

The Second Letter of John

The letter called “First John” wasn’t a personal letter addressed to one church. Instead, it was a letter that provided teaching for many churches. However, the letter called “Second John” is a personal letter addressed to one church. Some people believe that Second John may have been like a cover letter delivered with the letter of First John. Or, it could be that Second John was written after First John because the problem of false teachers had become more serious.

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 writes this letter to a specific church but doesn’t use any names of people or places in the letter.

The Reason for the Letter: John writes to a church to encourage them to continue walking in the truth, loving one another, and showing their love to God by obeying His commands. He also warns the church that “many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world” (7). John is worried that these deceivers and false teachers might try to convince the church to turn away from the truth.

Main Message of the Letter:

The greeting at the beginning of the letter identifies the letter as being from “the elder” to “the elect lady and her children” (1–2). The elder, John, begins by sharing his joy in knowing that they are walking in the truth (4). Next, he urges his readers to love one another and keep God’s commandments (5–6). Then he warns them to be on guard against false teachers that try to deceive followers of Jesus. He calls these people antichrists because they deny that Jesus came in the flesh. He then urges them not to welcome anyone who fails to keep to the teaching of Christ (7–11). Finally, he says he hopes to visit them soon and sends greetings from their “elect sister,” which is another church (12–13).

The Chosen Lady?

John addresses the letter to “the lady chosen by God and to her children” (1). Who was this person? Was there some prominent woman in the early church to whom John wrote this letter? Some people who study the Bible have thought that the “elect lady” might be the leader of a house church, similar to those churches that were led by Gaius (3 John 1) and Diotrephes (3 John 9). However, the more common view is that “lady chosen by God” is a way to refer to the church itself: the lady is the church, and her children are the members of that church. In a similar way, John may be referring to his own church in verse 13 when he says, “The children of your sister, who is chosen by God, send their greetings.”



1, 2, and 3 John

In our Bibles, we have three letters from the Apostle John. The church has called these letters First, Second, and Third John for nearly 2,000 years. However, those titles aren't on the original letters, and we don't know which letter John wrote first, second, or third. John might have written them all at the same time. Nevertheless, the titles First, Second, and Third help us as we study the Bible.

Who Was the Apostle John?

John and his brother James were among the first disciples called by Jesus. They were fishermen who left their fishing nets and their father named Zebedee when Jesus called them to follow him (Mark 1:19–20). Along with his brother James and the disciple Peter, John was in an inner circle among Jesus's followers. Jesus invited only Peter, James, and John to go with him when he raised Jairus's daughter from the dead (Mark 5:37), when he was transfigured (Mark 9:2), and when he prayed in the garden before he was arrested (Mark 14:33). James and John had the nickname "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17), and their headstrong ways sometimes got them in trouble with Jesus or the other disciples. For example, one time, they asked Jesus to guarantee them the two best seats in glory (Mark 10:35–41), and in another, they offered to call down fire from heaven to destroy a Samaritan village that has refused to welcome Jesus (Luke 9:51–55). James was the first of the twelve apostles to die as a martyr (Acts 12:2), and John went on to become a missionary in the early church. Luke tells of John testifying boldly before Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (see Acts 3:1–11; 4:1–20) and as a missionary among the Samaritans (Acts 8:14–25). John became known as "a pillar of the church," one of three people the apostle Paul regarded as key leaders (Galatians 2:9). The Apostle John wrote the Gospel of John, the three letters of John, and the book of Revelation.

A New Command

There are many similarities between John's Gospel and John's letters. To learn about all the similarities, see the study guide for Third John. In John's Gospel, Jesus gives the disciples a new command at the last supper, saying, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34–35). Many years later, in 1 John 2:7–11, John reminds them of the command Jesus gave, saying it is no longer a new command, but an old one, which they have had from the beginning. In Second John, he again says, "I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another." (5). John includes this simple command in these three different writings because he knows it is the most important. Indeed, Jesus said that the most important commandment is to love God and love one another (Matthew 22:34–40).

Read Second John two or three 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?