial trials, health trials, family trials or whatever. People all over the world have problems, trials and difficulties. What is unique is that we have a hope. We have an understanding of the reality of what lies on the other side of those trials and difficulties. That is what we are told to rejoice in—to rejoice in hope.

I Peter 2:1 we continue to be admonished, "Therefore, laying aside all malice, all guile, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking."

Verse 5, "you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Verse 6, it describes the analogy of laying in Zion the chief cornerstone, and that is Jesus Christ.

Verses 7-8, "Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient. 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,' and 'A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.' They stumble, being disobedient to the word to which they also were appointed."

Verses 9-12, "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy. Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation."

Verse 20, "For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer for it, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God." If I get in trouble for something I did and I take it in a good attitude, big deal! I brought it on myself. If I am persecuted for righteousness' sake and I take it well, now that counts for something because then I am doing what Jesus did. He

never suffered for anything He did; He suffered for righteousness' sake. I can't say that the only suffering I have ever done is for righteousness' sake. Can you? Then it go through in terms of human and personal relationships, husbands and wives, people dealing with one another.

In I Peter 3:14-15 we are told, "But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled. But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense [KJV, "an answer"] to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear."

You don't have to worry if you suffer for righteousness' sake. We can suffer for righteousness' sake and maintain a positive attitude. People are going to wonder, 'What's with you?' That's kind of the context in which people ask you what it is about you that is different. How can you go through this and handle it the way you do? We are told to be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks concerning a reason of the hope that is within us. It is the reality of that hope that enables us to endure.

It goes on and talks about trials and all of these things. The means of survival is the reality of that hope.

II Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness..." That hope is not something that is far removed. But we do look for a new heavens and a new earth.

Verse 13, "Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." The reality of that hope is emphasized.

II Peter explains a great deal of important material. It even explains and gives us some insight into the beginnings of the false church. It gives us insight into understanding how we came to have the New Testament preserved as we do. We will focus on that a little later. There is an emphasis on hope.

Faith, hope and love. John talks about love throughout the books of John.

I John 2:10, "He who loves his brother abides in the light..."

Verse 15, we are not to love the world or at least the things of the world.

I John 3:1, "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God..."

Verse 16, “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”

Verse 18, “...let us not love in word, or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”

I John 4:7-8, “...let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is begotten of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

Verses 10-11, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

Verse 16, “And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.”

Verses 18-19, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us.”

I John 5:2-3, “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.”

You know, you’d almost think that John was talking about love! Faith, hope and love. John explains what real love is.

James explains what real faith is. Real faith is living faith. It is a faith that is coupled with action and results in action. In other words, we act on what we believe. That’s what having faith with our works means. We act on what we believe. If I really believe it, I am going to act on it.

Peter explains how to keep on acting on it when everything is going wrong around you. You are able to keep going because you have a hope that is living, a hope that is real and a hope that is on the other side of the trial. How did Christ go through and survive what He went through? – Because of the reality of the hope that was set before Him. Peter explains the living hope that we have is the means of our enduring the trials.

We start out with faith and we demonstrate our faith by acting on it. Our faith is tried and tested. Our means of going through and surviving trials and tests is the hope that is real to us.

Then we come to understand the most fundamental aspect of God’s character, which needs to be made a part of us. Love! We find that love and law go together. We find that love is the fulfilling of the law.

I John 5:3 explains, “...this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments.” We are to love God and love one another. God loved us. We see this emphasis, this explanation, of what is real love.

If you go through the Gospels, you find that Jesus kept the Sabbath. He entered into the synagogue on the Sabbath, as was His custom (Luke 4:16). You go through the book of Acts and find out that the apostles did the same thing. Then James tells you that you need to have works with your faith. Then Peter tells you that Paul wrote a few things that were sometimes misunderstood. John tells you that sin is the transgression of the law (I John 3:4), and the love of God is that we keep His commandments. Jude tells you to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered (Jude 3). You are not going to get to Romans that Paul wrote and think that Paul must have done away with the Sabbath and the Ten Commandments. We have a basis of understanding on some of the things Paul wrote because you understand these fundamental areas of faith, hope and love, which Paul said were the things which were going to abide (I Corinthians 13:13). How do you understand what faith, hope and love are? You go back to James, Peter and John. John tells us that.

II John 6, “This is love, that we walk after His Commandments. This is the commandment that you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it.”

Then he talks about deceivers that have gone out into the world who are bringing this doctrine (vv. 9-11).

In III John 9-10, he talks about certain congregations being subverted.

We find that there was a church that was appearing on the scene that did not continue in the faith and actions of the apostles. Therefore, it should not surprise us to find that there were those who were trying to get rid of these epistles, and get them out of the canon. Who were they? Well, it’s a good bet that the ones that John and Jude were warning you of were the ones that you read of a few years later that were trying to get rid of those books. If people want to get rid of something, it is generally because it points them out.

Then you come to **Jude who warns about apostasy, the falling away and contending for the faith once delivered.**

Jude 3-4, “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you

to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Oh, so the problem was going to involve a misunderstanding of grace. Peter said Paul wrote some things a little difficult to be understood—or that can be misunderstood—if you don’t take them in the right way, which those that are unlearned and unstable twist (II Peter 3:16). In other words, they take it out of context. The way you misunderstand Paul is you don’t take him in context. He wrote long complicated sentences. You can extract something out of the middle of it, take it out of context, and totally miss the point. So, Peter warned that’s what some did, the same way they twisted other parts of the Scriptures.

*Jude tells us that those who were trying to subvert and to mess things up were the ones who were turning grace into lawlessness.* They were distorting what God’s grace is about. Now, God’s grace is wonderful. God’s grace is what makes possible our forgiveness and our opportunity to be a part of His Family. But God’s grace does not diminish from our responsibility of obeying Him. God’s grace is extended to us because our best efforts are not good enough. There is nothing we could ever do on our own to atone for what we have done in the past. God extends His grace and His mercy. If we believe that, we are going to act on that belief.

Jude goes through and really gives us warnings about some of these things. We have here material that is fundamental. We might look, just very briefly, at these books.

*Jude was addressed to the twelve tribes of the dispersion.* It was not just to the Jews but also to all of the Israelites. James was the presiding apostle at the headquarters Church in Jerusalem. He was the half-brother of Jesus Christ. This book was probably written around 60 A.D. James was a remarkable individual. He was known, even among the Jews, as James the Just or James the Righteous. He was martyred about 62 A.D. by being thrown over the side of the temple. He was pushed, shoved or thrown off of the high wall down on the rocks below.

Many of the Jews, interestingly enough, felt that the Roman invasion was retribution for their martyrdom of James. The Jews greatly respected him and, in a sense, knew that what they had

done was wrong. It is interesting in some of their own writings, some of the statements that are made concerning that.

James was an individual of quite renown. We will note some things when we get into the book of James. We will note the area of circulation and the areas of prominence that the book of James had throughout the Middle East, and even some of the areas of Britain and Parthia where Israelites were settled.

*Peter was written to Israelites dispersed along the southern shore of the Black Sea.* There is a lot of emphasis on hope in the midst of persecution. II Peter was written shortly before Peter’s death. It explains the origin and purpose of the New Testament canon.

John wrote about thirty years later. He wrote after all the others had written. He gives kind of a wrap-up and a summary. He zeroes in on two things. Interestingly enough, what did Christ warn?

Matthew 24:12, ““And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.”” It’s interesting. The thing that John focuses on is the fact that (1) lawlessness is multiplying and (2) love is growing cold. John focuses in on the relationship between love and law. He shows the antidote to what Christ had warned of because that’s what happened. That was what sapped the spiritual strength and stamina of the New Testament Church.

What did Christ tell the Ephesians Church? Revelation 2:1, 4, ““To the angel of the church of Ephesus write...nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.”” What sapped the spiritual strength and stamina? Well, there was a certain watering down. There was a disregard for law that began to grow; as a result, love began to diminish.

It doesn’t matter how much you emphasize love if disregard for the law and a casual approach to the law begins to grow. Love inevitably will dim because law and love go together. You cannot separate them. The reason is because a lawless attitude is a selfish, self-centered attitude. The law reflects our relationship with God and with other people. When you have a disregard for the law, you have an increase in selfishness and self-centeredness. Why do people want to break the law? Because they don’t want to be inconvenienced by doing what they are supposed to do. They want to do what they want to do. That is selfish. That is self-centered. When people have that kind of selfish, self-centered

approach, it is obviously going to diminish the love that they show toward others.

John zeroes in on these things. John wrote in the 90s A.D. What John wrote has specific connections with the heresies that were extant at the time.

Jude was written about the same time as II Peter. It shows the extent that the apostasy was in “full swing.” It has the warnings and the insight that helps us to understand what was actually taking place in the early New Testament Church.

Next Bible study we are going to cover the book of James. The following Bible study we will cover I and II Peter. Then the following study after that, we will cover I, II, III John and Jude. That may seem like a lot to lump together, but when you look at II John and III John, you realize they are little short chapters. They are just little short one-chapter books. Jude is just one chapter. I, II, III John and Jude, taken together, are very short amounts of material.

So I think it will give us a basis, a kind of an overview of this section of Scripture. This section is very basic in terms of understanding practical day-by-day Christian life. We can kind of take it from there.

When we conclude the General Epistles, we will save the remainder of the New Testament until later. We will come back and do a series on the “Life and Letters of Paul” at a later time. We will also save the book of Revelation until later. When we finish this, we will go back to the Old Testament. We will pick up the Major and Minor Prophets, and then we will see where we go from there.