

Contending for the Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] Well, a very good evening to you all. If you could please turn in your Bibles to the letter of Jude, which is the penultimate book in the New Testament. It's tucked away there just before Revelation, and it's on page 1027 in the Church Bibles.

As Edward mentioned, we'll be spending the next three Sunday evenings together in this short and very punchy letter.

So we'll read the whole letter this evening, so let's pay attention. Jude. Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James.

To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ, may mercy, peace and love be multiplied to you.

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

[1 : 2 0] For certain people have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were designated for this condemnation. Ungodly people who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe.

And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day.

Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

Yet in like manner, these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority and blaspheme the glorious ones. But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, The Lord rebuke you.

[2 : 4 4] But these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively.

Woe to them. For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error and perished in Korah's rebellion.

These are blemishes on your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, looking after themselves. Waterless clouds swept along by winds.

Fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted. Wild waves of the sea casting up the phone of their own shame. Wandering stars for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.

It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, Behold, the Lord come with ten thousands of his holy ones to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him.

[4 : 05] These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires. They are loud mouth boasters showing favoritism to gain advantage.

But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you, in the last time there will be scoffers following their own ungodly passions.

It is these who cause divisions. Worldly people devoid of the Spirit. But you, beloved, build yourselves up in your most holy faith.

Pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on those who doubt.

Save others by snatching them out of the fire. To others, show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh. Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority before all time and now and forever.

[5 : 34] Amen. We please have Jude open in front of you as we spend a few moments looking at these opening verses.

So why study this rather short, out-of-the-way sort of letter?

It just takes up one page in our Bibles. Do we really need to spend the next three weeks on it, you might be thinking? Just 25 verses.

Well, you can count yourselves lucky. Willie spent about nine weeks on this way back in 2006. So if I successfully whet your appetites, do have a listen to those online.

But why study it? It's a letter that packs a punch. And it's this letter that is as relevant today as it was back in 2006 when Willie preached on it.

[6 : 46] And two millennia ago when Jude first put pen to paper. It's a letter dealing with ultimate realities about salvation and judgment, about holding to the true gospel or being deceived and swept along by a false one.

We need to sense the urgency of this letter and heed the warning. We need to be persuaded to contend for the gospel and yet be reassured by Jude's confidence in the sovereignty of God.

We're going to take the letter in three steps. Tonight we're looking at the first bit, verses one to four. And then next week we'll cover the big chunk in the middle of the letter before we look in our last week together at verse 20 to the end.

So tonight we're in the first four verses. Now before we jump into the letter, I want to introduce you to Jude, the man who wrote the letter.

Who is he? Well, look with me at verse one. Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James. Now there's a bit of a surprise here.

[8 : 03] He's the brother of James, nothing surprising there. But there are only two mentions of a James-Jude brother combination mentioned in the whole Bible. And we can be pretty sure that the James mentioned here is the leader of the church in Jerusalem, the writer of the letter, James, which we know well.

And he was very well known in the early Christian worlds. In fact, James and Jude were sons of Mary and Joseph, which makes Jude the half-brother of Jesus.

So why doesn't Jude introduce himself in that way then? Why not say, I'm the brother of Jesus? Instead, he describes himself as a servant of Jesus.

Now, yes, that's a sign of true humility. And it indicates that he doesn't regard himself as privileged. Although a half-brother of Jesus, he doesn't get special status.

But it also reveals that Jude is a man who sees things as they really are. He is not primarily Jesus' half-brother, but rather his servant.

[9 : 17] And this seeing things as they really are is characteristic of the letter as a whole. Jude sees reality. He puts the ultimate realities, the ultimate destinations for the Christian and the ungodly people, as Jude calls them.

He puts those ultimate realities very clearly. And it makes for rather an uncomfortable read, doesn't it? As we read it earlier. So that is who Jude is, a man who sees reality.

So let's now turn and look a bit more closely at these verses 1 to 4. And there are three key points to make. Three key things to see.

Firstly, Jude's plea. Secondly, Jude's reason. But also Jude's reassurance. So we'll look first at Jude's plea.

And this plea is clear. Christians must contend for the gospel. Christians must contend for the gospel. Jude sets out his reason for writing very clearly at the start of his letter.

[10 : 26] He gets right to it. There in verse 3, we read about the letter he wanted to write. And the letter he had no choice but to write. Look with me at verse 3.

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

See, Jude wanted to write about their common salvation in general terms. That was the letter he wanted to write. He wanted to address them about the future and certain salvation that awaited them on the great day of judgment.

Salvation is a forward-looking word. Looking forward to that day when they can be sure, as they stand before Christ, that they are saved.

And it was a salvation that they shared. The people Jude was writing to were beloved, dear Christian people who he cared for deeply. They share the common salvation.

[11 : 30] And Jude wanted nothing more than to write about that. But he had to write a more focused letter because of the real urgency and danger presented to that common salvation by these people who are in the church.

Did you notice how again and again in the letter, Jude calls the threat these people? There in verse 8, yes, in like manner, these people.

Verse 10, these people. Again, in verse 12, these. Verse 14, it was about these. Verse 19, it is these.

Jude had to write, because these people who are in the church present a threat. He had no choice in the subject matter of his letter.

His subject, his main point is an appeal, a plea to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. Contend.

[12 : 42] Do we feel the force of that word contend? Contend. The word is steeped in the imagery of the Greek games. We need to imagine athletes competing, contending for a medal.

They're striving, agonizing, straining, sweating, giving all to win the prize. Jude is not calling these beloved Christians to passivity.

Quite the opposite. He's calling them to agonize, to strive for the faith that they share. Think back just under a year to the glorious London 2012 Olympic Games.

Think in your mind's eye of Jessica Ennis on her 800 meters final event. She's got the gold medal in the bag, pretty much. And yet she strove for that victory.

She went for it. She contended. Or just think a couple of hours ago to center courts at Wimbledon. Contending. It's an image of the Greek games, striving.

[13 : 52] So they're to contend. But what are they to contend for? What are they to contend for? Is Jude vague and imprecise in what he's telling them to contend for?

No, not at all. He's very specific. He's objective. He says that they are to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. It's the gospel.

Jude isn't talking about our little area of church responsibility. The flower arranging or bell ringing. He's not calling us to contend for those things.

It's the gospel. It's the objective, final gospel that's to be contended for. It's a gospel that's been delivered. Past tense.

It's done. It can't be changed. Think of your Royal Mail recorded delivery that you receive and you've got a sign for it. It's been delivered.

[14 : 53] It's been signed for. It can be proved. It's objective. It can't be changed. The gospel has been delivered. It's a done deal.

The gospel message that Jude is writing about here is objective and final. Contend for that. But where do we find the once for all delivered to the saints faith that Jude is talking about?

Well, it's right here in our Bibles. It's not to be added to or subtracted from. It was a danger his readers faced 2,000 years ago. And it's a danger we still face today.

We can think of countless examples, can't we, of people who want to remove the bits of the Bible that are embarrassing or uncomfortable. Jude is having none of that.

The gospel is fixed and it is final. Contend for that, says Jude. But let's be realistic. Contending in the sense that Jude means it here is going to be deeply unpopular for his original readers and for us now.

[16 : 02] As we all contend for the gospel, the gospel finally revealed in the Bible, we will be faced by opposition within the church.

People like those here that Jude talks about to hold to a different gospel. And we know something about that, don't we, in the past year or so.

We will all face opposition and ridicule from within the church as we all contend. And it's all of us that are to contend.

This wrestling to preserve the gospel is not restricted to a few professionals. It's not directed to the pastor primarily or the elders or a select few. No.

Who is Jude addressing here? The saints. Look down with me at verse 1 to see who Jude is writing to. To those who are called, beloved, kept.

[17 : 03] He's writing to all of those who call on the name of the Lord as saviour and king. And that is all of us who are Christians. It is not to be left to Willie Philip or Edward Lobb or Bob File or Andy Gemmel.

It's not to be left down to the elders here at the Tron Church or the staff team. It is directed to all who call Jesus Christ their Lord and saviour. We are all to hold to, to fight for, to contend for the true, complete gospel.

It's all of us. We all have this responsibility. And that is a real challenge, isn't it? Think about the things that we contend for in day-to-day life.

For me, I have to confess, it's table tennis. Making sure I beat Josh Johnson. We need to put that same desire to contend, to fight for the gospel.

That same energy, that same desire. Now Jude is here addressing our minds and our hearts. Are we prepared to contend?

[18 : 21] We'll think about our hands in a couple of weeks. What we're to do. How we are to contend. We'll look at that when we consider the last few verses of this letter.

We're going to think about the how question in a few weeks. But before we get there, Jude answers the why question. Why contend? And we come to the second point, Jude's reason.

And Jude's reason is that the true gospel is under threat. We're to contend because the true gospel is under threat. Jude wrote, urging his readers to contend for the faith because people with influence in the church were peddling a false Christianity through not so much what they said, but how they lived.

Look with me down at verse 4 where Jude gives his reason. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation.

Ungodly people who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only master and Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel itself was under threat.

[19 : 46] But not because of some external force. It wasn't the threat of an antagonistic culture. It was not the threat of an authoritarian regime. It was a threat from within.

The problem is not with unbelievers outside the church. But rather with gospel underminers within. And this has always been one of the greatest threats to the church, hasn't it?

The danger of ungodly people within. It doesn't take outside opposition or persecution to destroy the church. That usually has quite the opposite effect.

Persecution often needs to spread and growth of the gospel. But we need to look a little closer to home and to the church itself. That was where the danger lurked for the recipients of Jude's letter.

It's the great danger of people who say the right thing with their lips, but whose lives tell a very different story. These ungodly people, as Jude calls them, people who exert some influence in our churches, represent the most likely source of a real threat to the future of the church.

[20 : 59] These people are bringing a different gospel. So let's see why these people are just so dangerous. And why Jude has written specifically urging them to contend for the gospel.

So three things to note about these people. These ungodly people are firstly unnoticed. They're unnoticed. Did we see that? They're in verse 4.

This is why Jude is writing. These people did not come in with signs saying, watch out. We're holding to a different gospel, so beware.

Not at all. They seeped in. They infiltrated without anyone noticing. Isn't that just a little scary? Isn't that why these people are just so dangerous?

They've smuggled in a false gospel. A gospel, as we'll see in a moment, that has its focus on living for the now without reference to eternal judgment to come.

[22 : 07] A gospel that denies the lordship of Jesus over all of life. Now these people who Jude was writing to, they weren't ignorant.

They weren't untaught Christians. They were real, intelligent Christians. But these ungodly people were then, and they are now, convincing enough to threaten and fool real, intelligent Christians.

They slipped in. They were unnoticed. They were normal looking. So let's not fall into the trap of thinking that this is some danger out there.

We need to be alert and ready. These guys missed it. Don't assume we won't miss it. They should have been ready. They should have been alert to this new brand of Christianity that these people were peddling.

They've been exposed to the apostolic gospel. But they weren't alert. They weren't ready. Hence, Jude's urgent letter urging them to contend for the gospel.

[23 : 24] He's urging them to wake up to the reality that's in front of their eyes, but they can't see. So these ungodly people were unnoticed. Second thing to note, these ungodly people are destined for condemnation.

These ungodly people are destined for condemnation. There in verse 4, Jude explains that their judgment has been predicted.

These people were long ago designated for this condemnation. What is Jude talking about? What's he referring to? Where exactly were such people designated for condemnation?

Well, Jude has in mind here the ancient Jewish prophecies found in Scripture. He goes on in verses 5 to 19 to prove from the Old Testament that these people, these false teachers, through their teaching and practice, are in a class of people who incur God's wrath and condemnation.

As Don Carson puts it, these scriptures that Jude refers to demonstrate that the judgment that befell certain people in ancient times points to similar judgment falling on those with similar failing in Jude's own day.

[24 : 44] These people really ought to have been familiar with predictions about such people and the terrible, sobering reality of their condemnation.

It really ought to have been obvious, but they missed it. Let's heed that warning and be alert to Jude's warning here that there will always be opposition to the biblical gospel within churches.

Let's not ever think we've somehow made it and become immune to such a threat. Heed the warning. Jude is unmasking these people for who they really are. And the reality is that they really are marked out for condemnation.

It's as stark as that. Jude urges his readers, and he urges us to see the danger sign. Don't you get caught up with these ungodly people, says Jude.

Look where they're headed. Eternal matters are decided in the here and now. What could be more urgent or pressing than that?

[25 : 49] That's why you need to contend. Because these people are headed for eternal condemnation. So these ungodly people are unnoticed.

They're destined for condemnation. And thirdly, they're living by a different gospel. They're living by a different gospel. It's now that we get to the real center of the matter, the source of the problem that Jude saw, but which these beloved Christians he's writing to missed.

These ungodly people pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only master and Lord, Jesus Christ, says Jude.

Remember that these ungodly people are embedded in the church. Their threat is not obvious. But Jude doesn't tiptoe around the subject. He's not trading on eggshells.

He calls them ungodly. He says that they are perverting the grace of God and denying the Lord Jesus. What exactly is going on?

[26 : 58] Well, the behavior of these people has descended into sensuality. And the word sensuality, as Jude uses it here, has particular emphasis on sexual immorality.

These people have slipped into that. And they're using the gospel of grace as justification for it. They're denying the Lordship of Jesus over all of life. Two central elements of the gospel are being eroded here.

The grace of God and the Lordship of Jesus. The grace of God. Remember, it's God's grace that teaches us to say no to ungodliness.

It doesn't teach us to say yes to it. And the Lordship of Jesus. Remember that as Christians, we are called by God to live under the Lordship of Christ.

And that means obedience. We were bought with a price. We're not our own. We're to obey, to live under the Lordship of Christ. Why didn't the church recognize this?

[28 : 05] Why didn't they see it? The false gospel being brought in subtly was seductive and attractive.

It wasn't, as one writer put it, theoretical atheism. That was the problem. But rather practical ungodliness. These ungodly people weren't blatantly teaching false doctrine.

But were rather seeking to loosen the moral commands placed upon Christians. In favor of a sensuality. And they were doing it through how they lived. It was their lives.

These people were lips, not lives Christians. Our friend Dick Lucas put it this way. Although these people no doubt mouthed Christian phrases, quoted the Bible and knew all the songs, they were not to be taken at face value.

Jude was denouncing their friends and heroes as anti-Christian pagans. They said all the right things, I'm sure. But beneath the surface, they lived sensual lives.

[29 : 19] It's so very easy to play the part. Say the right things. But no one knows about the sensuality going on behind closed doors. The pornography, the affair, whatever it might be.

No one can see what's really going on. What was really going on here was the denial of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. These people used the words of faith, but disobeyed the commands of faith.

They used the words of faith, but disobeyed them. And isn't that what's been going on in the Western church in recent years? And it's so dangerous because our default is the easy life, isn't it?

The avoidance of difficulty. That's why the ungodly message of sensuality is just so alluring then and now. False teachers are not going to call us to something more difficult.

Something that means less enjoyment now. It's easier to go the way of sensual living and to convince others it's the right thing to do. It's to be more relevant and in step with the world.

[30 : 31] It's easier to go with the flow and live for pleasure now. It's much harder to heed Jude's plea and contend. Contend for the gospel that demands obedience.

Do you see what's happened? These pretend Christians have dimmed the lights on ultimate future reality. Their lives, speaking of living now in terms of what is pleasing now, that's what these false teachers, these ungodly people are up to.

They've dimmed down the lights on future reality. Jude's antidote is to turn up the lights on ultimate future reality.

Here is where these false teachers are really headed, says Jude. Ultimate condemnation. And here's where those who contend for the gospel are headed.

They are headed for salvation. So live now, not in the light of now, what feels good now, but in the light of reality, in light of the future.

[31 : 37] Contend now because the now is not all there is. If we don't contend for the gospel, once for all delivered to the saints, if we don't contend for that now, then the gospel that gets handed down to our children, our nephews, our nieces, our children's children will be a false one.

A gospel that leads not to future salvation, but future condemnation. Jude is as stark as that.

It's as important as that. So we can see, can't we, why Jude was just so eager to write, urging these beloved Christians to contend for the gospel.

The true gospel was under threat. The true gospel was under threat. Will we heed Jude's call to contend for the gospel? Will you contend?

That is our responsibility. And whilst we must take that seriously, we do need to remember another truth that Jude repeats in this letter again and again.

[32 : 51] And our third point tonight is Jude's reassurance. Jude's reassurance. And it's this, that God will keep you. God will keep you.

This letter, although calling us to the serious task of contending for the gospel, also gives great assurances of safekeeping for the Christian. We're to contend in the knowledge that those who hold to the apostolic gospel, the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints, are kept by none other than God himself.

Did you notice that word or variations of it that top and tail this letter? Look down with me at verse 1. Jude writes to those, verse 1, who are called, beloved in God the Father, and kept for Jesus Christ.

Look a little later to the end of the letter in verse 24 with the great doxology. Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling.

Yes, we are to contend for the gospel. We have a responsibility to do that. But we do so safe in the knowledge that we are kept, kept in a future sense.

[34 : 17] Jude, as we've said in this letter, is looking forward to that great day of judgment when Christ returns. Jude's horizon in this letter is the ultimate horizon. For those who are in Christ, who are kept, they can be sure of salvation from judgment.

Friends, if you are in Christ, you can be sure of salvation on that great day. And that is in stark contrast to the false teachers who are destined on that day for condemnation.

God will keep you. We know that is true ultimately, don't we? We know that those who are in Christ Jesus are certain of salvation, certain of eternal life of our Heavenly Father.

Remember that the biblical faith is a faith fixed on the future. Biblical faith is a faith fixed on the future. We look forward to a certain salvation then, but living now with struggle now, we must contend in the now.

That has and always will be the life of faith for the Christian. It's not always easy in the now. But we have, Jude assures us, the sure knowledge that we are kept by our God and Father through the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

[35 : 46] And we will find salvation on that great day. Be assured, brothers and sisters, that we are called, loved, and kept. But don't miss Jude's urgent appeal.

As one writer concluded, Jude knows that the divine action in calling, loving, and keeping safe must be met by faithful human response.

And the response called for here is to contend for the one true faith. The stakes could not be higher in Jude's day or in ours.

Do we see the danger? Ungodly people within the church will always threaten the gospel by repackaging it and making it more appealing in the now.

Be alert to that. It's worth reiterating a point of application made this morning. These people were unnoticed.

[36 : 50] They were unnoticed. And often when the gospel is under threat, the situation on the ground is rarely clear. These ungodly people, these false teachers, are not easy to spot.

They're normal people. They look like just like everyone else. These people in Jude's day looked good. They were convincing. They spoke the language of the now.

Enjoyment now. And it's the same today. Let's be alert to that. How are we to keep ourselves from this danger? The answer here is to contend for the once for all delivered to the saints' faith.

Will you strive for? Will you agonize for the gospel? Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word to us. Lord, your word is often so direct, so sharp, but at the same time so reassuring.

[38 : 17] Lord, would we heed this warning here in Jude to contend for the gospel. but would we do it in the sure knowledge that we are kept and that we look forward with certainty to salvation.

Lord, help us to get our minds around this. May our hearts be moved to contend for the one true gospel. Help us, Lord, in this coming week for your name and your glory.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you. Amen.