

1 John – Overview

There are times in life when things happen or when we are under pressure and we wonder if we, or others, are truly Christian. How can we know? What are the marks of a genuine Christian? Which path will God's true people take? 1 John answers these questions. It is written by a loving pastor (the apostle John) to his "dear children". He writes so they would not be led astray (2:26), and so they might have the assurance of eternal life (5:13). He appeals to what they are and what they know. He instructs, warns, exhorts, and comforts his readers to walk in the light and love of God found in his Son Jesus Christ.

1. What (if any) existing impressions / memories do you have of 1 John?
2. Pray and then read the whole letter together. As you read it, look out for answers to these questions...
 - a. What is your overall reaction to reading the letter as a whole? What are you left thinking/feeling?
 - b. What do you notice about the style of writing? Are there any distinctive features? How is it similar or different to say Paul's letters? What links/similarities can you see with John's Gospel?
 - c. What are the main themes of the letter (what topics/issues are addressed)?
 - d. What can we learn from the letter itself about the situation of the original recipients, and of why John writes (ie. what is his purpose in writing)?
 - e. How would you describe the mood/feel of the letter? Is it mainly a letter of comfort, or of challenge?
 - f. What questions are raised for you?
3. As time and energy permit, from just your first reading...
 - a. What does the letter teach us about God?
 - b. What does the letter teach us about the Christian life?
4. What are you looking forward to about studying 1 John and applying it to your life?

Extra Information: Who was John?

The Apostle John is the author of five New Testament books: the gospel of John, the three short epistles that also bear his name (1, 2, and 3 John) and the book of Revelation.

Not to be confused with John the Baptist, the Apostle John is the brother of James, another of the twelve disciples of Jesus. Together, they were called by Jesus “Boanerges,” which means “sons of thunder,” and therein we find a key to John’s personality. Both brothers were characterized by zeal, passion and ambition. In his early days with Jesus, at times John acted rashly, recklessly, impetuously, and aggressively. We see him in [Mark 9](#) forbidding a man to cast out demons in Jesus’ name because he was not part of the twelve ([Mark 9:38-41](#)). Jesus gently rebuked him, saying no one could cast out demons in Jesus’ name and then turn around and speak evil of Him. In [Luke 9:51-54](#), we see the brothers wanting to call down fire from heaven to destroy the Samaritans who refused to welcome Jesus. Again, Jesus had to rebuke them for their intolerance and lack of genuine love for the lost. John’s zeal for Jesus was also influenced by his natural ambition, as seen in his request (through his mother) that he and his brother be seated on Jesus’ right and left hands in the kingdom, an incident that caused a temporary rift between the brothers and the other disciples ([Matthew 20:20-24](#)).

In spite of these youthful expressions of misdirected passion, John aged well. He began to understand the need for humility in those who desired to be great. John’s is the only gospel that records Jesus washing the disciples’ feet ([John 13:4-16](#)). Jesus’ simple act of servanthood must have impacted John greatly. By the time of the crucifixion, Jesus had enough confidence in the young man to turn the care of His mother over to him, a charge John took very seriously. From that day on, John cared for her as if she were his own mother ([John 19:25-27](#)). John’s rash request for special honour in the kingdom had given way to a compassion and humility that would characterize his ministry in his later life. Although he remained courageous and bold, his ambition was balanced by the humility he learned at Jesus’ feet. This willingness to serve others and suffer for the sake of the gospel must have enabled him to bear his final imprisonment on Patmos where, according to reliable historical sources, he lived in a cave, cut off from those he loved, and was treated with cruelty and reproach. In the opening of the book of Revelation, which he received from the Holy Spirit during this time, he referred to himself as ‘your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus’ ([Revelation 1:9](#)). He had learned to look beyond his earthly sufferings to the heavenly glory that awaits all who patiently endure.

John was passionately devoted to the proclamation of truth. No one in Scripture, except the Lord Jesus, had more to say about the concept of truth. His joy was proclaiming the truth to others and then watching them walk in it ([3 John 4](#)). His strongest condemnation was for those who perverted the truth and led others astray, especially if they claimed to be believers ([1 John 2:4](#)). His passion for truth fuelled his concern for the sheep who might be deceived by false teachers, and his warnings about them take up much of 1 John. He had no qualms about identifying as “false prophets” and “antichrists” those who tried to pervert the truth, even proclaiming them to be demonic in nature ([1 John 2:18, 26, 3:7, 4:1-7](#)).

At the same time, John is also called the “apostle of love.” In his own gospel, he refers to himself as “the one whom Jesus loved” ([John 13:23, 20:2, 21:7, 21:20](#)). He is depicted as the one leaning against Jesus’ breast at the last supper. His brief second epistle is filled with expressions of his deep love for those in his care. He addresses his first epistle to a group of believers “whom I love in the truth” and exhorts them to “love one another” by walking in obedience to Jesus’ commands ([1 John 1:1, 5-6](#)).

(Extracted from <https://www.gotquestions.org/life-John-Apostle.html>, 24 April, 2018)

1 John 1:1-4 – How we know God

1. Read 1:1-4. As in his Gospel, John begins his letter with a 'prologue'. What impact do you think this opening has on us as readers of the letter?
2. What is the focus/subject of the prologue? I.e. What/who is he talking about? (see also John 17:3)
3. Why is it important that John has heard, seen and touched? What wrong thinking might this address? How might knowing this impact our lives? (See also 5:11-13 & 5:20)
4. Why does John declare and write these things to his readers?
5. What is so good about having fellowship with the Father? What do you think this means? How might it be connected to joy?
6. How does this opening give us confidence to trust in Jesus?

1 John 1:5-2:11 - Walking in the Light

In John's letter there are two summary statements about "the message you have heard" (1:5 & 3:11), each introducing a section unpacking the implications of a profound theological idea – "God is Light" (1:5) and "God is love" (4:8). The passage we're looking at in this study is governed by the idea of God being "light".

1. What images and ideas come to mind when you think of God as "light"?
2. Read 1 John 1:5-2:2. John deals with three "If we say" statements (possibly reflecting what false teachers of the time were saying). Each one is exposed as a form of lying.
 - a. What are the three statements/situations? What is wrong with them?
 - b. What response/reaction do you commonly make when you are aware that you have sinned? In what ways might you be tempted to think, say or imply the things John rejects here?
 - c. Given that God is light, and we sin, what remedy does John put forward?
 - d. What do you think about our current practice of confessing sins (privately and publically)? What factors hold us back from this? How might we benefit from more/better practice of confession?
3. Read 1 John 2:3-11. From these verses....
 - a. How can we be sure that we have come to know Jesus and have a genuine love for God?
 - b. When should people who say they are Christians rightly question whether they really are?
 - c. Do you think this means we can only be confident if we perfectly 'walk the talk'? Why/ Why not?
 - d. Do you think this was originally written to challenge the true Christians not to sin, or to assure them that they (and not others) are God's children? Why? (See also 1 John 3:1-10)
 - e. Why is loving Christian brothers and sisters evidence of living in the light, while hate is a sign of being in darkness? What might love and hate look like in our situation? (We will return to this big theme of the letter in later studies.)
4. How would you summarize what it means to live with the truth that "God is light"?
5. What have you found comforting or challenging in this study? Are there sins you need to confess? Pray together about these things.

1 John 2:12-17 – Not like the World

1. To what extent do you think Christians can/should happily follow the fashions and trends of the society in which we live?

2. Read 1 John 2:12-14. Three groups are twice addressed in turn – little children, fathers and young men.
 - a. (Don't spend much time on this!) Scholars generally have little idea why John chooses these 3 groups. Of these suggestions, which do you think is most likely?
 - They are different age groups in the church?
 - They are different stages of spiritual maturity: new believers, the mature and those in between?
 - Little children refers to all the believers (including women), which includes two sub-categories - fathers and young men (the mature and immature, or perhaps leaders and future leaders)?
 - A standard pattern of participation in civic life in the ancient world?
 - We don't know and it doesn't really matter?

 - b. What is said about the situation/status/privilege of each group? How would you describe (in your own words, free of religious jargon) what these mean and why they are so valuable?

 - b. Why do think it is important for Christians to be reminded of these things? How might this help us to live in an unbelieving world?

3. Now read 1 John 2:15-17.
 - a. What do you think John means here by "the world"? Does it include believers? See this passage and also 3:1, 3:13, 4:4-5, 5:19, John 15:18-19 &17:25 & James 4:4.

 - b. If the world (humanity under the sway of the devil and in opposition to God) is a negative thing, why would Christians be tempted to love the world and what belongs to it? Why is it attractive to us?

 - c. What reasons does John give for not loving the world, and the things that belong to it? How might the encouragements of verses 12-14 help us to love the Father, and not the world?

 - d. God loved 'the world' is giving Jesus (John 3:16), who died for the sins of the whole 'world' (2:2). How does God's love for the world fit with this command for his people not to love the world?

 - e. In what ways do you think you/we are most tempted to 'love the world or the things that belong to it'? ie. where do you think the "rubber hits the road" in applying this command to us today?

4. What would be good to pray in response to this word of God? Pray together.

1 John 2:18-27 & 4:1-6 – Enemies of Christ

In 1 John 2:18-27 we find warnings and reassurances about some people who have left the true church (based on the apostle's teaching), and are now seeking to deceive the remaining faithful Christians with wrong teaching about Jesus.

1. Do you think we are generally too aware and cautious of 'false teachers', or too naive and casual about them? Why do you think this is?

2. Read 1 John 2:18-27. Two key words here are found only in John's letters: "antichrists" (2:18, 22 & 4:3 & 2 John 7) and "anointing" (2:20 & 27).
 - a. From the text itself, what do we learn about the people John calls 'antichrists'? (Think about where they came from, their aims, their status with God, their teaching, etc).

 - b. What do you think John means by the "anointing from the Holy One"? Why does this give John confidence that true Christians will not be deceived? (See also John 14:16-17a & 25-26).

 - c. Why is it so serious to deny that Jesus is the Messiah? (See esp v 23) What differences might denying that Jesus was (and is) both human and divine make to our lives?

 - d. Does this passage lead us to expect antichrists today? Why/why not? If so, what form might they take? (Can you think of teachings today that deny what the apostles teach about Jesus?)

 - e. John also exhorts his readers to "remain in him" (v 27). Do you think this is an active or a passive thing? If active, what might it take for us to do this? (See also John 15:1-8).

 - f. Try and sum up the differences between the antichrists/deceivers and John's readers?

3. Now Read 1 John 4:1-6. John sees that different "spirits" lie behind different teachings.
 - a. According to verses 1-3, how can we test whether a spirit/teaching is from God?

 - b. What further tests are given for distinguishing the spirits in verses 4-6?

4. What actions/attitudes/preparation might help a church (or an individual Christian) to rightly distinguish between spirits and not to be deceived by antichrists? Is there anything you/we need to do/improve?

5. How should we respond to this passage in thanks, and in prayer? Do this now.

1 John 2:28-3:10 – Family Likeness

1. Are there any traits that characterise your family? (eg. a mannerism, way of speaking, look, habit or hobby, views, values, etc)?
2. According to verse 29, what characterises people “born of God”? What else can you learn about being born of God from these other references – John 3:5-8 and 1 John 4:7, 5:1, 5:4 & 5:18?
3. From verses 1 & 2, as people “born of God”, what is the great privilege that Christians now enjoy? What implications does John draw from this for life in the world now, and for the future?
4. Can you think of any greater privilege than becoming one of God’s children? To what extent are you (and Christians you know) conscious of this privilege? How might a greater consciousness of this make a difference in your life?
5. From verses 3-6, how will the true children of God respond/relate to sin? Some people have understood these verses to teach that we can live a sin-free life. Remembering that we can’t say “I have no sin” (1:8-10), what does it mean here that true a Christian ‘does not sin’ (v 6), and is ‘not able to sin’ (v 9)?
6. From verses 7-10, what are the characteristics of those who belong to God, and of those who belong to the devil? Why don’t people “born of God” continue to sin?
7. Noticing the introduction in verse 28, do you think this section of 1 John is written primarily to challenge or to comfort his original readers (and us too)? Why?
8. Thank God that we have the immense privilege of being loved by Him as his children, and that we can have confidence that we will see Jesus when he returns and be finally transformed into his likeness. Pray that our lives now will bear God’s family likeness.

1 John 3:10b-24 & 4:7-21 – Brotherly Love

In John's Gospel we find the famous words of Jesus: "*I give you a new command: Love one another. Just I have loved you, you must also love one another. By this will all people know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" (John 13:34-35). In his letters John applies this same teaching to the church. We will look first at 4:7-21 and then briefly at 3:10-24, but seek to focus on the main themes.

1. Read 1 John 4:7-21. The section begins and ends with a call to love one another, along with assertions that true Christians will love one-another. What is your immediate reaction to reading these words? How do they make you feel?
2. According to these verses, why should/will Christians love one another?
3. From verses 13-16 how does loving one another give true Christians confidence that they truly know God and have nothing to fear on the judgement day? (Is John saying that we are saved by loving others? Why/why not?)
4. The nature of love is revealed to us in God's work for us in Jesus (v 9-10). What does this reveal about the characteristics of love? How is it different to a soft or sentimental idea of love that we might have?
5. Now read 1 John 3:10b-24. From these verses can you add anything to your answers to questions 2-4? What do you think it means to love in both truth and action (v 18)?
6. In what different ways do we see Christians in our church loving one another?
7. What are the main barriers/difficulties/challenges you face in applying this teaching to your life?
8. What is one action you could take to grow/change the way you love your Christian brothers and sisters?
9. Pray together that we would love one another as God has loved us in Christ, and that we would have great confidence that we do truly know God?

1 John 5:1-21 – So that you may know

The last chapter of 1 John 'pulls together' the main themes of the letter. One commentator describes verses 1-13 as the theological conclusion, and verses 14-21 as the pastoral conclusion.

1. Read 1 John 5:1-21. What do you immediately notice about this concluding chapter?

2. What main themes of the letter can you see being 'pulled together' in verses 1-5? According to 1 John, how can we know who is a true Christian? (If you need some help, these verses will remind you of the three main 'tests' John has given: 2:22-23, 2:3-4 & 4:20-21.)

3. Through 1 John the alternative to God and threat to His children is "the world" (2:15-17, 3:13, 4:4-6). What do you think it means to "conquer the world" in verses 4-5? How is this an encouragement to us?

4. Now read verses 6-13.
 - a. It is not easy to know what is meant by Jesus coming by water and blood. Which of these most commonly suggested options do you think makes most sense? (Don't spend too long on this!)
 - i. The water refers to Jesus baptism and the blood to his death (See John 1:32-34)
 - ii. Both the water and the blood refer to Jesus' death (See John 19:34)
 - iii. The water refers to Jesus' birth, and the blood to his death. (See John 3:5-8)

 - b. Whatever the water and the blood refer to, what is the testimony they (along with the Spirit) give?

 - c. How then can we know whether or not we have eternal life? How does this clarity challenge or comfort you?

5. Now read verses 14-21. Given that we can know who belongs to God and has eternal life, how does this give us confidence...
 - a. In our prayers (v 14-15)? (cf. 3:21-22)

 - b. When we or others sin (v 16-18)? (cf. 3:7-10a)

 - c. When we are at odds with the world around us (v 19)?

 - d. When we lack assurance of salvation? (v 20)

6. Many commentators are puzzled by verse 21. This is the first mention of 'idols'. In what way do you think that verse 21 is a fitting conclusion to the letter?

7. As we have read 1 John, how have you been particularly helped, challenged, changed or comforted?

8. Give thanks and pray together about the work God has done in your lives through reading 1 John.

2 John – The Welcome Mat

2 John is the second shortest book in the New Testament, longer only than 3 John. Like 3 John, the writer (John) introduces himself as “The Elder”. Interestingly, while 3 John emphasizes the need to show hospitality in support of missionaries, 2 John warns against welcoming those who lead people astray with false teaching. **Read 2 John.**

1. John writes to “the elect lady and her children”. While most scholars see this as a reference to a local church (where the ‘children’ are the members), some think it may be an individual woman. What does the letter as a whole lead you to think about this?

2. According to the greeting in verses 1-3
 - a. What are the connections between truth and love in the Christian life?

 - b. What blessings do the writer and readers share? How do you think our lives might be different if we were more conscious of these blessings?

3. In verses 4-6 those who walk in the truth are urged to also walk in love.
 - a. Why does walking in the truth call for walking in love?

 - b. How is ‘walking’ in truth and love different to merely knowing or feeling them?

 - c. In his commentary John Stott writes: “Our love grows soft if not strengthened by truth, and truth grows hard if it is not softened by love.” In what ways do you see yourself or others tempted to be overly soft in love, or hard in truth?

4. In verses 7-11 John deals with a danger posed by people who don’t teach the truth about Jesus (v 7), and who want to “go beyond” Christ’s teaching (v 9).
 - a. Why is this so serious? (v8-9)

 - b. Why shouldn’t these teachers be welcomed? (v 10-11)

 - c. How do these instructions follow from the foundation of truth and love laid in v 1-6?

5. How might these instructions apply to us today? Do you think we should refuse to welcome anyone who thinks differently to us? Apart from a welcome to our home, are there other ways we might support to those who lead people away from Christ and from God?

6. Pray together about what you have seen and discussed.

3 John – Walking in the Truth

Test yourself. Can you name our link missionary families, their locations and what ministry they are involved in? How about their children's names?

3 John is the shortest book in the New Testament, and the only one with a "3". As in 2 John, John introduces himself as "the elder". Both letters deal with how to apply truth and love in dealing with visiting itinerant preachers.

Unlike 2 John however, 3 John is not addressed to a whole church, but to an individual – Gaius. There are 3 men named Gaius in the New Testament: Gaius of Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:14 & Romans 16:23), Gaius of Macedonia (Acts 19:29), and Gaius of Derbe (Acts 20:4). However, Gaius was a very common name, and the Gaius of 3 John may or may not be any of these.

1. **Read 3 John.** What impression do you get of how John feels towards Gaius?

2. Some brothers had visited and stayed with Gaius, then reported back to John. What was their testimony about Gaius? (See v 3-4 & v 6)

3. John rejoices when his children "walk in the truth" (v4). What was the evidence that Gaius was faithfully doing this? (See v 5-8 & 2 John 4) What might we learn from John's joyful reaction to hearing of this?

4. Gaius had faithfully welcomed some travelling brothers (missionaries), who were strangers (5). In verses 6-8 he is urged to do similarly in the future. What reasons are given for this?

5. In what different ways might we be able to apply the instructions of verses 6-8 to "support such men"?

6. In verses 9-10 John writes about another man, Diotrephes, who seems to have opposed John's ministry to the church. What do we learn about the character and actions of Diotrephes? Why does he need to be "called out"? Is this a loving thing to do?

7. John urges Gaius not to be influenced by Diotrephes (v 11), and then commends another man – Demetrius. Perhaps Demetrius is the bearer of the letter. In what ways and to what extent do we rely on the commendation of others for deciding whom to welcome/support? What might this lead us to pray?

8. (As time permits.) In the New Testament "hospitality" is not just having friends around for a meal, but rather it is the love of strangers.
 - a. What can we learn about the importance of hospitality from these verses: Romans 12:13, Hebrews 13:1-2, 1 Peter 4:7-9, Matthew 10:40-42 & Matthew 25:34-40?
 - b. What opportunities do we have to show hospitality in our church life? What barriers (in ourselves and from our culture) do we encounter in doing this? How might we overcome these to walk in truth and love in this area of life?