
1 John

Study Guide / Lesson 1

Introduction: Background on 1John

The First Letter (epistle) of John is tender, reassuring, affectionate, and practical. Though filled with theological content, it is like an epistle written by a pastor to his congregation. In days past, letters were *the* pathways of communication—documents that often recorded history or described scenes or situations so graphically that they spoke clearly to coming generations. First John, written to people of the early church, is such a letter. Now a part of our Holy Scriptures, it continues to be relevant. For centuries it has been classified as a general epistle because it is not addressed to one specific person or church and because the message is applicable to all believers.

Of all the New Testament books, only the letter to the Hebrews and this epistle begin without a formal salutation and statement of authorship. Christian tradition states that the Apostle John authored it—as well as his Gospel and two other epistles—probably while living and teaching in Ephesus (modern Turkey). Fragments of his Gospel found in Egypt have been dated in the last half of the first century, and internal evidence suggests that it was written before the epistles. There is no mention in either of the persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor Domitian in A.D. 95. Thus reliable tradition dates the time of writing of this epistle around A.D. 90, when John was between 80 and 90 years of age. He had lived a full life and would not be martyred as the others (James, Peter, and Paul) had been. Instead, he would be exiled to the Greek island of Patmos before he died. While there, he received personal revelations from the Lord which he wrote down as the book of Revelation—the final book in the New Testament.

In his youth, John had a fiery temper (Luke 9:54) and was apparently brash and loud (Mark 3:17). Yet he is also known as the disciple “*whom Jesus loved*” (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). His mother and his brother James were also followers of Jesus. The two brothers were working in the family fishing business on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus called them to follow Him. John's love for Christ mellowed his personality as he aged, for this epistle glows with patience and love. Now, as a beloved elder pastor in Ephesus, John was concerned for the young churches of Asia, seeing the pitfalls for new believers. He knew the dangers of heretical teachings that were creeping in to “*deceive the elect—if that were possible*” (Mark 13:22)—and wanted to warn them! He would write a letter to be circulated among all the churches: one that could be read long after his physical voice was stilled, one warning and instructing them on how to recognize evil and know the Truth—how to arm themselves with God's light, love, and life. And so the letter we know as 1John flowed from his pen, inspired by God's Holy Spirit.

This letter contains theological, moral, and social tests to destroy false assurance but confirm genuine faith. John asserts that if you believe that Jesus is the Son of God who came in the flesh, if you live a righteous life and habitually express love consistent with God's character, you can be sure that you are God's child. We live in an age of much erroneous doctrine and little righteousness or genuine love. The result is confusion—not certainty—about eternal life in the minds of many. The assurance gained by studying 1John can give believers great joy and peace, as well as boldness in approaching God and telling others about Him. Here John points the way to the “narrow road” spoken of in Matthew 7:13-14 that leads to real faith. In short, this book can do for us exactly what the author designed it to do for the original recipients.



Think About It: Heresy (error in doctrine) and wrong conduct destroy Christian fellowship with God and with each other. Fellowship implies that those who share it are "fellows" in a common interest. Since Christians are fellows together in the faith, anything that threatens the faith of one of us threatens the entire fellowship. John's letters are full of instructions for the fellowship—about holding to the truth, caring for each other, getting along together, and bearing one another's burdens. Our fellowship is a gift from God. We need it and we must treasure it!

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The main heresy threatening to destroy the spiritual life of young believers under John's care was Gnosticism, which denied that Jesus was fully human. It was based on the idea that spirit was good but matter (*every* material thing, including the human body) was evil. This heresy is an interesting contrast to the most prevalent heresy today—that Jesus as an historical man was a great teacher and even a prophet—but nothing more. Gnosticism taught the opposite: that Jesus Christ could not have been a real human being since all physical beings are matter, and matter is totally evil. The Gnostics concluded that Jesus Christ was only a spiritual entity and that what people had seen was merely a phantom! The end result of either heresy—Jesus Christ as only man or Jesus Christ as only God—equally deprives us of our Savior, our salvation, our hope that is so beautifully expressed in John 3:16: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

God loves you and me so much that He sent His only Son to become one of us, a human being. It was only by becoming human that He could be tempted in every way as we are (Hebrews 4:15). Yet He chose not to sin, and by dying willingly on the cross, He became our substitute, taking the punishment we deserve (Philippians 2:6-8). All that God requires of us if we are to receive pardon and eternal life is to accept Christ's sacrifice, believing God for the free gift of salvation (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8-9). If Jesus Christ were only man and never God, His death would mean no more for any of us than the death of any good person. How could a mere human's death possibly atone for the sins of the whole world? If Jesus Christ were only God and never man, He could not take our punishment on the cross because He had to be human and yet live a perfect life in order to be our substitute. The good news is that Jesus was both human and divine, man and God in one. *“He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory”* (1Timothy 3:16). Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, wrote of Jesus: *“For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form”* (2:9). Jesus is Lord!

We will study 1John according to the following subdivisions:

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|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| 1. INTRODUCTION                       | Background; John's reason for writing          |
| 2. THE WORD AMONG US (1:1-4)          | The defining of Jesus as the Son of God        |
| 3. WALKING IN THE LIGHT (1:5-2:6)     | The joy of walking in fellowship with God      |
| 4. EVIDENCES OF THE NEW LIFE (2:7-29) | How to live as God's children and defeat Satan |
| 5. GOD'S LOVE PERSONIFIED (3:1-24)    | God's love at work in the believer's life      |
| 6. TRUTH AND ERROR (4:1-21)           | How truth reveals itself in contrast to error  |

**Personal Summary:** Imagine if the loving Apostle John were alive today. Do you think he would communicate the same truths to us that we find in this letter? If so, would we need to hear and heed them? Most of us would probably say "Yes"; others may want to think about it. Let us then look more closely at this profound letter, 1John, and let it speak for itself.

# HOME STUDY QUESTIONS

## COMMENTARY REVIEW: Introduction

- 1) What in the first lesson excites you about continuing in this study of 1John?

## QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 2: The Word Among Us — 1John 1:1-4

As you begin your personal study of 1John, remember that the early Christians to whom the letter was sent were privileged to have as their mentor the Apostle John, who had lived with the man Jesus Christ intimately for three years and who had walked with Him in a spiritual sense for many decades since. John was their teacher and now is ours. He himself must have come close to experiencing personally the reality of Paul's prayer for the Ephesians:

*that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:17-19)*

Read 1John through, then reread 1John 1:1-4 along with the Gospel of John 1:1-18. (Before you start, ask God in prayer to help you understand what you are reading. Then answer the questions to the best of your ability; do not be concerned if some questions are difficult for you. Sharing your answers later with others in your group will be helpful to you, as will be the lecture that follows. The truths of the Bible will become clearer as you grow in understanding of the Lord's love, grace, and power.) Questions with an asterisk (\*) are for deeper thought.

## The Word, 1John 1:1-4 and the Gospel of John 1:1-18

- 2) a. Who is the Word?
- b. Why is He called the Word of life?
- c. How long has the Word been in existence?
- d. What is the light?
- e. How do we "walk" in the light?
- f. What are the results of walking in that light?
- g. What is the darkness?
- \*h. What is the present relationship between light and darkness?

- 3)
  - a. From these passages (1John 1:1-4 and the Gospel of John 1:1-18), record the details of John's personal experience with the Word (Jesus).
  
  - b. Have you had a personal experience with the Word? If so, please describe it.
  
- 4) What did John say concerning Christ's coming in human form?
  
- 5) What did he say about Christ's reception in the world?
  
- 6) What must *we* do to receive Him rightly?
  
- 7) Explain in your own words (or use a dictionary) the following results of receiving Him:
  - a. become children of God
  
  - \*b. born of God
  
  - c. receiving grace and truth
  
  - d. eternal life
  
  - e. fellowship with believers
  
  - f. fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ
  
  - g. joy
  
- 8)
  - a. How did John say we can "know" the Father?
  
  
  - b. Do you know the Father? If so, what difference does it make in your life?

**Personal Thought:** John ended this passage with "*We write this to make our joy complete*" (1John 1:4). By what means is this possible?

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# 1JOHN

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## Study Guide / Lesson 2 The Word Among Us

### Commentary on 1John 1:1-4

Within fifty years of the ascension of Jesus, heresies had crept into the church. John was undoubtedly disturbed by this, and wrote to remind Christians of the fundamentals of their faith and to warn them against these heresies which threatened to destroy the fellowship of believers. He stressed the unbreakable connection between possessing eternal life, believing the unadulterated truth, and practicing proper conduct. He begins by reminding his readers that he has *seen* and *heard* the truth he proclaims in the person of Jesus Christ. He insists that he has seen and actually touched with his hands the Incarnate Word of life. Similarly, the Apostle Peter wrote: "*We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty*" (2Peter 1:16).

John reminds them that all Christian fellowship is based upon Jesus Christ as proclaimed by the apostles and that all true joy is based upon that fellowship between God and man and the ensuing unity of believers (vv. 3-4). Knowing that his people clearly understood the truth and practiced it surely would have given John—as well as his "*dear children*" (2:1)—joy. Note the similarities between John's first letter and his Gospel, such as his emphasis on light (see John 1:1-5; 3:19-21; 8:12; 1John 1:5-7). Also, both the Gospel and the letter stress love as the hallmark of the Christian life (see John 14:15, 21, 23; 15:10, 12, 17; 1John 3:1, 11-18). However, their objectives differ. The purpose of John's Gospel is to introduce Jesus Christ as the Son of God so that those who believe in Him may have eternal life (John 20:31). The purpose of the epistle is to encourage those who *have* eternal life to enjoy it. 1John gives believers assurance about that life (5:13) and sets forth conditions for experiencing that assurance and the joy which results (1:4). Christians are clearly warned against both wrong beliefs and wrong conduct that might destroy their fellowship with God and with each other.

There are no new heresies—only old ones in new, different clothes. Those threatening the first-century church included Gnosticism (already mentioned) in two main forms: Docetism and the teachings of Cerinthus. Docetism comes from the Greek word *dokeo*, which means to seem or to imagine. Since in their minds all physical beings are matter, thus totally evil, the Docetic Gnostics concluded that Jesus Christ only *appeared* to be human! Some devastating consequences of this teaching are: (1) the Gospel records on the person and humanity of Jesus Christ could be false. What then in the Bible could we trust? And (2) if matter (physical and material) is impure and evil, why not let go and enjoy bodily sensations to the utmost since the spirit is all that matters? In fact, this is what the apostles saw people doing in their day. The teaching separating the physical from the spiritual removed restraints and led to licentiousness.

The Gnostic Cerinthus, who had a large following in Corinth, equated the divine nature with "Christ." He believed that the "Christ," or divine nature, can never suffer. According to him, Jesus was a perfect human being but truly "Christ" only for a time—that the divine nature of God descended upon Jesus at the time of His baptism and, just before He was crucified, left Him. This led people to disastrous, unbiblical conclusions, such as: (1) turning to a life of celibacy and rigid discipline because only the perfect can be indwelt by the divine nature of God. This contrasted totally to the teaching of Jesus and the apostles that all believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Or (2) it could



have the opposite effect, leading to negligence in the care of the body and gross immorality in the use of the body since the physical was thought to be without redeeming value. Finally, Gnosticism led to spiritual arrogance because it emphasized salvation by knowledge which (according to the Gnostics) gave them special spiritual insight. Some claimed that they had attained perfection, but the Apostle John refuted this idea, stating, *"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us"* (1John 1:8).

The theme throughout the letter is the assurance of salvation believers should have. Another strong theme is that of Jesus Christ Himself. Several cardinal doctrines about Him are found:

- the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ that is the heart of the Gospel (1:7; 2:2).
- the fact that Jesus Christ is God (5:20).
- the divine origin of Jesus Christ (1:1-2; 4:2-3; cf. John 1:1-4).
- Jesus Christ is a real human being (4:2-3).
- Jesus Christ is righteous, in Him is no sin (2:29; 3:5).
- Jesus Christ serves as our Mediator and Intercessor between God and ourselves (2:1-2).
- Jesus is the Messiah (2:22). This spoke particularly to the Jewish readers.
- Jesus will return to earth one day (2:28; 3:2).

**Think About It:** After completing our study of 1John, we will be familiar with Christology (the biblical teaching about the person of Jesus Christ) as well as the nature of man. John teaches the importance of living righteous lives, the necessity of being loving people. He makes it clear that no one can totally live up to God's perfect standard—we all fall short. That is why Jesus had to come and die in our place. Admitting that *about* ourselves *to* ourselves is difficult. Why not ask God to help you be open to learning the truth as it is written here in 1John?

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The Apostle explains why he writes about the wonderful Christ: *"that you also may have fellowship with us"* (v. 3a). The word used here is the Greek word *koinonia*, "to be associated in, to be a sharer in." To have fellowship with the Triune God means to be associated in that divine union, to be a sharer in God's wonderful resources! John goes on to say that *"our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ"* (v. 3b). How he must have longed for them to experience the same intimacy with Father and Son that he had! Another definition of *fellowship* is companionship (friendly association), so the implication in verse 3 is knowing God and being accepted by Him. John adds another reason for writing this letter: *"to make our joy complete"* (v. 4). What could fulfill him more—give him more joy—than introducing the Savior to others and helping them to find true fellowship with the living God and His Son, Jesus?

Personal Summary: "Knowing God" or having fellowship with Him is more than merely becoming a friend. The Bible teaches us that God the Father loves us so much that He wants us to come into His family to become His children and He will cherish us and care for us forever! The Bible teaches us that we are able to enter this blessed relationship through Jesus, God's Son. The Father and the Son both love us so much that the Son came into the world to witness to this love and to die to make the relationship possible. You will come upon these truths time and time again as you study the Bible but, for now, meditate on the following Scriptures:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1John 5:11-12)

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born, not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. (John 1:12)

Why not ask God to make you His child through Jesus Christ? Just ask—He'll do it!

HOME STUDY QUESTIONS

COMMENTARY REVIEW: The Word Among Us

- 1) What new fact have you learned about Jesus Christ from this lesson?

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 3: Walking in the Light — 1John 1:5-2:6

As you begin to do your questions, pray for guidance and insight. Read 1John 1:5-2:6 at one time and then read each suggested reference as you come to it. Please give Scripture references to indicate where your answers are found. Questions with an asterisk (*) are for deeper thought.

How Are We Walking? 1John 1:5-7; John 3:19-21; 8:12; 12:35-36

- 2) a. Why do some refuse to come to the light?

b. What is the condition under which these people walk?

c. Why do others come to the light?
- 3) *a. From John 8:12, what happens when we walk in the light?

b. From John 12:35-36, how do we become “sons of light”?

c. How would you describe your own walk?
- 4) *a. What is the test that demonstrates whether we are truly walking with God?

b. If we are *not* walking with God, how may our fellowship with Him be restored?

c. Read Romans 3:23; 6:23; 1Peter 1:18-19. What is God's cleansing agent and why is it necessary?

Let's Look at the Sin Question, 1John 1:8-10

- 5) If we do not acknowledge our sins, how are we
 - a. refusing to be honest with ourselves?
 - b. rejecting God and His Word?
- *6) a. What does the phrase “purify us from all unrighteousness” tell you about God's forgiveness?

- b. Do you think, after careful consideration of verse 9, that God forgives only the sins of which we are aware? Please explain your answer.

We Have an Advocate, 1John 2:1-2; Hebrews 4:14-16

- 7) a. The RSV uses the words *advocate* and *expiation*. Define these words, using a dictionary, if possible.
 - advocate:
 - expiation:
 - b. Why is Jesus Christ the only One qualified to be our advocate with the Father?
 - c. How does He help us as our advocate?
- 8) a. What is the process through which Jesus became the expiation for our sins?
(See Leviticus 17:11; Ephesians 1:7; Hebrews 9:22.)
- b. Why was this process necessary?
 - c. Using 1Peter 1:19 with John 1:29, explain the name John the Baptist used for Jesus.

Our Walk Must Match Our Talk, 1John 2:3-6

- 9) a. Describe the behavior of a genuine believer.
 - b. How does this manner of living produce assurance for us?
 - c. If we claim to know God but do not walk in His way, what is our condition?
 - d. What happens when we keep His Word?
 - e. Who is our example?
- 10) Do your responses to these questions give you assurance of your position in the Lord's family?
If not, what steps should you or will you take?

Personal Thought: True security comes from abiding in Christ and obeying Him. If we do this, we will be open and alert to the teaching of the Holy Spirit who will not lead us astray.