

James, Peter, Jude & John

When I was ordained, in the early 1950s, a former pastor of the congregation into which I was being installed had a good text for me to remember, Jude 3-4:

Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.

This former pastor was not saying that there were many apostates in the congregation that I was serving, but he did know that wherever I would serve, I would have to contend for the faith. He was right. The faith has been entrusted to all the saints from Adam and Seth onward, as we see in Hebrews 11. There will always be these people who will try to come in to destroy the unity of the body, as well as the wholeness of our faith. That is the way the Bible ends, warning us to contend strongly because of the great antithesis that is both out there and in here, and that we are always involved in. Let's pray.

*Lord, as we commence our studies now for the last lecture in this study of Biblical theology, we thank You for Your sustaining mercies and grace. God, we have had unusual experiences, but we have experienced Your richness, the richness of Your love and mercy. For Your upholding strength and power, thank You, Lord. What was wrong, forgive and we pray that You will establish the work of our hands now and forever in Jesus' name. Amen.*

We will go on to the last part of the New Testament as it is before us. Referring to James will give us the opportunity to cover the whole span of time. Who was this James? Was he the brother of Jesus Christ? Many scholars think so. We know that at one time some of the family of Christ would not accept him. Scholars are sure that this is the first New Testament book that was written, in 50 AD. They are also certain that it has a Jewish Christian character, but it nevertheless has an expansive application. It is a kingdom book, about kingdom living and covenantal obedience. It is a rewriting of the Sermon on the Mount in an epistle. I have read that in a few commentaries and I have often dealt with it that way. But I want to urge you, if you preach a series on James, do not preach more than four or five sermons or you will be repetitious. That is, unless you use the letter as an outline for the entire Old Testament and New Testament, covenantal living, and kingdom life. But I have heard a series on James go on and on. When I was young, we had a preacher who thought that James was the constitution for kingdom living, and he bored us to tears with 17 sermons. There is much good material in James, but you can handle most of that in five good sermons. A sermon for each chapter, I would say. But some of you may want to speak differently concerning that.

Is James aware of the broader context? I would like you to consider James 2:5 for a moment, "Listen, my dear brothers: has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" What does James mean by, "Inherit the kingdom"? That seems to me to be the key verse, here in chapter two. How do you inherit the kingdom? And not only that, but what do you inherit? I am convinced that we have to speak of this in the broader context of the entire Scripture: the king, the church (which is the army), the means of entering into and inheriting the kingdom. How do you do this? Be rich in the faith promised to those who love Him.

"The love for the Lord." It is a key phrase in James, but I want to go on to 1 and 2 Peter now. Peter, writing in about 60 AD, shows an awareness of Paul's letters. He does not negate Paul. He does not fight

with Paul. Paul rebuked him once, but you do not find anything in Peter's letters that would indicate that he felt that he still had to exonerate himself somehow. Or should you take the phrase, "Some things which are difficult to understand" as a sort of rebuke of Paul? I do not think so. I think that what Peter is saying there is, "I am not intellectually the man that Paul is, but I do not twist his words either." It seems that in Peter's days the Gnostics and the Judaizers were twisting Paul's words. Thus Peter warns against that. As in James, the Christian life, the covenantal life and the covenantal duties are referred to in Peter's letters. He gives evidence that the church was formed, and he wants to speak about the proper relationships that people have within the church.

Two passages are outstanding when we think of Peter. He speaks of the kingdom, 1 Peter 2, beginning at verse six, "For in Scripture it says: 'See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.'" The cornerstone is personalized, 1 Peter 2:9-10. Starting at verse seven, "Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. [That personal stone] But to those who do not believe, 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,' and, 'A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.'" Jesus Christ is a stumbling block. Jesus Christ is the judge. Jesus Christ is the condemner. Peter must have thought of the broader context of the blessing and the curse of the covenant. Christ, the mediator of the covenant, executed the curse as well as the blessing. "They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for." Those are under the curse. "But you are [he does not say 'you have made yourself'] a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God." Where does that come from? What is he quoting? Exodus 19:3-6. That precious possession God carried on the wings of an eagle, whom He brought to Himself and declared, "You are now My precious possession, My kingdom of priests, a holy nation." Peter is writing to Christian believers, whether they are Gentile or Jew. "You are what Israel was in the Old Testament, you are a kingdom. You are a holy nation. You are priesthood. You belong to God."

Peter continues and declares what the duties are: "That you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, now you are the people of God." Then he comes back again to that same emphasis that we saw in Paul: "God made you to be His. And He made you to be what He made the Old Testament people to be, but you can be that so much more comprehendingly. You can understand it so much better because the Cornerstone of whom Zechariah spoke has come into the world, Jesus Christ the mediator." As we read in 1 Peter 2:11-13:

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from your sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. Submit yourself for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men.

Peter sees the authorities, the government, as also part of the kingdom living. To be a member of the kingdom of God is not, therefore, to put yourself in distinction from the kingdoms of this world or whoever your authority or king may be.

Our first trip to Australia was a 16-day voyage on a luxurious British liner on the Pacific and Orient Line, they wa they used to have it. It was great food, great living. But 16 days is a long time on a ship. On a troop ship it was especially bad, but even on a royal liner it is a long time. Within ten or 15 minutes onboard ship, I met a man who I thought might be my brother in Christ. He was. He was going as a missionary to one of the islands north of Australia, and we began talking. That was special, Christian fellowship. We decided to see if we could get other Christians together too. So the very first day we were able to put a notice out in the ship courier, "All those who want to have Christian fellowship,

singing, praying, and studying God's Word, meet on the deck by the piano." There were 35 to 40 people there the next morning. There was one woman who was so pious. She tried to create the impression that she had a halo around her head. She had not been able to find a place where she could serve the Lord Jesus in the United States because wherever she went, she would be "in Caesar's realm." She had been a secretary for a lawyer. She had been secretary for a doctor. Now she was going to go and work in a truly Christian environment, because now she could go be a secretary to a preacher in Sydney. She thought once she could get into the preacher's environment, then she would be in the realm of Christ - the rest was all the realm of the devil.

She had the world cut down the middle, with a little segment over here and everything else was Caesar's, the devil's realm. She would no longer be a secretary in the devil's realm. She had no concept of the kingdom of God. She had no concept of submitting to the government either, for "President Eisenhower was not a godly man." I wonder what happened when she found out what the governing people were like in Australia! In her mentality, which she undoubtedly shares with many others, the world was dichotomized. There is the realm of Caesar and the realm of Christ. She was waiting to be lifted up out of the realm of Caesar as much as possible. She would not submit to the authorities. We had a Bible discussion that time and we tried to impress upon her that she had to think a little more broadly, more consistently, more fully. I never saw her again. If she saw me from a distance, she turned around and went elsewhere because she thought I was the devil's tool, to suck her into the devil's empire. Have you ever met people like that? That is not what Peter is telling us. This kingdom is an all-inclusive kingdom. But the Satanic, demonic parasite kingdom is there and you have to address it.

Peter speaks of that eternal kingdom in 2 Peter 1:11. 1 Peter 1:10-12 says:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you.

There Peter speaks concerning that great salvation of which the prophets spoke. Then in 2 Peter 1:10-11, he gives a fuller, broader statement concerning this salvation. He says, "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

What is the eternal kingdom? Go back again to what Peter has said before, that kingdom of which Jesus Christ is a great Lord and mediator. The royal priesthood. That is the kingdom that he is speaking of. Does Peter refer at all to the covenant? You will not find the word *diatheke*, "covenant," in his letters. Many of the Old Testament concepts and persons are referred to, such as the concept of holiness: "Be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy," that great covenantal command from Leviticus 19. He speaks of what God did with Noah, with Abraham, and with the prophets, the inspired Word. There is one passage that I would like to draw your attention to for a moment, 2 Peter 1:3-4:

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

Peter refers to the great promises, and we know that the promises are always in that covenantal context of the Old Testament. They are the promises that the Lord Jesus made as a mediator of the covenant, the

great king, the revealer of the Father. But when he goes on to say, “Through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires,” this phrase, “participate in the divine nature,” has caused much controversy. Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed believers have argued over whether or not we actually participate in the divine nature. The main debate is over the proper translation of *koinonoi*, the Greek word which is translated in the New International Version as “participate,” and in the New American Standard as “partakers.” The last article that I read on this problem came out in the Calvin Theological Journal, in the April 1990 issue, by Professor Wolters, an essay on the covenantal understanding of this passage. He argues that the word must not be “partakers.” In many other places the same verb means, “to partner,” instead of, “to partake.” We become partners with deity or with that divine nature, that divine power, of which he may have been speaking in this context. We become partners with Him, this Lord who has divine power. What is the context of being partners? Covenant, of course.

Thus, if you understand this passage in that covenantal framework, you might interpret it as meaning that we become partners with God because of His covenantal work and through the mediating work of the Lord Jesus Christ. And once we are indeed partners with God, we escape the corruption of the world caused by evil desires. It is not that we become divine, but we enter into that living, covenantal relationship. We become partners with God. If you keep your covenantal concept as a basic framework for your thinking, you will not deify saints, and I think that this is the proper solution. I had this presented to me as an option when I was at Westminster Seminary, that we have to think of that term as “partner” rather than “partaker,” which makes quite a difference. Here again, as a matter of translation, am I accommodating, am I reinterpreting so that I can get out of a hard passage? No, I believe that what I am doing is interpreting 2 Peter 1:4 in the broader context of Scripture. The Bible is a covenant document given to us that we may serve the King in His kingdom, and we are restored to be partners with our God.

Peter in his two letters speaks of us as this kingdom, speaks of us as partners in the covenant, and he loves the mediator. 1 Peter chapter one says, “To God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus . . . , who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood.” Then in verse seven he says, referring to the trials that have come to these believers, “These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” Peter loved the Lord Jesus and he calls His people to love Him. Peter knew that the Lord loved him. “Peter, do you love me? Jesus asked him. “You know that I love you,” he responded. Peter had to show his love for the Lord, but through that he came to be certain that the Lord loved him. His one great passion is that we know the love of Christ and that, loving Him, we live in the covenantal fellowship. We can indeed be partners with God, covenant partners with Him, living in His kingdom, being a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Notice the supreme place that he gives Christ, the mediator. In 1 Peter 2:1-8, he tells us:

Therefore rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house . . .

Peter uses the analogy of the builder, but do not build without Christ. You will never become a royal priesthood if you separate yourself from the mediator of the covenant, the King eternal. That is the

message of Peter. Nothing new, but written to believers, Jewish people very likely in dispersion, this message is applied to people under persecution.

Now we will move on to Jude. Whether he is an apostle or the brother of the Lord Jesus Christ, or both, does not make much difference to me. He writes between 65 and 80 AD. As I pointed out when I started, he is aware of the antithesis that the people have to be aware of. He is not talking about two realms. He is talking about one realm, the kingdom of our Lord, within which are all these forces that continue to try to creep in, like threatening clouds. If you face them with the brightness of the Son of God, these clouds would dissipate, just like a rain cloud would dissipate under a strong summer sun. Jude brings us back to paradise. He brings us back to the whole history of the Old Testament people and of the early stages of the Christian church. There is a great battle that is going on. There is the antithesis. He tells us that the angels are involved in this; Michael fights with the devil. This great battle is a cosmic battle. The fallen angels and the obedient, God-honoring and serving angels are involved in it. This is a spiritual battle at its heart. It is between God's kingdom and the parasite kingdom, between the Lord Jesus Christ and the great usurper, the devil. The devil has been defeated, but he has some powerful kicks yet in his death throws, beware. Watch out. You have to go into that world and you have to be a fighting Christian. You cannot say "Peace, peace," where there is no peace; it cannot be peace because you are confronted with the enemy that will not give up until the Lord Jesus returns. Paul speaks of that in I Corinthians 15:2. That is the setting of Jude as ministers.

When you are confronted by people in your church and you are wondering how to address them, Jude 22-23 speaks to that: "Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear – hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh." Fight for the faith. Contend. Brothers and sisters, we are called to be fighters in this world, contenders for that which was delivered from the time that God spoke to Adam and Eve and told the devil, "You are finished; your head will be crushed." That is an ongoing battle, the antithesis. I do not read much of this term in modern literature. In my tradition, we heard much more of it. In the book that I am writing I am spending a whole section on the antithesis established by God Himself in paradise. When He placed enmity, He placed an antithesis - the seed of the woman, over against Satan and his followers. This antithesis, this opposition, this contradiction, this fight, has gone on through the ages and is still going on. Do not ignore it. That is Jude's word to us, but Jude is not the only one who refers to that.

If you are not aware of the antithesis, John's writings will never be in the proper context in your mind. John's epistles emphasize aspects of the Gospel that John had stressed in his Gospel, but he also is very anti-Gnostic. He is contending for the faith and he makes some pretty strong statements in a few of his letters in which he says, "There are those who deny that Jesus is God and Jesus is human." He is not hesitant to speak his anathemas like Paul did. We have to be aware of heresy. God loved the church of the Lord Jesus. John loved those people to whom he preached and whom he had counseled, the elders, the women of the church. He loved them with a passionate love, for the sake of the Lord Jesus, and he saw heresy – heretical living – and disunity among the people as two of the greatest dangers, vices, and disturbing factors in the body of Christ. He saw them, heresy and disunity, as great dangers and challenges to the reign of the Lord Jesus. The lack of love for one another and the heretical thinking of not accepting Jesus as God come in the flesh, these were the two great concerns of John. They were not new concerns, but they were special concerns for the audience to whom he had preached, and to whom now (very likely from prison) he was writing what he had been preaching. He does not say "contend," but he does say, "watch out," beware," "Remember Jesus Christ, His love for you and your love for one another."

John closes the inspired revelation of God with one of the most challenging books of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation. When I was a student at Reformed Theological Seminary, we had three very strong, postmillennially, eschatologically oriented professors and three strong premillennially oriented professors. We also had eight professors who did not exactly take the middle ground, but who thought, "I am going to give all honor and praise to the Lord who reigns now and His kingdom is here now. It will not be realized more fully in a postmillennial way; it will not be realized by a sudden first coming." We used to discuss these issues for hours. We never argued. The president of the seminary, Sam Patterson, who was one of those who held the premillennial position, finally said, "I cannot hold my premillennial position," but the other two never gave up. The postmillennialists never gave up, the amillennialists never gave up, and the discussions continued. Many of these discussions centered on the Book of Revelation.

We came to agreement on quite a few other passages. For example, the passage in 1 Corinthians 15:23-24, where Paul, speaking of the return of Christ, says, "Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all domination, authority and power." Some premillennial dispensational people argue that the word, "then," includes a couple thousand years. That little word, "then," can refer to one second, or it can refer to a thousand years. It simply indicates that the events occur in a sequence. We came to agreement on that. It was more difficult to deal with 1 and 2 Thessalonians, "Is there to be a rapture?" All agreed that we should not make distinctions between pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, and post-tribulation; these are unnecessary distinctions. But as I said, those who came with rather firm views, in spite of what they heard from the others, did not change. Why is that? Is that because all three positions are so well-founded in Scripture? Or is this because of our emotional preferences? Is it because of a worldview that we have? Is it because of our hermeneutic? Is it because of the training that we have had from childhood on? Maybe these are all factors that are involved.

When I was young, my dad would sometimes keep me home from school because he could not afford to hire a second man to help bring in the hay. He had to have somebody up on the wagon as they pitched the hay up there, but sometimes I would stand there for a half hour, leaning on my pitch fork and listening to the discussion between my father and his neighbor about the millennial kingdom. I learned a lot of theology out in the hay field. My father talks a lot about common grace and special grace because these were issues that were controversial in those days. Maybe that is why I, today, am considered to be a member of the amillennial school – because I picked it up in the hay fields. But as I read the Scriptures I am confronted with these other views. I bought a book by Dwight on Pentecost because I want to read again how he deals with it. I am always trying to learn but I have not been convinced that I have to give up believing that the Lord Jesus is king of creation, Lord of the nations and He is reigning now. I am certainly not convinced that there is a role in the whole plan of salvation for Israel to play, for 1000 years after Christ first returns. Israel has played its role, and many Israelites (by flesh) are coming into the kingdom under the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I was in Australia, I had numbers of believing people who fled the Netherlands, who had been protected by many of the Dutch and Belgian people there, who had not been caught up in the Holocaust. They were devout Christians. They maintained their Jewishness, biologically, ethnically, but considered themselves to be members of the body of Israel, the church. There are many ministers today, many Presbyterian ministers who are at least partially Jewish, and they are part of Israel. They are part of the church. Many of them are not saying, "We are looking forward to our 1000 year reign on earth."

The question I have always asked myself is, "Let me go through the Book of Revelation again, let me go through 1 Corinthians 15 and Zechariah 14. As I look at those passages, what role in the plan of

salvation, what contribution, is Israel to make that it cannot make as part of the kingdom and church?" And I do not find that. Many of Israel will participate in the blessings of the mediator, of course. But in Romans 11, where Paul speaks of the tree, he says that there are various branches that are dead. The nation of Israel, pictured as a tree, is finished. And now what happens? To this dead trunk comes the living root - the Lord, Jesus, the mediator of the covenant is the root. Now what happens? Contrary to nature, two branches are put into the tree, the dead Israelites and the dead Gentiles. Both are dead. And by the miracle of God, both become branches in the one tree. God takes dead branches and He makes them into living branches, Israelite and Gentile, and thus all of God's people are saved, those He has known from eternity, be they Jew or Gentile. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither Greek nor Hebrew, male or female, bond man or free man; all are grafted on to that living root, the Lord Jesus. That is the context that I find, that is the center, the heart of the kingdom.

When John begins to work on his final book, Revelation, where does he start? He is on the Island of Patmos. He has a vision. Who does he see? He sees the Lord Jesus. He sees the man from Daniel, the Son of Man. "Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the first born from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth." John did not say, "Who will become ruler." He is ruler. That is how John begins. Christ is the great king over the cosmos, the king over the nations. He is Lord over everything; that is how John begins. "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom of priests." This is from Exodus 19, and is what Peter wrote about in the second chapter of his first letter. We are the kingdom. We are the priests. We are the royal nation. And who is he writing to? The seven churches. They may have some Jewish congregants, but they are mostly Gentile congregations in Asia Minor. He refers to them definitely, saying, "You are, you are, you are. God made you this kingdom. He who is the king of the nations has brought you into His kingdom."

Look, He is coming with the clouds,  
 and every eye will see him,  
 even those who have pierced Him;  
 and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.  
 So shall it be! Amen.

John goes on to say that he saw this Danielic man, the one like the Son of Man, and He has the key of life and death. He is Lord, Lord of heaven; He has complete control of hell. I am not saying that He is or has been in hell, but He surely has control over it and who are in there.

I understand chapter five to give us the great theme. When the scroll is handed to the lamb, the scroll referring to the whole counsel of God, no one could open it, and yet it had to be opened to find out the names of those reckoned and what had to be done to bring them in. Then the Lion of the tribe of Judah comes forward, the Lion spoken of in Genesis 49, of the Davidic line, and in 2 Samuel seven. It is He who carries out the sovereign will of God pertaining to election, pertaining to salvation, pertaining to bringing the saints into the eternal kingdom.

You are worthy to take the scroll  
 and to open its seals,  
 because you were slain,  
 and with your blood you purchased men for God  
 from every tribe and language and people and nation.  
 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,  
 and they will reign on the earth.

There you have it again – the Christians, the believers, are the kingdom. They are the priests. But this kingdom and this priesthood is going to have a rough time. John describes that from different perspectives as he goes through the book.

As we are short on time, I will conclude not with chapter 20 but with chapter 19, and what do I see in chapter 19?

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God [*logos*]. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean.

Who is He? “King of king and Lord of Lords.” Jesus Christ, the king, Jesus Christ the Lord over everything. He who was promised in Genesis 3:15, who was promised to David, who was promised to Abraham, and was promised through Moses. Jacob spoke of Him. Revelation concludes with a victorious mediator whose blood became the blood of the new covenant, bringing forth an efficacious atonement and establishing Him as Lord, now, then, and forever. I live under the reign of King Jesus now, with you and all our brothers and sisters in Christ. God bless you. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.