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In the family

Please read Jude 1-2

At the beginning of the twenty first century, as faithful Christians in the West watch and pray for the coming of the kingdom of God, on the surface there is much to depress us. Biblical truth is opposed both outside and inside the church. The latest false teachings seem to sweep through the church and often appear to be on the verge of taking over. Worldliness and moral laxity have become an increasing problem for the church.

Meanwhile, the true gospel is derided as small-minded, shabby and outmoded by the theological pace-setters of the academy. The entrepreneurs and prophets of show-business religion look down on it as 'traditional' and unexciting. The neo-pagan purveyors of strange religious experiences spurn it as unspiritual. The influential dignitaries of the church distance themselves from it in an attempt to keep a good media image.

At the same time the arrogant secular world disdains the good news of sins forgiven and eternal life in Jesus Christ as an insignificant, out-of-date myth—foolish nonsense which adult people should have outgrown long ago. The majority in both the professing church and the unbelieving world prefer new and more ‘enlightened’ approaches to salvation and lifestyle. Traditionally, Jude is known as the patron saint of lost causes and sometimes the gospel itself can seem like a lost cause.

But, according to Jesus, the majority is always wrong on such matters: ‘Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it’ (Matthew 7:14). For those who find it, this small gate, this despised gospel, really does lead to life: ‘It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes’ (Romans 1:16).

Heresies

Jude is writing to Christian believers at a time when the gospel is under attack from false teachers who have infiltrated among them: ‘I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you’ (vv. 3–4). The scenario here could refer to churches generally where false teaching had gained influence. Or it may refer to just one local church where this has happened and which was particularly well known to Jude. Either way, Jude is writing to combat this influx of heresy which he sees overwhelming and endangering the people of God. The most important features of the heresy are that it constitutes an attack on the moral purity of the church and the doctrinal truth about Jesus Christ. The heretics ‘change the grace of our God into a licence for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord’ (v. 4).

We have already given some thought in the introduction to the possible nature of the heresy which Jude is addressing. But suffice it to say that these main elements of morality and Christology seem linked into an interest in angelic spirits which permeates the whole epistle. For a New Testament letter as short as Jude's, the number of references to celestial beings is quite disproportionate. We will do our best to see how this interest fits into the jigsaw.

The issues of truth and moral integrity are fundamental to the health and vitality of the church. To drift in these areas is to put in jeopardy the church's very existence. This should ring alarm bells for the church, especially in the contemporary Western world. We are surrounded by a culture of ever more serious moral decadence, where the concept of truth itself is under increasing attack. There are immense and subtle pressures on the church to compromise in these vital areas. The letter of Jude could not be more pertinent to us.

It is a short letter, only twenty-five verses. But it is extremely potent. Think of a tiny dose of penicillin which can heal a person of a deadly disease. Think of a small personal computer which can carry vast amounts of vital information. Think of the mighty Goliath, felled with one little stone. In the providence of God this diminutive letter can heal sick churches, inform and clarify the thinking of God's people at a vital time and slay giant threats to the spiritual lives of Christians.

Jude's attitude

It is worth noticing two things about heresy generally before we proceed.

First, we can immediately detect that Jude's attitude is clearly

out of step with that of the modern world and its dominant philosophy. Even though he is a man of love who would far rather have been able to write a non-controversial letter (v. 3), his concern for truth would be viewed today as an anachronism. Our age is in the process of abandoning the notion of objective truth, especially in matters of faith and spirituality.

So-called 'post-modernism' and the New Age movement are increasingly influencing our culture and they are two sides of the same coin. The New Age movement tells people they have the power within them to shape their own reality. Post-modernism tells people that reality is only what they subjectively perceive it to be. Either way, with the concept of men and women shaping reality or perceiving reality, truth is a fluid commodity, malleable in the hands of human beings.

Then again, globalization is on the world agenda. The spirit of our times is one of multi-faith and multiculturalism which insists that no one religion can claim to have the truth. We all wish to see peace on earth. But for the sake of peace between people, our society brands all attempts to argue the truth of any religion as bigotry and demands that every opinion be treated as equally valid. Jude's statement that Jesus Christ is our '*only* Sovereign and Lord' (v. 4) does not sit easily with the spirit of our age.

The only heresy for the contemporary world is to say that there is such a thing as heresy. 'All opinions are valid.' 'All faiths lead to God.' 'Each one can find his own path up the same mountain.' Such slogans as these rule contemporary society.

But our author would disagree. For Jude there is truth and error. There are such things as false teachers. Though authentic

Christianity is spacious and does not restrict all Christians to seeing everything in precisely the same way, and though it makes allowances for differences of background and culture, yet there are well-defined limits. The fundamental facts concerning God, sin, and Christ and his atonement are universal and absolute. This truth, revealed by God, Jude calls 'the faith'. We can step out of truth and into error. There are true Christians and there are heretics. But for heretics and their followers, says Jude, 'blackest darkness has been reserved for ever' (v. 13). To be a false teacher, or to follow one, is to be lost.

We need to be clear as to what is at stake here. Jesus said, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). If contemporary society is right when it tells us there is no truth and that all paths lead to God, then the Lord Jesus was wrong. This is not a matter of insignificance to the church! It is a matter of momentous proportions. In fact there is no evidence at all that the 'All religions lead to God' theory current in our society is true. Different religions are so contradictory that one can only hold to the theory by abandoning the very idea of truth itself. To abandon the categories of truth and error is to abandon Christianity for a diametrically opposed world-view. The issue of truth is crucial.

Secondly, as we consider heresy generally, at the outset of looking at Jude's letter we need to notice something else. Jude calls us to 'contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints', and it is as well to understand that there is more than one way of departing from the body of salvation truth that Jude calls 'the faith'. We can either subtract from it, or seek to add to it. We meet both these avenues of heresy in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians we meet those who deny

the resurrection. In 2 Peter we meet those who scoff at the truth of Christ's second coming. These people are subtracting from the faith. They thereby deny the reliability of Christ and the apostolic witness to him. By contrast, in Galatians we are confronted by those who say that we need Christ plus adherence to Jewish customs. In Colossians we meet those who would place Christ alongside other spiritual beings and powers. These people are adding to the faith. They thereby deny the all-sufficiency of Christ our Saviour.

Today, there are many false ideas. There are many suggestions as to how the church should 'improve' on the old biblical gospel in the modern age. Jude is the small but powerful antidote to such things. It is strong medicine. For this small letter is not simply the word of men, but the Word of God.

So we look at the opening two verses of this New Testament letter. They tell us about the letter's correspondents. A letter conveys a message between two parties. Who are these people? What can we learn about them for our edification? So we now ask two questions: 'Who is Jude?' and, 'Who are the recipients?'

Who is Jude?

'Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James.' There is only one Jude in Scripture who has a brother named James. This is the Jude, or Judas, who was part of the earthly family of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is mentioned in Mark 6:3, when the people of his home town took offence at Jesus, saying, 'Where did this man get these things? ... Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, *Judas* and Simon?' (see also the parallel passage in Matthew 13:55). The writer of this epistle is probably this same man, who had been brought up alongside Jesus.

Many modern scholars try to argue that this is only who the writer of the letter *claimed* to be. They say that in fact it was written by some other anonymous Christian who simply used Jude's name in order to lend more weight to his letter. The technical term for this is 'pseudepigraphy'. But such ideas should be viewed with great suspicion by Bible-believing Christians as, not to put too fine a point on it, this would mean that this letter which calls others to contend for the truth would itself be based on a lie.

It should also be rejected on the grounds that arguments in favour of pseudepigraphy lack cogency.

Firstly, we have already noted the very close similarity between 2 Peter and this epistle of Jude. If 2 Peter was already in circulation among the churches, as the quotation in verse 18 of 2 Peter 3:3 implies, what would be the point of an anonymous Christian's writing a letter which so closely follows Peter's work?

Secondly, scholars who argue for pseudepigraphy put forward the idea that it was a well-known and perfectly acceptable way of writing in the early days of Christianity. But the flaw in this idea is seen as we read Paul's comments in 2 Thessalonians about those who have circulated letters under his name. There were people who put around letters using Paul's name and caused great mischief by so doing (2 Thessalonians 2:2). Paul's reaction was not to condone the practice, but to try to ensure that the churches knew how to identify letters which had genuinely come from him (2 Thessalonians 3:17). We can properly surmise that Paul viewed such lack of integrity with horror.

That the writer was Jude, a half-brother to Jesus, is the best explanation of the two phrases in his introduction.

He calls himself '*a servant of Jesus Christ*'. The brothers of Jesus were not generally known as 'apostles' in the early church. So Jude simply calls himself a 'servant'. The second phrase identifies Jude as the '*brother of James*'. There is only one person in the New Testament church whom everyone would know as just 'James' without any ambiguity, and that was James the brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19).

In these family links we can see much to encourage us at a practical level. Many of us have close family and other relatives to whom we have been witnessing for years, and yet they are still not saved. This can drive us to despair. 'Why can't they see it?' 'Is there something wrong with my Christianity?' We may ask ourselves such questions. We may feel ourselves to be total failures because our family have not come to Christ. But Jude and James provide encouragement for us. After all, these two, along with other half-brothers and half-sisters of Jesus, lived in the same house with, and grew up alongside, Jesus. Yet, living alongside God incarnate himself, they were unconverted for years. 'For even his own brothers did not believe in him' (John 7:5). Do your best to live lovingly and consistently for Christ, but don't blame yourself if your loved ones are not yet saved. People's hearts are hard. The devil has sadly blinded the minds of unbelievers (2 Corinthians 4:4) and it takes the miracle of new creation to enable them to see the truth.

It was not until after Christ's death and the infallible proof of the resurrection that Jude and his brothers and sisters came to faith. It is only after the Lord Jesus had risen and ascended into heaven that we find the members of his family gathered for prayer with Christ's disciples (Acts 1:14).

Jude was unconverted for years. Though the Lord Jesus had

turned the water into wine at the family wedding at Cana, though he had healed the sick and fed the thousands, none of this had touched Jude's heart and brought salvation. Somehow he had explained it all away. It may be the same with you. Your family do see that there is something different about you. They may even envy you the peace and joy which you know as you walk consistently with God. They may have a hidden regard for the guidance and certainty you have about your life. They may even half mean it when they say from time to time, 'I wish I had your faith.' Yet they put it all down to factors other than the power of God's Spirit. They put it down to 'luck', or your personality, or to 'psychology'.

But eventually Jude was converted. Eventually the evidence of the life of Jesus did begin to weigh with him. Eventually God did work in his life through the family crisis of Jesus' death and the marvellous miracle of his resurrection. In that there is encouragement for those of us with unconverted loved ones to keep praying and keep witnessing. Do not give up. Do not despair. We cannot know for certain that our families will be saved. But the Lord does say to us, 'Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up' (Galatians 6:9). The brothers of Christ were eventually born again.

But then another question may occur to us. If Jude is the half-brother of the Lord Jesus Christ, why doesn't he say so straight out? We wonder why he does not say this, but James does not say it either at the beginning of his New Testament letter. The answer is probably twofold.

First, Jude recognizes that *physical ties of blood and genetics are of no eternal worth*. Spiritual ties with Jesus are what saves us. It

is faith which trusts and submits to Jesus as his servant which unites us to the Saviour. The Lord Jesus had spelled this out during his ministry in a way which was so blunt as perhaps to cause offence to his family. Amid the pressure and controversy of his ministry in Galilee, Mark's Gospel tells of one day on which Jesus' family arrived at the crowded house where he was teaching: 'Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother"' (Mark 3:32-35).

Second, it is not only the priority of spiritual ties which shapes how Jude introduces himself; *humility* is also involved. Humility forbids Jude from mentioning himself as a physical half-brother of Jesus. Joseph was Jude's father, but it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that the child Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb. Jesus is the eternal Son of God become a man. Knowing that Jesus is Lord and God, Jude does not want to give any impression of being equal with Jesus. Announcing himself as being from the same family as Christ could be misunderstood in such a way and Jude wishes to avoid that. So he just calls himself 'a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James'. Furthermore, as I have suggested in the introduction, if the heretics in view in this epistle saw themselves as an élite group boasting of their supposed authority, then again it is the humility of Jude, a member of Jesus' earthly family, which would carry particular weight with Jude's readers as he writes to oppose them.

But here too in Jude's family connection with the Lord Jesus Christ we can find wonderful encouragement in our faith. The

holy Son of God did not falter from coming alongside sinners. It is very instructive to look at the family tree of Jesus. Matthew begins his Gospel by delineating Christ's antecedents through Joseph. He starts the genealogy with Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation. Yet as he records the first four names in that family tree we are reminded of the kind of family into which Christ was born. The genealogy opens with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Judah.

Abraham had been an idolater and even after God called him his faith often failed, as, for example, when he chose to have a son by the maid of Sarah his wife rather than to believe God's promise of a son through Sarah herself. Abraham's God-given son Isaac was ruled by his appetite for food and so showed foolish favouritism to one of his sons who was a hunter, thus bringing deep division into their family (Genesis 25:28). His son Jacob, the third in line, deceived his brother Esau out of his birthright. Then comes Jacob's son Judah who, among other things, got his daughter-in-law Tamar pregnant. An idolater, a failed father, a liar and an adulterer—and they are just the first four in the family tree. What a family! Yet into such a family the Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour, was pleased to be born as a great sign of his solidarity with sinners like ourselves. We can feel so unworthy and guilty in our sinfulness that sometimes we cannot understand how the Son of God would ever want us. Yet such facts in relation to Christ's family underline the promise that he made: 'Whoever comes to me I will never drive away' (John 6:37). Jude himself had rejected Jesus for years and yet Jesus did not reject him. The astonishing truth of the gospel is that God actually does love sinners.

Who are the recipients?

But, turning from the writer, let us look at those to whom Jude's