

“That You May Know”

A Study of the Letters of John

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- INTRODUCTION -

That Which Was From the Beginning (1 John 1:1)

The Father-Figure Behind the Letters

Abundant internal and external evidence points to the former fisherman—John the Son of Zebedee (Mark 1:19-20), the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23), author of the Gospel of John—as the author of these three Letters of John.

John clearly claims to be writing as an eyewitness (1 John 1:1-3). Take the time to search out and list some of the most significant events in the life of John as recorded in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles. What did he witness firsthand? In what was he personally involved?

The early 2nd century writers Polycarp and Papias (c. A.D. 100) directly cited and loosely alluded to 1 John, which proves a date of composition no later than the 90s A.D. Tradition holds that shortly before A.D. 67, John joined other disciples of Jesus in departing from Jerusalem prior to its destruction in A.D. 70 by the Romans. John reportedly ministered for a number of years in the vicinity of Ephesus before being exiled to Patmos, an island in the Aegean Sea to which Rome banished political criminals (Rev 1:9). Taking into account that he was working as a fisherman when Jesus called him to “fish for men” in approximately A.D. 30, John writes these letters as an aged, battle-tested “pillar” (Gal 2:9) of the faith.

He repeatedly refers (1 John 2:1, 12, 13, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21; 2 John 1, 4, 13; 3 John 4) to the recipients of his letters as “children,” even “my little children.” Why do you think he refers to them in this way?

The Focus and Flow of the Letters

Echoes of the Gospel of John can be heard throughout the letters of John. Verbal forms of *believe* occur (about 100 times) in John's Gospel and consistently throughout his letters. *Believe* in what? More accurately, in whom?

- The Father's sending of Jesus into the world (1 John 1:2; 4:9)
- The sacrificial death of Jesus (1 John 1:7)
- The triumphant resurrection of Jesus (1 John 5:11)
- The ongoing intercession of Jesus (1 John 2:1)
- The future appearing of Jesus (1 John 2:28; 4:17)

John affirms the ancient truth that "No one has ever seen God" (1 John 4:12), but he gradually builds to this climactic declaration: to know Jesus is to know God (1 John 5:20). John uses *know* more than 30 times in his letters. What can (and must) be *known*?

- The propitiation of our sins in Jesus (1 John 4:10)
- "The truth" as defined by our Creator (1 John 1:6, 8; 2:4, 21; 3:18-19; 4:6; 5:6)
- The new birth (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18; 3 John 11)
- Fellowship with God and his children (1 John 1:3-7)
- Completed joy (1 John 1:4)
- Perfected love (1 John 2:5; 3:18; 4:12, 17-18)
- Eternal life (1 John 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20)

Why must disciples of Christ *know* these things? Because there are serious differences between:

- Light and darkness (1 John 1:5-7)
- Obedience and disobedience (1 John 2:3-6)
- Love of the world and love of the Father (1 John 2:15-17)
- The truth and lies (1 John 2:18-27)
- The children of God and the children of the devil (1 John 2:28-3:10)
- The Spirit of truth and the spirit of error (1 John 4:1-6)

Therefore, "we know" is emphatically sounded at the end of John's first letter (1 John 5:18-20)

Practically speaking, what fruit does this *knowing* produce?

- We keep his commandments (1 John 2:3-4; 3:22; 5:3)
- The love of God is perfected (1 John 2:5; 3:22; 4:12, 17-18)
- God abides in us (1 John 4:12) and we in him (1 John 2:6; 3:24; 5:20)
- We walk in the same way in which Jesus walked (1 John 2:6; 3:10; 4:17; 2 John 4; 3 John 11)

“That Which Was From the Beginning” (1 John 1:1)

John begins his first letter with this deep and glorious exclamation:

That which was from the beginning...

This is strikingly similar to the introduction of the Gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
(1:1-5)

What should we “know” and confidently carry with us from these significant introductions?

- SESSION 1 -

Good News of Fellowship, Joy, and Life (1 John 1:1-4)

“That which was from the beginning...” (1 John 1:1). Thinking back to the Gospel accounts, what sort of specific things from the life of Jesus might John have had in mind when he references:

- “Which we have heard” –

- “Which we have seen with our eyes” –

- “Which we looked upon and have touched with our hands” –

What does John mean when he references “the word of life”?

In your own words, what impact did “the word of life” have according to 1:2?

When the Bible speaks of something being “proclaimed,” what is meant?

What is the aim of John’s proclamation according to 1:3?

Draw a diagram below to illustrate the profound point being made about fellowship in 1:3.

In what way would “writing these things” make John’s “joy” complete (1:4)?

- SESSION 2 -

God is Light (1 John 1:5-10)

“This is the message we have heard from him” (1 John 1:5). Why is this an important preface to what John is about to say?

“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you” (1 John 1:5). Is it enough simply to lead a good, moral life? Must the message be proclaimed or can the gist of the message be lived out in front of others with the hope that, if they’re interested, they’ll inquire?

“God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). In your own words, what is this profound idea communicating?

Why would anyone “say” they have “fellowship” with God while they “walk in darkness” (1:6)?

If we try to do so, John assures us, “we lie and do not practice the truth” (1:6). Why would he use such strong language?

In everyday terms, what does it mean to “walk in the light” (1:7)?

Two practical outcomes are promised “if we walk in the light” (1:7). What is meant by...

- We have fellowship with one another –

- The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin –

How would you summarize, in your own words, 1 John 1:8-10?

- SESSION 3 -

Jesus Christ: Our Propitiation and Advocate (1 John 2:1-6)

“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin” (2:1a). How could this letter from John possibly keep Christians from sinning?

“But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (2:1b).

- “But if anyone does sin” – what can we deduce from this phrase?
- What is an “advocate” and why would we need one?
- Why does John include “the righteous” in his description of Jesus?

“He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (2:2). In your own words, what is a “propitiation”?

“And by this we know that we have come to know him...” (2:3) Why would the Spirit of God lead John to complete this sentence, “...if we keep his commandments”?

In what way is the one who says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments a “liar”?

What does keeping God’s word have to do with the love of God being “perfected” (2:5)?

When John speaks of “abiding” in God, what does he have in mind?

- SESSION 4 -

A New Commandment From of Old (1 John 2:7-14)

“Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning” (2:7). What does this mean?

“At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining” (2:8). Why would John first say, “I am writing you no new commandment,” then say, “at the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you”?

How can a brother or sister in Christ come to transgress the warning of 2:9?

What does “loving” your brother have to do with “abiding in the light” (2:10)?

What does “hating” your brother have to do with “walking in the darkness” (2:11a)?

How does this darkness come to “blind” the eyes of people (2:11b)?

In your own words, what is John saying to:

- Little children (2:12) –
- Fathers (2:13a) –
- Young men (2:13b) –
- Children (2:13c) –
- Fathers (2:14a) –
- Young men (2:14b) –

- SESSION 5 -

Do Not Love the World or Its Things (1 John 2:15-17)

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

In everyday terms, what does it mean to “love the world” and “the things in the world”?

Why is loving the world and its things such a serious issue that disciples of Christ would be warned in this way?

Why is it either “the world” or “the Father”? Why can’t it be both?

In what way is “the love of the Father” not “in” a disciple who loves the world?

What does John mean when he references:

- The desires of the flesh?
- The desires of the eyes?
- Pride in possessions (or the pride of life)?

In what way are those things “from the world”?

Why are we told that “the world is passing away along with its desires”? What does this mean?

In what way will the one who “does the will of God” abide “forever”?

- SESSION 6 -

This is the Antichrist (1 John 2:18-27)

When John warns these “children” that “it is the last hour,” what does he mean?

What should we make of John’s reference to “antichrist” and “many antichrists” in 2:18?

We get the sense that John has something important in mind in 2:19. How would you summarize his message?

In what way had these Christians “been anointed by the Holy One” (2:20)?

Why is denying that Jesus is the Christ such a serious issue, as revealed in 2:21-23?

“Let what you have heard from the beginning abide in you” (2:24). How does this practically culminate in our abiding “in the Son and in the Father”?

Why would the Spirit of God lead John to emphasize what he does in 2:25 in this sort of context?

- SESSION 7 -

We are God's Children (1 John 2:28-3:10)

When John counsels Christians to “abide” in the Son, what does he mean (2:28)?

What does it mean to “practice righteousness” (2:29)?

“The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him” (3:1). On what basis can John make this assertion?

Why does John say, “Beloved, we are God's children now” (3:2)? Why the “now”?

What is John talking about in 3:2?

How does this truth lead the one who “hopes” in God to “purify” himself (3:3)?

What does it mean to “practice sinning” (3:4)?

What should we make of 3:6?

What can we learn from 3:8?

What is “God's seed,” referenced in 3:9?

Why is it important that the identities of “the children of God” and “the children of the devil” would become “evident” (3:10)?

- SESSION 8 -

Love in Deed and in Truth (1 John 3:11-24)

“For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning...” (3:11) In what way?

Why does God care so much about our loving one another?

What should Christians remember about and learn from Cain (3:12)?

Why shouldn't Christians be surprised when the world “hates” us (3:13)?

In what way have we “passed out of death into life” (3:14a)?

“Whoever does not love abides in death” (3:14b). Why is this the only other alternative?

How could John possibly be justified in asserting that “everyone who hates his brother is a murderer” (3:15)?

How does Jesus' sacrifice define the very essence of “love” (3:16)?

Can you provide some examples of ways that disciples might sometimes “love in word or talk” but not “in deed and in truth” (3:18)?

What should we make of 3:19-22?

“And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us” (3:24). What does this mean?

- SESSION 9 -

Test the Spirits (1 John 4:1-21)

Why can Christians not afford to “believe every spirit” (4:1a)?

Practically speaking, what does it mean to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (4:1b)?

On what authority can John assert that “many false prophets have gone out into the world” (4:1c)?

How would you summarize, in your own words, what John is warning about and prescribing in 4:2-6?

In what way is “love from God” (4:7)?

What is a “propitiation” (4:10)?

“By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit” (4:13). What does this mean?

What is John communicating when he writes, “By this is love perfected with us” (4:17)?

Why is there “no fear in love” (4:18a)?

“Whoever fears has not been perfected in love” (4:18b). In what way?

- SESSION 10 -

Whoever Has the Son Has Life (1 John 5:1-12)

What is John describing in 5:1? Where else in this letter have we run across the same basic point?

What does “keeping God’s commandments” have to do with “the love of God” (5:3a)? Why *must* they go hand-in-hand?

“And his commandments are not burdensome” (5:3b). Is this true? In what way?

What does it mean for Christians to “overcome the world” and what does our faith have to do with our overcoming (5:4-5)?

What does John mean when he describes Jesus Christ as coming “by water and blood” (5:6a)?

In what way is “the Spirit” the “one who testifies” and how do “the Spirit and the water and the blood” agree (5:6-8)?

What should we make of 5:9?

Why is it so important that Christians would believe “in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son” (5:10)? What elements of this testimony do you think John has in mind?

“Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar” (5:10). In what way?

“Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (5:12). On what basis can John make and stand by such a strong and straightforward assertion?

- SESSION 11 -

That You May Know (1 John 5:13-21)

What is “eternal life” and what does it mean to “know that you have” it (5:13)?

How would you explain the message of 5:14 in your own words?

What should we make of 5:15? Does this mean that we will receive anything we ask of God? If not, why not?

In what way is “all wrongdoing” sin (5:17)?

What is “a sin not leading to death,” and what should a brother “ask” of God on the committer’s behalf (5:16a)?

On the other hand, what is a “sin that leads to death,” and why would John write, “I do not say that one should pray for that” (5:16b)?

In your own words, summarize and convey the good news of 5:18.

In what way does “the whole world” lie “in the power of the evil one” (5:19)?

What does John want us to remember, believe, and anchor ourselves to in 5:20?

Why would John conclude his letter in the way that he does (5:21)?

- SESSION 12 -

Abide in the Doctrine of Christ (2 John)

What do you think John is implying with this introduction: “The elder to the elect lady and her children” (1:1)?

In your own words, what role does “truth” play in 1:1-2?

Practically speaking, what does it mean to “walk in the truth” (1:4)?

Why does John repeatedly return to the “love one another” imperative in his writings (1:5)?

In your own words, what does it mean to “walk according to his commandments” (1:6)?

Why is denying “the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh” such a serious offense (1:7)?

How would you summarize the message of 1:8? What does it mean to “watch” ourselves, and how do we go about doing it?

“Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for...” (1:8). What can we learn from that second phrase? What would it mean to “lose” in this context?

What is the message of 1:9 and why is it important?

Why would John warn and prescribe what he does in 1:10-11?

- SESSION 13 -

Do Not Imitate Evil, But Imitate Good (3 John)

“Beloved, I pray...” (1:2).

- What does it mean to pray “that all may go well” in our own lives and the lives of others?
- Why pray for “good health”?
- What can we learn from John’s inclusion of the last phrase about Gaius’ soul?

In your own words, how would you summarize the sentiment expressed by John in 1:3-4?

What makes a thing done for others a “faithful thing” (1:5)?

What is John describing and recommending in 1:6-8?

What was Diotrephes doing and why were his actions worthy of serious rebuke (1:9-10)?

In everyday terms, what does it mean to “not imitate evil but imitate good” (1:11a)?

In what way is the one who does good “from God”? And why would John assert that “whoever does evil has not seen God” (1:11b)?