

remain steadfast

A Brief Look At the Pastoral Epistles

Leading up to this message, Pastor Carr asked us to read and study the books of James, 1&2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude. She gave us a list of questions to guide our studies. These sermon notes contain sample answers to the first five questions.

1/2. What is special/what is the theme of the book of James?

At first glance, the book of James seems to be an eclectic mix of New Testament Proverbs, discussing supposedly unrelated themes on a variety of matters; however, upon recognizing the historical backdrop of his day, James's central message emerges.

The book of James was written to, "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (James 1:1). This refers to Christian believers, who had been scattered throughout the world *due to their faith* (Acts 8:1). Believers at this time (~AD 63) were being persecuted by both Jews and the Roman empire. These persecutions included stoning, being thrown to the lions, the guillotine, public beatings, imprisonments, and more.

As such, James writes to the church to encourage them to remain steadfast through their persecutions. He opens his letter admonishing believers, "count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds" (James 1:2). As he continues to develop his message, James urges believers to show their faith in God through their works, especially by enduring persecution. Their belief in Christ as Lord should cause their actions to reflect the standard of His Word, and should be a witness to all those around. This includes taming their tongues and living in harmony with one another (James 3:1-11; 2:1-13; 4:1-12). James closes his epistle by encouraging Christians to look at the righteous example of the prophets and Job, who endured suffering before them, yet maintained a strong faith in God (James 5:7-11). He also calls the church to stick together, fighting the good fight of faith as a community, not just a bunch of individuals (James 5:13-20).

3. What is special about the books of 1 and 2 Peter?

Peter's epistles are short, simple, and practical, with one main, unifying message: no matter what suffering or persecution may come your way, remain steadfast throughout, knowing that the reward for your faith is greater than the trials you face, and is coming quickly!

Like James, Peter wrote to "the elect exiles of the Dispersion" in Asia: in other words, believers scattered throughout the world because of their faith in Christ (1 Peter 1:1). As discussed above, these believers were facing severe persecutions because of their faith and evangelism that Jesus Christ is Lord. He encourages them to remain steadfast throughout their sufferings, knowing that their eternal reward is greater than their temporary trials (1 Peter 1:6-7; 3:8-22; 4:12-19; 2 Peter 3).

Peter reminds the church of their identity in Christ, and also deals with living a holy, godly, and orderly life, submitting to authority and respecting the proper order of the household (1 Peter 2:13-25; 3:1-7). He argues that believers should live holy, remembering their eternal reward, that those around them may see Christ through their struggles (1 Peter 1:12; 1:15; 3:15). He later gives warnings about false teachers, who prey on the weak, and ultimately encourages the church to maintain their faith, no matter what comes their way (2 Peter 2).

4. What is special about the letters of John, and the letter of Jude?

Jude is a short yet powerful book with similar themes to the letters of James and Peter. Written 3-4 years after the first letter of Peter, Jude encourages the church to hold fast to their faith, even in the midst of false teachers. False teachers were another major issue in the early church. People were coming in and manipulating the Word of God to suit their own fleshly desires (2 Peter 2; 3:14-18; Jude 4, 8, 16). Jude reminds the church that it was prophesied that false teachers would arise, and to "contend for the faith" (Jude 3, 18).

John also deals with the rise of false teachers. He exhorts the church to test spirits and people to make sure they are from God, for only one from God will confess Jesus as Lord (1 John 4:1-6). A second test John gives for false teachers is through their character. He expresses that those who say they love God ought to have that love reflected in their actions, similar to James's point that faith without works is dead. Those who love God and keep His commandments, especially to love another, are the true children of God (1 John 3:11-24). John uses simple, clear language, that people may not misunderstand or twist his words to mean something else, as they did with Paul (2 Peter 3:14-18).

5. What is the difference between true faith in Christ and a dead or merely intellectual faith?

James supports in his letter that a faith without works is dead (James 2:17). He does not argue that our salvation is based upon works, for it is truly a free gift of God that cannot be earned (Romans 6:23). No, James conveys that true faith is inseparable from good works. If you say you believe in Jesus, your actions ought to line up with who He said He was in His Word. Good works are obeying God's commandments. Whether it's something big, like praying for the sick to receive healing, or something small, like tipping well at a restaurant, those who confess a true faith in Christ should have actions that line up with His Word.