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# A Study of the Epistles of John



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# An Introduction to First John

**Author:** The Apostle John.

- A. External evidence: “The church fathers.” Polycarp, Papias, Irenaus, Origen, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Eusebius.
- B. Internal evidence. Similarities in vocabulary, thought phrases and style of writing to the gospel of John.
  - 1. The opening verse of First John echoes the first chapter of the Gospel of John and reveals the author as an eyewitness to precalvary and post resurrection.
  - 2. Distinctive words common to both books: “beginning,” “light,” “love,” and “abide.”
  - 3. Distinctive phrases common to both books.
    - a. “To do truth.” (1:6; John 3:21).
    - b. “To walk in darkness.” (2:11; John 8:12)
    - c. “Children of God.” (3:2; John 11:52)
    - d. “To be born of God.” (3:9; John 1:13)
    - e. “Children of the devil.” (3:10; John 8:44)
    - f. “To pass from death to life.” (3:14; John 5:24)
    - g. “The Spirit of truth.” (4:6; John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13)
    - h. “The only begotten Son.” (4:9; John 3:16, 18)
    - i. “No man has ever seen God.” (4:12; John 1:18)
    - j. “The Savior of the world.” (4:14; John 4:42)
    - k. “The water and the blood.” (5:6; John 19:34).

**Time of Writing:** Circa A.D. 90.

**Place of Writing:** Ephesus. (Most likely)

## Conditions Which Prompted the Writing

- A. Internal opposition to Christ and the church: false teachers.
- B. Poor spiritual condition.
  - 1. Worldliness in the form of false philosophy and carnal deeds. (2:15-17)
  - 2. A tendency toward sin and worldliness. (1:5 - 2:6; 2:15-17)
  - 3. A lack of love for the brethren and an indifference toward their physical needs. (2:7-11; 3:13-24)
  - 4. A lack of assurance of salvation. (5:13)
- C. Gnosticism.
  - 1. A religious and philosophical doctrine mixing Christians with Jewish and oriental doctrine, pretending intuitive and mysterious knowledge (Greek, *gnosis*) of divine matters.
  - 2. “Gnosticism was a philosophy of religion rather than a single system. It was built on the premise that spirit is good, that matter is evil, and that the two can have no enduring relation with each other. Salvation consists of escape from the realm of matter into the realm of the spirit. The means of this escape are numerous. Chief among them is knowledge by which man can rise above the earth-bound chains of matter into the

- heavenly apprehension of truth. This knowledge, or *gnosis*, to use the Greek term which gave the philosophy its name, could be attained only by those who were initiated into the inner secrets of the group. The teaching of the Gnostics was from an unorganized but cohesive cult, bound together by common rites and by common thinking rather than by officers and societies.” (Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953, p. 375)
3. Three groups of Gnostics.
    - a. The **Ebionites**, followers of Ebion. They denied the deity of Christ teaching that He was merely a creature.
    - b. The **Docetists**, who denied the humanity of Christ teaching that He was merely a visionary being, a phantom, void of human nature and had not come in the flesh.
    - c. The **Cerinthians**, followers of Cerinthus. They denied the union of the two natures of Christ prior to His baptism.
  4. A major factor in their teaching was sensuality. (Jude 16, 19; 2 Peter 2:2, 3, 10, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19; Rev. 2:14-15)

### Purposes of the Writing

- A. Deduced purposes.
  1. Evidences for faith in the deity of Jesus Christ. (1:3, 4; 5:13)
  2. To describe the life that faith demands. (3:1-12)
- B. As stated by John.
  1. That their joy may be full. (1:4)
  2. That they may not sin. (2:1)
  3. That they may be warned against error. (2:26)
  4. That they may know they have eternal life. (5:13)

### Themes in the Book

- A. The deity of Jesus Christ and the kind of life on earth that faith in Him demands. (1:1-4)
- B. Assurance. (5:13)
  1. “We know” occurs 13 times while its cognate does some 40 times.
  2. While the gospel of John was written to create faith, the epistle gives certainty of faith and possession of eternal life.

### Outline of the Book

- I. Introduction: Life’s Historical Manifestation (1:1-4)
- II. Certainty through Walking in the Light (1:5 - 2:29)
  - A. In personal spiritual conduct (1:5 - 2:6)
  - B. In social relationships (2:7-11)
  - C. In separation from the world (2:12-17)
  - D. In adherence to the Truth (2:18-29)
- III. Certainty through Abiding in Love (3:1 - 4:21)
  - A. The ethical proof of love (3:1-12)
  - B. The social proof of love (3:13-24)
  - C. The theological proof of love (4:1-6)
  - D. The emotional proof of love (4:7-21)
- IV. Certainty through Exercise of Faith (5:1-12)
- V. Conclusion: The Resultant Certainties of Life (5:13-21) (Tenney, 379)

## Review Questions

1. What are some sources of evidence for the authorship of the epistle?
2. What was the time of writing of the epistle? From what place was it written?
3. What was the spiritual condition of the disciple to whom John was writing?
4. What were some of the conditions which prompted the writing of this epistle?
5. What is gnosticism?
6. What is the basic doctrine of gnosticism?
7. Name three types of gnostics. List what each type believed in relation to Jesus.
8. Why was gnosticism accepted by some disciples?
9. What are John's stated purposes for writing this letter?
10. What are some themes of this epistle?

# First John: Chapter 1

## Summary

**Vv. 1,2.** Apostolic testimony in regard to the existence of Jesus Christ, God in flesh. The gnostics denied that Jesus was God in flesh and had succeeded in perverting the faith of some.

**Vv. 3,4.** The purpose of the testimony: 1. That the brethren might have fellowship with the apostles who, in turn, were in fellowship with the Father and Son. 2. That the apostles' joy might be full. All genuine joy consists of participating in this fellowship.

**Vv. 5-7.** Fellowship with God consists of walking in the light for God is light. To walk otherwise is to admit a lack of fellowship with God. The Gnostics claimed such fellowship but denied it with their carnal deeds.

**Vv. 8-10.** Instead of claiming to have no sin or that they do not sin, Christians should confess their sins so that God might pardon them by the blood of Christ. Those who do not admit sin deceive themselves and make God a liar.

## Review Questions

1. To what time does the phrase “from the beginning” refer?
2. Who is the “we” of verse one?
3. Why does John say they “heard...seen,...handled” Christ?
4. What does the phrase “the life was manifested” mean?
5. Why did the apostles declare Jesus and the facts concerning Him to men?
6. How is “joy made full?”
7. How is God “light?” Why can there be no darkness in Him?
8. What does it mean to “walk in the light?”
9. What establishes fellowship with God? What establishes fellowship with other men in religion?
10. What is the condition of those who say they have no sin? Why?

# First John: Chapter 2

## Summary

**Vv. 1-6.** The stated purpose for writing this epistle: to keep the recipients of it from sinning. In case a Christian does sin, though, he has Jesus Christ as his advocate before the Father. Jesus is the propitiation for the sins of mankind. The Christian, therefore, should avoid sinning but rather walk in obedience to the truth even as Christ walked.

**Vv. 7-17.** The new commandment: walk in love as Christ walked. The one who claims to walk in love but hates his brother contradicts himself. Recent converts, the more mature in the faith and those who had been in the faith a long time are all addressed specifically by John. Christians are not to love the world nor the things in it. Those things are in the process of passing away but the one who does the will of God abides forever.

**Vv. 18-29.** The anti-christ and his characteristics are presented. Christians are warned not to be deceived by him. Instead they were to exercise the anointing they had received and remain in the truth which they had heard so that they would not be lost as the anti-christ would be in the final judgment.

## Review Questions

1. What is an advocate? Who is the Christian's advocate with the Father?
2. Define "propitiation."
3. How can a person be sure he "knows" Christ?
4. Give some reasons why it is impossible to hate your brother and walk in the light at the same time.
5. Who are the "little children," "young men" and "fathers" in verses 12 through 14?
6. What "world" is referred to in verses 15 through 17? Why is the Christian forbidden to love it?
7. What and/or who is the "anti-christ?"
8. What were the anti-christs teaching?
9. What was the "anointing" of verse 27?
10. What is to be the attitude of the Christian toward Christ's second coming? How is it possible to have such an attitude?

# First John: Chapter 3

## Summary

**Vv. 1-3.** Christians are sons of God, disapproved by the world. They continue to purify their lives because they hope to be made like Christ at His second coming.

**Vv. 4-10.** The sons of God do not continue in a life of sin. The sons of the devil do. Habitual sin proves one to be a son of the devil and works against the purpose of Christ's first coming.

**Vv. 11-18.** To love one's brethren is evidence of sonship to God. This love is not a mere profession but is in deed and truth.

**Vv. 19-22.** The consequences of loving the brethren: 1. The assurance of being in the truth and a tranquil heart. (v. 19) 2. The assurance of being known by God, who is greater than our hearts and knows all things. (v. 20) 3. The approval of the heart itself and the boldness toward God it gives. (v. 21) 4. As a consequence of this boldness, God answers prayer. (v. 22)

**Vv. 23-24.** Summarizing the commandments into one: Believe in Christ and love one another in order to abide in Him and have Him abide in you.

## Review Questions

1. Why is the fact that we "should be called the children of God" such a good demonstration of the love of God?
2. How and why does the world not know the children of God?
3. Is the "manifested" of verse five the same as that of verse two? Explain.
4. How did Jesus "destroy the works of the devil?"
5. What is meant, in reference to one begotten of God, when it is said of him that "he cannot sin?"
6. Why should the disciples of Christ not "marvel" if the world hates them?
7. List those characteristics common to both a murderer and one who hates his brother.
8. What does it mean to love "in deed and truth?"
9. How can one's heart condemn him?
10. What assurance does the Christian have that his prayers are answered?



# First John: Chapter 4

## Summary

**Vv. 1-6.** The Christians to whom the epistle was written were not to believe every religious teacher of their time. Rather, they were to prove them in respect to the humanity and deity of Jesus because the Gnostics denied the dual nature of Jesus and refused to hear the apostles concerning it.

**Vv. 7-8.** Love is of God and is a proof that one is begotten of Him.

**Vv. 9-11.** God demonstrated His love by sending His only begotten Son to be the propitiation for sin. Having such love for an example, Christians ought to love one another.

**Vv. 12-16.** Loving his brethren is evidence that the Christian abides in God and God in Him.

**Vs. 17.** Love made perfect in the Christian gives him boldness in the day of judgment.

**Vs. 18.** Love casts out the fear of punishment because the one who is obedient in love will not be punished.

**Vv. 19-21.** Divine love serves as the source of and reason for the Christian to love. God has commanded Christians to love their brethren. To profess to love God while hating one's brother is to lie. It is impossible to love God without loving one's brethren.

## Review Questions

1. What are the "spirits" of verse one?
2. How can one know if a "spirit" is from God?
3. What is the "world" of verse five?
4. Why is brotherly love necessary in order to "know" God?
5. How is God's love perfected in Christians?
6. Does verse 15 mean that confession of Christ is all that is necessary to have God dwell in a person? Explain.
7. How does the perfection of the Christian's love give him boldness in the day of judgment?
8. How does perfect love cast out fear?
9. Why is it impossible to love a God one has never seen while hating a brother in Christ one has seen?
10. Summarize how the teaching of this chapter deals with the problems being caused by the Gnostics.

# First John: Chapter 5

## Summary

**Vv. 1-5.** Neither the Gnostics nor any others who denied the deity and incarnation of Jesus Christ are begotten of God or overcome the world. Those who believe in Jesus and who love God and their brethren are begotten of Him and overcome the world.

**Vv. 6-12.** The testimony of God in relation to His Son coming into the world. Believing this testimony brings the promise of eternal life. The Gnostics did not believe it, therefore, they did not have life.

**Vs. 13.** The purpose of John's epistle: To give his readers true *gnosis*, knowledge.

**Vv. 14-17.** Faith gives boldness. This boldness is exemplified in petitioning God in prayer. God hears and answers the prayers of the faithful. This fact is illustrated in the charge to pray for a brother who is not sinning unto death.

**Vs. 18-19.** The one begotten of God is kept from the evil one but the unbelieving world lies passively in him because it is conquered by him.

**Vs. 20.** Christians know the true God and are in Him in Christ Jesus.

**Vs. 21.** A final exhortation: Keep from idols.

## Review Questions

1. Why are those who believe that Jesus is the Christ begotten of God?
2. What is the test to know if one loves the children of God?
3. How does one overcome the world?
4. What is meant by the statement that Jesus came "by water and blood?"
5. Why is the witness of God greater than the witness of men?
6. How can one know if he has eternal life?
7. What gives boldness in prayer? Why?
8. What is a "sin unto death?"
9. What is unrighteousness?
10. What does it mean that "whoever is born of God does not sin?"

# Second John

**Author:** The Apostle John.

**Time of Writing:** Probably about 90 A.D.

**Place of Writing:** Ephesus. (Uncertain)

**To Whom It Was Written:** The elect lady. (*eklekte kuria*)

**Characteristics of the Book:** A personal letter dealing especially with gnosticism.

**Purpose of the Writing:** To confirm the faith of the recipients, to exhort them to walk in love and obedience and to warn them of false teachers.

## Outline of the Book

- I. Salutation (Vv. 1-3)
- II. The Request for Reciprocal Love (Vv. 4-6)
  - A. The cause of John's rejoicing (v. 4)
  - B. The basis of the request (v. 5)
  - C. The essence of the request (v. 6)
- III. A Warning against False Teachers and Apostacy (Vv. 7-11)
  - A. The cause of the warning (v. 7)
  - B. The appeal of the warning (v. 8)
  - C. The explanation of the warning (v. 9)
- IV. John's Desire to Visit (Vs. 12)
- V. Closing: Greetings from the children of her sister (Vs. 13)

## Review Questions

1. Who is the "elect lady?"
2. How does the author define "love?" Why is this a good definition?
3. What were the "deceivers" teaching?
4. What is the condition of one who does not abide in the teaching of Christ? Why?
5. What should be the Christian's attitude toward false teachers? Why?
6. In relation to the false teacher, what does it mean to "give him no greeting?"

# Third John

**Author:** The Apostle John.

**Time of Writing:** Probably about 90 A.D.

**Place of Writing:** Ephesus. (Uncertain)

**To Whom It Was Written:** Gaius.

**Purposes of the Writing:** A personal letter meant to:

- A. Inform Gaius of his love and prayers. (vv. 1, 2)
- B. Express his joy over Gaius' stand for truth. (vv. 3, 4)
- C. Commend Gaius for his hospitality. (vv. 5-8)
- D. Reveal his displeasure over the arrogance of Diotrophes. (vv. 9-10)
- E. Promote a rejection of the leadership of Diotrophes and a following of the example of Demetrius whom he commends. (v. 11-12)
- F. Inform Gaius of his plans to visit him. (vv. 13, 14)

## Outline of the Book

- I. Salutation (Vs. 1)
- II. Hospitable Gaius (Vv. 2-8)
  - A. Prayer for Gaius (v. 2)
  - B. Rejoicing over Gaius (vv. 3, 4)
  - C. Commendation of Gaius (vv. 5-8)
- III. The Preeminence of Diotrophes (Vv. 9-11)
  - A. His rejection of John (vv. 9-10)
  - B. John's rejection of Diotrophes (v. 11)
- IV. The Good Demetrius (Vs. 12)
- V. Conclusion (Vv. 13, 14)

## Review Questions

1. To whom was the book addressed? What did the author wish in reference to his recipient's prosperity?
2. To what two outstanding traits of Gaius did the brethren attest?
3. What was one of John's greatest joys?
4. How was Gaius a fellow-helper for truth?
5. What did Diotrophes love? Define your answer.

6. What four things had Diotrophes done?
7. What did John exhort his readers to imitate?
8. Who was Demetrius? What three witnesses did he have? What characterized John's testimony about him?
9. Why was John's letter to Gaius so short?
10. Who are the "friends?"



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