



THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

INVITATION TO STUDY

Have you ever wondered, “How can I know for sure that I’m really a Christian, that I’m truly saved, and that I have eternal life?” Have you ever had doubts about your belief in Christ? Are you simply not too sure what it is you truly believe because of the diverse teachings you encounter at church, on the television, and in books you read? Would you like to learn the basic doctrines of the Christian faith from someone who personally knew Jesus Christ and His teachings? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, then the First Epistle of John is for you.

Actually, John’s letter is for any Christian who desires a deeper knowledge of Bible doctrine and a closer walk with the Lord Jesus Christ. It is an excellent beginning point for a new Christian because it teaches doctrinal truths which are basic to a knowledgeable belief in Christ. It is also a wonderful encouragement for a more mature Christian because it gives firm assurance of the divine humanity of Jesus and expresses clearly how to continue in a healthy and vital relationship with Him.

I John was written because of love; because an elderly apostle-pastor loved his fellow believers and wanted to see them continue on the straight and narrow path which he had taught them to follow. The letter expresses the apostle’s love, God’s love and the love of Jesus Christ. It calls those who read it to love God, love Christ, and love one another. You are invited to learn more about this love and to share in it abundantly as we study John’s epistle. Will you ask God to open your heart to receive new insights into His word which will increase your understanding of His love for you and cause your love for Him and for His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to grow?

INTRODUCTORY BACKGROUND

I. WHO WROTE THE LETTER?

A. John, the Apostle

Most scholars agree that the epistle of I John was written by the apostle John, the son of Zebedee and Salome. He was also the younger brother of the apostle James (John 21:2; Matthew. 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 19:25; Matthew 4:21) and possibly a cousin of Jesus. (John’s mother, Salome, may have been the sister of Jesus’ mother, Mary. John 19:25)

B. Family Background

Before Jesus called John and James to follow Him, they were fishermen with their father, Zebedee, on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 1:19-20). Scholars believe their family was probably both financially well to do and influential because their household had hired servants (Mark 1:20), their mother Salome contributed to the financial needs of Jesus and the apostles (Mark 15:40-41 and Luke 8:3), and John was a personal acquaintance of Caiaphas, the high priest of Israel (John 18:15).

C. Educational Background

Acts 4:13 refers to John as being an uneducated and untrained man, but this obviously refers only to the fact that he had no formal training in the rabbinical schools. John was a Palestinian Jew with devout Jewish parents, so he probably had extensive religious training at home. He was also a disciple of John the Baptist (John 1:35-39) and no doubt learned a great deal from him.

D. Relationship to Jesus

As a follower of Jesus, John called himself *the disciple whom Jesus loved* (John 13:23, 20:2, 21:20). He stands out among the twelve apostles as one who was very close to Jesus and one in whom Jesus put His confidence. John was at the home of Peter when Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-31); he was present, along with Peter and James, at Jesus’ transfiguration (Matthew 17:1); he was on the Mount of Olives with Peter, James, and Andrew when Jesus foretold the destruction of Jerusalem (Mark 13:3); he was sent by Jesus, along with Peter, to prepare the Passover (Luke 22:8); he asked Jesus at the last supper who would be the one to betray Him (John 13:23-25); and he was with Peter and James in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-33). After Jesus was arrested, only Peter and John followed when He was taken to the home of Caiaphas, the high priest (John 18:15-16). John was the only apostle present at the crucifixion, and it was there Jesus gave His mother into John’s care (John 19: 26-27). On the first day of the week, after Mary Magdalene reported to Peter that Jesus’ tomb was empty, John raced him to the tomb and won, becoming one of the first to see and understand the empty tomb (John 20:1-5).

E. Leadership in the Early Church

After the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, John became one of the leaders

of the church in Jerusalem, along with Peter and James. In Acts 4:1-4, we read about John and Peter being arrested for preaching the gospel and according to Acts 8:14-15, John and Peter were sent to preach to the people of Samaria. After this, there is no more mention of John in the book of Acts, but it is assumed that he probably stayed in the area of Judea until the death of Mary to fulfill his obligation to Jesus to care for His mother.

F. Last Years

The latter years of John's life were probably spent in the vicinity of Ephesus, a major city of Asia Minor, although we know from Revelation 1:9 that he spent some time on the island of Patmos. He was apparently exiled there because of his preaching and his testimony concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. John probably died in Ephesus at the ripe old age of one hundred years. He died of natural causes and outlived all the other apostles, most of whom had died as martyrs.

G. Other Writings

John also wrote the Gospel of John, II and III John, and the book of Revelation.

II. WHY WAS THE LETTER WRITTEN?

A. John's Expressed Reasons

There are four main passages in I John where John explains his reasons for writing.

I John 1:4: *And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.*

I John 2:1: *My little children, these things I write to you, that you may not sin.*

I John 2:26: *These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you.*

I John 5:13: *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.*

These verses point out John's concerns for the recipients of his letter. He desired for them to continue to grow in joyful fellowship with himself and with the Lord Jesus Christ. He desired them to remain free from sin and free from deception by false teachers who would lead them away from belief in the name of the Son of God and rob them of their assurance of eternal life. The root of the problem seems to have been the false teachings which were stirring up trouble among the Christians and causing a crisis in the churches.

B. False Teachings

During the first century after Christ's crucifixion, the

time when John was actively preaching, teaching and writing, false teachers arose who attempted to lead new believers away from the pure and simple truths which had been taught by Jesus and His apostles. A basic understanding of some of these false teachings gives a greater insight into John's arguments and warnings.

1. Gnosticism

One of the main teachings of John's day, which became a threat to the early church, was known as Gnosticism. Gnosticism was based on Greek and Roman philosophy and Eastern religion. Gnostic teachers drew some professing believers away from the church, and these people began their own movement with their own teachings (I John 2:19). The result was that many believers who remained in the church became confused and unsure of their status as Christians. They were caught between the teachings of John and the teachings of their contemporaries who had turned their backs on the apostolic teachings, claiming to have a higher knowledge to which the ordinary Christian could not attain.

Gnosticism held that all matter was inherently evil and that spirit was divine and good. Therefore, one major group of Gnostics, the Docetic Gnostics, denied that Jesus ever had a real human body. They argued that it was impossible for God, who was spirit and good, to become flesh, which was matter and evil. So Jesus must have been a phantom — he only seemed to have a human body and was not really flesh and blood.

Another group, the Cerinthian Gnostics, made a distinction between Jesus, the man and Christ, the divine Messiah. They believed that Jesus was a real flesh and blood man but that the spirit and power of Christ did not come upon Him until His baptism and then departed from Him before His death. Therefore, it was only Jesus, the man who died on the cross and not Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2. Ebionites

Still another group of false teachers in John's day were the Ebionites who flatly denied the deity of Christ.

C. John's Challenge

These false teachings needed to be addressed and exposed. The weak and confused believers needed to be encouraged and exhorted to hold on to the truth they had been taught by the apostles who had seen, heard, and touched Jesus and knew first-hand the truth of the gospel message (1 John 1:1). John loved his flock of believers and longed for them to love one another with the love from above which so inspired him. He took pen in hand and wrote from his heart, hoping to

protect and preserve the sweet fellowship they had with him and with the Lord Jesus Christ.

D. Present Day Application

Our world today is not so different from that of the first century. There are many who do not recognize the deity of Jesus Christ, much less that He is the only way to the truth. There are philosophies and religions which claim to have the truth or at least one way to reach the truth. Many of them are based on Eastern religion, as was Gnosticism. Many people, even those who belong to churches, are confused about the truth or else they believe that there is no absolute truth — that truth does not come in black and white, but in shades of gray. However, that is not what Jesus taught. Jesus said, *I am the way, the truth, and the life* (John 14:6). In his epistle, John presents the persuasive proof of this statement, clearly distinguishing Christian truth from error, not only for the wavering believers of the first century, but for all believers who desire to strengthen their faith and love for the Lord Jesus Christ. May that include you!

III. WHEN WAS IT WRITTEN?

The exact date of the letter is unknown. Valid speculations range anywhere from 60-95 A.D. 1 John was probably written soon after the gospel and before Revelation, although some scholars believe that 1 John was the last of John's writings. If that is the case, 1 John would have been the last book of the New Testament to be written.

IV. TO WHOM WAS IT WRITTEN?

John wrote this letter to his dear *little children*, an endearing term which he uses nine times. We know very little about the specifics of who these *little children* were, but they must have been Gentile Christians.

A. Christians

I John was definitely written to Christians. John refers to them as those whose *sins are forgiven ...for His name's sake* (2:12). They have *known Him who is from the beginning, have overcome the wicked one, and have known the Father* (2:13). John is confident that the word of God abides in them (2:14). Most scholars believe the letter went out to a group of churches in Asia Minor with whom John had close association. Some have suggested that the churches mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3 (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea) are the particular churches to whom I John was addressed.

B. Gentiles

The Christians in these churches were predominately Gentiles rather than Jews, so they had little knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, an obvious reason that John did not quote from or refer to the Scriptures in his letter. Unlike Jewish Christians who experienced ostracism by their Jewish families and friends, the early Gentile churches were not so much faced with outward persecution. Their opposition was mainly intellectual deception by those who claimed to have a higher truth and deeper insights into spiritual things. The false teachers who confronted them were not trying to draw them away from Christianity but to change the teachings of Christianity by making them more intellectually respectable to the Roman world. The confused Christians needed a wake up call to return to confidence in Christ, the central foundation of true faith, and away from the counterfeit teachings which were causing them to compromise their lives and their love for one another.

C. All Believers

1 John was also written for all believers throughout time. The truths John conveys are timeless and the applications are as appropriate today as they were in the first century. As you read I John, will you take it as a personal letter from John to you?

V. WHAT IS THE LETTER ABOUT?

A. Aim

John's longing was for the recipients of his letter to turn away from the distractions of deceptive teachings and to return and grow in the fullness of fellowship with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, through whom they had received eternal life. If the believers allowed themselves to be led astray by false teachers, the joy of fellowship with them would cease. John loved them too much to allow that to happen.

B. Testimony of an Eyewitness

John was an eyewitness to the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. He had a message from Christ Himself and he knew the message was true.

1. Love

John wanted his readers to be fully convinced of and committed to the truth because he loved them. In his letter, he continually calls them *my little children* and *beloved*. The whole tone of the letter is one of a loving father imploring his children to do what is right, honorable, and in their own very best interest.

2. Exhortation

Behind John's gentle, loving approach to writing is also an unwavering authority which exhorts his readers to stand firm and not sin or back down and lose faith. He states very clearly that there is no room in a Christian life for double-mindedness (1:6-8), disobedience to God's Word (2:4-6), hating fellow Christians (2:9-11), dealing in the ways of the world (2:15-16), denying Jesus as the Messiah (2:22-23), or deliberate sin (3:4-10). Victory in Christ comes through confessing one's sin (1:9), discerning the truth (2:18-22 and 4:1-3), abiding in Christ (2:28), practicing righteousness (3:7), loving others in *deed and truth* (3:14-18), depending on God and the power of prayer (3:20-22), keeping God's commandments (5:3), and always putting Christ first (5:21).

C. Theme

The central theme of the letter is fellowship with God and His Son Jesus Christ. John desires to draw the reader into that fellowship with a security that it can never be lost. Fellowship with God and His Son Jesus Christ is a living union which is based upon knowledge and love.

Knowledge: God desires for those who fellowship with Him to know Him intimately. The word *know* in I John always refers to intimate, personal, interactive knowledge and not just intellectual knowledge. God sent His Son into the world as a flesh and blood human being to communicate the knowledge of Himself and His plan for our lives. John explains not only what we can know about God and our relationship to Him but also how we can be sure we know it.

Love: Another key word in the letter is *love*. John explains that we can love because God first loved us, and if we truly love God, His love will abide in us and flow out to others who also fellowship with Him.

We can be secure in our fellowship with God as we become secure in the knowledge which He has so graciously opened up to us and as we experience the love of God flowing out to others through our lives.

God desires for all believers to experience the joy of fellowship with Him, with His Son the Lord Jesus Christ, and with other believers. This is quite apparent in John's call to fellowship: *That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full (1 John 1:3-4).*

Thus, John opens his letter with a call to fellowship.

He goes on to explain the requirements and conditions of fellowship, calling his readers to:

Fellowship in the light	Chapter 1
Fellowship in Jesus Christ	Chapter 2
Fellowship in love	Chapter 3
Fellowship in truth	Chapter 4
Fellowship in faith	Chapter 5

As an apostle of Jesus Christ, John was fully convinced of the truth of the gospel which had been given to him. He was committed to making sure that the truth of the gospel was not distorted in any way. As a committed Christian, he was overflowing with the love of God which filled him through the power of the Holy Spirit. This love was the driving force reaching out through him to exhort and encourage those believers who were in danger of straying from the truth and missing out on the blessing of true fellowship in the knowledge and love of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. John wanted other believers to know what he knew and to experience the love which he experienced. He wanted them to experience the fullness and joy of fellowship with God, with His Son Jesus Christ, and with himself.

Applications:

1. How are you experiencing the joy of fellowship with God and His Son Jesus Christ?
2. Would you like to know more about enjoying the assurance and satisfaction of having an intimate personal union with God and His Son?
3. Do you desire to live the abundant life which can only be found in that perfect fellowship?
4. Will you commit to spending time daily in intimate fellowship with God as we study I John for the next six weeks? How will you schedule your time to make daily intimate fellowship with God a priority in your life?