

1, 2, and 3 John: A Chapter by Chapter Study

Introduction

John is notorious for not identifying himself as the author of his books (the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation) and his letters are no different. This is most likely due to Christian persecution during the time of the early church. However, there is almost no doubt that John is the author of these letters as early church fathers dating back to 140AD name him as such. Even without those confirmations his writing style and references in the letters are all strikingly similar to his other works. Much like the Gospel of John, his letters can be both easy to read and contain deeply thoughtful statements. It is safe to say that the word count in each of the commentaries on John's letters far outnumber the words in his actual writings.

It is generally believed that John did all his writing within a few years of each piece starting with his Gospel, then these letters, and closing with his Revelation. Most scholars put the complete works of John in the 90-95AD range, although there is room for error.

John does not provide an intended recipient of his first two letters other than to say that these works are for "believers." John particularly addresses Gnosticism in the first letter as this doctrine had made its way into the Christian church and had corrupted and confused many followers of John's day. Although not definitively stated, it is possible that these letters were a response to "push-back" from his gospel and that John is clarifying doctrinal questions that arose from his account of the ministry of Jesus.

1 John

Chapter 1

V1-4

John mimics the opening of his gospel here referring to God from the "beginning."

Why does John begin his letter in this manner referring to things seen, heard, and touched?

John is directly addressing Gnosticism with this sentence. Gnosticism in the first century was the belief that all things spiritual were good and all things physical were bad. As such, Gnostics believed that Jesus could not be good since He was a physical being (they argued that He was only good from the time of His baptism when the Holy Spirit entered Him until His death) or He was never physical and only some form of spiritual being, like a phantom. This, of course, removes the deity of Jesus and sets Him aside from God. John is trying to dispel this belief, much like he did in the first chapter of his gospel (John 1:14-18).

What does John mean when he refers to "The Word of Life" in verse 1?

John uses the word "Logos" here, just like he did in the first verse of his gospel. This is a reiteration to both Greek and Jew that Jesus is the "Ultimate Reason" or the highest being in the universe.

John uses the word "koinonia" in verse 3 which loosely translates to "fellowship." It is more accurately described as a sharing or a communion with a common bond and common life. This word would have a deep meaning to Christians and is one of the reasons why fellow believers are commonly referred to as "brother" and "sister" and why God is called "our Father."

Why does John say in verse 3, "...that you too may have fellowship with us" before mentioning the fellowship with God?

When Jesus walked the Earth, fellowship with Him was the closest anyone could come to God. Now that the Holy Spirit resides in each of us as Christians, we are the example of what a relationship with God should look like. New believers will come to know Christ through us. Our joy in verse 4 is what will attract unbelievers.

These first four verses are a long, single run-on sentence in the original Greek. Some translations break them into two or more sentences. This is considered the greeting of the first letter.

V5-10

John's opening statement in the body of the letter (verses 1-4 being the greeting) is a declaration of authority. "This is the message," carries the weight of a leader giving an order to a subordinate.

John continues a theme from his gospel of referring to Jesus as the "light." Darkness is the absence of light. Once we have a relationship with Jesus there is no darkness.

This chapter defines some of the doctrine of Christianity. We can claim to be Christian, but that doesn't make it so. We can claim to be perfect and sinless, but that doesn't make it so. A true Christian knows that Jesus is the only way to be forgiven of sin, both past and present, and will confess those sins to Jesus to be cleansed. John closes this chapter with a harsh reality for those that would choose to fool themselves into thinking they can get to Heaven.

Chapter 2

V1-6

John goes into more detail on sin and what our relationship with Jesus Christ means for our sins. John never says that we will be without sin. He simply says that Jesus covers the cost of our sins. However, as a Christian we should be aware that we know the difference between good and evil. Our aim is to walk in the footsteps of Christ as impossible as that may be. We should stumble *less* as Christians.

What does the word 'advocate' mean in verse 1?

The Greek word for advocate is used to describe the friends who voluntarily speak to the character of an accused person to a court.

What does the word 'propitiation' mean in verse 2?

The original Greek word has the idea of presenting a gift to the gods to turn away their wrath. This would speak clearly to the Greeks and Romans who offered many sacrifices to multiple gods. The words 'advocate' and 'propitiation' are used to describe the same person. Our friend who speaks highly of us and asks the court to spare us sacrifices Himself for us.

John makes it clear that there will be false believers among the church. John also offers a clear and simple way to identify ourselves as true believers. Follow Christ. Avoid sin.

V7-14

What is the 'new commandment' that John speaks of here?

Some find it odd that John doesn't repeat "the golden rule" here, but this is clearly a reference to Jesus telling His disciples to love one another (John 13:34). The following statements about a person loving or hating their brother reiterate this commandment.

John again uses light as a metaphor for Christ. He extends the 'light' past the Old Testament and Jewish restrictions to include Gentiles into those that can be removed from darkness.

Why does John use the phrase "little children" in verses 1 and 12?

Some may see this as a condescending phrase when translated to the English, but this is used to address new Christians as being newly accepted into the family of God. John wrote his gospel and his letters to help new believers grow in their faith as little children. John would build on this phrase in the next couple verses to define spiritual maturity. "Young men" would be those who have grown in their faith and continued to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. "Fathers" would be the pillars in the church; those that have nurtured the new believers and encouraged the congregation to stand in service to God.

V15-24

What does John mean to "not love the world" in verse 15?

The English word "love" can be translated into multiple words in the Greek. This verse would be better translated as "don't be content with what non-believers think brings contentment." Some of the most common worldly traps are sexual immorality, wealth, power, or status. All of these were sought after by Greeks and Romans, as well as most cultures both before and after this period. Christianity seeks to fill our hearts with God, not with worldly pleasures.

Another way of phrasing this paragraph (v15-17) would be, "Don't put any worldly idols before God."

What does the word "Antichrist" mean in verse 18?

This word, particularly in the book of Revelation, has been a focus of the people of the world regardless of their faith. It has been used in movies and stories to refer to many different things. The usage in this letter is different than that of Revelation where John is speaking more specifically of *The Antichrist* that signifies the end times. The original meaning by John used here simply means "the opposite of Christ" or "instead of Christ." Anything that puts God in second place is wrong and can be considered an "antichrist." Put God first always so you are prepared for the return of Christ.

V25-29

What does John mean by "eternal life" in verse 25?

The Jewish and Christian faiths believe that our soul is eternal. There is an afterlife, and we will live in that afterlife. What John means here is that we will live our lives as "The Eternal One," the kind of life that God lives and intended for us to live.

John closes this chapter by stating that we are anointed with Holy Spirit and that is all we need to be a Christian. Even if we don't have access to the Holy Bible (as no one did in John's day since he was still writing it) we are still a Child of God. Follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit, walk in the righteousness of Jesus, and seek the presence of God the Father.

Chapter 3

V1-3

What does it mean to be a "child of God?"

For non-believers, verse 1 means nothing. Being a child of the Living God has no meaning and no interest. But when you come to understand the sacrificial love of Jesus, the love that a Father must have to be able to give up

His own Son to save others, then you begin to see the meaning of being one of God's children. John is asking the readers to contemplate this kind of love. He asks believers to revel in it and non-believers to choose it. Knowing what our destiny is in the salvation of Jesus should make us want to be like Him and make us want to show others how to be like Him.

V4-12

John breaks down sin to its basic element. If God truly is the Creator and He made the law, then sin is the utter disregard for the law. Jesus came to remove that sin, that lawlessness, that we may be one with God.

What does John mean when he says, "Whoever abides in Him does not sin" in verse 6?

The original Greek uses verbiage that is more clearly defined as, "Whoever abides in Him does not live a lifestyle of habitual sin." Even John says if we say we have no sin then we fool ourselves (1 John 1:8). We have a sinful nature. But, as Christians, we need to fight that nature and emulate Christ to the best of our abilities.

Why does John say, "Let no one deceive you" in verse 7?

This is a strong indication (and is justified in other writings of the New Testament) that John is refuting some form of legalism that has made its way into the church. There were many that were trying to add requirements to the salvation of Jesus. Following the Jewish law and rituals to become "pure," for instance. John states clearly that if you practice the righteousness of Jesus then you need not worry about your salvation and what others may require of you.

John goes on to contrast righteousness and sin so there can be no argument about following Jesus. Following the Golden Rule is one of the best examples of Christ that a Christian can manifest. John even gives the example of Cain and Abel as the contrast between sin and righteousness.

V13-22

John shows the contrast of Christianity and non-believers. Following and applying the Golden Rule to our lives goes against human nature. The sinful nature is love "self" above all else. To put others first is one of the most distinguishing characteristics of a Christian. The world will hate Christians because our love of others exposes the selfishness of the world.

V23-24

The wording of the closing of this chapter is what most commentators focus on. John says there is a single commandment, yet he lists two separate commands. The idea is that these two commands go together and cannot be separated. To love Jesus is to love one another. Another aspect of John's verbiage is the use of "on" in "we should believe ON the name of His Son Jesus Christ" as opposed to believing "in" Jesus. The Greek language indicates that we are to trust Jesus, to rely on Jesus, and to even cling to Jesus. Believing in Jesus is not enough.

Chapter 4

V1-6

What does John mean by "test the spirits" in verse 1?

It is important to recognize that God is omnipotent but that doesn't mean that everything is of God. There can be false doctrine, false miracles, false claims of being a Christian, and many more things that can deceive believers. Check everything against the Word of God. One of the reasons John wrote this letter is to warn users against false signs. John gives guidelines on how to tell what is from God and what is not.

V7-14

Verse 7 opens with a powerful statement in the original Greek: “those who are loved, let us love.” We show love to others because we are loved, not because we are commanded to. God’s love encourages us to love one another because His very nature is Love.

This paragraph reiterates some familiar passages from John chapter 3 and 1 John chapter 2. But John also builds upon those concepts. God the Father was willing to sacrifice His own Son, and Jesus was willing to sacrifice Himself for the love of us. These two entities of God show unconditional love to the creation. We as the creation should emulate that love.

What does John mean in verse 12 that no one has seen God?

God the Father has manifested Himself to many people many times in the Old Testament. But no one has actually seen God in His entirety. Moses only saw the tail of God’s robe. Elijah spoke to God but did not see him entirely. Ezekiel saw visions of God but could not see past the light emanating from God. There is debate on whether Jacob wrestled with God or with an angel. Jacob says in Genesis 32 that he saw God face to face and was spared but Jacob also admits he didn’t recognize who he was wrestling with and most scholars agree that God was disguising Himself in some manner. As such, the most compelling evidence of God that we as Christians can show people is the love that comes from God living inside of us.

V15-21

John defines one of the basic principles of Christianity in verse 15. It is not enough to believe in Jesus. One must follow the teachings of Jesus to be a Christian. Even the demons believe in Jesus. That doesn’t make them followers. A true Christian will be so overwhelmed in love that we should look forward to the day of judgment, not fear it. His love will be such that not only will we want to return that love to Him but love all of those around us. This love is what will ultimately define us to others as Christians.

Chapter 5

V1-5

John continues to define the “requirements” for Christianity. This appears to be an effort to dispel any false teachings that add-on to Christianity or try and make it more complicated than it is. The simplicity of being a Christian is also its beauty. We need to accept and love Jesus and accept and love those that God created. God knows that we love Him because we love our fellow man. Our fellow Christians know we love them because we love God and keep His commandments. Everything else is at best trivial and at worst false teachings. This simple definition of Christianity is what assures us that we can overcome the world.

What does John mean when he says we can overcome the world?

John does not mean to say that we will have an easy life as Christians. John means that our love and joy in Christ cannot be taken away. Our salvation and eternity are assured for long after this world has passed.

V6-12

What does John mean by “water and blood” in this passage?

Much like John’s gospel where Jesus is talking to Nicodemus (John 3:5), the water that is mentioned is up for debate. Some take it as referring to baptism. Others take it to mean the water of the womb and that we must be born of this world to accept the teachings of Heaven. Still others think it might refer to the blood and water that came from Jesus’ side when He was pierced on the cross (John 19:34). Just as there are many possible

explanations for the passage in John 3, there are numerous commentaries on this passage, as well. The easiest answer is that any of these could be correct, but we simply don't know for certain.

Another side note about this passage is that the King James Version of the bible quotes verse 7 quite differently than some more modern translations. This has to do with a dispute in the 1500's between Erasmus, a scholar of Greek literature who produced what is considered to be one of the most accurate Greek bibles ever translated, and Latin scholars who had early translations of the bible with notes in the margin containing references to the trinity in this verse. Erasmus reluctantly added the references into his next printings of the bible, but he added footnotes saying that these references were not in the original Greek manuscripts. Since the King James bible was based on the Erasmus bible, this verse includes the trinity reference.

Most scholars agree that this passage does not reference the trinity. Again, there is no certainty, but one possibility is that the blood refers to the sacrifice of Jesus, the water refers to either Jesus or even man (those that claim Christ as their savior, that is), and the Holy Spirit, of course, is Himself. These are the witnesses to God the Father. The water symbolizing man would fit in with the rest of the verses in this passage as only an unbelieving man would dare call God a liar.

V13-21

This is the conclusion of the first letter of John. John is stating his confidence in God and that we should have that same confidence in a listening, loving God.

What does John mean in verses 16-17 about a sin that leads to death?

There is debate on the exact meaning and these words are understandably difficult to comprehend even in the original Greek. Some take this to refer to the "unforgivable sin" of blaspheming the Holy Spirit, but this is in dispute because of John's use of the word "brother" here. "Brother" would indicate that John is speaking of fellow believers so by definition they would not be blaspheming the Spirit. The most settled upon conclusion is that John is speaking of a believer who has backslidden so far that their own testimony is useless and God "calls them home" rather than have them wallow about and possibly lead other believers astray. Again, this is not certain. These are just theories presented by scholars.

John emphasizes to the believers the instruction to continuously put their faith in Jesus and know that whatever happens to us in this life pales in comparison to our salvation.

The letter ends abruptly with the simple, weighty command to avoid idol worship. It is so abrupt that it has caused many to question whether this is a complete work or not, but most scholars agree that this is such a definitive command as to not need much explanation. It is a reminder that acts as an exclamation point to a letter filled with doctrinal instructions.

2 John

Chapter 1

V1-3

Why does John identify himself as "the Elder?"

As the last living apostle of Jesus and surviving well into his 70's or 80's at the time of this letter, the church looked to John to settle many doctrinal disputes and confirm stories about Jesus. This was a title which John bore well. Even though the author does not directly identify himself there is little dispute dating back to the earliest recordings of the church that John is the author.

Who is the “elect lady and her children?”

There are two prominent possibilities for these titles. Either John was addressing a distinct church (the elect lady) and the congregation of that church (her children) or John was addressing a distinguished female of some authority and her family but chose not to mention her by name due to persecution, another reason for the author not to reveal himself in the greeting. Still another possibility that many scholars pose is that this is a letter written to Mary, the mother of Jesus, but it is most likely that she has already passed on from old age at this point. There is no way to be certain, however, and this does not sway the message of the letter either way.

V4-6

What is the “truth” that John references throughout this chapter?

Although Jesus is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” John is most likely referring to the truth of salvation rather than Jesus Himself. Our salvation and our faith in God, the truth, is what binds us together as Christians and causes us to love one another. This love and faith will be with us forever (verse 2).

What is the primary theme of this paragraph?

John focuses on the truth in this letter and shows us how to walk in that truth. John reiterates the commandment to love one another as he has done in his gospel and his first letter. How do we love one another? By following God’s commands. These “rules” that are found in the Bible are not there to punish us. They are there to show us how to be selfless so we can love God and others properly. Selfishness is the opposite of loving God.

V7-11

Another theme in John’s previous writings is the correction of the belief that Jesus was not a real person, but merely a phantom. John addresses it almost immediately in the opening of his gospel and again in his first letter. This belief had infiltrated the early church and was spreading rapidly. John is doing his best to quell this belief. He defines those that teach this falsehood as anti-Christian, and they are not to be listened to. He even goes so far as to ask true believers to shun these false teachers.

What does the word “greet” mean in verse 11?

The modern English translation is less involved than the word used here in the original Greek. To offer a greeting would be to show warmth, kindness, and even offer aid if needed. John isn’t saying, “don’t talk to them,” he’s saying not to help further their cause.

V12-13

There are different schools of thought concerning why John would say that he wanted to see the recipient(s) of this letter face to face. It could be that John wrote his gospel and these letters before being imprisoned by the Romans at Patmos. It could also be that he was imprisoned and anxiously awaiting his release. Although the former is most likely, there is no way to be certain.

John closes his letter with just as much ambiguity as his opening. Whether the “elect sister” is an actual person, or a sister-church is up for much debate.

3 John

Chapter 1

V1-8

Unlike his previous letters, there is little doubt who this letter is intended for. The brevity, the subject, and the style all indicate that both 2 John and 3 John were written very close together, possibly even at the same time.

John is commending Gaius for hosting fellow believers, a housing of missionaries, as it were. Gaius is mentioned in Acts 19:29, 1 Corinthians 1:14, and Romans 16:23, but it is uncertain if this is the same Gaius or not. This name was common in the Roman Empire during this period.

Why is this display of hospitality important?

Just like Jesus and the disciples, spreading the gospel meant these travelers were dependent on the kindness of strangers for food and shelter. John used the Greek word “koinonia” in his first letter, and that definition would apply here. Christian travelers brought news and messages to fellow Christians in other locations and those that received the letters would often welcome the messengers in as family in Christ. John even elevates these travelers in verse 7 saying that they only accepted hospitality from fellow believers and did not associate with non-believers, limiting who they could accept charity from.

V9-12

There is no mention of Diotrephes other than this passage, but it is evident that he has earned the ire of the apostle John. Diotrephes is spoken of as a prideful church leader who throws his authority around to serve his own purpose, excommunicating those that disobey his orders. For some reason, he won't even acknowledge John as a church leader. John wants to have words with this supposed leader in person.

Who is Demetrius in verse 12?

It is unclear, but most scholars believe that Demetrius is the messenger that carried this letter to Gaius. John is offering his personal reference so that Gaius will know to trust and extend friendship to this person.

V13-15

John concludes this letter in much the same way as his second letter, offering peace and greetings from fellow believers.

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