

JUDE: Contending for the Faith

by Ray C. Stedman

The letter of Jude is a thunderous word from a man who refers to himself in the first verse simply as,

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James. {Jude 1:1a RSV}

That identifies him, for James was very well known as a leader in the early church in Jerusalem, and he was also the author of the Epistle of James which we have in our New Testament. But he was famous not only because he was in himself an outstanding man, but also because he was the brother of the Lord Jesus Christ – the physical half-brother of Jesus. He had grown up in the little town in Nazareth with Jesus himself.

But notice that he says nothing about this relationship in the opening of his letter, instead refers to himself as “a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.” In that we can see that this man who grew up with the Lord Jesus and his brother James has now learned to see Jesus no longer after the flesh, but, as he truly was, God become man. He now worships him. Jude and James had an unique experience in the Christian church, in becoming the disciples of the One with whom they grew up.

What clear testimony this gives of the deity of the Lord Jesus. If anyone would be in a position to refute the claim of Jesus of being God, it would be the brothers of Jesus. Although they did not come to believe in him until after his resurrection from the dead, nevertheless these letters constitute a seal of confirmation that the claims of the New Testament concerning Jesus Christ are valid, in that they are supported even by those who would have every reason to deny them.

I am struck, too, by the fact that Jude takes the place of second fiddle to his brother James. Often, brothers and sisters of famous personalities are disturbed by being introduced as the brother or sister of so-and-so. But Jude is quite content to say he is the brother of James. He has learned the spiritual secret that God always has a place for every one. If it helps to identify him that way, he is perfectly willing to take that place.

Then he tells us how he came to write the letter:

Beloved, being very eager to write to you of our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. {Jude 1:3 RSV}

He had started out to write a letter containing certain insights and understandings of the faith. Certainly he was in a position to do this, and had perhaps been pressured by others to write his memoirs and to recount what he had experienced as the brother of the Lord. He had determined to do that when news came to him of an outbreak of some false and very distasteful teaching.

He feels constrained by the Holy Spirit to stop the treatise that he was going to write, and to write a tract instead. The treatise evidently never got written, but the tract is a very valuable addition to the New Testament scripture. So he writes to them to “contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”

There are some striking things about that instruction. That says:

1. First, that our faith is not something that anybody has manufactured; it was delivered to us. It is not fabricated, or worked up by a collection of individuals. It is one body of facts that is consistently delivered by authoritative persons, the apostles. It has come to us through them.
2. Furthermore, Jude says that it was once for all delivered. It was only given at one time in the history of the world. It does not need any additions. This little letter, lying as it does at the very back door of the New Testament, is a wonderfully helpful letter to use in answering the claims of the cults, -isms and false doctrines abroad today. It is my judgment that the essence of every false doctrine that has ever been expounded by anyone is answered here in this letter of Jude. For example, the Mormons tell us that the revelation that God gave us did not stop with the New Testament, but that we need new books and new revelations. But you see how clearly Jude answers this when he says, "I want you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints." It was given to us through the apostles, at one particular time in history, and it does not need any additions.
3. The third thing is that it needs to be proclaimed, or contended for. Now some think that contending for the faith means to roll the Bible up into a bludgeon with which to beat people over the head. Such people feel that they need to be very contentious in contending for the faith. But this is not what Jude has in mind at all. He is simply talking about the need for proclaiming the truth.

As Charles Spurgeon used to put it: "The truth is like a lion. Whoever heard of defending a lion? Just turn it loose and it will defend itself." This is the way the Word of God is. If we begin to proclaim it, it will defend itself.

The reason for this counsel, as he goes on to tell us, is that there were certain false teachers who had crept into the church:

For admission has been secretly gained by some who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly persons who per-

vert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. {Jude 1:4 RSV}

What bothered Jude was that this was not an attack from outside the church; these were not pagans. These were people who professed to be Christians. They had arisen within the church and were doing two things:

First, they were changing the grace of God into license to live an immoral, sexually degraded life. They were teaching basically that it did not make any difference what you did with your body as long as your spirit was right. You could indulge the body to the full, since it was no good anyhow; it was the spirit that counted.

Second, they were saying that the grace of God is so broad that God will forgive anything you do; therefore, the more you sin, the more grace, so go to it. This same idea is being promulgated in our own day. People from within the church are saying we have progressed beyond these old-fashioned Biblical ideas against licentiousness and immorality, and that we now have a new morality. It is based on the Christian theme of love. If you love someone, they say, it does not make any difference what you do with them. Love justifies anything. This is an exact duplicate of this 1st century heresy, that called forth such condemnation from the Apostle Jude.

Let us look briefly at how Jude handles this problem. First he points out that God will not ignore this kind of thing; the judgment of this kind of person is certain. That is Jude's theme and he supplies three Biblical examples to support it:

1. To begin with, he reminds the people that when God brought the people out of Egypt, he did a great thing; well over a million people were saved by the power and right hand of God. But they were a mixed multitude, as the Old Testament tells us. While some of them were really believers, others were not. They were all delivered and they were all set free. They all went through the Red Sea and all experienced the miracles of God's fatherly care. But when they came into the wilderness, God began to choose and judge among them. Those who

murmured and complained and rejected his leadership, refusing to enter into the land, he judged. Finally, out of all the multitude that left Egypt, only two men entered into the land – Joshua and Caleb. The rest all perished in the wilderness. Their children entered in, but this was God’s way of saying that he has a way of handling those who refuse to act by faith.

2. In the second example, he reminds us of the angels who did not keep their first position. These angels lived in the very presence of God and ministered before him, serving constantly at his bidding, and yet they followed Satan in his rebellion. They came to earth and became involved with the daughters of men. Thus, they too were reserved for judgment. His point is that even angels are not excluded from judgment, when they fall through pride and lust. And pride and lust characterized these men that Jude was talking about.
3. Third, Jude reminds them of the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. These two cities in the plain, down at the southern end of the Dead Sea, had fallen into the practice of homosexuality. So open, so blatant, so widely accepted was the practice, that when the angels visited Lot, the men of the city surrounded his house and ordered Lot to bring those men out so that they might have their way with them. For this, God judged that city.

Jude reminds us that God does not take these things lightly. There is a judgment provided for it. It may be sudden, as in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. It may be long-delayed as in the case of the angels; or it may come about in the natural course of events, as in the case of those who came out of Egypt. God is not going to ignore it.

Reading further, we see what was wrong with these men:

Yet in like manner these men in their dreamings defile the flesh, reject authority, and revile the glorious ones. {Jude 1: 8 RSV}

Verses 9 through 13 expand upon those three divisions, taking them in reverse order:

1. First, Jude takes the reviling of the glorious ones, and refers to an incident that is not recorded in our Bible. It comes from a book called *The Assumption of Moses* which was familiar to the readers of the 1st century. Many have been troubled by this because they think Jude is referring to a book that has perhaps been lost from the Bible. It has not been lost; we still have it. It, and other so-called “lost books” can be read in any reputable theological seminary library. But they are a mixture of truth and error, and what these New Testament writers sometimes do is refer back to them for some recorded instance that is true, so that what is recorded here is perfectly true, but not everything in *The Assumption of Moses* is.

A little further on in Jude’s letter, there is a quotation from the *Book of Enoch*, another book we do not find in our Bible, but which is also available today. The quotation Jude uses is truth; the entire book from which it was taken is not.

What happened is that when Moses died, Michael, the great archangel, the highest of the angels, had disputed with the devil over the body of Moses. The claim of the devil was twofold; he said he had a right to the body of Moses, first, because Moses was a murderer – he had slain an Egyptian. Second, the devil said the body of Moses belonged to him because it was in the realm of material things over which he was lord. But Michael disputed this. He claimed the body for the Lord, just as the whole of Scripture claims that our bodies are important to God. God has a plan for them as well as for the spirit.

The point he is making here is that even the archangel Michael did not speak directly to Satan when he confronted him face to face, but simply said, “The Lord rebuke you.” Jude’s argument is, if archangels, who have so much power and knowledge of truth, are careful to respect the God-given dignity of a fallen angel, then why should we, mere men, speak contemptuously of the principalities and the powers in high places? It is a thing to think about, isn’t it, when certain people today just sneer at the idea that the Scriptures present the existence of demons or Satan.

2. Now the second matter he takes up is that of rejecting authority:

Woe to them! For they walk in the way of Cain, and abandon themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error, and perish in Korah's rebellion. {Jude 1:11 RSV}

Jude is tracing the way sin, especially rebellion, develops in a life. He personifies rebellion with three Biblical men: Cain, Balaam and Korah:

He speaks of "the way of Cain," which was essentially selfishness. Cain stands forever as the man who thought only of himself, who had no concern or love for his brother, but put him to death. He looked out only for his own welfare, and Jude says that is the first step on the way to ultimate rebellion – selfishness.

The second thing was the "error of Balaam." There are two stories about Balaam in the Old Testament. In one story, a pagan king hired him to curse the children of Israel. As he was riding along on a donkey to do this, the donkey balked because he saw the angel of God blocking the way. Balaam could not see the angel, and finally the donkey had to speak with a human voice in order to rebuke the madness of this prophet, (Num 22:21-35). The thing that leaps out at you in that whole story is the greed of this man, and this is confirmed by the second story. In return for money, Balaam taught the children of Israel how to sin, (Num 31:15). He sent the pagan women among the camp to seduce the men of Israel sexually, as well as to introduce them to the worship of idols, which involved sexual rites. Thus, he became guilty of teaching others to sin. That is the error of Balaam. To teach someone else to sin is far worse than sinning yourself. Jesus said, "it would be better for him [by whom temptations come] if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin," {Luke 17:2 RSV}. That was the error of Balaam.

And the development from selfishness, through teaching someone else to sin, ends finally in the defiant rebellion of Korah: Korah and his group were the ones who said to Moses

and Aaron, "Who do you think you are, making yourselves the leaders of Israel? We are as good as you; we have as much authority as you have in Israel. What makes you think you have the right to speak for God?" {cf, Num 16:3 RSV}. Thus, he openly and blatantly challenged the God-given authority of Moses and Aaron. Do you remember what happened to them? God said, "Look, Korah and your group, you stand over there. Moses and the rest of you, stand over here. I'll show you what is going to happen." Suddenly the ground opened up beneath Korah and his group and they went down alive into the pit {see Num 16:20-35}. This was God's remarkably dramatic way of saying that defiance of God-given authority represents ultimate sin.

3. Jude goes on, and is evidently getting pretty worked up. He now tackles the third matter, "defiling the flesh." He says these people are blemishes on your love feasts, as they boldly caroused together. Now love feasts were potluck suppers. In the early church, the Christians would gather together and bring the food with them to the service on Sunday. After the service, they would all partake together, and they called this a love feast.

What a blessed name! I like potluck suppers, but I do not like the name. I am physically opposed to the first syllable and theologically opposed to the second. But love feast! Now there is a term for you!

Anyhow, these love feasts were wonderful times for fellowship for a while. But then people began to divide into cliques, and some of them kept the chicken for themselves. Others set aside the best pieces of angel food cake, and soon there was division; people began to boldly carouse together, looking after themselves. That is the mark of this kind of a person.

As Jude goes on, we can see his remarkable sense of imagery. It reminds us of James and also of the Lord Jesus in his ability to use all the events and scenes of life around him as illustrations. Listen to all of these, all describing useless people:

...waterless clouds, [promising rain, but never coming through] carried along by

winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, [not only dead in Adam, but dead in that second death – rejecting Christ] uprooted wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars for whom the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved forever. {Jude 1:12b-13 RSV}

Then he quotes Enoch, in that quotation I referred to above. He says that these are exactly the kind of men that were before the flood, and finally, he describes them as,

... grumblers, malcontents, following their own passions, loud-mouthed boasters, flattering people to gain advantage. {Jude 1:16 RSV}

That hurts, doesn't it? Some of us are guilty of some of these things, even though we do not fall into this classification. But now comes the positive, as Jude comes to a close:

... you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; {Jude 1:17 RSV}

They told you this would happen, so what are you going to do about it?

... you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith: {Jude 1:20a RSV}

That means study your Bible; learn what the truth is. He doesn't say to them, "Organize a counter-movement. Try to get these people thrown out of the church." He says to oppose them with the positive; learn the truth. And second:

... pray in the Holy Spirit; {Jude 1:20b RSV}

To pray in the Holy Spirit means to pray according to his teaching, and in his power, depending upon God. Study and learn what prayer is, follow the teaching of the Scripture about it. Obey the Holy Spirit in your prayer life.

Third, he says,

... keep yourselves in the love of God; {Jude 1:21a RSV}

Now some have misunderstood that to mean that it depends on us to stay in the family of God – as if your salvation depended wholly upon us. But what he is saying is, "Look, God's love is just like the sunshine, constantly shining on us. But we can put up parasols and various barriers that shut it off." Jude says we must learn how to keep walking in the experience of the love of God.

When there is no unjudged sin in your life, God's love is constantly able to warm your heart, fill your life. Of course, he loves you whether you are walking in the light or not, but if you walk in the light, you will experience that love. That is what it means to "keep yourselves in the love of God."

Finally:

... wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. {Jude 1:21b RSV}

That refers to the second coming; keep your hope sharp and bright, looking for the intervention again of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now what about others? Jude mentions three things concerning our attitudes and behavior towards other people:

... convince some, who doubt; {Jude 1:22 RSV}

Answer their arguments; reason with them. And next,

save some, by snatching them out of the fire; {Jude 1:23a RSV}

There are some with whom we need to move right in so as to try to bring them back from disaster. And then, finally,

... have mercy with fear, hating even the garment spotted by the flesh. {Jude 1:23b RSV}

That is a wise word. Be careful. There are some you cannot help yet; you are not experienced enough, or old enough yet. You are not wise enough to help these others. Even the wisest have to handle them with great fear, being very careful not to contract the disease they are trying to cure.

Now, at the end, we have this great benediction which is one of the great words of the New Testament:

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen. {Jude 1:24-25 RSV}

This too falls into three divisions:

“Now to him who is able to keep you from falling” indicates the potential in the Christian life. It does not say “Now to him who does keep you from falling,” because God does not always keep us from falling. He is able to, Jude says, but he does not always do it. We need to fall sometimes; some of us will not learn any other way. If we were not so thick-headed and stubborn, and if we would obey him, he would keep us from falling. In that sense, we never need to fall.

But even when we do fall, he is able “to present us without blemish before the presence of his glory.” The word translated “without blemish,” is the word *anomas*, which means “apart from the law.” He has so completely dealt with us that even our falls have already been handled in Christ. Therefore, after we have learned the painful lesson of it, he is free to wipe it out of the record, and to present us faultless before his glory!

And this will be done, he says, “with rejoicing.” That means we will have had a part in this too. We are also involved in the process, and when we get where we’re going, we can say, “Hallelujah! Thank God, I’ve won!” As Paul says, “I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness,” {2 Tim 4:7b-8a RSV}.

Then there is the final recognition of the only God, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. To him be “glory, majesty, dominion, and authority before all time and now and for ever.” That takes in everything, does it not? From the beginning, through the present to the eternal future, he is the One around whom the universe itself gathers.