

# SUSTAINING OUR FAITH

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Jude

## VERSES TO REMEMBER

[B]eloved, 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)

| Daily Bible Readings |         |                                     |                                  |
|----------------------|---------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>M</b>             | Feb. 26 | 1 Cor. 15:1–11                      | The Faith in Which We Stand      |
| <b>T</b>             | Feb. 27 | Num. 16:12–13, 23–34                | Turn Away from the Wicked        |
| <b>W</b>             | Feb. 28 | Gen. 18:20–22; 19:1–5, 15–17, 22–25 | Flee from the Presence of Sin    |
| <b>Th</b>            | Feb. 29 | 1 Pet. 2:13–25                      | Always Do the Right Thing        |
| <b>F</b>             | Mar. 1  | Gen. 5:18–24                        | Walk with God                    |
| <b>Sa</b>            | Mar. 2  | Jude 3–16                           | Contend for the Unchanging Faith |

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

We begin a new study today, all about examining our faith. How do we examine such a thing? We can't exactly slice it into sections, suspend them in slides, and put our faith under a literal microscope in order to zoom in on it. Faith is not a physical compound that we can scientifically scrutinize and document. It's more like the living organism from which a tiny sliver of material is taken to view close up. We can learn about elements of the whole by study of small pieces, but the full scope of it won't fit in our viewfinder. We have to step back occasionally and remind ourselves that we are trying to understand something dynamic and ever-changing.

We can, however, examine sections of Scripture that invite reflection on faith. We can look at biblical stories of faithful people and learn from them. We can read the words of faithful followers of Jesus, and hold our own beliefs up next to theirs to see how the light shines through both. These lessons help us do that. They won't tell us all there is to say about faith. There will always be more to discover. But they will help us attend to our faith at this particular point in time.

Our examination is more like a science fair project on faith than a scientific doctoral dissertation. We won't look at all the background material, read all the experts, or say everything there is to say. But we will discover some new ideas and have fun learning alongside one another. Wander the display hall of this study. Ask your fellow faith explorers about what they are learning. Share your discoveries and form new questions. Enjoy the process.

*Lord, we thank you for our faith, a gift from you. As we examine it today and in the weeks ahead, give us curiosity and courage. Help us ask good questions. Open our eyes and ears to learn from one another and from those we meet in Scripture. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

Jude 17–25

**17** But you, beloved, must remember the words previously spoken by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>18</sup>for they said to you, “In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts.” <sup>19</sup>It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions. <sup>20</sup>But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; <sup>21</sup>keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. <sup>22</sup>And have mercy on some who are wavering; <sup>23</sup>save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.

<sup>24</sup>Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, <sup>25</sup>to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

## TINY LETTER, BIG ISSUES

**W**e begin with a New Testament letter that tells us something about sustaining our faith. The tiny letter of Jude—written to a very specific group at a particular point in time—can inform our efforts today to follow Jesus faithfully at all times, and in all places. It is found at the end of the New Testament just a page or two before the final book of Revelation. Between the more heavily quoted Pauline letters that come before it, and the

curious images and apocalyptic visions that come after it, it's easy to skip over.

Jude may be unfamiliar to many of us. No Scripture readings from it appear in the Revised Common Lectionary often used by preachers. You may not have heard any sermons from it. A quick read through the letter's twenty-five verses reveals some possible reasons why: confusing statements about angels and prophecies; a focus on intruders sowing division in a particular church; and concerns about sexual immorality, debauchery, lust, and final judgment. These themes don't make for the most uplifting Sunday morning message! They do, however, show up as citations from Jude in some historic confessions of faith, and make their way into position papers and overtures to church bodies about controversial topics.

Biblical scholars have questions about the origins. The opening verse claims authorship as Jude (also called Judas, though not the same person as Judas Iscariot.) He calls himself "a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James." If true, this would make Jude a first-century eyewitness and relative to Jesus, which gives his words a level of authority. According to Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3, Jude and James are two brothers of Jesus. James is a leader in the Jerusalem church, trusted by Paul and others to represent the gospel faith in times of disagreement (see Acts 15; Gal. 2). On the other hand, claiming a connection to the family of Jesus and to eyewitnesses to the resurrection was also common among later authors. There are parts of Jude that sound like 2 Peter, written at the end of the first century. Similar themes and wording may indicate a common source or shared work (Jude 17–18; 2 Pet. 3:2–3).

Regardless of who wrote Jude, or when, the letter reveals a community in trouble. False teachers are leading some astray from the "most holy faith" given by the apostles. What are the faithful to do about it? We might wish to have started our project on examining our faith without the threat of false teachers straight out of the gate, but like Jude's recipients, here we are.

 **Who do you trust to advise you on matters of faith?**

## **WHAT REALLY MATTERS**

**T**he notes in my Bible on verses 17–23 sum up the bulk of the section we are studying (and the whole letter) well. They say:

“Exhortations: Recall the apostolic tradition, avoid the heretics, grow in faith, wait for the mercy of Jesus Christ, care for the erring.”<sup>1</sup> Jude mentions the tradition passed down from the original apostles at the beginning of the letter, appealing for his audience to “contend for the faith that was once and for all handed on to the saints” in verse 3. At the end of the letter, he reminds them that those early apostles predicted problems and division within the fellowship. In Jude’s time, dissension because of false teachers was seen as a mark of the last days, signaling the imminent arrival of the *parousia*, the return of Christ in the second-coming. As time extended and the church necessarily transformed into an institution, we’ve realized that division and disagreement within congregations are inevitably part of being human together.

A read through all the epistles reveals that clarity about theology, ethics, and practices was at issue in every church in the early days, as it is now. Jude points out that, even before Jesus, those trying to follow God’s call were subject to false understandings, prone to error, and at risk from heresy. He reminds his readers of earlier failures of God’s people: after the exodus, in Sodom and Gomorrah, and of the fates of the rebellious—like Cain, Balaam, and Korah—all of whom suffered punishment conferred by God. The history of the Christian church since then reveals a series of divisions, large and small, over questions of authority and what matters in issues of faith. If you locate your own faith community on a map of denominations, you can trace back a web of branches that have broken away over similar questions of what the gospel really means in practice.

Jude ultimately trusts God to deal with those who are sharing a “false gospel.” He exhorts his readers to concern themselves, not with rooting out and punishing those proclaiming a distorted faith, but rather with building up their own faith. They are to stay connected with the love of God, the mercy of Jesus, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in prayer. They are to show mercy to all those around them, whatever their state of belief or doubt. This is how they will stay connected to God, who will “keep them from falling.”

1. Bruce Metzger et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, NT (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 361.



**Why is it difficult to focus on our own faith in the midst of dissension and division?**

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

**B**ecause our churches are made up of fallible human beings, we are subject to the same sorts of division and error that plagued the early church in Jude's day. We don't all see the gospel's call the same way. In our quest to understand and live by Scripture, we have had denominational and congregational arguments about major issues throughout history: slavery, the role of women in the church, the welcome and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ siblings, and so on. Politicized debates about hot-button issues continue within and outside the walls of the church. You can surely name the most recent ones.

Some may be tempted to call those on a different side of an issue a "false teacher." Others may be confident they know who would be the subject of a letter from Jude today, sure that they would be the beloved recipient. It is always easier to assume we are in the right, rather than the ones who are misunderstanding God's intentions. Jude's letter asks us to back away from finger-pointing and name-calling, and focus on building up our own faith, not just for our own sake, but for the good of the whole community.

While there are appropriate times to wade into controversy, Jude invites careful consideration before doing so. Just because we have something to say in response to false teaching doesn't mean our words will contribute to a meaningful conversation. Social media comment threads make that abundantly clear. Our time might be better spent backing away from the keyboard or megaphone, and engaging instead in personal reflection on our own faith. I'm reminded of an elementary school poster's acronym Jude might have liked. "THINK before speaking: Is it True? Helpful? Inspiring? Necessary? Kind?"

The words in verses 20–21 give us another formula for the work of strengthening our faith: praise and thanksgiving. Long before any official doctrinal notion of the Trinity existed, the theological underpinning of God at work as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer shone through writings in Scripture, including here. In contrast to the rest of the letter, these lyrical words of Jude's final verses may be recognizable from their use as a worship charge or benediction. They reorient us when our tendency for dissension wells up.

"Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with

rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (vv. 24–25).



**What helps you sustain your own faith?**

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture.*

1. Remembering (v. 17) is a significant part of growing in faith, including remembering what a faith-filled life looks like, remembering what God has said and done, remembering God’s promises, and remembering what we’ve been taught by faithful followers of Jesus.
2. The phrase “last time(s)” (v. 18) was frequently used by first-century Jews to refer to eschatological times: the events that will mark the end of human history. Jude 18 quotes 2 Peter 3:3, which (like Jude’s letter here) specifically addresses the dangers that threatened the early church through false teachers whose greed for honor, recognition, and attention drove them to masquerade as spiritual super-teachers.
3. Jude provides a “litmus test” to enable believers to discern between false and faithful teachers: anyone whose words and lifestyle mimic the surrounding culture and who instigates division within the church should not be accepted as a faith model by believers.
4. Jude 20–23 encourages believers to resist the immoral ways of false teachers and instead to “contend for the faith” (v. 3): building their lives on the foundation of the gospel, praying in the spirit, relying on God’s love, looking forward to Christ’s mercy and eternal life, offering mercy toward others, and rescuing others from the fire. Such living sets apart the faithful from those who are false.