



Session Sixteen

THE “CATHOLIC EPISTLES” JAMES, PETER, JOHN AND JUDE THE BOOK OF REVELATION

*Let us feel in our hearts, Lord
The promise you gave.
That someday You will dwell with us and we with You
and that we will be Your people
as we have never been before.
And You will wipe every tear from our eyes
for there will be no more death, no more loss, no more pain
when the old order passes away.
“Behold!” You will command from Your throne.
“I am making everything new!”
Amen.*

From Revelation 21:3-5



Word Watch

catholic: from Latin & Greek meaning “universal.” The Catholic Epistles probably came to be termed thus because they were not addressed to individual churches or persons but were meant for the church at large. The word also appears in the Nicene Creed, describing the church; it is not a reference to the Roman Catholic church but rather to the universal church.

Apocalypse: from the Greek meaning “unveiling” or “revelation.” Besides the most famous New Testament Book of Revelation, “apocalypse” refers to any of a number of Jewish and Christian texts dating from the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD which contain prophecies about the end of the world and the salvation of the righteous.



The Catholic Epistles

These letters or epistles by James, Peter, John and Jude are called *catholic* because they are written about universal topics. You remember that catholic means “universal.” Sometimes these letters are also called the *general* epistles. We can look at them a little more specifically.

The Letter of James

In studying the letters of Saint Paul, we discovered that three big problems faced the early Church. One of these problems was that some Church members were saying that only a person’s faith mattered, not the person’s actions or “good works.” If we no longer follow the Mosaic law word for word, they said, then what we do no longer matters, since the Old Testament law was all about what a person should do or not do.

James, who was a relative of Jesus Christ and the first bishop of the Church in Jerusalem, wrote his letter partly to correct such ideas. James said that any person of faith will express that faith in good works. Read *James 2:14-17*. Rewrite it in your own words. You might want to do it as a story, a dialogue, or just a re-working of James’s own words. Share what you have created with the rest of the class.

James had another concern in this letter. He knew how powerful our spoken words can be. What we say can help us and others. But what we say can also injure and harm others. Read what he says in *James 3:7-12*. Next, read *Psalms 141:3-4*. Answer these questions:

- What do these two readings have in common?
- Think of a time when you or someone else used the power of words in a positive way.
- Think of a time when you or someone else used the power of words in a negative way.

What are some ways that all of us can use the power of words most positively?

The First Letter of Peter

This letter was written from Rome, and probably dictated by the apostle Peter to a close associate between 60 and 68 A.D. It’s addressed to new converts from paganism, living in Asia Minor. Peter explains in depth to these “newborn babes” what their baptism means. He reminds them to live in a new way, not looking back at what they were before. Read his description of what it means to be baptized in *1 Peter 1:3-9* and in *1:23-25*. Next, read what Peter tells these newly-baptized people to do in *2:1-5* and in *4:8-11*.

The Second Letter of Peter

The new Christians were excited about their faith. Some were so excited, in fact, that they thought the Second Coming would take place very soon. As time went on and life remained the same, some of them became impatient—why didn't God fulfill His promise now?

In his second letter, written to the same people as the first letter was, Peter addresses this problem. Read his words in *2 Peter 3:1-9*. What does Peter give as the main reason for God's delay in keeping His promise?

Peter also warns these new Christians against the Gnostics, who rejected the material world as evil and not having to do with God. You remember that the Gnostics denied the reality that Christ took flesh and rose from the dead. They refused to believe that God, who is Spirit, would involve Himself so closely with a physical body.

Read Peter's words in *2 Peter 2:18-22*. "They" refers to the Gnostics.

The First, Second, and Third Letters of John

The apostle and Gospel writer John wrote three letters, all of them from Ephesus around 90 A.D. The first letter is the longest, and contains the most important material. It was probably passed from church to church to be read and thought about. All three letters deal with the problems created by the Gnostics, whom John considered to be a bunch of religious snobs.

Why did John feel this way? Because the Gnostics thought they were special, a kind of "elite" among Christians. They were "too spiritual" to believe in the *Incarnation* (a word that refers to Jesus Christ taking flesh, or becoming man). They were also "too spiritual" to believe that He rose from the dead. In their view, Jesus of Nazareth was an ordinary man until He was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. At that time, He received supernatural powers. Once He had completed His mission of making God known to all humanity, the supernatural powers left Him. So the man who died on the cross was just a man, and His death meant nothing special. There was no resurrection of the divine Son of God for the Gnostics.

How did the Gnostics claim to know all this? They asserted that they had been specially enlightened. They felt that they were far above others in their exclusive knowledge of God. (The word *gnosis* in Greek means "knowledge" and it refers to this special knowledge they claimed. The name "Gnostic" comes from this word.)

The Gnostics looked down on their fellow Christians as “unenlightened” and were rather contemptuous of them. Even more serious, the Gnostics claimed to be above the laws that govern our physical lives. Some of them believed they were entitled to do anything for pleasure in eating, entertainment, or sexual activity. They were above those physical laws—let the unenlightened ones abide by them. The apostle John was quite right in considering them to be religious snobs, and he wrote plainly about it.

John first establishes himself as an eyewitness of Jesus Christ (as Peter also does in his letters). Then he writes about how we should feel toward one another. Read his words in *1 John 2:3-11*. How does John say we can “know” God? What does he say about looking down on others? What is he referring to?

John was of course concerned about divisions that the “exclusive” attitudes of the Gnostics could cause in the Christian community. He reminded his readers that we are all one family, bound together by the love God has shown to all of us, and also bound by the knowledge of God that we all have. But this is not just sentimental “love talk.” John also wants his readers to be wise, and not naïve. Read *1 John 4:1-6*. How does John want his readers to respond to things they hear?

Looking In

Look up *1 John 4:7-12*. How many times does the word “love” appear? What does verse 12 mean to you?

The Letter of Jude

This brief letter, by an unknown writer, addresses some crises of leadership in the Church. This letter contains a phrase that is often used to describe the Christian faith: “the faith that was once for all delivered [entrusted] to the saints [apostles]” (1:3). This phrase reminds us that there is one faith, and that God gave it to His people to hold and live by.

The Book of Revelation

Late in his life, the apostle and Gospel writer John was living in exile. He was given a vision, and was commanded by Christ to write it down. This book, written about 95 A.D., is the result.

John had been bishop of the Church in Asia Minor during the time when the Emperor Domitian began a persecution of Christians that spread across the whole Roman Empire. The Christians were his special targets because of their refusal to take part in the cult of emperor worship. Domitian called himself “savior,” “lord,” and even “god,” and had statues of himself erected everywhere. Refusal to go along with this idolatry cost the Christians jobs, possessions, freedom, and in many cases their lives. It was at this time that John was sent into exile on Patmos, off the west coast of Asia Minor.

John's Vision

The Book of Revelation is nothing less than a vision of Christ in His heavenly glory, and of the ultimate destiny of the world. It is filled with symbols, mysterious numbers, figures of speech, and descriptions of otherworldly events and creatures. The Church has never tried to "figure these out" because that is not the purpose of the book. Its author wanted to give comfort to Christians enduring terrible hardships and suffering in the world. He wanted to show them that it all had meaning and purpose and that things were still in God's hands, not the hands of their fierce human enemies.

In the book, John is commanded by Christ to send messages to each of the seven churches in Asia. Some of these warn of tribulation and suffering, some are critical of members' lukewarm faith. Other messages accuse the members of being too lazy about converting unbelievers, and two commend communities for their steadfastness in the face of suffering.

From these messages, Christians ever since have been taking inspiration and comfort. And the same is true for John's descriptions of terrible beasts that threaten the followers of Christ. John's beasts and terrifying creatures were Rome and the Roman emperor, but we can take his descriptions to apply to all the things that threaten and harm the Church in this world. John has the promise of God that if we hold on through the terrible things we face here, we will be with Him in His glorious Kingdom forever.

John also describes the breathtaking beauty of the Kingdom and the worship that goes on there. It is partly on this description that the Armenian Church and other Orthodox churches base their worship.

The Book of Revelation also tells us about God's final judgment on the world. For this reason it is also called The Apocalypse—remember that this means an unveiling or revelation. It applies to the "last days" of life, when Christ will come again, and life as we know it now will be at an end. We are told that God's judgment will be terrible and decisive. But, as we have said, the strongest message of the Book of Revelation is that we will survive all the terrors of this world, and will be with Christ in glory, if we only persevere in love and faith.

The New Testament Letters in Our Worship

When we studied the Book of Psalms, we said that there are psalms in every worship service of the Armenian Church and her sister Orthodox churches. They are really a book of prayers, and they have been used that way in churches since they were written.

Did You Know?

There have been many attempts to link the number of the "beast", 666 (Revelation 13:18), with contemporary figures since the verse clearly states that the number stands for a "certain man." However, 666 was a shared code with writer and audience that meant "Nero Caesar." The Hebrew letters for that title have a numerical value (did you know Armenian letters have a numerical value as well?) that adds up to 666.

The Armenian Angle

Take a few minutes now to write the number of the appropriate Bible citation next to each event from the Armenian Divine Liturgy. Use Bibles and Divine Liturgy books to find the correct answers. After you make the match-ups, be ready to explain how and why they match. You should be able to find most of these parts of the Divine Liturgy easily. For example, the point at which the priest vests is obviously the beginning of the service.

Many other passages from the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, are also used in our worship. This includes the letters we have just been studying.

Divine Liturgy

- a. The priest prays as he puts on his vestments.____
- b. As a sign that we are at peace with everyone and thus ready to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we give a kiss of peace to fellow worshippers.____
- c. At the end of the service, we acknowledge that all good things are from God and we thank Him.____
- d. During the anaphora (a Greek word which means “lifting up”) the priest offers our gifts of bread and wine to God, in preparation for Holy Communion. He offers us God’s blessing—a blessing that comes from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.____
- e. After singing Soorp Asdvadz, we ask God to remember those who govern us.____

Letters:

1. Timothy 2:1
2. Corinthians 13:13
3. Ephesians 6:13-17
4. Thessalonians 5:26
5. James 1:17