



Summary of 1 John

All five of the canonical writings attributed to the apostle John, the son of Zebedee, were written in the latter period of his life. He was quite young when he started following Jesus, probably no more than 20 years old, and was the only one of the original twelve who died of natural causes. However, he did suffer persecution and imprisonment, and eventually exile on the island of Patmos <<***because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus***>> (Revelation 1:9b).

It is accepted that John left Jerusalem, with Jesus' mother Mary, at the start of the Jewish-Roman war in AD67, which ended with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem along with much of the city and a final dispersion of the Jewish people. Historians report that between 580,000 and 1.1 million Jews died during the 3 year war but that no Christians were killed in Jerusalem during that time! This is despite the persecution they had faced under Nero, which started in AD64, resulting in the executions of Paul, Peter and thousands of other faithful disciples.

John settled in the thriving but idolatrous city of Ephesus, where Paul had built a strong church almost a decade earlier. It is believed that this letter was intended for the church in Ephesus and perhaps others that were established in the various cities in the Roman province of Asia.



The Roman province of Asia

Some commentators believe that John wrote to the churches to warn them of the dangers of proto-Gnosticism and Gnosticism, with the aim of exhorting them to remain steadfast in the truth of the Gospel message they had received.

Gnosticism had its heyday in the 2nd - 5th Centuries, making it unlikely that John had this in mind. John is neither anti-Gnostic nor anti-schismatic. John's focus is positive, not polemical. His aim is redemptive, not reactionary.

John urges readers to refine their theological understanding, sharpen their ethical rigour, and heighten their devotional intensity. That is, they must grow in faith, obedience, and love.

Chapter One

John opens the letter with one of the most eloquent and remarkable descriptions that gives evidence of Christ's excellent and divine character. For those who accept Christ their initial reward is to come into communion with him and with our heavenly Father. This is a reason for the joyful nature that should be apparent in all disciples.

John goes on to give the description of God that Jesus had passed to him especially that God is pure light. Although this is just one of the many characteristics of God, it is one that John wishes to make clear at the outset of his letter, as it is the light of God that penetrates the hearts of mankind to reveal their faith or their evil intent. Those who choose to live in that light will know what true life is.

No one should be foolish enough to be self-deceptive. It doesn't fool God but it portrays him as a liar, thus the Gospel has no place in their hearts. Those that choose to accept their fallen, sinful nature and come before God to confess their sins, accepting Christ, will be forgiven and be rewarded with eternal life in the presence of the Father.

Chapter Two

The letter did not have chapters and verses when John wrote it and the start of this chapter concludes John's remarks about Christian sinners. Having commented on those who claim not to sin, he now gives encouragement in the first two verses to those who recognise that they do still sin. Believers should thank God that Jesus is there as an intercessor when they do still sin. John goes on to show the knowledge and true love of God.

In the next section of this chapter, John deals with fraternal love, which is the natural outworking for those who have the love of Christ within them. Although John is giving the message that has always been known through original teaching, he also states that it is a new message, for there is renewal in God's love as it shines into the darkness.

John then gives a list of exhortations to believers, addressing them as children, young men and fathers, which may refer to the maturity of believers in their walk of faith. It certainly does not exclude women from the teaching.

John then moves on to give warnings, firstly against the seduction of the world and then instructs his readers to be wary of the antichrist, not just the devil, for they are in danger from all those that oppose the work of God. Although some believers will be tempted by what these people are offering, they only have to know that they have the power of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of Christ in their hearts, which will always protect them while they abide with God.

The chapter then ends just as a new section of the letter commences, in which John speaks of believers as being the true children of God.

Chapter Three

John continues with the theme that believers are genuine children of God, which started at the end of Chapter Two. John's initial comment is to show just what an amazing privilege it is for anyone to be designated in this way, and that it is a primary reason for them to be rejected by the world, for the world does not know Jesus for who he really is.

John notes that, at the Second Coming, believers will be like Christ in terms of the righteousness he gives and the love a believer shows to him and to everyone else. Therefore they need to prepare themselves for that event. Those who have the seed of God in their hearts will do all they can to refrain from further sin and will live their lives for God. Those who are not of God will show this by their lawless and sinful ways.

John then starts a new major section of the letter by returning to the theme of brotherly love, citing the historic case of Cain's fraternal murder to demonstrate the opposite of how a believer should feel and act toward his brother and sister in Christ. He reiterates that it is not a new command but the message that has been there since the beginning.

John also clearly states that such love and faith in Christ are not just a matter of the heart for they have to be demonstrated in the way a believer acts, with a clear demonstration of that love in their actions.

Just as Christ demonstrated his love by laying down his life, believers are to show that same love for others because they have passed through death into life by being in Christ. God knows the heart and if that love is in the heart then a believer not only has eternal life that the unbeliever does not have but will be able to stand in the presence of God without shame.

Chapter Four

In the opening section of this chapter John calls on his readers to show spiritual discernment when listening to those who come to teach them or communicate their ideas to them, because he knows that false prophets are among them. The key test is that anyone who proclaims the truth as given to them in the Gospel is of God. Anyone who denies the Gospel is not of God, but of the world, and he has the spirit of the antichrist. John concludes that: <<***this is how we recognise the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood***>> (v.6).

John's next assertion of how to tell who believers are is a test of love. Since God is love, he proved his love for his creation by sending his Son as a sacrificial offering of atonement for their sin, for all who would turn back to God through him; those that respond in that way can then be identified in that they too love God and their fellow believers.

John proclaims that God has given all true believers the Holy Spirit to indwell them. He also reminds them of his own eyewitness account of Christ's coming and sacrificial death. The theme continues that those who display love are of God but that those who do not have this love are not of God and remain in darkness and are

fearful. Those in Christ will need fear nothing on the Day of Judgement that will come upon the whole world.

Chapter Five

John continues on the theme of love but comes to it again with a different variation, for the love of God a believer has leads to the faith that is required to be obedient to him, which will then assure the believer that they have the victory and can endure whatever life and the world has to throw at them.

John then states that it is both God and the Spirit that give witness to Christ as being born of water and the blood. Those who have faith in Jesus as the Christ of God are preserved from the harmfulness of sin. They can be assured of the promises of God and will receive the reward of eternal life in the presence of God. Those who do not come to Christ will not have life.

John now concludes the letter in a non-standard way that brings a summary statement of the main issues addressed. People who sin are to turn to God through the Son to ask and receive forgiveness for that sin. Those who believe in the Son will be assured of that. The church is to pray for those that they see sinning so they too may come to forgiveness. There remains the polar situation of those who are of God and those who are of the evil one. Believers are to abstain from anything that is considered idolatrous.

John's letter has been a symphony of love that has addressed many and varied themes, moved away from them only to return, building up to the crescendo to exhort his readers to love and obey God then to demonstrate that love by loving each other; the true way of Christian life.

Whether it is said to a student writing a thesis or a person giving a public address or writing a report, the advice throughout the ages has always been:

- Tell them what you're going to tell them!
- Tell them!
- Tell them what you told them!

John's first epistle has done just that.