

There's A Letter for You

A study of the letters written by James, Peter, John and Jude

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There are 21 letters in the New Testament. Thirteen of them were written by Paul either to individuals or to churches in various locations. The author of the letter to the Hebrews is not absolutely clear, but many believe that Paul also wrote that letter. In this series we will be studying the other 7 letters, written by James, Peter, John and Jude.

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These study guides have been designed to assist you in the “Three R’s” of your own Bible study – reading, receiving, and responding. You are welcome to print out the whole series. If you wish to print out only one lesson at a time, choose that option from your printer.

Please feel free to use these materials for your own personal use or with a small group remembering to give credit where credit is due.

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Lesson One

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But the one who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

James 1: 25

James, the half brother of Jesus, was the first one to write a letter (A.D. 46) which would become a part of the New Testament. As a leader in the church in Jerusalem, he was aware of the reputation of Jewish Christians who were scattered in many geographical areas and of the persecution that they were experiencing from other Jews. He was not nearly as concerned about the details of their theology or their statement of belief as he was about their behavior. For James these two things were inseparable - real faith will always produce action. And then, he illustrates the kind of behavior that those who love God will demonstrate. It's still a clear and strong plea to Jesus' followers today.

READ - James from beginning to end. Take a look at the big picture rather than its parts.
Read this letter several times this week from start to finish.

CONSIDER - Read II Timothy 3: 16 – 17 – It's a good guide as you begin this study.
What does it say in your own words?

Truths for me to Believe (doctrine, teaching)

Errors for me to Avoid (rebuke, reproof)

Reasons for me to Repent (correction)

Instructions for me to Follow (training in righteousness)

CHALLENGE –

1. James has many concerns, doesn't he? Can you summarize them or outline the book in a simple and meaningful way for yourself?
2. What sections of this letter seem most thought provoking or challenging to you?

COMMITMENT – Write a short letter to James and express to him what you appreciate about his letter, what questions you have, and what reading it has caused you to consider in a new way. As you write, make your thoughts a prayer to the Lord God who invites you to come to Him in faith and ask.

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Lesson 2

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Who is wise and understanding among you?

Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

James 3:13

What would it have been like to grow up in the same home as Jesus, to be his half brother? We know very little about that family, but we do know that it was a large one – Matthew 13: 55 – 56. James apparently remained a skeptic about Jesus' claims to be the Messiah until the resurrection and then he was convinced completely. No doubt during those early years he had been watching his brother and those who claimed to be his followers very carefully so that by the time he wrote this letter he was very capable of discerning "hypocrisy" and the real thing. He was convinced that, while salvation = faith + nothing else, true faith will always be evident in the actions and behavior of the believer. How closely aligned is "your talk" and "your walk"?

READ – the letter written by **James**

CONSIDER –

1. As you go through this letter, choose several verses that you think are especially important to remember.
2. Why do you think that you chose these particular verses? For someone else, for Christians in today's world or for yourself?
3. How many times does James mention God in his letter? What does he point out about God? What kind of a God does he serve?
4. One of the big topics which occurs repeatedly is humility. What does James teach about it?
5. Many of the principles for living out your faith in God are contrary to what our culture believes and admires. Find some of them and explain the difference.

CHALLENGE – If James were writing a letter only to you, on what would he focus? Which of the themes in this letter do you want to consider more carefully and prayerfully? This would be a good time to do that. Perhaps you could write yourself a letter, using some of James' ideas and/or illustrations.

COMMITMENT –

It's not simply about the things that we do, but about the things that we don't do!
James 4: 17 – "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.
Is there anything that you need to confess and commit to God. He is glorified when you come to Him in faith.

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Lesson 3

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"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed."

I Peter 4: 12 – 13

Suffering is a universal language – all ages, all nations, and throughout all generations. Peter was not a stranger to suffering both from external pressure and problems as well as from internal choices and emotions. With gentle words of encouragement, Peter lifts the eyes of persecuted and suffering believers so that they can look beyond their circumstances to the only One Who offers strength and hope and an eternal reward. Why not be better prepared for your next "emergency"?

READ I Peter from beginning to end. There are 105 verses. Try reading them in different versions. Maybe it would be a good idea to write this letter in your own handwriting.

CONSIDER - Take one of these sections at a time and go through the letter focusing just on it. What stands out to you? It is not as important for you to make a complete list as it is to make a personal list. What impresses you?

Truths for me to Believe (doctrine, teaching)

Errors for me to Avoid (rebuke, reproof)

Reasons for me to Repent (correction)

Instructions for me to Follow (training in righteousness)

CHALLENGE - Write a letter to Peter expressing your response to his letter to you. What was helpful and encouraging to you? What caused you to pause and reflect? Were any of his ideas new or challenging at this point in your life?

COMMITMENT – There are so many things on Peter's heart as he writes to his dear friends. Go back and focus on one small section that God seems to be pointing out to you. What is Jesus inviting you to experience in your circumstances right now? (4: 1 – 2)
What is He asking you to receive from Him so that you might live righteously? (2: 24)
He wants to be not only your Savior, but your "Shepherd and your Overseer" (2: 25)

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Lesson 4

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**Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time.
Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you. I Peter 5: 6 – 7**

You can accuse Peter of denial, of failure, of impulsive behavior, but you can not accuse him of complacency. It would seem that God honored him for his energetic commitment, his outspoken witness, and his intense desire to follow Jesus. His heart became tender through tough experiences, his loyalty became strong through unexpected testing, and his compassion for people grew as he listened to Jesus' challenge to him. It is helpful to feel his passion and his intensity as you read his letter. Think of the best motivational speaker that you have ever heard and put that voice and impact into this letter.

READ - I PETER – Try reading it out loud to an audience of one – yourself!

CONSIDER -

1. As you go through this letter, choose several verses that you think are especially important to remember.
2. Why do you think that you chose these particular verses?
For yourself or for someone else or for Christians in today's world?
3. What does Peter want his readers to know and remember about Jesus Christ?
How will reflecting on Jesus help them in suffering and in life?
4. There are several verses on the subject of submission – to authority, to masters, to your husband, to each other & to older people. Why is this important in Peter's mind? Look for clues that he has included throughout the letter.
5. Be Holy! In every chapter there are many direct commands to these believers that define holiness. Make a list of them. Are there some things that are emphasized?

CHALLENGE – When someone says, "And in conclusion", it's time to pay close attention. That is what Peter does in verses 6 – 11 of chapter 5. He summarizes so clearly the rest of his letter. Write this summary in your own words, following his example verse by verse. Expand it and use your own name as if these were instructions and promises sent personally to you.

COMMITMENT –

Where are you weak? The God of all grace who called you into His family through Christ, wants to strengthen and uphold you, to make you firm and steadfast, so that your faith will be genuine and result in bringing Him praise, glory and honor. Will you trust Him?

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Lesson 5

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Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

II Peter 3: 1 -2

Do you like "straight talk"? Honest, sometimes hard to hear, direct and truthful. That is the kind of letter that Peter wrote to his dear friends. He knew that his time was short and he didn't want to waste any time or energy. Some believers were being influenced by false teachers and it was frightening to him. Others were being persuaded by those who were immoral or had turned their backs on the "way of righteousness". How can one discern truth and detect error? What will keep someone from yielding to the "corruption that is in the world caused by evil desires?" What's so dangerous about either one of these paths? If you're interested, read on . . .

READ – II Peter It's a short letter, so read it again and again – all of it.

CONSIDER - Peter believes that "knowledge" and truth are powerful. Find all his references to them in his letter.

Truths for me to Believe (doctrine, teaching)

Errors for me to Avoid (rebuke, reproof)

Reasons for me to Repent (correction)

Instructions for me to Follow (training in righteousness)

CHALLENGE –

1. Do you think there are false teachers/prophets today? There certainly are plenty of scoffers, aren't there? How do you discern truth and error? If you were advising a new Christian on choosing a church, what advice would you give them? What can you use from Peter's second letter to help you be discerning?
2. There is a huge promise for you in II Peter 1: 3 – 4. Is it believable? It's a promise with a contingency – "make every effort to add . . ." Is it possible?
3. Jesus made a big promise to Peter and the disciples both before and after his crucifixion. (John 14: 1 – 3 and Acts 1: 10 - 11) It didn't make much sense at the time, but it certainly made sense to them after his ascension. How does it affect your life?

COMMITMENT – Wait! Don't stop now! How does Jesus want to reassure you? How would He like you to respond to His promises?

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Lesson 6

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**And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.
He who has the Son has life;
he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.**

I John 5: 11 - 12

How many things do you KNOW with absolute certainty? Start making a list of them. It takes some concentration, doesn't it? In fact, most of life is lived under various other titles like "probably", "God willing", "hopefully", or "most likely". That is exactly why John writes his first letter to the churches. From his elderly and experienced vantage point, he wants to remind them that there are certain truths which can be known without a shadow of a doubt – truths about fellowship with Jesus Christ and with each other. There's a great deal of comfort and security in knowing for sure what you really do know.

READ - I John - several times!

Could you type it on your computer or write it out by hand?

CONSIDER - How many times can you find the word "KNOW" in this letter?

Make a list of the truths that John wants them to know.

Truths for me to Believe (doctrine, teaching)

Errors for me to Avoid (rebuke, reproof)

Reasons for me to Repent (correction)

Instructions for me to Follow (training in righteousness)

CHALLENGE

John has so many things that he wants the believers to KNOW and to understand. Write a letter to him thanking him for the reminders that are most meaningful to you, telling him what some of your struggles and challenges are, and expressing to him what was helpful to you in his letter. This will clarify your thinking and help you remember the content of this letter.

COMMITMENT

After studying this letter, what your own "Psalm" of thanksgiving and praise for what you KNOW to be true. What are the desires of your heart at this time? Tell them to Jesus.

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Lesson 7

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**How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!
And that is what we are!**

I John 3: 1

When you are privileged to have an extended conversation with someone that you admire greatly, someone with a broad range of experience, with a deep commitment to and confidence in Jesus, and a sense of adventure and hope, it makes a deep impact on you. The conversation ends too quickly and you always want to have more time with that kind of person. That's just what the apostle John must have been like. He had walked and talked with Jesus personally. He had intimately experienced the crucifixion and the resurrection, and then the days with Jesus before His ascension to the Father. He had obeyed God's command to go and preach and teach for many years. The Holy Spirit had inspired him to write the Gospel of John and was preparing him to write the Book of Revelation soon. Little did John realize what his life would be like when he left that fishing boat with his brother, James, to follow Jesus. Isn't it the same for you and for me?

READ - I John – Try reading it out loud to an audience of one – yourself!

CONSIDER -

1. As you go through this letter, choose several verses that you think are especially important to remember.
2. Why do you think that you chose these particular verses?
Are they promises, commands, information? Do they convict or motivate you?
3. There are many references to the reality of God the Father, His Son and the Holy Spirit in this letter. What can you learn about the Trinity from it?
4. Fellowship with the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ – what does that mean?
Fellowship with one another – what does it mean? How does it bring joy?
5. Write a short summary on the following topics as they are presented in I John.
God's love for us –
Our love for God -
Forgiveness -
Prayer –
False prophets/antichrists
6. The final word in the letter is "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols". Why?

CHALLENGE – What do you think you would want to talk about with John if you were able to have a conversation with him?

COMMITMENT – Is fellowship with the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, bringing you joy?
Is fellowship with other believers bringing you joy? Why or why not?

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Lesson 8

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**And this is love: that we walk in obedience to His commands.
As you have heard from the beginning, His command is that you walk in love.**

II John 1: 6

What is the difference between diversity and disunity? It was a question in the church of the first century and it is still a struggle in the church of the twenty-first century. All too often divisions come because of personal preferences or a desire for power rather than a legitimate defense of Biblical truth. At other times through ignorance, complacency, or a lack of discernment, error is allowed to be perpetuated and the message of Christ becomes diluted and evil. The incredibly important balance between truth and love is repeated throughout the Bible. In your personal relationships and in your leadership positions, which way do you lean naturally?

READ - II John and III John

Could you copy them, read them out loud and then read them again?

CONSIDER -

II John

Truths for me to Believe (doctrine, teaching)

Errors for me to Avoid (rebuke, reproof)

Reasons for me to Repent (correction)

Instructions for me to Follow (training in righteousness)

III John

Truths for me to Believe (doctrine, teaching)

Errors for me to Avoid (rebuke, reproof)

Reasons for me to Repent (correction)

Instructions for me to Follow (training in righteousness)

CHALLENGE - - Chuck Swindoll summarizes these 2 very short letters by saying that the second one teaches that "love always needs the protection of truth and discernment" and that the third one teaches that "truth always needs the boundaries of love, grace, and compassion".

1. Why do you think these short and personal notes were included in the New Testament?
2. Write your own short note to someone in a church today which expresses the heart of John's affection and his concerns in a modern setting.

COMMITMENT -

Is it easier for you to "speak the truth" or "to express your love (acceptance)"?

Read Ephesians 4: 14 – 16. Ask God to reveal to you where you need to "grow up".

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Lesson 9

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“. . .Build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.”

Jude 1: 20 – 21

Do you think that the problem of heresy within the church exists today? It certainly was a major concern for the leaders of the early Christian churches everywhere. So, if you agree that it does, then how do we identify it? What are the issues that have crept into our churches at this point in history? Is humanism or postmodernism causing confusion or creating a world view that is not Biblical? What aspects of our culture influence our thinking and life styles so that they are not in one accord with Scripture? Is the “emerging church” a solution or a problem? Should we care enough to be informed?

READ – The letter written by JUDE

You will probably need to read it in a newer translation, if possible.

Many Bible commentators agree that while this short letter is both one of the most neglected and complicated NT books, it is also one of the most relevant. See if you agree.

CONSIDER -

Truths for me to Believe (doctrine, teaching)

Errors for me to Avoid (rebuke, reproof)

Reasons for me to Repent (correction)

Instructions for me to Follow (training in righteousness)

CHALLENGE –

1. How does Jude describe those whom he sees as troublemakers?
2. If these people are so evil, why are they not more readily identified?
3. What is our response to be to those who are causing division and confusion?

COMMITMENT - After a passionate plea to his dear friends, Jude concludes his letter with a blessing – verses 24 –25. Take some time to think about these verses and to let the Spirit of God reach into your heart with reassurance and renewed confidence that HE IS ABLE . . .