

A Letter to God's People

Jude 1:1

There isn't an exact science to picking a book for a sermon series, and I admit that I don't have any grand overview or plan as we transition from book to book. As several of you asked me last week upon our completion of Nehemiah, you know that I didn't actually decide to preach on Jude until just this past week.

I would identify at least two very broad principles that I employ in making those kinds of decisions. First, as best I can discern, what subject or context is best or most helpful for the church? Are there particular needs, particular issues or concerns? Does the context of the church fit well the context of a particular book of the Bible? And second, again rather broadly, I am committed to preaching the whole counsel of God; the whole Bible. And to do so with some sense of balance and order.

So typically I alternate between Old and New Testaments. Even further, I typically alternate between types of books – for instance gospels and epistles, or history and prophecy and poetry. So having spent some time now in the history of the Old Testament, I decided to choose a New Testament book. And continuing to spend extensive time in the book of Acts in the morning in a sermon series that may last several years in length, I thought about a shorter book for these summer months and I focused upon Jude.

Yet with all those distinctions, the subject matter is very similar to that which we have just completed in Ezra/Nehemiah, for the subject is the church, building the church. Very different contexts, but the same message, a message focused upon the priority of the church in the lives of God's people. For Ezra and Nehemiah, building the church meant building a wall, building a city, building

a temple. And we saw often how those external realities apply to the church today. For Jude, building the church means “to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” But the subject really is the same. And we continue to study how God would build his church.

God does build his church, and he continues to build his church. Certainly in our own experience, in the ebb and flow of the life of the church from year to year, still what remains constant is that God is at work. And building the church isn't about adding numbers. The work of building the church continues to be the very same thing as what Jude identifies, so before we look rather closely this afternoon at verse 1, let me give you,

I. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF JUDE.

A very brief overview. Beginning with, v.3 “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”

That's how the church is built, when God's people “contend for the faith.” And it was necessary when Jude wrote because of false teachers who had “crept in unnoticed”, verse 4, “ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.” So the gist of this book is a warning about,

A. The danger of false teachers in the church.

Then Jude clearly exposes and describes,

B. The wickedness of false teachers.

Verses 5-16.

Because of their wickedness, they will be judged, and we will look at all of that in the weeks to come. The presence of such wickedness then gives Jude opportunity for,

C. An exhortation to persevere in the faith.

He addressed the saints directly,
v.17-21

Then, finally, there is a blessing, a benediction. And it comes in this context of the danger Jude identifies. You see, in the context of opposition to the gospel, in the context of ungodly men seeking to influence the church for evil, in the context of all the dangers we face in this world throughout this age, there is,

D. The blessing of God's preservation.

v.24-25

So with that context, let's go back to,
v.1

Two things are noted, as you would expect in a letter, the author and the recipients. This afternoon, we'll look more briefly at the author and then more thoroughly at the recipients.

II. THE AUTHOR OF JUDE.

The Greek form of the name is Judas, but of course this is not the disciple who betrayed Jesus and then, wracked by guilt, took his own life. In English we know him simply as Jude, and though the date of the letter is not identified, we can guess it to be later in the formation of the NT canon, probably in the early 60s A.D.

So who is he? He tells us two things in verse 1, he is "a bondservant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James." The Greek word for "bond-servant" is appropriately translated. Or to translate it even more simply, "slave." Jude is,

A. A bondservant of Jesus.

Paul also uses that same description. And Peter, James, and John, in the books of the Bible which they wrote. There is, then, an obvious interest in identifying apostolic authority, and the apostles do so by calling themselves "bond-servants."

So this title isn't merely an expression of humility, but one of great authority. An authority that is delegated, commissioned to them as apostles. It is not their authority, it is not their glory nor their status that is important. Rather, it is their position as those who were sent by Jesus. That's the meaning of the word apostle. And they all understand that perfectly well. Jude is a bond-servant of Jesus Christ! Thus this short book is the product of his apostolic authority to speak for his master. And when an apostle speaks, Jesus speaks! When the bond-servant of Jesus writes a letter to be included in the books of the Bible, then we receive that book just as if Jesus himself wrote it. Jude, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ.

Then a personal identification. Jude is,

B. A brother of James.

Before I comment at all on that relationship, let me read, Mat.13:53 "Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these parables, that He departed from there. 54 When He had come to His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, "Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? 55 Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? 56 And His sisters, are they not all with us?"

So who is this James? Though there are several men identified by that name, the overall context in Scripture and our

understanding of history is that James and Jude were brothers, sons of Mary, thus brothers also with Jesus. And by the time the letter of Jude was written, James was an elder/bishop in the church in Jerusalem, clearly one of the important leaders of the early church.

Consider what Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia in his own self-defense regarding his calling and qualifications to be an apostle.

Gal. 1:18 “Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. 19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord’s brother.”

So Jude is a brother of Jesus, identifying himself with all humility by mentioned their other brother, James. The point is clearly made, that this book bear direct, immediate apostolic authority, not only through priority and leadership of James within the early church, but even more so through Jesus himself.

But given his apostolic identify and authority, the more important question becomes, “What does he have to say?” The starting point to expound upon the answer to that question is by noting,

III. THE RECIPIENTS OF JUDE.

There is much to be learned and gained from understanding the audience identified by the author. And Jude’s introductory greeting, identifying his readers, is full of doctrine and theology that is beneficial and profitable for us to this day.

We don’t know exactly to whom Jude was writing, for he leaves his words in very general terms. But because of that, there is a much more clear and direct application for us. This is a real letter to real people, but we can read it in very general terms

as a letter to all of God’s people. And in that context, it is a letter to us, to you and to me.

And...it is a letter that will help you understand who you are before God. It is a letter which describes and defines the identity of God’s people. And as we look at this verse all the more closely, please take note of that description of your identity, if you are a Christian. Look at how Jude identifies us as believers, for there is a great encouragement to be found. If you are struggling with an assurance or confidence in your faith, if you are struggling with temptation, if you are struggling with an uncertainty of God’s love for you or with an uncertainty of your standing before God, if you are are unsure or what might lie ahead after death, any and all of those issues really are settled right here!

And Jude begins with election. Predestination. The sovereign will of God’s own choice of those whom he will save. Sadly, too often this is a subject that engenders debate and causes divisions among God’s people, and that is not how it is presented in Scripture. Election is presented to us in the Bible as a comfort, as an encouragement, as a matter of our confidence and certainty before God. And, therefore, as a matter of praise and worship.

So to whom does Jude address his epistle? To,

A. The elect.

v.1 “To those who are called...”

Interesting, isn’t it, that most of the time Christians in our age and our culture speak about what they did to become a Christian. When we ask people for a testimony of their faith in Christ, they generally speak about something they did, a decision they made, an experience they had. And so the plan of salvation is generally understood to refer to the things that we do to be saved.

Billy Graham's popular book reflects that tendency, with the title "How to be Born Again." For some, perhaps, that experience of becoming a Christ is defined by the words of a prayer. Pray this prayer. For some, it is repentance, confess this sin. For some, the emphasis is commitment, a decision. And all those things are true. But they don't get to the root of the issue. And actually, being "born again" is not something that you do at all. It is something that God does.

And so the very root of your salvation is something that God does. "To those who are called." It is a simple Greek word, and a simple English word. But one with deep significance, because the idea of "calling" is not simply an invitation. It is not simply a request or a desire, but rather it is an effective, or effectual, initiation. God's calling of us is what is explained in our Confession and Catechisms as "effectual calling." It is a work of God. In the words of our Shorter Catechism, "Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel."

God convinces us of our sins, he enlightens our mind, he renews our wills. And then, only then, do we embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. God does the calling, and that is never more clearly explained than in the language of the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel.

Ezek. 36:24 "For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. 25 Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in

My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. 28 Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God."

Let me put that in the simple words of Jesus,
John 6:44 "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day."

Similarly, John 6:63 "63 It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life. 64 But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him. 65 And He said, "Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father."

So the translation, "to those who are called," could be simplified, "to the called..." Or, "To the elect." To those who have been chosen. Let me read to you several other passages in order to demonstrate just how central an idea this is, the identification of God's people as "the called."

2 Tim. 1:8 "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, 9 who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began."

Eph. 4:1 "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called."

2 Peter 1:10 "Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble."

Rom. 8:28 “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. 29 For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. 30 Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.”

And then, in words of doxological praise and worshipful adoration,

Eph. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence.”

God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. And what does that mean? It means that he chose to love us. That’s what predestination is. It is God’s sovereign choice to love us, before we didn’t anything good or bad, before we were even created. That’s God’s purpose of election. And it is all to the praise of his glorious grace.

That is your identity and your security. That is what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be born again. It all goes back to the choice of God, to the calling of God. So Jude writes to Christians. He writes to the church of Jesus Christ. He writes “to those who are called.” And he writes to,

B. The beloved.

I hope you have already seen this connection. If the question is “why,” “why does God call people to himself?”, then the answer is, “Because of his love.”

Again,

Eph. 1:4 “In love 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.”

1 John 4:9 “In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

1 John 3:1 “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!”

The root of our salvation is the love of God, and the deepest description of our identity as Christians are these words of Jude to his recipients in the very first verse, translated in the ESV, “beloved in God the Father.” If you have a King James or New King James translated, the English word is “sanctified” instead of “beloved,” a result of different Greek texts that have been studied over the years. I simply believe that the correct word in the Greek, as it was originally given, is “beloved,” and that is the word most English translations use. Jude writes “to those who are called, beloved in God the Father.”

Jude uses that word four times in this short epistle, here in verse 1, then again in verses 3, 17 and 20.

v.3 “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation...”

v.17 “But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ”

v.20 “But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, 21 keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.”

I often use that word as well when I preach, addressing you by that title, “beloved.” I am simply imitating the language of the Bible. For that is who you are, as Christians. You are the beloved. You are the object of God’s love. It is a love which he chose to give to you, not on that you earned! Thus, it is not a love which you can lose, because you didn’t deserve it in the first place!

That’s what grace is all about. That God would chose you to be his beloved children.

So how should you respond? I hope that you are speechless, except for words of praise!

Eph. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.”

And I hope that you are moved to love God all the more, knowing that he has first loved you!

1 John 4:19 “We love because he first loved us.”

My outline for this sermon includes all of verse 1, focusing upon the recipients of this letter, but as I did last week in Acts, we will wait until next week for the final description of the recipients of this letter at the end of verse 1, the preserved. So letter C. on my outline will have to wait until next week because the idea of our

preservation is one that I want to spend a good amount of time studying. But even more than that, I want you to keep in your mind today, and through the rest of this week, this focus upon the calling of God and the love of God.

It is a life-changing awareness. God has chosen you. God has loved you. And everything in your Christian life and faith flows out of those two fundamental ideas.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.”

And, “We love him because he first loved us.”