



Investigating the Word of God

First John



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An Introduction to First John

The Author of the Book

“While his name is not attached to it at any place, tradition and history have always assigned this epistle to John. Placed alongside the Gospel of John, of which there is no question of authorship, this epistle bears very striking resemblances in several ways. He emphasizes Christ as the Son of God, says much about love, faith, and the life of God in Christ, and refers to the work of the Holy Spirit, much as he did in his gospel.” (William S. Deal, *Baker’s Pictorial Introduction to the Bible*, 408)

There are many similarities between the gospel of John and this book. For example, there are several distinctive words which are common to both books: beginning, light, love and abide.

There are also several phrases which are common to both books:

- “To do truth” (1:6; John 3:21).
- “To walk in darkness” (2:11; John 8:12).
- “Children of God” (3:2; John 11:52).
- “To be born of God” (3:9; John 1:13).
- “Children of the devil” (3:10; John 8:44).
- “To pass from death to life” (3:14; John 5:24).
- “The Spirit of truth” (4:6; John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13).
- “The only begotten Son” (4:9; John 3:16,18).
- “No man has ever seen God” (4:12; John 1:18).
- “The Savior of the world” (4:14; John 4:42).
- “The water and the blood” (5:6; John 19:34).

Those to Whom the Book Was Written

“There is no address in the opening chapter, as in most epistles. His oft-repeated references to ‘my little children’ and ‘my children’ make it evident he refers to Christians. It could have been a local congregation or church with which he was most familiar (2:19) to which he wrote. But this could also refer to the...church as a whole.” (Deal, 407)

“There are several things that indicate to us from a reasonable point of view that John was writing to the churches of Asia Minor. In the first place, in the Revelation given to him by Jesus, he specifically addressed seven of the churches of Asia. In the second place, he had been associated with the church at Ephesus. In the third place, it was the churches of Asia who were being stirred by the false religion of the Gnostics with which John deals at length in the first letter. It was not written, apparently, to any particular local church, but had in mind likely a group of churches. The fact that John warned against idols (5:21), combined with the fact that there is little reference to the Old Testament in the epistle, is an indication that the readers were perhaps largely Gentile Christians.” (Roy Cogdill, *The New Testament Book-by-Book*, 174)

The Time and Place of Writing

“First John was probably written in Ephesus after the Gospel of John, but the date cannot be fixed with certainty. No persecution is mentioned, suggesting a date prior to A.D. 95 when persecution broke out near the end of the Roman emperor Domitian’s reign (A.D. 81-96).” (*Nelson’s Complete Book of Bible Maps & Charts*, 467)

Why This Book Was Written

This book was written to address opposition within the church to Christ and the church by false teachers who promoted the doctrine of gnosticism. Gnosticism was a religious and philosophical doctrine which mixed doctrines of Christ with Jewish and oriental doctrines. It pretended to have some sort of mysterious knowledge (Greek: *gnosis*) of divine matters.

“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*, 375)

There were basically three types of gnostics. The Ebionites, followers of Ebion, denied the deity of Christ teaching that He was merely a creature. 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. The Cerinthians, followers of Cerinthus, denied the union of the two natures of Christ prior to His baptism.

“The best statement of the purpose of the First Epistle of John is found within the letter itself in these words, ‘These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God’ (5:13). This purpose in the epistle is best served by the effort that John makes to define the nature of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, that He may be set forth correctly in the face of heresies or false teachings which were afflicting the church near the end of the First Century.” (Cogdill, 174).

Why This Book Was Written

A prominent theme in this epistle is love—the word appears more than thirty-five times in the epistle. The apostle uses the example of Cain to illustrate what love is not: hatred is murdering in spirit, and it arises from the worldly sphere of death. John then uses the example of Christ to illustrate what love is: love is practiced in self-sacrifice, not mere profession. This practical expression of love results in assurance before God and answered prayers because the believer is walking in obedience to God’s commands to believe in Christ and love one another.” (Nelson’s, 467, 469)

“First John is an Epistle of assurance. The phrase ‘we know’ occurs thirteen times (2:3, 5, 29; 3:14, 16, 19, 24; 4:13, 16; 5:15, 18, 19, 20). In fact, cognates of the verb ‘to know’ appear at least forty times. Whereas the Gospel was written to create faith and life (John 20:31), the Epistle was penned to give certainty of faith and the possession of eternal life...(5:13)...The book contains a classic description of the concept of worldliness (2:15-17).” (Gromacki, 370-371)

An Outline of First John

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. (2:18-19)

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)

Outline is by Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, 379

First John Chapter One

Keys to This Chapter

Key Passage: Verse 7

“But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”

Key Words

Manifested

Fellowship

Darkness

Confess

Cleanse

Unrighteousness

Key Lesson

Questions on the Text

1. What had John heard, seen, looked upon and handled?
2. Who is the Word of life? (Use John 1:1-18 to help you answer)
3. What, according to verse two, had been manifested to John?
4. Why was John declaring to his readers what he had seen and heard?
5. With whom did John say he had fellowship?
6. According to verse six, what is the result of saying you have fellowship with God while you walk in darkness?
7. What is the result of walking in the light as God is in the light?
8. If one walks in the light, what cleanses him from all sin?
9. What happens when Christians confess their sins?
10. What are two consequences when a person says he has no sin?

True - False

- T F 1. John had seen that which was from the beginning.
T F 2. Eternal life had been manifested to John
T F 3. John did not want his readers to have fellowship with him.
T F 4. John wrote these things so that his readers' joy would be full.
T F 5. God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.
T F 6. We are in fellowship with God when we walk in darkness.
T F 7. The blood of animals cleanses us from all sin.
T F 8. We deceive ourselves when we say we have no sin.
T F 9. Even if we confess our sins, God will not forgive us.
T F 10. God's word is not in us if we say we have no sin.

Discussion Question

How does a person walk in the light?

First John Chapter Two

Keys to This Chapter

Key Passage: Verses 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 lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.”

Key Words

Advocate

Propitiation

Perfected

Overcome

Lust

Antichrist

Anointing

Acknowledges

Deceive

Confidence

Ashamed

Righteous

Key Lesson

Questions on the Text

1. According to verse one, why did John write these things?
2. Who is the Christian’s Advocate with the Father?
3. Who is the propitiation for the whole world?
4. According to verse three, how can we know if we know Christ?
5. What is one who says he knows Christ but does not keep His commandments?
6. What is perfected in the person who keeps Christ’s word?
7. According to verse six, how is a person to walk?
8. In what is one who hates his brother? In what does one abide who loves his brother?
9. According to verse 12, why did John write to these “little children?”
10. Why, according to verses 13 and 15, did John write to “young men?”
11. What can be said of the person who loves the world?
12. According to verse 16, what is in the world?
13. According to verse 17:
 - a. What is passing away?
 - b. Who will abide forever?
14. Who, according to verse 18, is coming?
15. How do we know “it is the last hour?”
16. According to verse 22, who is a liar?
17. According to verse 23, who does not “have the Father?” who “has the Father?”
18. What, according to verse 25, is the promise of God?
19. According to verse 28, what will the person who abides in Christ have when He comes?
20. According to verse 29, who is born of Christ?

Discussion Question

What is the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life?

First John Chapter Three

Keys to This Chapter

Key Passage: Verse 22

“And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.”

Key People

Cain

Key Words

Bestowed

Purifies

Commits

Lawlessness

Marvel

Murderer

Condemns

Pleasing

Key Lesson

Questions on the Text

1. What, according to verse one, are Christians?
2. What will Christians be when Christ is revealed?
3. Who, according to verse three, purifies himself?
4. What, according to verse four, is sin?
5. According to verse five, why was Jesus manifested?
6. Who, according to verse seven, is righteous?
7. Who is of the devil?
8. According to verse eight, why was the Son of God manifested?
9. According to verse nine, who does not sin?
10. According to verse ten, who is not of God?
11. What message had these people heard from the beginning?
12. What did Cain do? Why did he do it?
13. According to verse 14, who has passed from life to death?
14. Who, according to verse 15, is a murderer?
15. According to verse 16, what should a Christian be willing to do for his brethren?
16. According to verse 18:
 - a. How are Christians not to love?
 - b. How are Christians to love?
17. Who knows all things?
18. Who receives whatever they ask of God?
19. What, according to verse 23, is God’s commandment to His people?
20. According to verse 24, how does one know God abides in him?

Discussion Question

Why is it fair to say that a person who hates his brother is the same as a murderer?

First John Chapter Four

Keys to This Chapter

Key Passage: Verse 8

“He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

Key Words

Spirit

Prophets

Antichrist

Propitiation

Boldness

Judgment

Torment

Key Lesson

Questions on the Text

1. What were the readers of this book to do in relation to “spirits?”
2. According to verse one, what had gone out into the world?
3. What is the spirit of the Antichrist?
4. According to verse four, what had allowed these children of God to overcome the false prophets?
5. According to verse five, of what were the false prophets?
6. Who did John say heard his teachings? (v. 6)
7. Of whom is love?
8. According to verse eight, who is love?
9. How was the love of God manifested?
10. For what purpose, according to verse nine, was the Son of God sent into the world?
11. For what purpose, according to verse ten, was the Son of God sent into the world?
12. Why should Christians love one another? (v. 11)
13. Who has seen God?
14. How, according to verse 13, do Christians know that they abide in God and He abides in them?
15. How, according to verse 15, do Christians know that they abide in God and He abides in them?
16. What can the Christian have in the day of judgment?
17. What does perfect love cast out?
18. According to verse 19, why do we love?
19. What is one who says he loves God but hates his brother?
20. If a person loves God, who else must he love?

Discussion Question

Why is there no fear in love?

First John Chapter Five

Keys to This Chapter

Key Passage: Verse 13

“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.”

Key Words

Burdensome

Witness

Testimony

Confidence

Petitions

Commit

Sway

Understanding

Key Lesson

Questions on the Text

1. Who, according to verse one, is born of God?
2. How can one know he loves the children of God?
3. What, according to verse three, is the love of God?
4. Are the commandments of God burdensome?
5. Who, according to verse four, overcomes the world?
6. What is the victory that has overcome the world?
7. Who came by water and blood?
8. What three bear witness in heaven?
9. What three bear witness on earth?
10. Whose witness is greater than the witness of men?
11. What, according to verse 11, has God given to Christians?
12. In whom is eternal life?
13. Who has life? Who does not have life?
14. Why, according to verse 13, had John written to these Christians?
15. According to verse 14, of what can the Christian be confident?
16. What should a Christian do if he sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death?
17. What, according to verse 17, is sin?
18. Who, according to verse 18, does not sin?
19. Under whose sway does the whole world lie?
20. From what did John want these children to keep themselves?

Discussion Question

How does keeping His commandments show that we love God?

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