

## EPISTLES OF JOHN (1, 2, and 3 John)

From Nelson's Bible Dictionary

Three epistles—one longer (1 John) and two shorter (2 and 3 John)—written by the author of the Gospel of John. These epistles read like a love letter from an elderly saint who writes from long years of experience with Christ and His message. Although unnamed, the author addresses his readers intimately as "little children" (1 John 2:1,18,28; 3:7,18; 4:4; 5:21) and "beloved" (1 John 3:2,21; 4:1,7,11). His tone changes, however, when he bears down on his opponents for making light of the bodily existence of Jesus (1 John 2:18-23; 4:1-3,20).

For outlines of the epistles see 1 John, 2 John, 3 John

**Structure of the Epistles:** None of the three epistles yields naturally to a structural outline. First John begins with an uncompromising testimony to the bodily existence of Jesus (1:1-4). Since God is light, fellowship with God must result in confession of our sin before Christ, our forgiveness, and our "walking in the light" (1:5-2:2). To know Christ is to keep His commandments, or "to walk just as He walked" (2:6). One cannot be in the light and hate his brother or love the world (2:7-17).

The presence of antichrists, who deny that Jesus is the Christ, is a sign of the end times. But true believers rest secure in the "anointing" of the Holy Spirit which they have from Christ (2:18-27). Since God is righteous, believers are to be righteous in their lives. When the Lord returns, His children will be like Him (2:28-3:3). Whoever abides in Christ does not continue to sin habitually or constantly (3:4-10).

Christian love is not something merely to talk about, but to do (3:11-18). Active love gives us confidence before God (3:19-24). A person must examine various spiritual manifestations to determine if they are of God; only teachers who confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh are of God (4:1-6). In His love God sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for sin. As a consequence we are to love one another (4:7-21).

Faith is victory over the world (5:1-5), and there is a threefold witness to faith: the Holy Spirit, the water (baptism), and the blood (Holy Communion) (5:6-12). Christians may be assured that God hears and grants their requests (5:13-15). The letter concludes with assurance that the Son of God is sufficient to save (5:18-21).

Second John identifies its author as "the elder" and those to whom the letter is written as "the elect lady and her children" (v. 2 John). The "lady" and "children" are personified ways of referring to the church and its believers. Like 3 John, the letter has the character of a note from the elder, reminding his "children" to walk in truth and love (vv. 1:4-6). The elder also draws attention to false teachers who deny the bodily existence of Jesus Christ, and he warns against receiving them (vv. 1:7-11). He hopes to visit the church soon (vv. 1:12-13).

Third John, also from "the elder," is addressed to Gaius (v. 3 John), who has demonstrated his loyalty by offering hospitality to traveling missionaries (vv. 1:2-8). A certain Diotrephes had previously ignored a letter from the elder, and he receives some stiff criticism for doing so (vv. 1:9-11). In contrast to Diotrephes, a certain Demetrius is highly commended (v. 1:12). The elder expresses his hope to visit the church soon (vv. 1:13-15).

**Authorship and Date:** Although these three epistles were written by an anonymous author, he wrote affectionately to his readers as "little children" and referred to himself as "the elder" (2 John; 3 John 1). He must have been well-known and well-loved by those to whom he wrote.

Eusebius, an early church leader, mentions a John the elder (presbyter) who was a disciple and companion of John the apostle in Ephesus. Although we cannot say for sure, it may be that John the elder is the same "elder" mentioned in 2 and 3 John. If so, then he wrote the Gospel of John as well as these three letters; the style and content in each are very similar.

The inclusion of personal testimony (1 John 1:1-4) indicates that John the elder depended directly on the testimony of the apostle John in writing these documents. The epistles were probably written from Ephesus toward the close of the first century A.D.

**Historical Setting:** First John has none of the usual features of an epistle: no salutation or identification of author; no greetings; and no references to persons, places, or events. Ironically,

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although its format is impersonal, like a sermon or treatise, its tone is warm and personal. This suggests that it was written to a broad audience (probably in and around Ephesus) that was very dear to the author.

All three epistles were written to deepen the spiritual life of the churches while guarding against false teaching. The false teachers had arisen within the church, although the content of their teaching betrayed that they were not part of the church (1 John 2:19; 4:4). John fears that such a splinter group will lead true believers astray (1 John 2:26-27; 3:7; 2 John 7). He calls them "antichrists" (1 John 2:18-22; 4:3; 2 John 7) for denying that Jesus had come in the flesh (1 John 4:1-13; 2 John 7; also 1 John 2:18-25; 4:15).

By emphasizing the divine nature of Jesus, the false teachers appeared to be Christians; but they showed their true colors by denying that God became a true human in Jesus. Claiming to have the Spirit of God, they were actually false prophets (1 John 4:1-6).

**Theological Contribution:** Like the Gospel of John, the epistles of John are built on the foundation blocks of love, truth, sin, world, life, light, and Paraclete. It emphasizes the great themes of knowing, believing, walking, and abiding. These words seem simple on the surface. But in the hands of one who had pondered the mystery and meaning of Jesus' existence in human form, they yield many deep truths.

For John, the keystone in the arch of the gospel is that God has appeared in human form (1 John 1:1-4). The INCARNATION is life (1 John 1:2); and this life is available in the Son of God, Jesus Christ (1 John 5:11). "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12). The message of life is the alpha (1 John 1:2) and omega (1 John 5:20), the beginning and the end, of the epistle.

Jesus Christ has transferred us from death to life (1 John 3:14) by destroying the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). God made Jesus a "propitiation" (1 John 2:2; 4:10) in order to forgive sin (1 John 1:7-9; 2:12; 3:5). As a propitiation, Jesus is our "Advocate with the Father" (1 John 2:1) who takes away the guilt of our wrongdoing and gives us confidence to approach the judgment seat of God (1 John 2:28; 4:17). Jesus Christ is both the Son of God and the bearer of sin, the eternal demonstration of the love of God.

For John, love is not a feeling or attitude toward others. God is love (1 John 4:8,16), and He acts in love on our behalf (1 John 4:9-10). Love, therefore, is something one does, by keeping God's commandments (1 John 2:2-5; 5:3), "in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18), and, above all, by loving others (1 John 2:9-11; 3:10). John declares that it is hypocritical to profess love for God and to show hatred toward others (1 John 4:20). The love of God does not take us out of this world. Rather, it draws us into fellowship with God (1 John 1:3) and with others (1 John 1:7).

Fellowship with God is realized by knowing God and abiding in Him. To know God (the verb occurs 25 times in the epistles) is not to know about God, but to be joined to Him in righteousness (1 John 2:29), truth (1 John 3:19), and especially love (1 John 4:7-8). The permanence of such knowing is expressed in the word abide, which occurs 26 times in these epistles. To abide in God is to share the identity of Jesus Christ and to experience the characteristics of God: light (1 John 2:10), love (1 John 3:17; 4:12), and eternal life (1 John 3:15).

**Special Considerations:** Many Christians wonder about John's declaration, "Whoever abides in Him [Jesus Christ] does not sin" (1 John 3:6). This does not mean that if someone sins he is not a Christian. Indeed, in the epistles we are told that Christ came to forgive sins; and we are admonished to confess our sins to Him (1 John 1:6-2:2; 3:5; 4:10). The statement means that Christ has transferred us from death to life and has caused us to share in the nature of God. Consequently, we are no longer confined to darkness because Jesus Christ has broken the power of sin in our lives (1 John 3:8).

John says that believers may pray to God on behalf of others (1 John 5:16-17), unless their sins "lead to death." The exact meaning of such sin is unclear, although it probably refers to a denial of the bodily existence of Jesus (1 John 2:22; 4:3; 5:12).

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