



LIFE APPLICATION BIBLE COMMENTARY





LIFE
APPLICATION[®]
Bible Commentary

1, 2 & 3 JOHN

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TYNDALE HOUSE
PUBLISHERS, INC.
CAROL STREAM,
ILLINOIS

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Life Application Bible Commentary: 1, 2 & 3 John

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

1, 2, & 3 John / Bruce B. Barton . . . [et al.].

p. cm. — (Life application Bible commentary)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8423-2857-9 (sc : alk. paper)

1. Bible. N.T. Epistles of John—Commentaries. I. Barton, Bruce B. II. Series.

BS2805.3.A12 1998

227'.9406—dc21

97-33489

Printed in the United States of America

14 13 12 11 10 09

14 13 12 11 10 9

CONTENTS

ix Foreword

xi Introduction to 1, 2 & 3 John

<i>1</i> Introduction to 1 John	<i>123</i> Introduction to 2 John	<i>141</i> Introduction to 3 John
<i>1</i> Author	<i>123</i> Author	<i>141</i> Author
<i>3</i> Date and Setting	<i>124</i> Date and Setting	<i>141</i> Date and Setting
<i>4</i> Audience	<i>124</i> Audience	<i>142</i> Audience
<i>5</i> Purpose	<i>125</i> Purpose	<i>142</i> Purpose
<i>6</i> Message	<i>125</i> Message	<i>142</i> Message
<i>11</i> Vital Statistics	<i>127</i> Vital Statistics	<i>144</i> Vital Statistics
<i>11</i> Outline	<i>127</i> Outline	<i>144</i> Outline
<i>13</i> 1 John 1:1–2:11	<i>129</i> 2 John	<i>145</i> 3 John
<i>39</i> 1 John 2:12-29		
<i>61</i> 1 John 3		
<i>83</i> 1 John 4		
<i>105</i> 1 John 5		
<i>155</i> Bibliography		
<i>157</i> Index		

Gospels

MATTHEW:
MARK: between
LUKE:

Paul's Epistles

ACTS:
ROMANS: about 57
1 CORINTHIANS: about 55
2 CORINTHIANS: about 56-57
GALATIANS: about 49
EPHESIANS:
PHILIPPIANS:
COLOSSIANS:
1 THESSALONIANS: about 51
2 THESSALONIANS: about 51-52
1 TIMOTHY:
2 TIMOTHY:
TITUS:
PHILEMON:

General Epistles

JAMES: about 49

1 PETER:
2 PETER:

JUDE:

NEW TESTAMENT

AD 30

40

50

60

The church
begins
(Acts 1)

35
Paul's
conversion
(Acts 9)

46
Paul's first
missionary
journey
(Acts 13)

Jerusalem Council
and Paul's second
journey (Acts 15)

54
Paul's
third
journey
(Acts 18)
Nero
becomes
emperor

58
Paul
arrested
(Acts 21)

64
Rome
burns

61-63
Paul's
Roman
imprisonment
(Acts 28)

between 60–65

55–65

about 60

about 63–65

about 61

about 62

about 61

about 64

about 66–67

about 64

about 61

HEBREWS: probably before 70

about 62–64

about 67

about 65

JOHN: probably 80–85

1 JOHN: between 85–90

2 JOHN: about 90

3 JOHN: about 90

REVELATION: about 95

TIMELINE

70

67–68
Paul and Peter executed

68
Essenes hide their library of Bible manuscripts in a cave in Qumran by the Dead Sea

Jerusalem destroyed

80

About 75
John begins ministry in Ephesus

75
Rome begins construction of Colosseum

79 Mt. Vesuvius erupts in Italy

90

About 98
John's death at Ephesus

100

FOREWORD

The Life Application Bible Commentary series provides verse-by-verse explanation, background, and application for every verse in the New Testament. In addition, it gives personal help, teaching notes, and sermon ideas that will address needs, answer questions, and provide insight for applying the Word of God to life today. The content is highlighted so that particular verses and phrases are easy to find.

Each volume contains three sections: introduction, commentary, and reference. The introduction includes an overview of the book, the book's historical context, a time line, cultural background information, major themes, an overview map, and an explanation about the author and audience.

The commentary section includes running commentary on the Bible text with reference to several modern versions, especially the New International Version, the New Revised Standard Version, and the New Living Translation, accompanied by life applications interspersed throughout. Additional elements include charts, diagrams, maps, and illustrations. There are also insightful quotes from church leaders and theologians such as John Calvin, Martin Luther, John Wesley, and A. W. Tozer. These features are designed to help you quickly grasp the biblical information and be prepared to communicate it to others. The reference section includes an index and a bibliography.

INTRODUCTION TO 1, 2 & 3 JOHN

Most adults resent being treated as children by their peers, with patronizing, condescending remarks and simplified instructions. They take pride in their expertise, experience, and knowledge. Mature and well established, they stand confident and secure. But even the most self-assured adult will listen carefully to an admired elder and not be offended, knowing that this person has profound wisdom and insights gleaned from a lifetime of study and practice.

Spiritual adults, as well, may find it difficult to accept correction and instruction from those younger in the faith. But wise believers at any age will hear and heed the words of Spirit-led mentors and teachers.

When John wrote his first letter to the church, he often addressed his readers as “dear children” (1 John 2:1, 12, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21), and all three of his letters are sprinkled with other references to children (see, for example, 1 John 3:1-3; 5:1-4; 2 John 1, 4, 13; 3 John 4, 11). Yet far from being offended, the first recipients of these letters eagerly received the message of this elder statesman and revered apostle. Besides the difference in age (John wrote these letters as an older man), John was an eyewitness of Christ and was their spiritual father. In every sense, they were his “children” who needed to hear his inspired encouragements, warnings, and admonitions.

Centuries removed, believers today still stand as “dear children” who need guidance and instruction. Far from having arrived, we are in the process of becoming more and more like Christ as we mature in him (1 John 3:2-3).

As you read these epistles of John, open your heart as a child (Luke 18:15-17) and be ready to learn and obey what God is telling you.

INTRODUCTION TO 1 JOHN

With a flick of the wall switch, the light chases away shadows, reassuring the child that her monsters were only imaginary. Another switch turns on a powerful battery-powered beam and keeps the hiker on the trail after dark. Other lights warn, guide, illuminate, regulate, and decorate. Light—pure and bright—cuts through darkness, exposing reality and demanding attention.

Those who walk in light see clearly and know where to go. But those who walk in darkness grope, stumble, and turn the wrong way.

In his Gospel, John proclaimed that Jesus, the “light of the world,” had come to illuminate truth and to lead men and women to God (John 1:4-9; 8:12). Here in this first letter, John urged all to forsake darkness and live in the light (1 John 1:5-7).

Do you yearn for direction in life? Follow the light.

Do you doubt and wonder what’s real? Turn on his light.

Do you stumble and fall? Walk in the light.

Read 1 John and know that your Light has come. Let it shine!

AUTHOR

The apostle John.

The similarities between the Gospel of John and these letters identified as 1, 2, and 3 John are so remarkable that it would be difficult to argue that these writings were done by two different people. The syntax, the vocabulary, and the thematic developments are so strikingly similar that even the inexperienced reader can tell that the letters were penned by the writer of the Gospel. Therefore, once the writer of John’s Gospel is identified, we can automatically identify the writer of the letters.

Clearly, whoever wrote the Gospel was an eyewitness of Jesus and among the very first to follow him. The writer of this Gospel calls himself “the one whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). He was one of the twelve disciples, and among them he was one of those who was very close to Jesus (for example, see John 13:23-25, where John is said to have been leaning on Jesus’ breast during the Last Supper). The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) reveal that three disciples were very

close to Jesus: Peter, James, and John. Peter could not have been the author of this Gospel because the one who named himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” spoke with Peter at the Last Supper (John 13:23-25 NIV), raced Peter to the empty tomb on the morning of the Resurrection (John 20:2-4), and walked with Jesus and Peter along the shore of Galilee after Jesus’ appearance to them following his resurrection (John 21:20-23). Thus, someone other than Peter authored this Gospel. In addition, the writer could not have been James, for he was martyred many years before this Gospel was written (see Acts 12:2). The writer must have been John, the son of Zebedee, who shared a close relationship with Jesus. Most likely, it was also John who was with Andrew (Peter’s brother) when they became the first to follow Jesus (John 1:35-40). He was the one who was known to the high priest and therefore gained access for himself and Peter into the courtyard of the place where Jesus was on trial (John 18:15-16). This one disciple stood by Jesus during his crucifixion (John 19:25-26) and walked with Jesus after his resurrection (John 21:20). This is that same disciple who wrote the Gospel that bears his name (John 21:24-25).

The author’s proclamation as an eyewitness is just as pronounced in the first letter as it is in the Gospel. In 1 John, the author claimed to be among those who heard, saw, and even touched the eternal Word made flesh (1:1-5). In other words, John lived and traveled with the man Jesus. As such, his testimony is firsthand; he was an eyewitness of the greatest person to enter human history. Surely no human knew Jesus better than John.

At the beginning of 2 and 3 John, this author identified himself as “the elder.” This title probably pointed to John’s position at that time as the oldest living apostle and chief leader among the churches in the Roman province of Asia (otherwise known as Asia Minor). This is made clear in 1 John by the way he addressed the believers as his “dear children” (2:1, 18, 28; 3:7; 5:21).

Some scholars have thought this “elder” refers to a different John on the basis of a quotation from Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor (A.D. 100–140). Papias’s comment, transmitted through Eusebius via Irenaeus, is “If anywhere one came my way who had been a follower of the elders, I would inquire about the words of the elders—what Andrew and Peter had said, or what Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord’s disciples had said; and I would inquire about the things which Aristion and the elder John, the Lord’s disciples, say.” A number of significant commentators have argued for the existence of an

elder or presbyter John in Asia Minor who was different from the apostle John. However, Irenaeus, in *Against Heresies* and in the Muratorian Fragment (both from the end of the second century), assigns 1 John to the apostle John.

For more on the apostle John, see the introduction in the *Life Application Bible Commentary: John*.

DATE AND SETTING

Written in about A.D. 90 from Ephesus.

John and the other apostles were probably forced to leave Jerusalem by A.D. 70, if not earlier, due to mounting persecution. It is possible that John gathered with some of the Samaritan converts (see John 4:1-42; Acts 8:9-17) and some of John the Baptist's followers in Palestine, where they continued to preach the word. Sometime thereafter (but probably no earlier than A.D. 70), they migrated to the Roman province of Asia and began a successful ministry among the Gentiles.

John wrote a Gospel for these Gentile believers somewhere around A.D. 80–85. Sometime thereafter, some of the members of the community left to form a rival group. John, therefore, wrote a letter (1 John) in order to deal with the crisis by encouraging the believers to remain in Christ and in the fellowship and by denouncing those who had left. First John was probably written around A.D. 85–90. Second John must have been written in the same time period because it dealt with the same issue, warning the believers not to receive the traveling teachers who were spreading the false teachings of those who had left the church. Third John has the same characteristics; John cautioned Gaius about Diotrephes, who had evidently been affected by the secessionists and had a negative attitude about John and his coworkers.

Although there are no references in the Gospel or the three letters concerning where they were written, according to the earliest traditions of the church, John wrote all four books from Ephesus.

Located at the intersection of two ancient, major overland routes (the coastal road running north to Troas and the western route to Colosse, Laodicea, and beyond) at the western edge of Asia Minor (now Turkey) with easy access to the Aegean Sea, Ephesus had become a political, commercial, and religious center. Thus it was a key city in the Roman Empire.

The church at Ephesus had been founded in A.D. 52 by Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:19-21). The church had flourished and had become a strong spiritual community under the ministry of Apollos, Priscilla, and Aquila (Acts 18:24-26). Later, during Paul's first Roman imprisonment, he wrote the

letter to the Ephesians (about A.D. 60). The church is described in Revelation 2:1-7 where God commends the Ephesian believers for their “hard work” and “patient endurance” (Revelation 2:2 NLT). But God also warns the Ephesians about forsaking their love for him. He calls them to “repent and do the things you did at first” (Revelation 2:4-5 NIV).

After writing these letters from Ephesus, John was exiled by the Roman government to the island of Patmos. There he wrote the book of Revelation. Later he returned to Ephesus for his final years (A.D. 100).

For more information on Ephesus, see the introduction in the *Life Application Bible Commentary: Ephesians*.

AUDIENCE

The church in Ephesus and believers in nearby churches.

In recent years various scholars have tried to identify the original Johannine community—the group of believers for whom John wrote his Gospel and letters. That there was a special community of believers seems evident from the way John speaks to them and of them in his three letters. The apostle John and the believers knew each other well, and the believers accepted the teachings of the apostle as “the truth.” John encouraged them to stay in fellowship with him (and the other apostles); if they did so, they would enjoy true fellowship with the Father and the Son (see 1:1-4).

In the Gospel, this link between the believers, John, and Jesus is also made evident. Throughout the Gospel, John reveals that he had a special relationship with Jesus. Just as the Son was the one qualified to explain the Father to humankind because of his special relationship with the Father (John 1:18), so too John, who reclined on Jesus’ chest, was qualified to explain Jesus’ message to his readers because of his relationship with Jesus. In this Gospel, this one disciple is given a kind of preeminence:

- he was the first to follow Jesus (John 1:35-37);
- he was the closest to Jesus during the Last Supper (John 13:22-25);
- he followed Jesus to his trial (John 18:15);
- he only (of all the disciples) went to Jesus’ cross and was given a direct command from Jesus to care for Jesus’ mother (John 19:26-27);
- he outran Peter to the empty tomb and was the first apostle to believe in Jesus’ resurrection (John 20:1-8);
- he was the first to recognize that it was Jesus appearing to them in his Galilean visitation (John 21:7).

Because of his relationship to Jesus, John's testimony to his community could be trusted.

Some scholars (notably R. Alan Culpepper) attempted to reconstruct some of the distinctives of this Johannine community. Evidently this community was a kind of school (Greek, *schole*) that claimed Jesus as its founder and John as its master teacher. This school studied the Old Testament and was reared on the teachings of John about Jesus, therein absorbing John's esoteric language about mystical experiences with Jesus. This school was also responsible for collaborating with John in producing his written Gospel. As a community, they were detached from Judaism (perhaps several of the members were former synagogue members who had been expelled for their faith in Jesus), and they struggled with false teachers who denied Jesus as the God who had come in human form.

A careful study of the letters seems to indicate that the readers were close to John—close enough to be considered his family. They depended on him for his eyewitness account about Jesus and for his insights about his personal relationship with Jesus. They must have been accustomed to his rambling style, and they must have understood certain references that are vague and perplexing to modern readers. For example, they evidently understood John's words about "the one who came by water and blood" (5:6 NIV) and about the "sin that leads to death" (5:16-17 NLT). Readers today are forced to conjecture about the exact meanings. In any event, John's readers were believers of all ages who needed to be affirmed as a community in love, life, and truth.

PURPOSE

To reassure Christians in their faith and to counter false teachings.

If it is true that John wrote these letters to certain local churches in Asia—especially to those around Ephesus—one of the reasons that prompted his first epistle was that a heretical faction had developed within the church, a faction that promoted heretical teachings concerning the person of Christ. Scholars have identified this heresy as Docetism generally and pointed specifically to Cerinthus as the perpetrator of the specific brand of Docetism.

The Docetists denied that Jesus had actually become flesh and blood; they denied that God had come in a human body (see 4:1-3). According to Irenaeus, Cerinthus "represented Jesus as having not been born of a virgin, but as being the son of Joseph and Mary according to the ordinary course of human generation, while he nevertheless was more righteous, prudent, and wise than other men.

Moreover, after his baptism, Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler, and that then he proclaimed the unknown Father, and performed miracles. But at last Christ departed from Jesus, and that then Jesus suffered and rose again, while Christ remained impassable, inasmuch as he was a spiritual being” (*Against Heresies*, 3.4). John refuted the Cerinthian heresy in 5:5-8 (see the comments at that point in the commentary).

The heretical faction within the church (or churches) that John was addressing eventually left the fellowship. In so doing, they exposed the reality that they did not genuinely belong to God’s family (2:18-19). But their false teachings still lingered in the minds of the faithful. So John wrote to clear the air of all the falsehoods and bring the believers back to the pure beginning of the gospel and to the basics of the Christian life. John urged his readers

- to have fellowship with God in the light
- to confess their sins
- to love God
- to love their fellow Christians
- to abide in Christ
- to purify themselves from worldly lusts
- to know God personally and experientially
- to appreciate the gift of eternal life
- to follow the Spirit of truth (and the anointing) in discerning false teachings
- to esteem Jesus Christ as the true God

Above all these items, John stressed how necessary it was for the early believers to maintain a proper relationship with those who had been with Jesus. In the prologue (1:1-4) to 1 John, he invites all the believers to participate in the one apostolic fellowship. Fellowship is a two-way, simultaneous experience: both with fellow believers and with God. This is to safeguard against pseudospirituality and extreme individualism. Throughout this first letter, John seems to have been addressing his comments to those who were claiming to have a relationship with God, yet had left the fellowship of believers and did not love the brothers and sisters in Christ.

Today, those who claim to follow Christ need a fresh dose of the message of 1 John, examining themselves in light of these basics of the Christian faith.

MESSAGE

Sin, Love, Family of God, Truth and Error, Assurance.

John wrote this letter as one who was an *eyewitness* to the

Incarnation. He heard Jesus teach, saw him heal the sick, confront hypocrites, and clear the temple. John spoke with Jesus, saw him transfigured, ate with him, and lived close to him.

When John opened his Gospel, he fondly recollected how he (and the other disciples, for whom he was a spokesman) beheld the Son's glory, the glory as of a unique Son from the Father (John 1:14). And then he picturesquely described the unique Son, himself God, dwelling on the Father's bosom (John 1:18). The opening of this first epistle also contains John's personal testimony about his experience with the Son and Father, followed by an invitation to join him in that fellowship (see 1:1-4).

The first words of this epistle are unusual. Instead of saying, "*He* who was from the beginning, he whom we have seen," John wrote, "*That which* [a relative pronoun] was from the beginning, *which* we have heard" (1:1 NIV). The relative pronoun is more inclusive: it encompasses everything concerning the Word of Life, everything pertaining to (Greek, *peri*) the Word of Life from the beginning. It includes the Word's person and his work. It must also include that eternal fellowship that existed between the Word and the Father. (Note: As in John 1:1, he talked about the Word being face-to-face with the Father.) The Word of Life, who was face-to-face with the Father, was manifested to the disciples. John heard, saw, beheld, and even touched the one who was in fellowship with the Father. In effect, John was saying to his readers, "You can trust that what I say is absolutely true!"

Sin (1:5-10; 2:1-2, 12-17; 3:4-9; 5:16-21). Even Christians sin. Sin requires God's forgiveness, and Christ's death provides it. Determining to live according to God's standards in the Bible shows that believers' lives are being transformed.

Throughout this epistle, John calls into question all professed spirituality. These are presented in a series of statements (usually phrased "if we say") that probably mimic what various Gnostic believers were claiming about their spiritual experiences (for example, see 1:6, 8; 2:4, 6, 9). Talk is cheap; reality must be tested by one's relationship with the members of the church community. John urged the believers to know the truth and to live in it.

Importance for today. We cannot deny our sin nature, maintain that we are above sinning, or minimize the consequences of sin in our relationship with God. We must resist the attraction of sin, yet we must confess when we do sin.

Be honest with yourself and with God. Admit your sin to him and live in the freedom of his forgiveness.

Love (2:7-11; 3:10-11, 14-16, 23; 4:7-21; 5:1-3). John's epistles are an extension of the Gospel's focus on the Trinity, but with an

added emphasis—the practical, tangible experience of the Trinity in the life of the believer as tested by the believer’s relationship to the other members of the church community. For example, the Gospel speaks much of the mutual abiding of all three persons of the Trinity within the believers (see John 14–17), but there it is spoken of as a nascent revelation. In John’s epistles, all talk of one’s living in God must be tested by how one lives with his or her companions in Christ.

This leads to one of the primary themes in these letters: love for God must be exhibited in love for others. If we could ask John what is the one message he wanted us to get from these epistles, he would probably say, “Love one another.” This command did not originate from John; it came straight from the lips of Jesus (see John 13:34; 15:17). John repeated this command often (1 John 2:7; 3:11; 2 John 5-6), basing it on the premise that since “God is love,” then all who claim to know God must exhibit that nature in their relationship with others. Jesus commands his followers to love others as he did. This love is evidence that they are truly saved. God is the creator of love; he cares that his children love each other.

Importance for today. It is easy to talk about love and how much we love people, but love means putting others first. Love is action—showing others that we care—not just words. To show love, we must give sacrificially of our time and money to meet the needs of others.

Look for tangible ways to express God’s love to others, especially fellow believers. Instead of buying the latest fashions, buy meals or clothes for poor families; instead of pushing for recognition, encourage others and give them the credit; instead of remembering with resentment a past hurt, forgive and let it go. Love others for Christ.

Family of God (1:1-4; 2:18-21, 24-25, 28-29; 3:1-3, 10-20; 4:20-21). When the Son entered into time, his eternal fellowship with the Father also entered into time. Thus, to have heard Jesus was to have heard the Father speaking in the Son (John 14:10, 24), to have seen Jesus was to have seen the Father (John 14:8-10), and to have known him was to have known him who was one with the Father (John 10:30, 38). The Son and Father were so united that they indwelt each other. Christ himself perfectly expressed the Father because he lived in perfect union with him. For the disciples to know Jesus was for them to know the Father.

During the days of his ministry, Jesus was introducing the Father to the disciples and initiating them into the fellowship. Then once the disciples were regenerated by the Spirit, they actu-

ally entered into fellowship with the Father and the Son. Having been brought into this divine participation, the apostles became the new initiators—introducing this fellowship to others and encouraging them to enter into fellowship with them. Whoever would enter into fellowship with the apostles would actually be entering into their fellowship with the Father and the Son.

The one, unique fellowship between the Father and the Son began in eternity, was manifest in time through the incarnation of the Son, was introduced to the apostles, and then through the apostles was extended to each and every believer. Those who entered this fellowship by believing in Christ became members of God's family—the Christian community, a community that was held together by their common experience of the Trinity and by their acknowledgment of the truth as defined by the apostles.

God's life in his children enables them to love their fellow family members.

Importance for today. How people treat others shows who their Father is. God's children love others, especially those in the family of faith. Some think they can live for God on their own; but God created us for fellowship. He wants us to love and care for our brothers and sisters in Christ. We should take seriously our place in God's family.

Live as a faithful family member, becoming involved in a local church and reaching out in love to your brothers and sisters.

Truth and Error (2:4-6, 18-23, 26-27; 3:7-9; 4:1-6). Teaching that the body does not matter, false teachers encouraged believers to throw off moral restraints. They also taught that Christ wasn't really a human being and that people could only be saved by having special mystical knowledge. As a result, people became indifferent to sin.

According to 1 John, anyone who denies that Jesus is the Christ, that he is the unique Son of God, or that he has come in the flesh is the "antichrist." The biblical term, however, principally refers to a particular person in whom that denial reaches its consummate expression and who will play a key role in the final stage of history.

The word "antichrist" occurs only four times, all in John's epistles (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). First John 2:18 refers also to "many antichrists." John assumed that his Christian readers knew about the antichrist and had been taught to expect his coming (2:18-27). The presence of many antichrists, in fact, indicated that the end times had arrived. But John warned that a final antichrist would yet make an appearance. He, like the others, would deny that Jesus is the Christ.

John further described any person or message that did not “confess Jesus” as being of the spirit of the antichrist (4:3 NRSV). In 2 John, he referred to “many deceivers” who would not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh (2 John 7). Such a person, he wrote, was “the deceiver and the antichrist” (NIV).

Importance for today. God is truth and light, so the more we get to know him, the better we can keep focused on the truth. Many people today claim to have “a message from God”—the truth. The key question to ask of each teacher and any teaching, however, is, “Does it really agree with the biblical teaching that Jesus Christ, God’s Son, actually became man with a human body?” True teachers affirm God’s Word and teach that Jesus was fully God and fully man.

Don’t be led astray by any teaching that denies Christ’s deity or humanity. Check the message; test the claims.

Assurance (2:3-6; 3:19-24; 5:1-15, 19-20). Several times in this letter, John assures readers that they can “know” or “be sure.” They can know that they “belong to him” (2:3 NLT), that they are “living in the truth” (3:19 NLT), that God lives in them (3:24), and that God hears their prayers (5:15).

God is in control of heaven and earth. Because his Word is true, believers can have assurance of eternal life and victory over sin. By faith, they can be certain of their eternal destiny with him.

Importance for today. Assurance of our relationship with God is a promise, but it is also a way of life. We build our confidence by trusting in God’s Word and in Christ’s provision for our sin. Competing teachers can cause confusion, and tough times can bring doubts. Regardless of what is happening around us or to us, however, we can be assured of God’s presence and love and of our eternal destination.

If you have trusted in Christ as your Savior, you *have* eternal life. God lives in you, and you are on your way to experience heaven. Live with the assured confidence of the reality of God.

VITAL STATISTICS

Purpose: To reassure Christians in their faith and to counter false teachings

Author: The apostle John

To whom written: The letter is untitled and was written to no particular church. It was sent as a pastoral letter to several Gentile congregations. It was also written to all believers everywhere.

Date written: Probably between A.D. 85 and 90, from Ephesus

Setting: John was an older man and perhaps the only surviving apostle at this time. He had not yet been banished to the island of Patmos, where he would live in exile. As an eyewitness of Christ, he wrote authoritatively to give this new generation of believers assurance and confidence in God and their faith.

Key verse: “I write this to you who believe in the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life” (5:13 NLT).

Special features: John is the apostle of love, and love is mentioned throughout this letter. There are a number of similarities between this letter and John’s Gospel—in vocabulary, style, and main ideas. John uses brief statements and simple words, and he features sharp contrasts—light and darkness, truth and error, God and Satan, life and death, love and hate.

OUTLINE

1. God is light (1:1–2:29)
2. God is love (3:1–4:21)
3. God is life (5:1–21)

1 John 1:1–2:11

JESUS CHRIST IS GOD'S SON / 1:1-4

John's first letter opens as does his Gospel—both begin with a prologue. When John began his Gospel, he recalled how he (and the other disciples, for whom he was a spokesman) had beheld the Son's glory, the glory as of a unique Son from the Father (John 1:14). Then John described Jesus as the one who was both God and the Son of God living near the heart of the Father (John 1:18). In both the Gospel and the letter, John revealed that he (with the apostles) had heard, seen, and even touched God in his bodily expression in Jesus Christ. The apostles realized that the Word of Life, who had been in face-to-face fellowship with the Father for all eternity, had entered into time to relate to them in a human body. They shared the gospel message so that, across the world and down through the ages, we might also experience this fellowship.

1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.^{NIV} This letter is attributed to John, one of Jesus' original twelve disciples. He was "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:20), and, along with Peter and James, he had a special relationship with Jesus. This letter was written between A.D. 85 and 90 from Ephesus, before John's exile to the island of Patmos (see Revelation 1:9). Jerusalem had been destroyed in A.D. 70, and Christians had been scattered throughout the empire.

Unlike the style of most letters at this time, this letter does not give the name of its writer at the beginning. Both 2 and 3 John begin with "the elder" and follow with the name of the addressee. This letter, however, includes no author's name, except the understanding that this is an elder of the church writing to his "dear children" (2:1). (The "Author" section in the introduction offers more information about this letter's authorship.) This unaddressed, unsigned letter was probably more of a written sermon or treatise sent to several of the churches in and around Ephesus that were under John's care. As the oldest living apostle,

John was the “elder statesman” of Christianity; he had watched the church deal with conflict from within and persecution from without. Plentiful false teachers were accelerating the downward slide of many away from the Christian faith. John wrote this letter to put believers back on track. John directly confronted the false teachings, called them lies, and refocused the readers back to the truth of the foundational gospel message.

John’s first letter to the churches opens by emphasizing Christ’s eternal nature. The words “that which was from the beginning” seem odd because, since John was writing about Jesus, he might be expected to have written, “*He* who was from the beginning.” But the relative pronoun (“that which”) was more inclusive—it encompassed everything about “the Word of life” that the apostles had come to know and experience. “The Word of life” describes the Son of God as the personal expression of the invisible God and the giver of divine, eternal life to the believers. John opened his Gospel with the same thought (see John 1:1).

God came into the world as a human, and he, John, had been an eyewitness to Jesus’ life. In both the Gospel and this letter, John revealed that he (with the apostles) had *heard*, *seen*, and even *touched* God (John 1:14). When the Son entered into time, his fellowship with the Father also entered into time. Thus, to have heard Jesus was to have heard the Father speaking in the Son (John 14:10, 24), to have seen Jesus was to have seen the Father (John 14:8-10), and to have known Jesus was to have known him who was one with the Father (John 10:30, 38).

John made a point of saying that not only had they heard and seen Christ, they had “touched” him. In other words, Jesus had been a completely physical being. Some false teachers denied the Incarnation, claiming that God did not—indeed could not—become human. They taught that Jesus merely had assumed the guise of humanity but had not been truly human. The truth of Jesus’ humanity, however, is vital to Christianity and to salvation.

John called Jesus *the Word of life*. In his Gospel, John had written, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (John 1:1-2 NIV). As the “Word,” the Son of God fully conveys and communicates God. What kind of “Word” was this? The Greek term is *logos*, and theologians and philosophers, both Jews and Greeks, used the term “word” in a variety of ways.

In the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, “the word” was an agent of creation (Psalm 33:6), the source of God’s message to his people through the prophets (Hosea 1:2), and God’s law, his standard of holiness (Psalm 119:11). The Greeks used “the word” to refer to a person’s thoughts or reason or to a person’s speech

expressing his or her thoughts. As a philosophical term, *logos* was the rational principle governing the universe. For both Jews and Greeks, the term *logos* signified beginnings. Jesus Christ, the *logos*, is from the beginning because he is God (Genesis 1:1). John's use of *logos* is a good title for the Son who both created the universe with God and then came to earth to be the perfect expression of God to humanity. Jesus, the *logos*, reveals God's mind to human beings. Jesus Christ, the *logos*, is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15), the express image of God's substance (Hebrews 1:3), the revealer of God, and the reality of God.

Not only is Jesus Christ "the Word," he is the Word of *life*—of spiritual life. People may be physically alive but spiritually dead. Jesus, however, as the express image of God himself, gives both spiritual life and eternal life to all who believe in him (1:2).

1:2 This one who is life from God was shown to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and announce to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was shown to us.^{NLT} The Greek word for "life" is *zoe*. In classical Greek, it refers to life in general. There are a few examples of this meaning in the New Testament (Acts 17:25; James 4:14; Revelation 16:3), but in all other instances, the word was used to designate the divine, eternal life—the life of God (see, for example, Ephesians 4:18; Philippians 2:16; 1 Timothy 6:12). This "life" resided in Christ, so John described Jesus Christ as *this one who is life from God* and repeated the fact that *we have seen him*. He, the other disciples, and thousands of other people had indeed "seen" Jesus. He was more than just a human being. "Was shown to us" literally means "was revealed or manifested." The phrase has four emphases—life from God was shown (1) through Jesus' earthly ministry (3:5, 8); (2) through Jesus' appearances after his resurrection (John 21:1, 14); (3) through his appearing when he returns in full glory (2:28; Colossians 3:4; 1 Peter 5:4); and (4) through the Incarnation when all of his nature became present in the person of Jesus.

John's work during the many years since Jesus' ascension had been to *testify and announce* to everyone that [*Jesus*] is the *one who is eternal life*. Because Christ is eternal life, those who trust in him also have eternal life.

In Greek, the phrase "he was with the Father" suggests that the Word was face-to-face with the Father. This common Greek expression indicated a personal relationship. By using this expression, John was saying that the Word (the Son) and God (the Father) enjoyed an intimate, personal relationship from the beginning. In Jesus' intercessory prayer, recorded in John 17, he

revealed that the Father had loved him before the foundation of the world (John 17:24). The words “then he was shown to us” refer to the revelation of the Son of God in human form. Several times, Jesus explained that he was God himself, in human form:

- “Then they asked him, ‘Where is your father?’ ‘You do not know me or my Father,’ Jesus replied. ‘If you knew me, you would know my Father also.’” (John 8:19 NIV)
- “I and the Father are one.” (John 10:30 NIV)
- “‘If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’ Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.’” (John 14:7-10 NRSV)

1:3 We are telling you about what we ourselves have actually seen and heard, so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.^{NLT} The plural pronoun “we,” used throughout the prologue, refers, at times, to John and the other apostles (for whom John was acting as spokesman) and also to John and any other believers who had seen Jesus Christ in bodily form. These people had *actually seen and heard* Jesus Christ; they told about it *so that others may have fellowship with them*. The apostles’ testimony became the gospel, the truth about Jesus Christ. Accepting this truth was the “touchpoint” for believers in Christ. During his earthly ministry, Jesus introduced the Father to the disciples and initiated them into *fellowship*. The Greek word translated “fellowship” is *koinonia*. In the New Testament, this word refers to the life (spiritual and eternal) that all Christians share in a living relationship or partnership. This life became available to believers through Jesus Christ, who came as eternal life in a human body. In his Gospel, John wrote: “And this is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth” (John 17:3 NLT). Jesus was the source and substance of this eternal life. When the disciples were regenerated by the Holy Spirit, they actually entered into fellowship *with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ*. Having been brought into this living union, the apostles became the new initiators—introducing this fellowship to others and encouraging them to enter into fellowship with them. Whoever would enter into the fellowship with the apostles would actually be entering into

their fellowship with the Father and the Son. John knew about fellowship with Jesus. In the last hours before his crucifixion, Jesus asked John, along with Peter and James, to pray with him at Gethsemane. In the supreme crisis of Jesus' life, he asked for fellowship and prayer.



PERSONAL TESTIMONY

John testified to a personal, eyewitness experience with Christ. He did not build this relationship on wishful thinking, mystical mumbo jumbo, or a secondhand report. He and the other disciples had heard Christ speak. They had seen him with their eyes. They had looked at (continuously contemplated) and touched him. To underline the reality of this three-year encounter with the Son of God, John used even more sensory/experiential language in the next couple of verses. His point? Jesus Christ is a fact of history, and the lives of the disciples intersected with him in an objective, undeniable way.

What is your experience? You can know with certainty that Christ lives and that he lives in you. Meet Christ today in a personal and intimate way through the pages of the Gospels.

The first twelve disciples had private, personal fellowship with Jesus Christ. That fellowship did not stop when Jesus died, nor did it end with the Twelve. They shared the message of salvation in Jesus so that others could join this “fellowship” also. This corporate identity and relationship passed on from generation to generation. As believers fellowship with one another today, they participate in the same faith of the apostles and so “share the fellowship” with them and with the Father and the Son.

Four principles undergird true Christian fellowship:

1. Christian fellowship is grounded in the testimony of God's Word. Without this underlying foundation, togetherness would be impossible.
2. Christian fellowship is mutual, depending on the unity of believers.
3. Christian fellowship is renewed daily through the Holy Spirit. True fellowship combines social and spiritual interaction and is made possible only through a living relationship with Christ.
4. Christian fellowship demands adherence to truth. In this case, it required loyalty to Jesus as the truth, rather than to the esoteric knowledge of the heretics.

As an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry, John was qualified to teach the truth about him. The readers of this letter had not seen and heard Jesus themselves, but they could trust that what John wrote was accurate. Believers today are like those second- and

third-generation Christians. Though they have not personally seen, heard, or touched Jesus, they have the New Testament record of his eyewitnesses, and they can trust that these eyewitnesses spoke the truth about him.

1:4 We are writing these things so that our joy will be complete.^{NLT} This is a rendering of a Greek variant reading found in several reliable manuscripts. Other manuscripts read “that your joy may be complete.” The reading “our joy” is preferred. John was most likely thinking of the mutual happiness of all believers. In other words, just as the proclamation of the gospel message was for others to join the fellowship (1:3), so he was *writing these things so that [their] joy would be complete*. John wrote this letter to encourage the readers’ participation in both the fellowship and the joy that he (John) and the other believers were experiencing. Proclamation produces fellowship; fellowship produces joy. John’s joy would be complete if his readers remained in the fellowship and did not wander off into false teaching. John, caretaker of the churches and “spiritual father” to many of the believers in and around Ephesus, would only be able to experience “complete joy” if his “children” were experiencing the blessings of fellowship with one another and with God.



GOOD NEWS IS FOR SHARING

John considered his encounter with Christ to have been a joyful experience—the best thing that ever happened to him. What do we do when good things happen to us? We immediately pick up the phone. Or we run down the street to a friend’s house. Something about good news practically demands that we share it. How much more the wonderful and marvelous truth that God sent Christ into the world to bring lost and empty people back into a rich relationship with himself?

Note in the introductory verses of this epistle the number of times and ways John mentions his passion to communicate the gospel to others. Have you lost the passion to tell the Good News? Identify someone who you feel is ready to hear about Christ. Plan to relate Christ’s love to that person in both word and action.

Jesus spoke about this joy. It is the constantly overflowing life expressed as “life in all its fullness” (John 10:10 NLT). It is the exuberance found in being near a loved one (John 3:29), or the joy of anticipation (John 15:11; see also 20:20). In a parable, Jesus portrayed joy as the gratification of workers who see the harvest. In his final words to the disciples, Jesus described to them the joy that they would experience (*italics ours*):

- “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and *that your joy may be complete.*” (John 15:11 NIV)
- “Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will *rejoice*, and no one will take away your *joy*. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your *joy* will be complete.” (John 16:22-24 NIV)
- “I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the *full measure of my joy* within them.” (John 17:13 NIV)

In Galatians 5:22, joy is a fruit or by-product of the Holy Spirit’s work in believers’ lives. Joy also comes as the result of harmonious relationships among believers (Acts 13:52; Philippians 2:2).

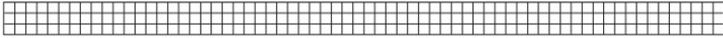
LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF GOD / 1:5–2:11

When Jesus was on earth, his divine life illuminated the inner lives of his followers. Everywhere he was present, he gave light. This light penetrated people—exposing their sin and revealing divine truth. No one could come into contact with Jesus without being enlightened.

So it is for the Christian who is indwelt by the Spirit of Christ. In his presence, we see our sin and his glory. Of course, a person can refuse to receive the light and can remain in darkness (a term John used to characterize the realm of Satan in the world). But whoever comes to Jesus will see his dazzling moral and spiritual excellence and purity.

1:5 This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.^{NKJV} Just as Christ passed on the message he *heard from* the Father, so the apostles in turn were passing on the same message that they heard from the Son. John did not use the term “gospel,” but he did use such words as “witness,” “testimony,” “word,” “truth,” and “message.”

John’s message emphasized that *God is light*. Light enables people to do their work. It produces growth in crops; it reveals beauty and provides safety. Light represents what is good, pure, true, holy, and reliable. Light reveals; light shines. God is so completely “light” that *in Him is no darkness at all*. “Darkness” represents what is sinful and evil. The Greek could be translated literally as “darkness is not in him ever.” God is untainted by any evil or sin. Thus, “God is light” means that God is perfectly holy and true and



LIGHT VS. DARKNESS

In many places in Scripture, the realm of God and the realm of evil are contrasted by the differences between light and darkness:

<i>Darkness</i>	<i>Light</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Despairing condition	Hopeful condition	Isaiah 9:2
Inability to recognize the light	Ability to enlighten the world	John 1:4-5, 9
The power of Satan	The power of God	Acts 26:18
Evil deeds	Good deeds	Romans 13:12-14
Natural heart condition	Gift from God	2 Corinthians 4:6
Fruitless works	Source of all that is good	Ephesians 5:8-11
Spiritual forces of evil	Armor of God	Ephesians 6:12-13
Powerful captivity	Kingdom of the Son, redemption, forgiveness	Colossians 1:12-14
Inability to exist in God's presence	God's presence, fellowship with God	1 John 1:5, 7
Transient nature	Permanent nature	1 John 2:8-11

that he alone can guide people out of the darkness of sin. Genesis 1:3 records God's expression of his nature and will in the statement "Let there be light." Jesus declared himself to be the "light of the world" (John 8:12). In 1 Timothy 6:16, Paul expressed that God "lives in light so brilliant that no human can approach him" (NLT). This light signifies Christ's moral excellence and purity. John was one of only three eyewitnesses to Jesus' transfiguration (see Matthew 17:1-13) where Jesus was described as being "dazzling white." The light reflected God's essence.

Light also relates to truth because light exposes whatever exists, whether it is good or bad. In the dark, good and evil look alike; in the light, they can be clearly distinguished. Just as darkness cannot exist in the presence of light, sin cannot exist in the presence of a holy God. "Darkness" can also picture a certain hiddenness and secrecy. The false teachers claimed to have received special knowledge that God only gives to a certain few. The nature of light, however, is to flood and fill. That God has "no darkness" means that nothing is hiding in shadows or kept in secret.

1:6 So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness. We are not living in the truth.^{NLT} "God is light" and there is no darkness at all in him (1:5). While "light" has many connotations, this reference points

of God's character. To "live in the light" requires constant contact with God and no tolerance for dishonesty, hypocrisy, or sin. Living in the light pictures a life of complete transparency, with no attempts to conceal anything from "the Light." To "walk in the light" (as it is translated in NIV and NKJV) cannot come from imitating other Christians; instead, it comes from continuous effort to take on Christ's qualities. This involves complete transformation from within.



COMING OUT

John wanted his readers to understand how to discern between true and false teachers. Because some had left the congregations to follow false teachers and start their own churches, many of the believers had been left confused. John said, first of all, that they should look at whether a leader's teaching and behavior were consistent with each other and then consider whether the teaching was consistent with the message the apostles had given them. It is a lie to claim to be a Christian but deny its moral foundation by living in sin and immorality. Today many Christians profess Christ but live so enmeshed in the values and attitudes of non-Christians that they are indistinguishable from them. If you love Christ, come out of the dark shadows and back alleys of sin and immorality. Stand in the light with all your imperfections and look to Christ, your perfect Light.

Walking in the light leads to *fellowship with each other*. This fellowship among believers results from each believer's having fellowship with God. By living in the light, John did not intend that all Christians should be hermits or mystics, living in solitary contemplation of God. Instead, their fellowship with Christ should produce the desire to join others in loving devotion. John's overall argument stresses this: True spirituality manifests itself in community fellowship. One cannot say that he or she communes with God and then refuse to commune with God's people. Such was the case with some of the false teachers of John's day, and this situation exists among false cults today. Often their followers and leaders claim to have special relationships with God, but they don't affiliate with other believers. They stay isolated and withdraw from everyone else. John's point is that the natural result of living in the light (in fellowship with God) should be joyful relationships with other Christians.

Another result of walking in the light is that *the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from every sin*. John emphasized that the death of Christ ("the blood of Jesus") saves people, not the false teachers' knowledge. The verb "cleanses" also means "purifies."

Sin is not only forgiven, it is erased. How does Jesus' blood do that? In Old Testament times, believers would symbolically transfer their sins to an animal, which they then would sacrifice (see a description of this ceremony in Leviticus 4). The animal died in their place to pay for their sin and to allow them to continue living in God's favor. God graciously forgave them because of their faith in him and because they obeyed his commandments concerning the sacrifice. Those sacrifices anticipated the day when Christ would completely remove sin. Real cleansing from sin came with Jesus, the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Sin, by its very nature, brings death—that is a fact as certain as the law of gravity. Jesus did not die for his own sins; he had none. Instead, by a transaction that humans may never fully understand, he died for the sins of all who will believe. When people commit their lives to Christ and thus identify themselves with him, his death becomes theirs. He has paid the penalty for their sins, and his blood has cleansed them.



THE FELLOWSHIP FACTOR

John's letter is filled with references to "fellowship." Fellowship means more than a superficial conversation after church or a midweek meal together. The biblical term conveys the idea of a deep sharing of life, partnership together in a common cause, and spiritual oneness. Remember that the intimacy and fulfillment of biblical fellowship (whether with God or with others) first require a relationship. This six-question test will help determine the quality of the fellowship within a relationship:

1. Are there any unresolved tensions or conflicts in the relationship? (If so, these must be addressed.)
2. Are we spending adequate time together? (If not, there can never be intimacy!)
3. Are we communicating openly and honestly? (The sharing of thoughts, concerns, feelings, plans—even motives—is indispensable to true fellowship.)
4. Do we share the same vision? (If we are going in two different directions, it will be impossible to be partners.)
5. Are we committed to this relationship? (If the relationship is not a priority, then fellowship will never be a reality!)
6. Are we laying aside our own agendas and looking out for the best interests of others? (Self-centeredness cannot coexist with fellowship.)

Those who "walk in the light," the true believers, will still find themselves at times in sin. Christians will not be made completely perfect until Jesus returns and brings them into his kingdom. Until then, however, they desire to walk in the light and so

refuse to consciously harbor sin. When they do sin, however, God has already made provision to deal with those sins through the blood of his Son. He died, not just for their past sins, but for all their sins that will be committed until the day of his return. These also are taken care of by his blood. That provision allows God's people to continue to walk in the light—dealing with sin through confession and receiving his forgiveness so that fellowship with God and with others can remain unhindered.

1:8 If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth.^{NLT} John attacked the second claim of the false teachers (see also 1:6 and 1:10): that people could be “without sin.” The false teachers refused to take sin seriously. In saying that they had *no sin*, they may have been saying that they did not need Jesus' death on the cross. They may have considered that Jesus' death abolished all sin, including the ability to sin. Or, they may have been teaching the false notion that the spirit and body are completely separate and that whatever a person does in the body does not affect the spirit.



THE INEVITABILITY OF SIN

This passage touches on one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith: the fact that although Christians are cleansed from sin, they still sin. What facts do we need to remember? First, sin has absolutely no power over Christians (Romans 6:6-7)! Because of our real union with Christ in his death and resurrection, we have a new power to say no to temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13) and yes to righteous living (Romans 6:11-14). Second, our old selfish, sinful nature—coupled with our inability to grasp our new identity as children of a holy God—leaves us vulnerable to temptation. As fallen (yet redeemed) people living in a fallen world, we will always struggle with sin.

In light of these facts, we Christians should admit our weakness to God; we should confess rather than rationalize or deny. Trust him for the power to live as he commands. When you do fail, run *to* him (not *from* him) for he stands ready to forgive, cleanse, and empower us.

John explained that those who believe the possibility of human sinlessness are *fooling* themselves and *refusing to accept the truth*. What “truth” were the false teachers refusing to accept? This reference to “the truth” refers to spiritual reality and veracity that could be verified by the apostles or other believers as being true (in both life and doctrine) to the teachings of Christ. To claim to have the truth and to refuse to accept humanity's inherent sinfulness is foolish. The truth of God's Word does not

change: people are sinful. Though Jesus condemned sin once for all, Christians still sin.

The struggle between the old nature and the new nature will continue until Christ comes to make his people perfect. Paul wrote about this struggle in Romans 7. Anyone who honestly looks at his or her inner life and claims to be sinless is refusing to accept the truth. John wanted his readers to understand that Christians still battle with sin, but God has provided the blood of Jesus to cleanse his people (1:7) and the promise of forgiveness when they do sin (1:9).

1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.^{NKJV} Being

God's people does not mean denying sin (1:8), but confessing it. Because all people are sinners, Jesus had to die. Because sin is not completely eradicated from the lives of those who believe in Jesus, God graciously gave his followers provision for the problem of sin. John explained it here in a nutshell: *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

To "confess our sins" means to agree with God that an act or thought was wrong, to acknowledge this to God, to seek forgiveness, and to make a commitment to not let it happen again. Augustine observed that confession of sin is a sign that truth, which is itself light, has already begun to illuminate people's sin-darkened lives. Refusing to admit sin is self-deception. No one can fool God. By refusing to admit sin, however, people cheat themselves out of the possibility of fellowship with him. So confession of sins is necessary for maintaining continual fellowship with God, which in turn will enable people to have good fellowship with members of the church community. Rather than denying the sin nature, believers are to confess their sins because God says they are sinners who need forgiveness. If this is not so, then his Son's death would be worthless. To confess sins means to agree with God concerning specific acts that have been committed; it means to admit sinfulness.

It is the duty of nations as well as of men to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon.

Abraham Lincoln

Confession is supposed to free people to enjoy fellowship with Christ. It should ease their consciences and lighten their cares. But some Christians do not understand how it works. They feel so guilty that they confess the same sins over and over; then they

wonder if they might have forgotten something. Other Christians believe that God forgives them when they confess, but if they died with unconfessed sins, they would be forever lost.

These Christians do not understand that God *wants* to forgive people. He allowed his beloved Son to die just so he could offer them pardon. When people come to Christ, he forgives all the sins they have committed or will ever commit. They don't need to confess the sins of the past all over again, and they don't need to fear that God will reject them if they don't keep their slate perfectly clean. Of course, believers should continue to confess their sins, but not because failure to do so will make them lose their salvation. Believers' relationship with Christ is secure. Instead, they should confess so that they can enjoy maximum fellowship and joy with him.



WHY CONFESSION?

If Christ already forgave all of our sins when he died on the cross, why does John tell us to “confess our sins” so that God will “forgive us”? At issue here is our fellowship—not relationship—with God. When we repent and believe in Christ, we become God's children forever. He adopts us into his family, and no sin on our part, no matter how awful, will ever cause him to “unadopt” us. However, a disobedient child of God cannot expect to have fellowship with God. This is where confession comes in. We agree with God (the literal meaning of the Greek term *homolegeo*) concerning our sin: that it is wrong, that Christ has paid for it, that it needs to be renounced, and that it has no power over us. As soon as we do this, we are once again able to enjoy an intimate, close walk with God. Confess your sins by saying, “I was wrong, I'm sorry, and I want to change!” To do so will “clear the air” and remove the sense of distance we feel from our holy, heavenly Father because of sinful choices we have made. What sins do you need to confess today?

When believers confess their sins, they do not stand in a place of judgment awaiting their punishment. That punishment has already been paid by Christ. Instead, John explained that God “is faithful and just.”

That God is “faithful” means he is dependable and keeps his promises. God promises forgiveness, even in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 31:34; Micah 7:19-20). God *wants* to forgive his people; he *wants* to maintain close fellowship with them. But this can only happen when the way to him is cleared of sin's debris—and *that* can only happen through confession.

That God is “just” means that he could not overlook people's

sin. He could not decide to let people get away with sin or to make the penalty less severe. “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Sacrifices had been offered for sin, and blood had been spilt from the beginning. This could not change because God does not change. Justice would have to be done in order to decisively deal with sin. But instead of making people pay for their sins, God took the punishment upon himself through his Son. In this way, justice was done, and the way was paved for God “to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” The word translated “forgive” is *aphiemi*, meaning “cancellation of debts” or “dismissal of charges.” The word for “cleanse” is *katharizo*, referring to washing away sin (unrighteousness) and restoring holiness. Those who confess their sins to God can trust in his forgiveness because they can trust in his character.



SELF-DECEPTION AND SIN

Some of the false teachers, trying to lead John’s readers astray, claimed that they had not sinned. They argued that what a person believes is what counts and therefore how he or she behaves is irrelevant. Even as they pursued this “higher, special knowledge of spiritual truth,” many lived in decadence. Nothing has changed down through the centuries. Due to the rising popularity of Eastern, “New Age” philosophies (and their sharp distinctions between the material and spiritual realms), many people continue to live as spiritual schizophrenics. They twist and distort the truth so that they can appear to maintain some semblance of godliness (2 Timothy 3:1-5). Even as they talk convincingly of “seeking God,” they live as they please. Do not be deceived by these alluring forms of creative “spirituality.” They are merely clever attempts to justify and rationalize sin. True faith will always be marked by right moral conduct.

1:10 **If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts.**^{NLT} The false teachers not only denied that sin breaks people’s fellowship with God (1:6) and that they had a sinful nature (1:8), but some even had the audacity to make a third claim—that, even if they did have a sinful nature, they had never actually sinned! They were claiming that they had *not sinned*. That was a lie that ignored one basic truth: all people are sinners by nature and by practice. This verse parallels 1:8, except that here the focus is on the actual acts of sin emanating from the sinful nature. These false teachers thought that their superior knowledge had placed them out of the realm of sin, rendering them incapable of sinning. This claim went beyond telling a lie (1:6) or merely fooling themselves (1:8); this claim was *calling God a liar*. God says that

all have sinned—otherwise he would not have needed to send his Son. To claim sinlessness treats the Cross with contempt and Christ’s suffering as worthless. To do this, said John, shows that God’s *word has no place in our hearts*. “This” refers not to the living *logos* (Jesus) but to the message of the gospel.

John wanted his readers to understand that people who make such a denial of sinful acts do not have the Word of God permeating and changing their lives because the Word of God clearly states throughout that all people sin and all need a Savior (1 Kings 8:46; Psalm 14:3; Isaiah 53:6; 64:6; Romans 3:23; 6:23). People cannot be forgiven if they do not recognize their sin.

[Jesus Christ] could not be our advocate in heaven today if he had not died to be the propitiation for our sins; and his propitiation would not have been effective if in his life and character he had not been Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

John R. W. Stott

2:1 My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin.

But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.^{NIV} After focusing on the false teachers and their lies in chapter 1, here John focused on his readers, the Christians. The address “my dear children” is used in a warm, fatherly way. John was not talking down to his readers but was showing affection for them. At this writing, John was very old. He had spent almost all his life in ministry, and many of his readers were indeed his spiritual children.

The first step for living in the light (1:5, 7) is to confess sin (1:9). The second step is to forsake all sin (2:1). John emphasized human sinfulness in chapter 1 in order to make his readers despise their sin and try to stay free from it. “So that you will not sin” means that you will try to stay free from sin by avoiding it, refusing it, but then also confessing it when it does happen. Christians will sin because they have not yet been made perfect. John fully understood this. He did not want his readers to take the inevitability of sinning as an excuse to sin. The tension between the phrases “so that you will not sin” and “if anybody does sin” forms a balance between a too harsh or too lenient view of sin. “Believers have no business sinning,” says John, “but when they do sin . . . God has provided a way for them to be cleansed.”

Believers should not condone or excuse their sin, but they should go to the Father without fear. “But if” means “but when.” When believers sin and then come to the Father for forgiveness, there is *one who speaks to the Father*. The word *paraclete*

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INDEX

Anointing

Christians receive from God, 50–51, 57
application for today, 51

Antichrist, The, 47–48

Antichrists (see False Teachers)

Assurance

theme of 1 John, 10

Blood, 22–23, 109–111

Cain, 72

application for today, 72

Cerinthus, 5–6, 109

Children of God

believers are, 61–64
will be like Jesus, 62–64
application for today, 63, 64

Christians

must live as God desires, 58–59,
66–70, 79–82, 105–109, 132–133
will overcome the world, 107–109
Chart: Three Tests for Believers,
106
Chart: What God Wants Us to Do for
Others, 91
application for today, 34, 35, 59, 65, 67,
71, 74, 109, 133, 146

Confession

of sin, 25–27
application for today, 26

Confidence, 78–79, 115–116

application for today, 79

Conscience, 78–79

Day of Judgment, 99–100

application for today, 100

Demetrius, 152–153

application for today, 153

Diotrephes, 150–153

Docetism, 5–6

Elder

John called himself, 2, 129, 145

Ephesus

church in, 3–5
setting of 1 John, 3–4

Eternal Life

promised to believers, 55–56, 93,
114–115, 120–121
application for today, 114, 115

Faithfulness

theme of 3 John, 143

False Teachers/Teaching

addressed by 1 John, 5–6
confronted by John, 21, 24, 27, 102–103
do not show hospitality toward, 137–139
theme of 2 John, 126
warnings against, 47–50, 52, 56–57,
83–90, 134–135
Chart: John Counters False Teachings, 21
Chart: Old Testament Tests for False
Prophets, 86
Chart: Signs of the Cults, 84
application for today, 22, 50, 56, 85, 87,
110, 130, 136, 138

Family of God

theme of 1 John, 8–9

Fear

no fear in love, 100–101
application for today, 100, 101

Fellowship

described, 16, 22
four principles of Christian, 17
application for today, 23, 139

First John, Letter of

date, 3–4, 13
message, 6–10
purpose, 5–6
Chart: A Book of Contrasts, 52

Forgiveness

of God, 25–27
application for today, 30

Gaius, 145–146

God

believers are God's children, 61–64
forgives, 25–27
is light, 19–20
is love, 61, 90–96, 101
testifies about Jesus, 111–112
Chart: What God Wants Us to Do for
Others, 91
application for today, 92, 95, 99, 112

Hatred

Cain was example of, 72
from the world, 72–73
means being in darkness, 35–38, 74,
101–103
application for today, 37, 38, 72, 73

Holy Spirit

- given to believers, 50–52, 57, 80–82, 96–97
- testifies to the truth of Christ, 109–111
- Chart: The Indispensable Holy Spirit, 81
- application for today, 51, 58, 97, 98

Hospitality

- Diotrephes refused to give it, 151–152
- important for God's workers, 147–150
- none for false teachers, 137–138
- theme of 3 John, 142
- application for today, 138, 148

Idols, 121

- application for today, 121

Jesus Christ

- advocate, 28–30
- came to destroy Satan, 68–69
- died for sins, 29–30, 65–66, 93–94, 97–98
- eternal nature, 14–16
- gives eternal life, 114–115
- humanity of, 15–16, 109–111
- purity of, 64–65
- relationship with the Father, 15–16, 53–54, 111, 120
- sinlessness of, 65–66
- the Word, 13, 14–15
- Chart: In Jesus Alone, 113
- application for today, 29, 30, 59

John, Apostle

- author of 1, 2, & 3 John, 1–3, 123–124
- disciple of Jesus, 1–2, 13
- relationship with Jesus, 4–5, 14
- application for today, 17

Joy, 18–19

- application for today, 147

koinonia, 16**Letters**

- in ancient times, 13

Light

- God is, 19–20
- living in the, 21–24, 28, 34–38
- Chart: Light vs. Darkness, 20

logos, 14–15**Love**

- command to love, 33–38, 71–77, 79–80, 90–93, 133–134
- how to show God's love, 32–33, 70–71, 75–77, 101–103, 106–108, 134
- meanings of, 61
- nothing to fear, 100–101
- theme of 1 John, 7–8
- theme of 2 John, 126
- Chart: In Truth and Action, 76
- Chart: Love One Another, 36

Chart: What God Wants Us to Do for

- Others, 91
- application for today, 33, 38, 71, 75, 77, 92, 93, 94, 96, 99, 107, 108, 134

Lusts, 44–45

- Chart: Temptations, 46

Missionaries

- application for today, 149

Obedience

- in order to know Jesus, 31–33, 70–71, 80–82
- shows our love for God, 106–108
- application for today, 32, 33, 108

Prayer, 115–117

- application for today, 116

Pride, 45

- of Diotrephes, 150–153
- theme of 3 John, 142
- Chart: Temptations, 46
- application for today, 151

Pure

- Christ is, 64–65

Satan

- sinfulness of, 68–69
- has been conquered, 40–42
- Chart: You Have Conquered the Evil One, 41
- application for today, 69, 119

Second Coming, 48, 58

- application for today, 49

Second John, Letter of

- date, 124
- message, 125–126
- purpose, 125

Sin

- Christians are not to, 66–70, 118–119
- confession of, 25–27
- forgiveness of, 39–40, 77–79
- inevitability of, 24–25, 27–28
- is lawlessness, 65
- Jesus is sinless, 65–67
- that leads to death, 117–118
- theme of 1 John, 7
- application for today, 24, 27, 67, 70, 78, 118

Temptation

- Chart: Temptations, 46

Third John, Letter of

- date, 141
- message, 142–143
- purpose, 142

Trinity, 110–111**Truth / Error**

- Christians know the truth, 52, 89–90, 129–131
- Christians must stay in the truth, 54–55, 137, 147
- theme of 1 John, 9–10
- theme of 2 John, 125

application for today, 53, 102, 131,
147

Witnessing

John's joy in, 18

application for today, 18, 89

Word of Life

Jesus as, 14–15

World

Christians hated by, 72–73, 88–89,
119–120

do not love this evil world, 42–47

Chart: God vs. The Evil World, 43

application for today, 45, 47, 73,
120