

# **BIBLE SURVEY, PART IV**

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**Grades 7-8  
Year 1  
Quarter 4**



# **GALATIANS**

## **Lesson Aim**

To impress upon students the fact that a legalistic approach to Christianity results in bondage, while living by faith is the greatest of all freedoms.

## **Memory Verse**

**Jeremiah 31:27** - "The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will plant the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the offspring of men and of animals."

## **Lesson Background**

Although there is some debate on the subject in evangelical circles, the letter to the Galatians was probably written to some of the Apostle Paul's earliest converts. On his first missionary journey, he traveled from the island of Cyprus to Asia Minor, spending time in the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. He revisited the same cities on the way home, then stopped back later on his second journey. It was in these cities that he was stoned and left for dead, and also here that he met Timothy, who was to become his most trusted companion. The churches of Galatia, among the first founded by Paul, were also among the first to be turned away by false teaching. The teaching to which they succumbed was already present in the days when Paul ministered among them.

During his first missionary journey, Paul was followed wherever he went by a group referred to as Judaizers. They saw Paul's teaching as a threat to the God-given Law of Moses and insisted that anyone who

wanted to become a Christian must observe the Jewish law in its entirety, including circumcision. Paul objected strongly to such a requirement, insisting that Gentiles did not have to become Jews in order to become Christians (which was confirmed by the Jerusalem Council), and telling the Jewish Christians that anyone who measured his standing with God on the basis of the law was trusting his own works for salvation rather than living by faith and trusting God's grace. This is the main issue addressed by Paul in Galatians.

Your students may not encounter anyone who insists that they must keep the ceremonial law in order to be good Christians, but they surely run up against legalism in many forms. Whether they are told that spirituality consists of avoiding certain forms of entertainment and worldly practices, or led to equate such things as church attendance, baptism, and devotions with godliness, middle school students (like the rest of us) find it very easy to view Christianity in terms of external behavior. They must be made to understand that true Christianity is life in the Spirit, which is freedom as opposed to the bondage of legalism.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin class by giving each student a piece of paper and asking him to write a paragraph describing what makes a good Christian. Tell the students not to sign their names. When they are done, collect the papers, mix them up, and read them aloud (omit any who did not take the assignment seriously; reading such papers aloud would only deflect the class's attention from a thoughtful consideration of the issue). If your students are like most, the papers you receive will focus largely on external behavior. A good Christian will be described either in terms of what he does or in terms of what he doesn't do. Such an attitude, of course, is legalistic, and has certain key similarities with the teaching against which Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians.

Take a few minutes to give the background behind the book of Galatians. Talk about Paul's previous contacts with the churches of Galatia and describe the Judaizers and the teaching they were trying to spread. Tie this in with the paragraphs your students just wrote by pointing out that the Galatians, like your students (or unlike them, if you have an unusual group), defined "being a good Christian" in terms of external behavior. That behavior could involve either what a person did or what he did not do. In either case, such an attitude is legalism. Paul tells the Galatians that God evaluates what you are, not just what you do.

### **1. Being a Good Christian Does Not Depend on the Things You Don't Do (Galatians 2:11-21)**

Paul in this passage recounts a conflict he had with Peter in the church in Antioch in Syria. The church in Antioch had many Gentile Christians, and the Gentiles and Jews in the church got along with one another rather well. All that changed when the church in Jerusalem sent representatives to Antioch to see how the church there was doing. Suddenly, the Jews in Antioch, afraid of what those from Jerusalem would think, stopped sharing meals with the Gentiles in the church (eating non-kosher food with Gentiles was a violation of the Jewish dietary laws; see Daniel 1). Both Peter and Barnabas were caught up in this hypocrisy, and Paul criticized them for perverting the Gospel. Ask your students to read verses 15-21 and explain why Paul said the others were distorting the Gospel. It is important to see that a Christian is defined, not by the things he avoids, but by the life of Christ within him that shows itself in faith.

Ask your students to list some of the ways that people try to define Christians today on the basis of what they don't do. The list could include such activities as drinking, smoking, dancing, movies, card-playing, etc. Make sure that your students understand that avoiding such things does not make a person a Christian. It is possible for a person to abstain from all these activities and yet be far from Christ. In fact,

all too often those who abstain from such activities have been led to believe that they are right with God simply because they avoid them. Such an attitude is salvation by works. No one can be saved on the basis of abstaining from “worldly practices.”

## **2. Being a Good Christian Does Not Depend on the Things You Do (Galatians 3:15-4:7)**

The Christians in Galatia had been told that in order to please God, they had to keep the Jewish ceremonial law - they had to be circumcised, eat kosher food, observe the Jewish feasts, etc. Paul insists that no one can possibly be saved by the things he does. Have your students read the passage and try to find reasons why this is true.

They should be able to see that no one can possibly be good enough to please God (verse 22). The law can never be a path to salvation because no one is able to keep it. Instead, God intended it as a way of revealing our sin and showing us that we needed a Savior. In fact, Paul calls the law a slavemaster, because anyone who thinks that he must please God by his own works must constantly keep working, afraid lest God should reject him for not doing enough. There can be no peace for one who defines Christianity on the basis of what a person does.

For your students, the slavemaster is not the Jewish law, but it can easily be the religious practices of American evangelical Christianity. Many young people are taught that things like baptism, church attendance, and Bible reading define what a good Christian is. Thus many believe that, as long as they are baptized, continue to attend church on a reasonably regular basis, and read their Bibles occasionally, that God must be pleased with them. Such thinking has been the root of much presumption among those living in a Christian environment. It also has led many genuine Christians to stagnate because they think that the Christian life consists of no more than these things. The attitude of Galatians 4:6 is completely foreign to them.

## **3. Being a Good Christian Depends on What You Are (Galatians 2:20; 4:6; 5:22-23)**

If the definition of a good Christian is not based on what a person does or does not do, then what is a good Christian? The verses listed above give Paul’s answer to this question.

### **A. A Good Christian Has Died with Christ, and Christ Lives in Him (Galatians 2:20)**

A person who is a Christian realizes that he no longer controls his own life. His old selfish desires have been crucified - he now wants what God wants for him. He serves Christ out of gratitude, not out of duty.

### **B. A Good Christian Has a Father-Son Relationship with God (Galatians 4:6)**

A Christian has a personal relationship with God. God is real, He loves His children, and they sense that love. They are confident because they know God loves them. They realize that their standing before God has nothing to do with their ability to impress God and everything to do with God’s love for them.

### **C. A Good Christian Displays an Attitude that Comes from the Holy Spirit's Work in His Life (Galatians 5:22-23)**

A Christian has the Holy Spirit inside of him. A person who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit will always display the fruit of His presence, though not always in the same degree as others. The clearest answer to the question of what makes a good Christian is found right here. A good Christian is not one who does good by his own efforts, but one whose life is being changed by the work of the Holy Spirit. When God enters a person's life, He makes changes, and those changes are obvious. They are not matters of external appearance, but changes in the attitudes of the heart.

### **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by summarizing both the wrong and right answers to the question, "What makes a person a good Christian?" Be sure your students understand that any who think to please God by their works are placing themselves in a position of slavery, and perhaps fooling themselves about their standing with God as well. Encourage them to evaluate their own lives against the standard of the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23.

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## GALATIANS

1. What contact had Paul had with the Galatians before he wrote a letter to them?
2. Who were the Judaizers? In what way did they pervert the Gospel?
3. Many people think that being a “good Christian” means not doing certain things. What kinds of things do people often say “good Christians” don’t do?
4. Other people define what it means to be a “good Christian” by listing certain things a “good Christian” does. What are some of these things?
5. Why is it impossible to define a “good Christian” either by the things he does or the things he doesn’t do?
6. According to Galatians 2:20; 4:6; and 5:22-23, what determines a “good Christian”?





# **EPHESIANS**

## **Lesson Aim**

To give students an overview of the book of Ephesians, and help them to see the relationship between doctrine and practical Christian living, particularly in the area of unity among believers.

## **Memory Verse**

**Jeremiah 31:28** - “Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the Lord.”

## **Lesson Background**

The book of Ephesians is one of Paul’s prison epistles, written during his first imprisonment in Rome about 63 A.D. It is perhaps the most impersonal of all of Paul’s letters, since it lacks any of the personal references that characterize the closing chapters of most of his works. In fact, scholars are not even certain that the letter was sent to Ephesus, since the phrase “in Ephesus” in the first verse of the letter does not appear in some of the most ancient manuscript copies. Whether this was a circular letter or was intended for a specific congregation, the book of Ephesians contains some of the most useful doctrinal and practical teaching to be found in the New Testament.

The book of Ephesians is arranged in a pattern characteristic of many of Paul’s letters. The first three chapters deal with doctrine, while the last three deal with practical application of that doctrine (note the same pattern in Romans, for instance). Paul realized that the teaching of biblical principles could not occur in a vacuum, but that it had to be applied to life. In fact, for him it was the practical needs of the recipients of his letters that motivated him to expound doctrine.

The Ephesian congregation apparently needed encouragement in the area of unity. Ephesus was a trade center in western Asia Minor with a cosmopolitan population. The people in the church came from many different backgrounds and had many different customs. Paul's main focus in this book is to help them to see themselves as a single body despite their differences. Your students, of course, can benefit from the same emphasis. We live in a society where minorities cultivate pride and special interest groups emphasize their distinctives. We are told that it is good to be different (at least in certain ways), but too often when we emphasize our differences it becomes difficult to live together in peace. It should not be so within the church. God's people are one, so they should be able to live together in unity. In surveying the book of Ephesians today, we will stress the ways in which the doctrinal and practical sections of the book work together to encourage the Ephesians (and us) to live out the unity God has created in His people.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by asking your students to define the word "doctrine." Some of your students may know that "doctrine" is just another word for "teaching," but they probably connect it in their minds with dusty books and boring lectures. If you were to ask them why people study doctrine, they would probably answer that it is necessary in order to graduate from Bible college or seminary, or to become a pastor or missionary. Before pursuing that subject further, change directions and ask the members of the class about parental discipline. When their parents tell them to do something, do they prefer simply to be told what to do, or would they rather have their parents also explain why the instructions are being given? Any teenager would quickly answer that he likes to be told why he should do the things his parents want him to do. At this point, go back to the question of doctrine and show your students that the doctrine in the Bible is very much like the explanations they want to hear from their parents. If Paul had simply written letters to churches and told them what to do, they might have turned away in a huff. Instead, he first taught them principles that allowed them to see why they should follow the instructions he gave them later. For this reason, most of Paul's letters deal with matters of doctrine in the early chapters before turning to practical issues toward the end. The recipients of the letters are then able to understand the basis for the instructions Paul gives in connection with the individual needs of the congregation.

Our study for today is the book of Ephesians. Give your students a little bit of the background information from the Lesson Background section, then tell them that Paul's instructions to the Ephesians concentrated largely on the matter of unity, which apparently was a problem in the congregation. Rather than jumping in with both feet and telling the Ephesians what to do about their problem beginning with the first sentence of the letter, he starts with a doctrinal section that helps them to understand the reasons for the practical advice on unity that comes later in the book. In surveying the book today, we will look both at its basic truths and at its practical instruction.

### **1. Basic Truths (Ephesians 1-3)**

#### **A. Christians are Chosen by God (Ephesians 1)**

Your students are all familiar, I'm sure, with the expression, "You can choose your friends, but not your relatives." Your students had no control over who would become their parents, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. In the same way, Christians have no control over those who are their brothers and sisters in Christ. God chooses those who are to be His children. While Paul sees this as a reason for praise in Ephesians 1, it is also the basis for an exhortation to unity.

## **B. Christians are United by Grace (Ephesians 2-3)**

Ask your students why the fact that God chose His children is used by Paul as the basis for telling the Ephesians to live in unity. If they have trouble figuring out the connection, have them read Ephesians 2:11-22. Here we find that the people chosen by God have also been changed by God. God has taken a group of people who hated one another because of their differences and removed the hostility that divided them (Paul here uses the example of the Jews and the Gentiles, but the same is true of different races, nationalities, social classes, etc.).

Paul also points out that since Christians did nothing to earn their standing as God's children, but received it by grace, they have no right to look down on others who were given the same benefit. Your students know that it is hard to love someone who is different, but God requires it. Those who are Christians owe it to God to learn to live in peace with their brothers and sisters in Christ, in the same way that members of a family must learn to live together.

## **2. Practical Instruction (Ephesians 4-6)**

### **A. Live as Members of the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4)**

In discussing the message of the second and third chapters, we used the analogy of a family. Paul used the same image (3:15), along with analogies of citizens of a country (2:19) and materials in a building (2:20-23). In chapter four he chooses an even more intimate image, however, when he speaks of Christians as parts of a single body (the same analogy is expounded at much greater length in I Corinthians 12). He begins the chapter by telling the Ephesians to live in unity because God had already made them one in fact (4:1-6).

Have your students read through the chapter and write down what Paul says it means to live in unity. They should discover that living in unity means serving one another under the supervision of the leaders of the church (4:11-13), being truthful with one another in a loving way (4:15,25), settling differences quickly (4:26), sharing with one another instead of taking advantage of one another (4:28), speaking in a way that builds others up rather than tearing them down (4:29), avoiding anger, bitterness, gossip, and grudges (4:31), and forgiving those who have sinned against us (4:32). After reading through these commands, ask the students to think about some of the ways they have failed to live in unity with family members or other Christians (if they themselves are Christians). Be sure to point out that those who are not Christians lack the resources to do the kinds of things Paul is talking about here. The opposite behavior is natural, and unbelievers can only avoid it temporarily.

### **B. Have Godly Relationships with Others (Ephesians 5:1-6:9)**

Those who tax our patience the most are those with whom we spend the most time - husbands and wives, parents and children, teachers and students, employers and employees. Unity becomes harder to maintain the closer people get to one another. Ask your students why this is true. They should realize that our faults are most apparent to those who know us best, and that we tend to let our guards down most frequently in the company of those close to us. In this passage, Paul gives us four basic principles that can help Christians to please God and live in unity in these difficult relationships with those close to us.

The first principle is purity. In Ephesians 5:1-20, Paul affirms that clean living is essential to unity among Christians. Unbelievers destroy their relationships by deceiving one another, cheating one another, and taking advantage of one another. Christians should not do these things.

The second principle is that of authority. Sin makes us want to rebel against authority of any kind, but God wants His people to submit. Unity is possible only as those under authority submit to those under whom God has placed them. Make sure your students understand how lack of submissiveness in all the areas mentioned by Paul undermines the possibility of unity.

The third principle is one of mutual respect. God realizes that those in authority are as much prone to abuse as those under authority are prone to rebel. If husbands do not respect wives, parents respect children, employers respect employees, etc., there will never be unity among Christians. These principles are equally important in relationships with non-Christians, of course.

The fourth principle set forth by Paul is that all is to be done as unto God. Christians serve other people and submit to their authority because they are doing what God wants them to do. The ultimate motive behind any action taken by a Christian should be to glorify God. No other motive will sustain the kind of attitudes and behavior needed for unity to exist over any extended period of time. The desire to please others is good in many situations, but it is no substitute for the desire to please God.

### **C. Stand Together Against Evil (Ephesians 6:10-20)**

Nothing draws people together like fighting a common enemy. A brother and sister may fight like cats and dogs when no one else is around, but if someone starts beating up the sister, the brother is the first to leap to her defense. Police who are called in to break up family fights often find the husband and wife forgetting their quarrel and turning against the peacemaker. Christians will be able to maintain unity more effectively if they realize that they are fighting against a common enemy. Paul closes the book by describing the warfare in which the Christian is engaged - a spiritual warfare against the forces of Satan - and listing the armor he needs in order to succeed in battle. Conclude the lesson by reminding your students that God intends them to be fighting a battle against Satan, not against one another or other Christians. The unity of the church is important, not only for our personal peace and comfort, but also for the progress of the Kingdom of God in this world.

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## EPHESIANS

1. Why does Paul use the fact that God has chosen those who are to be saved as an argument for unity among Christians?
2. What are some of the things Paul says are necessary in order for Christians to live in unity with one another (see Ephesians 4:15-32)?
3. In Ephesians 5:22-6:9, Paul discusses three relationships that are very important for most Christians - the relationships between husband and wife, parent and child, and employer and employee (actually master and slave). Read through these verses, and list what you consider to be the most important principle Paul mentions for each of the six people in the passage (husband, wife, parent, child, employer, employee). Which of these principles apply to you right now? Which are likely to apply to you in the future?
4. Which of the above principles are most important for you to keep in mind in your relationships with teachers and other students in your school?



# **PHILIPPIANS**

## **Lesson Aim**

To encourage students to experience the joy and contentment that come only from participation in the life of Christ.

## **Memory Verse**

**Jeremiah 31:29-30** - “In those days people will no longer say, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes - his own teeth will be set on edge.”

## **Lesson Background**

It must seem ironic to many people that the most “upbeat” letter written by the Apostle Paul was written from a Roman prison. After Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, he was imprisoned for a long period in Caesarea, during which he awaited the whim of the somewhat capricious Roman judicial system. He finally appealed to Caesar, convinced that he would never get a fair trial in Palestine. The trip to Rome included a shipwreck, but he and his guards finally arrived safely in Rome. At first, he was put under house arrest, but he later was confined in a cell of the Mamertine prison in the city. It was from this prison that Paul is believed to have written the book of Philippians. Despite the fact that Paul did not know whether he would ever leave the prison alive (many scholars speculate that he was released only to be rearrested later and finally beheaded), he wrote a letter to the church at Philippi that bubbles over with the joy of being a Christian.

The church at Philippi had been founded by Paul and Silas during the Second Missionary Journey (see Acts 16). The beginnings of the church were less than auspicious, and the earliest members included a Jewish businesswoman (Lydia), a slave girl who had previously been demon-possessed, and a Roman jailer. The church even now had its problems, with dissension being spread by a couple of cantankerous women named Euodia and Syntyche (4:2-3). Yet despite his own circumstances and the problems faced by the church, Paul is able to rejoice and encourages the church to do the same. Thus the key to the letter, and the main lesson to be learned by your students today, is that Christian joy is not dependent upon circumstances. It is very easy for your students to ride an emotional roller-coaster, especially during the volatile middle school years. While hormonal and social changes may help to explain these fluctuations, they do not excuse them in the lives of Christians. If Paul could rejoice and be content in a Roman prison, your Christian students can learn to overcome the forces at work in their bodies and not allow themselves to be bounced around constantly by wildly fluctuating emotional states.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by asking your students to tell about times when they have felt depressed. What kind of circumstances made them feel that way? Are such feelings caused by circumstances beyond their own control, by the actions of other people, or by their own foolishness? After allowing your students to share some of their experiences in this area, describe Paul's situation as he penned (or more likely dictated) the book of Philippians. If the response of your students was any indication of normal behavior, Paul should have been miserable. He was in terrible surroundings, people were treating him unfairly, and he had done nothing to deserve such a fate. Yet the book reflects no such attitude. Instead, Paul encourages the Philippians to rejoice in Christ, as he himself obviously is doing. What he writes can provide important lessons to the members of your class about what Christian joy really is.

### **1. Joy and Circumstances (1:12-30)**

Paul was facing very discouraging circumstances when he wrote the book of Philippians. Not only was he in prison, but some of his rivals in the church in Rome were doing everything they could to discredit his ministry. In spite of the physical and spiritual burdens he bore, however, Paul described himself as rejoicing. Ask your students to read this passage and explain why Paul was rejoicing. They should be able to see that he was pleased with the way the Gospel was being spread, both by his testimony and by the rivals who thought of themselves as competing with Paul. Note that neither of these would have occurred had Paul not been in prison. He also rejoices because of his coming deliverance (verse 19). Make sure your students recognize that Paul did not know how his case would turn out. He considered either release or death to be a deliverance, however, since he knew that if he died, he would be with Christ, and if he obtained his freedom, he would be able to visit his beloved churches once again.

Ask your students what Paul's attitude can teach them about responding to difficult circumstances. They should recognize that Paul was able to rejoice because he looked at the circumstances in terms of what God was doing through them rather than thinking only of his personal comfort. After all, it is God's glory that is important, not our own pleasure or success.

### **2. Joy and Humility (2:1-11)**

In chapter two, Paul tackles another problem that can rob Christians of their joy. This problem is conflicts between Christians. In Philippi, the conflict apparently was rooted in a quarrel between two women (4:2-3). Your students should certainly realize that the pleasure of coming to church can easily be disrupted



if there is someone in the congregation with whom one does not get along. How can joy be restored in such circumstances?

According to Paul, the solution is humility. He puts forth Christ as an example of the kind of humility that will produce joy even in the face of conflicts with others. Ask your students how Christ's example, described in verses 5-11, gives a solution to the problem of congregational disunity. Then ask them more specifically what they should do the next time one of their friends in church or school starts giving them a hard time, and they are tempted to stop speaking to the person or spread malicious rumors about the person. How can such humility allow for joy, even when other people are stirring up trouble?

### **3. Joy and Growth (3:1-14)**

Many teenagers derive their self-esteem from their appearance (most common for girls) and their accomplishments, whether academic or athletic (most common for boys). The result of this is that many teenagers are insecure and miserable, convinced that they simply do not measure up to the standards of their peers. As Paul expresses in Philippians 3, he had many reasons to feel good about himself from a worldly point of view. Yet he refused to evaluate himself according to a standard based upon his birth or accomplishments. Instead, he recognized that the only thing that was really important was that he knew Christ. That was the source of his joy, and it kept him from getting caught up in either the pride or the insecurity that results from judging oneself by human standards. Paul avoided insecurity because he knew he had been accepted by Christ. He avoided pride because he knew how limited his own spiritual progress really was - there was still plenty of room for growth.

Your students need to learn this important lesson. They will only know true joy when they refuse to judge themselves by human standards (such as appearance or academic or athletic ability), see themselves as accepted in Christ (of course, this only applies to the Christians among your students), and recognize that they still have a long way to go in terms of growth.

### **4. Joy in Christ (4:4-13)**

In the closing chapter of the letter, Paul reveals the "secret" of the kind of joy he himself experienced and that he was encouraging the Philippians to cultivate. That secret is no more or no less than faith in Christ. It is that faith that allowed him to overcome worry (verse 6) as well as to live above the circumstances of his life, whether they were good or bad (verses 11-12). He was able to do this, not because he was such a special person, but because Christ gave him the strength to do what is not normal human behavior (verse 13).

Too many people use verse 13 to motivate themselves and others to accomplishments on the human level - the very things Paul said were not important in chapter three. Be sure your students recognize that the "everything" for which Christ gives strength is not referring to winning basketball games or getting A's in tests, but is talking about the strength to be content under any and all circumstances - whether the team finishes first or last, whether the report card contains A's or D's, or whether one's appearance is considered attractive or unattractive by others. Only when this secret has been learned will your students be able to do what Paul tells the Philippians to do in 4:4 - "Rejoice in the Lord always."



## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## PHILIPPIANS

1. How does the joy Paul describes in the book of Philippians differ from the world's idea of happiness?
2. Where was Paul when he wrote the book of Philippians? What excuses could he have used to justify feeling miserable?
3. How does Paul use the example of Jesus in Philippians 2:5-11 to show how humility can lead to joy?
4. What kinds of things did Paul say were not important for his happiness in Philippians 3:4-6? In the same way that Paul ignored these things, what things in your life should you recognize as unimportant?
5. Explain Philippians 4:13. What kinds of things does Christ promise to give His children the strength to do (be sure to use the context)?



# **COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON**

## **Lesson Aim**

To show students what it means to live by setting our minds on things above rather than the things of this world.

## **Memory Verse**

**Jeremiah 31:31** - “‘The time is coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.’”

## **Lesson Background**

The letters to the church at Colosse and Philemon are often grouped together, not because of similarity of content, but because they were written at the same time and had the same destination. Both are prison epistles, written during Paul’s incarceration in Rome. Philemon was a member of the Colossian church (note mention of Archippus in Colossians 4:17 and Philemon 2, as well as the similarity of the names in the greetings sections with which the books close), thus both letters were delivered at the same time, probably by the same messenger.

As far as content is concerned, however, the letters are very different. The Colossian church was in serious danger of falling away from the faith because of the activity of false teachers in their midst. These false teachers were apparently teaching an early form of what later came to be known as Gnosticism, a mystical religion that combined features of Christian teaching with Greek philosophy and popular oriental cults. The Gnostics accepted the Greek belief that matter was evil, and therefore advocated asceticism - the denial of the flesh (some Gnostics instead argued that since the flesh was of no value, one could indulge it

indiscriminately; this did not appear to be a problem at Colosse, however). Gnostics also devised a complex hierarchy of angelic beings that served as a sort of buffer between God, who was good, and matter, which was evil. The further these angels got away from God in the hierarchy, the less good they became, until finally one of the angels near the bottom of the pile took it into his head to create matter. This entire angelic hierarchy was called the Pleroma (or “fullness”). Christ, by the way, was thought to be somewhere near the bottom, which allowed Him to appear in bodily form on earth, although most Gnostics believed that Christ’s body was not real, but an optical illusion of sorts. The letter to the Colossians combats both the theological and practical implications of this false teaching. The key verse of the book is Colossians 3:1 - because God is not unknown and unknowable, but has revealed Himself through His Son, and furthermore has raised His people into heavenly places with Christ, they should focus on heavenly things rather than earthly things (One would think that the otherworldly Gnostics would have no problem with this, but the fact of the matter is that the denial of the flesh always forces a person to focus his attention on what he is denying!).

The theme of focusing on heavenly things is carried over in the book of Philemon. This little letter was written to one of the pillars of the church - Philemon was in no danger of falling for the false teaching in which so many others seemed to be caught up. Paul wrote the letter to make a very difficult request of his friend Philemon. One of Philemon’s slaves, a man named Onesimus, had run away from his master, stealing some of Philemon’s goods in the process. He eventually found his way to Rome, where he encountered the Apostle Paul and was converted. Paul now sends Onesimus back (in fact, he was probably the messenger who delivered these two letters to Colosse), and asks Philemon to forgive him and treat him as a Christian brother, not as a runaway slave and thief who deserved flogging or worse. On the earthly level, the latter reaction would have been natural. Slaves in the Roman Empire were the exclusive property of their masters and had no civil rights. Philemon surely could have argued that to fail to punish a runaway slave would only encourage more of his slaves to do the same. Yet Paul pleads with Philemon to look beyond the values and practices of the world around him and focus on Christ, who forgave us far more than any of us will ever be called upon to forgive one another.

The application for your students is that Christians can get caught up in earthly things through religion as well as the daily routine of life. In the first section of the lesson, emphasize the former - that false religion takes man’s focus away from Christ and directs it toward the things of this world. It should be easy to draw comparisons between the Gnostics and some of today’s popular cults. The second part of the lesson should teach your students that good Christians who believe all the right things and would never fall for false teaching also must focus on Christ, or else they will wind up adopting the attitudes of the world around them without ever realizing that these attitudes are completely contrary to the Gospel. The lesson also has something important to say to the non-Christians in your class. The book of Colossians shows that religion is not enough. The Gnostics were very religious, but that is not sufficient to satisfy God. Those who teach that there are many ways to heaven demonstrate the truth that there are many ways to hell.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by asking your students to name as many cults as they can think of. Depending on the awareness of your class, the list may be very long or very short. Then ask them why they think people get involved in groups such as this, many of which have bizarre teachings and even more bizarre practices. Allow them to discuss this briefly, then point out that all cults have a number of things in common - some form of salvation by works, some variety of extrabiblical revelation, and (today’s theme) some way of turning people’s attention away from Jesus Christ.

## 1. Colossians - The Danger of Man-Made Religion

Explain to your students that the Colossians were in danger of being taken in by a cult of sorts known as Gnosticism. Give a little background on the cult, then skim through the book of Colossians, showing how what Paul says in the letter is intended to combat the teachings and practices of the Gnostics. Since this is not the sort of thing that your students are going to be able to do inductively, the following list should help them to see what Paul is doing through this letter:

1:9-10 - Paul here uses several “buzz-words” that were popular with the Gnostics (knowledge, wisdom, understanding). When he speaks of knowledge, the Greek word is *gnosis*, from which Gnosticism got its name. But while the Gnostics claimed that this knowledge was only accessible to the spiritual elite, Paul makes it clear that all Christians have this knowledge in Christ.

1:15 - For the Gnostics, to say in one breath that Jesus was the image of God and the head of creation was unthinkable. Contact with creation required separation from a holy God.

1:16 - Jesus is not only the creator of matter, but also the creator of the angelic powers that the Gnostics saw as part of the Godhead.

1:18 - The Gnostics opposed the teaching of the physical resurrection, since the body was thought to be evil.

1:19 - The word translated “fullness” here is the word *pleroma*, used by the Gnostics to describe the entire angelic hierarchy. The fullness of the Godhead is not found in a succession of angelic beings, but in Christ.

1:22 - Note the emphasis on Christ’s physical body again.

1:26-28; 2:2-3 - The Gnostics claimed that only the spiritual elite had access to the great mystery, and that only these could achieve perfection. Paul asserts that these things are for all Christians, not just a select few.

2:8-10 - Again, all that there is of God is in Christ; only worldly philosophy says otherwise.

2:16,20-23 - Paul criticizes the asceticism of the Gnostics, noting that such self-denial accomplishes nothing in terms of restraining sin. [Make sure your students understand why this is true.]

2:18 - The worship of angels is another reference to the Gnostic Pleroma.

Paul’s positive response to all of this false teaching is to give some very down-to-earth, practical advice to the Colossians in chapters three and four - advice about husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants, much the same sort of thing he deals with in Ephesians 5-6. What, then, does Paul mean when he tells the Colossians in 3:1 to set their hearts on things above? He does not mean for them to spend their time discussing abstract theological propositions (the Gnostics loved this; so do many Christians), nor does he mean for them to separate themselves completely from the life of this world (the Gnostics failed to realize that someone who devotes all his attention to those things he refuses to do is taking his eyes off Christ just as fully as the person who spends all his time indulging in what the world has to offer). What Paul means is that Christians should live their lives “to the beat of a different drummer.” Their standards are not to be the world’s standards. This is true not only in the area of abstract principles, but also in everyday life. The Christian who has really set his heart on heavenly things will be a better parent or child, wife or husband, employer or employee, teacher or student, because he refuses to approach life in the way the world tells him to do it.

## **2. Philemon - The Danger of Worldly Morality**

The book of Philemon provides a perfect example of how a Christian is to set his heart on heavenly things in the conduct of the daily affairs of this life. Summarize the story for your students (most of them will probably be familiar with it already), but try to modernize it a little. Suppose a student had been given a summer job by a man in your church. The student turned out to be irresponsible, lazy and did poor work when he did show up. Finally, he quit the job, largely in order to avoid being fired. Later the owner of the business found that a significant amount of stock was missing from the storeroom. He eventually was able to discover that the thief was the student who had worked for him the previous summer. The next Sunday, that same student showed up in church. He came up to the businessman and announced that he had become a Christian, and asked the man to forgive him. He offered to work to pay back what he had stolen if the man would only give him another chance. What should the employer do? Should he forget what had happened and take the student back into his employ? Should he forgive him, but turn him over to the police to take the consequences of his theft? How can he tell whether or not the student has really changed?

Philemon faced a similar predicament, with the added twist that he was in a position to carry out his own judgment. He had no need to go to the police. Onesimus was his property, and he could have had him flogged or even executed if he had chosen to do so. Clearly, the worldly response in this situation would be according to the proverb, "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me." Few would take back one who had robbed them without demanding punishment, as Paul asked Philemon to do. Yet doesn't this situation perfectly illustrate what Paul meant when he told the Colossians to set their hearts on things above? Only an appreciation for the forgiveness of God, and an awareness of the power of God to change a person's life could make Philemon do what Paul had asked him to do.

### **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by reviewing with your students what it means to keep their hearts set on heavenly things. It does not mean having a long list of things that you do not do, nor does it mean being wrapped up in all sorts of obscure theological questions. It does mean living a normal daily life in a very abnormal way - not following the world's way of thinking and acting, but being motivated by God's love and forgiveness. Also be sure to remind the non-Christians in the class that being religious is not enough to please God, but that Christ will change those who come to Him in faith, just like He changed Onesimus.



## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

1. Under what circumstances were the letters to the Colossians and Philemon written?
2. Who were the Gnostics? What did they teach? Give some examples from the first two chapters of Colossians of verses where Paul opposes their teaching.
3. What did Paul mean when he told the Colossians to set their hearts on things above? Why does he then go on to talk about normal family and business relationships?
4. If you were in Philemon's place, what would you have done when you received Paul's letter, delivered by your runaway slave? Why?



# **THE THESSALONIAN LETTERS**

## **Lesson Aim**

To help students understand what it means to anticipate and live in the light of the Second Coming of Christ.

## **Memory Verse**

**Jeremiah 31:32** - "It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the Lord."

## **Lesson Background**

The Thessalonian epistles are generally believed to have been the first written by the Apostle Paul (with the possible exception of Galatians). Acts 17:1-15 gives an account of the founding of the church at Thessalonica, a city in Greece. Many in the city responded to Paul's preaching of the Gospel, especially among the Gentiles, but the Jews in the city were violently opposed to Christianity. Paul and his companions had to sneak out of the city in the middle of the night, and even then the Jews were so determined to oppose them that they sent a contingent to Berea to stir up trouble there. It should not be surprising, then, when we see Paul mention persecution frequently in his letters to the young Christians in Thessalonica.

The two Thessalonian letters were both written a short time after Paul's visit to the city. The letters consist mainly of words of encouragement for the young congregation and include very little in the way of doctrine. Even the practical instruction given by Paul is of a very basic nature. The one issue that seems to have occupied the attention of the Thessalonians to the extent that Paul found it necessary to address it specifically was the matter of the Second Coming of Christ. Like many young Christians over the last two

thousand years, the idea that Christ is coming back again captured the attention of the Thessalonians, and they quickly developed all sorts of strange ideas about that blessed event. Paul consequently tries to straighten out these misconceptions in extended passages in both letters.

The church in our age, of course, struggles no less with misconceptions and wild ideas about the Second Coming of Christ than did the church of the first century. Your students will eventually be exposed to all sorts of bizarre teachings on this subject if they haven't encountered some already. It is therefore important that the members of your class get straight in their minds the fundamental Scriptural truths about the Second Coming, so that when they hear groundless speculation on the subject, they will be able to recognize it as such. They must also learn that the doctrine of the Second Coming is intended to have practical consequences - it is not merely a teaching about the future, but rather truth that should influence how we live today.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Open the lesson by asking your students what they know about the Second Coming of Christ. You should quickly be able to get some idea of the kinds of teachings and speculations to which they have been exposed. Since the subject tends more often than not to be ignored in Reformed circles, much of their knowledge may have come from previous experience in other churches or from teaching in a Christian school. After the students have had an opportunity to share some of the things they have heard on the subject, ask them why they think people find the matter of the Second Coming so interesting. Point out that one of the most intriguing aspects of the question is the application of biblical prophecy to the present time. People are fascinated with the idea that the Bible can be read as a guide to the newspaper - that things happening today were predicted in the Bible thousands of years ago. Make sure your students understand that the Bible is not intended to be read that way. A quick sampling of Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in the New Testament would demonstrate that, with few exceptions, no one could possibly have recognized the events toward which the prophecies pointed until those events occurred. Throughout history, those who have tried to speculate on the future fulfillment of biblical prophecy have made themselves and the Christian church look foolish when their predictions turned out to be wrong. It continues to be quite common, however, for those who are young in the faith to be preoccupied with the subject of Bible prophecy. The problem is not a new one, of course. Young Christians in the first century had the same tendency to get themselves wrapped up in speculation about the Second Coming of Christ as many Christians do today.

At this point, introduce some background information about the church at Thessalonica. Tell the students how the church got started, make sure they understand that the Christians in Thessalonica were experiencing significant opposition from the Jews in the city, and indicate that Paul's two letters to the church, written within about a year of its founding, both deal with some apparent misconceptions about the Second Coming of Christ. In today's lesson, we will look at what Paul tells the Thessalonians on the subject and see how it applies to us today.

### **1. Misconception #1 - There is some special blessing associated with being alive when Christ returns (I Thessalonians 4:13-5:3)**

The Bible clearly teaches that the Second Coming of Christ is imminent, which means that it could happen at any time. Paul anticipated that Christ might return in his own lifetime. Expecting that Christ might return at any time, however, is quite different from predicting that He will return at a specific time, or even within a certain time span. Date-setters have repeatedly made fools of themselves and of the church at large. Behind the date-setting mania is the implied belief that those who live at the time of Christ's return

will somehow experience a special blessing, that there is some special privilege or excitement associated with being alive in the Last Days. In this passage, Paul clearly shows that all Christians, both dead and alive, will share equally in the blessings of the Second Coming. When Christians are taken to heaven with Christ, it will make little difference how they got there. Besides, the Second Coming will be a surprise (especially to unbelievers). Paul tells the Thessalonians to encourage one another, both because they will see their departed brothers and sisters again and because their suffering and persecution will then be over.

## **2. Misconception #2 - The best way to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ is to live like the world, since the outcome is already decided (I Thessalonians 5:4-22)**

It is easy for those who believe in the doctrines of grace to be fatalistic about the future. After all, those who are elect will be saved, while the reprobate will be condemned. Why, then, should the Second Coming have any effect whatsoever on how we live? What difference does it make? In these verses, Paul uses the contrast between light and darkness to show that Christians should be different from the world around them. This difference, however, does not involve bizarre behavior (see Misconception #4). What it does involve is perseverance, consistent Christian living that is clearly different from the way of life of the surrounding world. The practical instructions given by Paul in verses 12-22 are often isolated from his teaching on the Second Coming, but in fact are illustrations of the general principle laid out in verse 11.

verses 12-13 - Respect those over you. God has placed leaders in the church to build up the body. The church becomes increasingly distinguishable from the world as the people follow their leaders into greater maturity in Christ.

verses 14-15 - Help those around you. The display of Christian love in the ways mentioned here will also build up the body. This is the way Jesus expects His servants to be behaving while they await their Master's return.

verse 16 - Be full of joy. The Christian who believes the Lord is returning is the only person in the world who has any real reason for optimism.

verse 17 - Pray continually. Maintaining regular communication with Christ is an excellent way to prepare for the day when we will be in His presence forever.

verse 18 - Be thankful in all circumstances. Only the Christian, who knows that God is in charge of everything that happens, can be confident that all things are moving toward the climax of history in the glorious return of the Savior, and thus be thankful even for those things that are unpleasant.

verse 19-20 - Do not cut off our present links with Christ. Today, Christ speaks to us through His Spirit and His Word. Those Christians who wish to prepare for the Second Coming should never despise what He has given us now.

verse 21-22 - Don't be gullible. All too often, charlatans have used religious fronts to draw people into all sorts of evil. Whether a con-man like Joseph Smith (Mormons) or a sincerely mistaken believer like William Miller (Seventh-Day Adventists), many have led the gullible into error through generating excitement about the Second Coming of Christ. A Christian who seeks to be prepared for the coming of Christ will exercise discernment, distinguishing truth from error. He will compare everything to the Word of God and reject and avoid whatever does not measure up.

### **3. Misconception #3 - The Second Coming of Christ is a spiritual truth that in fact has already occurred (II Thessalonians 2:1-12)**

Paul had good reason to encourage the Thessalonians to be discerning. No sooner did they receive his first letter than they got another letter, a forgery signed in Paul's name, telling them that the Second Coming had already occurred (no doubt in some spiritual way). Paul emphatically repudiates the forged letter and tells the Thessalonians that Christ's Second Coming will be preceded by a false messiah called the "man of lawlessness," who will claim to be God and will deceive many unbelievers, but will be overthrown by Christ Himself.

Christians have disagreed over the precise meaning of this passage for many years, and it is not our purpose today to resolve the significance of its details. Instead, emphasize the fact that the Second Coming of Christ is not some spiritual event that could possibly pass unnoticed. While Jehovah's Witnesses tell us that Christ returned in 1914 and liberal theologians insist that the Second Coming of Christ is no more than a metaphor for His ongoing influence in the world, we can be confident that, when He returns, we and everyone else will know it. He will be as real and visible as the false messiah He will overthrow.

### **4. Misconception #4 - The best way to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ is to ignore worldly pursuits and look toward heaven (II Thessalonians 3:6-15)**

Many Christians over the years have somehow gotten the idea that the best way to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ is to sell all you have, go up on a mountaintop, put on a white robe, and wait. When Christ returns, it will be to take His people out of the world, but it is erroneous to think that we should take ourselves out of the world before He comes back. People who engage in bizarre behavior of this sort do nothing but bring discredit on Christ and His church. In Thessalonica, some Christians apparently were using the Second Coming as an excuse for laziness (If Christ is coming back soon, why get a job? If Christ is coming back tomorrow, why do my homework tonight?). Paul again emphasizes that the best possible way of preparing for the Second Coming of Christ is by engaging in faithful service.

## **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by reviewing the four misconceptions about the Second Coming prevalent in the Thessalonian congregation and emphasizing the reality of Christ's return, its imminence, and the way to prepare for it (by faithful service). Also be sure to point out for the benefit of the non-Christians in your class that Christ's Second Coming will usher in a time of judgment for those who do not believe, and that once He returns, it will be too late to do anything about it.

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## THE THESSALONIAN LETTERS

1. Why are young Christians particularly vulnerable to false teaching about the Second Coming of Christ?
2. What are some of the wrong ways people have tried to prepare for the coming of Christ over the years?
3. What should a Christian do in order to prepare for Christ's return? How do the principles of I Thessalonians 5:12-22 help Christians get ready for the Second Coming?





# **THE PASTORAL EPISTLES**

## **Lesson Aim**

To teach students something of the qualifications, roles, and responsibilities of church leadership.

## **Memory Verse**

**Jeremiah 31:33** - "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people."

## **Lesson Background**

Last week we studied the first two letters written by Paul during his apostolic ministry - the letters to the church in Thessalonica. Today's lesson deals with the last letters he wrote. The Pastoral Epistles were probably written within a year or two of Paul's death. If he went through two Roman imprisonments, I Timothy and Titus could have been written during his interval of freedom or during his second imprisonment. In any case, II Timothy was written very shortly before his death, from a prison cell he knew he would never leave alive. These three letters - I and II Timothy and Titus - are generally known as the Pastoral Epistles because they were written by Paul to two young men whom he had sent out to oversee young churches. Timothy was at this time serving in the church at Ephesus, while Titus was laboring on the island of Crete. Thus the letters serve as manuals of church practice, or handbooks for pastors.

The letters deal with three main areas of instruction - the leader's qualifications, the leader's character, and the leader's oversight. As we will see, the Christian leader is not some superhuman character with gifts far beyond the powers and abilities of normal men, but is simply a man who is living the Christian

life in a consistent manner; the only requirement that sets a church leader apart from others is the demand that an elder be able to teach. Thus your students should be able to see in the description of a Christian leader a model for what they should strive to become, even if they never attain positions of leadership in the church. Furthermore, by gaining a better understanding of what the leaders in the church are supposed to do, they should develop more respect for those in authority over them. A study such as this should also help your students to develop the discernment that they will need when it comes time for them to choose churches for themselves after they have reached adulthood.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by asking your students what is necessary in order for a person to become a pastor. They may list all sorts of things, probably including seminary training, preaching ability, and ordination (If some particularly alert student tries to refer to I Timothy 3, put him off before he ruins your lesson introduction!). Once they have come up with a reasonable list, ask them why they think these things are necessary. They will probably respond with various practical reasons and some traditional ones, e.g., “No one will come to the church if the pastor can’t preach,” or “A pastor isn’t official unless he’s been ordained.” Then ask them whether God requires these things of pastors, and if so, where does the Bible say so. It should not take long for them to realize that their list of requirements comes from man rather than God. At this point, introduce the Pastoral Epistles, telling your students that in these letters we find the Bible’s definition of what a pastor ought to be. Describe the circumstances under which they were written, and tell your students that we will be surveying them under three major headings. Unlike last week’s lesson, today’s material is ideal for inductive study by your students. Divide the Pastoral Epistles up among your students, assigning one or at most two chapters to each student, depending on the size of your class (if you have fewer than seven or eight students, omit II Timothy; a six-student class, for instance, could have two students assigned to each of the three divisions of the lesson; if your class consists of five students or less, you might find the inductive approach impossible). Have your students read their assigned chapters and write down what they find Paul teaching Timothy and Titus about a church leader’s qualifications, character, or oversight, as appropriate.

### **1. The Leader’s Qualifications (I Timothy 3; Titus 1)**

The students assigned to these chapters have the easiest job, since the qualifications are listed very clearly by Paul, particularly in I Timothy 3. Make sure your students understand all of the qualifications. Be sure to point out that an overseer is the same as an elder or pastor. Your students should also realize that the qualifications for office do not include abilities, talents, or gifts (with the exception of the requirement that an elder be able to teach), but focus on consistent Christian living at home, in the church, and in the world at large (discuss why each of these is important). The church is not a corporation. God does not set apart the most talented for positions of leadership. Instead, those men who live faithful Christian lives of service to others are the ones who are designated by God as worthy of leadership positions. Note also that the qualifications for elder and deacon are virtually the same, again with the exception of teaching ability for elders. Your students should thus realize both that these qualifications should serve as a standard toward which they should aim in their own lives, and that the elders and deacons in your church should be models they can look to in order to see these qualifications in operation.

### **2. The Leader’s Character (I Timothy 1,4,6; II Timothy; Titus 3)**

In going through these chapters, your students should have come up with some of the following ideas:

I Timothy 1:3-11 - Paul begins by warning Timothy that he should not become embroiled in needless controversy, but should have a ministry characterized by love. It is essential that a teacher of the law also live according to the law. [A leader must be able to challenge error, but his ministry cannot be exclusively negative; his most important job is to teach the truth by his words and by his life.]

I Timothy 4:7-16 - Paul uses the analogy of athletic training to show Timothy that godliness requires constant practice and exercise. As a leader, Timothy must set an example in the congregation, especially because he is a relatively young man. He must work to sharpen his gifts and persevere so that his growth in the faith is evident to everyone. [Leaders are not those who have “made it” spiritually; part of their example is to model growth and change for the better.]

I Timothy 6:3-16 - Paul again warns Timothy against getting himself embroiled in constant controversy, and also warns him against the love of money (it is not only the rich who have to watch out for this). Lastly, Paul encourages Timothy to persevere in the faith. [Your students need to recognize that those in positions of leadership face greater temptations than most; it is not at all hard to think of a substantial list of Christian leaders who have fallen into sin because of material and sexual temptations. Your leaders need your prayers.]

II Timothy 1:8-14; 2:1-2 - Paul encourages Timothy to be fearless in the face of persecution (Paul is at this time very close to the time of his execution). He also impresses upon Timothy the importance of preserving and passing on the truth, so that it might be transmitted faithfully to future generations. [It only takes one generation of unfaithful teachers for the church to fall into error. God uses faithful teaching now to build the foundation for the church in the next generation, in which your students will play a part if they are Christians.]

II Timothy 2:3-7, 22-26 - Paul uses the analogies of the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer to encourage Timothy to exercise discipline and patience. He then repeats his earlier admonitions to avoid temptation and foolish arguments. Teaching must be done gently, allowing God to do the convincing rather than beating others into submission by harsh words, emotional manipulation, or human logic.

II Timothy 3:14-4:5 - The Christian leader must be a man of the Word of God, for it is only in the Word that he can find what he needs in order to live a godly life himself and instruct others to do the same. This often involves telling people things they don't want to hear. [Your students should realize that a preacher's responsibility is not to entertain, but to tell the people what God says and apply that truth to their lives.]

Titus 3:8-11 - Much the same as what Paul told Timothy, he instructs Titus to preach faithfully and avoid foolish arguments. He also has the responsibility to deal with anyone who is threatening the welfare of the church by his teaching or behavior.

### **3. The Leader's Oversight (I Timothy 2,5; Titus 2)**

Your students should be able to pick out some of the following ideas from these chapters:

I Timothy 2 - In the worship of the church, prayer is vital; for those in authority, so that the church may continue to function openly and in peace, and for the purpose of congregational unity - men who come before God together grow closer to one another in the process. Women in the church should not exercise authority over men (notice that this is not culturally conditioned, as some would teach, but is rooted in the universal truths of the creation and fall), but should minister in the church through good deeds. [Verse 12 specifically rules out women serving as pastors or elders, since teaching and ruling are the two major functions associated with that office.]

I Timothy 5:1-20 - Timothy's oversight extends to the entire congregation, but different segments of the congregation are to be handled in different ways. Older people are to be treated with respect. Dealings with young women must be undertaken with great care in order to avoid sexual temptation. Elderly widows are to be cared for by the congregation, but only if they have no family to care for them, and only if they have demonstrated godly character. Younger widows should be encouraged to remarry. Elders in the church are to be given appropriate respect, including financial support for those who minister the Word on a full-time basis, as well as a refusal to entertain wild accusations against them. Those elders who do fall into open sin are to be openly rebuked, however. [To what extent does your church follow the pattern laid out here? Note that Timothy's role in the church was a transitional one between the apostolic era and the rule of elders and deacons, and has no corresponding office in the church today (though episcopal churches maintain he and Titus are prototypes for the office of bishop).]

Titus 2:1-10 - Older people in the congregation are to be respected because of their age, and are to show their maturity by godly living and use their experience to teach the younger members of the congregation (note that, while women may not teach men, they may teach women and children - cf. II Timothy 1:5; 3:14-15). Young men and women are to learn and practice godliness. Slaves are to be honest and submissive.

## **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by reminding your students that the picture of a church leader painted by Paul in the Pastoral Epistles should be a model for them to follow, even if they never become leaders in the church themselves. Furthermore, an understanding of what a church is supposed to be and how it is supposed to work will help them to choose wisely when they reach adulthood and face the responsibility of choosing a church for themselves. Even now, an understanding of what is involved in the ministry of the leaders of the church should motivate your students to pray for their leaders and enable them to do so more intelligently.

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

1. Why are I and II Timothy and Titus called the Pastoral Epistles?
2. In the qualifications for church office given by Paul in I Timothy 3, which ones apply to the leader's life at home? in the church? in the world?
3. Why is character more important than ability in the life of a church leader?
4. Why is the example set by a leader in the church every bit as important as the words he speaks to the congregation?
5. Why does Paul teach that a leader in the church is to be neither an arguer nor an entertainer?
6. Why may women not serve as elders in the church? What may women do in the church?



# **HEBREWS**

## **Lesson Aim**

To show students the superiority of Christ as set forth in the book of Hebrews.

## **Memory Verse**

**Jeremiah 31:34** - “No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

## **Lesson Background**

The book of Hebrews is unique among the New Testament books because it is the only one of the twenty-seven that is anonymous. The lack of a clearly-defined author almost caused the book to be excluded from the canon of the New Testament in the second and third centuries, and it was finally accepted only because the church became convinced that it had been written by Paul. Scholars today generally doubt that Paul was the author of the book, not only because the book lacks Paul’s signature, but also because the author of the book apparently received the Gospel from the original followers of Christ (Hebrews 2:3), something that Paul himself vehemently denies (Galatians 1:11-17). Despite considerable speculation on the subject (some candidates for authorship include Apollos, Silas, Barnabas, or even Priscilla), the author remains unknown to us, though it is probable that whoever wrote the book was an associate of Paul at one time or another.

The book was probably written in the sixties, before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 A.D., since the discussion of the sacrificial system seems to imply that sacrifices are still going on in Jerusalem. The Hebrews to whom it was addressed appear to have been a group of Jewish Christians,

perhaps in Palestine, who were facing persecution and were tempted to return to the legalism of the Jews (some have suggested that they were being attracted to some form of the Essene cult, which placed a great deal of emphasis on Jewish ceremonial ritual). The author attempts to convince his readers that Jesus is superior to every aspect of Judaism, and that the Jewish rituals were no longer necessary now that Christ had completed His work on the cross. The theme of the book is thus the superiority of Christ.

It is highly unlikely that your students are being tempted to return to a religion they had previously practiced. Most of them have probably grown up in the church, and thus know little beyond the circle of evangelical Christianity. It is every bit as important for them as it was for the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews to recognize the superiority of Christ, however. Every day, whether in conversations with friends or on television or online, your students are being told that there is something better than serving Jesus Christ. They are being tempted with the glitter of material things and the “pleasure” of sexual sin. They are being told that Christianity is narrow and restrictive, and that freedom can only be found in throwing off the shackles of parents, school, and church. Thus it is vital for your students to understand that Jesus Christ is better than anything the world has to offer. As we go through the book of Hebrews this week, we will examine the aspects of Jewish life to which the author of Hebrews said Christ was superior, and at the same time attempt to draw analogies between those things and the modern temptations your students face. They must realize that what the world holds out as desirable is nothing more than a shadow compared to the beauty of following Christ.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by asking your students to think of commercials in which the advertiser claims that his product is better than those of his competitors. How do the commercials support these claims? Your students should be able to come up with numerous examples, including those in which the advertiser uses statistics, surveys, expert opinions, and comparisons to make his point. Do your students find these ads convincing? Why or why not?

At this point, introduce the book of Hebrews. Tell the students a little bit about the background of the book, then give them the basic theme - a comparison between Christ and a form of Jewish legalism for the purpose of demonstrating that Christ is better. Then ask your students to think of different things that the world wants them to think are better than Christ. What makes these things attractive? On what basis are people supposed to decide what to pursue in life?

### **1. Christ is Not Just Another Religious Leader (1:1-3)**

Many religions have sprung up over the years under the leadership of men who claimed to be prophets. These men have been as diverse as Muhammad, Joseph Smith, and Sun Myung Moon. Yet these false prophets have nothing to compare to Jesus Christ, who according to these verses surpassed even the genuine prophets of God because He Himself is God - the creator, the redeemer, and the ruler of all things. If Jesus is superior to the true prophets, men to whom God spoke, how much more is He better than false prophets who promote themselves today? Your students need to watch out for such men (If the commercials are popular in your area, mention the ads for L. Ron Hubbard’s *Dianetics* as an example).

### **2. Christ is Superior to Other Supernatural Beings (1:4-2:18)**

The cult of the Essenes, somewhat like the Gnostics of Colosse, paid special reverence to angels. In our own day, people don’t often worship angels, but many turn to demonic forces as a source of power.



Whether demonic powers are presented in movies or in popular music, they are seen by those who espouse them as a means of gaining power over their circumstances. The author of Hebrews pictures Christ as better than the angels because they worship Him, and because He rules over them along with everything else. If this is true of angels, how much more is it true of demons, who are subject to God's control and ultimately will be banished into the Lake of Fire forever? Experimentation with the occult may seem attractive to some, but the end of such a pursuit is disaster and destruction.

### **3. Christ is Superior to the Heroes of This World (3:1-4:13)**

Moses was respected among the Jews as the greatest of the prophets, both because he delivered Israel from Egypt and because he was the one through whom God gave the law. The writer of Hebrews insists that, no matter how great Moses was, he was only a servant in the house over which Christ was the ruler. No man could possibly be as great as the Son of God.

In our own day, young people look to heroes or idols on whom to base their appearance, behavior, or aspirations. These idols include rock musicians, TV and movie stars, and professional athletes. Putting aside the fact that most of these so-called "idols" are totally unworthy of emulation, we should recognize that even the best of human role models fall far short of Christ Himself. When Paul told the churches to whom he wrote to become imitators of him, he conditioned such statements by noting that he was to be imitated only insofar as he himself was an imitator of Christ. Jesus is the only true role model on which Christians should base their lives. Bad role models will lead them far astray, and even good role models will let them down on occasion.

The author of Hebrews then goes on in this section to compare the recipients of his book to the wilderness generation of Israel. The point of the comparison is that in the same way the Israelites in the wilderness often wanted to return to their slavery in Egypt, so the recipients of the letter were being tempted to return to Judaism. Do the Christian students in your class ever face the temptation to return to the bondage from which Christ has liberated them? The things of the world often seem seductive, but behind that attractive mask lies slavery, death, and destruction.

### **4. Christ is Superior to Religious Ritual (4:14-10:18)**

The major section of the book of Hebrews is taken up with a comparison between Christ and various aspects of Jewish worship, including the priesthood and the sacrifices. The author uses the shadowy figure of Melchizedek to illustrate the superiority of Christ to the Aaronic priesthood and demonstrates that the death of Christ was superior to the Old Testament sacrifices because of its finality and sufficiency.

The key concept in this section is that of Christ as Mediator. He is the only way to God. The religious ritual of the Jews, mediated by the priests, would never make a man right with God. Such symbols only pointed to the coming work of Christ, and His death rendered them meaningless and unnecessary. The idea that God could be reached through religious ritual and human mediators was not unique to the Jews of the first century, of course. Many people today believe they can make themselves right with God by going through the proper religious motions (baptism, church membership, church attendance, Christian service, etc.). Others seek human mediators, thinking that by praying to saints or following some human religious figure they can get to heaven. The fact of the matter is that Christ is the only mediator between God and man. He alone can lead a man to God. Faith in His atoning death is the only way of salvation.

## **5. Christ is Superior to the Life of This World (10:19-13:25)**

The two major aspects of the Christian's life in Christ that the author of Hebrews emphasizes in these chapters are that the Christian life is one of faith and one of discipline. These values are completely contrary to the values to which our society clings. Instead of living by faith with their eyes on an imperishable inheritance in heaven, your students will be told to live for the present (e.g., the beer commercial that tells people that "you only go around once, so grab all the gusto you can get!"). Instead of recognizing the importance of submitting to and learning from the discipline that God imposes upon His children, your students will be told that the most important thing in life is self-fulfillment, and that individual freedom is a "right" that no reasonable person would deny. Though the world may view the Christian life as narrow and inferior, the author of Hebrews makes it clear that it is the way of wisdom. The many examples given in chapter eleven show that God's way is the best way.

### **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by summarizing the five ways in which the book of Hebrews shows Christ to be better than anything the world has to offer. Make sure your students understand that it is not enough to recognize the truth of Christ's superiority. They must commit themselves to a life of faith in Him.

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## HEBREWS

1. What is the basic theme of the book of Hebrews?
2. In Hebrews 1:1-3, why did the author say that Christ was greater than the prophets?
3. Why do you think people today are so interested in the occult? How does Christ meet the need these people are trying to fill?
4. List the names of three people whom you would look upon as your “heroes.” Why do you look up to them? Why is Jesus more to be respected than any human being? Is it ever right to imitate another human being? Why or why not?
5. Name some religious rituals that people sometimes think can get them to heaven. Why are such methods insufficient?
6. What is a mediator? Why is this word an appropriate description of Jesus?
7. What does it mean to live by faith?



# **JAMES**

## **Lesson Aim**

To encourage students to avoid the many pitfalls against which James warns Christians in his letter.

## **Memory Verse**

**Jeremiah 31:35** - "This is what the Lord says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar - the Lord Almighty is his name."

## **Lesson Background**

"Old Camel Knees" - that was the nickname by which James, the brother of Jesus, came to be known by some in the early church. It was said that he spent so much time in prayer that his knees became hard and calloused like those of a camel. But James had not always been so devout. During Jesus' public ministry, the members of His own family were not the least bit encouraging. On one occasion, His brothers mocked Him and told Him that He should go to Jerusalem and expose Himself to the rabid opposition of the religious leaders (John 7). After Jesus' resurrection, however, at least two of His brothers became believers - James and Judas (the author of the book of Jude). James himself received a visit from the risen Christ (I Corinthians 15:7). He soon became one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, and rendered the final decision of the Jerusalem Council on the issue of the position of Gentiles in the church (Acts 15). James also is said to have sent observers to Antioch to check out the newly-formed church in that city (Galatians 2:12). Throughout his life, he had a reputation for holiness.

The book written by James is one of the oldest in the New Testament, and may have been the first New Testament book to be written. It is a general epistle, directed to no single church, but rather addressed to Jewish believers (James 1:1) throughout the Roman Empire. The major concern of the letter is practical holiness. The letter may be broken down into seven sections, in which James gives advice to Christians on matters of temptation, prejudice, good works, the tongue, worldliness, materialism, and godly living. All of these topics have practical value for your students. The lesson is set up to cover all seven, but you may not have time to do that with your class. If that is the case, pick out the areas that you consider most important for your students to consider. Remember that James is writing to Christians, so be sure not to give your students (especially any non-Christians in your class) the impression that a person is saved by godly living. Be careful to make it clear to your class that the practical steps advocated by James are the results of salvation, not the cause of it.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Open the lesson by asking your class who they think was the most important man in the church in Jerusalem for the first ten years after the death of Christ. Most will probably guess that it was Peter, and Peter certainly did play an important role and was widely respected. But tell them that the book of Acts seems to indicate that it was James, the brother of Jesus, who was recognized as the leader of the Jerusalem church, at least after the first few months following the ascension of Christ. Then share with them some of the information on James given in the Lesson Background. Having established James' interest in personal holiness, turn to the letter written by this great man of God.

### **1. Temptation (James 1)**

The first thing your students will need to know in order to understand this passage is the difference between trials and temptations. The former are difficult circumstances sent by God to test and strengthen the faith of His children. The latter, on the other hand, come either from Satan or from within ourselves, and involve enticements to disobey God. According to this passage, trials are to be endured with patience, while temptations are to be shunned. Note especially that trials endured lead to growth, while temptations to which one succumbs lead to death.

Ask your students to list examples of trials and temptations they have been called upon to face. Their list should give you an idea of whether or not they understand the difference between the two. Then focus on verses 2-8 and 19-25, which describe in turn how to deal with trials and temptations. How could the teaching in these verses be applied specifically to the trials and temptations that your students have listed?

### **2. Prejudice (James 2:1-13)**

Have your students read these verses and ask them how the Christians to whom James was writing were showing prejudice. Ask them if the people they know (in church, schools, etc.) have trouble with this same kind of prejudice. Then ask them what other kinds of prejudice people often engage in. Why do people do this? Often people show favoritism because they want something for themselves and hope those they favor can give it to them. Sometimes they exclude others simply because they are different, or because they see them as being inferior in some way. Why does James insist that there is no room for favoritism in the church? How can your students put this principle into practice in their church, schools, or neighborhoods?

### **3. Good Works (James 2:14-26)**

The main emphasis of this passage, which is so frequently misunderstood, is that true faith reveals itself by acts of love toward others. The passage is *not* saying that a person is saved by doing good works. Make sure your students understand the difference. The key word in the passage is “justification.” It does not mean “to make righteous,” but rather “to declare righteous.” Thus Abraham and Rahab are not said to have been made righteous by what they did; instead, the things they did revealed that God had changed their lives. Not only can there be no true faith apart from good works, but there also can be no true good works that are not motivated by faith. Otherwise, the best of man’s deeds are nothing but filthy rags. Encourage your students to examine the validity of their own profession of faith (if they indeed claim one) on the basis of this passage.

### **4. The Tongue (James 3)**

The middle school years are not ones remarkable for their displays of self-control. Most young people in their early teens have a great deal of difficulty controlling their tongues and their bodies. The severe warnings given by James in this chapter cannot be taken lightly by your students. Adolescence may be a reason for difficulty in the area of self-control, but it is no excuse. God expects His children to display the fruit of the Spirit, and this is one of them. [If this is a real problem area for your students, you may even wish to spend the entire lesson time on this chapter, going into some detail on what James teaches on the subject of the tongue. If you choose to go that route, you might want to supplement the lesson with appropriate verses from Proverbs.] Be sure to speak to your students about both the power of the tongue (James compares it to a bit or a rudder) and the inconsistency that most of us display in its use. One word can destroy the impact of a thousand, ruin a person’s reputation, or demolish any opportunity to be an effective witness for Christ. Words spoken to others can do more damage to them than a slap in the face. God holds people accountable for everything they say, so your students must realize that “I didn’t mean anything by it” is no excuse for careless, harmful language.

### **5. Worldliness (James 4)**

James discusses the perils of worldliness in chapter four. Worldliness is simply thinking and living like someone who is of the world rather than of God. James describes the problem by using four key ideas - fighting (verses 1-3), adultery (verses 4-5), pride (verses 6-12), and self-reliance (verses 13-17). Go through these one by one and ask your students to indicate why these attitudes are seen by James as signs of worldliness. Be sure they understand that all stem from putting the things of this world before the things of God and putting themselves before others. Challenge them to examine their own lives to see how often these attitudes are found in them.

### **6. Materialism (James 5:1-6)**

The lesson of these verses can easily be lost to your students because they probably do not view themselves as rich. Make sure they realize that, compared to most of the world, Americans are very rich indeed. James not only tells his readers that wealth is not permanent, but also warns them against using it as a tool of oppression. Your students thus need to be warned, not only about self-indulgence, but also about the selfishness that fails to acknowledge that all we have belongs, not to us, but to God. If time permits, you may want to have them discuss whether or not luxury is in itself sinful.

## **7. Godliness (James 5:7-20)**

James has spent the major part of his letter condemning sinful behavior. At the end, however, he emphasizes the positive. While he has spent a lot of time telling his readers how they should not behave, he now concludes by telling them what they should be doing. Again, he emphasizes four areas - patience and contentment (verses 7-11), truthfulness (verse 12), believing prayer (verses 13-18), and compassion for those who sin (verses 19-20). How do these characteristics counteract the traits of worldliness James condemned in chapter four?

### **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by summarizing the practical applications of the book of James that you have chosen to emphasize with your class. Make sure they are clear about the fact that the moral teachings of the book of James do not tell us what someone needs to do in order to be saved, but instead are intended to teach Christians how one who belongs to God ought to be living.



## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## JAMES

1. What is the difference between a trial and a temptation? Where do they come from? List some of the trials and temptations you have faced.
2. Why does James insist that Christians should never be guilty of prejudice toward other people?
3. Why does true faith always produce acts of kindness toward other people?
4. What part of the body did James say was the hardest to control? Why do you think this is so? At what times do you find it most difficult to control?
5. What does it mean to be worldly? What should a Christian do when he becomes aware of areas of worldliness in his life?
6. Why does James view wealth as a great source of potential evil? What can you do now, as a teenager, to cultivate the proper attitude toward wealth?



# **THE EPISTLES OF PETER**

## **Lesson Aim**

To encourage students to stand firm in the face of opposition directed against Christians.

## **Memory Verse**

**Jeremiah 31:36** - “Only if these decrees vanish from my sight, declares the Lord, will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me.”

## **Lesson Background**

Perhaps no character in the New Testament evokes more fully the strengths and weaknesses of redeemed humanity than the Apostle Peter. From loud-mouthed fisherman to beloved elder, he showed both a frailty and a commitment with which many saints over the years have been able to identify. When Jesus called Peter “the Rock” in Matthew 16, he seemed an unlikely candidate to live up to his nickname. The Gospels picture him as headstrong and mercurial, a man who spoke first and thought second. Yet the Holy Spirit did indeed change Peter into what Christ had called him to be. In his later years, he became a stable, confident follower of Christ, able to instruct others on how to deal with adversity. His life is a beautiful example of how Christ transforms His people into what He has declared them to be.

The two letters left for the church by Peter concentrate on the theme of how to deal with adversity. Peter had gone through the early years of persecution by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and lived to see the spread of the church throughout the Roman Empire. As the church grew, it came to be considered more and more of a threat to the emperors, and the result was persecution. The first of the official persecutions of the church by the Roman Empire began in the reign of Nero in 64 A.D. Peter himself is believed to have lost his life in this persecution. Tradition tells us that he was crucified upside-down in Rome sometime between

the great Roman fire of A.D. 64 and the death of Nero in A.D. 68. The first epistle of Peter was written to Christians in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), probably during the same time that Paul was establishing churches in the area. We know that the Christians in the region suffered persecution at the hands of the Jews, and it is probably that persecution to which Peter refers in the letter. The second epistle was written very close to his death, possibly from prison in Rome, and is addressed to Christians everywhere.

Persecution may not be something with which your students must cope to any significant extent. Part of the reason for this is that twenty-first-century America is in many ways a tolerant society, in which people are accepted no matter what they believe (at least on the surface). But a deeper reason why your students (and to a large extent, most American Christians) do not face persecution is because they live in a way that is not significantly different from the lifestyle of the non-Christians around them. Jesus told His followers to expect persecution; that we don't experience it may on the one hand be viewed as a blessing from God, but must also be seen as an indication of our lack of distinctiveness. As a result, Peter's letters serve both as instruction on how to cope with the persecution that some of your students may encounter, and also as a challenge to those who are unable to identify with the notion of suffering for Christ to live lives of greater faithfulness. Of course, the material in these letters will seem completely foreign to any non-Christians in your class. They need to be reminded that, while they may not suffer at the hands of the world, they also are excluded from the promises given to believers in the epistles of Peter.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by asking your students what they think it means to suffer for the sake of Christ. The answers you get may range from martyrdom to being teased at school about being a nerd or wimp. Then ask them why they think Christians are persecuted. After they have discussed the question for a while, classify their answers into two basic categories. From the standpoint of the world, Christians are persecuted because they are different. They hold different values and priorities and implicitly condemn the shallowness and materialism of those who live for this life only. From God's standpoint, however, Christians experience persecution in order to strengthen them and spread the Gospel. God uses trials in the lives of Christians to teach them greater dependence on Him. Persecution also draws the church together, producing greater unity among believers. It also has been throughout history one of the greatest testimonies to the power of God. Many unbelievers have been saved through seeing what God has done to uphold one of His children in times of suffering.

At this point, introduce the letters of Peter. Spend a little time talking about Peter's life and how God changed him, then tell the students about his two letters and the little we know about their dates and destinations. Divide the epistles of I and II Peter up among your students. If you have fewer than eight students, give more than one chapter to your better readers. If you have more than eight students, divide them up into eight small groups. Have each individual or group read through the assigned passage and write down everything that can be learned from it about the matter of suffering for Christ. After they have done this, the groups should share their findings with one another. In the ensuing discussion, be sure the following points are brought out:

### **1. I Peter 1**

verses 3-6 - Trials are insignificant in the light of eternity. God has chosen, saved, and will preserve His children.

verses 7-9 - Trials are for the purpose of strengthening a Christian's faith.

verses 17-19 - Christians are to live as strangers in the world, as those who are not wrapped up in what is merely temporary.

## **2. I Peter 2**

verses 9-10 - Christians are in the world to declare the Gospel to the glory of God. They have been set apart, not to stay to themselves, but to be a light in darkness.

verses 11-12 - One way to combat persecution is to live a life so blameless that no one will believe the charges leveled against you.

verses 13-20 - Christians must submit to those in authority so that there will be no legitimate basis for persecution.

verses 21-25 - Christians must not retaliate against persecutors. Rather than putting themselves in the same category as the oppressors, they should follow the example set by Jesus Himself.

## **3. I Peter 3**

verses 1-7 - In families where some are Christians and some are not, persecution can be a terrible trial. Christians must witness to their families first of all by being what a husband, wife, or child should be. If they don't do this first, no one will listen to their words.

verses 8-12 - An important part of a Christian testimony in a hostile world is unity among believers.

verses 15-16 - Christians must be ready to defend what they believe in a gentle yet credible way. It is important for your students to know, not only what they believe, but also why, and how to communicate it gently and effectively.

## **4. I Peter 4**

verses 1-5 - Persecution is something God can use to purge sin from a Christian's life. Too many Christians are too comfortable living like the world. Sometimes God finds it necessary to drive such desires from us.

verses 12-19 - Persecution draws a Christian closer to Christ, and in a sense involves sharing His suffering.

## **5. I Peter 5**

verses 1-7 - Humility toward one another and toward God is necessary in order to withstand persecution. We must submit to one another to produce unity, and to God to avoid anxiety.

verses 8-9 - While Satan seeks to use persecution to destroy the church, Christians can receive support from one another, knowing that victory is assured.

## **6. II Peter 1**

verses 3-11 - A Christian who lives a successful life is one who is constantly growing. A stagnant Christian will tend to collapse under both the temptations and the trials thrown at him by the outside world.

verses 16-21 - A Christian's faith is fortified by his confidence in the Scriptures, which are God's word to man.

## **7. II Peter 2**

This chapter, which treats many of the same themes found in the book of Jude (which we will study in two weeks), reminds Christians that not all trials come from the outside world. Some of the worst trials ever to befall the church have come from within - from false teachers who cause dissension and turn many away from the faith. Nothing has destroyed the reputation of the church as effectively as its internal squabbles. Satan loves to see the church torn apart from within, and plants his counterfeits everywhere to discredit the Gospel. Your students need to realize that not everyone who claims to be a Christian is one, and that Christ should not be judged by those who profess to be His followers. They should also expect that some of their worst experiences as Christians may well come from others who profess to be believers. [NOTE: If your time is short or your group small, you may want to omit this chapter, since we will study these things in much greater detail two weeks from now.]

## **8. II Peter 3**

verses 3-14 - The promise of the Second Coming of Christ is a great comfort to suffering Christians. This is not the case because Christians look forward to the destruction of the wicked, but because they trust that God will keep His promises. The expectation of the Second Coming not only encourages Christians during times of persecution, but also motivates them to live holy lives in the world.

## **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by encouraging your students in three areas. If the Christians in your class are experiencing persecution of one kind or another, they should realize that what they are facing is not unusual, but what is to be expected. Make sure they understand the value of what they are going through. Those Christians who are not facing persecution should understand that trials are a normal part of Christian experience. If they live for Christ, they will find trouble in one form or another. If not, it may be that they are really no different from the world around them. For the non-Christians in the class, Peter's warning of the judgment to come in II Peter 3 should serve as an indication that living only for this world will produce dire consequences in the world to come.

## **FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT      THE EPISTLES OF PETER**

1. Why does the Bible say that all those who live godly lives will suffer persecution?
2. Have you ever faced persecution for your faith? Describe an example of it if you have.
3. How does God use trials to strengthen individual Christians? to strengthen the church as a whole?
4. Why do non-Christians often dislike Christians?
5. Why does Peter teach that it is important to live a godly life during a time of persecution?
6. Why does Peter say that the promise of the Second Coming can help a Christian endure persecution?
7. What advice does Peter give in I Peter 3 to Christians who have non-Christians in their families?





# **THE EPISTLES OF JOHN**

## **Lesson Aim**

To encourage students to evaluate their own standing before God on the basis of the marks of true Christianity set forth by John in his letters.

## **Memory Verse**

**Jeremiah 31:37** - "This is what the Lord says: 'Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done,' declares the Lord."

## **Lesson Background**

John, like Peter, was a man whose life was drastically changed by the Holy Spirit. He and his brother James were Galilean fishermen who were first alerted to the work of God by John the Baptist. The two were known as the Sons of Thunder, probably because of their violent tempers. John's character was so altered through contact with Christ, however, that he came to be known as the Beloved Disciple (a title he used for himself in his Gospel out of humility, to avoid mentioning his own name). In the early years after the ascension of Christ, John remained in Jerusalem with Peter and the other apostles. He later spent many years ministering in the church in Ephesus, from which he wrote the three epistles that bear his name, and probably the Gospel as well. Near the end of his life, he was exiled to the island of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor by the Roman emperor Domitian, where he saw the visions that became the basis for the book of Revelation.

Our focus this week is on the three letters of John. I John 5:13 indicates that the purpose for which the first letter was written was to provide a basis for Christians to have assurance of their salvation. The second and third letters appear to have been brief notes to individuals, but they contain useful principles. While we will be spending most of our time today in I John, we will also look briefly at the other two letters, if for no other reason than that your students probably know virtually nothing about them.

In concentrating on the basis for assurance given by John in his first letter, be sure that your approach has a double thrust. For the believers in your class, the lesson should encourage them by showing them that they have good reason to have confidence in Christ and in His work in their lives. The last thing you want to do is undermine the confidence of young people who genuinely love the Lord. On the other side, those who are not believers, or whose status is uncertain, should be encouraged to use the marks of a Christian listed by John to evaluate their own standing. Make sure they understand that no one has any right to assurance of salvation whose life does not manifest the marks given by John to one degree or another. This is important because many young people (and adults as well) have been taught in their churches or schools to base their assurance of salvation on some past experience rather than on present evidence. They must be told in the clearest possible way that some experience in the past (an emotional crisis, raising one's hand, walking an aisle) cannot legitimately serve as the basis for assurance.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by asking your students how a person can know that he is a child of God. Since maximum participation is desirable, have the students write their answers rather than giving them out loud. After they have written down their answers to the question, have them discuss the matter together. Their responses should give you as a teacher a good idea of where they stand in terms of understanding this very important issue. After they have talked the matter over for a while, introduce the epistles of John and tell them that John's first letter was written to answer the very question they have just been discussing. Then divide them into five groups, assigning a chapter to each group, and instruct them to look through their chapters in order to find the different pieces of evidence that John gives to help his readers know that they have eternal life. When the groups come back together to share what they have found, make sure the following ideas come out.

### **1. I John 1**

verse 2 - Eternal life is Jesus Himself - a person, not an abstract possession. John and the other apostles had their assurance because of their personal relationship with Christ. The same personal relationship is the basis for anyone's eternal life, but the evidence is a bit harder to come by.

verses 5-10 - Eternal life involves walking in the light. This does not mean being without sin, but rather hating sin and seeking forgiveness whenever we do something against Christ.

### **2. I John 2**

verses 3-6 - One who knows Christ keeps His commands. Again, this is not talking about perfection (the previous paragraph talked about Christ's atoning sacrifice), but about the basic desire of a person's heart. One who lives his life with the intention of obeying God's commands shows by so doing that God has changed his heart.

verses 9-11 - If a true Christian's attitude toward God is one of obedience, his attitude toward other Christians is one of love. In general, this means that a Christian will prefer the company of Christians to non-Christians and will sense a bond of unity with his brothers and sisters in Christ that does not exist with unbelievers. More specifically, it means that he refuses to hold grudges against other Christians, but is willing to forgive them when they sin against him.

verses 15-17 - A Christian is not one who loves the world. This does not mean that he has no concern for the people in the world, but instead that his life is not controlled by the same desires and principles that govern the lives of unbelievers. He focuses on the eternal rather than the temporal.

verses 20-27 - A Christian is one who knows the truth. The Holy Spirit enlightens the mind of the believer so that he understands the Word of God. This does not mean that every Christian will possess profound doctrinal insight, but it does mean that he will be able to glean from Scripture the basic truths of the faith.

### **3. I John 3**

verses 4-15 - The themes of chapter two are worked out again here, particularly the ideas that a Christian does not live the life of a sinner, nor does he hate his brothers in Christ. Since the language of these verses is very strong, it might be helpful to explain to your students that the verb tense in Greek that John uses in these verses is a tense denoting continuous action - he is not saying that a Christian never sins, but that he does not persist in sin as a way of life.

verses 16-20 - The willingness to share with those in need is another indication that a person has been changed by God.

verse 24 - The presence of the Holy Spirit is the infallible sign of a Christian, but of course that presence is indicated only by the more visible signs John has already mentioned.

### **4. I John 4**

verses 1-6 - Those who are of God have discernment - they are able to recognize the truth when they hear it. They not only recognize the truth, but also are committed to heeding and obeying it.

verses 7-12 - Love is the defining mark of the Christian. This love is not some amorphous feeling, but rather the self-sacrificing love displayed by Christ Himself. It involves actively extending oneself in behalf of others.

verses 13-21 - Many of the earlier themes are repeated in these verses. Verses 17-18 add a new idea, namely that those who belong to Christ will have confidence. This is not to suggest that all Christians possess assurance of their salvation, but it is certainly true that Christians are in a position to live confident lives. A Christian certainly should not be a person dominated by fear.

### **5. I John 5**

verses 1-5 - Again we see the themes of faith, love, obedience, and confidence.

verses 18-20 - Here the themes of holy living, separation from the world, and discernment are reiterated.

While the theme of assurance and its foundation is the most critical aspect of this lesson, if time permits you should spend at least some time on II and III John so that your students gain some exposure to their content. This can easily be done because the themes of John's two brief letters correspond nicely with those of I John.

## **6. II John**

John is here writing to a woman of his acquaintance (the view that "the chosen lady" is a personification of the church is unlikely because John refers to those who know the truth as loving her as he does, though it could conceivably be a personification of a local assembly in the light of verse 13), encouraging her to persevere in love and obedience - two of the themes also found in I John. He lays special emphasis on discerning truth from error - one who does not bring the teaching that has been spread by the apostles is not to be received or acknowledged.

## **7. III John**

This third letter gives specific examples to illustrate the points John has been making in his other letters. While Gaius shows us the characteristics of one who truly belongs to God (faithfulness, obedience, love for other Christians), Diotrephes is a good example of one who professes Christ but does not possess Christ. His pride and hatred of other Christians demonstrate clearly that his life has never been changed by the Spirit of God.

## **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by returning to the question with which you began it. By now, your students should hopefully be in a better position to answer it biblically. Challenge the members of the class in the ways indicated in the Lesson Background, encouraging the Christians while emphasizing that all of your students should evaluate their professions of faith on the basis of the standard set forth by John in his letters.

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT      THE EPISTLES OF JOHN

1. In his first letter, John lists many ways in which a person can know whether or not he is a Christian. List as many of these as you can and tell why these characteristics are indicative of true Christianity.
2. What does John mean when he says that a Christian does not practice sin?
3. In III John, which of the characteristics of a true Christian are demonstrated in the life of Gaius? Which are clearly lacking in the life of Diotrephes?



# **JUDE**

## **Lesson Aim**

To impress upon students the necessity of being able to discern false teaching and the dangers of being influenced by it.

## **Memory Verse**

**Jeremiah 31:38** - “The days are coming, declares the Lord, when this city will be rebuilt for me from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate.”

## **Lesson Background**

Like the books of II and III John, the book of Jude is both one of the shortest books in the New Testament and one of the least familiar, not only to your students, but probably to most Christians. Jude was one of the brothers of Jesus who, like his brother James, became one of the leaders of the early church. Beyond that, we know almost nothing about him. His brief epistle, directed to Christians at large, is similar in content to the second chapter of II Peter (somewhat surprisingly, this caused some in the ancient church, along with many liberal scholars today, to question the authenticity of II Peter; there is no record of anyone in the ancient church doubting the legitimacy of Jude’s letter).

The book itself is a warning against false teaching in the church and an encouragement to stand fast in the truth. Such a warning is appropriate for your students because we live in a day when many who call themselves Christians openly deny the foundational doctrines of the faith. It is important to recognize, however, that doctrinal deviation is not likely to be a significant problem for your students at the present time. Middle school students are generally not doctrinally literate to any large extent, and their awareness of and contact with false teaching is usually very limited. Most of them still accept with little question the

doctrinal teachings they have heard from their church and families, and they are not sufficiently aware of doctrinal diversity to have a basis for serious questioning or critical doubt. Consequently, this lesson serves on the one hand as a preparation for future conflict, but one that has little immediate relevance.

On the other hand, Jude recognizes that doctrinal aberration always manifests itself in immorality. Ethical deviations spring from doctrinal problems, and doctrinal departures always result in ungodly living, at least in the long run (while it is true that some liberal theologians have been moral and even godly men in their private lives, their systems have led others to overthrow the constraints of biblical morality, usually within the time span of one generation). Your students may not be familiar with the teachings of liberal theologians, but they most certainly are exposed daily to the moral consequences of those teachings. It is important for them to recognize that at the root of the prevailing immorality of our day is a denial of the basic truths upon which Christianity stands. Jude sees the connection, and your students must see it as well. They must learn to shun the immorality that has grown out of false teaching, because succumbing to that immorality will lead them ultimately to affirm the false teaching as well. The reason for this is the great power of the human mind to rationalize. Behavior that is enjoyable must be right, and therefore denial of biblical truth suddenly becomes an attractive option. People frequently deny Scripture, not because of rational evaluation, but because the Word of God condemns their sin, and the only way to justify their own behavior is to affirm the unreliability of the Bible. Thus Jude's message becomes a very timely one for your students. They must understand the connection between immoral behavior and false teaching, and thus recognize the double importance of fleeing immorality.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the class by asking the students the question, "Do you think false teaching is serious enough to endanger the salvation of those who listen to it?" Your students will probably respond in the affirmative, but when pressed to give reasons may not be quite so certain. Of course, it is obvious that false teaching regarding salvation itself imperils the souls of those who pay attention to it; your class will probably pick up on this right away. But what about false teaching that has no direct bearing on salvation? Is such teaching really dangerous? Depending on the insight of your students, they may realize that such teaching endangers the church because it threatens its unity, and thus its testimony in the world. The book of Jude, however, focuses on another danger associated with false teaching - its inevitable connection with immoral behavior. Give your students the little bit of background information on Jude known to us, then explain that Jude illustrates the danger of false teaching by the use of highly pictorial images and examples. We will concentrate our attention on these in our study today. At this point, have the students take a few minutes to read through the twenty-five verses that make up the book of Jude.

Rather than attempting to divide the book up into segments, simply go through it verse by verse, commenting and discussing as you go. Be sure to point out the following:

verses 1-3 - Jude is writing to Christians, and though he would like to dwell on more positive things, he recognizes that it is essential to warn people against the false teachings that are polluting the church and prepare them to stand firm for the truth.

verse 4 - Jude wastes no time in pointing out that false teachers are a danger to the church. They are dangerous because their teaching gives an excuse for immoral behavior and because they are subtle - they sneak in so that they are able to catch some Christians off guard, though their activity comes as no surprise to Christ, who predicted while He was on earth that false teachers would arise and knows that Satan is the Great Counterfeiter.



verse 5 - An important key to detecting false teaching is to realize that not all who profess to be Christians really are. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, not all who visibly identify with the people of God are truly men of faith.

verse 6 - Not only are some professing Christians self-deceived, but also some of those who hold positions of authority may be counterfeits. If angels in heaven could use their authority to rebel, as Satan did, how much more can some in positions of leadership in the church be deceivers?

verse 7 - How do Sodom and Gomorrah serve as illustrations of false teachers? The similarity certainly does not lie in the area of subtlety. Instead, Jude makes the point that the judgment suffered by Sodom and Gomorrah - sudden and irremediable - is the same judgment awaiting those who bring false teaching into the church. It should also be noted in passing, though this is not Jude's point, that such open immorality can be terribly seductive and destructive to God's people, as it was to Lot and his family.

verse 8 - This verse gives several characteristics of false teachers. First of all, they are dreamers; many false teachers throughout history have claimed special revelation from God by means of dreams and visions. Secondly, they pollute their bodies; these same visionaries have often been men of loose morals (examples include Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormons, who had dozens of wives, and Muhammad, the founder of Islam, whose later visions were often excuses for his own licentious behavior). Thirdly, false teachers reject authority; they claim that their visions supersede the authority of those who have been legitimately appointed to church office. Fourthly, they slander celestial beings; while this may take many forms, it certainly includes claiming power over Satan that is truly exercised by God alone. False teachers often claim powers of healing and exorcism that rightly belong to no one but God.

verse 9 - Jude uses this incident, mentioned nowhere else in Scripture, to show that even the most powerful of the angels do not arrogate to themselves power that belongs to God alone, but instead combat evil in the name of God.

verse 10 - Again, Jude makes the point that false teachers are ultimately revealed by their own immorality. They have no real understanding of the doctrines they deny, but they do understand their own lusts, to which they give free exercise. Your students need to realize in this connection that the open advocacy of immorality that is so prevalent in modern society may be traced back to denial of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith a century or more ago. False teaching and ungodly living always go together.

verse 11 - Jude here uses three Old Testament illustrations to provide an accurate picture of what false teachers do. Cain placed his own reason and the works of his own hands above the specific teaching of God. Just because something seems to make sense, however, does not mean it is right or acceptable to God. Balaam, like so many false teachers today, sought to use the power of God for personal profit. It is no wonder that *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, a book on church practice from the second century, said that false teachers could be recognized by the fact that they asked for money! Korah led a group of Israelites in a wilderness rebellion against Moses, and he and his followers were swallowed up by an earthquake. Like him, many false teachers refuse to acknowledge the legitimate authority of the church, setting themselves up as self-appointed proclaimers of the truth.

verses 12-13 - Jude here uses a series of images to characterize false teachers. Firstly, he refers to them as blemishes at love feasts. The early church would frequently share a communal meal before celebrating the Lord's Supper. These meals were called *agapes*, or love feasts. False teachers would sit down at these meals as if they were part of the body, but would disrupt the very unity of the church that the Lord's Supper is intended to picture. Secondly, he calls them shepherds who feed only themselves - a reference to their practice of using their influence with the people of God to line their own pockets. Thirdly, he says they are

clouds without rain. Not only do they promise showers of blessing that they are unable to deliver, but they themselves are unstable, easily moved by any wind of change. Fourthly, he compares them to uprooted autumn trees - not only lacking in the fruit of the Spirit, but having no foundation in the firm soil in which the righteous man is planted. The fifth image Jude uses is one of waves on the ocean - not only does this picture instability, but also gives an indication of the tendency of false teachers to dredge up what is evil and disgraceful from the bottom of their own hearts. The last image used by Jude is one of "wandering stars," a term used in the ancient world for planets, which from the standpoint of an earthly observer follow no orderly path through the heavens. Jude uses the planets as an example of false teachers, not only because of the erratic behavior of these men, but also because of their ultimate destiny - outer darkness.

verses 14-15 - Jude again refers to an incident unmentioned elsewhere in Scripture, a prophecy spoken by Enoch concerning the ultimate judgment of the wicked, which Jude applies to the false teachers of whom he has been speaking.

verse 16 - The underlying attitudes of false teachers are important to note. They constantly criticize others, seek to make themselves look good at all times, boast openly of their accomplishments (real or imagined), and use flattery to gain followers. Beware of such people.

verses 17-19 - False teachers are dangerous because they divide the body. They lack the Spirit of God, and thus operate on the basis of purely worldly principles and skills. One who has the Spirit should be able to discern the falseness of such men.

verses 20-23 - Jude has been very negative thus far, but now he presents in positive terms what a Christian's attitude ought to be. First of all, he must guard himself, making sure to keep himself in the love of God and not be led astray by any false prophets. But he also must be careful about his attitude toward those who do come under the influence of false teachers. Those who waver must be shown mercy, not treated with superior contempt. Those who fall must be delivered, not written off, but this must be done with great care, so that the one who is seeking to help others does not himself fall victim to the snare of the false teacher (this, by the way, is the great danger of involvement with cults and the occult; one who seeks to help others must exercise great caution and proceed with great humility, lest he himself succumb to the power of evil).

verses 24-25 - Jude ends his book with words of praise, addressing Christ, appropriately enough, as the One who is able to keep His people from falling.

## **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by emphasizing once again the connection between false teaching and immoral living. Make sure your students understand that the relationship works both ways. Not only does false doctrine lead to ungodly living, but it is also true that those who become entrapped in immorality are susceptible to heresy as well because of the tendency of the human mind to rationalize whatever is considered pleasurable at the moment. Your young teenagers need to realize that giving in to the loose morality of the world around them can easily lead them to deny the faith in which they have been raised.

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## JUDE

1. Why does false teaching in the church always lead to immoral living?
2. Why is it also true that immoral living often leads a person to deny the teachings of Scripture?
3. When Jude compares false teachers to Cain, Balaam, and Korah, what is he telling us about them?
4. What do the following images used by Jude communicate about the nature of false teachers: “shepherds who feed themselves,” “clouds without rain,” “autumn trees,” “wild waves,” and “wandering stars”?
5. What should be the attitude of Christians to those who fall into false teaching and immoral living?



# **REVELATION - THE SEVEN LETTERS**

## **Revelation 1-3**

### **Lesson Aim**

To impress upon students the warnings and encouragements found in the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation.

### **Memory Verse**

**Jeremiah 31:39** - “The measuring line will stretch from there straight to the hill of Gareb and then turn to Goah.”

### **Lesson Background**

Near the end of his life, the elderly Apostle John was arrested in the city of Ephesus, where he was serving the church, and sent into exile on the rocky island of Patmos off the coast of Turkey. While he was there, he saw the visions that make up the book of Revelation. The record of these visions was sent to the seven churches located along the main Roman road through western Asia Minor. John’s arrest was only one small act in a general persecution directed against the Christians during the reign of the emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96). Domitian was the younger brother of the famous Roman general Titus, who had destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Constantly living under the shadow of his brother made him insecure, and he spent most of his reign trying to discover plots that he imagined people were making against his life and rule. He insisted that others address him by the title “Lord and God”; anyone who refused to do so was suspected of being an enemy of the state. Domitian hated the Jews above all other peoples in the Roman Empire. He considered them disloyal because they would not take part in the patriotic rituals of emperor worship. In the early nineties, he began to crack down on all dissident groups, but especially the Jews. He even went so far as to have his officials seek out all descendants of the line of David in Palestine, with the intention of ridding himself of these supposed rivals to his throne. According to the story, they were only able to find two -

grandsons of Jesus' brothers. Domitian had them brought to Rome, but when he saw that they were simple fishermen, he released them. The emperor's harassment of the Jews involved the Christians as well, since they were still considered a sect of Judaism. Many Christians were executed during this time, including Flavius Clemens, the emperor's own cousin. The persecution was particularly severe in Asia Minor, where many of the magistrates were zealous to earn the emperor's favor. It was to these persecuted Christians that John wrote, giving them Jesus' own encouragement in a time of great trial.

We will be spending two weeks on the book of Revelation. This week, we will look at the cover letters addressed to the seven churches, which contained specific warnings and encouragement directed to their own particular needs. Next week, we will examine the symbolic descriptions of the book and see how these were intended to bring comfort to suffering Christians. The seven letters in Revelation 2-3 were intended not only for the churches to whom they are addressed, but to all churches. Their descriptions of dangers and opportunities are universally applicable and can show your students what Christ wants His church to be.

The letters share a common structure, though not every letter contains every piece. They begin with a description of Christ, the author of the letters. Most of these are taken from John's vision in Revelation 1, and each is particularly appropriate to the needs of the church to which Christ is speaking. The description is then followed by a commendation for the things the church is doing right and a condemnation for what it is doing wrong. These are followed by a warning, and finally a promise. In the same way that the descriptions of Christ are keyed to the vision in chapter one, the promises are taken from the final vision in the book, the vision of the New Jerusalem in chapters 21-22. Thus the letters are structured in such a way as to personalize the content of the visions for the various churches to whom the book is addressed.

One comment needs to be made concerning the so-called Church History view of the seven letters. Many commentators have interpreted these letters as representing seven ages in the history of the church. Such a view is untenable. Not only does it obscure the fact that these letters describe seven very real first-century churches, but it also forces the complex events of history into a very simplistic mold (How could anyone possibly identify the church at Sardis, which is called "dead," with the Protestant Reformation?!). Another problem is that every interpreter who has expounded such a view of Revelation 2-3, from the ancient church down to the present, has unfailingly identified his own era as the Laodicean age. Obviously, the identification of the seven letters with eras of church history is too flexible to be of any significant value. It is much better to see all seven letters as describing aspects of the church throughout its history, and thus come to the letters expecting to learn something of value for us today from each one.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by showing your students a map of Asia Minor (from a Bible atlas, Bible handbook, or even the back of a Bible) that includes the island of Patmos and the seven cities where the churches to which Revelation was addressed were located. Show the students that the seven cities were located on a roughly circular Roman road running through the region, and that the order of the letters, beginning with Ephesus and ending with Laodicea, is the order in which a messenger traveling the road would arrive at the cities. Then describe for your students the circumstances under which the book was written and outline for them the structure used in each of the letters.

### **1. The Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)**

The Ephesian church had a long and noble history. In its early years, it had been visited twice by Paul. He had stayed there for several years during the Third Missionary Journey and had written a letter to

the church. Paul later sent Timothy to supervise the church's growth. Later still, the Apostle John came to live in Ephesus and became a beloved pastor of the church there. Yet the church apparently had lost much of its early zeal for the faith. It is therefore appropriate that Christ speaks of Himself as the One who walks among the lampstands (cf. 1:20). He is really present with His church - something of which the Ephesian church needed to be reminded. They are commended for their hard work, their orthodox teaching, their perseverance in trial, and their opposition to false prophets. Christ criticizes them because they have lost their love. Orthodoxy rapidly becomes dead apart from love. Christ describes this lovelessness as sin and tells the Ephesians to repent. Like many second-generation Christians, the Ephesians needed to understand that it is not enough to be right. In the same way that Christ threatened the Ephesians with removal of their lampstand - the disappearance of the church - so your students, many of whom are second-generation Christians, need to realize that the church cannot be sustained on orthodox doctrine alone. When your students become the leaders in the church in future years, will the church die? It will, unless truth is coupled with a genuine love for Christ. To those who do repent and return to their first love, Christ promises an eternity in His presence. But such a promise can only be meaningful to those who value Christ's presence now.

[A couple of brief comments might be appropriate at this point. Each letter is addressed to the "angel" of the church in question. The word literally means "messenger," and has been understood by commentators in three different ways. Some believe it to refer to an actual angelic being who is in some way associated with the church (cf. that cryptic reference in I Corinthians 11:10). Others see it as referring to the pastor of the church - God's messenger to His people - while still others believe it is a reference to the messengers who delivered the letters from John to the churches. Frankly, I don't know the answer, and I'm not convinced that the solution of the puzzle has any great impact on the interpretation of the letters. Secondly, there is the matter of the Nicolaitans. There is no independent evidence in church history for the existence of such a sect (references to a heretical group called the Nicolaitans by some of the church fathers are no more than an attempt to identify the group mentioned here in Revelation). Some have attempted to identify the group by etymology (the word literally means "victory over the people"), concluding that it must have been some sort of authoritarian sect that made a sharp distinction between the clergy and the laity, and implying that it was a forerunner of the same sharp distinction in the Catholic Church. I believe the most satisfactory explanation, however, is the one drawn from context. The references to the group in these letters seem to indicate that it advocated compromise with the world - something the Ephesians stalwartly avoided, but a real problem in Pergamum.]

## **2. The Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)**

The church in Smyrna was facing particularly severe persecution, so Christ appropriately speaks of Himself as the One who came to life from the dead. The church in Smyrna is the only one for which Christ has no condemnatory words. They receive only praise and encouragement. He tells them that the persecution will get worse for a brief time, but if they are faithful to the point of death, they will receive life. Though physical death may overtake them, they will never know the pain of spiritual death. Your students need to realize that, like the church at Smyrna, they must evaluate the events of their lives on the scale of eternity. The troubles of this life are indeed insignificant in the light of the promised blessing awaiting the people of God.

## **3. The Church in Pergamum (2:12-17)**

The main problem in Pergamum was compromise. They had suffered persecution and, though they had not denied the faith, they were being sorely tempted to accommodate themselves to the world around them. Christ therefore introduces Himself as One who bears a sharp sword - He is able to divide the true from the false, the godly from the ungodly, the church from the world. The references to Satan's throne

probably allude to the centerpiece of the city of Pergamum, a temple to Aesculapius, the god of healing. The symbol of this god was a snake wrapped around a sword (still used as a symbol of the medical profession today). To the Christians in Pergamum, the great snake adorning the temple of Aesculapius reminded them of another Serpent. The reference to Balaam (interestingly enough, his name in Hebrew means the same thing as “Nicolaitans” in Greek) again has to do with compromise - he was the one who convinced the king of Moab to corrupt the Israelites with sexual immorality and idolatry when he was unable to direct a prophetic curse against them. To those who resist the temptation to compromise, Christ promises hidden manna and a new name - He will sustain them, and they will belong to Him exclusively. The same promise goes for those who resist compromise today. Your students face the temptation to be like the world around them every day. They must understand that Christ will care for those who are His alone and do not succumb to divided allegiance.

#### **4. The Church in Thyatira (2:18-29)**

The church at Thyatira was also having a problem with compromise. It appears that their major temptation was in the area of immorality. They were serving Christ faithfully and even expanding their avenues of service, but their personal lives were a shambles. Like so many Christians today, they had compartmentalized their lives, so that what they did on Sunday had little to do with their activities on Saturday night. The focus of this immorality seems to have been a woman in the church whom Christ refers to as Jezebel. Those who followed her were risking destruction, as many of today’s religious leaders who have fallen because of immorality have discovered. Christ presents Himself to them as a holy judge and promises to those who keep themselves pure that they will take part in the judgment of evil. Your students need to realize that those who follow Christ cannot involve themselves with the evil practices of this world. There is no room for singing on Sunday and swinging the rest of the week.

#### **5. The Church in Sardis (3:1-6)**

The church in Sardis was living on past laurels. They had been a strong church at one time, but now they were little more than an empty shell, bearing the name of Christian but having no spiritual life. Jesus presents Himself to them as the One who bears the life-giving Spirit and warns them to awake from their fatal lethargy. The image of a thief in the night was particularly appropriate for Sardis. The city was located atop a cliff and thought itself impregnable to outside invaders. Twice in its history the city had been invaded successfully, however, and both times it had happened the same way. Soldiers had scaled the narrow path up the cliff in the middle of the night and had found the guards asleep. Having dispatched the guards, they easily were able to sneak into the city and capture it while the inhabitants were sleeping. Christ threatens the church with the same sort of destruction while it sleeps. He praises the few who have remained faithful and promises them eternal life with Him. Unfortunately, there are many churches today like Sardis. Once they were bastions of the truth, but today they are lifeless; only a few faithful servants of God remain among many who are doing no more than going through the motions of Christianity. Your students need to be aware that such churches exist, and that, while they may have a few true believers in them, such churches are dead and should be avoided by those who seek to serve Christ.

#### **6. The Church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)**

The church in Philadelphia was located at the crossroads of the two major Roman highways in western Asia Minor. Christ thus stands before them as the holder of the keys. They have a great opportunity. The many travelers who passed through such a crossroads town, if reached with the Gospel, could then take it with them to the far reaches of the empire. Christ promises to give them strength in their weakness and to preserve them through the persecution that has not yet arrived in their town. They may be weak and small,



but Christ promises to make them great and eternally stable. Your students need to realize that it does not require great strength or great ability to serve God - simply a willingness to trust Him and obey Him, realizing that He will produce results in response to faithful service.

## **7. The Church in Laodicea (3:14-22)**

The letter to Laodicea is perhaps the best known among the seven in this book. The Laodiceans were cultural Christians. They maintained a profession of faith, but they were in reality no different from the world around them. The city of Laodicea was located in the Lycus River valley, near the towns of Hierapolis and Colosse. It was on a high plateau overlooking the river, on the other side of the mountains from Hierapolis. The town of Hierapolis was famous for its mineral hot springs. Crowds flocked to the springs to bathe in their healing waters. The water from the springs flowed over a waterfall to Laodicea, but by the time it got there, it was lukewarm, and the high mineral content made it impossible to drink; anyone who tried became violently sick to his stomach. The Laodiceans thus had to bring water up from the Lycus River near Colosse through an aqueduct. This cold, pure water could easily be cut off by any prospective invader, so the Laodiceans were highly vulnerable to attack. They thus became masters of compromise. The city was also very wealthy. It was a banking center for the region, contained a famous medical school that produced an eye medication known as Phrygian powder, and exported a fine black wool used to make fashionable clothing. Christ uses all of these images to illustrate the pitiful condition of the Laodicean church. Like the people in the city, they were self-satisfied and totally unaware of their precarious state. Your students need to realize that security never can be found in the things of this world, and that those who seek it there will deceive themselves into a false sense of security that will ultimately be spiritually fatal. The dire state of the Laodicean church can be seen by the famous picture in verse 20 - Christ, the head of the church, is standing outside of the door seeking entrance. They don't even realize that He is not in the church, and yet He is gracious enough to offer fellowship to those who will admit Him. Even if your students should find themselves in the position of the Laodiceans - false professors with no spiritual reality whatsoever - assure them that a gracious Christ continues to invite them to fellowship with Him.

## **Conclusion**

You know the needs of your students. Conclude the lesson by focusing on the applications from the letters that are most appropriate for them. Are they Christians who know what is right but don't really care about God or others? Are they suffering for the sake of righteousness and in need of encouragement? Are they in danger of compromising with the world around them, either morally or otherwise? Are they children of Christians who have never really come to know Christ for themselves? Are they false professors with an unwarranted sense of security who need to be awakened from a potentially fatal sleep? Whatever they may be, Christ has a message for them. Bring it to them in whatever way is most appropriate for your students.



## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## REVELATION THE SEVEN LETTERS

Fill in the following chart using the letters in Revelation 2-3:

CHURCH	VIEW OF CHRIST	COMMEN- DATION	CONDEM- NATION	WARNING	PROMISE
EPHESUS					
SMYRNA					
PERGAMUM					
THYATIRA					
SARDIS					
PHILA- DELPHIA					
LAODICEA					

What is the personal application of each of these letters to your life?



# **REVELATION - THE PROPHECIES**

## **Revelation 4-22**

### **Lesson Aim**

To encourage the Christians in your class and warn the non-Christians concerning the final victory of Christ over the forces of evil.

### **Memory Verse**

**Jeremiah 31:40** - “The whole valley where dead bodies and ashes are thrown, and all the terraces out to the Kidron Valley on the east as far as the corner of the Horse Gate, will be holy to the Lord. The city will never again be uprooted or demolished.”

### **Lesson Background**

There is perhaps no portion of God’s Word about which Christians have disagreed more than the book of Revelation. The highly symbolic language of the book has contributed to this difficulty, of course. Throughout the history of the church, there have been four major approaches to the interpretation of this difficult book. The oldest of the four is the futurist approach. This was the one favored by the commentators of the early church, and basically sees the main body of the book of Revelation as describing in symbolic language the events surrounding the Second Coming of Christ. While this view dominated the church in the early centuries, it virtually disappeared during the Middle Ages. It has only recently become popular again, mostly in connection with British and American evangelicalism, particularly of the dispensational variety.

The second view is the idealist view, which sees the symbolism of the book of Revelation as describing the cosmic struggle between God and Satan, but without reference to any specific events of human

history, past, present, or future. The idealist view developed in the larger context of the allegorical approach to the Scriptures that was popular beginning in the third century and extending through the Middle Ages.

The third view is the historical approach, which sees in the visions of the book of Revelation a symbolic description of the entire sweep of human history. This approach first appeared in the thirteenth century and typically identified the papacy with the Antichrist. This was the view favored by the Reformers, although today it is rarely held, largely because of the tremendous variety of results when people attempted to match up the visions with actual historical events.

The fourth approach to the book of Revelation is the preterist view, which sees the book as an example of Jewish apocalyptic, a genre that used highly symbolic language to describe present political conditions. Those who take this view see the entire book as referring to events of the first century, either ones that had already occurred or those in the near future. This view, while taking the historical and literary background of the book seriously, renders it virtually irrelevant for today and is generally the approach favored by liberal scholars.

It is hardly within the scope of a single Sunday School lesson on the middle school level to attempt to resolve this interpretive dilemma, and I am not about to try (in case you would be interested in what sort of bias I bring to the writing of this lesson, I favor a futurist approach to the book, but my treatment of the material will be of such a general nature that it can be accommodated to any of the above views). The matter is further complicated by the fact that a number of recent interpreters have attempted to combine some of the views enumerated above in order to retain their strengths while eliminating their weaknesses. What I propose to do, therefore, is to structure the lesson in a way that will familiarize the students with the general content of the book and the history of its interpretation, while at the same time impressing upon them its basic thrust - that of the eventual, certain, and final victory of Christ over the spiritual forces of evil that oppose Him. This underlying theme should provide both a source of encouragement to the Christian students in your class and a warning to those who do not belong to Christ.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by reminding the students about what they learned concerning the writing of the book of Revelation last week. Then ask them why people find the study of Bible prophecy so fascinating. As they discuss it, help them to realize that many who find prophecy such an absorbing topic do so because of curiosity - they want to know what is going to happen in the future and treat the Bible almost as they would a fortune-teller. Others find it comforting to look at the newspaper headlines and be able to match them up with Bible prophecies; it gives them a greater sense that God is really in control if they can see that He predicted these things ahead of time. Others enjoy it because it gives them a superior feeling of knowing something that others don't. Point out that most of these reasons are not particularly healthy. Too often, those who are preoccupied with prophecy are not anywhere near as concerned as they should be with living faithful and obedient lives in the present. This is not to say, of course, that we should ignore the prophetic portions of Scripture. All of the Word of God is profitable; none should be ignored. But we also should not devote so much attention to certain isolated portions of Scripture that we forget about the rest of what it teaches.

It is also important to warn your students about misguided attempts to interpret the details of biblical prophecy that has not yet been fulfilled. If one examines the Old Testament prophecies concerning the earthly ministry of Christ and the ways in which they were fulfilled, it is easy to see that anyone attempting to predict the details of fulfillment would have fallen far wide of the mark. Many of the prophecies quoted by Matthew, for instance, could never have been identified as pointing to events in Jesus' life prior to the

occurrence of the events themselves. This should serve as a warning against any rash attempts to identify how certain biblical prophecies will come to pass. In all likelihood, we will not know to what events certain prophecies refer until after the fact. Prophetic speculation has done much to damage the reputation of the church over the years. The history of the church is littered with people who have made themselves and Christians in general look very foolish by insisting that they knew how certain prophecies would be fulfilled (e.g., those who predicted the return of Christ in 1000, 1260, 1844, 1874, 1914, 1978, 1994, etc., along with those who identified the Antichrist with Nero, Napoleon, Mussolini, John F. Kennedy, and Henry Kissinger!). Given those cautions, it is time now to turn to the book of Revelation itself.

## **1. Interpretations of the Book of Revelation**

Summarize briefly for your students the four views of the book of Revelation given in the Lesson Background. This will help them to understand the variety of evangelical positions that exist, though they are really too young for a detailed treatment of this subject. At least this summary should help them to appreciate the difficulty associated with the interpretation of the book and give them some exposure to positions differing from what they may have been taught at home, in church, or at a Christian school.

## **2. Content of the Book of Revelation**

All we can hope to do here is give a general summary. Since the differences in approaches are so vast, I will try to avoid interpretation. At least the students will gain some idea of what the book contains.

### **A. John's Vision of Christ (Revelation 1)**

Christ appeared to the Apostle John in a vision on the island of Patmos. The description of Christ's appearance becomes the basis for Christ's description of Himself to the seven churches, as we have already seen. It also shows something of His glory and power and elicits worship from John. We should note right from the beginning that worship is the proper response to this book. When Christ is revealed, what can man do but worship? The entire content of the book makes it clear that this is exactly what will ultimately occur.

### **B. Seven Letters to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2-3)**

We have already looked at these in last week's lesson. Remind the students that the purpose of these letters is to personalize the general message of the book to fit the needs of the individual churches to whom it was sent.

### **C. The Wrath of God (Revelation 4-20)**

This is the section of the book that generates the most controversy. It opens with a vision of the glorified Christ on His throne, surrounded by angels and saints who are singing His praises (chapters 4-5). Note in passing that the songs sung in these chapters (and at the end of the book as well) provide the words for some of the most magnificent songs of praise the church has ever known, including parts of Handel's *Messiah* like "Worthy is the Lamb" and "The Hallelujah Chorus." The vision in these chapters shows not only that those who have suffered for the sake of Christ will be rewarded, but also that their chief occupation in heaven will be one of praise.

The remainder of this section deals with God's judgment against those who have opposed His Son. It includes three sets of judgments (seals, trumpets, and bowls), the infamous 144,000 witnesses (claimed by almost every cult to be prophetic of themselves), the Beast and the False Prophet (identified by many with

the Antichrist), the two witnesses (who act very much like Moses and Elijah), and the ever-popular, cryptic 666. It also speaks of a great prostitute called Babylon the Great, which some have identified with the Roman Catholic Church, while others see it as merely representing in some general way the godless system of this world. The section ends with the defeat of the Beast and the False Prophet by Christ in chapter 19, followed by the Last Judgment in chapter 20.

Chapter 20 also contains the famous description of the Millennium. This is the only place in Scripture where this thousand-year period is mentioned. If time allows, explain briefly to your students the three basic interpretations of the Millennium that have existed in church history; premillennialism, with its belief that Christ will return to earth, defeat the forces of Satan, and reign on earth for a thousand years (the belief of the early church, which generally fits the futurist view of the book of Revelation); postmillennialism, with its teaching that the church will bring in a Golden Age of peace and prosperity on earth, after which Christ will return (now to a large extent out of favor, but popular in the optimistic environment of the nineteenth century); and amillennialism, which believes that Revelation 20 gives a symbolic description of the present age, in which Satan is bound and the work of God advances (this was the view of Augustine, which dominated the Middle Ages and is still popular with many today, and fits with the idealist interpretation of the book of Revelation).

#### **D. The Reign of Christ (Revelation 21-22)**

As the book began with the glorified Christ, so it ends. John's final vision pictures a combination of renewed Garden of Eden and Holy City - the effects of the Fall have been removed by the redemption of sinners through the work of Christ. The great beauty of the description in these chapters reminds one of Jesus' use of the Valley of Hinnom, the garbage dump outside of Jerusalem, as a picture of Hell in Mark 9. In the same way that human language is inadequate to describe the horrors of Hell, causing Jesus to use the most disgusting imagery available to impress the truth upon His listeners, so the beauty of Heaven is indescribable, despite John's use of the most glorious things known to man to describe it. It is a great disservice to the glories of Heaven to picture it as a place where people sit on clouds wearing white robes and strumming harps.

### **3. Application of the Book of Revelation**

Close the lesson by impressing upon your students that the book of Revelation was never intended to be the subject of mere idle curiosity to God's people. It had a practical purpose when it was written, and it has practical applicability today as well. What, then, should your students learn from your brief study of this book?

First of all, they should learn that God will ultimately complete the victory over Satan that was sealed by Christ on the cross. The forces of evil cannot prevail, no matter how strong they may sometimes look. Though God may not appear to many to be active in the affairs of this world, He is accomplishing His purposes and will not fail. Satan and his followers will be defeated. For your Christian students, this should be a source of encouragement. They often face struggles that are hard for them to handle, and they often feel like they are losing ground. They must understand that they are fighting on the winning side. For any non-Christians in your class, point out clearly that the mighty powers of this world will some day crumble to nothing before the power of God. Trusting anyone or anything other than Christ for safety and security is the grossest of follies. Hell and destruction await those who refuse to submit to God.

Secondly, your students should understand that the appropriate response to God is one of praise. How can anyone look on the Christ of the book of Revelation and not sing His praises? Worship involves declaring, in a great variety of ways, both with the tongue and the life, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain!"



## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## REVELATION THE PROPHECIES

1. Why are so many people so fascinated by the book of Revelation? What are the dangers involved in becoming preoccupied with Bible prophecy?
2. Summarize briefly the differences among the futurist, idealist, historicist, and preterist views of the book of Revelation.
3. What is the purpose of the seven letters to the seven churches at the beginning of the book of Revelation?
4. What are the differences among premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism?
5. Why should the teachings of the book of Revelation bring a response of praise from the Christian? Look through Revelation 4,5, and 19 and see how many songs you can think of that take their words from these passages.