

GUIDELINES

BIBLE STUDY FOR TODAY'S
MINISTRY AND MISSION

JANUARY–APRIL 2024

INCLUDED IN THIS ISSUE

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Failure

Emma Ineson

Song of Songs

Ruth Wells

1 Samuel 1—15

Walter Moberly

2 Corinthians

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Migration

C.L. Crouch

John the Baptist (part II)

David Spriggs

Lent in John

Stephen Finamore

Psalms Book III

Bill Goodman

Women in Genesis/Exodus

Evie Vernon

The letter of Jude

Ian Paul

GUIDELINES

VOL 40 / PART 1
January–April 2024

Edited by Rachel Tranter and Olivia Warburton

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ISBN 978 1 80039 236 6
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Cover image © Brushinkin paintings/stock.adobe.com

Distributed in Australia by:
MediaCom Education Inc, PO Box 610, Unley, SA 5061
Tel: 1 800 811 311 | admin@mediacom.org.au

Distributed in New Zealand by:
Scripture Union Wholesale, PO Box 760, Wellington
Tel: 04 385 0421 | suwholesale@clear.net.nz

Acknowledgements

Scripture quotations marked with the following abbreviations are taken from the version shown. Where no abbreviation is given, the quotation is taken from the version stated in the contributor's introduction. NRSV: The New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. KJV: The Authorised Version of the Bible (The King James Bible), the rights in which are vested in the Crown, are reproduced by permission of the Crown's Patentee, Cambridge University Press. NIV: The Holy Bible, New International Version® Anglicized, NIV® Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed by Gutenberg Press, Tarxien, Malta

Suggestions for using *Guidelines*

Set aside a regular time and place, if possible, when and where you can read and pray undisturbed. Before you begin, take time to be still and, if you find it helpful, use the BRF prayer on page 6.

In *Guidelines*, the introductory section provides context for the passages or themes to be studied, while the units of comment can be used daily, weekly or whatever best fits your timetable. You will need a Bible (more than one if you want to compare different translations) as Bible passages are not included. Please don't be tempted to skip the Bible reading because you know the passage well. We will have utterly failed if we don't bring our readers into engagement with the word of God. At the end of each week is a 'Guidelines' section, offering further thoughts about, or practical application of, what you have been studying.

Occasionally, you may read something in *Guidelines* that you find particularly challenging, even uncomfortable. This is inevitable in a series of notes which draws on a wide spectrum of contributors and doesn't believe in ducking difficult issues. Indeed, we believe that *Guidelines* readers much prefer thought-provoking material to a bland diet that only confirms what they already think.

If you do disagree with a contributor, you may find it helpful to go through these three steps. First, think about why you feel uncomfortable. Perhaps this is an idea that is new to you, or you are not happy about the way something has been expressed. Or there may be something more substantial – you may feel that the writer is guilty of sweeping generalisation, factual error, or theological or ethical misjudgement. Second, pray that God would use this disagreement to teach you more about his word and about yourself. Third, have a deeper read about the issue. There are further reading suggestions at the end of each writer's block of notes. And then, do feel free to write to the contributor or the editor of *Guidelines*. We welcome communication, by email, phone or letter, as it enables us to discover what has been useful, challenging or infuriating for our readers. We don't always promise to change things, but we will always listen and think about your ideas, complaints or suggestions. Thank you!

To send feedback, please email enquiries@brf.org.uk, phone +44 (0)1865 319700 or write to the address shown opposite.

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Stephen Finamore is a former principal at Bristol Baptist College. Steve has worked as a pastor, as a lawyer and in community development in inner London and the Peruvian Andes. He has been elected to serve as the president of the Baptist Union of Great Britain for 2024–25.

Bill Goodman encourages and enables lifelong learning among clergy and other church leaders in the Anglican diocese of Sheffield, UK. *Yearning for You* is the published version of his Sheffield PhD: a conversation between the Psalms, Song of Songs and contemporary songs, about desire for intimacy.

Evie Vernon is a Nannyish (Jamaican womanist liberation) theologian. She is an Anglican deacon, based at St Mildred's Church in Croydon.

Ian Paul is a theologian, biblical scholar and local church leader. After a decade in pastoral ministry and another in theological education, he now writes and teaches freelance, publishing at the widely read blog psephizo.com.

The editors write...



This issue of *Guidelines* is full of some real treats!

I hope you are looking forward to it as much as we are.

We are delving into a number of Old Testament books in this issue, with a host of wide-ranging topics. We'll be looking at Book III of the Psalms alongside Bill Goodman, the third of his five-part series; Daniel alongside Ernest Lucas, exploring the tensions between divine and human sovereignty; 1 Samuel 1—15 alongside Walter Moberly, which he will conclude in the next issue; and the migration narratives in Jeremiah and Ezekiel alongside C.L. Crouch – particularly relevant as we think about involuntary migration in our own times.

In the New Testament, David Spriggs will continue his series on the biblical witness to John the Baptist, looking further at how John's ministry and Jesus' interweave. Joanna Collicutt will take us through the difficult and strangely fragmented book of 2 Corinthians, while Ian Paul tackles the oft-neglected book of Jude. Finally, as we head into the season of Lent, Stephen Finamore will guide us through the Easter narratives in John's gospel.

In this issue we are also doing something different, alongside more familiar expository notes. Evie Vernon imaginatively explores the thought processes of a selection of women from Genesis and Exodus, rooted in what the narrative says happened to them – a proposed corrective to exclusively patriarchal readings. Do let us know what you think. If it really doesn't work for you, just spend time with the Bible passage or revisit an earlier section. We also welcome Ruth Wells, who brings her experience as a performance poet to bear with a series on the poetry of Song of Songs.

Meanwhile, Emma Ineson provides some challenging thoughts on the topic of failure. Far from being accusatory or guilt-inducing, Bishop Emma helps us see how failure is part of life, even the Christian life, and explores how we can learn to live well with it.

We hope you continue to enjoy and learn from all that *Guidelines* provides. We love to hear what our readers think of particular issues or notes, so please do get in touch if you have anything to feed back – positive or negative!

Rachel

Olivia



The letter of Jude

Ian Paul

The letter of Jude is very short and equally challenging! Where some of the New Testament letters feel like spacious rooms of theological and pastoral exploration, this one feels like a small closet packed floor to ceiling.

The author is one of the younger brothers of Jesus, mentioned third in Mark 6:3 and fourth in the parallel list in Matthew 13:55. It is clear that Jesus' brothers were not believers during his lifetime, but they seem to have encountered the resurrected Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 15:7) and were involved in early missionary activity (1 Corinthians 9:5). It is notable here that Paul describes 'the Lord's brothers' separately from 'the apostles'; their actual kin relationship to Jesus did not grant them special authority.

Jude appears to be writing to people whom he knows and responding to a situation he has heard about, so this is not a general 'catholic' epistle like those of Peter and James. The main section of the letter is full of powerful and persuasive rhetorical devices, but the beginning and ending make it clear that this is a genuine letter. We need to remember that almost all communication in the ancient world was oral, both in origin and reception; letters were dictated to a secretary and read aloud to the audience. Jude is particularly fond of saying things in threes!

Challenges for the modern reader include not just the powerful yet concise language Jude uses. He is writing in the style of Jewish apocalyptic, using much terminology that is unique in the New Testament. He draws extensively on Jewish traditions with which we are unfamiliar, especially the Jewish works of 1 Enoch and the Testament of Moses, both of which are mostly lost to us. Yet his message is as pertinent today as ever: do not be drawn away from the apostolic faith by those claiming new revelation, who reject the disciplines of holiness for their own gain and bring division and disunity to the people of God.

Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotations are taken from the NIV.

1 Called, chosen – and challenged

Jude 1–4

Jude is one of the brothers of Jesus (and so brother of James, the leader of the community in Jerusalem), but he does not claim any authority from that earthly kinship. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus has changed everything; what matters is that he is a servant of Jesus, the exalted Messiah.

Jude loves to do things in threes! He greets his readers as being ‘called’, ‘loved’ and ‘kept’ (also translated ‘chosen’). This is language used in the Old Testament of God’s people, particularly in anticipating their restoration from exile (see, for example, Isaiah 42:1, 6), and echoed in the voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism. This language looks back; what God has accomplished by his love in Jesus is the fulfilment of all God’s promises to his people. But it also looks forward; though the kingdom of God has broken in, we will not see it in its fullness until Jesus returns, and in the meantime, we are kept, safe and firm, by God.

The threefold greeting is typically Jewish in speaking of the ‘abundance’ of God’s mercy, but also reflects the gospel of peace with God that we have as his love is poured into our hearts (Romans 5:5).

Rather than expound further what God has done for us in Jesus, Jude needs to tackle a real and practical challenge his readers are facing. It is striking that he begins first with an assurance of all that God has done for us – but quickly focuses on what we need to do in return. God’s grace is not just something to rest in, but also something to respond to; the waiting we are called to is active, not passive. This should come as no surprise; such conflict was anticipated ‘long ago’ and will not jeopardise either God’s salvation or his just judgement.

As Paul has seen in Corinth (1 Corinthians 6:12) and Galatia (Galatians 5:1), Jude sees that the radical freedom that is ours in Jesus can be misunderstood. It is not freedom *from* obedience to God, but freedom *to* live lives of holiness that honour him. Perhaps the equivalent error in our age is the idea that ‘God accepts me as I am; therefore I can stay as I am’. But if we proclaim, ‘Jesus is Lord’ (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3), then it means surrendering our lives to his transforming power.

2 Three examples to heed

Jude 5–7

Jude now moves into the main part of his argument, signalled by ‘I want to remind you’, using language like that of Paul (Romans 11:25; 2 Corinthians 1:8; Galatians 1:11). But he is not offering them new, additional knowledge, for they already know the full truth that they received when the message of the apostles was shared with them once and for all. Christian teaching can never add to or displace that apostolic message – but it is a core discipline for us to remember and reflect on the truth we have received. The central act of Christian worship is to ‘do this in remembrance of me’.

Jude continues in his threefold rhetoric by pointing to three episodes from the Torah which serve as examples for his readers, just as Paul notes that these stories are offered as warnings to us (1 Corinthians 10:11). There is no sharp difference between ‘Israel’ and ‘church’; the same Greek word *ekklēsia* is used for both. Those who follow Jesus now, both Jew and Gentile, are the new Israel in him, and so *their* stories are now *our* stories, and we must learn from them.

The three episodes are: the unbelief of the people about the goodness of the promised land in response to the report of the spies in Numbers 14; the fall of the ‘sons of God’, driven by lust, in Genesis 6:1–4, interpreted through the language of 1 Enoch 6–19; and the sin of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. The strong sense of God’s sovereignty means the language here is expressed in terms of God’s active judgement, but each story is in fact about the consequences of actions, unbelief and disobedience. Two of the three relate to immoral sexual desire – the angels for the daughters of men and the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah for the ‘strange flesh’ of angelic visitors.

These classic Jewish examples show that no one is exempt from accountability before God – not the foreigners in Sodom or Gomorrah, nor the angelic powers, nor even the people of God whom he longs to save. Rejecting God’s call to holy living does not bring freedom, but chaos and disaster – and Jude longs for his readers to learn this lesson.

3 Don't repeat their mistakes

Jude 8-10

Jude now makes the connection with the present situation; the false teachers he is warning about are falling into error 'in the very same way' (v. 8) as those of the past. Like Peter at Pentecost ('in the last days'; Acts 2:17) and Paul writing to the Corinthians ('[we] on whom the culmination of the ages has come'; 1 Corinthians 10:11), Jude sees the coming of Jesus and the renewed Israel following him as the end-time (eschatological) fulfilment of the scriptures. Therefore all the lessons from the story of God's people apply to the followers of Jesus.

Dreaming can sometimes be seen as positive (Acts 2:17), but more often it is associated with false prophets (Deuteronomy 13:1; Jeremiah 23:25) because the dreams are claimed to offer an alternative, new source of revelation – and so 'a different gospel' (Galatians 1:6-8). The three problems that arise are related to the three Old Testament examples that Jude is drawing on, but do not correspond to them in order.

The examples of the angels in Genesis 6 and Sodom and Gomorrah both involve sexual immorality, and Jude agrees with Paul that this causes harm to oneself ('whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body'; 1 Corinthians 6:18). The throwing off of moral restraint is not just a general rejection of authority, but specifically a rejection of the lordship of Christ; the unusual term *kurios* (v. 6) connects back with the mention of 'the Lord' (*kurios*) in verses 4 and 5. 'Heap abuse on celestial beings' (v. 8) is most likely a reference to the Jewish tradition that the Torah was given to Moses by angels, who are the faithful messengers of God to humanity.

The story of Michael contending with Satan for the body of Moses comes from the apocryphal Testament of Moses, but the idea of Satan as the accuser of God's people is found in Job, Zechariah and Revelation 12. Michael's language of rebuke, based on Zechariah 3:2, demonstrates that, in these spiritual conflicts, even the angels don't depend on their own power, but appeal to the authority of God who is the just judge. The false teachers are following their own desires, just like animals, rather than seeking to understand the truth of the gospel.

Departing from the teaching of the apostles is not just unfortunate – Jude sees it as dangerous and damaging at every level.

4 Avoiding error; shunning rebellion

Jude 11–13

We are now reaching the pinnacle of Jude’s rhetoric against the false teachers, with more examples from scripture and vivid metaphors from nature. It is challenging to be immersed in this language – but this kind of ‘woe’ oracle was stock in trade of the Old Testament prophets and a key part of the teaching of Jesus (see Matthew 11:21; 23:13–29). The emphasis here is not the authority of the prophet themselves, but the judgement of God alone.

The three further examples from scripture are now individuals rather than (as previously) groups. Jude is drawing not just from the biblical text, but from the way these examples were used in Jewish tradition. Each committed sin – Cain’s murderous anger when his sacrifice was not accepted in Genesis 4, Balaam’s being enticed by money to prophesy against Israel in Numbers 22 and Korah leading a rebellion in Numbers 16 – but in the tradition they all were thought to have led others astray as well.

The criticism of the false teachers that follows focuses on their attitude towards God and on the damage they are doing to the community of faith. The word translated ‘blemishes’ is actually the normal word for a rock, that is, something that causes a shipwreck. The false teachers are in danger of destroying the central reality of community life, here described as *agape* meals for the first time in the Bible. They participate ‘without the slightest qualm’ (v. 12) or fear of God, and their ministry serves only themselves (Ezekiel 34:2) rather than the people of God.

The use of vivid metaphors from the natural world comes from the wisdom tradition; we find similar language in Proverbs, in James and in the teaching of Jesus. Jude draws from what were considered the four regions of the universe – air, earth, water and the heavens – showing how comprehensive the issues are. The false teachers either fail to produce what God intended – life-giving rain from clouds, fruit from trees – or produce what is not wanted, such as turbulent waves throwing filthy debris on to the shore. The image of ‘wandering stars’ (from which we get our word ‘planet’) is drawn from 1 Enoch, but uses the same language as Jesus when he rebukes those who are ‘badly mistaken’ (Mark 12:27).

There is a serious warning to believers – but there is also a note of pity. These false teachers are missing out on all that God promises; there is a much better way.

5 Nothing new under the sun

Jude 14–19

Having looked to the past in the biblical narrative in relation to the events of the present, Jude now changes his focus. He appeals to two sources to assure his readers that these tests are not unexpected, but were anticipated long ago.

His first source is, again, 1 Enoch, introduced with a quotation formula. This book is not often included in the canon of scripture, but that does not stop it from being a text which can offer insight and encouragement. It was valued because it reflected on the application of key parts of the Torah, particularly on Deuteronomy 33. Enoch is seventh from Adam on the basis of ‘inclusive’ counting; he was revered along with Moses as those whose burials were mysterious, and Elijah as ones who defied death to enter God’s presence (Genesis 5:24).

The Jewish hope was that God would come as promised to judge the world, raise the dead and both purify and redeem his people from oppression. The New Testament consistently identifies this hope with the royal return (*parousia*) of Jesus; he is King in principle now, seated at the right hand of God, but will be recognised as Lord by all when he comes again (Philippians 2:10–11, citing Isaiah 45:23). ‘Lord’ is used in the Old Testament of the God of Israel, but in the New Testament it refers to Jesus, who does for us all the things that God does. In both the quotation and the rebuke of the false leaders, Jude for the first time focuses on what they say as well as how they live. His threefold critique is of grumbling speech (which characterised the dissenters in the wilderness), following evil desires (as at Sodom and the ‘sons of God’ in Genesis 6) and seeking their own gain (as Balaam did).

As a brother of Jesus, Jude does not count himself as one of the apostles. The quotation in verse 18 is not a precise one from any text we have, but it echoes both the teaching of Jesus (Matthew 24:24) and Paul (2 Timothy 3:1–5). The contrast between ‘natural instincts’ and the Spirit is the same as Paul makes between the ‘works of the flesh’ and the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ in Galatians 5:16–26. Claiming new insights, rejecting God’s call to holiness and indulging desire will always bring division and disunity to the people of God.

6 He is able

Jude 20–25

These closing verses return to the positive tone of the opening section. Jude once more emphasises that those he is writing to are beloved ('dear friends', *agapetoj*, here and in verse 17). The reason for his strong warnings about the false leaders is his deep concern for his sisters and brothers in Christ. His final commendations include three emphases which might seem surprising to us.

First, the primary strategy for continuing to live faithfully in obedience to Jesus is not to get dragged into disputes and debate, but to focus positively on what we believe. We are to be active in building ourselves up, in praying in the Spirit (as in Ephesians 6:18) and in guarding what we already have (similar to John 15:9, 'remain in my love'). Jude here talks in Trinitarian terms, referring to the work of the Spirit, the love of the Father and the hope we have in Jesus, and in doing so echoes the Pauline triad of faith, hope and love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Second, our attitude to others must always be marked by compassion. Between those who are strong in faith and those who are drawn to these erroneous teachers will be the middle ground of those who have questions, and they are to be treated with mercy. But part of that merciful compassion will be a recognition that they are in real danger from false teaching; we should rightly fear the consequences of them falling away, which is why Jude has gone to so much trouble to expound the dangers.

But, third, our confidence is not in ourselves and our ability to avoid error, but in God's ability to complete the work that he has begun in us (Philippians 1:6), so that we will reach the full maturity that he desires for us (Ephesians 4:13). As everywhere else in scripture, our confidence in God motivates us to positive action, and our action is always rooted in our confidence in God. The goal is to fully live the life of the kingdom of God; our power to do this comes from God alone; and the result is for his glory alone. 'For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever! Amen!'

Guidelines

In reading carefully through this short letter, it feels as though we have come a long way. There are some important things to learn from our journey.

Though filled with strong language and stark warnings, the letter of Jude begins and ends with his love and concern for the believers he writes to. This must surely be the first motivation in tackling and engaging with false teaching. It applies in our thinking about ourselves as well as our thinking about others. If we hear words of warning and discipline from God, we need to remember that this springs from God's deep love for us, the forgiveness, peace and hope that he has given us in the costly gift of Jesus, and his calling and empowerment through the Spirit. And if we love our sisters and brothers in Christ, we will want them to be aware of the dangerous reefs created by claims to new revelation which will lead them away from the truth.

Throughout his letter, Jude interprets the present challenges through the lens of scripture, interpreted and applied within his Jewish teaching tradition. Because we are all, Jew and Gentile, incorporated into the Israel of God by means of the overflowing grace of God, 'from every nation, tribe, people and language' (Revelation 7:9), the story of Israel is our story. We face the same dangers that they did, and so we need to learn the lessons from their experienced.

Although Jude uses different language from the gospels and other letters in the New Testament, the theological and pastoral ideas are the same. The good news about Jesus, passed on to us by the apostles and now forming the text of our New Testament, is all that we need to 'grow up in your salvation' (1 Peter 2:2). There is no further 'new revelation' needed, since Jesus is God's last word to us (Hebrews 1:1-2) and the scriptures testify to him. When confronted with claims to new teaching, we need to realise two things: first, that they represent a real danger for ourselves and for others; and second, that the primary response must be to stand firm in the faith that we have received. God calls us to true freedom, empowering us by the Spirit to live in the holiness which is ours through the new life offered in Jesus.

FURTHER READING

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'I find *Guidelines* so helpful, full of insight and depth. The challenges are also helpful, and looking outside the box of a particular stance is so refreshing.'

'Our thanks for making us think things through.'

'I feel I must write to say how much help, support and encouragement we have felt from the recent contributors. Many thanks to all concerned.'



Commissioned and edited by
BRF Ministries Editorial Manager
Rachel Tranter and Head of Content
Creation **Olivia Warburton**.

Published three times a year in
January, May and September.

Also available as an app for
Android, iPhone and iPad.

