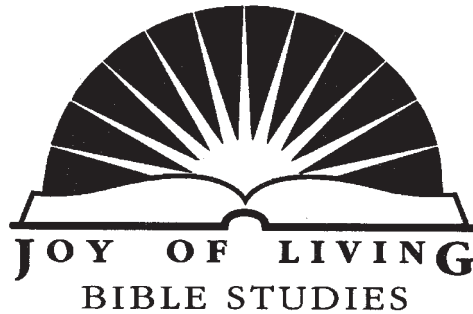


The Letters of John

Lesson 2



1 John 1:1-4

The book of 1st John is a letter written by the Apostle John to various churches located throughout the Roman province of Asia (in modern Turkey).¹

It was about A.D. 90 when these letters were written, and, as with every age, there were certain false teachings that had entered the church. Some of the teachers of these false doctrines had remained within the church gatherings and corrupted what was being taught, while others had taken some of the members of the church and departed to establish their own religious groups. The aged John, who alone remained of all Jesus' disciples, wrote to address the false teaching and to reassure the believers who remained faithful to the truth.

First John is as relevant today as it was when it was first written. As Psalm 119:89 says, "Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens." And 2 Timothy 3:16-17 adds, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Who Were the False Teachers?

The false beliefs John addresses in his letters suggest that the false teachers were promoting an early form of what would eventually be known as Gnosticism. Although Gnosticism did not develop fully into a religious system until the second century, its general false teachings were already being addressed in the later books of the New Testament, especially 1 John, 2 Peter, and Jude.

- ☛ *Gnosis* means "knowledge," and Gnostics believed they were saved, not by faith in Jesus Christ, but by special knowledge available only to those initiated in the cult.
- ☛ Gnosticism borrowed from a variety of religious traditions, including Judaism, Christianity, and pagan religions.
- ☛ Gnostics taught that the material world is evil, and only spirit is good. This dualism often led to immoral behavior, since some Gnostics claimed that what they did with their bodies did not affect their spiritual state. Rejection of the material world also

led to a denial that God could take on true human form and to a denial that Jesus' death paid the penalty for our sins.

- ☛ Many Gnostics claimed that Christ only appeared to be human.²

When you are counting or adding objects, two plus two equals four. If you say the answer is five, you are just as wrong as if you said the answer was five million. One answer may be closer to being correct than the other, but it is still incorrect. Satan is always at work attempting to pervert the truth. He doesn't care how far off the truth he leads a person, so long as they do not believe the truth. Speaking of the evil one, the devil, Jesus said, "He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Satan has used the same lies and falsehoods throughout the years, although they may be presented with a different name or cloaked in different terminology.

In 2 Timothy 2:15, Christians are exhorted, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." We can be confident that although falsehood spreads, God's truth and His followers, the church, will remain. Paul says, "Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his'" (2 Timothy 2:19).

John Knew Jesus

The very first issue John addresses in 1 John is, "Who is Jesus Christ?" Was He merely a good man, was He just a prophet, or is He God? And if He is God, did He actually come in the flesh, or did He just appear to be human?

People continue to discuss (and argue about) this today. So many have their opinion. Their arguments often begin with, "Well, I think..." John, however, says, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched" (1 John 1:1). John was there. John saw Jesus. John traveled with Him. John heard Him teach. John touched Him, and talked with Him. John knew Him personally. John did not merely have an opinion...John *knew*.

2. Adapted from: John Walton, Mark L. Strauss and Theodore W. Cooper Jr. *The Essential Bible Companion*, "Introduction to 1 John" (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

1. See footnote 2 on lesson 1, page 5.

John and his brother, James, were the sons of Zebedee. They were fishermen in partnership with two other brothers, Peter and Andrew. Their business was located in Capernaum, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Luke 5:1-11¹ and Matthew 4:18-22 tell of the calling of the four men and of their immediate response to Jesus' command, "Follow me." All four became disciples and later apostles (see Matthew 10:1-2)².

In the Gospel he wrote, John refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23).³ He was with Jesus when He healed the sick, raised the dead, made the lame to walk and the blind to see, walked on water, stilled the storm, miraculously fed the thousands, and did many more miracles. He was also one of three disciples—Peter, John, and James—which are sometimes referred to as, "the inner circle." These three were the only ones who were allowed to go with Jesus when He raised Jairus' daughter from the dead (see Mark 5:37). They were with Him when He was transfigured in the presence of Moses and Elijah (see Mark 9:2-7). And in Mark 14:32-35, the night before He was crucified, Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him deeper into the Garden of Gethsemane to keep watch while He prayed.

John stood at the foot of Jesus' cross and was singled out by Jesus to care for His mother (see John 19:25-27). After the resurrection, John along with Peter went into the empty tomb, where he saw the empty grave clothes (see John 20:1-8). That same evening, when the eleven disciples, including John, were gathered together discussing reports that Jesus had been seen alive, Jesus appeared to them. "While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.' When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, 'Do you have anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence" (Luke 24:36-43).

Then, "After his suffering, he presented himself to them [the disciples, including John] and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). John knew that Jesus was physically alive. There was no doubt in his mind.

On one occasion after the resurrection, when Jesus was eating with them and giving them instructions, "He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why

do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven'" (Acts 1:9-11).

John saw Jesus physically ascend into heaven, and then, just a few days later, John, along with a number of others, was filled with and empowered by God's Spirit (see Acts 2).

As we said before, John didn't just have an opinion about Jesus, he knew Jesus and was an eyewitness to all that happened.

The Word of Life

It is important to remember that John was not writing to unbelievers, or even to a mixed group of believers and unbelievers. John was writing to fellow Christians. First John does not open with the usual type of greeting that you would expect in a letter, but with a magnificent declaration, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us" (1 John 1:1-2).

What do we know about the "Word of life" John is referring to?

- ☛ The Word was "in the beginning" (Gospel of John 1:1-2).
- ☛ The Word "was with God" and "was God" (Gospel of John 1:1).⁴
- ☛ The Word created all things (see Gospel of John 1:3,10; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2b).
- ☛ In Him "was life" (Gospel of John 1:4; see also 5:26; 14:6).
- ☛ "The Word became flesh"—a true human being—and lived among us (Gospel of John 1:14; see also Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 2:14).
- ☛ The Word is "the one and only Son" of God (Gospel of John 1:14; see also 1 Corinthians 1:9).

As John revealed in his Gospel, the Word is Jesus Christ. We need to continually remember Who He is, and give Him the honor due His name.

Eternal Life

People tend to think of eternal life as something that can be separated from God, as though it is merely living forever, or going to heaven or to some other place. To understand what eternal life is, we must first look at what death is.

Death is separation. Physical death occurs when the body and the spirit are separated (see James 2:26). Spiritual death occurs when

1. Luke calls the Sea of Galilee the Lake of Gennesaret.

2. Although the words disciple and apostle are sometimes used interchangeably, they mean different things. A disciple is a follower or student of someone. An apostle is someone who is sent out with a message or mission. (From Reference.com, "What is the difference between disciples and apostles?")

3. See footnote 1 on page 10.

4. God is beyond our complete understanding because He is infinite and we are finite, limited beings. God is described as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, yet He is one. The terms we use to describe this are the "Trinity" or the "Godhead." These particular terms are not used in the Bible.

the spirit is separated from God (see Ephesians 2:1; Isaiah 59:2). Adam and Eve, the first humans, had known God, Who is life. They had walked and talked with Him in the Garden, but their sin had broken that relationship. Although they were originally created in the image of God, they had become spiritually separated from Him—spiritually dead.¹ Then Adam “had a son in his own likeness, in his own image” (Genesis 5:3). Every human since has been born with that same nature, since we have all descended from Adam. We sin because we are born with a fallen, sinful nature (see Ephesians 2:1-3). You don’t have to teach a child to do wrong; they do it by nature. The long history of our planet demonstrates that where the human race goes, evil springs up. Romans 5:12 tells us, “Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.”

When you consider that everything that completely satisfies a person is in God (or springs forth from God), you will realize that it was by God’s grace and mercy that He did not allow humanity to physically live forever while being spiritually separated from Him (see Genesis 3:22-23). And it was His grace and mercy that made the way for people to be reconciled to Him, to be brought back into relationship and fellowship with Him. This is what eternal life is. John 17:3 says, “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” Knowing and being in relationship with the eternal God, now and throughout eternity, is eternal life.

This is what John is declaring—that we can know and have fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ.

Consider this:

- ☛ All people are sinners; no one is perfect (see Romans 3:23).
- ☛ We are all separated from God by sin and are spiritually dead (see Ephesians 2:1; Isaiah 59:2).
- ☛ Jesus Christ paid the price for our sin on the cross, so that we can be reconciled to God (see Colossians 1:22).
- ☛ God offers us this gift of eternal life—this relationship with Himself (see 1 Corinthians 1:9; Romans 6:23).
- ☛ When a person accepts this gift, their sins are forgiven (see Ephesians 1:7), they are born again spiritually by God’s Spirit (see Gospel of John 3:3-7), they become God’s child (see Galatians 3:26), and they are brought into fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ (see 1 John 1:3).

So what must you do? Romans 10:9-10 says, “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.”

Have you accepted His gift? You can do it right now at this very moment; don’t wait (see 2 Corinthians 6:2).² If you already have re-

ceived His gift, are you sharing this wonderful news with others? If you are not sharing, why aren’t you? Will you ask God to help you?

True Joy

John says in 1 John 1:4 that he writes this “to make our joy complete.” Some Bible manuscripts say “to make *your* joy complete.”³ Both renderings fit with what we are told in other places in God’s Word.

In our society we use the terms *happiness* and *joy* interchangeably. Real joy, however, is deeper than happiness; it is eternal, and it is rooted in God. Psalm 16:11 says, “You will fill me with joy in your presence” (NIV). The English Standard Version makes it clearer, “In your presence there is fullness of joy.” It is only those who are in relationship with God that can experience true joy.

Joy is a fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22). That fruit is produced only if we are born of God’s Spirit, and it is manifested only as we remain, or abide, in Christ (see John 15:5). Then, as God’s love grows within us, our joy increases as we see others come to truly know and walk in fellowship with Jesus Christ (see Philippians 2:1-2).

True joy is eternal and is not dependent on external circumstances. Billy Graham said, “When we come to Jesus Christ, He does not promise to exempt us from trouble or sorrow. Tears will come, but deep inside there will be a joy that is difficult to explain. It is a joy from God—produced by the Holy Spirit. In the midst of trials and agony and tears, which come to us all, a supernatural power is given out, producing joy.”⁴

Truth vs. Lies

Human nature has not changed since John wrote this letter. Humanity, as a whole, is still self-seeking; it still rejects the truth and follows lies. The letter John wrote to encourage believers to know and walk in the truth is as applicable today as it was at the end of the first century.

There are innumerable lies that we can believe, often mixed with just enough truth to sound right, but there is only one truth—God’s truth. John MacArthur wrote, “Federal agents don’t learn to spot counterfeit money by studying the counterfeits. They study genuine bills until they master the look of the real thing. Then when they see the bogus money they recognize it.”⁵ As you continue to read and study 1 John, ask God to help you recognize lies and counterfeit “truths” that are presented to you. Pay attention to God’s truth, and ask Him to help you understand it and apply it to your life.

1. Read Genesis 2-3 for the full story.

2. If you need more information, turn to page 4, or speak with your Bible study leader, your pastor, or a Christian friend.

3. *NIV Study Bible*, text note on 1 John 1:4.

4. Billy Graham Evangelistic Association website, Daily Devotion, “Joy in Sorrow,” October 19, 2016.

5. John F. MacArthur. *Reckless Faith* (Crossway Books, 1994)

Third Day: Review 1 John 1:5—2:2.

John now begins to refute one of the falsehoods put forth by the Gnostics: their indifference to sin and their belief that what they did with their bodies didn't affect their spiritual state.

1. a. John doesn't leave any room for doubt about his meaning. What does he say in 1 John 1:6 about those who claim to have fellowship with God, but walk¹ in darkness?

b. What does he say in 1 John 1:8,10 about those who claim they have not sinned?

2. a. How does Isaiah 53:6 describe another way to walk, other than God's way?

b. Personal: When we choose our own way rather than God's way, we walk in darkness. Only when we walk in His way do we walk in the light and have fellowship with Him. Have you been deceiving yourself by going your own way instead of His and thinking it didn't matter? What will you do about this?

3. a. Read the Gospel of John 3:19-21. Light reveals and exposes. From verse 19, what attitude do people in general² have toward darkness? Why?

b. Who hates the light? (John 3:20a)

c. Why won't they come into the light? (John 3:20b)

d. Who comes into the light? Why? (John 3:21)

4. Read Ephesians 5:8-13, which is addressing Christians. What instructions are given to the believer?

1. "Walk" describes a person's lifestyle—how they live their life on a daily basis.

2. Romans 3:10, 23 tell us there is no one who is righteous, that all people are sinners.

5. Personal: God is perfect. All that is true—both knowledge and wisdom—all that is righteous and holy, and all that pertains to life and living has its source in God. There are those, even today, who act as though sin doesn't matter. They think that God is their "good buddy," "pal," or "friend upstairs," and that He will simply overlook sin. After reading today's Scriptures, what do you think about this?

Fourth Day: Review 1 John 1:5—2:2.

1. Remember that John is writing to Christians. He plainly states that one cannot have fellowship with God and walk in darkness. What transpires when we walk in the light? (1 John 1:7)
2. What does Ephesians 1:7 say regarding the blood of Jesus?
3. a. John has been speaking of the relationship we can have with God because of what Jesus has done for us. Read Colossians 1:21-22. What did Jesus accomplish for us by His death?

b. By faith in what Jesus accomplished, we partake in these blessings (see Ephesians 2:8-9) and are born of His Spirit (see Gospel of John 3:1-18; 1 Peter 1:23). From Colossians 1:23, what is our responsibility?
4. Personal: We are forgiven and reconciled to God by faith in what Jesus Christ accomplished. We continue to live and walk through life by faith in Him. Write Colossians 1:21-22 again, inserting your own name. Now take a moment to truly thank Him.

Fifth Day: Review 1 John 1:5—2:2.

While pointing out the falsehood that sin isn't an issue for Christians, John does not leave his readers feeling hopeless.

1. a. Once again, remember that John is writing to Christians. One definition of the word *sin* is "to miss the mark."¹ When a person throws a dart at a target, they aim for the center, a bull's-eye. If they don't hit the center, they missed the mark. The standard we are to be measured by, to aim for, is God's standard—perfection (see Matthew 5:48). Although we are forgiven, we are not yet perfect. We continue to "miss the mark." As Christians, what are we to do when we sin? (1 John 1:9a)

b. What will the Lord do? (1 John 1:9b)

1. Dr. James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, word number 264.

2. Read Proverbs 28:13. What do we learn about the one who attempts to conceal their sin? What must they do to receive mercy?

3. a. God sees the attitude of our heart (see 1 Samuel 16:7b). In 2 Corinthians 7:10 we learn there are two types of sorrow, godly and worldly. God wants us to see, acknowledge, and turn from our sin. Read Psalm 32:2-5, which was written by David, of whom God said, "I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart" (Acts 13:22). From Psalm 32:3-4, describe David's experience when he didn't acknowledge or confess his sin to the Lord.

b. What transpired when David confessed his sin to the Lord? (Psalm 32:5)

c. Who does David say is blessed? (Psalm 32:1-2)

4. a. Challenge: Read Psalm 51, which David wrote when the prophet Nathan confronted him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. What was David's attitude regarding his sin in Psalm 51:1-4?

b. What did David want God to do for him? (Psalm 51:7-12)

5. Personal: Do you have unconfessed sin in your life? Perhaps you've been trying to deceive yourself by *saying* it isn't sin, but you *know* that it is. Won't you go to the Lord right now, acknowledging your sin, and ask His forgiveness? Remember, He has promised both to forgive you and to cleanse you of all unrighteousness if you are trusting in Jesus for your salvation.

Sixth Day: Review 1 John 1:5—2:2.

1. a. In 1 John 2:1, John addresses those he is writing to as "my dear children." In the New Testament, this is a term of kindly address by teachers to their disciples.¹ What does John say is another reason he is writing to them? (1 John 2:1a)

1. *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, word number 5040.

- b. What hope is there for the one who does sin? (1 John 2:1b-2)
2. An *advocate* is “one who pleads another’s cause before a judge, a pleader, counsel for defense, legal assistant...one who pleads another’s cause with one, an intercessor.”¹ What do you learn about this from the following verses?
- Romans 8:34
- 1 Timothy 2:5-6a
3. Read Hebrews 9:12 and 1 Peter 3:18a. How completely did Jesus’ death take care of sin—past, present, and future?
4. a. In 1 John 2:2, the Greek word translated *atoning sacrifice* “speaks of a sacrifice that satisfies the righteous wrath of God. Without this appeasement all people are justly destined for eternal punishment.”² From 1 John 2:2, for whose sin was Jesus the atoning sacrifice?
- b. What do you learn about this from the Gospel of John 3:16-17?
5. Challenge: What do you learn about the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ from Romans 3:25-26?
6. Personal: Our sin has been thoroughly dealt with on the cross. We can live in fellowship with God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. Write a prayer or psalm of thanks to God!

1. *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, word number 3875.

2. *NIV Study Bible Notes* on Romans 3:25. *Hilasmos* in 1 John 2:2 is closely related to *hilasterion* in Romans 3:25. (See question #5.)