

THE BOOKS OF
1, 2 & 3 JOHN



INTRODUCTION TO 1, 2 & 3 JOHN

The three books in the New Testament that the early church simply entitled 1, 2, 3 John are known as the epistles or letters of John. It was the conviction of the majority of the early church fathers that these books were written by the same writer as the Gospel of John, **Apostle John**. He wrote to the churches near Ephesus where he was serving as a beloved elder to a host of churches. The three epistles of John form a single “package,” probably curated to be imbibed together.

His purpose for writing **1 John** was to combat a form of heresy that was being taught in the churches that focused on Jesus’ divinity while denying his humanity. John writes to encourage the believers to endure the persecutions they were facing and not accept the false teachings of the “*many antichrists [who] have come*” (1 John 2:19). After all, John knew Jesus, walked with Him, and lived with Him (1 John 1:1). He saw Him heal. He heard His words. John had been to the empty tomb, and he knew... Jesus is not one of the many options for salvation but the only option.

Jesus is the
only way

2 John is a warning to a specific house church. The people who deny Jesus, whom John calls the “*deceivers*,” were probably going to approach them for validation or support. John specifically tells the church that they are not to offer any.

3 John is written to a certain member of a house church named Gaius. John asks Gaius to welcome the legitimate missionaries who were to arrive soon because the leader of that church community, Diotrephes, was acting like a fool and rejecting people that were associated with Apostle John.



THE BIG IDEAS FROM 1, 2 & 3 JOHN

■ Walking in God's LIGHT and God's LIFE

Light is the promise of hope and joy. Darkness is the threat of despair and misery. And God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. This is the message that John heard from Jesus. Jesus came into the world to reveal it. It is the foundational message of this book.

So, *“walking in the light”* which is the main theme of John, is directly related to following Jesus, who said, *“I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life”* (John 8:12). In 1 John 1:7 he says, *“If we walk in the light as He [God] is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”* In verse 5, John says that God's very nature is light. Jesus, then, is the conduit or provider of light to the world. Our Christian duty is to live in the light God gives: *“Now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light”* (Ephesians 5:8). *When we walk in the light, we cannot walk in darkness. Sin is left in the shadows as we let our light “shine before men”* (Matthew 5:16).



I AM
the Light
of the
World

JOHN 8:12

■ Truth and Love Go Hand in Hand

The parallelisms in 1 John are striking for their simplicity: Christ vs. antichrists, light vs darkness, truth vs falsehood, righteousness vs sin, love of the Father vs love of the world, and the Spirit of God vs the spirit of the antichrist. While this is not a complete list, it reveals a letter that presents the world in an uncomplicated way—there is right and there is wrong, period. This emphasis on truth by John, while striking, is not without love.



Truth and love go hand in hand. It would be easier if we could choose between the two, but we can't. Never one without the other. To pursue both is a Christian's singular task. John recognized that love comes from God, and he encouraged believers to love one another (1 John 4:7). John's first epistle teaches us that while it is important to recognize the lines between truth and error, it must always be done in a spirit of love. No other book of the Bible talks about love as often as 1 John. About one in every 50 words is a form of "love"—that makes for about 52 mentions of love in just five short chapters. And it's no surprise that love is evidence of salvation (1 John 3:14), and John says that God Himself is love (1 John 4:8).

Love is the new way to live. It's actually the only way to live. Selfishness and hate lead the way to death, but selfless love is the way to live now and forever. This is the way we participate with Jesus to bring light to this world of darkness.

■ Hospitality – A Believer's Attitude

For John, hospitality is both theological and pastoral. It's also the outworking of truth and love.

In 2 John the elder appeals to his readers to withhold their hospitality from false teachers. While this may sound unloving, *"the motivation behind it is actually love,"* because *"he doesn't want his beloved readers to be put at theological risk by their false teachings."* Thus, *"truth and love are applied to this pastoral situation."*



Likewise, 3 John connects truth and love when Gaius is instructed to show hospitality to missionaries. *"Gaius' hospitality is a tangible expression of his love as well as his commitment to the truth."*

CHAPTER SUMMARY

1 John 1 – 2

Walking in the Light of Jesus

1 John 1:5
"This is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all."

1 John 3 - 4

Walking in the Love of God

1 John 4:11
"Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

1 John 5

Follow Jesus the God Incarnate

1 John 5:2
"This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out His commands."

2 John

Tough Love

2 John 1:7
"I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist."

3 John

Be Generous and Hospitable

3 John 1:11
"Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God."

1 JOHN 1 – 2

WALKING IN THE LIGHT OF JESUS

1 John 1:1, *“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.**”*

1 John 1:5, *“This is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you: **God is light**; in him there is no darkness at all.”*

John announces to his readers that God is the source of life. Whatever life is, we learn from John that it derives from God. *Life* is not seen by John as an abstract philosophical entity but as a gift that has its origin in God’s character and nature. Moreover, this life from God has come among us and lived with us.

What we have in 1 John 1:1–4 is a practical commentary on the prologue of the Gospel of John. The great theme about life in the original prologue, *“In him was life, and the life was the light of men”* (John 1:4), is now made understandable and practical, totally accessible to mere human beings. John emphasises on this wondrous *“Word of life.”* His main point is that we have seen, looked at, and touched this Word of life. Jesus is the Word of life. He is the eternal life that John knows so well from personal experience, and now we who read John’s letter are warmly invited to have fellowship with other disciples of Christ as well as with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

John announces to his readers the liberating news that **God is not only the source of life but also of light and truth.** *God is light.* The word “light” in the Gospel of John and 1 John is used interchangeably with the word “truth.” (Note John 1:9, 14 and 1 John 1:6.) God never deceives, misleads, or distorts. There can be no strategy of “*heavenly deception*” on God’s part because God is Light and His own character, His own essential nature, rejects such a stratagem. John is announcing the good news (what they heard from Him personally), that God has spoken for Himself that His speech is the speech of Life and of Light.



What does this mean for us today? When Jesus Christ is Lord of our life, then we see the road more clearly. Jesus Christ not only shows us who the Father is, He also shows us who we are and where we are. We better see our own faces, and we better see the landscape ahead. He is the Light who brings clarity to our journey ahead where we live, move, and have our being come into focus. So, God’s truth is not an abstract philosophical ideal to be honoured and held up for respectful admiration, but a relationship to be lived.

We are to “*walk in the light,*” and this means to walk in the way of this revelation. Jesus Christ walks with us as the Light, revealing our sin. This truth confronts our attempts to deny our

failings. As Scripture warns, *“If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar.”* But Jesus Christ is also the Lord of Life, who enables us to resolve injustice and sin and the tragedies of darkness as we walk along with Him. God Himself, who brings the light also brings help; that help is the Person Jesus Christ, who sacrificed His own life on our behalf. John tells us that if we walk in the light, the *“blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”*

To walk in the light does not mean that a human being is sinless and flawless; rather, to walk in the light means that a human being is fully aware that he or she is a sinner. That is the point! John presents a classic summary sentence in verse 9. *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins ...”* We are told by John that our responsibility is to agree with God about the nature of our sinful crises. This openness and vulnerability on our part is what firmly plants our feet upon the pathway of light. There are no special code words to learn, special incense formulas to master, or elaborate rituals to perform, **but our solution only lies in an interactive relationship with Jesus.**

If God’s light is now shining through Jesus, then that means the world’s darkness is passing away and God’s children already have victory over sin and death that reign in the world. This leads John to issue a challenge to the churches. Don’t love the world; it too will pass away. John specifically refers to pride and sexual corruption, which were likely problems connected to the conflict that had recently taken place in the churches.

1 JOHN 3 - 4

WALKING IN THE LOVE OF GOD

1 John 4:7-12, *“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, because **God is love.** ⁹This is how God showed His love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Dear friends, **since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.** ¹²No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”*

God is love. God’s love is an integral part of our essential relationship with Him. *Agape* is the word which John uses twenty-eight times in chapter 4 alone to describe God’s love. John says that if we do not experience love, we are not experiencing God, *“for God is love.”* John does not invite his readers to reverse the sentence and conclude that *love is God*. John is not teaching that our theory about love is divine, but rather that God is the one who gives to us the meaning of love. Our love doesn’t define God; rather, it is God who is the source of love.

The theological core of John’s definition of love is *“Not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the one who takes our place...”* Love, for John, is what God has done on our behalf. Love is the person Jesus Christ alongside humanity on the road as Savior of the world. *“If we are so loved, then we ought to love.”* John now comes back to his opening

sentence, *“Let us love one another.”* We do not earn God’s love by our acts of love, but rather it is our experience of God’s love that provides the inner motivation toward love. It is the kind of love we ourselves received; the love that forgives our sins and identifies with us in our journey. Perfect love casts out fear. As love matures in our lives on a day-to-day basis, fear is cast out.

God’s love meets our deepest need and vulnerability. Therefore, once we know we are loved when we are empty-handed, it sets us free from depressive self-doubt about our future acceptability or even future needs. God has already seen us completely and has loved us in total vulnerability and in stark light; therefore, the light of further judgment (*crisis*) is not a new

reality with which we must cope. The Christ we met on the road as our redeemer is the Christ we will meet on Judgment Day as our Lord.

“Do not love the world.”

We are at first surprised by the sentence *“Do not love the world,”* because it reminds us immediately of the most famous of all Johannine sentences: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).*

We know that God loves the world, and yet we are now challenged by John not to love the world. John clarifies what he means through the sentences that follow. John is describing not so much the created earth itself but a worldly perspective toward life, which he explains by the use of two further words: *“lust”* and *“pride.”* The root word for lust is thumos, which means passion or strong desire and is also used as a word for anger. The word translated *“pride”* is a word that means pretense or arrogance.

Disordered desires and arrogance toward life are not from God; they are, in fact, what John means when he refers to the world; they are worldly values. John’s point is that we are not to crave the world nor love it from its own standpoint. We are to love the world from God’s standpoint. The world and all desire and arrogance pass away, but the one who does the will of God abides forever.

1 JOHN 5

FOLLOW JESUS - THE GOD INCARNATE

1 John 5:2-4, *"This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out His commands. ³In fact, this is love for God: to keep His commands. And His commands are not burdensome, ⁴for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. ⁵Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God."*

John repeats a mandate which, by now, is a recurrent theme in 1 John: *"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments."* The Greek translation of "keep" is a word that carries an undertone of "guarding" and "keeping watch over." We are to be careful to carry out

Words and Works

Our Lord always combined within His ministry what He said and what He did, so that the two are inseparable. This is why we cannot develop an elaborate theology about the words of Jesus and His teaching apart from the events of Jesus.

The Cross and the empty tomb are essential to our faith because Jesus is both what He said and what He did. Otherwise, we are in danger of developing a theology of Christian ideology and theory, and when that happens, the truly radical nature of Christian faith will be totally subverted. But Christian faith is radical. God has spoken for Himself, the Word become flesh in action. Our actions are the best indicators of our beliefs. Real actions and behaviours can indicate an underlying belief that holds more command than our words and thoughts.

Our belief is not measured by how strongly we feel about the belief. The human mind can easily deceive itself. It is nearly impossible to objectively assess one's own desires and motives. We can honestly believe on the surface level, but if there is no

God's commands because so much is at stake. God's very love is involved in His commandments.

evidence of belief, then there is something significantly lacking in that belief. Jesus doesn't wait for us to get to the point of perfectly acting in alignment with all of our beliefs. He seeks us where we are and, through the power of the Holy Spirit helps us take step after step in our faith journey.

God's commandments have been made clear by John.

They are deeply related to the threefold relationship:

1. A true understanding of who God is and His message through Jesus Christ.
2. God's commandments have to do with our inner self and walk. We are meant to walk in the Truth and be assured of our identity in Jesus Christ.
3. The third has to do with our relationships toward the neighbours closest and farthest. We are to display God's love toward our brother and sister in Christ and also our neighbour.

Now, we have the climactic conclusion of the sermon: *"We know the Son of God has come, so we can know the One who is true. And we are in the One who is true, in His Son Jesus the Messiah. This is the true God, and eternal life"* (1 John 5:18-21) So, *who is the One who is true and gives me true life? Jesus or God?"* And John's answer is simply, "Yes." John doesn't know any God apart from Jesus. When he and the other apostles encountered Jesus, they discovered the God who loves us so

deeply that He has chosen not to exist without us despite our failures. This revelation of God is so surprising and unexpected that John's final words call us to *"keep away from idols,"* that is, to resist any temptation to remake this God in our own image (1 John 5:21). To know Jesus is to know the God of creative, life-giving and self-giving love.



2 JOHN

TOUGH LOVE

2 John 1:6-7, *“And this is love: that we walk in obedience to His commands. As you have heard from the beginning, His command is that you walk in love. I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.”*

2 John is a warning to a specific house church. This letter is addressed to an elect lady of the church and her children. The most reasonable conclusion from the limited data in 2 John is that she was a prominent leader in the church. The people who deny Jesus, whom John calls the *“deceivers,”* are probably going to come looking for validation or support. John specifically tells the church that they are not to offer any.

This letter says the same things as 1 John, but in different words. Therefore, the value of 2 John to the New Testament does not rest in the doctrinal teaching of the letter itself, since each doctrinal theme has already been more fully explained in the first letter. The importance of the letter lies precisely in the fact that we who read it are able to see how deeply John felt about the themes in his first letter.

In John’s second letter, an inspired *“postcard”* to believers, he stresses the relationship between *love and truth*. He begins by rejoicing in the fact that so many believers are *“walking in the*

truth" (verse 4), but he wants them to keep showing love to one another by "[walking] in obedience" to God's commands (verse 6). **For John, there is no divine love apart from the truth of God—the two go hand in hand!**

John shares some pastoral advice concerning those false teachers who are traveling among the churches: "*Do not receive him into your house*" (v. 10). This pastoral counsel gives us some insight into a special problem that the early Christians faced.

The Christian tradition of hospitality was a beautiful and important ministry within the first-century church community. But we hear John warn against its exploitation by persons who masquerade as Christians and then take

The Art of Hospitality

Jesus had an uncanny ability to turn enemies into guests and guests into family. He did this through "*radically ordinary hospitality*," just eating meals around a table. The word we use for "*hospitality*" comes from '*philoxenia*' in Greek. It is a compound word: '*Philo*' means love, and '*Xenos*' means stranger or foreigner.

It is no secret that political and emotional polarization is at an all-time high right now. And while the digital age has caused it to intensify, polarization is nothing new. Into a world of tribe-against-tribe hostility came Jesus of Nazareth, who literally died to turn enemies into family, and who said in His Sermon on the Mount: "*Blessed are the peacemakers.*" (Matthew 5:9)

The early Church took those commandments of hospitality to heart and really lived them out! But somewhere along the line - amidst smartphones and cable TV - we became a reclusive and private society. Amidst affluence and abundance, we became prideful about our personal spaces and let our fear of man override our Biblical command to practice hospitality.

advantage of the generosity of Christian hospitality. The worst part of this exploitation is that these pseudo-prophets then make use of the offered hospitality to spread chaotic and false teaching.

Biblical hospitality is a demonstration of love. Food and other elements are mere tools used to express our love for people. Our motivation for being hospitable is a response to God's work in our lives. Hospitality is one way we can tangibly demonstrate our love for God.

John is advocating a balance. He advocates a zeal for truth, a vigorous and active tough love, and a wise and discerning approach to people and situations. John is advocating a healthy mixture of law and gospel, of truth and grace, and of wisdom and tough love, which is applicable even today.



3 JOHN

BE GENEROUS AND HOSPITABLE

3 John 1:11, *“Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.”*

3 John is written to a certain leader of a house church named Gaius. Who is this man? In Acts 19:23–41, we have the narrative of Paul’s terrifying and very close call at Ephesus when he was opposed by the silversmiths and the worshipers of Artemis. In that text, we hear of a Macedonian named Gaius who was identified as a companion of Paul.

John asks Gaius to welcome the legitimate missionaries that will be arriving soon because the leader of that church community, Diotrophes, is acting like a jerk and rejecting people that are associated with Apostle John. From the context of this letter, it appears that this Diotrophes is a leader in the Christian fellowship but has taken a stand against John’s authority.

In this letter, John praises the works of Gaius, a church elder, who repeatedly demonstrates hospitality and generosity to traveling Christian workers. On the other hand, he condemns the actions of Diotrophes, a controlling troublemaker, who has not only stopped other believers from showing hospitality but also kicked them out of the church. John wants Gaius to keep imitating what is good—and to continue

showing hospitality by receiving his coworker Demetrius, who will be bearing this letter.

The crisis concerning hospitality that was the concern of 2 John is a matter of concern also in 3 John. If 2 John states the mandate on the negative side, then 3 John states the mandate on the affirmative side. If we place the two texts together, we have very wise and encouraging counsel on the matter of hospitality toward strangers. John does not want the church to follow the arrogance of Diotrephes but to imitate good like Gaius.

John had been right next to Jesus in the Upper Room when the Lord gave His famous discourse on love. Often when we remember Jesus' words, *"Everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another"* (John 13:35), we are thinking only of the more pleasant aspects of love—serving, sacrificing, helping, or sharing. But included in Christ's profound teaching on love is the previous verse:

"As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (verse 34). The Christian church is a fellowship, and friendships are made in the church that exist on the foundation of God's love. Also, loving as Christ loved includes some less pleasant aspects of love—confrontation and correction. **We must remember that loving like Christ means we will sometimes be intolerant of sinful and dangerous actions in others. We need to love others enough to tell them the truth and John is doing the same.**

CONCLUSION

The Lord Jesus, God incarnate while He was on the earth, modelled the walk of love for us. He loved the Father God because He knew He was good and always purposes ultimate good, and obeyed the heavenly Father accordingly. And despite suffering, He counted God as His treasure and believed that God was using all things to His good, pleasing, perfect purpose. Similarly, therefore, we know we are *"in Him"* when we *"walk as Jesus did"*: when we know God rightly, obey Him in light of who He says He is, count Him as our most valuable treasure, and believe that He is constantly working to bring good for the glory of His name and for the utmost joy of all people. And this is called LOVE.





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