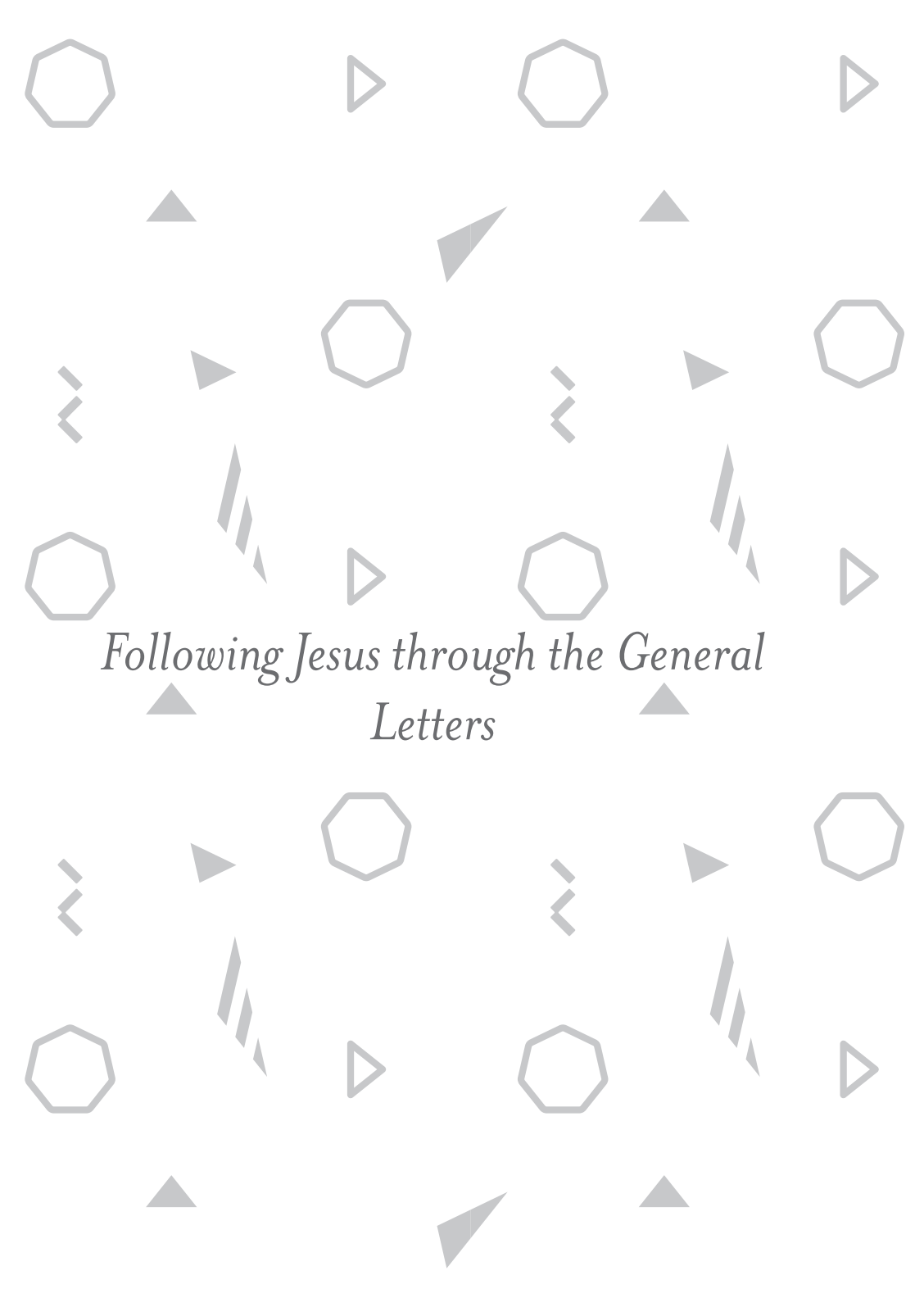


GENERAL LETTERS

Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude

The background of the page is a repeating pattern of various geometric shapes in shades of gray. The shapes include octagons, triangles, and zig-zag lines. Some shapes are solid, while others are hollow outlines. The pattern is symmetrical and repeats across the entire page.

*Following Jesus through the General
Letters*

HOW DOES THIS TYPE OF LITERATURE FIT INTO THE BIBLE AS A WHOLE?

Decades into the Church's existence, it had spread out into Asia Minor and the greater Mediterranean region and was now facing internal problems like false teaching and external pressures like persecution. Even though a few letters may have been addressed to individuals, the authors of the general letters collectively sought to shepherd God's scattered flock by circulating letters to be read by the church at large. Written to both Jews and Gentiles, these books of the New Testament tell Christians to resist false teaching, live holy lives of endurance, and set their hope fully on Jesus (1 Peter 1:13).

Hebrews was written broadly to Jewish converts feeling drawn back to traditions not aligned with the Gospel. James, the half brother of Jesus, wrote to Jewish Christians "scattered across the nations" (1:1). James was likely addressing misunderstandings of Paul's teaching, harmonizing how genuine faith works itself out in a life of wisdom and good works. Peter wrote across Asia Minor to stand firm underneath the weight of threatening circumstances such as discrimination in the Greco-Roman world. The recipients of John's letters were endearingly referred to as 'dear children' to give assurance of eternal life and that Jesus is greater than the opposition they faced. The aging and fatherly apostle called his audience to hold faithfully to true doctrine, live obediently, and be completely devoted to Jesus. Jude, the brother of James and Jesus, wrote Christians believers under attack for their faith telling them to contend for the true faith, knowing they were kept secure by Jesus.

HOW DO WE READ THE GENERAL LETTERS NORMALLY?

Learning about and being mindful of a letter's wider purposes and themes always helps us with interpretation:

- Hebrews is a robust theology with well-crafted arguments that also uses strong imagery, metaphor, comparisons and contrasts, and allusions to historical events and people in the Old Testament.
- Set against the backdrop of factions in the church such as conflict between the rich and poor, James was concerned with Christian's living out their faith.

Thus, James gave practical rebukes for worldliness and challenged his audience to be wise and sincere people who were doers, not just hearers, of the Word (James 1:22).

- Peter encouraged endurance among the suffering by looking back on Jesus' suffering and looking forward to His second coming and rich inheritance. Writing with a pattern that moves back and forth between theological truths and practical applications, the apostle incorporated vivid figurative language to express urgency and intensity.
- John wrote in response to the rise of a heresy called Gnosticism; a mystical religious movement that distorted Christian theology and emphasized salvation through special knowledge.
- Jude's letter, sometimes known as a "judgment oracle" (i.e. message from God), has a fierce and urgent tone to describe and condemn false teachers who enticed people to see God's grace as a license to sin.

HOW DOES THIS PART OF THE BIBLE POINT TO JESUS?

The general letters are unified in their instruction to not be deceived into thinking that anything is superior to Jesus and His Gospel.

- Hebrews explains how the Old Testament pointed to and was fulfilled by Jesus superior to everything else; greater than any angel, person, priest, or old covenant institution. And that He therefore gives perfect salvation and helps His people find rest and perseverance. This theological history unpacks the good news that Jesus sacrificed Himself "once for all" (Hebrews 9:12, 26; 10:10) to offer true rest and a secure anchor for the soul (Hebrews 6:19).
- James reminds us that Jesus communicated good news through words and action, things inseparable for genuine faith.
- Peter pointed to the redemptive suffering of Jesus, that He responded to evil by doing good, bringing life to those who believed in Him. Though the enemy attacks and tempts us, we know that Jesus overcame him by the Word of God and ultimately defeated evil by His perfect goodness.
- John understood that Jesus is the focus of every believer's transformation by the power of His Spirit. Since God is love (1 John 4:16) and has demonstrated that by sending His Son as the sacrifice (1 John 4:10), Jesus is the clearest expression of God's love.

- When Jude called out false teachers bothering God's sheep, he was describing the sort of counterfeit leaders Jesus described (in John 10) as hired hands, thieves, and robbers who steal and destroy. In stark contrast, Jesus is the good Shepherd who laid His life down for His sheep, protecting them as they listen to His true voice.

HOW DO THE GENERAL LETTERS FIT INTO OUR LIVES TODAY?

Each of the general letters was written by a specific person to people in a specific context. By peering into their worlds, we can see that the truth of the Gospel is universal and has application in wildly different settings. Take, for instance, Jesus' half brother Jude. His letter was written to a community familiar with Old Testament literature (including all the promises, prophecies, and warnings) and yet many of us read it today without considering their frame of mind. This early church was in its infancy and was wrestling with where their story intersected with thousands of years of ancestors who trusted in God and believed in His promises. Jude calls this community to recognize God's decisive work in Jesus as the fulfillment of their hope and to live in kind, to pray and love and obey as Jesus really is who He says He is (the Jewish Messiah they were waiting for).

This is where we can sink our teeth into the story because if we believe that Jesus really is who He says He is, the way we live will be the most valuable indicator of our belief. We labor not for what we ourselves can earn but because God's mercy and grace fully epitomized in the person and work of Jesus is worthy of our love, honor, and obedience.

