

Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About the New Testament
Living the Message 2021-2022
April 2022 Study Guide for Participants and Facilitators

April Question:

What About All These Other Letters? James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude

[Click here to watch the video.](#)

Overview

The last two months, we've been reading the "epistles," the various letters in the New Testament. The "General Epistles" (These Other Letters) are those not written by or attributed to Paul. They include James; 1 & 2 Peter; 1, 2 & 3 John; Jude; and Hebrews. These are sometimes called the "General" or "Catholic" (in the sense of "universal") Letters because they deal less with specific communities and their problems and are addressed more generally to Christians at large. (The letters of John are an exception, as they are written for a specific community, probably the one for which the Gospel of John was written.) For this reason, they are more instructional and exhortative – that is, teaching about morals and urging people to follow those ethical guidelines.

On the whole, there is less of what we would call "the Gospel" in these letters – that is, the proclamation of God's love poured out in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – than in Paul's letters or the gospels. (For instance, the Letter of James only mentions Jesus twice! Little wonder Luther once called James "a book of straw.") That can make reading the general letters challenging. But... in addition to some of the moral counsel offered (and admitting that the quality of that advice varies widely across these letters) the general epistles do shed some interesting light on the state of the early church when these letters were written. Among the latest books written (between 90-110AD), these letters reflect a church that is large enough and connected enough that you can address a letter to "congregations at large." These congregations were probably also feeling the stress of pressure both outside (persecutions), and internal (factionalism and heresy). Because they are responding to problems of a church that is now struggling, the general letters tend to feel a bit defensive in nature, and often focused more about rules to maintain the status quo than good news.

Initial question for discussion (before watching the presentation):

Have you read any of the General Letters? What did you make of them? How often have you heard them preached on?

Questions for discussion (after watching the presentation):

1. Having learned more about the General Letters, do you think you are more or less likely to read them, either devotionally or for study? Why?
2. How does placing the General Letters in the context of a church that is simultaneously growing and struggling help you understand these letters?
3. Does it help to think of the General Letters as an "ongoing conversation" the church is having?

Key Passages

[James 2:14-26](#) – “Faith without works is dead.” (Challenging Paul, or interpretations of Paul.)

[1 John 1:1-10](#) – Encouragement written to the community to whom the Gospel of John was addressed.

Going Deeper into the Word with Pastor Ruud - James

1. In James 2:24 it reads, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone,” seemingly contradicting what the Apostle Paul asserted in many prior letters that faith alone justifies. Why do you think the author of James wanted to issue a corrective? What might we infer the author was reacting to in the community of faith?
2. Can a writing be “godly” or “Christian” without mentioning Jesus’ death and resurrection?
3. Martin Luther’s critique of the epistle of James suggests some books and verses of scripture are more worthwhile, gospel-centered, “chief,” and/or essential than others. Why? If you were asked what is the chief message and purpose of the New Testament, what would you say? How does this open scripture up for deeper critique?

Closing Prayer

Dear God, as we learn about the development of the early Church and the faithful efforts to seize opportunities and face challenges, let us be renewed in our faith, confident that you come to each and all of us in grace and equip us to serve and love each other. Amen.