

## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 23 November 2020 Today's topic: Hey Jude

*Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James, to those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ: Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance. Jude 1-2 (NIV).*

Hey Jude...sorry, I just had to. But if the Beatles help you get into your Bible, then spin that one more time. Like Obadiah, Philemon, 2 John, and 3 John, Jude is a book of only one chapter. Yet its 25 verses contain what seem to be an extension of 2 Peter in how they denounce false teachers and encourage struggling believers.

We don't know exactly who Jude was. "Jude" was a familiar name for someone with the given names of "Judah" or "Judas." Clement of Alexandria, the renowned second-century church leader, attributed the book to Judas, the younger brother of Jesus Himself. Both Matthew and Mark mention Jesus had a younger brother named Judas, and traditions all the way up to the time of Clement attributed authorship to him. Judas (also called Thaddeus), son of James, could also have been the author, though some details of his life don't seem to line up with the text.

But let's keep it real: it doesn't especially matter. Someday, when you get to Heaven, ask Jesus. Or Jude.

Until then, take some encouragement from knowing that there was a man who wrote a short book that prayed abundant mercy, peace, and love to anyone who read it. We could use some more of that these days, couldn't we?

After all, nearly 50 years ago, the Beatles sang a song to encourage a young man who was depressed. Paul McCartney's voice was the lead, but the song was actually a dedication to John Lennon's son, Julian. Other than similar sounding names, there really isn't a tie between the song and the epistle...

...except this: it's about grace, mercy, and love. A man who grew up beside the living Son of God would have learned about those things, even before the Son came into His own ministry. A man who spent his adult life following his brother, his Savior, would have believed in Him even up to the point of death. A young man in 1960s England would have needed to hear about those things at a low point in his life.

And a reader perusing these words today might need to hear them as well. If you believe, you've been called by Jesus to believe in Him and to follow Him. Even though you're a believer, you still get down every now and then, and you need to be reminded of the love, mercy, and grace of Jesus. Even now, those things matter more than ever.

Hey Jude, take a sad song, and make it better.

For further reading: Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3, Jude 3

*Lord God, thank You for a new day to learn about Your grace, love, and mercy.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 24 November 2020 Today's topic: Contend Today, Stand Today

*Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people. Jude 3 (NIV).*

Dear friends, we still need to contend for the faith.

If you live in the People's Republic of China – or any other Communist country – you are living in a beautiful homeland with a pagan government that is hostile to your faith. Communism and Jesus Christ cannot co-exist, and while Jesus wins the battle of the ages against any government, in the meantime, communism and other related, perverted beliefs battle to rule the day. If you live in one of these countries, your faith puts you in danger.

If you live in Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or Sudan, you are living in an ancient homeland where your Christian faith puts your life in danger. Anywhere Islam rules, it crowds out any other faith. Like totalitarian government, Islam must exterminate any other belief system because those other beliefs are threats. The practices of Christianity and Islam co-exist, but the faiths in them cannot. If you're a Christian living in a Muslim country, your life is in danger.

And if you are a Christian working in corporate America, or in any corrupt government on the planet; if you are a Christian and you attend a secular university, or speak up for your faith in an LGBTQ climate, or even if you display your faith in many public schools today, you are living in an atmosphere where your faith is no longer welcome. It wasn't always this way, but it is now, and it promises to get worse in the very near future.

Dear friends, in this fallen world, just like in Jude's world, it is difficult to contend for the faith. It is becoming more and more difficult to stand up for Jesus in a world that hates Him more and more.

Here's the beautiful thing: stand up for Jesus anyway. He doesn't want us to stand alone because He promises His Spirit will speak words from our mouths and that He will abide with us here. Yes, stand up for Jesus anyway, no matter what the world schemes to do to us. Stand up for Jesus and make your stand on the side of love, truth, justice, and godliness. Stand by your faith, by your belief. Stand up and let Him stand through you, for love's sake. Make your stand for that, for Him, no matter what it costs. In the end, the cost will be all worthwhile

Jesus is right, the only right. Stand up for what is right, Who is right. Dear friends, contend today. Believe now. Stand today.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 10:14, Titus 1:16, 2 Peter 2:1, 1 John 2:22, Jude 4

*Lord Jesus, help me to stand for You today. Forgive those who persecute us, and use my life to witness You to a world set against You.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 25 November 2020 Today's topic: Weigh-Downers

*For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord. Jude 4 (NIV).*

The only real liberty in this world is found through faith in Jesus Christ. Sorry to my secular friends, but that's just how it is. Only by freeing us from the spiritual penalties of our sinful actions can we be free – truly liber – to do as we please. Having faith in Christ then teaches us that, to do as we please, means doing things in ways that please Christ. It's not to gain His favor or earn attaboy's: it's to serve Him by serving others. We do that by living our lives, using the talents and opportunities He gives us.

Yet freedom isn't free; liber isn't libertine. Salvation from Christ isn't a 'get out of jail free card' for us to go on wallowing in sin. And wallowing in sin can mean either continuing to commit those sins or also not letting Christ take them over for us. To do so is to say of our faith, "I know better." That's idolatry. It's the start of a slippery slope that ends at denouncing faith. Christ has promised that there is nothing in heaven or earth that can take us away from Him...but we're free to denounce Him. Just like He's free to turn us over to the consequences of our choices. That's a fate too terrible to contemplate.

But it's the fate Jude was talking about when he mentioned that people in the world have already condemned themselves long ago. In Jude's time, it was the rise of the Gnostics, who twisted the true faith into things it never said. And it included the Judaizers, who insisted on polluting The Way with Judaic regulations and practices; doing things that took away from the complete salvation given only by Christ.

We aren't so different, you know. We find ways to burden each other, especially in matters of faith. Control, strict doctrine, church discipline: there are good and useful purposes for these manmade practices but, in the hands of unloving practitioners, they abuse the free grace given by Jesus. You must do it our way; baptism only by immersion; true communion can only be close communion; grape juice instead of wine: the list could go on and on. If you don't know the things of which I'm speaking, consider yourself blessed.

The people who would maliciously wield good knowledge and practices to serve their own desires were the kind of people Jude was warning us about. They would take the freedom of living in Christ and twist it into chains with which to weigh down unsuspecting believers. They're still alive today.

For further reading: Galatians 2:4, Titus 1:16, 1 John 2:20, Jude 5

*Lord Jesus, help me to be on the lookout for anyone who would change Your Word into something else*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 26 November 2020 Today's topic: Enough Miracles

*Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord at one time delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe. Jude 5 (NIV).*

This is the start of Jude listing out six examples of how the Lord delivers His people. He did it using miracles, and those miracles still happen.

While the Israelites were in the desert, they “grumbled” against the God who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. They had survived the Passover, had been brought to Sinai, and had walked through the Red Sea, and had seen the Egyptian army drowned. They had been fed on manna and quail; they had seen the pillar of fire every night; they had seen water come from the rock. They had the Ten Commandments.

And it wasn't enough.

All these miracles demonstrated that God was more powerful than the most powerful nation on Earth. Again and again, the miracles re-iterated that God loved His people more than His people thought possible. And, again and again, the miracles weren't enough. God wasn't enough.

Tell me: are the miracles in your life enough to prove to you that God loves you?

If you're in the middle of a divorce, if you're enduring bankruptcy or joblessness, if you've been told you're dying, if you're brokenhearted, abused, or hated, if you think you're unlovable, tell me: do you actually trust God or do you think God only loves you on your timeline?

You woke up today. You have a beating heart, air in your lungs, and blood flowing through your veins. Science can't make life, but God does. Miracles.

You're reading these words online, either on a phone or on a computer. They came from my office in North Texas to wherever you are. Just a few years ago, this wasn't possible, but it happened today. Miracle. Do you want me to list the thousands of large and small miracles that happen every day around you? They aren't just coincidences, or chance, or fate, or technology, or any other explanation that a cynical world uses to try to explain God.

You have a choice. You can recognize these things for the truths they are, or you can reject them. If you recognize them as miracles, as God's gifts to you, today especially, shouldn't you be thankful for them? In a tough year in an uncaring, fallen world, shouldn't you give thanks to God in your way for all He's done for you? Maybe it's not all you wanted, or wished for, but God gave it to you so it's what you need. And it's just the start. Who knows what other miracles today might bring?

The ancient Israelites didn't do this. They rejected God so He reluctantly turned them over to the consequences of that choice. Make a better choice today.

For further reading: Numbers 14:29, Deuteronomy 1:32, Psalm 106:26, 1 Corinthians 10:105, Hebrews 3:16-17, 1 John 2:20, Jude 6

*Lord God, thank You for the hundreds of miracles You perform in my life every day. Thank You for all You give me!*

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## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 30 December 2020 Today's topic: Me First

*And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. Jude 6 (NIV).*

Example Number Two: the fallen angels.

This site, <https://versebyversecommentary.com/2008/03/09/jude-6/>, does a good job explaining who Jude was referring to in verse 6. It discussed Genesis 6 in which “sons of God” (meaning angels) chose to fornicate with human beings and produce children who were abnormal by birth (neither fully human nor angelic). This was an abomination of God’s intended order for the world but the sin of the angels is one we are each all too familiar with.

“Me first!”

I’m guilty of this; how about you? If not, did you enjoy your Thanksgiving holiday? What was the best part: the family gathering? The dinner? The day off? The Dallas Cowboys losing? Tell me: did you deserve the good time? I think most of us would say “yes,” and there may even be a hint of truth in it.

Or was it a downer for you? Was your holiday one of the millions affected by the Covid-19 outbreak this year? Did you cancel your gathering, or scale it back? Did you obey a government edict limiting what you could do? Tell me: was it unfair that you couldn’t gather with your loved ones? Again, I think most of us would say “yes” and, again (again) there might be a hint of truth in that.

But be very, very careful here. We’re edging forward on a slippery slope. There’s a thin line between “it’s not fair” or “I deserve that” and simple idolatry.

The fallen angels were guilty of rebellion, insurrection, and revolution against God Himself. But the genesis of their sin (pun intended) was nothing more than simple idolatry. “Me first.” I know better. It’s not fair. I deserve better. Look at me.

Right?

Years ago, some angels revolted against God and perverted the order He intended for mankind. Far-from-innocent mankind did nothing to stop it. The Nephilim of old are thought to be the offspring of women and angels, and they rebelled against God. So God consigned them to a place of darkness, cut off from Him. Jesus is the light of the world, and angels were intended to always walk in His presence. Yet some chose differently and now await final judgment along with all the sins of the world, away from the light, away from life, away from God. That would be terrifying, even for a powerful, immortal being.

That’s pretty heavy for a Monday, but that’s what it is. To lighten the load, let’s put off our ‘me first’ attitude. Let’s use this Monday after Thanksgiving to continue giving thanks, for a Savior, for another day, another set of miracles in our midst.

For further reading: Genesis 6:1-7, 2 Peter 2:4, Jude 7

*Lord God, thank You for showing me simple idolatry. Forgive me when I fall for this old sin temptation and help me to walk Your better path.*

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## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 1 December 2020 Today's topic: Where I Come From

*In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire. Jude 7 (NIV).*

Jude's third example: Sodom and Gomorrah. Or, another place that's the same. Let's call it "my hometown."

Over the weekend, I watched "Hillbilly Elegy." It's a new movie by Opie (Ron Howard) that tells the story of a man's upbringing in a forlorn factory town on the Ohio/Kentucky border. It was a good movie; the book was even better. The theme of the movie/book was cultural crisis, and how one's values are both shaped by it and reactive to it. The author of the book, J.D. Vance, was born in Kentucky, but moved to Middletown, Ohio as a child, because his family worked in factories there. But once the factories shut down, the hardscrabble people in the area were left in economic, social, political, and even spiritual crisis.

As I watched the movie, I thought Vance's hometown of Middletown closely resembled the places where I spent my adolescent and teenage years. The same crisis-of-faith that the people in the movie were living through was the same one I saw in so many of the homes of my fellow students.

And then I read today's verse, about Sodom and Gomorrah, and it hit me: that could be about my hometowns, too. Pick your pet sin. they're all perversions of God's order for us, of His intent for us to live in harmony and love with Him and each other. Sodom and Gomorrah were famously destroyed for their sexual sins, yet it was the stench of all their combined sins that made them offensive to God.

Sounds like our world today. Families, societies being torn apart by abuse, drugs, fornication, and a host of other seemingly irresistible temptations: are these not further perversion of what Jesus wants for us?

In Appalachia (and in McAlester, Oklahoma, Clinton, Iowa, and Mitchell, Indiana, too), you learn you should depend on your family when everyone else lets you down because they will. Yet even family can't always 'be there' for you. So, who can?

You know the answer. In fact, answering anyone but Jesus would be tacit admission that, yes, your thoughts are a bit perverted as well. Maybe a little out of line from where you know God wants you to be.

Let's hope there's no fire and brimstone in our future. Surely the people of Sodom and Gomorrah didn't realize they were all done for until it was too late. Maybe we should learn from them now lest someone else write another brutally honest lamentation about the places we come from.

For further reading: Deuteronomy 29:23, Matthew 10:15, 2 Peter 3:7, Jude 8

*Have mercy on us, Jesus, for all the ways we've failed You.*



## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 2 December 2020 Today's topic: Christmas Music

*In the very same way, on the strength of their dreams these ungodly people pollute their own bodies, reject authority and heap abuse on celestial beings. Jude 8 (NIV).*

How's that culture of disrespect working out for you? Warning: rantings of an older man to follow.

We're listening to Christmas music these days. In fact, it's been on the radio here in North Texas for most of a month now. My wife has stations preset into our radio so she can zip from one to another if she gets bored (confession though: I'm the worse channel flipper). Last night, as we were driving home listening to Jessie J on the Christmas station, it hit me.

There really isn't much good Christmas music being newly recorded. Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion, Kane Brown, Billie Eilish, The Weeknd, and most of the rest of the stars recording popular music these days just don't record good Christmas music. Every now and then, a nugget will shine but, for the most part, in my middle-aged, old-man observation, most popular Christmas music isn't good, probably won't last, stinks. In fact, just this week, the Billboard Hot 100 chart has re-appearing Christmas songs by 8 artists (6 of whom are actually dead) just in the top 50. None of these are from new artists.

Personally, I think it's because of our culture of disrespect. Our politics are almost violently divided, and while there are reasons for that, one common cause is that respect has broken down. Our universities and schools have become dysfunctional for the same reason. Ditto advertising, most TV shows, work interactions, and even how we relate as families. All this makes quality suffer. We don't respect each other.

Dig a little deeper and I'll bet you find it's because we first abandoned our respect for God and the angels He gave us, dearly beloved, to get through this thing we call "life" (thank you, Prince, quality artist). Turn away from the Lord and it becomes so easy to turn away from each other.

Jude might agree if he were here today. This fourth observation of his – that ungodly people bring their sad estate on themselves – fits quite well in our anything-goes modern world. The dreamers who turned away, the rebels who rejected authority, the fools who flaunt the angels: they all first embraced the subtle idolatry of disrespect for God. Respect for the Lord had long been waning in the Jewish community of antiquity. Is it any wonder that Judea was occupied by the tyranny of Rome?

At least they didn't have shoddy Christmas music

The good news is that things can turn around as long as God gives us time. This old man suggests we start on the radio.

For further reading: 2 Peter 2:10, Jude 9

*Lord, teach us to respect each other more by reminding us to respect You first.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 3 December 2020 Today's topic: Jesus, Thumper, and Bing Crosby

*But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not himself dare to condemn him for slander but said, "The Lord rebuke you!". Jude 9 (NIV).*

Ok, I'm going to admit I'm hesitant to discuss this; perhaps I should watch my words.

For Jude 9, I researched some heavy Scriptures (listed below) and some deep analysis of the verse. To paraphrase all of it, Jude 9 is an apocalyptic verse that discusses a supernatural battle and the moral we should draw from it, namely that we should simply say what we mean. The way Jesus put it, "let your 'yes' mean 'yes', and let your 'no' mean 'no.'" Jesus stuck to the facts; he wasn't into adjectives or adverbs. Or, to put it another way, as Thumper might say, "if you don't got nuthin nice to say, don't say nuthin at all." Even Bing Crosby could chime in for us to, "accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative, don't mess with Mister In-Between." There. That wasn't so tough.

If you'll recall, in Jude 8, we are encouraged to respect everyone, especially our 'betters' from the angelic realm. One way to boil that down is to stick to what Jesus recommended: yes and no. If we keep our comments respectful and simple, while it might infuriate our inner English teacher, it also will keep us out of trouble.

A few weeks ago, we discussed how 2 Peter 10-11 (and Jude 9) referred to an apocryphal text called, "The Assumption of Moses." The only known copy of it was discovered in the 1860s, and it was incomplete. Still, what we know of the story is that God's archangel, Michael, fought Satan for the body of God's greatest prophet, Moses. In doing so, pristine angel to fallen angel, Michael chose to not slander or demean even the devil himself, only to oppose and fight him. Let God do the heavy lifting, especially in our speech.

If God's chief general can do that, I think we can manage as well.

After all, cheap talk is cheap. Coarse words are coarse. Shaming the shameful is, itself, shameful. You get the drift. Revenge isn't for us; vengeance is only for God to mete out. That includes how we talk with each other. We can (and sometimes should) oppose or battle each other, but our doing so should be forceful, upright, and powerful yet just, not demeaning. In those battles, use whatever weapons are at your disposal, just make sure you don't shame yourself – or your Lord – in the process.

Perhaps Jesus, Thumper, and Bing Crosby would agree.

For further reading: Deuteronomy 34:6, Daniel 10:13&21, Daniel 12:1, Zechariah 3:2, Matthew 5:37, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 2 Peter 2:10-11, Revelation 12:7, Jude 10

*Lord Jesus, teach me Your way to speak, to battle, to hold my tongue.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 7 December 2020 Today's topic: He Still Is

*Yet these people slander whatever they do not understand, and the very things they do understand by instinct—as irrational animals do—will destroy them. Jude 10 (NIV).*

Danger, my friend. If you wade too deeply into your favorite pet sin, it won't be long before it feels completely normal to you. But before that happens, it'll start to destroy you. Mind you, it might feel ok, even great for awhile. But it's killing you. You don't even show symptoms. It's like an undiagnosed cancer inside you. It won't be long until it grows out of control, however. It won't be long until you are in over your head, navigating through matters and ways you don't fully understand. Your adversary understands them, though. He struts around like a roaring lion, but when the light is shined on him, he's a dying fungus.

And still, you're sick with that fungus. It's that cancer, destroying your healthy tissue. It's an infection; I'm done in through and through with it; so are you. Got skin? Got sin. Worse, even: it seems like it's woven into our cells, into our DNA. Sin is like the HIV virus. It takes over healthy cells and replicates itself over them, fooling the healthy cells in the process until it opens you up to even worse things.

The cure? Go to the cross. Especially in this whacked-out year, go to the cross. No, run to the cross. Bring your brokenness and confess that your brokenness is all you've got. Bring your sins, your filthy sins. Bring your guilt, your shame, your worries, your fears, your pride. Bring your best because your best has turned into nothing good. Bring your secrets, your hidden 'achievements,' your worst nightmares. Bring them all to the cross.

Bring it, baby. Guess what? The man who hung there? He wants it. He wants all your filth because He wants to grab it away from you. He's the only one who can. On your own, you've already screwed up big; you can't do it. Only Jesus can.

I have a hunch about it, too. Once you've given up all that mess that you made, you'll find out that He came to you first, not the other way around. You'll find out He sought you out when you were at your worst. That He sent His holy angels to battle on your behalf in wars we've never seen in action. That He Himself waded into the foul pool of your sins to rescue you when you got in over your head. When you were sick.

Are you sick of wandering like a hunted animal in the wild? Are you sick of the dangers yet, of the sickness? Ready to let go? He's ready to help now. He always is.

For further reading: 2 Peter 2:12, Jude 11

*Lord Jesus, help me! Rescue me now!*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 8 December 2020 Today's topic: Woe to Us

*Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion. Jude 11 (NIV).*

Get out your Bible. If you don't remember (or don't know) who Cain, Balaam, and Korah are, we're going to make some re-introductions. When we do, take a look in the mirror to see if these men stare back at you. Woe to us when we do.

Cain. You've heard of him. Cain and Abel; the first man born of both man and woman; the first murderer; the first criminal; the guy with the mark. The first child ever born, his actions set the pace for everyone who ever lived after. He could have chosen the path of God; God personally implored him to do so. Instead, he chose murder, and rebellion, and exile. I wonder if he didn't live the rest of his life in angry sadness. And woe.

Speaking of rebellion, there's Korah, who rebelled against Moses and Aaron in the desert. It was after God had delivered the Israelites from Egypt, after He had given them His Ten Commandments; after they had left Sinai. Korah thought of himself as better able to lead God's people than Moses or Aaron, but Korah wasn't God's selected servant. He led 250 men to rebel against Moses and the rebellion was crushed when God Himself intervened. Before it was done, over 14,000 selfish and self-righteous rebels were lethally punished by the Lord. More woe.

And there's Balaam. Balaam was a prophet who interfered with the Israelites moving into the Promised Land. His complicated story (which involves animal abuse and narrowly averting being slain by the Angel of the Lord) began with trying to thwart God's plan for the Israelites occupation of Canaan, but ends with him reluctantly blessing the Jews instead. He advises his master, Balak, to lure the Israelites into temptation so that they would fail. Instead, God turns Balaam's scheme upside down.

Do any of these stories sound familiar? Can you identify? Perhaps you haven't murdered your brother, but I'm betting you've been snortin' mad and some point in your life. Perhaps you haven't rebelled against God's chosen deliverer, but I bet you have willfully chosen paths that run against what you know is a better way. Perhaps you never beat a talking donkey, but I'm betting you've belittled your fellow man.

I've done those things; how about you? What does the person in the mirror say? You know those Ten Commandments? If we break one, we're actually breaking all ten...and more.

Woe to us. Think about it.

For further reading: Genesis 4:1-17, Numbers 16:1-3 & 31-35, Numbers 22:4-20, Hebrews 11:4, 2 Peter 2:15, 1 John 3:12, Jude 12

*Lord Jesus, I've broken Your holy laws. I've rebelled against You, hated, abused Your love. Forgive me.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 9 December 2020 Today's topic: Jude's Downer

*These people are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead. Jude 12 (NIV).*

I'm going to admit: this verse is a bit of a downer. I mean, when someone splashes cold water on your face and you realize, "hey, they splashed cold water on my face," after you get over the shock it can be a bit of a downer. But it still matters.

In our politics, our politicians are self-serving. That's nothing new; self-serving nature goes to the very nature of politics. Yet in our time, when so much money and power are tied to political office, "the little guy" is easily forgotten and overlooked. It's almost like politicians today are blemishes, shepherds who only feed themselves, clouds without rain, blown along by the wind, trees that don't produce fruit and are dead inside.

Or even our churches; yes, I'm going there. During this 2020 pandemic, so many churches were forced to close. Sure, we should respect civil authority, but so many churches nationwide are still closed while civil authorities ignore real spiritual crises. The COVID disease is serious, but churches don't close for other outbreaks of equally contagious diseases that happen every year. Yet the leaders of so many of our churches seem deaf, almost as if they're afraid to defy the secular government instead of ministering to hurting flocks. Again, blemishes, hungry shepherds, rainless clouds, and dead trees.

Or, yes, our families. My wife and I were talking about this very thing in one of our devotions this week. Namely, that our families need to be led to be spiritual leaders. That our time with God as a nation starts with how we spend time with him as couples and families. It is 15 days until Christmas, and I wonder how many folks actually anticipate Jesus Christ as the real gift at Christmas instead of the dozens of gifts under the tree. Do we really have meaningful relationships with Jesus that we are working to pass onto our kids and grandkids, or is prayer just a wish-factory and God is just that thing we turn to when we're in trouble? Blemish, lost shepherd, puffy cloud, dead inside.

Where do you find yourself in this? Jude's verse here is a downer, indeed, but it's a sober one, meant to warn us about people whose spiritual apathy (or even antagonism) endangers how we practice our relationship with God. Like the aphorism says, if we feel distant from God, it isn't Him who's moved away.

For further reading: Proverbs 25:14, Ezekiel 34:2, Ephesians 4:14, Jude 13

*Lord Jesus, strengthen my faith in You to resist those whose conduct tries to distract or hurt me. Forgive them, but keep them from me.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 10 December 2020 Today's topic: That's Where Jesus Found Me

*These people are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead. They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever. Jude 12-13 (NIV).*

Confession: I'm guilty of insulting people on social media. Forgive me for being a work-in-progress on this, and I have no excuse for not tolerating opinions with which I disagree. In the past, I denigrated people for saying things I thought were stupid, or foolish, or just contrary to what I liked or said or believed.

That officially makes me one of the people Jude was describing here. Wrong is wrong, whether it's online or in person. I was wrong. I've been wrong, and have wronged others, even innocents. On my own, nothing good can come of this.

But the good news about this is that Jesus gob-smacked me a few times. Not just once: repeatedly. I must have tried His patience. "I'm doing this again, Dave, because you didn't learn the first time." Only after being put in my place several times did it sink in that I have been the jerk. I make no excuses for it and plead my guilt. I don't want blackest darkness forever, but that's what I deserve for things I've said and done.

That's where Jesus found me. It's where He finds me – and you – every time we mess up. Every time we deserve condemnation, which means it's pretty much where He finds us every day. The beauty of Him is that He doesn't give me the destruction I've earned. Instead, He heaps love after love on me, removing the stench of sin and replacing it with His own righteousness. Then, He sends me back into the world and says, "today."

Perhaps there were people praying for me. In fact, I know there were. There were also people who directly helped me, who advised me of better ways. Like a hard-headed jackass, I often ignored their advice, but they didn't give up on me. Thank God Jesus isn't a jackass.

So, here's my unsolicited therapy advice: seek Jesus more and seek to be more like Him. Pray for those who need help; help those in your direct circle. And keep doing it. We can't (and shouldn't) try to directly help everyone, but we can (and should) pray for those we can't help any other way.

For further reading: Isaiah 57:20, Philippians 3:19, Jude 14

*Lord God, thank You for not giving up on me when I so often have deserved it.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 14 December 2020 Today's topic: Listen to Enoch

*Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about them: "See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all of them of all the ungodly acts they have committed in their ungodliness, and of all the defiant words ungodly sinners have spoken against him." Jude 14-15 (NIV).*

There are two men we know of from the Bible who did not die but were, instead, taken directly by God without experiencing death. One was the prophet Elijah, who was taken to heaven in a chariot riding a whirlwind. And the other was Enoch, 7<sup>th</sup> descendant of Adam, making him a man of the 7<sup>th</sup> generation of mankind. All other people, including Jesus Himself, have died before experiencing the afterlife.

Some quick research says the name 'Enoch' means "instructed" or "trained up." Though a sinful man like the rest of us, Enoch, like HIS descendant, Noah, walked with God and listened to God. In a time when the men of Enoch's earth were turning away from the Lord, Enoch chose to cleave to God, to listen to him and obey Him. So, God gave Enoch a gift: namely that He took him without experiencing death.

Before that happened, according to Jude, Enoch prophesied. He prophesied about God judging sinners. Moses also talked about this in Deuteronomy; so did Daniel; so did the author of Hebrews. So did John the Revelator. But Enoch did so long before anyone. You know the account. At a time only the Father knows, God will end this world and replace it with one He remakes. Those who accepted Him will experience His blessings forever. Those who rejected Him will experience His absence forever. With my friend, Pastor Vern, I cling to the possibility that God may have something in store even we can't understand, that He finds a way to save the lost that is beyond our human comprehension. They're our brothers and sisters, who are worth our prayers.

Yet if that doesn't happen, if Enoch's prophecy was indeed a prediction, then it will be eternally unpleasant for those who deny and reject the Lord. Separation forever from love, hope, peace, and mercy; yearning like fire for His relief; eternal consequences of our lifelong temporal choices.

And way back when mankind was still new, men of Enoch's day were already thinking about it. Perhaps Enoch personally knew his great-great-great-great grandfather, Adam; the timeline from Genesis 5 would allow it. Perhaps he heard from Adam's own lips how he and Eve had once lived in perfect harmony with the Lord, and how they had thrown it away.

Enoch foretold the consequences of that if we don't turn back to God. It's time we listened.

For further reading: Genesis 5:18-24, Deuteronomy 13:2-3, 2 Kings 2:11-12, Daniel 7:10, Hebrews 12:22, 2 Peter 2:6-9, Jude 16

*Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

## **Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 15 December 2020 Today's topic: For People Everywhere, Anytime**

*These people are grumblers and faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage. Jude 16 (NIV).*

In this verse, Jude is talking about the sinners who live against God's order, specifically the ancient people from Enoch's time. In referenced later verses, Paul and Peter also talk about people from ancient times who grumbled against God, specifically those who rebelled against Moses and Aaron (if you'll recall, we talked about them a few days ago; see Jude 8).

But flash forward to our time today. Could Jude have written this verse about us? You know the answer.

I mean, we're nearing the end of another political cycle, and "flatter others for their own advantage" has been the rule of this year. Isn't it that way during every election? I suppose so, given that deceitful flattery is at the very nature of most politics. Yet I must confess that even I, a political junkie, am thoroughly sick of it. I'll be glad once the whole thing is finally over. But you get the picture: Jude could have been writing about our politics.

And then there's boasting about themselves. I've done plenty of that; have you? It's in our DNA; it's part of our sinful nature. Yes, can be psychologically healthy – and even Godly – to accept praise for use of our talents, some of our works; that sort of thing. We need positive strokes; they are a basic psychological need. Yet, all too often, we veer off the Godly straight and narrow and dive into boasting. "Look at me!" IS social media. I'm guilty of that. Jude could have been writing about me. Maybe you, too.

Following our own evil desires: have you been to San Francisco lately? Or Phuket? Have you heard of human trafficking, and electoral graft, and a hundred other pet sins? Yes, we as humanity have spent too much time following our evil desires.

Finally, grumbling and faultfinding. I pray I'm not doing that here, or anywhere. It's one reason why I've scaled back on my news intake, on listening to doom-criers and liars. There's too much grumbling. Sure, 2020 has been a long, tough year, but let's keep it real and say that every year can be tough. That's been amplified by our predicaments, yet surely this year isn't tougher than 1941, or 1914, or any of the first thousand years in Christian history (when every day could have brought death or destruction).

You get it. Jude could have written about us, about our time. Maybe that's the lesson: that these words of his, of God's, ARE timeless, are for people everywhere, anytime.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 10:10, 2 Peter 2:10, Jude 17

*Lord Jesus, thank You for blessing me with Your words through Jude. Give them meaning in my life today.*



## **Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 16 December 2020 Today's topic: Friend of Jesus**

*But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. Jude 17 (NIV).*

Read back on the last few verses and see how Jude excoriates people for their sins. And then read verse 17. The same God who inspired Jude to write those other things inspired Jude to write this one.

"Dear friends." God used the words of His servant, Jude, to address us as "dear friends." Not "children." Not "you damn, dirty sinners." Not "hey people." Friends. Have you ever had a truly close friend, someone with whom you exchange your inmost feelings and fears, who you love as your family? Jesus calls us friends here. The God of the universe calls us friend. When I try to focus on that, I'm comforted. And I'm overwhelmed.

I don't deserve to have Jesus call me "friend," but He makes me deserving. I haven't earned that right, that privilege, but He earned it for me. I haven't done anything to prove He's my friend, but He says that doesn't matter. And every day, I mess up in large and small ways that dishonor Him and make Him look small, but He forgives me anyway. He sets me back on my feet and bids me to do again.

The twelve apostles – 13 if you count Judas – foretold many things. Some were about the end times; some were about times in-between. They used their words and lives to tell a hostile world that there is this God-man named Jesus who offers eternal life to anyone who believes in Him. All of them but one died gruesome deaths after living rich but persecuted lives for talking about this Jesus they knew in their youth. This Jesus who called them "friend."

Like He does us. Like He does you.

Last night we had dinner with good friends who are missionaries in Romania; look for an interview with them to be posted on our website soon. It hit me that they, like the apostles, live their lives to carry the gospel to strangers, to talk about Jesus (in words when necessary). They're living out the book of Acts, and Matthew 28, taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

We should do the same. We should use our lives, starting right now, to carry the Gospel as far as it lets us carry it. To talk about this Savior who calls us "friends." To act friendly to Him. I can't do much but I can do this. So can you. And when you do it, you'll find you're living in ways that, as Jude reminds us, those apostle friends of Jesus talked about so very long ago.

For further reading: Ephesians 4:11, Hebrews 2:3, Jude 18

*Lord Jesus, thank You for Your apostles, for all they foretold in Your Name. Thank You for calling me Your friend.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 17 December 2020 Today's topic: Scoffers' Last Days

*They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires." Jude 18 (NIV).*

Read anywhere on the internet these days and you'll quickly find a story talking about how Christians are saying we are in the end times. That's nothing new. There are dozens (even hundreds) of verses throughout the Testaments that talk about what will happen at the end of this world. That doesn't even count this statement from Jude.

And we have talked about this many times before. Surely the people in Europe must have thought the world was ending in September 1939, when Hitler launched the Second World War. Their parents and grandparents must have thought the same thing 25 years earlier when a previous German Reich had launched the First World War. Ditto the American South in April 1865. Or the people of Milan during the great plague of 1629. Or the citizens of central Europe when the Black Death broke out in 1347.

When the end seems near, desperation can quickly set in.

And yet, even in those desperate times, scoffers gonna scoff. People will still be more interested in their own beliefs than in following Christ's better way. We shouldn't spoil for a fight but when the fight comes, we should be ready to stand, to witness. In a world where worldliness seems to count more than Godliness, we need to be ready in every moment.

Here in the world, it's going to be a losing fight, at least in the way the world measures success. Jude and the other prophets foretold that evil would rise and fight against the Lord. That means it will target those of us who believe in Him. Yet, while we need to stand up for Jesus, we also need to remember that it is He who will do the fighting. He'll fight through us; He will fight on His own against them for God's own sake. He who calls us friend will not only defend with us: He will defend us. The fight may cost us everything here, but the eternal victory of Christ is already fore-ordained. There is no way He will lose.

That knowledge, too, is as old as mankind itself, going all the way back to Eden and that conversation between God, Adam, Eve, and the devil. The scoffers don't want to admit this. In fact, the idea of it must terrify them. That's too bad for them. Misplaced pride can blind us to so much that is better.

If these are the last days, let's use them well. Live Jesus, talk Jesus, work to be Jesus for someone who doesn't know Him. Witness kindly to the desperate scoffers. Jesus wants to call them 'friend,' too.

For further reading: 1 Timothy 4:1, 2 Timothy 3:1, Jude 19

*Lord Jesus, come Lord and quickly. I'm standing for You.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 21 December 2020 Today's topic: Skeptical

*These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit. Jude 19 (NIV).*

Full confession: I'm a skeptic. Usually, I don't trust "the experts." Yes, especially as a Christian, I understand science (mainly because faith in Jesus is the beginning of all knowledge, wisdom, and reason, especially scientific), but I'm skeptical of anyone who says "the science says x." Some things I know well, others, not so much. Most things, however, I'm quite ignorant of. For me, belief in Christ is enough.

In verse 19, Jude was talking about people who reject Jesus. Recall that he wrote to his friends, cautioning them that people would scoff about Jesus, would reject who Jesus was and what He said about His return. All the scoffing, all the secular beliefs, all the science in the world won't justify someone's rejecting Jesus. At His return, He'll take up the matter with them. Personally.

And what of the Christian "experts" who say they can predict when Christ will return? Call me skeptical.

We don't know when Jesus will return. Only God the Father knows, and He hasn't said; see Matthew 24. When people say they can say with full certainty when Jesus will come back, or even that we are definitively in the end times, I usually ignore them. At best, I'm skeptical. Instead, I'm siding with Jude, thinking such people are dividers following their instincts of the world instead of the wisdom of God.

Perhaps their intentions are good, but the road to hell is paved with such things. Perhaps they truly do mean well but so do most despots in one way or another. Perhaps they have a point, but so does the same ball point pen that writes thousands of other scandalous words.

So, perhaps we should simply leave it up to God and leave it at that. The better way is to always be on our guard, maybe even a little skeptical, about what "the experts" say and, instead, jump into our Bibles and find out what God said there.

Mind you, I'm all for knowledge, college, and the like. I simply don't accept it as the be-all, end-all of meaningful knowledge. For matters of the Spirit, a far wiser source is found in the Scriptures. We all have access to those; they're a gift from God to everyone. So when my skepticism begins to pique, and when my eyebrows rise in disdain, I'm learning more and more to ask "what does the Bible say" as my first point of reference. God bless the experts and God bless their knowledge. Let's all keep it in perspective.

For further reading: Matthew 24:36, 1 Corinthians 2:14-15, Jude 20

*Lord of all knowledge, thank You for the gift of knowledge of You, for curiosity about things, for questions and answers*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 22 December 2020 Today's topic: A Christmas Star

*But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. Jude 20-21 (NIV).*

Did you see "the Christmas Star" this week? A first-in-800-year coincidental conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn is being called "the Christmas Star" in the US media. It's a cool thing, to be sure, but it's also a media creation. If you want to know the account of the true Christmas star, read Matthew 2. But let's not poo-poo this particular event too much because of one important fact.

It's helping people get closer to Jesus.

Jude might agree. So might Matthew and Paul, who wrote the verses they are cross-referenced below. They all speak about building up the body of believers. About encouraging each other in faith. About saying things and doing things that express our faith in this Savior who just happened to be born in a miracle, and over whom a miracle star rested.

In this depressing time, the fallen world could use a little Christmas encouragement. If a couple of orbiting planets serve to bring folks closer to Christ, so much the better.

Yes, the doctrinally overzealous Lutheran in me really does want to nitpick the media story of this 'star' occurrence that hasn't happened in 800 years. If you are skeptical like I am, and if you want to stick to 'the science', then Jupiter and Saturn converged in 7 BC, and Jupiter and Venus converged in 2 BC. And, there was a comet in 5 BC that could have been taken for a Christmas 'star.' Any one of these could scientifically explain an extraordinary astronomical event that signified the birth of Christ.

Or, you know, as Matthew 2 said, it could also have been a miraculous star that God created especially to guide wise Zoroastrian professors from east of Judea to worship a newborn King in their West. After all, the original star of Christmas moved with the wise men.

Know what? None of that really matters. It really doesn't. What matters is Jesus, and if this week's phenomenon in the skies brought a few wayward non-believers a little closer to the Lord, then bring on a Christmas star every week! Only good can come of it when the secular media causes people to get into their Bibles.

If you didn't see it last night, take a gander at the southwestern US sky tonight. Then open up your Bible and learn again about another miracle that really happened.

For further reading: Matthew 2:1-12, Ephesians 6:18, Colossians 2:7, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Titus 2:13, Jude 22

*Our amazing Lord, thank You for Your signs of encouragement in the faith, for wonders in the heavens and the miracle of Your Christmas birth.*

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## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 23 December 2020 Today's topic: Christmas Mercy

*Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh. Jude 22-23 (NIV).*

Mercy. That's really the story of Christmas, you know. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, so let's spend some of the last verses of Jude talking a little about why Christmas happened.

In my way of thinking, Christmas happened because of mercy. Love and mercy are intertwined, and there's really no way to undo that. The merciful are merciful from love, and love shows great compassion and mercy. There's really no better statement about mercy that an eternally loving God could make than by giving Himself to us as one of us in the most humble way.

After all, first century Judea was full of people in doubt. First century Judea was full of people burning with fiery desire. First century Judea was full of people who were afraid: afraid of the Romans, afraid of their Jewish overseers who had lost their common touch, afraid God had forgotten them. First century Judea was full of people who hated the corruption of sin even as so many of them were tangled up in sin.

Come to think of it, first century Judea sounds a lot like twenty-first century America. Or Uganda. Or England. Or anywhere here on the 2020 third rock.

Here, now, in our world, there are people burning up. Whether it's hell's damnation fire for our lifetimes of sin, or the psychological fire of sin's consequences here and now, people are burning alive. The fires of anger, hatred, unforgiveness, and spite alone are enough to scorch and scar us. If you don't believe me, how else can we account for crime, war, and a hundred other pestilences?

Sin is fire. Fire awaits those who don't throw it off. Lord have mercy on us.

Enter Christmas. Christmas is hope; Christmas is about love. And mercy. The God who loves us and wants each of us to be with Him forever had abundant mercy on us. He came here Himself as a man just like us, arriving as a baby just like any other human. The world back then was burning alive in fire, so God had mercy on us and sent us Christ Immanuel on that first Christmas morning.

In our lifetime of fears, once a year there is a brief moment when we get to remember that God is with us always. That He had mercy on us when we didn't deserve it, where we least expected it. Christmas is in two days. Enjoy the mercy of it today.

Tomorrow, let's talk about Easter.

For further reading: Amos 4:11, Zechariah 3:2-5, 1 Corinthians 3:15, Jude 24

*Merciful God, I'm excited for Christmas once again. Thank You, praise to You, for Your mercy and love, and for this Christmas.*

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## Practical Proverbial, from Jude, 24 December 2020 Today's topic: Happy Easter

*To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. Jude 24-25 (NIV).*

Happy Easter 2021. Oh, and Merry Christmas, too. Here we arrive at Christmas Eve, as well as the last two verses of the book of Jude. They are a doxology praising God for His glorious nature given to us in Jude's brother, Jesus: Jesus, born on Christmas specifically to die on Good Friday so He could resurrect 3 days later. That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.

Yes, I'm splashing you with a healthy shock of cold water (or eggnog, or wassail) in saying that Christmas means nothing without Easter. Yep. Today, when so many lights are sparkling, when we're remembering the beautifully humble story of the babe in the manger, when we're excited for Santa to come, when trees are trimmed and football is on TV, and when we are hopefully nestled in our beds with visions of sugar plums dancing in our heads, remember that today only happened because it started the road to Calvary.

More importantly, it began the path that led to the stone being rolled away. On Easter. On Easter, when the full meaning of Christmas finally became clear. Christmas only happened because God had already set Easter in motion.

I love Christmas, especially in this whacked-out year of 2020. So much has been upside down this year, and so many people have suffered worldwide. But I love that there is still this end-of-year miracle about mercy and love that God gave to us. I love that, despite the best workings of bad government, Christmas hasn't been locked down, or delayed, or destroyed. I love that we are still able to celebrate this year and enjoy the gifts, the cookies, the fellowship, the story of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

Know what I love most of all? That Easter is what gives meaning to Christmas. Easter is what makes Christmas so beautiful. We don't sing "Easter carols"; there aren't even that many popular Easter hymns. So, this year, let's sing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," or "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," or even "Jingle Bells" remembering that they point to Jesus born in Bethlehem under the cruelest circumstances. Jesus, born on Christmas with the divine purpose of dying that horrible death on Good Friday.

So He could rise on Easter. Because Easter gave Good Friday meaning. Because Easter makes Christmas worth celebrating. Without Easter, Christmas is just another royal holiday; big freaking deal. With Easter, it is the miracle. It's the herald angels singing. It is Emmanuel with us to save us. It is merry bells jingling in anticipation of eternal happiness. The baby in the manger grew up to be the resurrected man who walked out of that Easter tomb. Gloria in excelsis deo and that matters most.

Christmas is wonderful because of Jesus' mercy and love, so let's remember that today. And, as we close Jude and give praise to God, let's remember to say "merry Christmas" at least once more. Every time we do, we're actually proclaiming, "He is risen. He is risen indeed."

For further reading: Matthew 1:18-2:23, Mark 15-16, Luke 2, John 1:1-19, John 21 Obadiah 1

*Lord Jesus, thank You for Your birth that began Your journey to Your resurrection!*