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General Epistles

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade..." 1 Peter 1:3-4

Key verses: 1 Peter 1:3-5, 13-16; 4:12; 5:10-11; 2 Peter 3:17-18; 1 John 1:5-7; 4:10-16; 5: 11-13; 2 John 5-6; 3 Jude 21-23

Key personalities: Peter, John and Early Jewish Christians

Timeline: The Church is established and grows by the Power of the Holy Spirit and the multiplying networks of Peter, John, and other apostles, 60-95 A.D.

The Epistles of: James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Jude.

These Epistles are called the "Catholic Epistles," meaning, "general," as, the "General Epistles," because they are not addressed to specific individuals or churches but were circulated to regions and open to all the early Christians. For example, James is addressed to "the twelve tribes". This means everyone—all those in Christ's service, all those who should be in Christ, "the elect exiles in the dispersion" (as Paul states).

The Epistle of 1 Peter. 60-68 A.D. This letter is to a group of churches in distress, where "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ," encapsulates Christ as our living hope, so we can live in a hostile world. Peter encourages them to remain faithful, live a life of submission, purity, godly living, and be steadfast and faithful even in persecution. Peter also warns all not to betray Christ with false teaching and feel-good health-and-wealth doctrines. The truth is that there is no guarantee of happiness as a Christian; our salvation only by faith in Christ Jesus is the guarantee. Our living hope is our new birth in Christ. Things will not always be what we want. In a fallen world, there will always be suffering. There will always be evil. (We see this in the persecution of Christians by the Romans and in these days, too.)

The Epistle of 2 Peter. 67-68 A.D. In this sequel, Peter, the Apostle of Hope, reminds the early Christians to be diligent with the truth of the Gospel. He reminds Christians to fight against false teachers, evil doctrine, perverters of Truth, deceivers, and those who twist and taint the work and teaching of Our Lord. Peter is also warning the people to be on guard from those ideas elsewhere. We can combat false teachings with spiritual maturity (2 Peter 2:1)! There is Truth! There is ABSOLUTE Truth. God's Word—the Truth—remains unchanged and inerrant even when you may not feel it or when others proclaim otherwise. We are called to learn and know the Truth and be on guard against false truths. He also reminds Christians to be faithful and prepare for the coming persecutions. This is the Book that tells us about Heaven and Christ's second coming for which we prepare by our growing faith.

The Epistles of John. 90-95 A.D. John the Apostle and the author of the Gospel that bears his name, addresses these short letters to an unidentified group. The theme is that we have a living fellowship with the Holy God of Light and Love. He emboldens his audience with the knowledge that we have the certainty of eternal life because of Christ; and, and because God is love, we are to walk in that love. John emphasizes faith and love; John also calls upon the church to deal with the danger of the increasing of false doctrines. We are never to forget what is real and important--our "fellowship with God"-- and living out our faith in Truth and love.

The Epistle of Jude. 65-67 A.D. Like Peter, Jude realized that false teachers were the biggest threat to the church--even more than tribulations and/or persecutions! Jude tempers his attack of the false teachers by focusing his readers on drawing on and growing in the knowledge and truth of Christ (Jude 1:3, 20-23). Jude is also encouraging. He tells Christians to remain in the faith. Trust in Christ. Like Peter and James, Jude exhorts Christians to go after and bring back those who have fallen away. He warns of the dangers of apostasy and to "contend for the faith."

The Epistles of James and Hebrews will be addressed in other sessions.

Key Happenings: The celebration of Jesus Christ! Being diligent to live out and guard His Truth!

These Epistles were written to a Church under siege. The siege was both internal and external with bitter conflicts and schemes from within the church and attacks from militant pagans and some hostile Jews. Thus, the Apostles write to encourage how to cope with and prepare for the worst that would come—even more heinous persecutions. The encouragement is this: Heed Christ as Lord, His Truth, and fight against anything that comes against this! Be on guard and fight against heresies and false doctrines while being vigilant building faith and the Church.

The church was also new, and it grew out of Judaism from an evangelism campaign by Peter, James, Paul and their protégés by the impact of the Holy Spirit. The church was in a difficult place—surrounded by a Greek and pagan culture, they were having birthing and growing pains. They were being negatively influenced and confused by the spectacle of cults and false religions that surrounded them. They needed the Truth; they needed a Savior. They could not just retreat inward or run away; they had to fight with faith and model the love of Jesus for those who did not understand or want it. This was written for the early Christians; this is written for us.

1 Peter points us to Christ our Redeemer who is our living hope even when we are hurting!

Jesus offers His forgiveness and grace; by, with and through Him, we are enabled and empowered to live holy lives. He, indeed, has a plan and a purpose for us! Life here—now—is preparatory and temporary. Our citizenship is to come in a glorious, wondrous eternity! Our God is in control and totally sovereign. He gives us the faith and the ability to face whatever comes our way, so we do not become the hurting who hurts others (1 Pet 1:3).

- We are called to *set your hearts*. This means to have understanding, to think, and to have a desire for real, *bona fide* faith as well as truth. We are to think about Christ and consider what we have in Him to experience our new lives. Truth is something we want to learn for triumphant lives and effectual churches, something we want to live in. As long as we are in Christ, our connection to purity is maintained; thus, we should not sin and live as we please. Paul emphatically fights this heinous notion, too. We have no right to sin deliberately, and we have no right in thinking, “*I am already forgiven so it is OK to sin*” (Col. 1:9; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 1 Pet. 2:2)!
- We are called to *set your mind*. This means to place Christ first. Bad thoughts and actions lead to bad lives, so we are called to purposefully focus ourselves on Christ, His precepts, and His presence. When we focus on Christ, our attention is off other things and distractions—even sin! Heavenly values will translate into earthy values when we are centered on Christ, allowing His work in and through us (Matt. 6:33; Rom. 8:5; Phil. 1:23; 4:8; 1 John 2:15-17).

Christ is our living Hope that will never fade away!

In a loving, caring, pastoral tone, 1 and 2 Peter deal with suffering--why we have it and what we're going to do with it. We will face the sufferings and trials; we will even be persecuted for following the faith and being good witnesses. How we grow and what we learn through the trials is what matters to God and is the value to us. Jesus, being fully God, suffered on our behalf; we live in a world of sin that suffers due to the consequences thereof. Jesus bore our sins and took away our ultimate, deserved suffering.

- We are chosen by God and by God alone! The Holy Spirit sets us apart. We are able to hear and receive His Words of grace and life. We need to be reminded of what we have and who we are in Christ. If not, we will soon forget and replace His guidance either with our frailty or with the ways of the world.
- Our Lord modeled for us how we are to deal with suffering (1 Peter 1:16-21; 2:21, 4-25).
- The key to the Christian life and spiritual growth is our faith that develops our trust in Christ, and our submission to His precepts which produces character and maturity (1 Peter 2:12; 5:10-11).
- 2 Peter and Jude give us less theological substance, but accomplish essential, needed tasks such as growing in faith (2 Peter 1:8-10, 12, 16-21; Jude 1:3), how to face dangers (2 Peter 1:13-14; 2:1-3; Jude 1:20-22), combating false teaching and false teachers (Rom. 12:8; 2 Peter 2:1-22; 3:3-4, 15-18; Jude 1:4-19), and the second coming of Christ (2 Peter 3:1-13)!

Jude confronts false teachers as does 2 Peter. False teachers were teaching that we have the liberty to sin because we have grace. They were also being arrogant--a true sign that a person is not from God (Psalm 5:5; 107:17; Hab. 1:7-9; Titus 3:3-8; Jude 1:4-19).

Jude reminds us the veracity and impact of spiritual error! We do not have the right to rationalize sin or to bow to the world or be influenced by it. We are called to be the influencers of the world, not influenced by the world. We live in a world that sees truth as relative; know this: Truth is not relative. There is one Truth, Jesus Christ, and any thoughts of a Christian that stray from that truth causes that Christian and, perhaps, others around him or her, to stray from the faith and into confusion, disillusionment, and sin!

Peter and Jude are writing to Christians who are oppressed, confused, and struggling. They are seeking to live for Christ in a world that not only does not understand but also persecutes those of the faith. In the midst of the oppressions of the world and family, others come along who seek to deceive and entice them to live in sin and not for Christ. Peter and Jude encourage, challenge, and give Christians the hope to remain in Christ. Peter and Jude point out that they are living in error and admonish them to be aware and be on guard. Peter and Jude exhort Christians to be aware and be on guard to live for Christ, putting on His virtues and not the world's. These epistles are as relevant today as they were 2000 years ago; what they experienced, we experience! The early Christians needed hope and encouragement just as need these today; the Truth is for all for all time.

John writes his epistles with similar themes to Peter including endurance in trials and confronting false teachers. John tells Christians, in all things, to have a love for one another and to guard against anything that takes the place of Christ being first in our lives. John warns us about the antichrist; this is the only place in the Bible with that warning or personality figure. Note the antichrist is plural--more than one--and is anyone who opposes or distracts us away from Christ as Lord (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 1:7).

These early Christians received the grace of Christ, but found themselves in further turmoil.

False teachings, mysticism, empty philosophies, legalism, and bad traditions also threatened the health and well-being of the Christians and their evangelistic opportunities. (Sound familiar?) The Christians were under siege by prideful men seeking sensationalism and mysticism rather than Christ as Lord. Christ's Deity was being challenged and rebuffed for more so-called "clever and newer" ideas (Acts 19).

- Greek philosophies were captivating as were the Jewish mysticisms and traditions. These early forms of "Gnosticism," were the biggest threat, where it was taught that salvation was received from knowledge of spiritual secrets or principles and not through faith in Christ. This basically was a cult that sought to manipulate people and their money—just like today. This was a form of "Asceticism," where one seeks to free himself from the body's physical influence; others sought indifference of the body. The scheme was that the soul was the only thing good and important, while all else, including the body, was irrelevant to seeking a higher spiritual plane.
- Peer pressures and social status were also at stake. These included believing the body to be evil so it did not matter what was done in one's physical form as long as we were sincere; this was, in essence, a license to sin; the ritual of circumcision and the traditions of dietary laws were in place. Those who accepted these ideas had more social status; this is what we with in today's postmodern culture. Some of the Jewish Christian leaders were mixing the paganism of secret knowledge with tradition.
- Others said Christ was pleased only by their observance of the traditions and holy days. Some were teaching that angels were necessary to mediate between man and God, while others sought occult practices. What they needed to know was the truth--Christ is really and truly sufficient, and only in Him comes real wisdom, new life, and completeness (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19; Col. 1:15-28; 2:2-3, 8-11, 14-20; 3:5).
- The people were confused; they were not sure who to follow or what to do.

These early Christians needed to understand that knowing God was not a one-time event. Knowing God is a continual and continuous relationship in which we constantly rely on Him. He alone is the Hope we have. He alone gives us grace and peace.

Our place and security is in Heaven to come; our joy can be declared and lived out. Christ is sufficient for faith and salvation; there is no other and there will never be. Yes, we do have hope beyond hope. If our place is

secured in eternity—and, it is; if we have a Savior in Whom we can have faith and trust—and, we do, then we can lead lives of endurance no matter what is thrown at us. These are things we cannot accomplish by our own means; we need Jesus. He needs to be placed first!

Key Takeaway: These early Christians who were grateful for Christ, placed Him as LORD, realized we need to guard His Truth so to live in truth and love. We are urged to put Christ first and move on to spiritual maturity. This creates a healthy church, prevents false teachings, and facilitates a mutual faith and hope that is contagious and effectual. We know His Truth, and we can still be triumphant in Him in the time we have here on earth. In so doing, we need to be known for who we are in Christ, not for just what we are against. The early Christians were positive with the Gospel and the call to love our fellow believers and enemies. They exercised kindness with one another and with outsiders. They were patient with the decadent society and persecutions they were in. However, they had to guard the Truth from those who come into the church, not seeking Christ, but who sought to destroy, wreak havoc, and to distract others with a prideful disregard for all that is Holy and Right and True.

The Call to the Church? The people in your care need to know the importance of our relationship with God and with one another. In this way, we can be positive with those who do not know Christ. We must be known for who we are in Christ, not just for what we are against. We have to show kindness and patience--the key characters of love--to those we 'feel' we must hate. We never will reach others for the Gospel by our negativity or argumentations. Our reach is effective by our kindness, by holding on to truth, by being patient with those who are ignorant or even hateful of the truth, the Word of God.

Questions to Ponder

1. What do these Epistles teach us about Jesus Christ? What did you learn new?
2. How and why does John open up his first epistle? What is the *Word of Life* and why is it important?
3. How would you describe your faith? What is it that you need more of to develop your continual relationship to rely on Christ?
4. How is Christianity perceived by those outside of your church walls?
5. How important is being positive for the Gospel verse being negative with it?
6. How would you describe a living hope? How important is hope for your life? What would life be without it?
7. What difference does it make we have an inheritance for eternity? What does eternity mean for your daily life and faith?
8. What is it you need when you are going through trials? What does Christ give us?
9. How and why should we rejoice through distresses?
10. Why are false teachers a problem for the church? What can we do to guard against them and encourage others not to follow them?
11. What is our responsibility as believers? How should your church act on that responsibility?
12. Who are the people in your community that need to see a demonstration of the love of Christ? What are you and your church going to do about it?