

General Letters

Philemon, James, 1&2 Peter, 1,2&3 John, Jude

Overview of Section

The Catholic, or general, epistles are the terms sometimes used for the letters written by James, Peter, John, and Jude. They are so called because they are addressed to Christians in general, not to any church or person in particular such as the epistles to the Corinthians, Thessalonians etc. The word "catholic" originated from Greek and then Latin words which simply meant *throughout the whole*. The Catholic Epistles were not written by, or to, those who became known as Roman Catholics, a church organization that began long after James, Peter, John, and Jude, all of whom were Jews, wrote their "catholic" epistles.

Philemon

Theme: Bondage to Brotherhood

- ❖ **Author & Date:** Paul A.D 62
- ❖ **Author's reason for writing:** This book is written as a plea to Philemon to allow his slave Onesimus to return, and be forgiven for the things that he had done to wrong his master.
- ❖ **Literary Style:** Letter
- ❖ **Background and Setting:** Paul is writing from room to Philemon who lives in Colossae
- ❖ **Key People:** Philemon, Onesimus, Paul, Epaphras
- ❖ **Historical/Cultural Context:** Paul is under house arrest in Rome, and he is currently ministering abroad through the writing of letters. Paul wrote Philemon around the same time that he wrote Ephesians and Colossians.

- ❖ **Summary:** Philemon was a slaveholding Christian who lived in the city of Colossae. He owned a certain slave named Onesimus. Onesimus in some way had wronged Philemon, probably by stealing money, and for that reason had fled to Rome. In Rome Onesimus became a part of Paul's ministry, and became transformed in it through the power of the gospel.
- ❖ **Outline:** Praise of Philemon(1-7) Plea of Philemon (8-17) Pledge of Philemon (18-25)
- ❖ **Tough Questions:** Why would a just God allow slavery to exist? Is Paul pleading for Onesimus emancipation?

James

Theme: Faith that Works

- ❖ **Author & Date:** James aprox. A.D. 41-46
- ❖ **Author's reason for writing:** James is written to Jewish Christians imploring them to put their faith into action, and turn from leading a "double-minded life," going between God and the world.
- ❖ **Literary Style:** Letter
- ❖ **Background and Setting:** Most likely written to the Jewish house churches outside of Palestine, based on its mention of "the twelve tribes of dispersion."
- ❖ **Key People:** "twelve tribes of dispersion," James
- ❖ **Historical/Cultural Context:** The Christians in this letter are most likely in a situation of poverty and persecution. These facts can be derived from the pleas to rejoice in suffering.
- ❖ **Summary:** As a result of persecution and poverty many are turning to worldly passions, and away from God. They are turning to worldly things find wisdom and joy, instead of asking God for this.
- ❖ **Outline:** Greeting (1:1) Testing of Faith (1:2-18), Hearing and Doing the Word (1:19-27), The sin of

Partiality (2:1-3), Faith without works is dead (2:14-26), The Sin of Dissension in the Community (3:1-4:12), The sins of the Wealthy (4:13-5:12), The Prayer of Faith (5:13-18), Concluding Admonition (5:19-20)

- ❖ **Tough Questions:** See James 2:21-23 and Romans 4:1-4. Are James and Paul saying the same thing? According to James, are works necessary for Justification?

1 Peter

Theme: Standing Firm

- ❖ **Author & Date:** Peter A.D. 62-63
- ❖ **Author's reason for writing:** To encourage Christians to persevere through suffering and persecution.
- ❖ **Literary Style:** NT epistle
- ❖ **Background and Setting:** Peter is probably writing from Rome during intense persecution by Nero, to believers in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. (1:1)
- ❖ **Key People:** Peter, Gentile audience, Believers in many of Paul's churches
- ❖ **Historical/Cultural Context:** The death of Paul prompted Peter to begin writing to the churches that Paul had established on his missionary journeys.
- ❖ **Summary:** The letter emphasizes hope in the midst of suffering; perseverance in spite of pain. Peter did not want the persecutions to choke out the seed which Paul had planted. He perceived the danger of straying to be especially susceptible to outside attack.
- ❖ **Outline:** Salvation of the Believer (1:1-2:12) Submission of the Believer (2:13-3:12) Suffering of the Believer (3:13-5:14)

2 Peter

Theme: character and counterfeit Christianity

- ❖ **Author & Date:** Peter A.D. 64-67
- ❖ **Author's reason for writing:** Peter writes because his time is short and he knows that God's people are facing many dangers (1:13-14; 2:1-3). Peter writes to provide a reminder of the basics of the Christian faith (1:12-13, 16-21) and to instruct future generations of believers in the faith (1:15) by affirming its apostolic tradition. Peter writes to warn his readers about the coming of false teachers (2:1-22) who deny the soon return of the Lord (3:3-4) and live immoral and greedy lives.
- ❖ **Literary Style:** Epistle
- ❖ **Background and Setting:** Peter is writing from prison while he awaits execution, probably to a Christians.
- ❖ **Key People:** Peter
- ❖ **Historical/Cultural Context:** This Letter was written during the reign of Nero, and Christians were suffering intense persecution, and also a time at which many false teachers were rising.
- ❖ **Summary:** First Peter speaks of the new birth through the living Word. Second Peter stresses the need for growth in the grace and knowledge of Christ. The best antidote for error is a mature understanding of the truth.
- ❖ **Outline:** 1 HOLINESS 1 Cultivation of Christian Character 2 HERESY Condemnation of False Teachers 3 HOPE Confidence of Christ's Return

1 John

Theme: The test of eternal life

- ❖ **Author & Date:** John the son of Zebedee late first century A.D.

Theology Lab Presents:
Thru the Bible

- ❖ **Author's reason for writing:** 5:13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life.
- ❖ **Literary Style:** Rhetorical
- ❖ **Background and Setting:** John likely wrote this book near Ephesus, he spent the end of his life ministering to churches in this area
- ❖ **Key People:** John, all believers
- ❖ **Historical/Cultural Context:** Gnosticism, which is a religious mysticism that pirates Christian motifs to propagate an understanding of salvation based on esoteric "knowledge," was growing in popularity.
- ❖ **Summary:** Advanced in years, the Apostle John wrote this fatherly epistle out of loving concern for his "children", whose steadfastness in the truth was being threatened by the lure of worldliness and the deception of false teachers. John's epistle was written to refute the destructive teachings of the Gnostics by stressing the reality of the Incarnation and the emptiness of profession without practice.
- ❖ **Outline:** God is light Christ is the way (1:1-2:6) The Abiding Commandment in a Transient World (2:7-11) Overcoming antichrist by confession of the son (2:18-3:10) Overcoming evil by listening to the apostle (3:11-4:6) The assurance of God through the Love of God (4:7-21) Faith in the Son as the way to Life (5:1-12) Final call to Faith and Understanding (5:13-21)

2 John

Theme: Walking in truth and love

- ❖ **Author & Date:** John the son of Zebedee late first century A.D.

Theology Lab Presents:
Thru the Bible

- ❖ **Author's reason for writing:** John reminds his readers to walk in obedience and warns them not to associate with false teachers
- ❖ **Literary Style:** epistle
- ❖ **Background and Setting:** John likely wrote this book near Ephesus in his congregation, to another church body or congregation that he was going to visit soon
- ❖ **Key People:** John, "the elect lady" a congregation or the church body
- ❖ **Historical/Cultural Context:** John spent the end of his life ministering to churches in the area near Ephesus
- ❖ **Summary:** John writes to the "elect lady" to encourage believers to love each other and beware of deceivers. He offers practical counsel on showing hospitality to traveling missionaries and seeks to prepare the "elect lady" for his anticipated visit in the near future
- ❖ **Outline:** Greeting: The Elder's Love (1-3) The Elder's Joy and Request (4-6) The Elder's Concern (7-8) The Elder's warning (9-11) Closing: The Elder's Farewell (12-13)

3 John

Theme: Loyalty to the truth

- ❖ **Author & Date:** John the son of Zebedee late first century A.D.
- ❖ **Author's reason for writing:** John 3 was written as a personal letter to Gaius commending him for his service, and condemning Diotrephes for his misconduct
- ❖ **Literary Style:** personal epistle
- ❖ **Background and Setting:** John 3 was written by John near Ephesus at the end of John's life
- ❖ **Key People:** Gaius, Paul, Demetrius, Diotrephes

- ❖ **Historical/Cultural Context:** 3 John was delivered as a part of a packet containing both 1st and 2nd John. It was delivered by Demetrius, who is mentioned in verse 12
- ❖ **Summary:** John evidently encouraged a number of traveling teachers to spread the gospel and solidify the Asian churches. Fellow believers received these teachers into their homes and supported them. Third John was occasioned by the report of some of these emissaries (called “brethren”), who returned to the apostle and informed him of Gaius’ hospitality and Diotrephes’ hostility. In spite of its briefness, Third John skillfully develops the characters of Gaius and Diotrephes with surprising vividness. The letter gives us a glimpse into the frank and personal correspondence that John and other early Christian leader maintained.
- ❖ **Outline:** John Commends Gaius in 1-8 and John Condemns Diotrephes in 9-14

Jude

Theme: Beware of false teachers

- ❖ **Author & Date:** Jude mid 60’s A.D.
- ❖ **Author’s reason for writing:** Jude wrote with a heart of love, understanding, concern, and authority. He wanted to write a joyful theme, “about the salvation we share” (Jude 13), but was compelled to write a much more somber epistle. “Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 3). His love for the endangered believers moved him to turn from the more pleasant theme to sound a solemn

warning. This epistle is intensely concerned with the

- ❖ **Literary Style:** Epistle
- ❖ **Background and Setting:** The book does not give a specific region as to which this letter is written, however, it is inevitably one, that he felt had an issue with false teachers arising.
- ❖ **Key People:** Jude
- ❖ **Historical/Cultural Context:** Jude was the half-brother of Jesus and brother of the James the apostle, author of the epistle “James.”
- ❖ **Summary:** Jude warns against following those who have gained entry to the church and are perverting the one true faith with false teaching. The letter warns against allowing the false teachers to continue to have influence. Jude calls the church to defend the truth aggressively against this infiltration.
- ❖ **Outline:** Introduction 1-4 Anatomy of a False Teacher 5-16 Antidote for a False

Gospel Connection

- ❖ **Philemon:** Christians’ treatment of one another in Christ is to be transformed in light of his grace toward them
- ❖ **James:** Christians’ are to live with wisdom that befits followers of Christ. Christ lived a perfect life; we should seek to live similarly.
- ❖ **1 Peter:** Christians’ are to endure suffering for the sake of Christ, looking back on Christ’s suffering and forward to the consummation of salvation in his second coming.
- ❖ **2 Peter:** Hold fast to the truth found in Christ while patiently awaiting the second coming.
- ❖ **1 John:** John speaks repeatedly about Christians showing love, and living in love towards one another. This example was demonstrated through Christ’s life

- ❖ **2 John:** Now that Christ has accomplished salvation, we are to abide in his teach, "everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God." (2 John 9)
- ❖ **3 John:** Similar to 2 Peter, 3 John is written so that we might hold fast to the truth found and given by Christ, while we patiently await the second coming.

Life Passages

❖ James:

- James 1:2-8 – Testing of your Faith
 - What does it look like to count it joy when you are faced with trials? Do you turn first to God for wisdom in decision making or to people?
- James 1: 14-17 - Temptation
 - Sin is progressive, how often do you turn from the desire of the flesh, before it turns to sin, before it will lead to death? Do you seek for the good found in God and the Gospel or in the world?
- James 2:18 – Faith and Works
 - Is James implying that works are necessary for salvation?
- James 4:2-4 – Passions of the flesh
 - Where do we draw the line between living a life on mission (in trying to relate to people), and being a friend of the world?
- James 4:17 – Do the right thing
 - Not doing something you know you should is called the sin of omission. How often do you take the easy road and not do what is right out of fear of rejection or disapproval?

❖ 1 Peter:

- 1Peter 1:14-19 – Be Holy
 - You have been ransomed from sin! Will you live now in fear throughout this time of

exile, or will you return to the sinful ways of your forefathers that will re-enslave you?

- 1Peter 2: 9-10 – A royal priesthood
 - We are a holy nation, called to proclaim his excellencies, are we as a body doing an adequate job of proclaiming the excellencies of God? Or do we more often burden people with their sinful?
- 1Peter 2: 3-14 – Submission to Authority
 - It is counter-cultural, to obey authority, especially in our time. Will you obey authority even when it seems like it's not a big deal to not?
- 1Peter 4: 3-5 – Stewards of Grace
 - What are some practical ways that we can witness to people when they are ensnared in earthly passions?
- ❖ **2 Peter**
 - 2 Peter 2:4-10 – God's faithfulness
 - How's your perseverance? Are you quick to turn to former sins when things get rough or do you find comfort in the faithfulness of God?
 - 2 Peter 2:19-20 – Slavery to sin
 - What are you overcome by? Is it God or is it an earthly passion?
 - 2 Peter 3:8-9 – Slow to wrath
 - God is slow to wrath, how is this comforting?
- ❖ **1 John**
 - 1 John 1:8-10 – Walk in the light
 - How often do you repent? God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. If we think there is no need to repent, we are making God a liar.
 - 1 John 4:7-8 – Love one another
 - Often times people mistake being nice for love. Why is true love only from God? How

Theology Lab Presents:

Thru the Bible

is this different from the world's view of love?

- 1 John 5:3 – Not Burdensome
 - Do you find it hard to keep God's commands? If yes, what is making it difficult, is it a worldly passion that you aren't ready to give up?
- ❖ **2 John**
 - 2 John 9 – Abiding in Christ
 - How close do you feel to God? How closely do you follow Christ's teaching?
- ❖ **3 John**
 - 3 John 12 – From God, Seeing God
 - If we do good we are from God, if we do evil we have not seen God. How do we lose sight of God? What are some practical ways that we can see God better?
- ❖ **Jude**
 - Jude 3-4 – Contend for Faith
 - Do you find yourself allowing brothers and sisters to fall into sin or are you more prone to speak truth in love? It's easier to not speak up, but if you love God and your brother, you will contend for the faith.