

THE EPISTLES OF JOHN

Background

John was a disciple of Jesus who was the brother of another disciple, James. His parents were Zebedee and Salome. He was the author of five NT books. James came from a well-to-do fishing family, with a home in Capernaum (Mk. 1:20, 21; Mt. 4:21-23). John was one of the twelve original disciples selected by Jesus (Lk. 5:10, 11; 6:14). With Peter and James, John was a member of Jesus' inner circle of three which shared several special experiences with Jesus (Mt. 17:1; 26:37; Mk. 5:37; 14:33; Lk. 8:51). In Gal. 2:6-10 he is called a pillar of the Jerusalem church. Most commentators believe that John is the "disciple whom Jesus loved" modestly mentioned in Jn. 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; and 21:7, 20-24.

Insights into John's personality come from three sources: incidents reported in the Gospels, John's later Biblical writings and traditions preserved by the early church. According to tradition, John outlived the other disciples and died near the turn of the century. His Gospel and other books were written near the end of the first century AD. A very early tradition reported by writers who knew people who were taught by John, says that John settled in Ephesus. He was briefly exiled to the Isle of Patmos, where he probably wrote Revelation, but returned to Ephesus and died of old age. Irenaeus reports that, when John became too weak to walk he was carried to church meetings. There he whispered again and again, "Little children, love one another."

Three incidents in the Gospels give a surprising picture of this "apostle of love." Luke 9:49 reports that John wanted to stop a man driving out demons in Jesus' name because "he is not one of us". When Samaritan villagers refused to give shelter to Jesus' disciples, James and John asked Jesus if they should call fire down from heaven to avenge the insult (Lk. 9:51-55). This sort of behaviour earned these brothers the nickname "Sons of Thunder" (Mk. 3:17). Finally, Mt. 20:20-28 suggests that John and James had their mother ask Jesus for places of special authority in Christ's coming Kingdom. In each of these portraits, John seems to be an aggressive, self-centered individual.

In light of this, John's later emphasis on love gains greater significance. The mature John has learned that in Jesus' Church neither pride nor position are important. The mark of Christ's presence in the believer's life is love.

In a beautiful passage in his first letter, John conveys this truth he has learned so well: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God...since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (I John 4:7, 11).

Introduction

The Epistles of John are three concise, warmly pastoral letters by the apostle John written, probably late in the first century AD, to encourage and guide churches. Each letter calls on Christians to lives of love and obedience, and two warn against false teachers—"antichrists."

By the end of the first century, Christian congregations were established in cities throughout the Roman Empire. Congregations were linked by the circulated letters of the apostles and by itinerant teachers. Unfortunately, some traveling teachers promoted heresy. This serious problem is reflected in the later NT letters of 2 Timothy, Jude and the letters of John. Some believe John is concerned with the inroads of a specific heresy, Gnosticism. This dualistic philosophy dismissed the notion of sin and denied the deity of Jesus Christ.

The Epistles of John: Reading and Study Guide

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Content Summary</u>	<u>Related Articles</u>
<u>1 John</u>		
1	John is eager for his readers to experience fellowship with God. This requires Christians to walk in the light and to confess sins to God, claiming Christ's forgiveness.	Fellowship Light Confess
2	Obedience and love for the brothers are evidence that a person has come to know God. Antichrists who deny Jesus will try to lead believers astray.	Obey Love Antichrist
3	True believers will not keep on sinning because they have been born of God. Love for others gives us confidence in our relationship with God, but love must be practical.	Sin Born again Give
4	Those who deny Jesus Christ has come in the flesh are not from God. We love because God loved us first.	Incarnation Atonement
5	Those who believe Jesus is the Christ are born of God and have eternal life. Believers are to restore those who sin.	Believe; Faith Testimony; Death
<u>2 John</u>		
1	The "elect lady" is to love and follow the truth and be on guard against deceivers.	Truth
<u>3 John</u>		
1	Gaius should follow the truth and continue to show hospitality to itinerant teachers, but be on guard. <small>(above material taken from The Revell Bible Dictionary)</small>	Hospitality

1 John

Some expositors consider the epistles of John to be the final books written in the Bible. Certainly John's epistles are the last which he wrote.

The three epistles are called letters; yet the first epistle is not in the form or style of a letter. It has no salutation at its beginning or greeting at its conclusion. Its style is more that of a sermon. It bears all the marks of a message from a devoted pastor who had a love and concern for a definite group of believers.

John served as pastor of the church in Ephesus, which was founded by Paul. It has been the belief of the church down through the years that John wrote his gospel first, his epistles second, and finally the Revelation just before his death. However, in recent years some of us have come to the position that John wrote his epistles last. Therefore, he wrote his first epistle after his imprisonment on the island of Patmos. This places the date about AD 100. John died in Ephesus and was buried there. The Basilica of St. John was build over the grave of John by Justinian in the fifth century.

To understand the First Epistle of John we must know something about the city of Ephesus at the beginning of the second century. It was very much like your city or hometown today. There were four important factors which prevailed in Ephesus and throughout the Roman world.

1. There was an easy familiarity with Christianity. Many of the believers were children and grandchildren of the first Christians. The new and bright sheen of the Christian faith had become tarnished. The newness had worn off. The thrill and glory of the first days had faded. My, how exciting it had been to be a believer on that day when Paul had come to the town and challenged Diana of the Ephesians! The whole town had been in an uproar. In Acts 19 we read of the effect Paul's teaching had upon the synagogue at Ephesus and also the impact of his daily sessions in the school of Tyrannus for two years. How fervent their love and zeal for Christ had been in those days. But many years later, when the Lord Jesus sent a letter to the Ephesian believers through John while he was in exile on the Island of Patmos, He said, "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love" (Rev. 2:4). It was as Jesus had long before warned, "...because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold" (Mt. 2:12). The Ephesians' devotion and dedication was at a low ebb.

2. The high standards of Christianity made the Christians different, and the children and grandchildren of the first Christians did not want to be different. The believers were called saints—from the Greek word *hagios*. Now the Christians were to be *hagios*—different, set aside for the use of God.

But the Ephesians had become assembly-line Christians, programmed by the computer of compromise. They had become plastic Christians. They were cast in a different mold from the disciples to whom Jesus had said, "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own; but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you" (Jn. 15:19). And also in His high priestly prayer to His Father are these words: "I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (Jn. 17:14). There was a breakdown of the Judeo-Christian ethics and a disregard of Bible standards.

3. Persecution was not the enemy of Christianity. The danger to the Ephesian church was not persecution from the outside but seduction from the inside. The Lord Jesus Himself warned of this: "for there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect" (Mt. 24:24). And the apostle Paul had said to the Ephesian elders: "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30).

Christianity was not in danger of being destroyed; it was in danger of being changed. The attempt was being made to *improve* it, give it intellectual respectability, and let it speak in the terms of the popular philosophy.

4. Gnosticism was the real enemy of Christianity, and my friends, it still is. Gnosticism was the basic philosophy of the Roman Empire.

Gnosticism took many forms. However, one primary principle ran through this philosophy: matter or material was essentially evil; only the spirit was good. All the material world was considered evil. Therefore Gnosticism despised the body. They held that in the body was a spirit, like a seed in the dirty soil. The same principle is in modern liberalism which maintains that there is a spark of good in everyone and that each person is to develop that spark of good. The Gnostics sought to cause the "seed," the spirit within them, to grow and tried to get rid of the evil in the body.

There were two extreme methods of accomplishing this goal as practiced by the Stoics and the Epicureans. The apostle Paul's encounter with these two sects is recorded in Acts 17:18: "then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and some the Stoics, encountered him. And some said, What will this

babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus and the resurrection.”

The Stoics were disciples of Zeno, and their name came from the Painted Portico at Athens where Zeno lectured. They were pantheists who held that the wise man should be free from passion, unmoved by joy or grief, and submissive to natural law. They observed rigid rules and self-discipline.

The Epicureans took their name from Epicurus who taught in Athens. They accepted the Greek gods on Mount Olympus. They considered pleasure rather than truth the pursuit of life. Originally they sought to satisfy intellectual, not sensual, gratification; but later they taught their followers to satisfy the body's desires so it wouldn't bother them any more.

There were all shades and differences between the two extremes of Stoicism and Epicureanism, but all of them denied the messiahship of Jesus. I believe John had them in mind when he wrote: “who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son” (1 Jn. 2:22). They denied the Incarnation, reasoning that God could not have taken a human body because all flesh is evil. Therefore John distinctly declared, “And the Word was made [born] flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). And in his epistle he wrote “Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of god: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world” (1 Jn. 4:2-3).

Docetic Gnosticism, considering the Incarnation impossible since God could not unite himself with anything evil such as body, taught that Jesus only *seemed* to have a body, but actually He did not. For example, when He walked He left no footprints.

Cerinthus was more subtle in his teaching. He declared that there was both a human Jesus and a divine Christ, that divinity came upon Him at His baptism and left Him at the cross. In fact, the Gospel of Peter, which is a spurious book, translates the words of Jesus on the cross like this: “My power, my power, why hast thou forsaken me?”

The early church fathers fought this heresy and maintained that “He became what we are to make us what He is.” It is my firm opinion that John wrote his first epistle to answer the errors of Gnosticism. Actually there is a fivefold purpose expressed in 1 John: (1) 1:3, “that ye also may have fellowship with us [other believers]: and ... with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ;” (2) 1:4, “That your joy may be full;” (3) 2:1, “That ye sin not;” (4) 5:13, “That ye may know that ye have eternal life;” and (5) 5:13, “That ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.”

First John has been called the *sanctum sanctorum* of the New Testament. It takes the child of God across the threshold into the fellowship of the Father's home. It is the *family* epistle. Paul's epistles and all the other epistles are church epistles, but this is a family epistle and should be treated that way. The church is a body of believers in the position where we are blessed “...with all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ” (Eph. 1:3, Translation mine). We are given that position when we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Believing on the Lord Jesus brings us into the family of God. In the family we have a relationship which can be broken but is restored when “we confess our sins.” Then “he is faithful and just to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9).

2 & 3 John

A man whom I knew years ago in the South had the best way to divide the three epistles of John that I have ever heard. He called them “one-eyed John,” “two-eyed John,” and “three-eyed John.” I do not think you will forget the three epistles of John if you remember them like this. That man, by the way, was one of the three conservative ministers in the community in which I served in Nashville, Tennessee, at

that time. He was a real brother in Christ. Any Christian, regardless of his race, nationality, or station in life, if he is right on the inside, if he has been born again, is my brother. That is the great truth taught in 1 John which will be continued in 2 and 3 John with a different emphasis.

Your first impression, I am sure is the brevity of these two last epistles. It is something that is almost startling. You might wonder why just thirteen verses in the second epistle and fourteen verses in the third epistle should be included in the Scriptures. Both of the epistles are very brief indeed. Someone will say, 'Doesn't their brevity discount their message? Obviously, John didn't have too much to say.' Not at all. Their brevity does not in any way take away from the importance of these epistles. In fact, it actually enhances them. Although they are very brief, these epistles are very important, and they are essential for getting a proper perspective of the first epistle and avoiding a perverted viewpoint. Let me illustrate it like this. My doctor at one time gave me two kinds of medication that I was to take whenever I suffered certain symptoms. One was a pill so small that I had trouble locating it in the bottle. The other was a capsule which looked like it was too big to swallow. I needed almost a gallon of water to get it down—I had to float it first! But I discovered in using both of them that the smaller one, the teeny-weeny one, was the more potent of the two. In fact, I found out it was the more important one: if the big one didn't work, then I used the little one. So it is with 2 and 3 John. Their brevity does not make them less potent.

(above material taken from Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee)

The Message

Assurance—and tests for false teaching

We have:

1. The true and original gospel
 - God's Son really came. 4:2, 15; 5:1, 6-10
 - Those who saw and heard. 1:1-4; 4:6
 - Deny one, deny both. 2:22-24; 5:10-12; 2 John 9
2. God's promise of forgiveness
 - This is quite clear. 1:9; 2:12
 - Because Jesus died. 2:1,2; 4:10
 - In spite of our feelings. 3:19-22
3. A new way of living
 - Power to break with sin. 3:4-10; 5:4
 - And to overcome Satan. 2:13, 14; 3:8, 9; 4:4
 - Doing what God wants. 2:17, 29; 3:3
 - You can't have it both ways. 1:6, 7; 2:3-6
4. The Holy Spirit indwelling
 - God-given understanding. 2:20, 27
 - Real assurance. 3:24; 4:13; 5:7-10
5. New love for one another
 - Real Christians love others. 3:14, 23, 24; 4:7, 12, 16, 21; 5:1-3
 - Loving is self-giving. 3:16; 4:9-11
 - When we don't. 2:9-11; 3:14, 15, 17; 4:8, 20
 - Get on with in. 3:11, see 2 John 5, 6

(above material taken from Opening Up God's Word by John Balchin)