

Overview Book of 1 John

"A GOOD man . . . yes . . . perhaps one of the best who ever lived . . . but just a man," say many. Others disagree, claiming that he suffered from delusions of grandeur—a "messiah complex." And the argument rages over the true identity of this man called Jesus. Suggestions have ranged from "simple teacher" to "egomaniac" and "misguided fool." Whoever he was, all would agree that Jesus left his mark on history.

Hearing these discussions, even Christians can begin to wonder and doubt. Is Jesus really God? Did he come to save sinners like us? Does God care about me?

First John was written to dispel doubts and to build assurance by presenting a clear picture of Christ. Entering history, Jesus was and is God in the flesh and God in focus—seen, heard, and touched by the author of this letter, John the apostle. John walked and talked with Jesus, saw him heal, heard him teach, watched him die, met him arisen, and saw him ascend. John knew God—he had lived with him and had seen him work. And John enjoyed fellowship with the Father and the Son all the days of his life.

The elder statesman in the church, John wrote this letter to his "dear children." In it he presented God as light, as love, and as life. He explained in simple and practical terms what it means to have fellowship with God.

At the same time, false teachers had entered the church, denying the incarnation of Christ. John wrote to correct their serious errors. So John's letter is a model for us to follow as we combat modern heresies.

John opens this letter by presenting his credentials as an eyewitness of the Incarnation and by stating his reason for writing (1:1-4). He then presents God as "light," symbolizing absolute purity and holiness (1:5-7), and he explains how believers can walk in the light and have fellowship with God (1:8-10). If they do sin, Christ is their advocate (2:1-2). John urges them to obey Christ fully and to love all the members of God's family (2:3-17). He warns his readers of "antichrists" and the antichrist who will try to lead them away from the truth (2:18-29).

In the next section, John presents God as "love"—giving, dying, forgiving, and blessing (3:1-4:21). God is love, and because God loves us, he calls us his children and makes us like Christ (3:1-2). This truth should motivate us to live close to him (3:3-6). We can be sure of our family relationship with God when our lives are filled with good deeds and love for others (3:7-24). Again, John warns of false teachers who twist the truth. We should reject these false teachers (4:1-6) as we continue to live in God's love (4:7-21).

In the last section, John presents God as "life" (5:1-21). God's life is in his Son. To have his Son is to have eternal life.

Do you know God? Do you know Christ? Do you know that you have eternal life? First John was written to help you know the reality of God in your life through faith in Christ, to assure you that you have eternal life, and to encourage you to remain in fellowship

with the God who is light and love. Read this letter written by one overwhelmed by God's love, and with renewed confidence, pass on his love to others.

Vital Statistics

PURPOSE: To reassure Christians in their faith and to counter false teachings

AUTHOR: The apostle John

ORIGINAL AUDIENCE: The letter is untitled and was written to no particular church. It was sent as a pastoral letter to several Gentile congregations.

DATE WRITTEN: Probably between A.D. 85 and 90 from Ephesus

SETTING: John was an older man and perhaps the only surviving apostle at this time. He had not yet been banished to the island of Patmos, where he would live in exile. As an eyewitness of Christ, he wrote authoritatively to give this new generation of believers assurance and confidence in God and in their faith.

KEY VERSE: "I 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" (5:13).

KEY PEOPLE: John, Jesus

SPECIAL FEATURES: John is the apostle of love, and love is mentioned throughout this letter. There are a number of similarities between this letter and John's Gospel—in vocabulary, style, and main ideas. John uses brief statements and simple words, and he features sharp contrasts—light and darkness, truth and error, God and Satan, life and death, and love and hate.

THE BLUEPRINT

1. God is light (1:1—2:27)
2. God is love (2:28—4:21)
3. God is life (5:1–21)

John wrote about the most vital aspects of faith so that his readers would know Christian truth from error. He emphasizes the basics of faith so that we can be confident in our faith. In our dark world, God is light. In our cold world, God brings the warmth of love. In our dying world, God brings life. When we lack confidence, these truths bring us certainty.

MEGATHEMES

Sin

EXPLANATION: Even Christians sin. Sin requires God's forgiveness, and Christ's death provides it for us. Determining to live according to God's standards in the Bible shows that our lives are being transformed.

IMPORTANCE: We cannot deny our sin nature, maintain that we are “above” sinning, or minimize the consequences of sin in our relationship with God. We must resist the attraction of sin, yet we must confess when we do sin.

Love

EXPLANATION: Christ commands us to love others as he loved us. This love is evidence that we are truly saved. God is the Creator of love; he cares that his children love each other.

IMPORTANCE: Love means putting others first and being unselfish. Love is action—showing others we care—not just saying it. To show love we must give sacrificially of our time and money to meet the needs of others.

Family of God

EXPLANATION: We become God’s children by believing in Christ. God’s life in us enables us to love our fellow family members.

IMPORTANCE: How we treat others shows who our Father is. Live as a faithful, loving family member.

Truth and Error

EXPLANATION: Teaching that the physical body does not matter, false teachers encouraged believers to throw off moral restraints. They also taught that Christ wasn’t really a man and that we must be saved by having some special mystical knowledge. The result was that people became indifferent to sin.

IMPORTANCE: God is truth and light, so the more we get to know him, the better we can keep focused on the truth. Don’t be led astray by any teaching that denies Christ’s deity or humanity. Check the message; test the claims.

Assurance

EXPLANATION: God is in control of heaven and earth. Because his word is true, we can have assurance of eternal life and victory over sin. By faith we can be certain of our eternal destiny with him.

IMPORTANCE: Assurance of our relationship with God is a promise, but it is also a way of life. We build our confidence by trusting in God’s Word and in Christ’s provision for our sin.