




Editor's Note

Sometimes normal routines get interrupted. It's that way with this issue. Normally, this Editor's Note gets written somewhere along the way. This time it's being written last. Normally, we don't use ESN space to talk about personal needs. This time, I'm hoping our readers will understand!

In June, my dear wife Ruth fell and broke her hip. Replacement surgery went well, as did some weeks in a "rehab" facility. Once home, the physical therapist was helping her to learn to walk again. Progress was slow but

encouraging. Then suddenly last week she became ill and landed in the hospital emergency room with a serious infection.

She's back home now, trying to relearn to walk. We understand that our times are in the Lord's hand, but He says, "Ask!" So this is a request for prayer for strength for us both, and for Darcy, a beloved sister who has come to live with us and help us. Since prayer is our biggest need right now, it's a way to show kindness, as you are [see my article this issue] "moved with compassion!" 

New Testament Overview

Part 6: The General Epistles *by Warren Henderson*

The seven epistles written by James, Peter, John, and Jude are often referred to as the General Epistles because these are addressed to the wider Body of Christ. *Hebrews* may be a Pauline work, but it is usually lumped with the General Epistles for this reason. Though written to individuals, the letters of 2 and 3 John are included within the General Epistles as to not unduly isolate them from John's first epistle. The General Epistles largely focus on the practical aspects of living for Christ during arduous times.

Hebrews

The author of *Hebrews* did not identify himself and countless arguments have been raised to assert authorship. Paul, Apollos, and Barnabas are prominent candidates. The author may have remained anonymous so as not to distract his audience from the theme of the book—the supremacy of Christ. Christ is superior in His person, sacrifice, and ministry to all that the Old Covenant economy offered. The writer wanted to encourage oppressed Christian Jews to move forward with hope and endurance in their New Covenant faith; they were not to slide back into what was inferior.

The book was written prior to the destruction of the Jewish temple in A.D. 70 as the Levitical priesthood was still functioning (10:11). After Nero blamed the Christians for the burning of Rome in A.D. 64 an intense time of persecution occurred against the Church. Furthermore, the Jewish people suffered many atrocities during the Roman-Jewish war in Palestine during A.D. 66–70. Putting these components together suggests that *Hebrews* was written during this time-

frame.

The writer reminded his readers that the good things of Judaism had been replaced by "better" things in Christ. Christ was superior to the angels, to Moses, to the Levitical priesthood, to the Old Testament sacrifices and Covenant; and as a superior High Priest, Christ served before the living God in a better sanctuary in heaven! For this reason, five warnings are issued in the epistle:

- 1) Do not drift from the truth (2:1)
- 2) Unbelief precludes receiving God's rest (3:7-12)
- 3) Do not become dull of hearing (5:11)
- 4) Do not waver, but hold fast to confession of our hope (10:23)
- 5) Look ahead, do not turn away from Christ (12:25)

The Jewish Christians had already received the best that God could offer them—Christ; they were not to go back to that which was inferior and offered them no hope!

James

James, the half-brother of the Lord Jesus, was unconverted until after Christ's resurrection. After the Lord met with James privately (1 Cor. 15:7) we find the Lord's family, including Mary, waiting in Jerusalem with other believers for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). Not only did James write this epistle, but he became one of the prominent leaders of the Church at Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:17-18; Gal. 1:18).

The epistle, written in about A.D. 45, is addressed to "the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad." James was writing to Christian Jews that had been displaced by

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According to the gospel records, the Lord Jesus was a compassionate person. No less than a dozen times we read that He “had compassion” or “was moved with compassion” toward suffering people. This must surely be an important quality for present-day disciples who are seeking to be Christ-like in lifestyle and service, so this article will consider the subject under three headings: 1) Understanding the word; 2) Importance in the life of the believer; and 3) How elders can cultivate and encourage it in the assembly.

Understanding the Word:

The Greek word compassion is actually related to the inner organs of a person that are affected by the suffering of another. It comes to mean “to feel sympathy or pity,” and being related to the seat of emotions, it is sometimes rendered “bowels” or “heart.” References to the Lord being “moved with compassion” remind us that compassion can be a good motivator. Sometimes He healed and sometimes He wept, but He always acted.

Paul used this word in Phil. 1:8: “I long after you in the affections [lit. *bowels*] of Christ.” In the famous story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) we read that when the father saw his repentant son returning, he “had compassion and ran” to welcome him home. This suggests the question, *Is true compassion possible without love?* Probably not.

Importance in the Believer’s Life

Many Scriptures describe God’s compassion for His people. Sin and the curse have brought suffering everywhere, and as imitators of Christ, we need words to describe an acceptable response. *Love, kindness, and mercy* come to mind. These are wonderful words, but they don’t place much emphasis on the *feelings* of the observer, the one who would reach out to help. However, *compassion* implies more than just sad feelings; it implies a desire and willingness to get involved if possible.

In this connection, Heb. 4:15 is helpful. “For we have not an high priest

which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities....” Some other translations render it “sympathize with our weaknesses.” But you get the idea, because the context involves the high priest in his capacity of serving His people (v. 16). His heart of compassion or sympathy leads to action.

So then, if our God is a compassionate God, and the Lord Jesus is a high priest with genuine feelings of sympathy or compassion for those who hurt, ought not we as the people of God to expect to see that kind of heart being developed within us by the Holy Spirit? This of course signals a huge change from the callous or selfish responses often seen in the world and that formerly characterized us. And this in turn points to the importance of the local assembly being not a social club but a place where training and equipping in Christian virtues is constantly taking place! This brings us to the third area for inquiry.

How can Elders Cultivate Compassion within the Church?

It’s a sound biblical principle that training proceeds from the top down; the older must train the younger. This is true in the family and it’s true in the church, and hopefully, it’s a principle of interest to church elders in their work of leading and feeding the flock. Therefore, the saints must be taught what compassion is, and what it is not. They must understand that God’s justice and hatred of sin is not in conflict with His heart of compassion. And this is critically important because God’s heart is being reproduced in the believer as he grows. How will this be possible if he holds wrong views about God’s love and God’s justice? Further, compassion is not a spiritual

gift selectively available to some. It’s more like the fruit of the Spirit, one inevitable quality of a Spirit-filled life.

Space doesn’t allow an exhaustive study of details, but generally speaking, if believers are growing in their walk with the Lord and their human relationships, Christian virtues will be forthcoming. And if the local church is modeled after that which Jesus is building as described in Scripture, compassion will be unmistakable. Thus we can think of two major areas of church life that bear scrutiny: the internal and the external. What do we mean by these?

Internal

Internal functions are Acts 2:42 activities. Sound Bible teaching in public, in small group meetings such as home Bible studies, and one-on-one encounters are opportunities to build in truth, assuming it’s also lived out by those doing the teaching. Also critical are healthy relationships as believers gather for fellowship, seen also in marriages, friendships, families...and submission to God-appointed authority. Gatherings for worship and prayer should manifest the joy and refreshment of thankful hearts. Most Christian groups would claim to provide these things, although the forms may differ.

But that is not the whole picture. The Christian assembly must be an environment where all of the above take place in an atmosphere of kindness, gentleness, the readiness to forgive, tenderness for the weak ones and the young ones—in short, hearts of compassion. Does this describe your place of fellowship? Is it a matter of concern for the elders, so that one senses a heart of compassion in their dealings and hears it in their prayers? It’s easy to become occupied with the forms of church order, and lose the warm heart of “first love” that was so attractive in the past.

External

Turning to external functions, these have to do with relationships outside the church, the day-to-day life in society and our outreach to the world with good

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news. Wherever there are people, there are hurts and sorrows, and these are opportunities for the outflow of compassion. Many fail to realize that darker days present greater opportunities.

On this subject, careful study of the life and teachings of the Lord Jesus are essential. His meeting with the Samaritan woman in John 4 and His par-

able of the good Samaritan in Luke 10 model compassion. In the latter passage, compassion is the stated reason why the Samaritan behaved as he did. These will keep us from the error that compassion is an end in itself. Like the Lord, we can reach out to the suffering one to win a hearing for the need of the soul to know the Savior.

Blessed is the church whose elders model this quality in daily life, who encourage the saints to follow the Lord's example, and who oversee the meetings and activities of the church so that these things are embraced rather than tolerated!



Epistles (continued from page 1)

persecution. The purpose of the letter was to encourage his brethren to endure affliction patiently and to offer warnings and admonition to proper conduct despite hardship (e.g., controlling one's tongue, ch. 3). James also adds a note of clarification in chapter 2 concerning the subject of justification. While it was true that believers were not justified by doing works (as Paul profoundly taught), true faith would be demonstrated by obedience to God's Word. Accordingly, genuine faith would always stand in the company of good works (2:17).

This practical book may be outlined as follows:

- 1) The Testing of Faith (1:1-2:26)
- 2) The Power of the Tongue (3:1-18)
- 3) Worldliness Rebuked (4:1-17)
- 4) Exhortations in light of the Lord's Coming (5:1-20).

1 and 2 Peter

Peter, writing in AD 63-65, addresses his first epistle to dispersed Christian Jews sojourning in five provinces in western and northern Asia Minor (1:1). Both James and Peter want to encourage their brethren to continue enduring persecution and also to prepare them for more hardships to come. Peter begins with the subject of salvation and suffering (1:1-12), then moves to the topic of sanctification (towards God, towards believers, and from the world; 1:13-4:19), before concluding with specific exhortations to church elders and those in their care (5:1-14). Peter teaches us that following Christ's example of suffering patiently in righteousness prepares us for glory!

Peter's second epistle in A.D. 66-67 was directed to his previous audience and for the same purpose (3:1-2). Clearly, Peter is the author as he mentions being present at the transfiguration of Christ (1:16-18). Peter desired to encourage his audience to nurture proper Christian character (1:1-15), to avoid the influence of false teachers and their heresies (2:1-22), and to press on while patiently awaiting the Lord's return (3:1-14).

1, 2, and 3 John

John, the apostle, wrote three epistles to mostly unidentified recipients in A.D. 90-95. The theme of *1 John* is that believers will enjoy fellowship with a Holy God as they walk in the light of revealed truth. Our eternal union with Christ permits us to experience God's love (5:13). John also calls on believers to take action against those spreading false doctrine (especially the idea that Christ had not come from heaven as the Son of God). The entire epistle exhorts believers to shun sin and to love each other as God has loved them (4:19). John invites all believers to experience the God of truth (*light*, 1:1-2:28), the God of righteous (2:29-4:6), and the God of love (4:7-5:21).

In his second epistle, John refers to himself as "The Elder," which referred to his great age (he outlived the other apostles by many years). Believers of this era would have readily recognized John by this title. The letter is addressed to "the elect lady," a Christian woman of some social rank. She and her children were zealous for the Lord and hospitable. Unfortunately, evil men were taking

advantage of her goodness to promote themselves and to spread their corrupt teachings. The letter is brief because John expected to visit her shortly, but he felt compelled to warn her not to accept false teachers into her home (v. 10).

John again refers to himself as "The Elder" in his third letter written to another notable believer with excellent character, a brother named Gaius. He was particularly known for his hospitality and of aiding traveling Christian workers. John commended Gaius' selfless conduct and also warned him of a man named Diotrephes, who "loved to have the pre-eminence." Diotrephes had elevated himself to a position of authority in the local church and had even denied John's apostleship. Like his second letter, this note is brief as John expected to visit Gaius soon and deal with reprobate Diotrephes.

Jude

Jude was the half-brother of Christ, and like Peter, he realized that false teachers represented a great danger to the Church. Writing in about A.D. 68, Jude reminded his brethren that the apostles had earlier predicted the rise of false teachers and they had now arrived. He exhorts them to grow in the knowledge of the truth and stand fast in the faith so that they will not be deceived. Like James and Peter, Jude also encourages believers to go after and restore those who have fallen away (v. 23). Jude employs several triads to punctuate his main points and his eloquent writing style crescendos with the closing doxology.



Wives' Corner

Encouragement for Caregivers by Marsha Blair

“Hear my cry, O God; attend to my prayer. From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I.”

—Psalm 61:1-2

The Lord brought this verse to mind often when I was caring for my 94-year-old mother, as my heart was indeed “overwhelmed within me.” In fact, as I recently reviewed the notes I made during that season of my life, the word *overwhelmed* was on every page. As I look back on that time, and the things I learned, I want to encourage myself, and perhaps some of you, with the things the Lord taught me. And if He gives me opportunity to be a caregiver to someone else in the future, may I apply the things the Lord has taught me in the past.

First of all, there will be difficulties. It can be challenging to care for another person, especially a loved one (spouse, parent), and many times there is emotional “baggage” between the caregiver and the recipient. As a retired nurse, this was the most difficult job I had ever done.

One of the things I learned was the futility of “micromanaging” my mother’s life. In my effort to spare her from discomfort and suffering I actually made her

life, and mine, more difficult in the process, causing increased stress in our lives.

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I wanted to protect her from suffering, but I came to realize that’s not my job. I had to learn to trust the Lord, who loved her so much more than I did.

I was also reminded that God had things to teach me—and Mom—and that in trying to protect her from difficulties, I might be thwarting His plan for her life. She was going through this for a reason, and we both had things to learn from the Lord in all of this. I recently read William MacDonald’s Believer’s Bible Commentary on Romans 12:8, “he that shows mercy, with cheerfulness”:

A Christian lady once said, “When my mother became old and needed someone to care for her, my husband and I invited her to come and live with us. I did all I could to make her comfortable.... But while I was going through the motions outwardly, I was unhappy inside.... Sometimes my mother would say to me,

“You never smile anymore. Why don’t you ever smile?” You see, I was showing mercy, but I wasn’t doing it with cheerfulness.

Thus I wondered, *would I want ME to be my caregiver?* Was I an example of the Lord Jesus to my mother, showing the love of the Lord Jesus to her?

If the Lord gave me the opportunity to be caregiver for another person in the future, here are a few things I would like to remember:

- Pray always and seek the Lord’s help and strength for this difficult task
- Give myself grace to make mistakes and learn from them.
- Apologize if I’ve done wrong, and be willing to confess my sins
- Don’t be afraid to ask for help, or receive it if offered
- Take time away, if possible, from caregiving as able—whether a few hours, or a day, or whatever the Lord would provide as respite for us both
- And if I know a caregiver, make it a point to encourage him or her with notes, texts, emails; pray for and with them; visit or provide respite care as I am able.

Know that the Lord will indeed give me “mercy, and grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16)



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