

The First Letter of John

John, the apostle, cared deeply for the church of Jesus Christ. He writes this letter as an elder in the church, saying, “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (2:1–2). His letter provides truth and instruction to the church during that time and continues to teach us the truth and provide instruction for us today.

Writer: John, the disciple of Jesus. Also called John the Apostle.

Date of writing: Sometime in the first century AD. Possibly between 80-85 AD.

Original Audience: John didn’t write this letter to one specific church or group of churches in one city. Instead, he probably sent this letter to many different churches and expected the letter to be passed from church to church.

The Reason for the Letter: John says, “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). John wrote a similar statement at the end of his gospel, saying, “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31)

Main Message of the Letter: John begins the letter by saying that the “word of life” that he proclaims comes from his personal experiences. He shares things he has seen and heard (1:1–4). Next, he shares that God is light and compares what it means to walk in the light versus walking in darkness (1:5–2:2). The love of God is made perfect in those who obey God’s commandments, especially the command to love one another (2:3–11). After a poetic encouragement to different groups in the community (2:12–14), John pleads for the readers not to love the world (2:15–17). Next, John writes about people who oppose Jesus Christ. These people are called ‘antichrists’ (2:18–27). John encourages the followers of Jesus to fix their hope on the coming of Jesus (2:28–3:3). He teaches about the difference between children of God and children of the devil (3:4-10) and between people who hate fellow believers and people who have God’s love in them (3:11–24). Then, John teaches the believers to identify false prophets and whether or not a spirit has come from God. (4:1–6). Finally, John returns to his main point: love is the sign of a true relationship with God (4:7–21). We show our love for God by carrying out his commands (5:1–5). Next, John reminds us that our faith can be strong because of the three things that testify about Jesus: the Spirit, the water, and the blood (5:6-12). John concludes by urging the readers to pray confidently for others (5:14–17), and then he offers a series of concluding encouragements (5:18–20) and a final warning against idolatry (5:21).



Outline of 1 John:

John's letter has two large sections based on two truths about God. The first is the truth that God is Light, and we should walk according to God's light. The second is that God is Love, and we should act according to God's love.

1. Introduction (1:1–4)
2. Truth 1: God Is Light (1:5–3:10)
 - a. The Light and the darkness (1:5–7)
 - b. Turn away from sin (1:8–2:2)
 - c. Obey God's commands (2:3–11)
 - d. Do not love the world (2:12–17)
 - e. Hold on to the Truth (2:18–27)
 - f. Live like God's children (2:28–3:10)
3. Truth 2: God Is Love (3:11–5:12)
 - a. Love one another in practical ways (3:11–24)
 - b. Identifying false prophets (4:1–6)
 - c. Love one another as Jesus loves us (4:7–21)
 - d. Obey God and overcome the world (5:1–5)
 - e. Testimony about Jesus (5:6–12)
4. Conclusion (5:13–21)

Jesus is the Christ

The Hebrew word “Messiah” and the Greek word “Christ” both have the same meaning: the anointed one, but the idea of the “anointed one” is full of meaning. In the Old Testament, people anointed someone because they were chosen for some special purpose. God promised to send an anointed one or chosen one to save all people. Jesus is God's chosen one. He is the promised Savior and King. John tells us that everyone who denies that Jesus is Christ is a liar (2:22).

The Humanity of Jesus Christ

John's Letters emphasize the reality and significance of Jesus' humanity. The beginning of 1 John recalls the first words of John's Gospel, saying, “in the beginning” (1 John 1:1 and John 1:1). But there is a difference: in the Gospel, “the beginning” referred to the beginning of time before the heavens and earth were created (Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1). In John's letter, it refers to the beginning of the life and ministry of Jesus, who was an actual person, a man who could be heard and seen and touched (1 John 1:1–3). This emphasis on the physical reality of Jesus prepares the readers for the later claim that only spirits that confess “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” are from God (1 John 4:2–3). In the Gospel of John, some people thought that since Jesus was a human being, he could not be God come down from heaven (John 6:42). Later, it seems some people are arguing the same wrong understanding in the opposite direction. They are saying since Jesus was God, he could not be human. Still, John emphasizes Jesus's humanity while at the same time emphasizing that He is God. Again this reminds us of the first chapter of John's Gospel where he says, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Study each section in the outline above. As a group, read each section at least two times. Imagine the Apostle John is speaking directly to your group. Discuss the following questions together:

1. What do we learn about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit?
 2. What do we learn about people?
 3. What do we need to obey?
 4. Who else can we share this story with?
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