

Letters to Suffering Believers: Hebrews, James & 1 Peter

The Early Church was persecuted and scattered. Both Jewish and Gentile believers in the church had no written "New Testament."

Two things pressured believing Jews to turn from Christ back to Judaism:

1. Their loyalty to Moses and to Jewish customs.
2. The fierce persecution from unbelieving Jews. Following Jesus often cost these believers their reputations, houses, lands, possessions, freedom, and sometimes their lives.

HEBREWS

Jesus is our High Priest.

The author is unknown. This is not Paul's writing style.

More than any other book of the New Testament, Hebrews reveals Jesus as better than all who came before Him. "*Better*" is used 13 times.

The book was written to strengthen the faith of the believers and warn them of God's judgment on all who turned away from Christ.

Hebrews shows that we can persevere in the midst of our trials because Jesus is better than all who came before Him, and He will help us.

Hebrews emphasizes that we must live by faith in Jesus to please God.

The author gives us 7 warnings:

1. Listen or drift away (2:1-4)
2. Don't harden your heart (3:7-19)
3. Enter His rest (4:1, 11-13)
4. Stop going over the basic teachings and move on to maturity (5:11-6:20)
5. Do not deliberately sin (10:26-31)
6. Do not allow a root of bitterness to grow (12:14-17)

7. Do not refuse to listen to the one who is speaking – Moses and the Word (12:25-29)

He balances the warnings with “*let us*” passages:

“Let us” Passages	Hebrews
“Let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it (God’s rest)”	4:1
“Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest.”	4:11
“Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.”	4:14
“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence.”	4:16
“Let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity.”	6:1
“Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.”	10:22
“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess.”	10:23
“Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.”	10:24
“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.”	10:25
“Let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”	10:25
“Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.”	12:1
“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”	12:2
“Let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.”	12:28
“Let us, then go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.”	13:13
“Let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise.”	13:15

JAMES

Jesus demands faith with works. He is the Healer of the sick.

The following “General Epistles” were not written to one specific church or group of people:

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

The author: James, the half-brother of Jesus.

- He was an unbeliever during Christ’s earthly ministry (John 7:5). Later, he became a well-known leader.
- Jesus appeared to him after the Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7)
- James was a pillar in the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:9)
- When Peter was set free from prison, he sent word to James (Acts 12:17)
- James was a leader at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)
- After Paul was saved, he saw James in Jerusalem (Galatians 1:19)
- Years later, Paul saw James on his final visit to Jerusalem (Acts 21:18)
- James was so well known that Jude refers to himself as, “Jude, the brother of James” (Jude 1)
- According to Josephus, the Jewish historian, James was stoned in Jerusalem about AD 62.

Why did he write the letter?

1. To encourage Jewish believers who were suffering for their faith.
2. To correct false ideas about the nature of saving faith.
3. To teach his readers how faith shows itself in righteous living and good deeds.

James gives us MANY direct commands, with one theme woven throughout: **Faith that works.**

We have trials and temptations.

- Trials are troubles that come upon believers from the outside.

- Temptations are troubles that come from the lusts of our sinful nature; from the inside.

We are saved by grace through faith. But works will follow our faith.

*An old man used a small boat with two oars to help people cross a river. One day a passenger noticed the word **faith** on one oar and the word **works** on the other. “Why have you carved a word on each oar?” asked the curious rider. “I’ll show you,” replied the old man. At first, he rowed only with the oar of faith. This caused the boat to go in a circle. Then, he rowed only with the oar of works. Again, the boat went in a circle, the other way. However, when the man rowed with the two oars of faith and works, the boat traveled straight ahead. “So it is in life,” said the wise old man. Faith and works must pull together. One without the other is useless.*

Romans tells us that we are saved by faith in our hearts.

James tells us that when faith is in our hearts, we can see it in tangible actions.

The two go together.

1 PETER

Jesus is the Shepherd of our souls. He suffered for us.

A scribe named Silas, who wrote excellent Greek, helped Peter write this first epistle. In contrast, Peter probably wrote his second letter without help, since its Greek is less polished and more common.

Suffering as Jesus did is the major theme of 1 Peter.

Truths about Suffering

Length and purpose of suffering	1:6-7	The believers have undergone trials “for a little while” to prove the sincerity of their faith and to bring glory and honor to Christ.
Prophesied suffering	1:11	The Spirit of Christ spoke through the prophets and predicted both Jesus’ sufferings and His glories to follow.
Undeserved suffering	2:19-25	Jesus is our example when facing undeserved persecution. Enduring unjust suffering honors God and is commended by Him. In the midst of His suffering, Jesus did not retaliate but trusted in God. We are to do the same.

Suffering for what is right	3:14-18	Suffering indicates blessing. Again, Christ is our example of enduring persecution for righteousness' sake. We should persevere under trial with gentleness and respect and without fear.
Results of the right attitude about suffering	4:1-6	Since Jesus endured the Cross for us, we should go through suffering with an attitude of patience and perseverance. In essence, our attitude about suffering is a weapon against our enemies. As a result, we will no longer live to please ourselves but will live to please God.
Rejoicing in suffering	4:12-19	To followers of Christ, suffering should not come as a surprise but should be expected. We rejoice in suffering in that we participate in what Christ endured and in His glory to be revealed. Persecution is God's purifying judgment. <i>"If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name"</i> (4:16).
God's promise concerning suffering	5:10	Peter ends his exhortations about suffering with a wonderful promise from God. <i>"And the God of grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen"</i> (5:10-11)

Letters About False Teaching: 1, 2 & 3 John, 2 Peter, Jude

The Apostle John wrote five New Testament books: Gospel of John, 1,2,3 John, and Revelation.

Gnosticism was a prominent false teaching of John's day. These believed these **erroneous** ideas:

- The spirit is good. The body is evil/bad.
- Salvation comes through secret knowledge, not the gospel.
- Jesus was only a man. The divine Spirit of Christ joined Him at His baptism. The Spirit left Him before He died.
- The body should be treated harshly, since it is evil.
- Sinning with the body is not wrong, since only the spirit matters.

1 JOHN

Jesus is our Standard for truth and practice.

A key word in 1 John is *"know."*

Since the Caesars were persecuting believers, Peter and John may have avoided the word *"church"* because of danger. Referring to the church as a *"lady"* protected the identity of the believers to whom it was written.

John gives us 7 tests of Christian behavior. These are introduced with words, *"if we say,"* or *"the one who says."*

1. Walk in the light. *"If we claim to have fellowship with him yet we walk in darkness, we lie to do not live by the truth."*

2. Admit you are a sinner. *"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."*

3. Obey God's will. *"The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him."*

4. Imitate Christ. *“Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.”*
5. Love others. *“Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness.”*
6. Relationship with the world. *“If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”*
7. Prove Christ is Righteous by Your Life. *“If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does that is right has been born of him.”*

John talks about the importance of right belief. Sin can start in our intellect. What we believe determines how we act. We must know WHAT and WHY we believe.

2 JOHN

Jesus is the Union of Truth and Love.

We are commanded to LOVE. (*2 John 5, 6*)

- Love shows itself by forgiving others as God forgave us.
- Love shares with those in need as the Good Samaritan did.
- Love visits those who are suffering.
- Love prays for those who need God’s help.
- Love reaches out a hand to those who need a friend.
- Love listens when others speak.
- Love stands firmly for the truth.

3 JOHN

Jesus changed the “Son of Thunder” (John) into the Apostle of Love

In 3 John, the writer contrasts three church leaders:

1. Gaius—walked in the truth. He not only believed the truth, but he lived it.
2. Diotrephes was proud and did not show kindness. He wanted to be first. *Leading and loving must go hand in hand.*
3. Demetrius—had a good reputation, was devoted to the truth and opposed false teachers.

2 PETER

Jesus is the patient Lord who will return to judge the earth.

2 Peter encourages us to:

- Grow in grace.
- Attend to the Scriptures.
- Guard against false teachers.
- Live a holy life.

2 Peter	Those who grow in grace	Those who fall from grace	2 Peter
1:5-7	Add to faith goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love.	Relax and ignore their responsibilities, becoming near-sighted and blind. They forget that Jesus cleansed them from their sins.	1:9
1:8	Become effective and productive.	Become ineffective and unproductive.	1:8
1:10-11	Are eager to make their calling and election sure. They will never fall but will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom.	Follow and teach false doctrines. They deny the sovereign Lord who bought them and follow the desires of the sinful nature.	2:1,10
1:19	Pay attention to the Scriptures as to a light shining in the dark.	Have left the straight way to wander and follow the way of Balaam.	2:15
3:11-12	Live holy and godly lives, looking forward to the day of God and speed its coming.	Are re-entangled in the corruption of the world they once escaped through Jesus Christ.	2:20

3:14	Make every effort to be found spotless, blameless, and at peace with Him.	Have turned their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them.	2:21
3:17	Avoid being carried away by the error of lawless men and falling from their secure position.	Fulfill the proverbs: A dog returns to its vomit; a sow that is washed goes back to wallowing in the mud.	2:22

JUDE

Jesus is coming with thousands upon thousands of His saints.

Jude was the half-brother of Jesus and full brother of James. He wanted to warn believers of false teachers. False teachers are enemies of God and the Bible.

Jude	Topic	Threefold Statement
1	The readers	Called, loved, kept
2	Prayer	Mercy, peace, love
4	False teachers	Were written about, Change God's grace, Deny Christ
5-7	Sinners God judged	Israel in the wilderness, Angels, Sodom and Gomorrah
8	False teachers	Pollute, reject, slander
11	Three sinners God judged	Cain, Balaam, Korah
12	False teachers	Rainless clouds, fruitless trees, twice dead
14	The Lord	Is coming, to judge, to convict
16	False teachers	Grumblers Faultfinders Followers of their own evil desires
19	False teachers	Divide you, Follow natural instincts Do not have the Spirit
20-21	Believers	Build yourselves up, pray, wait
22-23	Helping weak believers	Be merciful, snatch, show mercy mixed with fear
25	To God	Glory, majesty, power and authority
25	God's honor	Before all ages, now, and forevermore

Revelation

Jesus is the Bridegroom coming for His Church.

He holds the keys of death and hell.

Jesus is the Son of God with eyes like blazing fire and feet like polished bronze.

He is the Lamb of God. Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

Author: John

Revelation uncovers Jesus and His future victory. John shows the Lamb of God slain for the sins of the world now seated upon the throne!

Themes:

1. Jesus will return to triumph over all evil.
2. Only those who overcome evil in this life will inherit the Kingdom.

Four views for interpreting Revelation:

1. Preterist (past) view

Chapters 1-18 happened in the first century. Little effect on the future.

2. Historicist (historical) view

They try to match Revelation with historical events from the Early Church to the present. Does not believe in a Great Tribulation at the end of the age, but that tribulation has been spread over the history of the Church.

Interpretations change with each generation as events continue to take place.

3. Spiritualist or idealist view

The book is simply a parable—spiritual idea—not real people or events.

4. Futurist view

Revelation 4-22 will take place in the future

Revelation 1:19, "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later." This provides a natural outline of the book.

1. "What you have seen"—the vision John saw of Christ (Rev. 1)
2. "What is now"—the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 2-3)
3. "What will take place later"—future (Rev. 4-22)

John used symbols:

1. To protect Christians during the times of persecution.
2. To give us word pictures that add emotion and value to truth.

We must allow Revelation to explain its own symbols when possible.

Symbol	Meaning
Seven lampstands (1:12-13)	Seven churches (1:20)
Seven stars (1:16)	Seven messengers or pastors (1:20)
The morning star (2:28)	Jesus (22:16)
Key of David (3:7)	Power to open and close doors (3:7-8)
Seven lamps (4:5)	Sevenfold spirit of God; the Holy Spirit (4:5)
The Lamb (5:6)	Jesus, Lord of lords and King of kings (17:14)
Seven eyes (5:6)	Sevenfold Spirit of God; the Holy Spirit (5:6)
Golden bowls full of incense (5:8)	Prayers of the saints (5:8)
Four horses and riders (6:1-8)	Conquest, war, famine, and death (6:1-8)
Fallen star (9:1)	An angel (9:1)
Woman and child (12:1-2,5)	Israel and Christ (12:5)
Red dragon, old serpent (12:3; 20:2)	Satan, the devil (12:9; 20:2)
A third of the stars of heaven (12:4)	Fallen angels (12:7-9)
A time, times and half a time (12:14)	1,260 days = 3.5 years (12:6)
The beast out of the sea, with seven heads and ten horns (13:1-10; 17:8-12)	The beast (Antichrist) who is the eighth king, and his kingdom (17:11)
Seven heads of the beast (13:1; 17:3, 7)	Seven hills and seven kings (17:9-10)
Ten horns of the beast (13:1; 17:3,7)	Ten kings with the beast who is the Antichrist (17:12-13,16-17)
The beast out of the earth (13:11-17)	The false prophet (19:20)
The great harlot, Babylon the Great, who sits on a beast with seven heads and ten horns (17:1-71)	The great city that sits on seven hills and rules over the kings of the earth (17:9, 18)
The waters on which the woman sits (17:1)	The peoples of the world (17:15)
Fine linen (19:8)	Righteous deeds of the saints (19:8)
The Rider of the white horse (19:11-16)	Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords (19:16)
The Root of David (22:16)	Jesus (22:16)

Contrasts in Revelation

The holy Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the sevenfold Spirit (1:4-5)	The evil triad: the devil, the Antichrist, and the false prophet (20:10)
The description of Christ (1:12-16)	The description of the Antichrist (13:1-3)
The rebukes Christ gave five of the seven churches (2-3)	The lack of rebuke to Smyrna and Philadelphia (2-3)
The good things Christ said to six of the seven churches (2-3)	The absence of any praise to Laodicean believers (3:14-22)
Promises to overcomers in all seven churches (2-3)	Warnings to those who do not overcome (2-3)
Our God who is holy and eternal (4:8)	The beast who is evil and temporary (13:5)
The Creator (4:11)	All created things (4:11)
He who was, and is, and is to come (1:8; 4:8)	The beast who once was, now is not, and is going to destruction (17:8, 11)
The Lamb who alone is worthy to open the scroll (5:7-10)	All in heaven, on earth, and under the earth who are not worthy to open the scroll (5:3)
The white-horse rider with one temporary stephanos crown (6:2)	The white-horse Rider with many permanent diadem crowns (19:11-12)
The fifth seal: martyrs resting in heaven, praying, "Avenge us!" (6:9-11)	The sixth seal: sinners trembling on earth, saying, "Hide us!" (6:12-17)
The silence before the scroll is opened (8:1)	The roar of great multitudes in heaven shouting, "Hallelujah!" (19:1-6)
Three and a half years of turmoil on earth with the Antichrist (11:2-3; 12:6, 14)	One thousand years of peace on earth with Christ (20:2-6)
The anger of the nations (11:18)	The wrath of God (11:18)
Rewarding the prophets, saints, and those who respect God (11:18)	Judging the dead and destroying those who destroy the earth (11:18)
The woman out of the serpent's reach (12:14)	The woman's children within the dragon's reach (12:17)
Those with the name or mark of the beast on their hands or foreheads (13:16-17)	Those with the name of God on their foreheads (14:1; 22:4)

The lost who never find rest, tormented in the lake of fire (14:10-11)	The saved who find eternal rest in the presence of God (14:13)
The vile dress of the harlot of the Antichrist (17:3-4)	The pure dress of the bride of Christ (19:7-8)
The city of Babylon in ruins (18:2)	The city of the new Jerusalem (21:2)
The sinful citizens of Babylon (18:4-5)	The holy citizens of the new Jerusalem (22:14-15)
Mourning of kings, merchants, and sailors over Babylon's fall (18:9-19)	Rejoicing of saints, apostles, and prophets over Babylon's fall (18:20)
The Wedding Supper of the Lamb (19:9)	The great supper of God (19:17-18)
The first resurrection (20:5-6)	The second resurrection (20:12-13)
Overcomers, children of God who inherit the new Jerusalem (21:7)	Cowards, unbelievers, the vile, murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic, idolaters, and liars who inherit the like of fire (21:8)
Those who do shameful or deceitful deeds (21:27)	Those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (21:27)
Those who are vile and do wrong (22:11)	Those who are holy and do right (22:11)
Come (22:17)	Depart (20:15)