

Jesus *and the* Johannine Letters



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Skim over the three epistles of John.*

Memory Text: “And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14, NKJV).

False teachers spreading error among the saints? Deviant views on the nature of Christ? Power struggles in the church? Theological errors spreading in the pews? Folk needing assurance of salvation? Others needing to know that faith must lead to obedience to the law?

Sounds like our church today, right?

These, however, were some of the issues that John dealt with almost two thousand years ago in his three short epistles in the New Testament.

How true were Solomon's words, “There is nothing new under the sun” (*Eccles. 1:9, NKJV*)!

John, though, does not concentrate on the problems only. He points to God the Father and the Son; he portrays who They are and what They have done for us, and thus what we must do in response.

The Week at a Glance: Why do we believe that John wrote these epistles? To whom was he writing? What were his concerns? How does he address those concerns? What does John tell us about Jesus? What promises can we take away from these books?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 4.*

From Whom and to Whom—Author and Recipients

The first epistle of John begins without formal introduction. For whatever reason, the author does not introduce himself. The second and third letters mention as the author a person called only “the elder.” They also inform us to whom they are addressed—an elect lady and also someone named Gaius. This information is not extensive and leaves open a number of questions; nevertheless, from the letters themselves, we can learn about the one who wrote them.

Common style and vocabulary seem to indicate that the author of 1, 2, and 3 John is the same. What do these three letters tell us about him? As you read, focus on, among other things, some of the terms that he uses for those he addressed in the letters (*1 John 1:1–3; 2:1, 18; 4:4; 2 John 1, 12; 3 John 1, 13, 14*).

Obviously the author had been an eyewitness to Jesus. He also seemed to have had an intimate relationship with the church members to whom he wrote, because he called them “little children,” an expression of endearment. He maintained a leadership position in the church and more than once said that he eventually hoped to visit those to whom he was writing. The close resemblance of phrases and themes to the Gospel of John, as well as the testimony of church fathers, reveal that he was the apostle John.

All this brings up a very important point: How important that we seek to develop a kind, caring, loving relationship with those around us. It’s very clear from these letters that John loved and cared about these people and that He wanted to see them strong in the Lord. There can be little doubt that the love he expressed for them only strengthened, greatly, the power of his words. What an important lesson for all who seek to be witnesses for Jesus and the truths He has given us as a church.

It’s one thing to have a knowledge about the nature of God, the plan of salvation, the Second Coming, and the right Sabbath day. But what happens to our witness if our lives don’t reflect the love and character of the God who created these truths? Maybe you have propositional truth? That’s good, but how much love and concern for others come with your expression of that truth?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *1 John 1:5–7*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that Jesus’ sacrifice and intercession for us impact how we live here and now.

Feel: Confident that we can live a positive, Christian life in Jesus.

Do: Develop kind, caring relationships.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. Know: Jesus’ Sacrifice Requires a Response

A In what ways does Jesus’ sacrifice and intercession affect our attitude toward sin?

B How does His sacrifice impact our moral behavior?

C How does our response to Jesus’ sacrifice affect our relationships with others?

II. Feel: Have a Positive Attitude

A “God is Light” and offers us a life in the light; yet, we sometimes fail to live in that light. What gets in the way?

B What impact does living in the Light have on how we feel about those around us, both Christians and non-Christians?

C In what ways can focusing on the Light help us to feel positive about people and situations?

III. Do: Caring for Others

A In what practical ways can we deal with the discrepancies between how Jesus treated people and how we often do?

B List as many ways as possible how we can be loving and lovable Christians.

▶ **Summary:** John meets false teachings head on, by focusing on the positive truth of Jesus’ sacrifice and intercession for us. Our understanding of what Jesus has done will be reflected in warm, loving relationships with others.

What—The Content of the Epistles

In the first letter of John we find a number of important topics, even if the apostle does not seem to move forward in any kind of linear progression. This observation has led some scholars to conclude that John presents his arguments in a cyclic way; that is, he revisits his topics but from different angles. Thus, the same things are being discussed but from various perspectives.

Read 2 John 1–13. Follow his line of thought:

2 John 1–3 _____

2 John 4 _____

2 John 5, 6 _____

2 John 7–11 _____

2 John 12, 13 _____

In 2 John the apostle expresses his thankfulness that the lady’s children walk in the truth. He also talks about love and obedience and then focuses on the false teachers that he already mentioned in his first letter. He employs again the term *antichrist*. In his conclusion John expresses the desire to visit his audience. He also transmits greetings.

How does 3 John relate to the previous two letters, which deal with false teachers who are not mentioned in John’s last epistle? It is conceivable that all three letters deal with a similar situation but from different perspectives. While 1 John and 2 John warn against false teachers, 3 John may show how in one particular instance church leadership tried to control the problem.

In many parts of the world, the idea of doctrinal orthodoxy sounds so medieval; it reminds people of such things as the Inquisition, when folk were tortured and killed because they weren’t orthodox enough in their theology. Hence, many shy away from the idea of orthodoxy altogether, arguing instead that all you need is love, regardless of teaching. John, though, whatever his strong emphasis on love, didn’t shy away from dealing with theological error. What should this tell us regarding how we should act in the face of theological error in our own church?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: John's letters emphasize the true nature and mission of Jesus. He wrote them to help us experience the joy and the assurance of salvation.

Just for Teachers: John's letters are among the last of the New Testament writings. Read through them in one sitting to get a sense of the apostle's burden for the church. Focus on the theme common to the letters and lead the class to understand what the joy and the assurance of salvation means.

Discuss: One important feature of the three epistles is the emphasis on the uniqueness of Christianity. The author does this through a series of contrasts: light and darkness (*1 John 1:6*); Christ and antichrist (*1 John 2:18, 2 John 7*); truth and falsehood (*1 John 2:4*); being of God and being in the world (*1 John 4:4, 5*); the spirit of truth and the spirit of error (*1 John 4:6*). Are such contrasts absolute? Or are there gray areas in between the extremes? Give reasons for your answers.

Discover: Ask members to read 1 John 1:4; 2:1; 2:26, 27; 5:13; 2 John 4; 3 John 2 and discover the purpose of John's letters.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: Imagine you are nearing the end of your life, and you want to write a last letter to your loved ones. What would your letter contain? What kind of emotions will run through your letter? Now help your class experience John's feelings as you begin studying one of the last writings of the New Testament.

Bible Commentary

Who wrote the epistles, and why? What is the central message of the three epistles? As you explore these questions, focus on the authority, the message,

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Why—The Purpose of Writing These Letters

Repeatedly, John tells us why he wrote his first letter. What is he saying?

1 John 1:4 _____

1 John 2:12–14 _____

1 John 5:13 _____

All these statements are positive and reaffirming. However, the context shows that they must be understood within the context of serious problems in the churches to which 1 John was addressed. This letter makes strong statements about false teachers. They are called *antichrists*. The term is found four times in 1 John and once in 2 John. Otherwise, it is not used anywhere else in the Bible.

These antichrists had erroneous ideas about Jesus Christ, ideas that also affected their Christian lifestyle. John, obviously, felt the need to deal with these teachings, and he did so in a powerful and uncompromising manner.

Nevertheless, the author portrays a positive picture of true Christianity and focuses on its positive nature. In countering the theological error and the ethical error of the false teachers, John argues in favor of the unity of Father and Son, acceptance of divine forgiveness, and a life governed by the principle of love.

While he encourages church members and warns against inadequate views of Christ and Christian behavior, he may even hope to win back some of those who have left the church.

In 2 John and 3 John, the reasons he wrote the letters are not mentioned, but those reasons are discernible. The purpose of 2 John is to warn church members against the erroneous teachings and ethics of the false teachers mentioned in 1 John.

According to 3 John a power struggle was going on. Diotrephes was attempting to usurp all authority. Apparently by using the problem of heresy, he was trying to establish his own power base.

Though not downplaying the seriousness of these false teachings, John deals with them by emphasizing the positive. There is an important principle here for us. How easy it is to get so caught up in fighting error that we focus on it instead of truth. What's your own way of dealing with what you deem wrong? Do you focus on the error at the expense of truth? How can you start training yourself to deal with problems in a more positive manner?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

and the purpose of the epistles. As you explore, keep in mind that God’s revelation is timeless and stands as a guiding light in times of chaos, confusion, and hopelessness.

I. John’s Epistles: Their Author and Authority (*Review 1 John 1–4 with the class.*)

The second and third epistles are written by the one who introduces himself as “the elder.” Both letters contain common themes of love, truth, and obedience (*2 John 3, 5, 6; 3 John 3, 6, 11, 12*). Similar concerns are found throughout 1 John, showing that all three letters are written by the same elder.

Who is this elder? A comparison of the elder’s first epistle with the fourth Gospel of the New Testament reveals many common themes, which can help identify who the elder is. For instance, both speak of:

The beginning—*1 John 1:1, John 1:1*

The fullness of joy—*1 John 1:4, John 15:11*

The new commandment—*1 John 2:8, John 13:34*

Being born again—*1 John 3:9, John 3:1–6*

Eternal life—*1 John 2:25; 5:11, 13; John 3:16; 10:28; 17:2, 3*

Denial of the Son as denial of the Father—*1 John 2:23, John 15:23*

Loving one another—*1 John 3:11, John 13:34*

The world hating us—*1 John 3:13, John 15:18*


“The Spirit of truth”—*1 John 4:6, John 14:17*

God sent His Son—*1 John 4:9, John 3:16*

Such similarities lead us to conclude that the “elder” who wrote the three epistles is also the one who wrote the fourth Gospel. The writer of the fourth Gospel is none other than John, the disciple whom Jesus loved (*John 21:7, 20–24*).

John’s authority to condemn heresy, convey the truth, and confirm the fellowship of love and light arises from the fact that he was an eyewitness to the Savior’s life and mission. John begins the first epistle with the core of the Christian manifesto: “That which was from the beginning . . . the Word of Life” (*vs. 1, NKJV*). The verse echoes John 1:1–3, 14, where the eternity of Jesus, the Word, and His journey to human life are recorded. John’s message finds its roots “in the beginning” and is meant to assure us so that our “joy may be full.”

Discuss: John has given to us three significant writings: the Gospel,

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Jesus in the Johannine Epistles

Jesus is found throughout 1 John. He is at the center of this book. Who is He according to this epistle?

1 John 1:1 _____

1 John 1:2, 5:20 _____

1 John 1:3, 4:15 _____

1 John 2:1 _____

1 John 2:8 _____

1 John 2:22 _____

1 John 4:14 _____

1 John 5:20 _____

Although in 1 John God the Father is mentioned more frequently than Jesus, the problem of former and maybe active church members is with the Son. Church members and false teachers may have agreed largely on the nature of the Father. They disagreed, however, when it came to Jesus, as to His humanity and His divinity. The issue was whether or not Jesus “has come in the flesh” (1 John 4:2, NKJV) and “is the Christ” (1 John 2:22, NKJV).

In the midst of all this, John clearly maintains that it is impossible to separate Father and Son. Even in our days some people, including some Christians, think they can have a relationship with God the Father without caring about Jesus. For them Jesus is just a wonderful human being. John, however, is clear: If you know about Jesus but do not accept Him as the Messiah and the Son of God, you cannot have a saving relationship with God the Father.

First John contains 105 verses. Jesus is mentioned in about 45 of them. What does that tell me about the place Jesus has in this letter? How central is Jesus in your own understanding of truth? That is, might you be too occupied with dates, charts, and doctrines as opposed to knowing Jesus and His forgiveness and grace for you? If so, how can you change? Why must you change? See John 17:3.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

the epistles, and the book of Revelation. Each one of them speaks of Jesus in a unique way. Recall some of these ways and share them with the class. What portrait do they paint for us of Jesus?

II. John's Epistles: The Message and Purpose

As John neared the end of his life, he was pained to see that false teachers had crept into the church. Their teachings were opposed to what was revealed in the beginning by and through Jesus. Instead, they were rooted in Greek philosophy and Roman paganism. Such teachings included (1) questioning the incarnation of Christ—1 John 4:2, 3; (2) minimizing the nature of sin—1 John 1:8–10, 3:4–8; (3) denying the need for obedience—1 John 1:5, 6; (4) neglecting the commandment of love—1 John 2:8–10, 4:20, 2 John 6; and (5) rebellion against the apostle—3 John 9–11.

To guard against these and other false doctrines, the elderly apostle wrote his letters. Pain and concern for the situation filled him, but he also felt hope that the errors could be corrected and hearts healed.

What does the apostle propose as the perfect antidote for such heresies? He knows but one answer: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, . . . and our hands have handled” (*1 John 1:1*). Jesus is the answer. The eternal Jesus, the real Jesus, the true Jesus, the saving Jesus. Know Him, and all other knowledge must come under His critique. Love Him, and joy and eternal life become your own. Accept Him, and sin has no power over you, and the antichrist has no room to enter. As in his Gospel, so in his epistles: Jesus is all in all. Without Him we are nothing.

Thought Question:

Being an eyewitness to Christ's ministry provided the authority for the apostle's proclamation of the gospel (*1 John 1:1–4*). For those of us who are not eyewitnesses, what is the basis of our faith and assurance, and why? (*See 1 Cor. 10:11, 1 Tim. 3:16, 2 Tim. 2:15, 2 Pet. 1:16–21.*)

► STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Take a few moments to let your class members share with one another what principles they are able to find in this lesson and how they can practice those principles.

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Jesus' Ministry in John's Epistles

The Johannine letters not only portray Jesus from different perspectives, telling us that He is from the beginning (*1 John 1:1*), has come in the flesh (*1 John 4:2*), and remained righteous, pure, and without sin (*1 John 2:1; 3:3, 5*); they also emphasize His ministry and work.

Who Jesus is and what He has done are deeply related. To deny His divinity or humanity also means to deny His ministry as Savior, as example, and as Lord. Salvation through Jesus depends on Jesus' divine-human nature. Without a proper understanding of Jesus' divine-human nature, you can end up with a different understanding of the plan of salvation and the problem of sin. Sin may be taken lightly or even denied (*1 John 1:6–10*), an attitude that will surely, one way or another, influence Christian behavior and ethics.

What does John tell us about Jesus' ministry and work? That is, what promises are made to us because of what Jesus has done or is doing for us now?

1 John 1:7 _____

1 John 2:25 _____

1 John 2:28 _____

1 John 3:8 _____

1 John 3:16 _____

1 John 5:18 _____

2 John 3 _____

What Jesus has done for us as our Savior and what He is doing for us as our Advocate require a response on our part. Forgiveness of sin, the assurance of salvation, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the hope of the Second Coming, and the promise that we will be like Him and see Him as He is cannot leave our hearts cold. We believe in Him, love Him, follow Him, obey Him, and abide in Him and in His teachings.

Look at some of the promises listed above. Which ones mean the most to you, and why? Which ones, perhaps, are you not experiencing in your life as you should? Why might that be, and what can you do in order to realize, even better, the richness of these promises?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Thought Questions:**

- 1 “In the beginning, God created . . .” (*Gen. 1:1*). “In the beginning was the Word” (*John 1:1*). “That which was from the beginning” (*1 John 1:1*). Discuss the relationship between these three references to “beginning.” How do they relate to Christian faith and practice?
- 2 Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? These are questions that religions and philosophies try to answer. After you have studied this week’s lesson, what is your answer?
- 3 Many Christians would say, “All we need is Jesus; we do not need doctrines.” Why is doctrine important to Christian faith and life? And yet, why is doctrine alone not enough?

Application Questions:

- 1 Second John 9 speaks of the “doctrine of Christ” that was under attack during John’s time. Is that true today? If so, how?
- 2 “That your joy may be full” is a key burden of 1 John 1:4. Share how you have experienced this joy.

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: While John’s epistles warn against false doctrines and teachings, the apostle does not neglect to emphasize a positive picture of Christianity. Encourage your class to discuss what they can learn from knowing the negatives and affirming the positives.

- 1 Compose a piece of music or sing a selection of hymns that celebrate the joy and assurance of salvation. Perform the composition in class or arrange time for a special song service in which the class can join in singing the songs.
- 2 Role-play situations in which class members might be confronted with the kinds of deceptions John warns about in his epistles. How can class members use what they learned in the lesson this week to navigate their way through the murky and dangerous waters of false teachings and doctrines?

Further Study: Read 1 John in one sitting to get an overview of this important epistle.

“As the years went by and the number of believers grew, John labored with increasing fidelity and earnestness for his brethren. The times were full of peril for the church. Satanic delusions existed everywhere. . . . Some who professed Christ claimed that His love released them from obedience to the law of God. On the other hand, many taught that it was necessary to observe the Jewish customs and ceremonies; that a mere observance of the law, without faith in the blood of Christ, was sufficient for salvation. Some held that Christ was a good man, but denied His divinity. Some who pretended to be true to the cause of God were deceivers, and in practice they denied Christ and His gospel. Living themselves in transgression, they were bringing heresies into the church. Thus many were being led into the mazes of skepticism and delusion.

“John was filled with sadness as he saw these poisonous errors creeping into the church. He saw the dangers to which the church was exposed, and he met the emergency with promptness and decision. The epistles of John breathe the spirit of love. It seems as if he wrote with a pen dipped in love. But when he came in contact with those who were breaking the law of God, yet claiming that they were living without sin, he did not hesitate to warn them of their fearful deception.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 553, 554.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read the Ellen G. White quote listed above. Suppose she were writing for the church today. What might she write? That is, what are the theological challenges that the church is facing today? In what ways are they similar to the ones John was dealing with? What can we learn from John that could help us as we deal with these errors?
- 2 As Adventists, we believe we have been given a great deal of truth, truth that many other churches do not have. (After all, if they had these truths, then what purpose would we as Adventists serve?) At the same time, how could we, as a church, better reflect the love and kindness that must go along with our witness? How can you, either as a class or as an individual, help your local church better manifest the love of God? It's frightening to think of how many people who, attracted to our message, have never accepted it because of the lack of kindness, grace, and love expressed by the church. We can and must do better.