

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

Peter, John and Jude

60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

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Introduction: The Gospel Triumphs in the End

I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people.

(Jude 3)

In June 2015, *The Spectator* magazine ran a feature on the haemorrhaging of the Church across the Western world. Taking the UK as a primary example, it observed that

It's often said that Britain's church congregations are shrinking, but that doesn't come close to expressing the scale of the disaster now facing Christianity in this country. Every ten years the census spells out the situation in detail: between 2001 and 2011 the number of Christians in Britain fell by 5.3 million – about 10,000 a week. If that rate of decline continues, the mission of St Augustine to the English, together with that of the Irish saints to the Scots, will come to an end in 2067. That is the year in which the Christians who have inherited the faith of their British ancestors will become statistically invisible... [They are] one generation away from extinction.¹

Shifting its gaze further afield, the article notes that the American Church is on a similar trajectory of decline too.

¹ Published on 13th June 2015, this article was entitled “2067: The End of British Christianity”.

Christianity is in tatters right across the Western world and the article concludes that the Church's day in the developed world may well be done. *The Spectator* is by no means a Christian publication, and yet it urges people to wake up to two forces at work behind the catastrophic failure of Western Christianity. The first is external: an aggressive secularism which hates the Church and is determined to eradicate its historic creed. The second is internal: weak church leaders who are far too willing to dilute the Christian message in order to cling onto their places of influence in an increasingly secular world. *"They're led by middle-managers who are frightened of their own shadows. They run up the white flag long before the enemy comes down from the hills,"* the article concludes. *"It can't be stressed too often that the secularisation that happens inside churches is as important as the sort that happens outside them."*

If there is any truth in this article – and, let's face it, the Church is haemorrhaging across the Western world – then it means we are in desperate need of the six letters written by Peter, John and Jude.² Almost all the New Testament letters to the first generation of Christians were written by Paul.³ He was a tentmaker and he knew how the first generation of believers ought to construct the Church on strong foundations in its early days. By way of contrast, almost all of the New Testament letters to the second generation of Christians were written by Peter, John and Jude.⁴ Peter and John were fishermen who knew how to mend nets broken through long periods of fishing. Jude was the son of a carpenter and knew how to fix a wobbly table leg before the whole table fell over. God used these three men to

² John technically wrote four letters, not three, if we include Revelation. John tells us that he merely acted as scribe to Jesus in that fourth letter, so I have given it a separate volume in this commentary series.

³ The only exception is James, written in c.48 AD. Paul wrote his last letter to a church in 61 AD. Thereafter he only wrote to train up Titus and Timothy as leaders for the second generation.

⁴ The only exception is the anonymous letter to the Hebrews, written in c.68 AD.

mend the broken Church at a moment when everybody expected it to roll over and die.

Peter, John and Jude may sound a bit like a teenage boy band, but they were a trio of old men who had learned the hard way how to follow Jesus throughout life's ups and downs. God used their personal frailties and failures to teach the second generation of believers how the Gospel triumphs in the end if we remain faithful to his Word.

Peter had been a coward. He talked big but he had run away from danger and denied knowing Jesus on the eve of his crucifixion. When hostility against the Christians began to intensify, he was therefore the perfect man to write **1 Peter** to assure the persecuted believers that they had a **Living Hope** which no amount of suffering could extinguish.

Peter's lessons in cowardice and restoration also made him the perfect man to write **2 Peter** from death row in 65 AD to combat false teachers, who were offering a way to make life easier by accommodating the Gospel to Greek thinking and Greek morals. Peter reminded them that their **Precious Faith** was not theirs to change. The Gospel would triumph over their enemies and their false friends, but only if they refused to exchange the crown jewels of the Gospel for the bric-a-brac imitations of the world.

Jude was one of Peter's teammates. While Peter wrote to the Gentile believers across the world, it appears that Jude wrote a similar message to the Jewish Christians. Since he was the son of Mary and Joseph, who had once mocked the idea of believing that his older half-brother was the Messiah, he was the perfect man to write **Jude** and to urge them to hold on to their **Holy Faith**.⁵ They of all people needed to remain faithful to the hope of Israel as it had come to them in Jesus.

By the time John wrote his three letters, between 85 and 93 AD, he was the final survivor of the twelve disciples.

⁵ Mark 3:21; 6:3; John 7:3-5.

He was therefore the perfect man to write **1 John** and to help the believers keep hold of the **True Knowledge** that God had given them. Even though the Roman persecution was now so systematic and so violent that many of them were dying, and even though the false teachers at work within the Church were becoming more and more determined, if they held onto the truth as they had received it from Jesus then the Gospel would triumph in the end.

He was also the perfect man to write **2 John** and **3 John** to explain what **True Love** meant for the Church. It meant opening wide the door to godly teachers and it meant slamming the door hard on false teachers – even on those who were friends. John is the last writer of the New Testament, so he assures them that, if they hold on to the truth, the Gospel will triumph in the end.

In today's world, where Christian believers are facing increased levels of persecution, we need to understand why Peter calls the Gospel the "*living hope*" that overcomes. In today's world, where false teaching is often accepted and encouraged, we need to understand why Jude "*felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people*". In today's world, where the commentators seem to agree that the Church will soon succumb to its enemies, we need to understand what made John so sure that the Church would "*overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world*".⁶

These letters could not be more relevant to our generation. Their message could not be more urgent. So let's study them together. Let's allow them to teach us how the Church can survive and thrive in our own day. Faced with enemies on the outside and false friends on the inside, let's not panic. Let's discover how the Gospel triumphs in the end.

⁶ 1 Peter 1:3; 1 John 4:4; Jude 3.

God's Doorman (1:1)

*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect,
exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus,
Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.*

(1 Peter 1:1)

The Jewish leaders were very good at slamming doors. In 30 AD, they forced the Roman governor in Jerusalem to drag Jesus out of the city gates and to crucify him outside the city walls. We need to hear the Jewish leaders slamming the door on Jesus if we want to understand Peter's ministry and his letters. God had appointed Peter to be his doorman.

There's a reason Peter is normally pictured holding a bunch of keys in religious iconography. Jesus had singled him out in Matthew 16:16–19, promising to use his confession that “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*” as the solid ground on which to build his Church and as the key with which to open locked doors to the Gospel:

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Seven weeks after the Jewish leaders slammed the door on Jesus, Peter stood up on the Day of Pentecost and pleaded with the crowds to *“Save yourselves from this corrupt nation.”* Although most English translations of Acts 2:40 take the Greek word *genea* to mean *generation*, it is often used in the New Testament to refer to the Jewish nation.¹ Peter was deliberately opening a door for Jews to identify with the true Israel of God. That’s why he commanded his 3,000 Jewish converts to be baptized in water, a ceremony reserved for Gentile converts to Judaism, as a confession that their Jewish birth had no power to save them. He urged them to confess that their only hope lay in the death and resurrection of the Jewish Messiah.²

Three years later, the Jewish leaders slammed the door on Jesus yet again. They stoned Stephen to death and launched such a violent wave of persecution against the Church that the believers were forced to flee Jerusalem. While at the port of Joppa, Peter received a vision from God that convinced him it was time to open the door of salvation to the Gentiles. He confessed freely to a group of Romans in Acts 10–11 that *“It is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile”* but that God had instructed him to preach the Gospel to them all the same. He later told his horrified Jewish friends that *“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.”* Peter’s preaching opened the door on the Day of Pentecost for the pagans, proving that *“God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”*

This was too much for the Jewish leaders. It made them hate the Christian message even more. In 57 AD, they slammed the door on Jesus for a third time. Acts 21:30 tells us that *“seizing*

¹ The word *genea* must mean the Jewish *nation* in Matthew 11:16, Mark 13:30, and Luke 17:25 and 21:32.

² Peter became an “apostle to the Jews” by opening this door (Galatians 2:8). Paul and John explain more about “true Jews” and “false Jews” in Romans 9:6–9, Galatians 3:16–29 and Revelation 2:9 and 3:9.

Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut.” Peter’s ministry had already changed significantly from the days when Paul was able to describe him as “an apostle to the Jews”. But now we can tell from the opening verses of his first letter that this slammed door made him open the door of salvation even wider to the people of the non-Jewish world.³

First, Peter introduces himself as “*an apostle of Jesus Christ*”.⁴ This does not mean that he has now disowned his role as “an apostle to the Jews”. He still opened the door of salvation to any who would listen. It simply means that he has also become far more than this. He has learned to be God’s doorman for the Gentiles too.

Second, Peter does not address his letter to a group of Jews. He writes it to Gentile believers in the five Roman provinces in the north of Asia Minor (the first-century name for modern-day Turkey). Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia had smaller Jewish populations than the two southern provinces of Lycia and Cilicia, and Peter makes it clear that his readers used to live in pagan ignorance, pagan immorality and a thoroughly pagan lifestyle. Nevertheless, he assures them that they are now the children of Abraham and Sarah: “*Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.*”⁵ Make sure you don’t miss this. It is massive. Peter is telling us that, despite the Jewish rejection of the Gospel, it was still marching on.

Third, Peter uses three Greek words that include these Gentile believers in the Jewish story. The word *eklektos* means *chosen* or *elect*. Peter says that God has chosen these Gentiles in

³ Although Paul described Peter this way in 49 AD in Galatians 2:8, he tells us only six years later in 1 Corinthians 1:12 and 9:5 that Peter soon began to open the door of salvation to the Gentiles too.

⁴ None of the leaders of the early Church ever disputed Peter’s authorship of 1 Peter. It takes 2,000 years of distance to do that. It was quoted as early as 95 AD, in 1 Clement.

⁵ For some clear examples, see 1 Peter 1:14, 1:18, 2:9–12, 3:6 and 4:3. Nevertheless, Peter describes these Gentile believers as “the people of God” in contrast to the pagans around them.

the same way that he chose Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau and the Jewish nation over the pagans. The word *parepidēmos* means a *resident alien* or a *sojourner*. Peter says that God has made these Gentiles citizens of heaven and foreigners on earth, like the patriarchs in Canaan, like the Hebrews in Egypt and like the Jews in Babylon.⁶ The word *diaspora* was a technical term for the *scattered Jews* who lived across the Roman Empire. Peter tells these Gentile believers that they have been scattered as God's people all across the world in order to preach the Gospel.⁷

This perspective matters, especially if you live in a Western nation and are tempted to think that the declining Church means that the Gospel has lost its power. Philip Jenkins reminds us that this is not the case in the developing world:

*Until recently, the overwhelming majority of Christians have lived in white nations, allowing some to speak of "European Christian" civilization... Over the last century, however, the centre of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably away from Europe, southward, to Africa and Latin America, and eastward, toward Asia... By 2050, only about one-fifth of the world's 3.2 billion Christians will be non-Hispanic whites. Soon, the phrase "a white Christian" may sound like a curious oxymoron, as mildly surprising as "a Swedish Buddhist." Such people can exist, but a slight eccentricity is implied.*⁸

⁶ Genesis 23:4; 28:4; Exodus 2:22; 23:9; Psalm 39:12; 137:4; Hebrews 11:13.

⁷ Jews outside the land of Israel were known as *Diaspora Jews*, based on the Greek word used in the Septuagint translation of Deuteronomy 28:25 and Psalm 147:2. It is used to describe them in James 1:1.

⁸ Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom: The Coming Age of Global Christianity* (second edition, 2011).

Peter is God's doorman and he says that, whenever people slam the door on Jesus, God always opens up other Gospel doors all around the world.

Peter has barely started his letter. He hasn't even finished his opening greetings. But he has already reminded us that he is God's doorman and that he serves the one who says in Revelation 3:7: *"These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open."* Peter's first verse shouts above the sound of many slamming doors that the Gospel always triumphs in the end.

Triangulation (1:2)

... chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood.

(1 Peter 1:2)

It's easy to tell where you are in the world if you possess a smartphone. By establishing the position of nearby transmitter masts, a modern phone can work out its own position through triangulation. As long as it determines the location of two or three fixed points, no matter how dark or foggy it may be, it can calculate its own position from them.

Peter wrote this letter in around 62 AD, at a time when the Church was disorientated and reeling.¹ The Jewish high priest had just broken Roman law by callously murdering the leader of the church in Jerusalem. He had taken James to the top of the Temple and, when he refused to deny Jesus, he had thrown him down to his death below. When James survived the fall, his enemies had encircled him and crushed his skull with heavy stones. James was one of Peter's closest friends, so this must have hit him hard, but what hit him harder was the way that many Christians were panicking at the news.² That's why he starts his letter with some urgent triangulation. Peter gives us

¹ Since it talks about fierce persecution but does not mention slaughter, it must have been written between the execution of James in 62 AD and the launch of Nero's persecution in 64 AD.

² James is named as the leader of the church in Jerusalem in Acts 12:17 and 21:18. His murder is described by Josephus in *Antiquities of the Jews* (20.9.1) and Eusebius in *Church History* (2.23.1–25).

three fixed bearings to reassure us that, no matter what, the Gospel always triumphs in the end.

First, Peter tells the believers that they *“have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father”*. They must not panic at the news that James has been killed, since their God knows the events of history long before each one of them comes to pass. They must not feel isolated and vulnerable, because this same all-knowing God has told them to call him Father. They must not doubt his love for them because, unlike a human father who only meets his newborn baby for the first time at its birth, the Lord has known them since before the dawn of time. He chose to love them and to make them part of his earthly family. They must not panic as a thick cloud of persecution descends on the churches of Asia Minor. Even in their darkest hour, their position never changes. They can still address the Lord God Almighty as their Dad.

Second, Peter reassures the believers that they have been saved *“through the sanctifying work of the Spirit”*. The Greek word here for sanctification is *hagiasmos*, which means *being set apart as holy*. God has therefore chosen to make them his very own people in the midst of a rebellious world. He has demonstrated this by sending his Holy Spirit down from heaven to fill them and to turn them into his earthly home. If they feel weak and fearful, the Spirit will strengthen them with God’s own power and make them brave. If they are arrested for their faith, the Spirit will tell them what their Father wishes them to say. If their possessions are confiscated, the Spirit will give them a joy that can never be taken away. If they feel like throwing in the towel on their faith altogether, the Spirit will encourage them by giving them a fresh glimpse of God’s glory. He will remind them of their own place in his plans. He will ensure that they can never lose.³

³ Matthew 10:19–20; Luke 10:21; John 14:26; Acts 1:8; 4:31; 7:55; 9:31; 13:52; 1 Thessalonians 1:6.

Third, Peter tells the believers that God has chosen them *“to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood”*. This Greek word *rhantismos* and its sister words are only ever used in the New Testament to refer to high priests sprinkling sacrificial blood on Temple worshippers to purify and consecrate them to the Lord.⁴ Peter is therefore telling his readers that their lives are of incredible importance to world history. They are the ones for whom the Son of God shed his precious blood. They are the ones who have been declared pure and sinless in God’s sight, consecrated as holy and obedient work tools in the Messiah’s hands.

Like a smartphone determining its position on the earth’s surface by triangulating with nearby phone masts, these three factors show us our true position in the world. When we know where we are in relation to God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit, it tells us where we are in relation to everything else too. This verse is one of the earliest declarations of the Trinity, ranking alongside the command of Jesus in Matthew 28:19 to *“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,”* but Peter sees it as far more than a statement of theology. He also sees it as a statement of geography. If we have been chosen by the Father, saved through the Son and filled with the Spirit, our position in the world is guaranteed.

You particularly need to hear this if you are a Christian living in the West. It is all very well for Philip Jenkins to remind us in the previous chapter that the Gospel is triumphing in Africa and Asia and Latin America, but what about Europe and North America? I’m sure that Philip Yancey is correct in his remark that *“As I travel, I have observed a pattern, a strange historical phenomenon of God ‘moving’ geographically from the Middle East to Europe, to North America, to the developing world. My theory is this: God goes where He’s wanted”* – but I’m also

⁴ See Hebrews 9:13, 19, 21; 10:22; 12:24.

pretty sure that he is wrong.⁵ Is God any less my Father if I am a European? Is Jesus any less my Saviour if I am Canadian? Is the Holy Spirit any less available to me if I am German? If the answer to these three questions is “no” then Peter wants us to see that our fundamental position hasn’t changed. God has not “moved on” from our nations. We simply need to tell him that we want him and that our churches want him too. We simply need to triangulate our position correctly and to cry out for the Gospel to triumph in Western nations too.

That’s why I love the opening greeting in both of Peter’s letters. It is similar to the one used by Paul and yet it is subtly different. It literally translates “*May grace and peace be multiplied to you.*”⁶ It reminds us that God does not need ration books to dole out his diminishing reserves of blessing. He is not the God of meagre rationing but the God of lavish multiplying! He can work more in Asia, Africa and Latin America without needing to work any less in Europe and North America. So away with foolish ideas about God having “moved on”! Our position in his purposes remains the same.

If you are going through a difficult season personally, like Peter when he lost his close friend James, then let the Father, Son and Spirit help you triangulate your true position. If you are going through a difficult season in your church, like Peter’s friends in Asia Minor, let the Father, Son and Spirit help you triangulate your church’s position too. Let the three Persons of the Trinity open your eyes to your place in their perfect plan. Let them multiply the grace and peace of God to you today.

⁵ The Christian author said this in an interview with *Christianity Today* magazine (5th February 2001).

⁶ Paul normally begins his letters, “*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.*”