



John's Epistles

**Confidence in Christ Alone!
Right Belief + Right Love +
Right Conduct = Fellowship
with God Through His Grace**

Exton church of Christ
Fall 2021

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Studying through 1st, 2nd & 3rd John

Nine Lessons

Lesson 1: Introduction – key themes, author, date, purpose of these letters.

Lesson 2: Some background on Gnosticism, it's relevance to these letters and to us today.

Lesson 3: True Fellowship (1st John 1 - 2:2)

Lesson 4: Staying in Fellowship with God (1st John 2:3-29)

Lesson 5: Conduct Befitting Fellowship with God (1st John 3)

Lesson 6: Conduct Befitting Fellowship with God...continued (1st John 4)

Lesson 7: Conduct Befitting Fellowship with God...continued (1st John 5)

Lesson 8: The Truth...and Nothing but The Truth; Fellowship Between Believers (2nd John)

Lesson 9: “Extending the Right Hand of Fellowship” (3rd John)

A number of resources were consulted and used in compiling this study including:

- 1) Womack, M.W. (1998). The College Press NIV Commentary 1,2,3 John, College Press Publishing Company
- 2) Akin, D.L. (2014). Christ Centered Exposition / Exalting Jesus in 1,2,3 John, B&H Publishing Group
- 3) Smith, J. (2001). Letters Of Love - Studies From 1st, 2nd and 3rd John
- 4) Spears, D.R. (1987). A Study of New Testament Epistles
- 5) [WWW.Bibletools.org](http://www.bibletools.org) - Gnosticism

Lesson 1 – Introduction to 1st, 2nd, 3rd John

Read through 1st John in its entirety.

The Author:

Although John never names himself, or claim authorship of these epistles, we have a high degree of confidence the Apostle John wrote these three letters. Below are just a few of the external evidences that support John's authorship:

- Irenaeus attributed the authorship to John (Against Heresies III, 16, 5 & 8). a.k.a....*The Detection and Refutation of What IS Falsely Called Knowledge*...a treatise against Gnosticism.
 - Lived from ~ 130-202 AD. A “bishop” in France; originally from Smyrna in Asia Minor and a student there of Polycarp...who was a disciple of the Apostle John.
- Clement of Alexandria wrote this in one of his manuscripts... “John...in his larger Epistle” taught in these words...and then gave a near verbatim quote from 1st John 5:16-17.
 - Also known as Titus Flavius Clemens. Lived from ~ 150-215.
- Polycarp, Papias, & Justin Martyr, some of the “early church fathers,” quoted from John's works:
 - Both Polycarp and Papias were identified as John's pupils
 - They both wrote in the 2nd century.

1) What “internal evidence” (within the scriptures) can you identify to show that the same John who authored the Gospel of John, also authored these letters? Look for any common themes, phrases, or common terms used in the gospel account and in these letters.

- a. Consider (Jn. 1:1) ...see anything familiar in 1st Jn. Ch.1?
- b. Consider (Jn. 20:30-31; 1st Jn.5:13)
- c. Consider 1 Jn. 1:1-3...what is significant about this claim?
- d. Can you find common terms used in the Gospel of John and these letters?
 - 1 Does John 13:34-35...sound familiar to 1st Jn 2:7 & 2nd Jn. 5?
 - 2 Does John 15:11, 16:24...sound familiar to 1st Jn. 1:4 & 2nd Jn. 12?
 - 3 Consider how 1 Jn. 2:1 compares to some phrases used in 3 John...

2) Drawing on your knowledge of scripture, what are some things that we know about John? (Name and provide a reference for as many “facts” as you can...e.g., relatives, secular occupation, reputation, friends, work as an evangelist, how he describes himself...etc.)

- 3) Reflect and comment on John's life, his work and his diligence. Consider some of what Mike Sullivan discussed about the "value of work" in our recent gospel meeting. How does honest work, coupled with considering everything we do "as for the Lord" impact us both secularly and spiritually? How might it have impacted John? (Think about Luke 9:57-62; Col. 3:23)

Approximate date and location of writing:

With John the apostle established as the author, most historians place the writing of these letters towards the end of his life (approximately 90-94 AD). They advocate that an "elder" John wrote them pointing to 2 Jn. 1 and 3 Jn. 1. In the 2nd and 3rd letters, he refers to himself as "the elder". Most believe the reference is to him being "chronologically older", (aged) rather than his noting that he served as a "shepherd"/"elder". The fact that John refers to his readers as his "little children" seems to be an indicator and in support of this perspective (see 1 Jn. 2:1; 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 5:21 and 3 Jn.4). Yet, there are some who believe that the date could be closer to 70 A.D.

We know that John was eventually banished to the isle of Patmos (believed by the Roman emperor Domitian), from where he was directed by the Spirit to write Revelation (Rev. 1:9). It is commonly believed that he returned to Ephesus to live out the rest of his life, and that it was from there, where he wrote these three epistles as well as the Gospel of John. We can't be sure of the exact date the letters were written, or the exact location where they were penned. Agreement on the exact location and timing of the writings is not necessary to learn the deep doctrinal messages these letters contain.

- 4) The purposes of the 1st letter: John gives at least four reasons for writing 1st John. See how many you can identify. Cite the verses referencing them.

- a. One is in 1st Jn.1
- b. One is in 1st Jn.2
- c. A second is in 1st Jn. 2
- d. One is in 1st Jn. 5

- 5) Having read 1st John, what key themes (main thoughts) did you identify in the letter?

- a. 1 Jn. 1:6-7
- b. 1 Jn. 2:15-17
- c. 1 Jn. 3:6-8
- d. 1 Jn. 3:14-16
- e. 1 Jn. 4:1

6) Beyond these themes, there are several “spiritual contrasts” we see addressed in 1st John that Jesus himself teaches on as well...what are they? See if you can locate Jesus’s teaching in the Gospel of John that parallels these passages and how they compare.

a. *1 Jn. 1:5*

b. *1 Jn. 2:9-10; 1 Jn 4:20*

c. *1 Jn. 3:10; 3:8*

7) Thought question:

a. Above we noted four “purposes” John mentioned for writing the 1st letter. Of the four...which do you think gives the most complete context/purpose for this letter? How did you arrive at your conclusion?

Lesson 2:

Some background on Gnosticism, it's relevance to these letters and to us now.

1) Thought exercise:

Re-read 1st John. Try using a different translation than you may have used in your first reading. Now, with the letter fresh in your mind, put yourself in the shoes of the author and think about what he was facing, as well as what he might be feeling when he wrote these letters. Each of John's three letters are written from a very personal perspective. In each he makes a very impassioned plea to his readers. We can see from his writing that John was very concerned about the false teaching that was entering into the 1st century church (most agree this was Gnostic doctrine which we will be discussing in class).

Consider his relationship with Christ, and his relationship with the other Apostles that were martyred...all the suffering he and they endured together in helping establish the first century church. As we noted, it is believed by most, that John wrote these letters sometime toward the end of his life. It's fairly well established (through the writings of 2nd century historians) that John was the last living Apostle...the last living "witness" of Jesus! **Given that building and establishing the church had been his life's work, can you imagine the state of his emotions as he wrote these letters? Think how you might have felt in his shoes.**

2) Writing exercise:

Try writing a brief paragraph as if you were reviewing the book of 1st John from a literary perspective...almost as if you were being asked to write a forward to the book. As you complete your column on this literary work, consider all of the above facts in describing the author, his mindset and the subject of his writing... (use the back of your lesson sheet for more room).

3) **Gnosticism:** Do a little outside research on Gnostic doctrine...summarize the key points you find. There are many resources available; *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* has a pretty good high-level summary. For a much deeper analysis you can look at:

<https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/topical.show/RTD/cgg/ID/66/Gnosticism.htm>

Note: The above site is maintained by the "Church of the Great God". That aside, it is a relatively scholarly explanation and summary of Gnosticism and its principles.

- 4) While he does not call the Gnostics specifically by name, John does “call out” those spreading falsehood using several different expressions (descriptive names). What are they...there are at least three?
- a) *1 Jn. 4:1*
 - b) *1 Jn 2:22-25; 2:18; 4:3; 2 Jn. 7*
 - c) *2 Jn 2:7*
- 5) John warns his readers about the serious and degenerative nature of this teaching. How does he characterize the impact this doctrine would have on their relationship with God the father in 1st Jn. 2:22-23 and 2nd Jn. 9? Also, how does he instruct his audience to “treat” or “react” to those teaching this heretical doctrine in both 1st and 2nd John?
- 6) In order to combat these heresies, John provides proof of the reality of the Lord and his incarnation.
- a) *What method does he use in 1st Jn 1:1? Why is it so effective?*
 - b) *in 1st Jn. 5:6-8 he names three witnesses of Jesus.*
 - i. *What/who are they?*
 - ii. *How do each of them witness Jesus?*
 - iii. *Can they provide witness today...how?*
- 7) In 1st John 3 he makes some key points to refute the notion that sinful activity can be indulged in without consequences. Can you locate them?
- 8) It seems Paul was also battling Gnostic doctrine in his writings. Can you point to any evidence of this in 1st Corinthians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus?

- 9) John uses several words frequently in these letters, two are “manifest” and “know”. What do they mean? How do they support the points John is making about Christ in relation to gnostic doctrine? Can you locate them in the Gospel of John?

Thought questions for lesson 2:

- **Why is it worthwhile to develop an understanding of Gnosticism? How might it be useful/relevant to us today? Also, comment on the mindset that underpins the Gnostic view and the fundamental challenges it brings.**

- **The word love (or its derivatives) is mentioned over 62 times in these letters. What are some of the different contexts in which it appears and why is it such a central theme?**