

## THE LETTERS OF JOHN

Although no author is mentioned in the three letters, style of writing and vocabulary shows that they were all written by the same person. They are attributed to the apostle John, son of Zebedee, brother of James, author of the Gospel, and writer of Revelation (the style and imagery is similar to the Gospel of John and Revelation). 1st, 2nd and 3rd John were probably written after 85AD, perhaps around 90AD, just before the persecution by Domitian, which saw John banished from Ephesus to the island of Patmos. It is likely, then that the letters were written to Christians living in the area of Ephesus and later circulated to a wider readership.

The purpose seems primarily to be combating Gnosticism (from *Gnosis* meaning *knowledge*), a set of philosophies pervading the early church. Gnosticism covered a range of ideas but the main beliefs were as follows...

1. A denial that Jesus was God in human flesh. They believed that if Jesus was really God, he could not have had a truly human body (since the body is made of matter and therefore evil). This view was called Docetism (Gk *dokeo*—*to seem*).  
A variation was that the Divine Nature (Logos) came upon Jesus at his baptism and left just before his crucifixion, so that only a human Jesus died on the cross (Cerinthianism—after its main proponent Cerinthus).
2. Christians have souls which are saved, but living in a sinful human body. The two were so far removed from each other (a form of dualism) that sins committed in the body could not touch the soul. Thus the Gnostic was free to do whatever he or she wanted to.  
A contrary variation on this was that the body should therefore be treated harshly and subjugated (a Gnostic form of Ascetism)
3. Only those who had been initiated into Gnosticism's secrets had the true light of salvation.

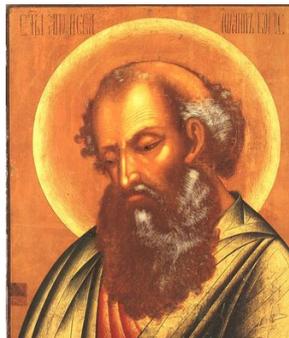
What John was combating were the early forms of Gnosticism. The heresy became more developed as a systematic belief in the second and third centuries.

Evidence of further refuting of the beliefs also occurs in other New Testament letters (1 Corinthians for example).

John wished to give his readers assurance of salvation (without Gnosticism's special knowledge) and to warn against false teachers.

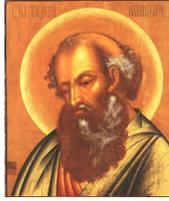
Where spaces and lines are provided at the top of paragraphs in the NRSV text, write in your own summary heading to help you to remember the main themes.

Take especial note of words in bold type, to discuss their meaning.



# 1 John

## Chapter 1



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<sup>1</sup>We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—<sup>2</sup>this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—<sup>3</sup>we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

In verses 1-3 what Gnostic belief is John apparently combating? What are his qualifications for making his assertions?

Apart from correcting heresy, what other purpose does John have?

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<sup>5</sup>This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup>If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; <sup>7</sup>but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. <sup>8</sup>If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup>If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup>If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

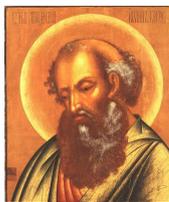
How might verses 5-10 correct Gnostic heresy?

What does the passage reveal about God?

Do you see any evidence of this type of Gnostic thinking in the world today?

# 1 John

## Chapter 2



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<sup>1</sup>My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; <sup>2</sup>and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Rather than deny that sin exists, or subjugating the body, how is sin dealt with?

<sup>3</sup>Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. <sup>4</sup>Whoever says, "I have come to know him," but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; <sup>5</sup>but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God **has reached perfection\***. By this we may be sure that we are in him: <sup>6</sup>whoever says, "I abide in him," ought to walk just as he walked.

[\* God's love is truly made complete in him — NIV]

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<sup>7</sup>Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. <sup>8</sup>Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because **the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining**. <sup>9</sup>Whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. <sup>10</sup>Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. <sup>11</sup>But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.

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<sup>12</sup> I am writing to you, **little children**, because your sins are forgiven on account of his name.

<sup>13</sup> I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young people, because you have conquered the evil one.

<sup>14</sup> I write to you, children, because you know the Father.

I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young people, because you are strong and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

If knowledge of God does not come through a special "gnosis" how does it come about? How may we identify those who know God?

In what way is the true light shining and the darkness passing away?

What is the evidence of someone walking in the light?

"Little children" could refer to all those he writes to, or perhaps those young in the faith. "Young people" and "fathers" may also apply to different levels of faith. Why might these people need these assurances?

<sup>15</sup>Do not love the world or the things in the world. ~~The love of the Father is not in those who love~~ the world; <sup>16</sup>for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. <sup>17</sup>And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.

What sort of things comprise a love of the world and why does John warn against them?

<sup>18</sup>Children, it is **the last hour!** As you have heard ~~that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists~~ have come. From this we know that it is **the last hour.** <sup>19</sup>They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us. <sup>20</sup>But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge. <sup>21</sup>I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth. <sup>22</sup>Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. <sup>23</sup>No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also. <sup>24</sup>Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. <sup>25</sup>And this is what he has promised us, eternal life.

John saw that Christians live in the last days or hour (an indefinite period). Why do you think he uses these words?

John's readers apparently expected a significant enemy to come to power before Christ's return (see 4:3 and cf 2 Thessalonians 2:3 and Revelation 13). In the meantime there are obviously a number of significant opponents to the faith. What are their characteristics?

How can Christians safeguard against antichrists and deceivers?

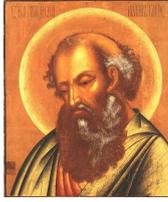
<sup>26</sup>I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. <sup>27</sup>As for you, **the anointing that you received from him** abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.

<sup>28</sup>And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.

Can you identify "antichrists" from history?

# 1 John

## Chapter 3



~~2:29~~ If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him. <sup>3:1</sup> See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. <sup>2</sup> Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. <sup>3</sup> And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

What is the encouragement here for Christians?

~~4~~ Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. <sup>5</sup> You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. **<sup>6</sup> No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.** <sup>7</sup> Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. <sup>8</sup> Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. <sup>9</sup> Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God. <sup>10</sup> The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.

John uses the word "sin" to characterise a way of life rather than the individual sins that we commit. How might this have applied as a warning to Gnostics, and how might it apply today?

What is the major characteristic identifying those who are of God?

~~11~~ For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. <sup>12</sup> We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. <sup>13</sup> Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. <sup>14</sup> We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. <sup>15</sup> All who hate a brother or sister are

Why does the world hate righteousness?

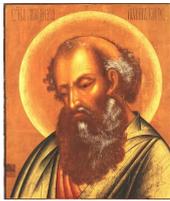
murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. <sup>16</sup>We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. <sup>17</sup>How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

<sup>18</sup>Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. <sup>19</sup>And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him <sup>20</sup>whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. <sup>21</sup>Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; <sup>22</sup>and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

<sup>23</sup>And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. <sup>24</sup>All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

# 1 John

## Chapter 4



<sup>1</sup>Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. <sup>2</sup>By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, <sup>3</sup>and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. <sup>4</sup>Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. <sup>5</sup>They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. <sup>6</sup>We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

<sup>7</sup>Beloved, let us love one another, because

Why do you think that hatred is equated with murder?

How is Jesus’ love expressed, and how may we express it to others?

How can we know we are right with God and what is the result of that assurance?

People may be moved to speak and teach by the Holy Spirit or by other spirits. What is the test of sound doctrine and teaching (vv1-15)?

love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup>God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

<sup>13</sup>By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. <sup>14</sup>And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. <sup>15</sup>God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. <sup>16</sup>So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

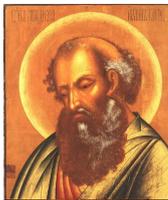
God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. <sup>17</sup>Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. <sup>18</sup>There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. <sup>19</sup>We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup>Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. <sup>21</sup>The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

What are some results of love and abiding in God?

Is all fear to do with punishment?

# 1 John

## Chapter 5



<sup>1</sup>Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. <sup>2</sup>By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. <sup>3</sup>For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, <sup>4</sup>for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. <sup>5</sup>Who is it that conquers the

Why does it make sense to love other Christians?

world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

What overcomes the world, and how?

**6This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood.** And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. <sup>7</sup>There are three that testify: <sup>8</sup>the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. <sup>9</sup>If we receive **human testimony**, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. <sup>10</sup>Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. <sup>11</sup>And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. <sup>12</sup>Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

“Water” refers to Jesus’ baptism, “blood” to his death. Which Gnostic teaching is John responding to?

What is the testimony of the “water”, “blood” and “Spirit”? To what do they testify?

**13I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.**

<sup>14</sup>And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. <sup>15</sup>And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him. <sup>16</sup>If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one—to those whose sin is not mortal. **There is sin that is mortal;** I do not say that you should pray about that. <sup>17</sup>All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal.

What are the conditions for effective asking of God?

What do you think that the mortal sin (ie that leads to death) is in the context of this letter?

<sup>18</sup>We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but **the one who was born of God** protects them, and the evil one does not touch them. <sup>19</sup>We know that we are God’s children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one. <sup>20</sup>And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

<sup>21</sup>Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

# 2 John

~~<sup>1</sup>The elder to the elect lady and her children~~, whom I love in the truth, and not only I but also all who know the truth, <sup>2</sup>because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever:

<sup>3</sup>**Grace, mercy, and peace** will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, in truth and love.

~~<sup>4</sup>I was overjoyed to find some of your children~~ walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father. <sup>5</sup>But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning, let us love one another. <sup>6</sup>And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning—you must walk in it.

~~<sup>7</sup>Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist! <sup>8</sup>Be on your guard, so that you do not lose what we have worked for, but may receive a full reward. <sup>9</sup>Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. <sup>10</sup>Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching; <sup>11</sup>for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person.~~

~~<sup>12</sup>Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink; instead I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.~~

<sup>13</sup>The children of your **elect sister** send you their greetings.

John's warning is not to be inhospitable to non-Christians, but to those who distort the truth. Can you see any parallels these days?

# 3 John



<sup>1</sup>The elder to the beloved Gaius,

whom I love in truth.

~~<sup>2</sup>Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you~~ and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul. <sup>3</sup>I was overjoyed when some of the friends arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely how you walk in the truth. <sup>4</sup>I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

<sup>5</sup>Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you; <sup>6</sup>they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; <sup>7</sup>for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. <sup>8</sup>Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth.

What do we learn about the support of Christian workers?

~~<sup>9</sup>I have written something to the church; but Di-~~otrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. <sup>10</sup>So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing in spreading false charges against us. And not content with those charges, he refuses to welcome the friends, and even prevents those who want to do so and expels them from the church.

How would John deal with those spreading false charges?

<sup>11</sup>Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. <sup>12</sup>Everyone has testified favourably about Demetrius, and so has the truth itself. We also testify for him, and you know that our testimony is true.

What have been the recurring points that John has made in his three letters? What have you learned from them?

~~<sup>13</sup>I have much to write to you, but I would rather~~ not write with pen and ink; <sup>14</sup>instead I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face.

<sup>15</sup>Peace to you. The friends send you their greetings. Greet the friends there, each by name.