

Inset Commentary
(From *The Holy Bible In Its Original Order*
A New English Translation
A Faithful Version with Commentary)

The Original Placement of the General Epistles in the New Testament

In nearly every version or translation of the New Testament, the General Epistles are found after the book of Hebrews and before the book of Revelation. But that was not the original placement of the seven General Epistles.

Few people who read the New Testament realize that in its original canonization by the apostles of Jesus Christ—Paul, Peter and John—the General Epistles were placed immediately after the book of Acts and before the Epistle to the Romans. That is the proper order of the books in the New Testament, as “inspired” by God the Father and Jesus Christ. To this day, the Byzantine Text of the New Testament retains the correct order of the books.

The original arrangement of the books of the New Testament is well-known by scholars and textual critics. As one scholarly work states, “Whether copies contain the whole or a part of the sacred volume, the general order of the books is the following: Gospels, Acts, Catholic Epistles [the title that scholars have given to the General Epistles—not epistles written by the Fathers of the Catholic Church—the word Catholic in this sense means General or Universal], Pauline Epistles, Apocalypse [the book of Revelation]” (Scrivener, *Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, 4th ed., vol. 1, p. 72).

In his dictionary of the Bible, Hastings shows that even scholars who were involved in higher criticism acknowledge the original placement of the General Epistles. He states, “This is the position [the General Epistles before Paul’s] assigned them in the critical editions of Lachmann, Tischendorf, Tregelles, Westcott and Hort” (*Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. “Catholic Epistles,” vol. 1, p. 360).

Scholars attribute the original placement of the General Epistles to the high repute in which their authors were held by the early New Testament church. Concerning the placement of the General Epistles, we read, “In our English New Testament, the General Epistles are placed near the end of the volume, just before the Book of Revelation. The Greek manuscripts put them, as a rule, immediately after the Gospels and Acts, and before the writings of Paul. This was no doubt in recognition of the fact that they bore the names of the Apostles who were directly associated with Jesus, and whose authority, therefore, might be considered superior to that of Paul. In keeping with this principle, the first place of all was accorded to the Epistle of James. Its author was assumed to be no[ne] other than James, the Lord’s own brother” (*The Literature of the New Testament*, pp. 209-210).

While acknowledging the role that the apostles’ high standing played in the placement of the General Epistles, we must be careful not to view their original placement as a matter of human opinion. It is not human judgment but divine “inspiration” that guided the original placement of these epistles among the books of the New Testament.

The Divine Purpose in the Original Placement of the General Epistles

The General Epistles, which were originally located after the book of Acts and before the Epistle to the Romans, clearly teach that obedience to the laws and commandments of God is required of all Christians and is essential for salvation. The General Epistles lay a firm scriptural foundation for understanding Paul’s words concerning law and grace, not only in the Epistle to the Romans but in his other epistles as well. If the original order of the apostolic epistles had been retained by the translators of the New Testament, perhaps the scriptural teachings concerning

grace and law-keeping would not have been so universally misconstrued.

While the General Epistles are relatively short, they contain clear and easy-to-understand instructions for Christian living. In the first epistle, written by the apostle James, we read, “Then be doers of *the* Word, and not only hearers, deceiving your own selves; because if anyone is a hearer of *the* Word and not a doer, this one is like a man considering his natural face in a mirror who, after looking at himself, went away and immediately forgot what he was like. But the one **who has looked into *the* perfect law of freedom, and has continued in *it***, this one himself has not become a forgetful hearer, but is a doer of *the* work. **This one shall be blessed in his actions**” (Jas. 1:22-25).

James shows that Christians who truly understand the law of freedom and want to receive God’s blessings will be keeping all the commandments of God. James makes it explicitly clear that to break even one of these commandments is sin. He writes, “If you are truly keeping *the* Royal Law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well. But if you have respect of persons, you are practicing sin, being convicted by the law as transgressors; **for if anyone keeps the whole law, but sins in one aspect, he becomes guilty of all**. For He Who said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘You shall not commit murder.’ Now if you do not commit adultery, but you commit murder, you have become a transgressor of *the* law. **In this manner speak and in this manner behave: as those who are about to be judged by *the* law of freedom**” (Jas. 2:8-12).

After James’ powerful words, we find the epistles of Peter, which confirm that obedience to God is required of all believers. Peter admonishes, “As obedient children, do not conform yourselves to your former lusts, *as you did* in *your* ignorance. But according as He Who has called you *is* holy, you yourselves also be holy in all *your* conduct; for it is written, ‘You be holy, because I am holy.’ And if you call upon the Father, Who judges according to each man’s work without respect of persons, pass the time of your *life’s* journey in *the* fear of *God*” (I Pet. 1:14-17).

Following Peter’s writings are the inspired words of John, which make it absolutely clear that commandment-keeping is required for salvation. John declares, “And by this *standard* we know that we know Him: if we keep His commandments. **Anyone who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar**, and the truth is not in him. On the other hand, *if* anyone is keeping His Word, truly in this one the love of God is being perfected [*made complete*]. By this *means* we know that we are in Him. Anyone who claims to dwell in Him is obligating himself also to walk even as He Himself walked” (I John 2:3-6).

John shows that it is a grievous error to claim that Christians do not need to keep God’s commandments. He makes it clear that those who teach this false view are actually promoting sin! John proclaims, “Everyone who practices sin is also practicing lawlessness, for **sin is lawlessness** [KJV, “sin is the transgression of the law”]” (I John 3:4).

After James’, Peter’s and John’s exhortations comes an urgent warning from the apostle Jude to be on guard against those who promote lawlessness. Jude writes, “Beloved, when personally exerting all *my* diligence to write to you concerning the common salvation, I was compelled to write to you, exhorting *you* to fervently fight for the faith, which once for all *time* has been delivered to the saints. For certain men have stealthily crept in; those who long ago have been written about, condemning *them* to this judgment. *They are* ungodly men, who are **perverting the grace of our God, turning it into licentiousness**, and are personally denying the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ” (Jude 3-4).

These selected quotes from the General Epistles, which clearly reveal that commandment-keeping is required of all Christians, should give the reader a better understanding of why God inspired the apostles who compiled the New Testament to place these seven epistles before the apostle Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. The Epistle to the Romans contains some very difficult to understand teachings about law and grace. Of this Peter wrote, “And bear in mind that the long-suffering of our Lord *is* salvation, exactly as our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has also written to you; as *he has* also in all *his* epistles, speaking in them concerning these things; in which are some things *that are* difficult to understand, which the ignorant and unstable are twisting *and* *distorting*, as *they* also *twist and distort* the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction” (II Pet. 3:15-16).

Shortly before the close of the apostolic era, false apostles and false teachers from within the churches of God were distorting the words of the true apostles of Jesus Christ and were changing the truth of God into a lie! As Jude warned, they were turning the grace of God into

lasciviousness—license to sin—by teaching that the laws of God were no longer in effect. The apostle John identified this growing apostasy, led by “many antichrists” as “the spirit of error” or “the spirit of deception.”

The early Christians were being confused by seductive teachings and false doctrines promulgated by this spirit of error and deception. Many antichrists were teaching that Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh, that humans do not have sinful natures, and that commandment-keeping is not required for salvation. Through these and other false doctrines, a new pseudo-grace was being substituted for the grace of God toward righteous living through Jesus Christ.

To combat these satanic doctrines, the apostle John was inspired to write the truth of God in simple yet powerful language. He clearly taught obedience to the commandments of God, the forgiveness of sins, the fullness of God’s love, the true meaning of brotherly love, and the eternal calling to be the children of God. John’s words make it absolutely clear that the destiny of the children of God is to become as God is, through God’s profound and magnificent love!

The Order of the Seven General Epistles

The General Epistles begin with the Epistle of James, a leading apostle and brother of Jesus Christ. His epistle is followed by the epistles of Peter and John, whose teachings also carried great weight in the early New Testament Church. In describing his early contacts with these leading apostles at Jerusalem, the apostle Paul shows the high repute in which they were held. We find this account in the Epistle to the Galatians, where Paul describes his personal calling by Christ—separate from the other apostles—and tells how he became acquainted with James, Peter and John.

After writing about his calling, Paul relates his first contact with Peter and James: “I went away into Arabia [where he was personally taught in visions by Jesus Christ] and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years [from the time he went into Arabia], I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Peter, and I remained with him fifteen days. But I did not see *any* of the other apostles, except James the brother of the Lord” (Gal. 1:17-19).

It was not until fourteen years later, when there was a dispute over circumcision, that Paul again visited the apostles at Jerusalem. He writes, “Then after fourteen years I again went up to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus with *me* also. And I went up according to revelation, and laid before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those of repute, lest by any means I should be running, or had run in vain. (But indeed, Titus, who *was* with me, being a Greek, was not compelled to be circumcised.)

“Now *this meeting* was *private* because of false brethren brought in secretly, who came in by stealth to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, in order that they might bring us into bondage; to whom we did not yield in subjection, *not* even for one hour, so that the truth of the gospel might continue with you. But *the gospel that I preach did not come* from those reputed to be something. (Whatever they were does not make any difference to me; God does not accept the person of a man.) For those who are of repute conferred no *authority* upon me.

“But on the contrary, after seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel of the uncircumcision, exactly as Peter *had been entrusted with the gospel* of the circumcision; (for He Who wrought in Peter for *the* apostleship of the circumcision wrought in me also towards the Gentiles;) and after recognizing the grace that was given to me, **James** and **Cephas** [Peter] and **John**—those reputed to be pillars—gave to me and Barnabas *the* right hands of fellowship, *affirming* that we *should go* to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcision” (Gal. 2:1-9).

Notice the order in which the apostle Paul lists these leading apostles: James, the brother of the Lord, and then Peter and John. The order in Paul’s account gives us an indication of the standing of these three apostles, who were considered pillars in the early days of the church at Jerusalem. It is no coincidence that the order of the seven General Epistles follows the same sequence: **James, I and II Peter and I, II and III John**.

The General Epistles also include the Epistle of the apostle Jude, who was another brother of Jesus Christ. Jude’s epistle is placed after John’s epistles. While neither the New Testament nor early Church history reveals when Jude was made an apostle, it was—as in Paul’s case—after Peter and John. Peter and John were among the original twelve chosen by Jesus Christ and were recognized as leading apostles, along with James. Accordingly, in the sequence of the General Epistles, we find Jude’s epistle placed after James’, Peter’s and John’s.

The order of these epistles also follows a sequence of topics that conforms to Scriptural revelation through Paul. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul lists the three most important aspects of true Christian belief and practice: “And now, these three remain [they are living spiritual qualities]; **faith, hope and love**; but the greatest of these *is love*” (I Cor. 13:13).

We find that God also inspired the topics of the General Epistles to follow the same order. The theme of the first of the General Epistles, written by the apostle James, is **faith**. The theme of the next two epistles, written by the apostle Peter, is **hope**. The three epistles that follow Peter’s were written by the apostle John. It is no coincidence that the theme of all three of his epistles is **love**.

The order of these three themes is additional evidence of God’s powerful inspiration in the writing of the General Epistles. These themes reflect the ongoing process of a Christian’s spiritual growth toward maturity in Christ Jesus.

James’ Theme: Faith

The believer must begin his or her Christian walk by faith. This faith is founded upon a personal belief in God the Father and Jesus Christ. Each believer must personally accept the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins by grace through faith.

This first step in spiritual growth was taught not only by James but by all the apostles. Paul explained it very clearly when he wrote, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this *faith has not come* from your own selves; *it is* the gift of God. Not from works [your own human works], so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto *the* good works [based on the Word of God and faith], that God ordained beforehand [to live by every word of God], in order that we might walk in them (Eph. 2:8-10).

True faith in Jesus Christ will lead each believer to follow in His footsteps, walking in obedience to the Father’s commandments, as Jesus did, and doing the same good works. The apostle James shows that a faith that does not produce obedience and good works is of no value in God’s eyes. James wrote this concerning faith: “My brethren, what good *does* it do, if anyone says *that he* has faith, and does not have works? Is faith able to save him? Now then, if there be a brother or sister who is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; be warmed and be filled,’ and does not give to them the things necessary for the body, what good is it?

“In the same way also, faith, if it does not have works, is dead, by itself. But someone is going to say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ *My answer is*: You prove your faith to me through your works, and I will prove my faith to you through my works. Do you believe that God is one? You do well *to believe this*. Even the demons believe—and tremble *in fear*. But are you willing to understand, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac, his own son, upon the altar?

“Do you not see that faith was working together with his works, and by works *his* faith was perfected? And the scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Now Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him for righteousness’; and he was called a friend of God. You see, then, that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only” (James 2:14-24).

James’ epistle gives the truly converted Christian clear instructions on how to grow from a beginning belief in God to a mature, active, living faith like that of Abraham, the father of the faithful.

Peter’s Theme: Hope

The Scriptures show that **hope is built upon the foundation of faith**. Peter describes this hope as “a living hope” because it is manifested in the way that a Christian lives his or her life. Paul touches on this same theme in his Epistle to the Romans, where he shows that Abraham lived not only by faith—the true spiritual faith that pleases God—but also by hope.

He writes: “For this reason *it is* of faith, in order that *it might be* by grace, to the end that the promise might be certain to all the seed—not to the one who is of the law only, but also to the one who *is* of *the* faith of Abraham, who is *the* father of us all; (exactly as it is written, ‘I have made you a father of many nations.’) before God in Whom he believed, Who gives life to the dead, and calls the things that are not as though they are;

“*And* who **against hope believed in hope**, in order that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, ‘So shall your seed be.’ And he, not being weak in the faith, considered not his own body, already having become dead, being about one hundred years old, nor *did he consider* the deadness of Sarah’s womb; and he did not doubt the promise of God through unbelief; rather, **he was strengthened in the faith**, giving glory to God; for **he was fully persuaded** that what He has promised, He is also able to do” (Rom. 4:16-21).

Hope is rooted in faith, but faith comes first. Likewise, God inspired the themes of the General Epistles to follow the same order: faith first, then hope. In his epistles, the apostle Peter shows that this hope is based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Peter begins his first epistle:

“Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who, according to His abundant mercy, **has begotten us again unto a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead**; unto an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and unfading, reserved in heaven for us, who *are* being safeguarded by *the* power of God through faith, for salvation *that is* ready to be revealed in *the* last time” (I Pet. 1:3-5).

Peter’s words show how our faith in Jesus Christ leads to faith and hope in God the Father. Peter declares that we were redeemed “... by *the* precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot; Who truly was foreknown before *the* foundation of *the* world, but was manifested in *these* last times for your sakes, *even for you* who through Him do believe in God, Who raised Him from *the* dead and gave Him glory, so that **your faith and hope might be in God**” (Verses 19-21).

Peter goes on to show that we should always have hope in God the Father and Jesus Christ, regardless of the circumstances that beset us. He exhorts, “But sanctify the Lord God in your own hearts, and always *be* prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you the reason for **the hope that is** in you, with meekness and reverence” (I Pet. 3:15).

Peter closes his first epistle with some of the most comforting words of hope in Scripture for those who have been suffering. “Now may the God of all grace, Who has called us unto His eternal glory in Christ Jesus, after *you* have suffered a little while, Himself perfect you, establish, strengthen, *and* settle you” (I Pet. 5:10).

John’s Theme: Love

As James focuses on faith, and Peter on hope, so John focuses on the theme of **love**. The order of these three themes is fitting because it is **faith** and **hope** that lead each Christian into the love of God. Love is the greatest spiritual gift, freely imparted by God the Father to every true believer through faith and hope in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul expresses this profound spiritual truth as follows:

“Therefore, having been **justified by faith**, we have peace with God **through our Lord Jesus Christ**. Through Whom we also have **access by faith into this grace** in which we stand, and we ourselves boast in **the hope of the glory of God**. And not only *this*, but we also boast in tribulations, realizing that tribulation brings forth endurance, and endurance *brings forth* character, and character *brings forth* **hope**. And the hope *of God* never makes us ashamed **because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts** through the Holy Spirit, which has been given to us” (Rom. 5:1-5).

What a wonderful progression of **faith, hope** and **love** that God gives us by His grace through the Holy Spirit!

It is no coincidence that the apostle John, whom Jesus loved, wrote more about love in his Gospel and Epistles than the other apostles. John’s words reveal the profound love of God in a very personal way and show why His love is the greatest gift of all. The most memorized and most often quoted verse in the entire Bible was written by the apostle John: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16, *KJV*).

John 3:16 is so universally publicized that even at televised sporting events, one will nearly always see a sign or placard with this verse written on it. While this common use of the verse may seem to trivialize the Scriptures, we should not allow it to detract from the profound meaning of these words that God inspired John to write in his Gospel.

Although much shorter and not as well known as his Gospel, John’s epistles contain many passages and even whole chapters which expound on the love of God. In describing the

immeasurable richness and fullness of His love, John shows that the love of God is the foundation of the believer's hope:

“Behold! **What glorious love** the Father has given to us, that we should be called the children of God! For this very reason, the world does not know us because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are the children of God, and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be; but we know that when He is manifested, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him exactly as He is. And **everyone who has this hope** in him purifies himself, even as He is pure” (I John 3:1-3).

John goes on to show that the love of God is His most all-encompassing attribute and the very essence of His nature. John's words make it clear that those who truly have the love of God dwelling in them will manifest that love by loving one another. He declares, “Beloved, we should love one another because **love is from God**; and everyone who loves has been begotten by God, and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God **because GOD IS LOVE**” (I John 4:7-8).

John emphasizes that the love of God, which is freely given to us, not only enables us but *obligates* us to love one another. He declares, “In this *way* **the love of God** was manifested toward us: that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. In this *act* is **THE LOVE**—not that we loved God; rather, that **He loved us** and sent His Son *to be the* propitiation for our sins. Beloved, **if God so loved us, we also are duty-bound to love one another**” (I John 4:9-11).

The highest pinnacle of spiritual growth is to dwell in love and to have the love of God perfected in us. John shows that this spiritual perfection is accomplished through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit:

“No one has seen God at any time. **Yet if we love one another, God dwells in us, and His own love is perfected [made complete] in us.** By this *standard* we know that we are dwelling in Him, and He *is dwelling* in us: **because of His own Spirit which He has given to us.**

“And we have seen *for ourselves* and bear witness that the Father sent the Son *as the* Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwells in him, and he in God. **And we have known and have believed the love that God has toward us. GOD IS LOVE, and the one who dwells in love is dwelling in God, and God in him.** By this *spiritual indwelling*, the love of God is perfected [made complete] within us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment because even as He is, so also are we in this world” (I John 4:12-17).

John's words actually encompass all three themes of the General Epistles by showing how faith and hope lead to true spiritual love. As John reveals, the process of being perfected in the love of God brings each believer into a close personal relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ so that he or she can overcome fear and hatred and even human frailty. John writes, “There is no fear in the love of God; rather, perfect love casts out fear because fear has torment. And the one who fears has not been made perfect in the love of God.

“**We love Him because He loved us first.** If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar. For if he does not love his brother whom he has seen, how is he able to love God, Whom he has not seen? And this *is* the commandment *that* we have from Him: that the one who loves God should also love his brother” (I John 4:18-21).

John brings the love of God into sharp focus when he writes that those who love God and have the love of God dwelling in them will be keeping His commandments. “By this *standard* we know that we love the children of God: when **we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God: that we keep His commandments**; and His commandments are not burdensome” (I John 5:2-3).

The teachings of the apostle John and all the writers of the General Epistles are clearly based on the personal teachings of Jesus Christ concerning the love of God and the commandments of God, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew: “And Jesus said to him, ‘You shall love *the* Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is *the* first [primary] and great commandment; and *the* second *one is* like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ **On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets**” (Mat. 22:37-40).

To help us fully understand the teachings of Jesus Christ, God inspired the General Epistles to be written and preserved for us in His Word. Even the sequence of their themes shows divine planning and confirms the inspired arrangement of these seven epistles.

Jude's Warning

The Epistle of Jude is the seventh and last of the General Epistles. Jude's epistle is a stern warning against false teachers and prophets who seek to destroy true faith, hope and love as taught by the apostles of Jesus Christ. Jude's closing admonition includes an earnest appeal to true believers to remain in the faith and love of God while continuing in the hope of eternal life:

“But you, beloved, remember the words that were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; because they said to you that in *the* last time there would be mockers, who would be selfishly walking according to their own ungodly lusts ... But you, beloved, *be building up yourselves on your most holy faith*, praying in *the* Holy Spirit, *so that* you **keep yourselves in the love of God while** you are **personally awaiting the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life**” (Jude 17-18, 20-21).

Jude's warning to true Christians is a fitting conclusion to the General Epistles and further confirms the inspired arrangement of these epistles, which are so vital to our understanding of true faith, hope and love.