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**Build yourselves up on your most holy faith;
pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God;
look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ
that leads to eternal life. JUDE 20–21**

Faith, Hope, and Love

Although the seven Catholic Epistles often stand in the shadow of the four gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and the letters of Paul, they are just as much a part of the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ as these other works. These seven letters—one from James, two from Peter, three from John, and one from Jude—are described as “catholic” because they are encyclical letters addressed to the whole, universal church. Unlike the Pauline letters, which were addressed to particular communities or individuals, they were written to broad, general audiences.

Another reason why these seven letters were called “catholic” is that they defended the universal faith and morals of the church against the rising challenge of heretics. They are focused on guarding the apostolic faith. 2 Peter aims at false teaching; Jude speaks to false living. John asks, “Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?” (1 John 2:22). He warns, “Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (2 John 7).

While two of these letters, 1 Peter and 1 John, were universally accepted by the ancient church as inspired and canonical, there was controversy about the status of the other five letters down to the close of the fourth century. While Eusebius of Caesarea, in the early fourth century, was the first to explicitly list these seven letters as the collection called the Catholic Epistles,

he was reflecting earlier tradition; it remains unclear when exactly these letters were viewed together as canonical Scripture.

It seems that these seven letters were received into the New Testament canon as a group to offer the church a complementary, non-Pauline witness to Christian practice and belief. As a second collection of letters, they provide a broader and more balanced representation of the apostolic witness than the letters of Paul by themselves. They are traditionally attributed to two of Jesus' apostles, Peter and John; to James, the brother or relative of Jesus; and to James' brother Jude (called "the brother of James").

When these seven letters became a collection, they were often associated with the Acts of the Apostles, which supplied a narrative context for the letters. James, Peter, and John were known as the "pillars" of the church in Jerusalem (Gal 2:9). James became the first letter of the collection in recognition of his role as the overseer of the community in Jerusalem, which was then followed by the other apostolic witnesses.

The Catholic Letters sought to address the ordinary problems encountered by the whole church: refuting false teachings, strengthening believers in the ethical practice of the faith, and upholding their strength in the face of oppression from others. There is a special emphasis on the themes of suffering as a witness to Christ and of joy in persecution.

Because these seven letters provide a unique window into early Christian theology and practice, they should ideally be read together. Having entered the canon as a collection, they are connected and provide a coherent vision of the Christian life. Together, they make it clear that following Jesus Christ is a matter of practice as well as of formal belief. James, Peter, and John are all agreed on the assumption that "faith without works" is dead (Jas 2:26). The "works" spoken of in these letters are those deeds that spring naturally from faith in Jesus Christ: self-sacrifice, generosity, humility, and love.

The great Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love recur throughout these letters and form a kind of thematic unity within the collection. These three virtues, traditionally called the theological virtues, are made known through the revelation of Scripture. They cannot be obtained by human effort but are infused into believers through divine grace. They have God for their origin, their motive, and their object.

Through living the Christian life, believers exercise and strengthen these virtues of faith, hope, and love and practice them more readily. As evidence of this encouragement to exercise these virtues, Jude exhorts: “Build yourself up on your most holy faith,” “look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life,” and “keep yourself in the love of God” (Jude 20–21). While all three of these virtues are found throughout the Catholic Letters, faith is most emphasized by James, hope by Peter and Jude, and love by John.

Reflection and discussion

- Why is it significant that we have the literary witness of James, Peter, John, and Jude in addition to the Pauline collection of 13 letters?
- For what reasons were these seven letters given the designation “Catholic Epistles”?

Faith in the Letter of James

The letter of James was written from Jerusalem, the wellspring of the church and the heart of Jewish Christianity, where James labored as the leader of the church and where he died as a martyr around the year 62. Judged by some to be the oldest of the New Testament books, the letter is meager in doctrine but rich in comfort and lessons of holy living based on faith in Jesus Christ.

It shows all the signs of a mid-first-century letter, with its exhortations to good works and its similarity to the teachings of Jesus exemplified in the Sermon on the Mount. It contains more reminiscences of the words of Christ than any other New Testament letter. James writes in the pithy, proverbial, and sermonizing style of Eastern wisdom. He warns his readers against covetousness, pride, and worldliness, and he comforts them in view of present and future trials and persecutions.

The letter represents an early stage in the development of Christian teaching, and it contains no indication of the controversies that developed with Paul's outreach to the Gentiles and had to be worked out at the Jerusalem Council. It may even be said to be a kind of bridge between Judaism and Christianity, showing how the early church applied the words of Jesus to their daily lives. It is eminently practical and free from the subtle theological questions that characterize the letters of Paul.

This letter of James, as well as the letters of Peter and John, were written in polished Greek, which some scholars suggest would not be possible for Galilean peasants. However, the letters are marked by the concerns of Jewish writers, especially those who had been influenced by Christian faith and discipleship. These Catholic Epistles would have all been written with the assistance of an accomplished secretary (*amanuensis*), whose influence varied widely. Some secretaries would simply take dictation and then polish the style; others would offer heavy editing and a fair degree of autonomy in word choice, phrasing, and even organization. For this reason, the Greek compositional style cannot be used as a reason to deny the authorship of these letters to the apostolic pillars of the church.

The theme that runs throughout this letter of James is his insistence on genuine faith. He warns his readers against the perennial human ability for self-deception: considering themselves true believers and chosen by God while they belie their beliefs by living according to their own desires rather than God's. True faith in Jesus Christ must make a difference in the way a disciple lives the issues of practical Christian life: temptation, speech, partiality, care for the poor, disputes within the church, prayer, illness, and more.

James urges those who profess faith in Jesus Christ to be real disciples and to manifest a living faith. James' diatribe against "faith without works" is simply an echo of the teachings of Jesus. James never opposes faith and works but rather points to the absurdity of their separation. The entire letter is about the importance of true faith and the danger of a false, self-deluded faith. Like Jesus, he preaches against hypocrisy and self-deception—thinking that one has faith when there is none. He wants to evoke from those who claim to have faith the kind of behavior that manifests faith. His letter offers a collection of maxims on faithful life, on what a life full of faith looks like.

Reflection and discussion

- What are some indications that James is an early Christian letter?
- What is James' understanding of genuine faith?

Hope in the Letters of Peter and Jude

Peter's letters were written by the apostle in his later life, when his fiery temperament had been deeply humbled, softened, and sanctified by the work of grace. As Peter nears the end of his ministry, he exhorts his readers to abide in joyful hope as they endure trials and suffer hardship for the sake of Christ. With these circular letters written from Rome to the churches of Asia Minor, Peter offers the fruit of his rich spiritual experiences to the wider church as he prepares to offer his life in martyrdom, as Jesus had told him.

In his first letter, Peter demonstrates that the life of Jesus and the life of baptized believers are inseparable. The willingness of Jesus to suffer unjustly to fulfill God's purposes provides the "example" so that Christians may "follow in his steps" (2:21). His resurrection is the source of the believers' "new birth into a living hope" and of their imperishable inheritance (1:3–4). Peter offers them consolation, encouragement, and guidance as he shows them that their identity as Christians is not only the reason why they suffer various kinds of trials, but also the source of their greatest joy.

Peter's first letter reflects his role as an eyewitness of Christ's teaching and ministry. It also attests to the pastoral and doctrinal role Jesus has given to Peter, the foundational rock of the church. As one called to tend the sheep of the flock that is the church, Peter urges his listeners to live up to their calling to be God's own people and to strengthen their faith. In the midst of slander and trials, they must be ready to defend that faith to anyone who demands "an account of the hope" that dwells in the heart of believers (3:15).

Peter's second letter was also written as a sort of final testament. But unlike the first letter, the second struggled for acceptance within the canon of the New

Testament Scriptures. To account for the significant literary differences between the two letters, Jerome suggested that Peter may have used two different secretaries, each of whom were given some latitude in word choice and style. Unlike the first letter, the second was listed by Eusebius among the “disputed” letters, but it was eventually accepted by the councils of the fourth century.

In this second letter, Peter aims to remind his readers of the truth of the gospel, to warn them against false teachers who wish to lead them astray, and to rouse them to lead holy lives as they await the Lord’s coming. He accuses his opponents of two primary errors: first, denying the promise of Christ’s return and the final judgment, and second, living and teaching a way of life not in accord with the gospel. Peter vigorously defends the teaching that Christ will come again, and he calls his hearers to live blameless lives as they wait attentively for the Lord’s return.

The small letter of Jude, like 2 Peter, is addressed to those confronting false teachers in the community. The author claims to be the “brother of James,” making him, along with James, a close blood relative of Jesus, perhaps a cousin or son of Joseph, but not a child of Mary. The letter was also listed among the “disputed” letters in the early church. It is similar to 2 Peter in its vocabulary and concerns, probably due to both authors drawing from and reworking a common source. Jude exhorts his readers to “contend for the faith” (1:3) so that the truth they have received may be preserved and effectively handed on to others. He says that errors and false paths must be identified and struggled against, yet he urges the community to try to win back those who place themselves in spiritual danger.

Reflection and discussion

- Why is the Christian life the source of both suffering and deep joy?

- What might account for the differences in Peter’s two letters? What might account for the similarities in 2 Peter and Jude?