

Introduction

The letters of John

Historical tradition says that 1, 2 and 3 John were written by John the Apostle, probably towards the end of the first century. After Jesus died and rose again, he appeared to many of his disciples and stated that he would be back soon. By the time these letters were written, the apostles had faithfully preached the gospel all through the Mediterranean area, and many people had become believers.

But most of the first believers had died, and Jesus still hadn't returned. Many Christians were struggling and had become discouraged, particularly as they faced heavy persecution for believing in Jesus and heard wrong teaching about Jesus from false teachers. John was perhaps the only apostle still living — and therefore he was a significant and trustworthy witness to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. So John wrote these letters to encourage and strengthen believers to keep trusting in Jesus as the only way to truly know God, and to remind them that Jesus will come again.

Two great commands

As we turn to the first letter, we see that it centres on one great Saviour and two great commands. The commands cannot be disconnected from this Saviour. John's first focus is on love of God and one another, which reveals our attitude to sin; John usually issues one side of a command and then flips to the other side. So, John explains the impossibility of continuing in sin in chapter 3, then immediately moves onto the necessity to love others as an example of not sinning.

Loving is something we do by being actively involved in the lives of the people around us in practical ways, such as caring for their needs (1 John 3:17). This command is shaped by none other than Jesus himself, who has no sin in him and came to abolish sin. Jesus is the reason that we know what love is, because he gave himself for us.

John's second focus is to show that our attitude to sin comes from believing in Jesus, the Son of God. On the surface this looks easy and unimpressive, probably because in our era belief is a personal, private

aspect of our life. Yet, as we read this letter, John demands that we understand that right belief about Jesus is critically important. Without a proper belief in Jesus we cannot have a relationship with God the Father, nor have we the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:22–24, 4:1–4).

John is insisting that our beliefs have right content. We must believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the true Messiah sent from God, and that he was born and died a genuine death. If we deny these truths, we are an antichrist. Indeed, we call God a liar as we refuse to accept his testimony about Jesus and demonstrate that we are not God's children (1 John 2:22, 4:3). When John wrote his letters, false teachers were denying these truths and so 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 will not meet us outside them or on any other basis. If we want a relationship with God, we must come to him on his terms. Believing these true things about Jesus and trusting him to save us *are* God's terms.

The challenges we must face

John's message in his letters is immensely challenging. He shows us how Christians are to live, and, as we read through these letters, it becomes clear that none of us meet this standard. This realisation is a definite purpose of John's message, as seen by the way he begins with the issue of our ongoing sin problem at the start of his first letter. John states Jesus' full qualifications for acting as our mediator: his death for us and his faithfulness in representing us now (John 1:7–2:1). This, therefore, is the context for all the challenges that John issues throughout this letter. John's desire is not to condemn us for our shortcomings but to demonstrate the seriousness of our choices.

For example, if we follow Jesus, we need to know that our attitude to other people matters. John does not say that we need to love our "brothers" (1 John 3:13–14) so we will become a Christian. Instead, John shows us that our attitude to other people arises out of our relationship with God. Therefore, if we find ourselves hating someone else, we know that something is seriously wrong.

John is unsparing in the way he prods us to examine ourselves in the light of God's standards. But because we know Jesus pleads for us, we can go to God with this issue, as with every other shortcoming that John's letter may expose in us.

So, John's first letter is demanding. He insists that we ask ourselves hard questions that probe us in uncomfortable ways. Yet at the same time John comforts us by reminding us of Jesus and his faithfulness and the great salvation we find in him (1 John 3:24–4:3,7,15). John assures us that the mere act of believing in Jesus means that we are starting to live this eternal life (5:11–13) — in a very small way — and we have even “overcome the world” (vv 4–5). John reminds us that all our sin is dealt with in Jesus and invites us to come to Jesus with all our sin.

Ultimately, John points us away from ourselves and our resources to Jesus; he encourages us to “rely on the love God has for us” (1 John 4:16). Strengthened by having glimpsed the sheer magnitude of our salvation, both in the present and stretching into the future, John encourages us to keep believing in Jesus and 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. We might live in a different world to John's first readers but we need to hear the same things that John wrote to them: how to live life the way Jesus wants us to, and what we need to think and believe about Jesus.

As we study these letters, it is helpful to realise that this John was a fisherman who left his nets to follow Jesus. For three years he, with the other eleven disciples, saw first-hand the miracles that Jesus did and 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 put our belief in Jesus into practice in our everyday lives. “Know” occurs at least thirty times; it is worthy of our attention!

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

DAY 3: 1 John 1:5–10

7. If we say we have fellowship with God, what evidence will show that our claim is true or false?

8. a) What is true of us if “we claim to be without sin”? (vv 8,10)

b) What happens to us if “we confess our sins”?

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) Read Hebrews 9:22,28 and 1 John 2:2. What then is the significance of Jesus’ death?

Day 4 continued . . .

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

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. List the ways we can tell if we know Jesus or live “in the light”.

14. Suggest three things that a person living out these commands would do and say and think.

DAY 6: 1 John 2:12–14

15. What characterises the people to whom John is writing?

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. How would you define the ‘love of the world’?

19. Think about what you’ve learned from John’s letter so far. What would you say “the will of God” means?

Study 1 review notes

(to be read at home after the group meeting)

1 John 1:1–2:17

John opens his letter in an unusual way. Instead of greeting the people he is writing to directly, he turns immediately to speak about the Lord

Jesus. John gives us confidence that he was part of Jesus' earthly life: he saw, touched and interacted with him (1:1–2). So, when John speaks about Jesus, he isn't making things up. This is important because John will make some extraordinary claims about Jesus as he continues.

One of these claims is that, simply by believing the message about Jesus, John can have “fellowship” (1:3) with the people who will receive his letter, regardless of whether 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. What it means for us now is that we can look on those around us who believe in Jesus as being our ‘family’: there is a link between us that can't be broken. Believing 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, if we are to have a relationship with God, we need to be purified, which we cannot do ourselves (1:7–2:2). If we deny our sin, then we believe something about ourselves which is not true (1:8). We need to recognise that we need someone else to solve our sin problem for us.

John shows us why Jesus can do this for us. Jesus is trustworthy and pure, and he has died for our sins in a special “atoning sacrifice” (2:2). The idea of atoning sacrifice is drawn 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 these animal sacrifices could not take away sin. Rather, they pictured what Jesus would do on the cross (Hebrews 10:1–14). 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, made right with God when we believe.

After introducing us to Jesus, our sin problem and Jesus' solution, John assures us that coming to Jesus and admitting our sins to him is

the key to dealing with them. The reason we can have such confidence that Jesus hears and acts on our appeal is because of who Jesus is. He is absolutely trustworthy and does what is right (1:9–10). Jesus can and will speak on our behalf, like a lawyer taking our part. Not only is he capable of saving us because of his death but he is good and is willing to save us when we ask him.

John then shows us how Christians live. In doing so, he challenges us to live out our identity as true children of God. John reminds us that, if we are believers in the Lord Jesus, it will be evident in our lives: we will live as Jesus did. It isn't too surprising that John identifies love as one of the key characteristics of a Christian — this is what characterised Jesus' life. In fact, John sounds like he is reflecting on what Jesus said to his disciples: “My command is this: Love each other 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 blunt about love. If we don't love, then we are just pretending to ourselves that we are Christians. Even though we all will fall short of Jesus' perfect example, John wants us to realise that love is not an 'added extra' when we become Christians. Love is something that should be noticeable about our lives.

Don't walk in fellowship with the world

On the other hand, John goes on to show us that Christians are people who aren't caught up with the “world” (2:15). When John talks about the world, he doesn't mean the planet earth but the way of life of those who don't know Jesus. It's a way of living which doesn't acknowledge God and the claims he has on our lives. John shows us that Christians need to be people who live life with different concerns and priorities because our world's accepted materialistic way of life will soon be gone. Christians live lives 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 opens his letter at full speed 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 tell we are Christians by the way we love? And he reminds us that Jesus brings us into eternal life, so we aren't to be caught up in the 'lifestyle' of the people around us.

These are not minor issues: they are issues which require us to examine ourselves. Take the time to ask John's questions. Don't push them away as too confronting. It is by thinking and praying about God's word in this way that God works in our hearts, changing us. And as you think and pray and chat to other people about these issues, don't forget 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).