

A SHORT DISTANCE FROM TRUTH TO TOTAL LOSS

But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. They said to you, “In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires.” These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.

JUDE 17-19

It's A.D. 67 as Jude sits down to compose his letter; the curtain is soon to close on the Age of the Apostles. By now, the news has traveled back to Jerusalem of the executions of Paul and Peter in Rome by Emperor Nero; the storm clouds of the most cataclysmic event in Jewish history are forming on the horizon when Jerusalem will be destroyed in A.D. 70 by the Roman army. The prophetic words of Jesus will be fulfilled that not a single temple building block would remain in place on another;¹ the Jews will be scattered and for 1,878 years, Israel will cease to exist as a political entity; the church in Jerusalem that has been central to the mission of the Apostolic Fathers will be displaced and next generation names like Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna will lead the church into its second century.

And yet, even in the midst of all this, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is continuing to be revealed in apostolic clarity and fullness: Matthew and Luke are compiling their gospel accounts; John's gospel, letters, and apocalypses will be forthcoming in later years, and Jude is eager to write about the glorious salvation in Christ that was “common” to people all over the Roman Empire, in transcending race, culture, and social standing.

¹ cf. Matthew 24.2

So, it is with anticipation and excitement that Jude dips his quill into the ink and writes his opening words:

Jude, a slave of Jesus Christ, and a brother of James:

To those who are the called, loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ.

May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. (CSB)

Jude's eyes and spirit linger over the words he has just written; he remembers with a pang of shame the days when he considered his older brother a lunatic, an embarrassment to him and his siblings, and a danger to his own self. His mind goes to the disbelief that he experienced when he encountered the one he had known from his mother to have been crucified, now undeniably alive and yet bearing the marks of his execution by the Romans. He had then realized that this was more than his older brother—this was the Christ, the Son of God, crucified and resurrected. What mercy that he, such a skeptic, should have the honor of claiming the role of being a *doulos*, a slave, of Christ! This is truly a glorious salvation—how can I express its wonder to me?

Before he can continue with his intended thoughts, the Holy Spirit begins to press—the way that you might press your thumb into modeling clay—another perspective comes into his mind. It is a thought so different from what he had been thinking—and one that profoundly affects his spirit as he is transported into the spiritual realm and begins to experience divine revelation and insight as scenes from eternity past through the history of his ancestors are being unveiled in his mind with a clarity and understanding that he has never experienced.

The words that follow are quite different from what Jude originally intended, spilling from his spirit onto the page as he now writes, driven with urgency by the Spirit of Christ—

Dear friends, I wanted very much to write to you concerning the salvation we share. Instead, ¹ I have to write insisting — begging! — that you fight with everything you have in you for this faith entrusted to us as a gift to guard and cherish. ² (¹ CEB, ² MSG)

As Jude looks beyond his own heart that is rejoicing in “this glorious salvation” there is a deeply disturbing scene of doctrinal corruption and spiritual laxity that has spread among believers and through the churches.

Some people have slipped in among you unnoticed. Not long ago they were condemned in writing for the following reason: They are people to whom God means nothing. They use God’s kindness as an excuse for sexual freedom and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (GWT)

Astoundingly, with the light of original apostolic revelation still brightly shining, the golden Age of the Apostles is, however, already being overshadowed by the Age of Apostasy.

Between his first and second use of “dear friends” Jude documents a history of apostasy by those who knew the truth and experienced the reality of the True Holy God and yet discarded it in rebellion against spiritual oversight and for indulgence in self-will and sense-oriented desires! He begins with his own Jewish ancestors, God’s chosen people of Israel—

I’m laying this out as clearly as I can, even though you once knew all this well enough and shouldn’t need reminding. ¹ The Lord, who once saved a people out of Egypt, later destroyed those who didn’t maintain their faith. ² (¹ MSG, ² CEB)

The Holy Spirit then directs Jude's attention to eternity past when Lucifer exalted himself,¹ drew a third of the angels into his deception, and there was war in the heavenlies.²

Remember the angels who did not stay within the limits of their proper authority, but abandoned their own dwelling place: they are bound with eternal chains in the darkness below, where God is keeping them for that great Day on which they will be condemned. (GNT)

Jude returns to the Biblical historical record, and drawing on the authority of Peter's apostolic revelation,³ he continues—

And don't forget the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighboring towns, all full of lust of every kind, including lust of men for other men. Those cities were destroyed by fire and continue to be a warning to us that there is a hell in which sinners are punished. (LB)

¹ cf. Isaiah 14.12-15; Ezekiel 28.11-19. Ezekiel 28 contains two prophecies addressed, respectively, to the ruler and king of Tyre. The first is addressed to the "ruler of Tyre" who is specifically addressed as "a man and not a god" (v. 2). The second prophecy addressed the "king of Tyre" and is followed by characterizations that transcend human application. It is clearly a reference to Lucifer, and the correlation of descriptions with the first prophecy reveal the godless supernatural influence that controlled the ruler of Tyre.

² Revelation 12.3-4, 7-9

³ Much of what Jude writes in condemnation of false teachers, use of examples and metaphorical descriptions, parallels chapter two of Peter's second letter, which was likely written in Rome shortly before his death. Peter was the central apostolic figure in the church at Jerusalem, so Peter's testimony would have been important to Jude—who wasn't an apostle—being able to write with clarity and certainty. Verse 18 is a direct quote of 2 Peter 3.3 and is evidence that Jude, whether in Jerusalem or Alexandria, or traveling as an evangelist, was very familiar with Peter's letter. Thus, Jude is standing on the apostolic authority of Peter regarding the "faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (ESV).

In the same way, these people ¹—these false teachers, carelessly go right on living their evil, immoral lives, degrading their bodies and laughing at those in authority over them, even scoffing at the Glorious Ones. ² But even Michael, one of the mightiest of the angels, did not dare accuse the devil of blasphemy, but simply said, “The Lord rebuke you!” (This took place when Michael was arguing with the devil about Moses’ body.) But these people scoff at things they do not understand. Like unthinking animals, they do whatever their instincts tell them, and so they bring about their own destruction. ³ How horrible it will be for them! ⁴ (¹ NLT, ² LB, ³ NLT, ⁴ GWT)

By now, Jude is deeply aware of the over-riding and inspiring influence of the Holy Spirit directing him what to write. This is far beyond the joy that was in his own heart when he sat down to write this letter—his thoughts and his words are not his own and he understands what the Apostle Peter meant when he wrote:

Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet’s own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God.

2 PETER 1.20-21 NLT

When he is prompted by the Spirit to write, “Woe upon them! For they follow the example of Cain who killed his brother,” his mind is drawn back to the startling and frightening words of the Lord Jesus:

“You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘Never murder. Whoever murders will answer for it in court.’ But I can guarantee that whoever is angry with another believer will answer for it in court. Whoever calls another believer an insulting name will answer for it in the highest court. Whoever calls another believer a fool will answer for it in hellfire.

MATTHEW 5.21-22 GWT

Another name comes to Jude's mind: Balaam—representative of false preachers who will do anything for money. You know their names; you've seen their shenanigans and heard their false gospel: "Give me your money and you will get a blessing." More godless teachers who claim to follow Jesus, but their words reveal that they have, in truth, rejected Jesus as their Master, because he said, "I tell you that unless you give up everything you cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14.33)

"Remind them of Korah," prompts the Holy Spirit. Jude's thoughts go back in the history of his people to a fateful, terrifying scene during the wanderings on the Sinai peninsula.¹ Korah, a Levite, chosen and set apart to minister in the presence of the LORD who is holy. Korah, who whispered to others his dissatisfaction with the spiritual oversight of Moses and Aaron. Korah, who convinced 250 other leaders that they did not have to follow the leadership of Moses or submit to his directions. "We can worship however we want; our way is just as good as what you say is the right way."² Oh, please remember, my readers, thinks Jude, grumbling against and rejecting spiritual leadership is disastrous! Korah? the LORD God split the ground open underneath his feet and devoured him and his men, their families, and their possessions. And the 250 leaders? Fire came out of the LORD God and burned them alive—while they were offering incense to the LORD!³

¹ This account is found in Numbers 16. Read verses 1-3 and 8-11. Like the angels to whom Jude referred, these Levites rejected their assigned calling; they wanted a position that God had not called them to. They are like many Christians who rebel against spiritual leadership, who believe that they know better, or as has often been the case, go off and start their own ministry. All rebellion against and rejection of human authority is a rebellion against God's authority. He is the one who calls and determines the place and role for each person. Beginning with Lucifer, all creation has a wretched record of "staying in one's own lane" and fulfilling one's assignment. Nothing could be further from the spirit and example of Christ who was absolutely surrendered to the will of God and whose servant-heart we are expected to emulate—"Christ became a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth" (Romans 15.8).

² Numbers 16.12-14

³ Numbers 16.35. Even after God's judgment on the 250, the people still grumbled and incurred further judgment on themselves. This saga continues through Numbers 17.

The Holy Spirit, who knows the mind of the One who is the True Gardener and the One who knows and judges the thoughts and intent of every heart,¹ begins to bring to mind metaphors to describe these people “who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.”

“These people are blemishes at your times of Communion, eating with you without the slightest qualm.” They are Ezekiel’s shepherds—feeding only themselves; sheep who trample the pasture and muddy the clear water.²

“They are like clouds blowing over dry land without giving rain, promising much, but producing nothing.” (LB)

“They are like fruit trees without any fruit at picking time” (LB) —like the fig tree cursed by Jesus because it was all leaves and no fruit. *“They are not only dead, but doubly dead, for they have been pulled out, roots and all, to be burned”* (LB). It is just as the Lord Jesus said—

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. . . . If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

JOHN 15.1-2a, 4, 7 NIV

“They are like wild waves of the sea, churning up the foam of their shameful deeds.” (NLT)

“They wander around looking as bright as stars, but ahead of them is the everlasting gloom and darkness that God has prepared for them.” (LB)

¹ cf. John 15.1; Hebrews 4.12-13; Revelation 2.23

² cf. Ezekiel 34.1-10, 17-19)

Enoch, who lived seven generations after Adam, knew about these men and said this about them: “See, the Lord is coming with millions of his holy ones. He will bring the people of the world before him in judgment, to receive just punishment and to prove the terrible things they have done in rebellion against God, revealing all they have said against him.” (LB)

These people are grumblers and faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage.

Do they not remember, thought Jude, what the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth—

For we must never forget, dear brothers, what happened to our people in the wilderness long ago. God guided them by sending a cloud that moved along ahead of them; and he brought them all safely through the waters of the Red Sea. This might be called their “baptism”—baptized both in sea and cloud!—as followers of Moses—their commitment to him as their leader. And by a miracle God sent them food to eat and water to drink there in the desert; they drank the water that Christ gave them. He was there with them as a mighty Rock of spiritual refreshment. Yet after all this most of them did not obey God, and he destroyed them in the wilderness.

From this lesson we are warned that we must not desire evil things as they did, nor worship idols as they did. (The Scriptures tell us, “The people sat down to eat and drink and then got up to dance” in worship of the golden calf.)

Another lesson for us is what happened when some of them sinned with other men’s wives, and 23,000 fell dead in one day. And don’t try the Lord’s patience—they did and died from snake bites. And don’t murmur against God and his dealings with you as some of them did, for that is why God sent his Angel to destroy them.

All these things happened to them as examples—as object lessons to us—to warn us against doing the same things; they were written down so that we could read about them and learn from them in these last days as the world nears its end.

So be careful. If you are thinking, “Oh, I would never behave like that”—let this be a warning to you. For you too may fall into sin!

1 CORINTHIANS 10.1-12 LB

When Jude now writes “dear friends” for the second time in his letter, it is to say—

But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. They said to you, “In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires.” These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.

“Remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold” – the astonishing reality is that what the apostles **foretold** concerning the “**last times**” has already happened!

When Jude makes reference to what the apostles of our Lord Jesus foretold, he quotes from Peter’s second letter (3.3), a letter that Peter wrote to remind believers that they need to build up their faith in light of the apostasy of the last days—

For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 PETER 1.8

In warning believers, Peter wrote—

My dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both letters to stir up your sincere understanding with a reminder. I want you to recall what the holy prophets foretold as well as what the Lord and Savior commanded through your apostles. Most important, know this: in the last days scoffers will come, jeering, living by their own cravings, and saying, “Where is the promise of his coming? After all, nothing has changed—not since the beginning of creation, nor even since the ancestors died.” But they fail to notice that, by God’s word, heaven and earth were formed long ago out of water and by means of water. And it was through these that the world of that time was flooded and destroyed. But by the same word, heaven and earth are now held in reserve for fire, kept for the Judgment Day and destruction of ungodly people. Don’t let it escape your notice, dear friends, that with the Lord a single day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a single day. The Lord isn’t slow to keep his promise, as some think of slowness, but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to perish but all to change their hearts and lives. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. On that day the heavens will pass away with a dreadful noise, the elements will be consumed by fire, and the earth and all the works done on it will be exposed. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be? You must live holy and godly lives, waiting for and hastening the coming day of God. . . . Therefore, dear friends, while you are waiting for these things to happen, make every effort to be found by him in peace—pure and faultless.

2 PETER 3.1-11, 14 CEB

The word “apostle” is *apostolos* and means “one sent as a messenger or agent.” Its root word *apostello* means, “set apart to be sent out.” The apostles are the foundation of the church, with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. They are the ones through whom, as Jude wrote in verse three, the message of faith in Christ Jesus was delivered in totality, “once for all.”

The word *apostasy* closely resembles *apostle*, sharing the first five letters and sharing the same root word, *apo* (off, i.e. away from something near). But at that point all resemblance ends. Apostasy is defined as a falling away; both Jesus and Paul described how many would turn away from the faith, abandoning their thrust in Christ, and following false teaching and their own desires (see Matthew 24.12; 2 Timothy 4.3-4). It is represented in the New Testament by a couple of words: *apostrepho*: “to turn away or back;” *apotoassomai*: “to say adieu (by departing or dismissing); to renounce.” Stories abound today of churches amending the faith that was “once for all entrusted to the saints” and people who were noted Christians leaders and artists rejecting what they once claimed was the truth of God. Many have simply said “adieu” to the body of Christ and the fellowship of “yourselves” (Jude 20, 21). The writer to the Hebrews warns us: “Don’t stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10.25 CEB).

Jude is not led by the Holy Spirit to encourage us to be faithful, to go to church when we can, to have a Bible – but to contend and labor to build. Every step of the way, we must fight for our faith against the constant pressure and deception that will cause, as Jesus said, the love of most to grow cold.¹

Jude began by telling us that we are kept by Christ; he ends by writing that Christ is able to keep us from falling. In between, he reminds, begs, urges, and commands. Why? As the Scripture has revealed: ***it is a short distance from truth to total loss.***

¹ Matthew 24.12