

Jude

*Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James,  
To those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father  
and kept for Jesus Christ:*

<sup>2</sup> *Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.*

<sup>3</sup> *Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the  
salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend  
for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people.*

<sup>4</sup> *For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long  
ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people,  
who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and  
deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord. [NIV]*

"Life and death."

"It's a matter of life and death." We use that phrase  
sometimes to describe something of *utmost importance* – or  
at least something that we *think* is of the *utmost* importance.

"It's a matter of life and death that you respond to me  
quickly." But is it, really? Ah, usually not.

"I must get that new iPhone that just came out – it's a  
matter of life and death." No, not really.

"If I don't get a drink of water soon, I'll die!" Well,  
probably you won't die.

That's like Esau, right? You remember when Esau  
rushed into the house after he'd been out hunting and said  
to his brother Jacob, "Quick, give me some of the stew  
you're cooking, or I'll just die!"

He wouldn't have died if he'd not eaten in just that  
moment.

In fact, because Esau couldn't discern what was and  
was not a matter of life and death, he lost quite a lot in his  
life.

That's one of the big problems we have as fallen  
human beings, you know: we have trouble figuring out  
what's really important and what really isn't. We tend to  
attach utmost importance to things that, really, just aren't,  
and that causes a lot of trouble in our world.

Actually, if you take the definition of the word,  
"utmost" seriously, there really can only be one thing that  
is of *utmost* importance. What Jesus seems to say that it is  
is what happens to us when we die. The theological way to  
put that might be, "the state of our eternal soul."

If we're in right relationship with Jesus, regardless of  
what happens to us or around us here on earth, our eternity  
with God is secure.

But if we're *not* in right relationship with Jesus – well,  
*there's* the *real* life and death issue, you see. *That* is what  
Jude is concerned about for those to whom he wrote.

So, who was Jude?

William Barclay says, "Few things tell you more about  
a person than the way they speak of themselves – the titles  
by which they wish to be known."

Jude introduces himself as "*the servant of Jesus and the  
brother of James*," which tells us more about Jude than we  
might presume.

You see, Jude realized that, of the two of them, James  
was the one people knew, and he's the type of guy who's  
content to be secondary to that. He didn't demand the  
situation be, "James, the brother of Jude," as some people  
feel they have to do – to put themselves first in order to  
inflate their own egos. Jude was just fine being the  
unknown brother of the two.

And, he introduces himself as "the servant of Jesus."  
Of course, the word for servant, *doulos*, is the same as the  
word for slave in Greek, so what that tells us about Jude is  
that he realized who his master was. Jude's ambition in life  
was to be useful to Jesus.

That's who Jude was: one who was not concerned  
about himself, his own reputation, or his own ego. This is a  
tremendous advantage in living the Christian life, because  
when a person is ultimately concerned about self – about  
how self looks, about how self is perceived by others, about  
how self is evaluated on the world's scales, then the thing  
that becomes "of utmost importance" is self. Self becomes  
the life or death issue.

Jude was not so concerned, which is why he was able  
to give himself and his efforts to Jesus and to what Jesus  
considered of utmost importance – which is, again, the  
eternal souls of persons.

That's the cause for which Jesus died, and it is the  
cause for which He asks us to live.

So that's who Jude was, and we would do well to be  
like him.

Why did Jude write to these Christians?

Well, interestingly, his reason for writing changed as  
he contemplated this letter.

He had always intended to write.

Even as I say that, that phrase, "I always intended to  
write," it sounds familiar. That's probably because more  
than one girl I was interested in in years past said that to  
me at some point or another: "Well, I always intended to  
write."

If you have to say that you always intended to write,  
you probably didn't.

Annette wrote me back, so I married her.

Jude, though, *did* always intend to write, but to write  
something very different than what he wound up writing.  
He says there in verse 3, "*I was very eager to write – about  
the faith we all share.*"

Now, of course, we don't know for sure what all he  
means by that, but very likely it was more of a developed,  
theological work that he intended to write – probably a  
larger and deeper and more reflective treatise on the  
Christian faith "that they all shared."

But, he didn't write that because he'd received word  
that something was amiss in this church, which was more  
important. So he had to change his plans at, what seems  
like, the last minute.

We know about that, don't we? To have circumstances around us change our plans at the last minute?

We've learned what that's like over these last few months, and that's something that especially Americans are just not used to. And we're rather unique in that way. Most of the rest of the world doesn't understand the planning that most Americans have come to expect to be part of their lives, because most of the rest of the world lives, today, and has always lived far more day by day and moment by moment than we do.

On our trip to Russia a few years ago, someone observed, "one of the main differences between Americans and Russians is that Americans are shocked when things don't go as they've planned, but Russians are shocked when things do go as planned."

And that sentiment about Russians is true for most of the rest of the world.

This virus thing has forced us to either become that kind of flexible—or frankly, just angry. That is our choice.

But blessed are the flexible. Sometimes that's how God gets our attention: He has to interrupt our plans in order to get His work accomplished, which He was able to do with Jude.

I do wonder, though, if Jude ever got to write what he had originally intended to write. We're given no indication.

In the moment, Jude may well have thought of this little note here as a concession. He was probably frustrated that he had to ditch his bigger plans in order to deal with this.

And you and I, we know those feelings, too.

We get these notions that God wants us to do some big, great thing—but then we're disappointed when that doesn't come together, due, usually, to some circumstance out of our control.

Yet what we don't often consider is that maybe it was God who sent the circumstance that steered us back to what actually needed to be done.

In Jude's case, he wound up writing what someone I read called "a tract instead of a treatise." But you see, in this moment, the tract was what was needed for the sake of human souls.

Sometimes a tract for the time is better than a treatise for tomorrow. Here we are, a couple of thousand years later, still reading the tract, while the treatise, if he'd gone ahead with that, would likely have been lost to the dustbin of so many other theological treatises written by people who thought they were great, but in truth, weren't really very good.

What seems, in the moment, to be less than what we intend may well wind up being more significant, more enduring, more critical even, than we can know. That's why we have to be OK with realizing that it's not the apparent magnitude of our accomplishment, but instead, it's our flexibility and faithfulness to the leading of God's Spirit that accomplishes God's purposes. That's what makes the eternal life-or-death difference.

Jude had the humility to embrace this and to take up his lot, not just in relation to Jesus and to his brother, James,

but even to the piece of literature he was called to produce. A very Christ-like example to us.

May we be able to bless others by our flexibility in the same way.

So, what was the issue that caused Jude to change what he would write?

Well, this is the life or death part. He writes in verse 4 there, "*Certain godless men – ones whose judgment has been written about from long ago – have crept in, teaching that God's grace is a license for immorality and who deny that Jesus is our only Master and Lord.*"

What happened is the discovery of an infestation.

Have you ever had one of those? An infestation?

At our first pastoral appointment in Pennsylvania, we lived in a parsonage that backed up to a wooded hillside; three steps out the back door there was a woods that went straight up. And on the first cold day that fall, suddenly we found that we had an infestation—of mice.

Over the course of that summer and early fall, I'm sure field mice from the woods had found the little holes and cracks in that house's foundation and they had certainly come and gone in our basement from time to time without us even noticing.

But when it turned cold, they made their presence known upstairs—and in a big way. It just about sent both Annette and me over the edge.

In the mornings, we'd go to the kitchen and find, let's say "evidence" of their presence on the kitchen counter. Annette would take everything off the counter, bleach it, and walk away. And literally within moments—the bleach would barely be dry—there would be new "evidence" left there on the counter.

That is how the days would go.

One night, in the middle of the night, we heard this crinkling sound coming from our bedroom closet. We opened the door and found a mouse sitting there, looking at us with a Werther's candy that had fallen out of one of our pockets. He had it in his little mouse hands. We chased that thing all around our bedroom. If we'd had neighbors, which we didn't, they'd have thought us insane.

You see, those mice had been in and out of our house for months in a hidden way. We didn't know it, but they were slowly increasing their number, their presence, and their influence. Then suddenly—in a moment—all that was hidden became known.

That's what happens with an infestation: it builds secretly and undetected—a completely covert operation, but then suddenly, it appears in a big, big way.

Maybe Jude had noticed the new guys and wondered who they were. Maybe he'd heard a stray comment here or there—not often, you know, just very occasionally something about God, about grace, about Jesus—that sounded a little odd.

Maybe he'd noticed just a tiny piece of, you know, evidence, but only here or there or now and then. Probably nothing to be concerned about. Those believers were solid. They were strong. Well-trained. They knew wrong from right, doctrinally—theologically. Anyway, those kinds of things always just seem to straighten themselves out.

Maybe that's how it went along for a season.

But then the weather turned cold, and suddenly, the infestation that was there – that had crept in over time – exploded! The reality of the problem – the intensity and magnitude of what had been going on – became apparent, and it shook Jude. It shook him and shocked him into writing some of the harshest words in the New Testament, actually.

And what was the real problem – the core of the infestation?

We'll talk about that a lot more next Sunday, but from verse four, the problem was, in a word, *heresy*: ungodly doctrine that leads to ungodly practice. They go hand in hand, as they always do.

A group of people had, over time, crept into the body – into the church – and had both taught and lived that, first, the gift of God's grace means that you can do anything you want. You can live any way you like, and grace will cover it in the end.

Their premise and message and lifestyle was, "When it comes to experiencing God's grace, a person's behavior doesn't matter." That is *antinomianism*: that idea that grace frees believers from the need to keep any law – any moral code or standard. It seems that was being taught and modeled as a legitimate Christian doctrine.

And then second, these who had, as some translations say, "*wormed their way into the church... denied that Jesus is our only Master and Lord.*" They were rejecting Jesus and His authority over them.

These were the issues that compelled Jude to change his letter, in order to, as he says there in verse 3, "*urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people.*"

This was a life or death issue, you see? To Jude, this was an infestation that threatened to destroy the whole house and to wreck the salvation of those to whom Jude wrote. We can tell that by verse 3. The word translated "contend" there can also be translated into English as "agonize." This defense of – this fighting for, contending for – the faith was an extremely serious matter. Not only was truth, for its own sake, on the line, but the results of truth were in jeopardy. Once truth is lost – once the salvation that had been "*entrusted to them for all time*" had been called into *question*, and from *there* into *doubt*, and from *there* into *denial* – you see, then all is lost.

It all falls like a line of dominoes.

That is what Jude is writing to try to prevent, because of his great love for those to whom he writes.

It was indeed a life or death matter – an eternal life or eternal death matter.

And all this was happening because these godless people – presumably men, but women can be godless, too (godlessness knows no gender bounds) – these godless people had wormed their way into the body of Christ and were chewing on the root of the truth of the gospel. Unless this infestation of worms was dealt with, the whole garden would be lost.

The Greek word for this "worming in," or "creeping in" is *pareisduein* and, interestingly, always indicates a negative or evil intent. It's a slipping in – an infiltration – that is intended to do harm, to ruin. These are some of the

"wolves in sheep's clothing" that Jesus warned would come (Matthew 7:15). The Apostle Paul called people like this, "savage wolves that would come and not spare the flock." (Acts 20:29).

Passages like this are, by the way, just some of the reasons why Wesleyans believe salvation can be lost, you see? Just like the love of God, it can't be taken from us, but we can give it away. We can reject it by not contending for it when challenges like this come, and especially dangerous are those challenges that come *covertly – surreptitiously – secretly – quietly* – by most accounts unnoticeably, until the evidence of their presence becomes so obvious that it's nearly too late.

It's this covertness of the danger – the creeping in – that I hope we can see today: the magnitude of the danger that these sorts of covert operations can pose in our lives – and not just regarding theological things.

There are covert dangers – possibilities of infestation – in every area. In this broken world, there are things that are constantly trying to worm their way into our lives with the intent to destroy.

Consider what a little chatting or a little flirting with someone at work or online can do if allowed to continue quietly, if it's justified in our minds more and more readily. Look what damage that can do to a marriage and a family – to a whole community!

Consider what the quiet, private use of pornography can do to that same marriage and family.

Consider what loose sexual standards – what pre-marital or extra-marital sex – can do to a person, to a family. A little messing around here or there, then more and more, and then suddenly all of life is changed!

Deceptive business dealings secretly chewing on the roots of honesty. Look at the people those sorts of things have taken down in the last decade.

Ungodly thoughts or rude opinions, posted online – a little one here or there – just so we can have our say. We think no one's really paying attention, until someone does and reveals to the world what now seem like such childish opinions that we so wish we'd kept to ourselves. They ruin reputations and careers every day.

They're infestations! We don't plan for them. They just worm their way into our lives.

How about the subtle re-education of our children that's going on? We leave it to others who don't share our views to monitor – and even introduce – what's learned and seen. We have no idea what's going on, and then we wake up one day and our children are complete pagans.

You want to change a nation? Get hold of the minds of the children – that was Hitler's strategy. It doesn't happen all at once. It happens over time, and it has changed nations – it has brought nations down. It's tearing ours apart even now.

These are infestations that chew at the root of truth.

And then, of course, there is the spiritual element of all this.

We see something – we hear something online or in a book – that's intriguing to us. It's not consistent with the faith we've learned through the years, and it's not consistent with orthodox theology through the ages, but it's

appealing. It's nearly always appealing to us because it allows us do more of what we please.

It's amazing the capacity we have to believe anything that will let us have our own way and prove our opinion right. That's part of the vestige of the fall still alive in us: to demand our way, even above God's way, and to take every opportunity to get our way.

Even as the Spirit shouts inside us, "Don't go there; that's not right; that's not true!" It's incredible how easily we'll listen to that which feeds us ourselves.

And so, we listen some more—and some more—and some more. And unless we will hear and heed that combination of God's Word and His Spirit's voice, we will be led, just like those original readers of Jude were led—like sheep to the slaughter—by the wolf in sheep's clothing just waiting to devour us.

In our day, because of this COVID thing—fear and worry have wormed in to some of our lives and chewed on the roots of faith and courage and trust.

In others, it's been anger and rage that have crept in, and chewed on the roots of peace.

Selfishness and resentment and disappointment and rebellion and despondency. This virus has given opportunity for all these to worm their way into lives, slowly but surely, until one day they take over who we are and how we live and the things we say and do.

Insidious infiltrations.

Secret infestations.

Covert operations.

The enemy has stolen so much from so many through the ages using this very strategy:

creep in;

approach from the shadows;

claim to be someone you're not;

appeal to our baser wishes;

chew on the roots of what's truly good.

Before long, the purpose is achieved: destruction and even eternal death.

And compared to Jude's world, our world today offers infinitely more opportunities for covert operations like this to take place. Jude and that church were dealing with the stray itinerant quack preacher, you see? Today, we have voices all around us clamoring for our attention, calling for us to believe them—to do it their way—to let them in.

But we don't have to listen.

We don't have to fall for them.

Their success is not a foregone conclusion. You see, even here, Jude held out hope for the deceived and for those on the edge to return to the truth.

Jude offered light to see by—to see what was really happening in their lives—and then grace for redemption. He offered an invitation to those who'd been under the influence to respond to his own words and warnings—and to the voice of God's Spirit—to see what these infestations had done in their lives and to begin again to contend—to battle for what's true and real and good.

There was still time for those to whom Jude wrote to rid themselves of the infestation of lies and return to Christ—just as there is still time for us to do that today.

If you sense today that God's Spirit is showing you where godless behaviors and godless attitudes of whatever sort have wormed their way into your life, today is the day to repent of those things—to get rid of the infestation and return to the truth of Christ.

It's of the utmost importance.

It's a life or death situation that makes an eternal difference.

[A quiet time for self-examination.]

Father, would you show us in these next moments and hours and days any places where ungodliness has crept into our lives—where we've believed things that are not true, where we are doing things that are not good, where we are harboring attitudes that are not godly. Would you show us those places; would you forgive us for letting them go on for as long as we have; would you eradicate them; would you exterminate them that we might be whole and right and pure and good—as Jesus is whole and right and pure and good.

Don't allow us to go on happily to destruction, infested with godlessness.

Stop us and change us. Do whatever you need to do to make us like Jesus, for our good and for your glory, we pray. Amen.

Benediction:

This week, may the Lord give us all eyes to see and expose any covert operations that are infiltrating us.

May He give us ears to hear the warnings of the Jude He's placed in our lives.

May He give us the sensitivity to know without question the leading of His Spirit.

And May He give us the power to overcome every trick of the enemy, that we might overcome and move on always toward life—and eternal life.

May these pursuits become, truly, that which is of the utmost importance to us. Amen.