

Catholic Letters (7) and the Book of Hebrews

Bible Study in Spring 2021

Place: St. Barnabas Catholic Church, Long Beach

Teacher: Fr. Bernard Santiago (Associate Pastor)

Co Teacher: Fr. Antony Gaspar (Pastor)

Core Group: Olivia, Brian and Sam.

Time: Thursday from 7 -9 pm for 12 weeks (May to August 21)

Study materials: The Bible study material will be emailed to each participant on every Tuesday and everyone is expected to print their own material beforehand and read through beforehand for better participation. All the 8 books will be read and the important themes will be studied in detail with biblical, historical and theological background to cull out the core message of each book. The last fifteen minutes will be dedicated for clarification.

The books to be studied: Catholic Letters (7) James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude / the letter to the Hebrews.

Recommended Bible Versions for our study purpose: New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE) & New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition. The use of electronic Bible in the class is discouraged as we intend to make the participants be familiar with the placement of each book in the Bible, one way of knowing the Biblical books.

Open Bible Quiz: Besides the class material, 5 chapters from each book will be assigned for personal reading and weekly Quiz. You are highly recommended and expected to participate in the open bible quiz for your spiritual reading of the Holy Bible and also for doing the homework.

Purpose of the Study: The study will make an attempt to understand the teachings of the great apostles in their context and how we can apply their teaching in our context and it will also help us to meaningfully participate in the liturgy of the word of God.

What is the value of the group study in the parish? Ignorance of the Bible is ignorance of Christ (St. Jerome). Group Bible study is not just valuable, it is invaluable.

Small group study is so effective that Jesus used it to train his disciples and apostles. He taught them about the kingdom of God...how to pray. How to listen and respond to the word of God. How to be cautious in their ministry. What to carry and what not to carry.. How to grow in faith and how to be good stewards....

Small group Bible study moves us from being spectators in a weekly church service to active participants in a like-minded community dedicated to spiritual growth. As we encounter God's Word together, we have an opportunity to share our different perspectives and insights and are broadened because of the interaction. More information is retained when there is active involvement, so biblical literacy is enhanced to move God's Word from the intellect to the heart. Transformation takes place and our lives are changed. When our lives are changed, the lives of those around us are changed as well.

As we gain in our knowledge of the Bible we deepen our relationship with God and other believers (Colossians 2:7), We become better equipped to live and share the gospel with those in our schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces. Our commitment to a group Bible study is a model to those around us. It is an evidence that we value our spiritual growth enough. Our children are watching our actions and they gain firsthand knowledge of what it means to be a follower of Christ and honor the Word. They benefit from our commitment because they see us walking our talk, working out our salvation (Philippians 2:12). The word of God grew and the Christian community grew: acts 12:24/ /13:49 19:20/. Hence the Bible study is a great opportunity for the spiritual growth of the parish community.

Study Method: Due to safety concerns of the Covid19, we will continue the virtual Bible study, live streamed through zoom link, from St. Barnabas Church Rectory. Zoom application meeting ID: **99174147604** Password: **3955**

Participation Certificate: At the end of the course, the participants will be awarded with a certificate of participation and excellence. Hence, interest, passion, regularity and continuity are very expected of the participants. Anyone from any parish who desires to join the Bible Study is welcome. Kindly avoid joining in the middle or at the end of the course

Lectio Divina: The bible study will conclude with the Lectio Divina of the following Sunday readings for a meaningful participation of the Sunday Mass.

Contact Email: The bible study email is biblestudy@stbarnabaslb.org The Lesson materials and other informations related to the bible study will be sent through this email. Contact Phone number: 5624248595 **Webpage:** <https://stbarnabaslb.org/bible-study/>

Join our Bible Study: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/biblestudy1b>

**12 WEEKS LESSON PLAN FOR THE BIBLE STUDY WITH DATES
AND THEMES**

05/06/2021	Introduction to the Catholic Letters and Hebrews
05/13/2021	2nd Lesson: The book of James and its practical theology. What is true religion and why we need religion? What is genuine faith? How to grow in wisdom?
05/20/2021	3rd Lesson: 1 Peter offers encouragement to suffering christians. Jesus the cornerstone and the characteristics and conduct of the christian people. Peter's moral, catechetical and sacramental exhortation
05/27/2021	4th Lesson: 2 Peter's warning to Christians against false teachers and exhortation to grow in the knowledge of christ. Beware of heresies and heretics in the church.
06/10/2021	5th Lesson: The vital aspects of faith in 1 John - God is love - we are part of God's family
06/17/2021	6th Lesson: John's emphasis on following Christ and his demands of the basic ingredients of true Christianity in 2 and 3rd John. The core message of Jude
07/01/2021	7th Lesson: The superiority of Christ
07/08/2021	8th Lesson: The eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ in the NT Verses the Levitical Priesthood of the OT. The greatness of the New Covenant Vs Old Covenant.
07/15/2021	9th Lesson: The Supreme Sacrifice of Jesus Once for All.
07/22/2021	10th Lesson: The biblical heroes of Faith and Jesus the perfecter of faith.
07/29/2021	11th Lesson: Encouragement and exhortation for daily living in the book of Hebrews
08/05/2021	12th Lesson: what did I learn from the Catholic letters and the book of Hebrews? A Personal sharing

Opening Prayer for the Bible Study

Leader: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Angelus Prayer (During the Easter Season until Pentecost Sunday)

Leader: Queen of Heaven, Rejoice, Alleluia.
All: For He whom you did merit to bear, Alleluia.
Leader: Has risen, as He said, Alleluia.
All: Pray for us to God, Alleluia.
Leader: Rejoice and be glad, O Virgin Mary, Alleluia.
All: For the Lord has truly risen, Alleluia.

Leader: Let us pray. O God, who gave joy to the world through the resurrection of Thy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, grant we beseech Thee, that through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, His Mother, we may obtain the joys of everlasting life. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Angelus Prayer (During the regular time of the year)

Leader: The Angel of the Lord declared to Mary
All: And she conceived by the Holy Spirit
Leader: Hail Mary.....**All:** Holy Mary.....
Leader: Behold the handmaid of the Lord
All: Be it done unto me according to your word
Leader: Hail Mary.....**All:** Holy Mary.....
Leader: The Word became Flesh
All: And dwelt among us
Leader: Hail Mary...**All:** Holy Mary
Leader: Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God
All: That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Leader: Let us pray: Pour forth, we beseech You, O Lord, Your grace into our hearts; that we, to whom the incarnation of Christ, Your Son, was made known by the message of an angel, may by His Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of His Resurrection, through the same Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Leader: Heavenly Father, your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. We praise you and bless you for bringing us this evening to learn your words of everlasting life. We ask that your life giving words impact us in our day today life and lead us to kind and compassionate action. When you called Samuel, he responded to your call, saying, "Speak O Lord, your servant is listening". When you called Jeremiah and placed your words in his mouth to be a prophet, he accepted your call to be a prophet over kings and kingdoms and lived a true prophetic life despite challenges and ridicules from his audience. When Jesus sent the apostles with a mission command, " Go and proclaim the gospel to every creature" they responded to His call and proclaimed Him every nook and corner. As we commit ourselves to our weekly bible study, we ask you to bless us that we may cheerfully immerse in the knowledge of the bible so that we may grow in you and in your word so that we may blossom in our christian life with the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit. Blessed Mother and St. Joseph, Intercede for us to your Son that we may learn, love and live His life giving words. St. Jerome, the Patron Saint of Bible Study, pray for us and bless us to bear abundant fruits in our life. Amen. (Our Father..... Glory.....)

First lesson: Introduction to the Catholic Epistles (7) and the book of Hebrews

In addition to the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the thirteen letters attributed to Paul, the New Testament includes nine other writings: Hebrews, James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude, and the Revelation of John. These are the last nine books in the New Testament canon. Seven of these writings—James, 1, 2 Peter, 1, 2, 3 John and Jude— are commonly grouped together under the label “Catholic” or “General” Letters. Eusebius of Caesarea (a church historian and bishop of Caesarea who died around 340) was apparently the first one to use the term “Catholic Letters” to designate this group of writings. The term “catholic” or “general” is a genre distinction. That is, a catholic or general letter is a letter written to a non-specific, or general audience.

What is the difference between St. Paul’s 13 Letters and the 7 Catholic Letters?

The 20 formal letters are divided into two categories. The Pauline letters were written by St. Paul’s and the non - Pauline letters were written by others. The latter are known as the General letters. The Pauline letters are arranged according to their size, the General letters are different in several ways.

The General Letters have various authors while the Pauline letters have the same author Paul. Paul’s letters are named according to whom the letters were addressed. The General letters were named according to their authors. The General Letters have also been called the Catholic Letters (Catholic means universal, widespread, non-localized). These letters were intended for a larger and general audience than the Pauline letters with their specific audiences.

Another difference between the two sets of letters is that the General Epistles were intended mostly for a primary Jewish audience but Paul often wrote to the Gentile Christians. The Majority of the General letters authors were either leaders or elders of the church in Jerusalem. Paul was not. More than once Paul had to defend himself against accusations from some of the leaders of this church. Unlike Paul, authors of the General letters were either one of Jesus’ disciples (while He lived here on earth) or were related to Jesus in some way.

A variety of writing genres can be found in these letters. Hebrews is written as a sermon, James is written with a letter style but continues like wisdom literature. 1 Peter is like a pastoral letter, 2 Peter is a good bye letter. 1 John is written as a sermon. 2, 3 John and Jude are short letters. Although different in style and intended audience, the General letters are very necessary. Combined with the Pauline letters, we have a more complete picture of how to live the christian life. The different backgrounds, personalities and life experiences of these authors bring different view points. Just as we have a better account of Christ’s birth, life, death and

resurrection because we have four Gospel writers, our understanding of the NT Church doctrines is more complete with the variety of authors who wrote the General Letters.

Purpose of the letters: The purpose of the Catholic Letters is to meet ordinary problems encountered by the whole church: refuting false doctrines, strengthening the ethical implications of the Gospel message, sharing in the common catechetical and moral materials, and giving encouragement in the face of the delay of the Parousia and strength in the face of possible martyrdom under Roman persecution. They guide the ordinary Christian in his day-to-day life in the church.

The Catholic Letters preserve a considerable common legacy of ethical themes and quotations. Because the Catholic Letters represent a common pool of Christian teaching, there are overlapping points, but these come from shared tradition rather than literary dependency. In these letters, theological and credal statements are woven in and used for immediate ethical application. Thus, they differ from the Pauline style of extensive theological sections coupled with ethical applications that follow at the end of the epistle.

The Catholic Letters in synopsis:

1. The letter of James: The Letter of James is often criticized as having nothing specifically Christian in its content apart from its use of the phrase the “Lord Jesus Christ” and its salutation to a general audience depicted as the twelve tribes in the dispersion (the Diaspora) but it depicts the teachings of the early church not in a missionary vein but to a church living dispersed in the world knowing the essentials of the faith but needing instruction in everyday ethical and communal matters with traditional critiques on wealth and status. In matters of church discipline and the practice of healing, there is stress on prayer, anointing, and confession of sin in order that the healing of the sick may be effected. The letter is moralistic rather than dogmatic and reflects early Jewish Christianity. The writer covers such topics as endurance under persecution, poverty and wealth, control of the tongue, care for orphans and widows, cursing, boasting, oaths, and prayer. The passage that stresses the importance of faith with good works (“So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” 2:17) has been troublesome for theologians like Martin Luther who deny human participation in the process of salvation. Luther famously called the Letter of James “the epistle of straw.” This is the only NT book reference to anointing of the sick (5:14), which is cited, mostly by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologians, as a reference to one of the seven sacraments.

2. The First Letter of St. Peter: This letter is from Peter to the believers who had been dispersed throughout the ancient world and were under intense persecution. If anyone understood persecution, it was Peter. He was beaten, threatened, punished, and jailed for preaching the Word of God. He knew what it took to endure without bitterness, without losing hope and in

great faith living an obedient, victorious life. This knowledge of living hope in Jesus was the message, and Christ's example was the one to follow.

Though this time of persecution was desperate, Peter reveals that it was actually a time to rejoice. He says to count it a privilege to suffer for the sake of Christ, as their Savior suffered for them. This letter makes reference to Peter's personal experiences with Jesus and his sermons from the book of Acts. Peter confirms Satan as the great enemy of every Christian but the assurance of Christ's future return gives the incentive of hope.

3. The second letter of Peter: Peter was alarmed that false teachers were beginning to infiltrate the churches. He called on Christians to grow and become strong in their faith so that they could detect and combat the spreading apostasy. He strongly stressed the authenticity of the Word of God and the sure return of the Lord Jesus.

Knowing that his time was short (2 Peter 1:13-15) and these churches faced immediate danger (2 Peter 2:1-3), Peter called upon the readers to refresh their memories (2 Peter 1:13) and stimulate their thinking (2 Peter 3:1-2) so that they would remember his teaching (2 Peter 1:15). He challenged the believers to become more mature in their faith by adding to it specific Christians virtues, thereby becoming effective and productive in their knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:5-9). The Old and New Testament writers were set forth as their authority for their faith (2 Peter 1:12-21, 3:2, 3:15-16). Peter desired they become strong in their faith to withstand the false teachers that had crept in and adversely affected the churches. In his denunciation of them, he described their conduct, their condemnation, and their characteristics (2 Peter chapter 2), and also that they ridiculed the Lord's Second Coming (2 Peter 3:3-7). For the Christians, Peter taught that the Second Coming is the incentive for holy living (2 Peter 3:14). After a final warning, Peter again encouraged them to grow in the grace and knowledge of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He concluded with a word of praise to his Lord and Savior (2 Peter 3:18).

4. The first letter of John: False spiritual teachers were a big problem in the early church. Because there was not a complete New Testament that believers could refer to, many churches fell prey to pretenders who taught their own ideas and advanced themselves as leaders. John wrote this letter to set the record straight on some important issues, particularly concerning the identity of Jesus Christ.

Because John's letter was about the basics of faith in Christ, it helped his readers reflect honestly on their faith. It helped them answer the question, Are we true believers? John told them that they could tell by looking at their actions. If they loved one another, that was evidence of God's presence in their lives. But if they bickered and fought all the time or were selfish and did not look out for one another, they were betraying that they, in fact, did not know God. That did not mean they had to be perfect. In fact, John also recognized that believing involved admitting our sins and seeking God's forgiveness. Depending on God for cleansing from guilt, along with

admitting our wrongs against others and making amends, was another important part of getting to know God.

5. The Second Letter of John: The Book of 2 John is addressed to "the chosen lady and her children." This could either have been a lady of important standing in the church or a code which refers to the local church and its congregation. In those days when Christians were being persecuted such coded salutations were often used. The Book of 2 John is largely concerned with an urgent warning concerning deceivers who were not teaching the exact doctrine of Christ and who maintained that Jesus did not actually rise in the flesh but only spiritually. John is very anxious that true believers should be aware of these false teachers and have nothing to do with them.

6. The third letter of John: John is writing with his usual strong emphasis on truth to this much-loved brother in Christ, Gaius, a layman of some wealth and distinction in a city near Ephesus. He highly commends Gaius' care and hospitality to his messengers whose mission was to take the Gospel from place to place, whether they were known to him or were strangers. John exhorts him to continue to do good and not to imitate evil, as in the example of Diotrephes. This man had taken over the leadership of a church in Asia and not only refused to recognize John's authority as an apostle but also refused to receive his letters and submit to his directions. He also circulated malicious slanders against John and excommunicated members who showed support and hospitality to John's messengers. Before John concludes his letter, he also commends the example of Demetrius, of whom he has heard excellent reports.

7. The book of Jude: The Book of Jude is an important book for us today because it is written for the end times, for the end of the church age. The church age began at the Day of Pentecost. Jude is the only book given entirely to the great apostasy. Jude writes that evil works are the evidence of apostasy. He admonishes us to contend for the faith, for there are tares among the wheat. False prophets are in the church and the saints are in danger. Jude is a small but important book worthy of study, written for the Christian of today.

The book of Hebrews: The Book of Hebrews addresses three separate groups: believers in Christ, unbelievers who had knowledge of and an intellectual acceptance of the facts of Christ, and unbelievers who were attracted to Christ, but who rejected Him ultimately. It's important to understand which group is being addressed in which passage. To fail to do so can cause us to draw conclusions inconsistent with the rest of Scripture.

The writer of Hebrews continually makes mention of the superiority of Christ in both His personage and in His ministering work. In the writings of the Old Testament, we understand the rituals and ceremonies of Judaism symbolically pointed to the coming of Messiah. In other words, the rites of Judaism were but shadows of things to come. Hebrews tells us that Christ Jesus is better than anything mere religion has to offer. All the pomp and circumstance of

religion pales in comparison to the person, work, and ministry of Christ Jesus. It is the superiority of our Lord Jesus, then, that remains the theme of this eloquently written letter.

Why study the Catholic Letters? The Catholic Epistles give us a unique window into early Christian theology and practice. These letters highlight the centrality of love for not only fellow believers (1 Peter and 1 John), but the neighbor in general (James). They explore the inevitability of trials and testing in life that are ultimately from God and therefore strengthen faith (James and 1 Peter). Throughout these letters one finds the pervasive contrast between allegiances to God and this “world” as incompatible (James and 1 John) along with an emphasis upon the reality that true faith is always accompanied by a transformed life, faith is united with “works” (especially James 2:14–26). Finally, the concern for correct doctrine both in the face of false teaching (2 Peter and 1 John) and the influence of immoral living (Jude) surfaces again and again. They are letters with a difference. Though other New Testament letters are also concerned with the connection between orthodox teaching and moral living, the Catholic letters are especially focused on this connection.

Why are the Catholic Epistles Important? *As already mentioned, firstly, these letters often stand in the shadow of the Gospels and Paul, but they are as much part of the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ as these other works. Christians have received these books as part of holy Scripture from the beginning and this is the first reason to focus on them. These letters make up part of the New Testament witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. As such they offer a complementary, non-Pauline witness to Christian practice and belief. These letters give a clearer picture of early church life because of their occasional nature.*

Secondly the Catholic Epistles are apologetic in nature, defending orthodox faith and morals against the rising challenge of heretics. John’s letters are interested in combating false teaching by citing agreed upon apostolic confessions of high Christology – “Who is the liar, if not the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?” (1 John 2:22) and “Many deceivers have gone out into the world; they do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh” (2 John 7). Likewise, both Jude and 2 Peter are clearly focused on defending the “once for all entrusted” faith by combatting false teaching (2 Peter) and false living (Jude).

Finally, the Catholic Epistles are important in that they make it clear that Christian faith is a matter of practice as well as of formal belief. James, Peter, and John are all agreed on the assumption that “faith without works is dead.” The “works” spoken of in these letters are not those of the Mosaic Law but those deeds that spring naturally from faith in Jesus Christ – most importantly deeds of charity or love. The early church summarized these “works” as self-sacrifice, generosity, humility, and love. The emphasis on such deeds meant that Christians must be prepared to live their lives and give their lives for the faith. The patient endurance of suffering here and now, living out Christian faith in the midst of a hostile world, is a preparation for this supreme sacrifice, as the example of Jesus’ earthly life bears witness. This is why the Catholic Epistles are so important.