

Introduction

The letters of John

It has always been accepted that John the Apostle wrote 1, 2 and 3 John. Probably he wrote these letters near the end of the first century. After his death Jesus rose again and appeared to many of his disciples. Jesus stated that he would come back soon. By the time John wrote his letters, the apostles had faithfully preached the gospel all through the Mediterranean area. Many people had become believers.

But Jesus had not yet returned. Most of the first believers had died, and many Christians were struggling. They felt discouraged because they were persecuted for believing in Jesus. And they heard wrong teaching about Jesus from false teachers. Perhaps John was the only apostle still living. He had witnessed the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. People could trust what he said. So John wrote these letters to encourage and strengthen believers. He wanted them to keep trusting in Jesus as the only way to truly know God. He reminded them that Jesus will come again.

Two great commands

John's first letter centres around one great Saviour and two great commands. The commands are connected to this Saviour. They cannot be separated. John's first focus is on love of God and one another. This is what shows our attitude to sin. John likes to show both sides of a command. So, in chapter 3, John explains that believers cannot continue in sin. Then immediately he teaches about loving others as an example of not sinning.

To love is to be active in the lives of the people around us — such as caring for their needs (1 John 3:17). Jesus himself shaped this command. There is no sin in him; he came to put an end to sin. He is the reason that we know what love is, because he gave himself for us.

Next John shows that belief in Jesus, the Son of God, affects our attitude to sin. This might seem simple if we see belief as only a private matter. Yet John insists that right belief about Jesus is critically

important. Without a proper belief in Jesus we cannot have a relationship with God the Father. Nor do we have the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:22–24, 4:1–4).

John insists that our beliefs be correct. We must believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the true Messiah sent from God — and that his birth and his death were real. To deny these truths is to be an antichrist (an enemy of Christ). Indeed, we call God a liar if we refuse to accept his testimony about Jesus. That shows we are not God’s children (1 John 2:22, 4:3). When John wrote his letters, false teachers were denying these truths. They were leading people away from a right relationship with God.

We cannot separate God from these truths. He meets us in these truths about his Son, and not on any other basis. If we want a relationship with God, we must come to him on his terms. God’s terms *are* to believe these true things about Jesus and to trust him to save us.

The challenges we must face

The message in John’s letters is a big challenge. He shows us how Christians are to live. But, as we read the letters, it becomes clear that none of us meet this standard. That is what John intended. We see this by the way he begins his first letter with the problem of ongoing sin. John shows that Jesus is fully qualified to act as our mediator: Jesus died for us and faithfully represents us now (1 John 1:7–2:1). So, all the challenges of John’s letter come with that in mind. John does not want to condemn us for our failings but to show us how important are our choices.

For example, if we follow Jesus Christ, our attitude to other people is important. John does not say that we must love our “brothers” (1 John 3:13–14) to become a Christian. Instead, John shows that our attitude to other people comes from our relationship with God. So, if we hate someone else, we know that something is very wrong.

John wants us to examine ourselves by God’s standards. But we know Jesus pleads for us, so we can go to God with this issue. We can do that with every failing that John’s letter reveals in us.

John's first letter makes us ask ourselves hard, searching questions. Yet, at the same time, there is comfort. John reminds us of Jesus' faithfulness and our great salvation in him (1 John 3:24–4:3,7,15). John assures us that simply by believing in Jesus we begin to live this eternal life (5:11–13). In Jesus we have even “overcome the world” (vv 4–5). John reminds us that all our sin is dealt with in Jesus. He invites us to come to Jesus with all our sin.

John points us to Jesus, not ourselves and our own resources. He encourages us to “rely on the love God has for us” (1 John 4:16). We gain strength as we glimpse the magnitude of our salvation — right now and into the future. So John encourages us to keep on believing in Jesus. We are to be confident in God's great love for us, as we move towards the glorious future prepared for us.

John was guided by the Holy Spirit as he wrote. He didn't simply write his own ideas and thoughts; what he wrote was from God (2 Timothy 3:16). So, even though John's letters were written about two thousand years ago, God still speaks through them today. The world is different now, but we need to hear the same things that John wrote for his first readers. We need to know what to think and believe about Jesus, and how to live the way Jesus wants us to.

John was a fisherman who left his nets to follow Jesus. As we study these letters, it is helpful to realise this. For three years John and the other eleven disciples saw first-hand the miracles that Jesus did. They heard his teachings. John recorded these experiences in the Gospel of John so that we may “believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (John 20:31). Now, in these three short letters, John wants us to *know* how to practise our belief in Jesus in our everyday lives. “Know” occurs at least thirty times — so it is worth taking notice!

Study 1

1 John 1:1–2:17

Fellowship with God

DAY 1: Introduction

1. Why did John write his letters? Find your answer in the Introduction.
2. John writes about some key issues. What are some of them?
3. How are John's letters relevant to us today?

DAY 2: 1 John 1:1–4

4. a) Whom do you think these verses are about?

b) List what we learn about this person in verses 1–2.
5. Who is it that John has fellowship with? (vv 3–4)

6. What do you think this “fellowship” means for us today?

DAY 3: 1 John 1:5–10

7. If we claim to have fellowship with God, what will show whether this is true or false? (vv 5–7)

8. a) If we claim to be without sin, what is true of us? (vv 8,10)

b) What happens to us if we confess our sins? (v 9)

DAY 4: 1 John 1:7–2:2

9. What two things does Jesus do *for* us? (1:7, 2:1)

10. a) Read Hebrews 9:22–28. What is necessary for atonement?

b) So, what does Jesus’ death mean for us? (See Hebrews 9:22,28 and 1 John 2:2.)

Day 4 continued . . .

11. Jesus has paid the price for all our sins. Write down two or three words or phrases to describe how you feel about that.

DAY 5: 1 John 2:3–11

12. John says there are “commands” that believers in the Lord Jesus should live by. What are those commands? (See also 1 John 3:23–24.)

13. How can we tell if we know Jesus and live “in the light”? List the ways. (vv 3,6,10)

14. What might a person do, say and think to follow these commands? Suggest three things.

DAY 6: 1 John 2:12–14

15. What things does John note about the people he is writing to?

16. What do you think John means by “overcome the evil one”?
(vv 13–14)

DAY 7: 1 John 2:15–17

17. Why does John tell us not to love the world?

a) Verse 15

b) Verse 17

18. What do you think ‘love of the world’ is?

19. From what you’ve learned so far from John’s letter, what do you think “the will of God” is?

Study 1 review notes

(Read this at home after the group meeting.)

1 John 1:1–2:17

John begins his letter in an unusual way. He does not greet the people he is writing to. Instead he starts by writing about the Lord Jesus. John

assures us that he was part of Jesus' earthly life. He saw, touched and related with Jesus (1:1–2). So, when John speaks about Jesus, he isn't making things up. This is important because John makes some extraordinary claims about Jesus.

One claim is that, simply by believing in Jesus, John can have “fellowship” (1:3) with the people who will receive his letter. This is so whether or not he has met them. So, people who believe in Jesus are close family with each other. John will show us more of what this means later in this letter. For us now, it means that we can regard as our ‘family’ those around us who believe in Jesus. There is a link between us that can't be broken. Belief in Jesus might be the only thing we have in common, but John helps us see that this is the strongest link of all.

Walk in fellowship with God

We cannot have fellowship with God if we sin. If we deny our sin, we are in darkness (1:6). John points out that, to have a relationship with God, we need to be purified. We cannot do this ourselves (1:7–2:2). If we deny our sin, then we believe something about ourselves which is not true (1:8). We must recognise that we need someone else to solve our sin problem for us.

John explains why Jesus can do this for us. Jesus is trustworthy and pure. He has died for our sins in a special “atoning sacrifice” (2:2). The idea of atoning sacrifice comes from the Old Testament. God's people were instructed to bring an animal, put it on the altar, place their hands on its head and confess their sin. They were to do this in obedience and faith. But animal sacrifice could not take away sin. It was a picture of what Jesus would do on the cross (Hebrews 1:1–14). Jesus' death on the cross was not a martyr's death. His death was the only sacrifice for sin (1 Peter 2:24). Jesus experienced God's judgment on sin. Today, because of his death, we can be forgiven. We are made right with God when we believe.

John tells us how to deal with the problem of our sin. The key is to come to Jesus and admit our sins to him. Jesus hears and acts on our

appeal. We can have confidence because of who Jesus is. He is totally trustworthy and does what is right (1:9–10). Jesus can and will speak on our behalf, like a lawyer taking our side. He is able to save us because of his death. Not only that, he is good and is willing to save us when we ask him.

John then reminds us how Christians are to live. As true children of God, we are to live out who we are. If we are believers in the Lord Jesus, it will show in our lives. We will live as Jesus did. Love was clearly shown in Jesus' life, so John says love is one of the key qualities of a Christian. It seems that John was thinking of what Jesus said to his disciples: "My command is this: Love each another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:12–13).

In his letter John is frank about love. If we don't love, then we are just pretending to ourselves that we are Christians. John wants us to realise that love is not an 'added extra' when we become Christians. Love is what people should notice about our lives, even though we fall short of Jesus' perfect example.

Don't walk in fellowship with the world

John goes on to teach that Christians are not caught up with the "world" (2:15). When John talks about the world, he doesn't mean the planet earth; he means the way of life of people who don't know Jesus. This way of living doesn't acknowledge God and his claims on us. John shows us that Christians must have different concerns and priorities because the world's materialistic way of life will disappear. The life of a Christian is ruled by Jesus, who commands us to love and teaches us how to love. It's a quite different way of living to 'worldly' living.

John begins his letter quickly and doesn't slow down. He gives us great news: Jesus can save us from our sins. Then John asks hard questions: Are we truly Christians? Can others see we are Christians by the way we love? He reminds us that Jesus brings us into eternal life, and so we are to resist the world's self-centred way of life.

These are not minor issues: they make us check up on ourselves. Take the time to ask John's questions. Don't avoid them. It is as we think and pray about God's word that God works in our hearts and changes us. And as you think and pray and chat to other people about these issues, remember what John tells us about Jesus: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1:9).