

The First Epistle of John

Introduction

First John has been called 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). 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 us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

There is a strong connection between belief and life. The Gospel of John was designed to produce faith so that we might have life (Jn 20:30-31). However, it is The First Epistle of John which describes the nature of that life in greater detail (e.g., 1Jn 3:14).

Author

The epistle does not identify the author, but the strong, consistent and earliest testimony of the church ascribes it to John, the beloved disciple of Jesus (Jn 13:23; 19:26-27; 20:2; 21:7,20). Similarities in style, vocabulary, and themes in both this epistle and the Gospel of John certainly offer internal evidence for this conclusion.

There is also external evidence that John is the author.

Polycarp, a close associate of John, appears to make reference to this epistle in a letter to the Philippians at the beginning of the second century.

Irenaeus, a student of Polycarp, quoted from the epistle and attributed it to John.

Recipients

No one is specifically mentioned by name. John may have been in Ephesus at the time, and some think this was a general epistle to Christians throughout Asia Minor (modern day Turkey).

Date

Trying to date the writing of 1 John can be difficult. Much of the scholarship and study concerning the date can place the writing before AD 100 with certainty.

Purpose

In his epistle John frequently states why he was writing:

- “these things we write to you that your joy may be full” - 1Jn 1:4
- “these things I write to you, that you may not sin” - 1Jn 2:1
- “these things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you”- 1Jn 2:26
- “these things I have written to you...that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God ” - 1Jn 5:13

While these reasons may state the positive purpose for John's letter, it appears he was also responding to errors prevalent at the time (“these things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you” - 1Jn 2:26).

If not fully developed in John’s day, there was at least a precursor to Gnosticism.

Those who later came to be called Gnostics claimed to have a superior knowledge (the Greek word for knowledge is gnosis). A fundamental presupposition was that all matter was evil. Therefore they believed that God did not create or have anything to do with the material universe (rather, it was created by a demi-god). Also, that Christ could not have come in the flesh (cf. 1Jn 4:1-3).

One branch of Gnosticism, Docetism (dokein, “to seem”), taught that Jesus only seemed to be physical (contrast that with John’s statement in 1Jn 1:1).

Cerinthus, a contemporary of John, taught that “Jesus” was physical, but that the "Christ" came upon Him at his baptism, and then left before His death, so that the "Christ-spirit" never suffered (cf. 1Jn 5:6).

The Gnostics’ application to everyday living took two different directions. Since all matter was considered evil, some taught one should abstain altogether from anything that would satisfy the flesh. Others claimed it did not matter what one did in the flesh (it was evil anyway), and to have “full knowledge” it was proper to explore everything.

John’s purpose therefore appears to be two-fold:

- Assure Christians that they have eternal life (1Jn 5:13)
- Counter those who denied that Jesus had come in the flesh (1Jn 4:1-6)

Theme

Believers are to have faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made flesh, and are to live a life of love and discipleship in the unity of the Spirit.

OUTLINE

From the **Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary...**

Prologue: The Word of Life (1:1-4)

1. God Is Light (1:5-3:10)

- a. Walk in the Light (1:5-2:2)
 - 1) God is Light (1:5-7)
 - 2) Resist sin (1:8-2:2)
- b. Obey the command to love (2:3-11)
 - 1) Know God and keep His commands (2:3-6)
 - 2) Learn the new command and love others (2:7-11)
- c. Know your spiritual status (2:12-14)
- d. Be warned of enemies of the faith (2:15-27)
 - 1) Beware of the world (2:15-17)
 - 2) Beware of the antichrists (2:18-27)
- e. Live like children of God (2:28-3:10)
 - 1) Be confident and ready for His coming (2:28-3:3)
 - 2) Be righteous and do not sin (3:4-10)

2. God Is Love (3:11-5:12)

- a. Love one another: part one (3:11-24)
 - 1) Love in action (3:11-18)
 - 2) Live in confidence (3:19-24)
- b. Test the spirits (4:1-6)
- c. Love one another: part two (4:7-21)
 - 1) Love others because God loves you (4:7-10)
 - 2) Love others because God lives in you (4:11-21)
- d. Obey God and experience the victory of faith (5:1-5)
- e. Believe in the Son and enjoy eternal life (5:6-12)

Conclusion: Confidence and Characteristics of the Child of God (5:13-21)

- a. Know you have eternal life (5:13)
- b. Be confident in prayer (5:14-17)
- c. Do not continue in sin (5:18-20)
- d. Keep yourself from idols (5:21)

RESOURCES - Used in the writing of the introduction:

J Vernon McGee - *Thru The Bible* 1 John Study Guide.

Mark Copeland – *I John Study Guide*.

CHAPTER 1, The First Epistle of John

John begins his first epistle like he does his gospel: with a prologue regarding the Word of Life (Jesus Christ) who dwelt in the flesh among men and made fellowship with the Father possible (v1-4). Fellowship with God is maintained as we walk in the light and confess our sins that we might enjoy continual cleansing through the blood of Jesus (v5-10).

THINGS TO CONSIDER IN THIS CHAPTER

- * The witness of John concerning the Word of Life
- * The nature of the evidence for faith in Jesus
- * The basis of our fellowship with God

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) What are the main points of this chapter?**

- 2) How is John's beginning in this epistle similar to his gospel? (v1-4, cf. Jn 1:1-14)**

- 3) How does John describe the pre-incarnation of Jesus? (v1)**

- 4) What empirical evidence does John provide concerning the Word? (v1)**

- 5) What does John declare? What does he want to share? Why does he write? (v2-4)**

- 6) What message has John heard that he now declares to us? (v5)**

7) If we say we have fellowship with God but walk in darkness, what are we? (v6)

8) What do we enjoy as we walk in the light together with God? (v7)

9) What if we say that we have no sin? (v8,10)

10) What's required to be forgiven of sin and cleansed of all unrighteousness? (v9)

CHAPTER 2, The First Epistle of John

We have an Advocate who is also the propitiation for our sins and to truly know Him we must keep His commandments (**v1-6**), especially to love one another (**v7-11**). Describing his original readers' spiritual state (**v12-14**), John cautions against loving the world and being deceived by antichrists (**v15-23**), by letting truth abide in them and they in Christ (**v24-29**).

THINGS TO CONSIDER IN THIS CHAPTER

- * The true test of knowing Jesus as our Advocate and our propitiation
- * Things in the world we cannot not love
- * The identity of antichrists in the writings of John

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) What are the main points of this chapter?**

- 2) How can Jesus be of aid to us when we have sinned? (v1-2)**

- 3) What are two proofs that we know Jesus and that we abide in Him? (v3-6)**

- 4) What commandment is both "old" and "new"? (v7-11)**

- 5) List three groups of people and how John describes their spiritual state. (v12-14)**

6) What three things in the world should we not love? (v15-17)

7) What does John reveal about antichrist? (v18-23)

8) How can we be sure that we will abide in the Son and in the Father? (v24-29)

CHAPTER 3, The First Epistle of John

John describes God's wonderful love for us, how hope as His children should motivate us to pure lives. Righteous living should be expected when we know what sin is, that Christ came to destroy it, and that one truly born of God will not persist in sin (**v1-9**). True righteousness includes loving one another, even as Christ loved us, which in turn gives us confidence and assurance that we are abiding in Him and are of the truth (**v10-24**).

THINGS TO CONSIDER IN THIS CHAPTER

- * God's love for us, and our love for one another
- * The definition of sin, and the meaning of "does not sin" (**v6,9**)
- * The outworking of love, and the assurance it gives of our salvation

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) What are the main points of this chapter?**

- 2) What should motivate us to live pure lives? (v2-3)**

- 3) How is sin defined by John? (v4)**

- 4) What is true of one who abides in Jesus? Who has been born of God? (v6, 9)**

- 5) What distinguishes children of God from children of the devil? (v10)**

- 6) What serves as evidence that we have passed from death to life? (v14)**

7) How do we know what true love is? How then should we love? (v16-18)

8) What gives us assurance and confidence that we are of the truth? (v19-23)

9) How can we know that He abides in us and we in Him? (v24)

CHAPTER 4, The First Epistle of John

John cautions his readers not to believe everyone who claims to be led by the Spirit, but to test them (**v1-6**). He then exhorts them to manifest brotherly love in keeping with the character and example of God's love as demonstrated in the sacrifice of His Son (**v7-21**).

THINGS TO CONSIDER IN THIS CHAPTER

- * Distinguishing the spirit of truth from the spirit of error
- * How God's love should impact our love for one another

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) What are the main points of this chapter?**

- 2) Why should one not believe every spirit? (v1)**

- 3) If one is truly led by the Spirit of God, what will they confess? (v2)**

- 4) What did John say about the coming of Antichrist? (v3)**

- 5) What did John write about their ability to overcome? (v4)**

- 6) How does one discern between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error? (v6)**

- 7) Why should we love one another? (v7-8)**

8) How was God's love for us manifested? (v9-10)

9) How can we ensure that God will abide in us? (v12-16)

10) When we love one another as we should, what does it give us? (v17-18)

11) If we claim to love God, but hate our brother, what does that make us and why? (v20)

CHAPTER 5, The First Epistle of John

John writes of faith in Christ, loving God, and overcoming the world (**v1-5**). He then reviews God's witness that gives us certainty regarding eternal life in Christ (**v6-13**), and concludes with teaching on prayer (**v14-17**) and the sure knowledge found in the Son of God (**v18-21**).

THINGS TO CONSIDER IN THIS CHAPTER

- * The importance of faith, love, and obedience
- * The nature of eternal life as a present possession
- * Sin which does not lead to death versus sin which does lead to death

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) What are the main points of this chapter?**

- 2) To be born of God, what is absolutely necessary? (v1)**

- 3) How can we be sure that we love the children of God? (v2)**

- 4) How can one overcome the world? (v4-5)**

- 5) What three things bore witness concerning Jesus Christ? (v6-8)**

- 6) What are the consequences of not believing the testimony of God about His Son? (v9-10)**

7) What has God give us? Who has this? (v11-12)

8) Why did John write these things in his epistle? (v13)

9) What confidence do we have in prayer? (v14-15)

10) What is described as the true God and eternal life? (v20)