

# General Letters

Week 1: Jude  
and John

# Daily Reading Schedule

**Monday:** 1 Peter 5-1 John 2

**Tuesday:** 1 John 3-Revelation 1

**Wednesday:** Revelation 2-8

**Thursday:** Revelation 9-16

**Friday:** Revelation 17-22

## Introduction

It has finally arrived; the last week of the devotional is here.

### A challenge to reflect

Before we begin introducing the books covered in this week's readings, I want to stop and offer you a challenge. Being at the end of a year's worth of reading, it would be appropriate to set aside a time to reflect on what you have accomplished. Set aside some time this week, perhaps an hour or so, to get quiet and reflect on where you have been this year. (You may want to spend your quiet times next week doing this, since the daily reading regiment will be over.)

In your time of reflection answer the following questions or do the following exercises:

Before you began this reading journey, what was your perception of the Bible?

What big questions did you have regarding God and the Bible?

Were any of your questions answered in the course of this year?

What were some memorable moments in your reading?

In what ways did you see the daily reading regiment have an impact in your daily life?

In what ways has your faith been strengthened as a result of this reading journey?

Take a few minutes and flip through the pages of your Bible and see if any memories are sparked from either the reading of the pages or the community discussion surrounding the reading.

Take a few moments and thank God that He has given us the written word so that we can have an objective way to learn about Him and love Him more.

# Introduction to the Letters

## Letter of Jude

It is most likely that Jude is the physical brother of Jesus. In the Gospels we know that Jesus' family did not believe in Him. After His resurrection, however, both His brother James and His brother Jude became His disciples and prominent leaders in the church. In this letter, Jude is writing to the church to fight against the false teaching that was filtering into their ranks. There are great similarities between Jude and 2 Peter, as both letters are speaking very harshly and firmly against false teachers. The believer is called to fight for the faith and not be misled.

## 1 John

John, the beloved apostle, will occupy the bulk of our final week of reading. This is the same John who wrote the Gospel. Upon first reading of 1 John, the similarities between the letter and the Gospel are obvious.

At the end of the first century, John became a prominent leader in the church at Ephesus and the outlying region. Refer again to the Gospel readings for further notes on the character and context of John. In the tone of a wise and loving pastor/mentor, John writes this letter to the church to encourage them to not be persuaded by the pressures of the world and the teaching of false teachers to stray from the pure gospel of Jesus and be sucked into destructive patterns. The message of 1 John could be summarized in the following sentence, "Walk in the light of God's truth, which is love, stay away from the darkness of the world, and overflow with love for each other."

## 2 and 3 John

These letters of John are so small that they have been called the “postcards” of the New Testament. In his second letter, John writes a note to a leading lady in the church to warn her to “close the door” to false teachers who were headed her way. In his third letter John writes to his good friend, Gaius, encouraging him to receive Demetrius and a trusted partner in the gospel.

## Revelation

Now we come to the section of the Bible that has evoked more controversy and colorful imagery than any other piece of scripture. While in exile on the island of Patmos, John received a vision from God. In this vision, he met Jesus in His glorified state and received instructions. In the instructions that Jesus gave to John, in v. 1:19, we can find a convenient outline for the content of the book. Jesus said, “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now, and what will take place later.” Thus, we can divide the book into these three parts:

**What he has seen** ch. 1 -- Jesus in all His glory standing among the 7 lamp stands.

In this section we learn three important points

1. Jesus is alive and is the supreme power of the universe.
2. There is a “decoder ring” to the metaphorical imagery of the book. Jesus explains to John that the seven lamp stands in his vision aren’t literally seven lamp stands, but represent the

seven churches in Asia Minor to whom Jesus wants John to send this letter. Therefore, we can be safe to interpret all the other colorful imagery in the rest of the vision as cosmic metaphors for practical, human realities (i.e. the beast crawling out of the sea isn't really a creature, but probably a human ruler; the scorpion/locusts aren't really supernatural bugs, but probably represent some kind of human army, etc.)

3. Revelation is actually an epistle. In John's day there were very popular books that had been written during the 200 years before Jesus that were called apocalyptic books. They were cosmic tales that depicted God coming in all His glory to overthrow the kingdoms of the world and establish the Kingdom of Israel on earth once again. These books were typically attributed to some great Old Testament characters such as Enoch or Moses. The Revelation is often considered to be an apocalyptic book. While it has many striking similarities, it would be better to think of Revelation as more of prophetic/pastoral epistle. Remember that the prophets of the Old Testament were preachers of God's truth, who used colorful metaphors to proclaim judgment on the nation of Israel and to bring the people back to repentance. Revelation was not a detached, cosmic tale attributed to an Old Testament character. It was a real letter written by a compassionate pastor to real people in real churches who were undergoing some very real and severe persecution. When John met his old friend and his Lord Jesus on Patmos, and was given the gift of this vision, he wrote it down and sent it to the churches in order to teach them some very important lessons. We will speak to the lessons of Revelation in a moment.

**What is now** ch.2-3 -- Jesus dictates seven letters to seven churches in the region of Asia Minor.

In these two chapters Jesus dictates to John a letter to each of the seven churches in the region of Asia Minor. John knew these churches intimately. The study of these letters will reveal great insight into how God views the church and what he expects from His people.

**What will take place later** ch. 4-22 -- Cosmic images of heaven, Earth, war, justice, and a final, eternal peace.

It is this bulk of the Revelation that sparks the real controversy among scholars. It is fairly easy to map out what the letter SAYS. It is an entirely different thing to articulate exactly what it MEANS. In light of this difficult interpretation, it is even more difficult to determine HOW it should be applied to our lives today. One's interpretation of Revelation really depends upon one's presupposition regarding its intent. There are four basic schools of interpretation that have been espoused during the two thousand years since the writing of this letter.

**Preterist** -- In this view, the images and metaphors of John's vision all refer to events and political figures of John's day. The beast and Babylon represent the Empire of Rome and the war and tribulation represent the present suffering of God's people under the cruelty of this empire. The purpose of the vision was to demonstrate to the people that Rome would eventually fall and that the Kingdom of God, which was the peace found in Jesus Christ would eventually bring justice to all men. In this

view all the events of Revelation lie in our past. The images of heaven are representations of the rule of Christ in the church which is fully realized in Jesus Himself.

**Historicist** -- Throughout the history of the church many scholars have seen the sequence of events laid out in Revelation as pertaining to epochs in world history, inevitably culminating in their present day, proclaiming the evil ruler (for Luther it was the Pope himself) as the Beast. Not many people hold to this view currently.

**Idealist** -- In this view, there is no direct correlation between the images of the vision and any specific people, countries, or events located in human history, past, present, or future. The images represent evil itself as manifested in all forms of human government. The Revelation is describing the inevitable persecution of all followers of God's Kingdom that will be suffered at the hands of corrupt human institutions which are inspired by Satan himself. The message of Revelation is that, despite all the corruptions and suffering, God's Kingdom will, in the end, prevail.

**Futurist** -- the futurist believes (a la "Left Behind") that the images of Revelation all pertain to specific human people, places, and events, and that all of these events lie in our future. Many futurists enjoy linking the 70 weeks of Daniel to John's Revelation and speak of the 70th week being the "Great Tribulation" in which the Beast (a world power) will spend 3 1/2 years ruling in supposed

peace and then 3 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> years of wretched persecution of the church. Within this view there are two hotly debated topics. First is whether the “rapture” (when the church will be caught up in the air with Christ e.g. 1 Thessalonians, will happen before the Tribulation, in the middle of it, or after it and simultaneous with Jesus’ second coming. These are called Pre-trib, mid-trib, and post-trib rapture positions. The second issue has to do with the 1000 year (or Millennial) Kingdom in ch. 20. Will Jesus’ second coming happen prior to the Millennial Kingdom in which He will physically establish a 1000 year reign on the earth prior to the end of all things. Or, will Jesus’ return happen at the end of the 1000 year reign, bringing the end of all things. In this view the 1000 years is symbolic for the church age and the church is responsible to bring about Jesus’ second coming by evangelizing the world. Finally, some interpreters question whether the 1000 years has any bearing on a specific time table, but simply represents the reign of Christ over all things.

As you can see there are many views to choose from. Many of these views are prefaced with a “pre”, “mid”, “post”, or “a.” For the purposes of this devotional we are going to adopt a “pan” view. No one really knows for sure how to interpret it correctly and we believe that it will all “pan” out in the end.

Seriously, there is a danger in getting distracted by the controversy over Revelation. Many people get caught up in attending prophecy conferences and watching current events to match them up with Biblical prophecy and “scare” everyone into not being “left behind.” James told us that there would be many antichrists who would come. Jesus told

us that not even He knew the hour of His return. There are only two things that we need to know for sure and the rest we can, in good measure, enjoy the process of studying in loving community. The first is that Jesus promised that He would return for us. Yeah! The second is that, no matter what happens around us, our marching orders are always the same. Whether we are in prosperity or enduring the Great Tribulation, we live in the Kingdom of God, we are not of this world, and we are to love God and love others. Enough said.

## Monday: Walk in the Light

1 John 1:5-2:6

How is God described in this passage?

What should be the natural effect on a person that is walking in the light of God?

What is John's purpose in writing this letter? (2:1)

How can we know if we have come to know God?

What is the standard expectation of every follower of Jesus? (2:6)

## Food for thought:

Have you ever noticed that when you borrow another person's car you are much more careful with it than your own? You don't want to eat in it so that you don't spill anything. You tend to take a little extra time looking for oncoming traffic. Why is that?

When someone lends you something, you realize that they are doing it out of the kindness of their heart and that they didn't really have to do it in the first place.

Out of consideration for that person you would never think of abusing their property the way you do your own.

As we read 2:1-2, we get this same sense with Jesus; realizing that He has loaned us something special. First of all, John said that the point of his letter was that he didn't want Christians to sin. That's the standard. That's the expectation. Now, for most of us, we look at that and think, "Well, forget it. I'm out. I sin all the time, even when I don't want to. If the standard is no sin, then God's just going to throw me on the scrap heap." Read v. 2 again. Here we see the loan from Jesus. John says, "BUT", if anybody does sin (whew) Jesus is our defense attorney in the court of God. Here's where the car analogy comes into play. Does Jesus have to be our defense attorney? Do we deserve to have Jesus standing there, claiming His own blood as our defense against the wrath of the holy and righteous God? No, absolutely not. Jesus, out of the kindness of His heart is standing before the Father; He has lent us his car, so to speak. This is the grace of God. It is on loan to us. Do we treat it like that?

Many people have taken this passage as a license to live however they please. They look at 1 John 1:9 as a ticket to "party" because they believe, based on this

verse, that God must forgive them if they sin. The self-speak, rationalization goes like this, "I know that what I am about to do is wrong, but I'm going to do it anyway, then ask for forgiveness, and, because of 1 John 1:9, God has to forgive me. I can have my cake and eat it, too." Whoa! Time Out! Read on my friend. John throws the yellow flag on that kind of thinking and rebuts it with vv. 4-5. If a person truly is in Christ, that kind of thinking would not be present in their mind. If someone knows God, then they are being transformed from the inside out and are attempting with every ounce of strength they have, to walk as Jesus walked.

Perhaps the key to this passage is to understand what it means to know God. John said that if anyone says, "I know God" then he would behave as Jesus did. Many people know about God, but they do not know Him. To know God, in this context, is not the possession of factual data regarding proper theology, rather, it is the relational interchange between two persons. It's like the difference between knowing George Washington and knowing your spouse. You can read about Washington and appreciate him from a distance, but you can know your spouse experientially; involving the mind, body, and spirit. That is how we are called to know God. We need to step into His light, to be permeated by His life-giving presence, so that our mind, spirit, and body can be transformed from the inside out.

This is the expectation of every follower of Christ. So, walk in God's light today and give thanks that Jesus has given you a wonderful gift of advocacy before the throne of God. May we never treat this grace with contempt, but, rather, throw ourselves into the life of Jesus and be made into His image!

## Tuesday: No Fear!

1 John 4:7-21; 5:11-12

Where does love come from?

How is God's love described in this passage?

What effects should God's love in our heart have on our behavior?

## Food for thought:

The key to this passage is found in v. 7. We are commanded to love one another. Let's stop right there. Have you ever struggled with that command? Is there someone in your church that you find very difficult to love? Is there someone in your family or your workplace that just drives you nuts? If there is and you read this passage, then you may start beating yourself up and thinking, "I must not be a very good Christian because I'm having such a hard time with this person. I just can't love them." Here's the truth of the situation. You can't love that person.

The reason we struggle so much with loving someone is because we are trying to use human, self-generated love to do it. In the 1960's the motto of the youth culture was "all we really need is love." That sounds really good, doesn't it. The problem is that the kind of love that was advocated then was a "what-can-I-get-out-of-it-love." We still have that mentality in our culture today. We are willing to love as long as 1) it doesn't hurt me, and 2) I will get something out of it. That is not God's kind of love, that is human love.

Now let's continue in the verse. John goes on to say, "*For love comes from God.*" Here again is the key to living in the Kingdom of God. You are not the source of goodness. You can't work really hard to become better at loving. You have to die to it, and acknowledge the fact that you can't do it and that God is the source of love, not you.

Once you have died, then you can stop and really analyze why you struggle loving that person. You probably struggle with them because they threaten to take something from you. They either take away your time, because they are constantly wanting to talk

to you about things you don't want to talk about. Or, they take away your image, because they are not the sort of people that either meet your standard of living or that you feel comfortable associating with (you know, the wrong side of the tracks kind of thing). Or, they take away your power, because they are better at something than you (that's called jealousy, by the way). Or, they take away your sense of safety (perhaps they gossip, or have predatory tendencies).

Everyone takes something from you, but if they give something back, then it doesn't feel like they are taking something; it's more of an exchange. So, if the person you struggle to love seems to be taking from you, it's because you don't perceive that they can give anything back to you. On a human level this logic makes sense. Why would you spend time loving someone who can't or won't give anything back to you, right?

In vv. 9-10, God exposes the truth of His economy. God loved us, even when we could give nothing back to Him. We were His enemies. We were the ones who rebelled against Him and have been wallowing around in filth. Yet, He loved us so much that He gave up everything for us. That is the key. God's love is other-focused. When we die to our self we stop looking through the world's love-lens, asking, "what can I get out of this love-relationship," and start looking through God's love lens and start asking, "how can God use me to be a channel of His love to this person today."

Every one of us needs to be loved. We were created to be involved in loving community. That is true. Yet, until we can come to the place where we realize that 100% of our love need comes from God and God

alone, we will not be able to truly love our neighbor. As long as we look to be filled by the love of another human, including our spouses, we will always be disappointed and hurt and unable to truly love one another.

Here is where the heart of the passage lies. Read v. 18 again. *“Perfect love drives out fear.”* A person who looks through the world’s love lens is always afraid of being hurt. They are afraid of being used and abused and abandoned. But, the person who is completely reliant on the love of God to fill her soul will realize that there is nothing that anyone can do to her that could truly harm her. Even if she was killed, she would not be separated from the love of God.

As God-lovers, we have nothing to fear. God loves us. He paid for our sins. We have been given the seal of His Spirit. He is working in us to bring about His righteousness. To be in this life is to be a vessel of the mysterious treasure of Christ. To depart from this life is to be fully in the presence of the unveiled glory of Christ. We are in a win-win situation and, therefore, have nothing to fear.

Now, look at that person you struggle with again. Is whatever bugs you about that person really something worth getting in the way of the riches of knowing God and being filled with His love. Ask God to help you die to whatever is blocking your love arteries and let your channels of His love begin to flow freely through you.

## Wednesday: What's in Your Letter?

Revelation 2-3

Fill in the charts:

To the church in \_\_\_\_\_

What you do well:

What I hold against you:

Promise to him who overcomes:

To the church in \_\_\_\_\_

What you do well:

What I hold against you:

Promise to him who overcomes:

To the church in \_\_\_\_\_

What you do well:

What I hold against you:

Promise to him who overcomes:

To the church in \_\_\_\_\_

What you do well:

What I hold against you:

Promise to him who overcomes:

To the church in \_\_\_\_\_

What you do well:

What I hold against you:

Promise to him who overcomes:

To the church in \_\_\_\_\_

What you do well:

What I hold against you:

Promise to him who overcomes:

To the church in \_\_\_\_\_

What you do well:

What I hold against you:

Promise to him who overcomes:

## Food for thought:

Now do this exercise two more times. First, fill in your church's name in the blank. What would Jesus say to your church if he wrote you a letter? What do you do well. What would he hold against you? In what ways could you try to rectify the deficiency found in your church?

To the church in \_\_\_\_\_

What you do well:

What I hold against you:

Promise to him who overcomes:

Second, fill your own name in the blank. What would Jesus say if He wrote a letter to you? What are you doing well? What would He hold against you? How might you rectify this?

To the church in \_\_\_\_\_

What you do well:

What I hold against you:

Promise to him who overcomes:

Now, to the overcomer... That is really the point of these letters. John wrote these letters (as Jesus' scribe) to encourage a group of people who were being severely persecuted. To be a follower of Jesus is to be engaged in a spiritual battle. Paul told us that we do not fight against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of evil. We are called to put on the armor of God. We are called to overcome the patterns of this world and walk in the Kingdom of God. To him who overcomes will be given eternal life. Remember a core truth of the New Testament: Jesus has already overcome. This is not a call to muster up your own strength and storm the gates of Heaven with your own righteousness. This is a call to die to yourself and cling to the grace and authority of Jesus, drawing upon His strength to stand firm, even in the face of extreme persecution. Through Him who has overcome, will we be able to overcome. Jesus has given us eternal life, let's live in its power today and always!

## Thursday: On Your Face!

Revelation 4-5

As best you can, either draw a picture of what John saw in this chapter or make a chart listing the things he saw.

What did those gathered around the throne do in regard to the one seated on the throne?

What did they say regarding the one seated on the throne?

What was their attitude toward Him?

Peek back at Ezekiel chapter 1 (and any notes you took during that study) and notice any similarities between Ezekiel's vision and John's vision.

Who was worthy to open the scroll?

How was He described?

Why was He worthy?

What was the “new song” that was sung?

What was the attitude of those surrounding the throne toward this new character?

## Food for thought:

The key word for today is “sovereignty.” The dictionary defines the word “sovereign” as “a person exercising supreme authority, esp. a monarch”, and “sovereignty” as “supreme and unrestricted power.” When reading Revelation, we must keep in mind that this is a letter, written to the seven churches in Asia Minor. The churches at this time were experiencing extreme persecution. To be a Christian was to choose between safety and truth. Many believers were turning away from the faith, or selling out to the worship of the emperor in order to save their lives and property. Those who desired to cling to the gospel of Jesus were confused and appalled by the sell-outs. They were afraid, and, as they watched their property be taken away and their loved ones mercilessly tortured and killed they undoubtedly asked the question, “Where is God in all this?”

John’s answer to that question is found in chapter 4-5. God is where He always is. He is seated on the throne of the universe and is in control of everything. Let’s look at the imagery of the throne for a moment. (Please note that the following interpretation is very abbreviated and that many scholars throughout the centuries have debated the meaning of these images. I am just a mere mortal, giving it my best shot.) In front of the throne are four “living creatures”. As we discovered in Ezekiel’s vision, the imagery of these cherubim were common in the Persian religion that had so heavily influenced the Jews’ view of God. These creatures represent all life on Earth, and in the Persian tradition, were the guardians of the Temple of God. The twenty four elders represent the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles, demonstrating that the rulers of God’s people are present, both prior to Jesus and following Jesus. The glass sea represents

the multitudes of people in the earth.

There are three major points to focus on from this passage:

1. God is over everything, so don't worry.
2. Everything exists for the purpose of giving glory to God.
3. Jesus, the lion who became the lamb who was slain, is on the throne and is "opening God's scroll," making all things right in the world.

Rather than enter into a lengthy explanation of all three points, I challenge you to meditate on them as they stand. Read them over in your mind a few times. Do you really believe them? In what ways does your lifestyle demonstrate that you believe them? How would your perspective on things change if you truly believed these statements with every fiber of your being?

The bottom line for John's churches was this: No matter how bad things get, God is in control and justice will be served, so don't worry, just stay focused.

## Friday: The Point of it All

Today marks a wonderful day. Twelve months ago you probably never dreamed you would make it, and yet, here you stand, having read the entire Bible! This is the last day of the Devotional. There could not be a better subject to end on that that found in Revelation 21-22. Today we look at the point of the whole thing.

In order to prepare for reading this passage, it would be helpful to take a few moments and read these passages first.

Read Ezekiel 37:23-28

Ezekiel 47:6-12

Zechariah 2:10-13

John 1:14

Now read Revelation 21:1-22:5

What similarities do you see between this passage and the Old Testament prophecies?

How is the New Jerusalem described? If you could sum it up in one phrase, what is the point of the images used to describe the New Jerusalem?

## Food for thought:

Much debate exists about the interpretation of the images found in our passage today. Some people believe that these images should be read literally. They believe that there will actually be a 1500 mile tall city erected over the Mediterranean Sea. Others believe that these images are completely metaphorical and do not pertain at all to any specific, literal place in the future, but represent the pure nature of God Himself at work in His people. Others take a middle ground and admit to the metaphorical nature of the language in this passage, so do not hold to a literal description of a place, but do hold to a metaphorical description of a yet unrealized future state of existence.

There are not enough pages in this devotional to adequately discuss and debate all these differing views. I challenge you to study them on your own. Regardless of your perspective on this passage, there are some incredibly encouraging observations that can be made about the Kingdom of God.

God is in love with His Kingdom like a groom loves his bride.

God's Kingdom is one where the subjects of the Kingdom interact with the King.

There are no tears, death, mourning, crying, or pain in God's Kingdom.

There is unity in the Kingdom of God (it's gates are the tribes of Israel, its foundation is the apostles: Jews and Gentiles living together)

The Kingdom of God is the perfection of God's

presence. (Notice how the measurements are that of a cube. The Holy of Holies in the tabernacle was a cube. This is the representation of the perfection of God. Being in the Kingdom of God is being in the “Holy of Holies”)

There is no war in the Kingdom. (The gates never shut)

The Kingdom of God is pure truth.

The river of Life runs through the center of the city, its inhabitants will live forever.

## The Big Finish

Read Genesis 3:21-24. What was the consequence of sin?

Read Revelation 22:1-5. What is freely accessible in the Kingdom of God?

Here is the HOPE that you have. Jesus is the King, the Lion that became the Lamb. He came so that we may have life abundantly and may enter the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is an already, but not yet kind of thing. We have access to the tree of Life right now. In Jesus Christ the fullness of the Kingdom has been realized and is present within us through the Holy Spirit. We don't have to pine away our time until we die to experience the Kingdom. It is alive within us right now. Yet, we also know that its fullness has not yet been realized. We have only begun to plunge the depths of what it means to be in the Kingdom of God, the presence of the Almighty.

My prayer is that you, having completed the reading of the entire Bible will remember these few, simple truths:

*God loves you more than you can ever imagine.*

*God is in control of all things, at all times, even when things seem desperate.*

*Through Jesus Christ you have access to the riches of the Kingdom of God.*

*Your life has been given to you for the purpose of bringing honor and glory to your Heavenly Father.*

*Through the power of the Holy Spirit you can live a life of meaning and power.*

*If you will die each day to yourself and be filled with the presence and the glory of God, then you will overflow in love and purpose to the world around you.*