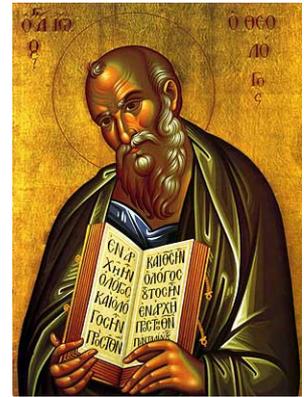


# 1 John

by Ross Callaghan

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- Author** John, one of Jesus' disciples and a leader of the early Church. John also wrote 2 and 3 John, the Gospel of John, and Revelation.
- Written to** Christians in churches around Ephesus.
- Date** Around 90 -95 AD when John was quite elderly. 1, 2 and 3 John were probably written just after John wrote his gospel.
- Place** Probably written in Ephesus.
- Type** Teaching, designed to counter heresies in the Church.
- Theme** Walking in the light. This involves having fellowship with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ; not walking in the darkness of sin; not loving the world; living as children of God; loving one another; and putting your faith in Jesus.
- Purposes** Gnostic teachings were starting to influence the Church, promoted by false teachers. John wrote to counter them by providing clear instruction about the essentials of the Christian faith. His purposes were to:
- encourage the early Christians to maintain their relationship with God, abide in Him, and walk in the light.
  - warn the early Christians about the false teachings, especially the "Cerinthian heresy", based on Docetism, a Gnostic philosophy. (Cerinthus said that Jesus could not have been God as He was a human being).
  - refocus the early Christians on the essential truths of their faith: personal knowledge of God, fellowship with God and with other believers, love, purity, obedience to the leading of the Spirit, eternal life, discernment in regard to false teaching, and acknowledgment that Jesus Christ is both God and man.

## Themes

### Love

We are to love others as God loved us in Christ. When we love we don't just talk about it; we act for the good of others. If we truly love it shows we have been saved and are God's children.

### God's children

We become God's children by believing in Christ. When we do this we become part of God's family and have wonderful access to God, and His protection and support.

### Truth

False teachers had denied that Jesus was God, and taught that the physical body was unimportant, leading to lack of moral restraints. We must recognise the truth and not be led astray by false teachings. We are to walk in the truth.

### Sin

When we sin we are to confess our sins, be forgiven and walk in righteousness. In Christ we are righteous in God's eyes, but in our daily lives we are to resist sin and be righteous.

### Assurance

God is in control! As a result we can have assurance of eternal life and victory over sin.

## Key verses

*Our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. 1:3.*

*If we walk in the light, as He is in the light we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin. 1:9.*

*Do not love the world or anything in the world. If you love the world, love for the Father is not in you. 2:15.*

*See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. 3:1.*

*This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. 4:2,3.*

*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 4:7-11.*

## Outline

1 John is not in letter form and does not have a logical development like many of the other New Testament books. Rather it is a series of thoughts around the theme of 'walking in the light'.

### Fellowship with God and with other Christians 1:1-4

1 John begins in a similar way to John's Gospel and the letter to the Hebrews. John states that he has heard, seen, and touched *the Word of life*. i.e. Jesus who was *with the Father and has appeared to us*.

He is proclaiming this so we may have fellowship with him and *with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ*. This will make John's *joy complete*.

The word for fellowship here is *koinonia*. It is also translated as *communion, communication, participation, and sharing*. So fellowship with God and with other Christians is an intimate communion in which we communicate and share, heart to heart. It is a deep two-way love relationship!

### Walking in the light 1:5-2:2

The central point John is making is this: *God is light*. God is completely and fully light. *In him there is no darkness at all*. Coming from this truth are a number of significant implications:

- Walking in the light enables us to have fellowship with God. It is not possible to *walk in the darkness* and have fellowship with God. If we claim anything different *we lie and the truth is not in us*.
- Everybody has sinned but the blood of Jesus *purifies us from all sin*.
- Walking in the light requires cleansing from sin. We must confess our sins and then He is *faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness*.
- If we deny that we sin we are effectively saying that God is a liar, and this proves God's word *has no place in our lives*.
- Walking in the light also results in fellowship with other believers.



### Christians who sin

These verses highlight a real problem that many Christians face. We know that Jesus has taken all of our sins upon Himself (at the Cross), and now our sins are forgiven, we are righteous in His sight, and we are able to have fellowship with our righteous God. *God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21.*

Yet we know we are still sinners! If we sin does this mean that the work Jesus accomplished at the Cross doesn't count? No! John tells us that we should always walk in the light. That means keeping very short accounts with God. If we sin we should immediately confess our sin and come back into right relationship with God. Then He will *forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness*. We are righteous in God's sight (in Christ) – always! But we also need to repent of all sin, seek forgiveness, and walk with God in righteousness in our daily lives.

John writes these things so that we *will not sin*. But if we do sin *we have one who speaks to the father in our defence – 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.*

### Obeying the Lord 2:3-14

We will know that we are in relationship with God *if we obey His commands*. It's not enough to just say "I love Him". If we say this and don't obey Him we are lying and the truth is not in us. But if we obey Him it *shows God's love is truly made complete* in us. We must obey Him! That's how we will know we are in Him. *Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did.*

This is nothing new. But if we obey the Lord and love others it will make our light shine out into the darkness. This is already happening. *The darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.* But all of us – children, fathers, young men.... all of us must love others and do nothing to make them stumble. If we don't do this it shows we are still in the darkness. If we do, it shows we are walking in the light.

### Loving the world 2:15-17

Another aspect of walking in the light is to *not love the world or anything in it*. If we love the world we can't be loving the Lord.

The world is described as:

- the cravings of sinful people
- the lust of their eyes
- their boasting about what they have and do.

These things *do not come from the Father, but from the world*. They are transitory and will pass away, *but the will of God lives forever.*

### Jesus, the Son of God 2:18-27

John states *that this is the last hour* and that *the antichrist is coming*. Indeed, he says, many antichrists have already come. They were part of the fellowship but have now left, showing that *none of them belonged to us*.

(The early Church believed that Jesus would be returning soon. This eschatological belief underpins the teaching in most of the New Testament books).

So who is an antichrist? *It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Messiah. Such a person is the antichrist – denying the Father and the Son. No-one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.*

The false teachers were saying that Jesus was not the Messiah, and that, because He was a man, He couldn't be God. This was based on the Gnostic philosophy that God is spirit and is entirely good and that matter is entirely evil. Cerinthus was an example of this kind of thinking. In what came to be known as the Cerinthian heresy he said that the Christ came to Jesus at baptism, guided him in His ministry, but left him at the crucifixion. The Docetists were another group who taught that Jesus was like a phantom. He didn't actually exist and His life, death and resurrection were just illusions. The Docetist philosophy died out relatively quickly, but Gnostic philosophies continued to seriously influence the Church as its doctrines were being established, and still underpin the thinking of some liberal Churches and political systems today.

John says that he is *writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray*. He wants us *to see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what He promised us – eternal life.*

The way that we will know whether something is true or not is by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. *But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. The anointing you received from Him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as His anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in Him.*

Not loving the world is a big issue for many Christians. We are supposed to be the light of the world (Matthew 5:14) so we must be in the world, and interact with all of the world's systems. We can't help this anyway! Jesus prays that we would not be taken out of the world; rather that we would be protected from its evils. John 17:15. The key is to be "in the world, but not of it". In other words not conform to the world, Romans 12:2; recognise that love for the world is hatred towards God James 4:4, and live differently from those in the world. 2 Corinthians 10:3. Ultimately whatever is born of God overcomes the world, 1 John 5:4, and *the world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.* 1 John 2:17.

This is very challenging when most people (including Christians) are so materialistic.

**The anointing** Greek *chrisma* – unction, anointing,

When you have an anointing the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you sense His presence. eg. by a lift in your spirit, a sense of peace, a feeling of assurance, a raising of your heartbeat, warmth, tingling.... Along with the anointing you will have a sense of what God is saying. More often that not it will be just an understanding rather than specific sentences. The meaning will become clear in your mind and you might say “*God spoke to me...*” or “*I just know it was the Lord...*”

The anointing comes from the Holy Spirit, is communicated to your spirit, and is then understood in your mind. It is one of the main ways that God will guide you, so that you know His truths, and what He wants you to do.



### Being God's children 2:28-3:10

We are to continue in Him so that when He appears we may be confident and unashamed before Him at His coming.

We have been *born of Him*. This means that we are God's children. *What love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God*. He is righteous and we can know we are His children because we do what is right.

John now explains some of the implications of being children of God.

- The world does not recognise us as God's children because they don't know Him.
- We are growing as Christians. *What we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.*
- Becoming like Jesus gives us hope, and this helps us to stay pure.
- We will not *continue to sin* because *God's seed is in us* and we *cannot go on sinning*, because we have been born of God. This is in contrast to those who deliberately sin, and thus break the law. They are *of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning*. But Jesus came to *destroy the devil's work*.
- We can recognise those who are children of God and those who are children of the devil. *Those who do not do what is right are not God's children; nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.*

To be a child of God is a wonderful privilege. We know that God loves us; we are part of His family, and that He will always look after us. Not only that, we will spend eternity with Him!

### Loving one another 3:11-24

*For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. We should not be like Cain who murdered his brother, and we should not be surprised if the world hates us for it. We know we have passed from death to life, because we love one another. Anyone who does not love remains in death.* So if a Christian hates another Christian they are like murderers and *no murderers have eternal life in them*.

We know what love is because *Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another.* Our love should not be *with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth*. For example *If any of you has material possessions and sees a sister or brother in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you?*

We know we are not very good at loving like this, and our hearts often *condemn us*. But *God is greater than our hearts, and He knows everything*. If we *keep His commands and do what pleases Him – believe on the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another* - then we will know that we *belong to the truth* and our *hearts will be at rest in His presence*. This is because *those who keep His commands live in Him, and He is them*. And how do we know that He lives in us? *We know it by the Spirit He gave us*.

Loving one another is not optional for Christians. It is an essential part of what being a Christian is all about, and proves our genuineness. It's true that some fellow believers may not be very lovable, and some may treat us poorly – but our responsibility is to love them, regardless.

Jesus' *new commandment* was that we should *love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another*. Further He said that *By this will everyone know you are my disciples, if you love one another*. John 13:34,35.

## Testing the spirits 4:1-6

In response to the false teachings about Jesus, John now provides a test by which we can know whether a spirit is from God. *There are many false prophets in the world but this is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist which is already in the world.*

If we are in Christ we are from God and have overcome them, because greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world. The antichrists are from the world and speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. But we are from God and those who know God listen to us, but whoever is not from God does not listen to us.

Jesus is both God and man.

John also said this in his gospel: *The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* John 1:14.

God came to us in the flesh in Jesus Christ. This directly contradicts Gnostic teachings that say God is spirit and is perfectly good, and people are flesh and are evil.

**Acknowledgement that Jesus is God is a central truth of Christianity. Hinduism recognises that Jesus is a God, and Islam that He is a Prophet. But John shows us that there can be no compromise on this matter. Jesus Christ is God incarnate!**

## Loving God 4:7-21

We now come to one of the greatest statements about love ever written.

*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed His love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us.* 4:7-12

- God is love.
- God showed that He loves us by sending His Son Jesus as the sacrifice for our sins.
- Love comes from God.
- We are able to love because God, who is love, is within us and His love is made complete in us.
- As God loves us, we are to love one another.

So for Christians, being born of God, loving God, knowing God, and loving others are all powerfully intertwined. And they all have their source in one place: the love of God! *God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.*

But how can we know that we live in Him, and He is us?

- He has given us the Holy Spirit.
- We have been saved. *We have seen that the Father sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world.*
- We have experienced God's love and proved that it is consistent and reliable.

As a result

- We have confidence about the day of judgment.
- We lose our fear because *there is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*
- We are able to love others. *We love because He first loved us.*
- We are shown to be liars if we don't love our brothers and sisters and yet say "I love God."

## Believing in Jesus 5:1-12

John now brings his teaching about Jesus together in a series of strong statements. They are designed to show conclusively that Jesus is God, that He is the Son of God, that He is the Christ, that He came in the flesh and that the only way to have eternal life is to believe in Him. All of this contrasts with what the false teachers had been saying.

What are the results of our faith? Believing in Jesus means:

- we are born of God.
- we know we are children of God.
- we have a responsibility to love other Christians, and to obey God's commands, but this is not burdensome.
- we have a victory that overcomes the world.
- we have a testimony in our hearts.
- we have eternal life.



*And this is the testimony: 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.*

And this is all authenticated by the God Himself! *There are three that testify: the Spirit; the water and the blood.* God sent His Son to the earth. Jesus was a man and went through the *water* of baptism. Jesus shed His *blood* on the Cross but rose again victorious over death. Jesus sent the Holy *Spirit* who now lives in us. *The Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.*

John's case about Jesus is now proved! *Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*

### **Concluding remarks 5:13-21**

John reminds his readers why he was writing: *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.*

This gives us the confidence to approach God and *we know that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of Him.* (This is not a promise that every prayer we pray will be answered. We must ask according to His will. The key to answered prayer is to know God's will and pray accordingly).

It also lays a responsibility on us not to sin. If we see another Christian sinning we must pray for them *that God would give them life*; regardless of whether it a *sin that leads to death*. (This could refer to the 'unpardonable sin' of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Matthew 12:31). *All wrong doing is sin and we know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them.*

*We are children of God. At present the whole world is under the control of the evil one but the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him who is true.*

John has strongly affirmed that Jesus is God throughout his writing. He finishes with yet another affirmation; this time of both the Father and the Son: *And we are in Him who is true by being in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.* Because God is God we must keep ourselves from anything that would seek to diminish this: *Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.*

## Discussion questions

A common theme in 1, 2 and 3 John is 'walking in the truth'. Why was this so important for John and the early Christians? What does it mean to walk in the truth? How do you know that you are walking in the truth?

Truth is not a very relevant concept in today's pluralistic world. Morality is seen to be relative; people can believe what they like and it is true for them, and tolerance is a great virtue. But, what is truth? What are the essential truths of the Christian faith? How can Christians proclaim the truth (as John did) without being seen as bigoted, narrow and negative?

One of the central aspects John addresses is false teaching, especially teaching that was coming from Gnostic philosophers. What were the false teachings that he addressed? Why were these kinds of teachings so influential in the early Church? Are these kinds of teachings still around today? Are they influential today? If so, in what areas? How can we be aware of false teachings and protect ourselves from them?

Identify each time that John starts a sentence with "We know ...". What was he so sure about? Why was it so important that he was sure about these areas? Do you have equivalent confidence in these areas that you can say with John "I know"?

We know that Christians are righteous in Christ, yet we all sin. What should we do when we sin? Why do we sin after all that God has done for us in Christ? How does our sinning affect:

- the way God sees us?
- the way we react when we sin?
- our attitude to sin?
- our behaviour when we see others sin?
- our eternal future?

What does it mean to be a child of God? Identify all the rights and responsibilities of being a child of God that are mentioned in 1 John. What are the implications of these in our Christian lives?

1 John contains some of the Bible's most powerful teaching about love. What does it say about:

- God's love for us?
- our love for God?
- the way we love others?

What have you learned from your study of 1 John? How will you apply this in your life?