

## **A Common Faith**

### **Jude 3**

Sometimes a letter just has to be written. The situation is a crisis, the need is overwhelming, the danger is imminent. A warning is needed, even a stern rebuke. I have written some of those letters in my own life, and they are always a very, very great burden. Jude writes this letter in just such a situation.

It would seem that he had originally intended to write a peaceful, friendly letter, as we might write to those whom we count as friends. As the NKJV translates our verse, “I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation,” the Greek verb “to write” is in the form of a present infinitive, which seems to imply something of a leisurely style or context. A friendly letter. With diligence, even an eagerness to write, as the ESV translates it, no doubt because of the enjoyable context. There was no urgency or crisis at hand, but just an ongoing exchange of letters among friends. Perhaps, there was even a previous letter that had been begun, perhaps even an earlier letter sent by Jude that remained merely a personal letter and not one inspired by the Spirit of God to be included in the Bible.

But something changed. Jude became aware of some particular danger in the church, and the letter took on a great sense of urgency. That urgency is reflected in the Greek verb translated, “I found it necessary to write...” No longer was the pleasantness of an enjoyable fellowship at the root of the letter. Now it was necessary! Now he had to snatch up his pen and write under a very real sense of duty and obligation. No longer is the writing of this letter a lingering, enjoyable opportunity for warm fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ; now it is the unwelcome task of an urgent and necessary duty springing from his convictions and from his responsibility to protect the church

from dangerous error and heresy.

We know what the occasion was; just peak ahead one verse. It is the danger of antinomianism, the spirit of anti-law, anti-Christian morality. It is the danger of licentiousness; the danger of those who pervert the grace of God, making that grace an excuse to sin, an excuse to indulge in sensuality. The grace of God is perverted to become a rational explanation for sin!

v.4 “For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We’ll get to that verse in detail next week. But today, verse 3, and I want to begin with the idea of what Jude calls “our common salvation.” Or,

### **I. A COMMON FAITH.**

Those expressions seem almost interchangeable, “our common salvation” and “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” We’ll look specifically at the experience of salvation in a minutes, but at the outset I want to consider those things as essentially the same. Thus Jude identifies “a common faith.” What do those words mean?

“Faith” can mean many things in the Bible, and it often refers to the trust and commitment of your heart. Your “faith”, as in, your belief in the truth of God as it is revealed in the Bible. By faith, you believe the Bible to be true. By faith, you are saved. By grace through faith, you are justified, faith being the means by which God grants to you the forgiveness of your sins and the gift of eternal life. By the exercise of your faith, by the choice and will to believe and to trust. Faith, then, is what you do.

But faith also has an objective sense. And especially when used in English with the article “the,” it refers to the content of what you believe, “the faith.” It is the body of belief, those things that you believe. And Jude calls that faith “common.” Specifically, “Our common salvation.”

Again, careful definitions are very helpful. Because “common” often means ordinary, or secular. Common is often contrasted with “holy” or “sacred.” The precise word then is “profane,” again by contrast with that which is set apart for the worship of God as holy. Common can mean profane.

But that’s not what it means here, for here the root word in Greek is usually translated “fellowship.” The idea is of that which we hold in common, that which we share together. So our common faith is the faith that is uniform and consistent among all true Christians, the faith that we share with other Christians. And that is a particularly important idea to proclaim and to grasp today.

#### **A. Christian faith has a uniform definition.**

“The faith” is not subjectively defined, each person deciding for himself what to believe, determining for himself what is true and what isn’t true. “The faith” does not refer to one thing for me and something else for you! “The common faith” means that there is an objectively defined identity, a uniform definition.

Sadly, too often the division of Christians on matters of secondary importance seems to be the dominant description of the followers of Christ. So we are identified by denominational labels, or theological labels, or doctrinal distinctives. And there is a place to be careful and articulate about what you believe, and there can be edifying interaction among Christians about things upon which we disagree, but at its root, the Christian faith is uniform. The Christian faith is one.

That’s the value of our creeds, isn’t it? And our catechism. There is a definition to what we believe.

Sadly, again, today all too often the reaction against denominational divisions is the movement toward eliminating any priority of doctrine; or even eliminating it altogether—eliminating any uniform definition and replacing that with the call of authenticity. Typically, we identify many modern churches in that context, a church rightly seeking authentic Christian experience, but doing so without any commitment to a common faith or a uniform definition of Christianity is all about. That push is everywhere today, the push toward what is practical, what is pragmatic, what is popular, what is stimulating while not bearing any authority. And in the postmodern world of autonomous thinking, not only can everyone do what seems right in their own eyes, but everyone can think and believe whatever seems right in their own eyes.

So we have to emphasize this reality today, just as Jude did in his day. Christian faith has a uniform definition. We have a common faith. And the definition of that faith was “delivered” to us. We are the recipients of that common faith, not the author of it! In other words, you and I cannot decide for ourselves what that faith is all about. We can’t define that faith according to our own desires and interests. We receive it, we receive and accept what God delivered to us. In other words,

#### **B. Christian faith has an objective definition.**

This is really a huge point, and hugely important. You and I are not autonomous. We do not bear the right to decide what is true for ourselves what to believe. We don’t determine for ourselves what is true or false, what is right or wrong. God decides. God has already decided. God himself has already defined the faith. And through the written word of God, by the

inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he delivered that faith to us.  
Objectively, not subjectively.

We live in such a subjective world. So let me challenge you to think about your own words, especially the difference between “I feel...” and “I believe...” You will likely catch yourself often saying “I feel” when “I believe” is much appropriate. For me, when I am preaching or teaching, what “I feel” should actually be quite irrelevant to you. You don’t need to know what I feel about certain doctrines or certain propositions. Thus, what I proclaim to you is not what I feel is true. What I preach is what I believe to be true! I am to preach the common faith which has been delivered to us.

So I don’t merely “feel” that the Bible is true, and certainly, it doesn’t become true because of my subjective feelings. Rather, I firmly believe it to be true, because God has delivered it to us himself. And that’s the key word, “delivered.” The faith was delivered to us.

Let me get even a bit more specific. The word “delivered” means to be handed over, or handed down. It has the idea of committing something to the care of others, entrusting. The word was used for handing down authorized tradition, such as,

1 Cor. 15:3 “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.”

Similarly,

Gal. 1:11 “But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. 12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Or in the establishment of the Lord’s Supper, we read,

1 Cor. 11:23 “For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread...”

The point is made consistently. The faith, the content of the faith, is something that is delivered to us. The truth which God has revealed is entrusted to us. The faith, the common faith which is the same for all true Christians, is a system of doctrines or beliefs that has been transmitted to us by God. And that was done, we read, “once for all.”

v.3 “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.”

So it is that,

### **C. Christian faith has an unchanging definition.**

Beloved, we don’t need novelty. We don’t need new and improved. We don’t need a new perspective. Instead, we need “to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” Once for all.

One of the things that is prominent in our educational system today is the pursuit of novelty. Something new. Every doctoral student, every Ph.D candidate, needs to write a thesis on a subject that is new. And that spirit of novelty often infects university professors in every context, in the name of academic freedom. The rallying call in higher education is that freedom, the freedom to teach with an absolute sense of freedom. Any restriction upon that freedom is called censorship, as if there were no middle ground. And often that spirit infects the church as well. So Christians become tempted to give our attraction to that which

is new in its presentation. We get bored with that which is the same. “I’ve heard that all my life.” We get turned off by the consistency of teaching that doesn’t change. Familiarity breeds contempt. Boredom takes over. And we lose this sense of the glory of the unchanging definition of the Christian faith.

But beloved, the faith, the Christian faith, the definition of what you are to believe as true, does not change! Because God does not change. Jesus does not change. Truth does not change. Surely, it is good and wise to be contemporary in expression, in explanation. Surely it is good to be fresh and vital, authentic and genuine, but the substance of this faith we profess is uniform, objective and unchanging.

Then comes Jude’s main point. The necessity, even the emergency of his appeal.

v.3 “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.”

Let’s look at what those words mean,

## **II. CONTENDING FOR THE FAITH.**

That is an athletic word in the Greek, a description of an athlete exercising great effort and exertion in the pursuit of victory. The focus is upon the object of that effort, the goal for which you are struggling. The Greeks were well known for wrestling, and perhaps a wrestling match is the best image you could have to understand this word. So intense a battle, so demanding, and so personal. Such an obvious struggle that requires all of your attention, all of your strength, all of your wisdom and skill.

Beloved, that is our calling as Christians! You and I are to contend for the faith! And I would suggest that includes both

doctrine and practice, both what you believe and how you live. And you need to contend for that faith because it takes a great deal of work. We have an enemy, Satan, who is clever, full of schemes. We have our own flesh, which provides temptation from within our own hearts. And we have the appeal and attraction of the world bombarding us with the call to reject the faith, to rebel against that which is sure and true.

So please be conscious of those temptations. Again, the personal, evil temptations of the Devil himself, tempting you when you are the most vulnerable, the most susceptible, the weakest. He tries to undermine your faith, often just a little bit at a time. He catches you off guard, he appeals to you at your weakest point, attracting you in the very way that you find most attractive. And, of course, that doesn’t leave you guiltless or innocent. You still have what the Bible calls the flesh. And I don’t mean by that “flesh and blood,” as in your physical body. But rather, the flesh refers to your old man, the remnants of your fallen nature that now, as a Christian, wage war with your soul.

Rom. 7:18 “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. 19 For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. 20 Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. 21 I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. 22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. 23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.”

I can’t read that passage without completing it, though. Paul continues,

Rom. 7:24 “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 I thank God—through Jesus Christ

our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.”

So Paul knows what it means to be delivered from the flesh. He is not a slave, powerless and unable to resist the desires of his flesh. But he understands the nature of the war.

In one form or another, that war rages in the heart and soul of every believer. It rages in your heart and soul. It may be an intellectual battle, a battle in the mind, in which your mind is not fully in submission to the revelation of God through his word. It may be a moral battle, a battle with the outward practices of sin, in which you disobey God’s commandments. It may be both. And so Jude is compelled to write this very personal and pointed letter to God’s people, to those who are called, those who are beloved in God, he writes them with an urgency regarding,

#### **A. The effort and duty of contending.**

It’s a war! So get fighting. It’s an athletic contest, so start wrestling. And with Jude, “I find it necessary to [preach] appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” That is your responsibility. That is your duty.

Perhaps you need to analyze and evaluate yourself in that regard, and perhaps you need this encouragement rather personally! Too often the battles are ignored, the spiritual battles of life. Too often the mind is not being transformed by the word of God. Too often Christians can take the faith for granted, they can allow the seeds to doubt grow and develop. Or you can simply find yourself bored by the whole thing, considering the faith as something somewhat irrelevant, something unrelated to the more practical and important matters of life. And you can be lazy. That’s the context for this letter of Jude.

v.4

Let me go back, then, to that expression in verse 3, “our common salvation.” As I said, I find that to be a parallel expression for “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” But “our common salvation” does emphasize the personal experience of the one who has faith. This faith we profess, this Christian faith, is not merely an intellectual doctrine. This “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” is not merely a philosophy of life. It is not simply a code of conduct. It is not something that merely resides in the head or in the mind, nor is it something that we simply use to win a debate. This faith is actually an experience. It is,

#### **B. The experience of salvation.**

Again, Jude calls the faith “our common salvation.” It is often an overused word, “salvation,” but we still need to preserve it. And use the word well. Your salvation has reference to your relationship with God. Your reconciliation with God. Your peace with God.

That relationship is to be one of great joy and strength, Consider Romans 5, and let me read a passage that is often used in theological and doctrinal discussions about the faith. The passage is rightly used in that context, for there is much here that has to do with the objective content of “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” But this afternoon I want to read this in the context of the benefits of your relationship with God, the benefits of the experience of your salvation.

Rom. 5:1 “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”

So Paul moves from the doctrine of justification to the experience of peace! And then, immediately, from peace to joy! So that's the doctrine of justification, the experience of peace and then joy before God! And Paul has more to say about that joy.

Rom. 5:3 "And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

So joy, even in sufferings. And then hope. That is the experience of salvation, our common salvation. And every one of you understands the need for that, for every one of you knows something of suffering. And every one of you knows something about the need for hope!

And what is our hope? Reconciliation! That's the experience of salvation, reconciliation with God. And as I preached last Sunday, the basis of that hope of reconciliation is nothing other than the love of God.

Rom. 5:6 "For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. 10 For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. 11 And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation."

So reconciliation goes right back to joy! Beloved, that's the experience of salvation. That is our common salvation, our

common faith, the faith once for all delivered to the saints! "We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

That's the faith for which we to contend. That's why we contend for good doctrine, because it is our doctrine that provides the foundation for this right understanding of reconciliation with God, peace with God. And only then can their be joy.

Later in Romans, Paul writes,

Rom. 14:17 "...for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men."

That's our common faith, our common salvation, the faith for which we must contend. This is what the faith is all about, "Righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

One more thought as we close this afternoon. Notice the simple phrase at the end of verse 3, "to the saints." This common faith, this true faith and right experience of salvation has been delivered "to the saints." Plural. As a group. In other words, to the church.

This common salvation is not merely a personal experience. It is not merely a private matter. It is corporate. This common salvation is common among us as Christians, we share it together, and we are intended to live out the experience of that common salvation together. For as a body, as the church, together, we have this heritage, this "faith that was once for all delivered to the saints." In other words, this faith has been delivered to us. And that is,

### **C. The heritage of the church.**

1 Tim. 3:14 “These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; 15 but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”

The church is the “pillar and ground of the truth.” The church is the recipient of this common salvation, the saints joined together have received this “faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” We have it. It is ours. God put it in writing. What a glorious, glorious heritage that is!

So it is not an individual battle. When you contend for the faith, you are part of an army, part of a body. If you wish to contend for the faith, then do so as part of the church. Let us contend for the faith, together. And that certainly begins with my preaching.

So you aren’t going to hear anything new from me when I preach. Fresh, I hope and trust. Vital, alive and earnest! Yes, to be sure. And those are things I strive for. With contemporary application and an awareness of life today. But no new doctrine. No academic freedom to test out the newest formulations of doctrine. No novelty, whose real main purpose is to make myself look smart or wise, or to attract new people. No new perspective on the faith once for all delivered to the church.

Rather, I will preach that faith that had has revealed in Jesus, the faith by which we can be saved. The faith by which we can have life, and in that life, peace with God. And, therefore, joy. May you gain those things, dear friends, as you contend for that faith with me.

Rom. 5:1 “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”