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1. JOHN

*Abide in Jesus and you will have eternal life*

WRITTEN

90-95 AD

KEY VERSE

*"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."*

5:13

Last updated March 18, 2023

Preserve the church and assure them that they have eternal life

PURPOSE

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## INTRODUCTION

The author does not say who he is, but both the Church Fathers and the writing style point in the direction of the Apostle John. The background of the letter seems to be a church split, where someone who has left the church (2:19) now denies that Jesus is the Messiah (2:22-23), creates confusion and leads people astray (2:26), and denies that Jesus came as a man (4:2-3). They thus refuse the atonement (2:2, 4:10) and claim that there is salvation elsewhere than in Jesus' death on the cross, and that is serious.

Church tradition says that the Gospel of John was written to remove Gnostic heresy, and it is therefore quite possible 1 John also corrects the Gnostics' view of Jesus and salvation and says that those who broke with the church had a Gnostic theology. The Gnostics distinguished between the human Jesus and the divine Christ because they could not believe that God had become flesh. They also believed that salvation came through knowledge (Greek: *gnosis*) and not through faith in Jesus. John talks a lot about us being able to *"know"*, perhaps to counter the claims of the Gnostics.

With this letter, John wants to preserve the church and make them stick to the message they heard in the beginning (2:24). He also wants to assure them that they have eternal life (5:13), and he gives them three tests that can help them identify true believers among those who want to mislead them. They must have:

1. Right Doctrine (e.g., 2:22-23, 4:2-3)
2. Right Living (e.g., 2:3-6, 3:6-10)
3. Love (e.g., 2:9-11, 4:20-5:2)

John writes "circularly" and therefore visits the same topics several times. That is why people have by no means agreed on a structure for the letter. But in any case, we have an opening in 1:1-4 and a conclusion in 5:13-21, possibly in 5:18-21.

All the writings of John are usually dated to the 90s.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Have you ever been confused about what you believe?

How can you be sure you believe the right thing?

Can you know that you are saved?

Which religion has the truth?

### 1 JOHN 2:19-26

“They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. 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. As for you, 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. I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray.”

John wrote this in the wake of a church split. Some have left the church (2:19). They deny that Jesus is the Messiah (Christ) (2:22-23). They create confusion and lead people astray (2:26). They deny that Jesus came as a man:

* “This is how you can recognize 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.” (4:2-3a)
* Thus they preach salvation elsewhere than through Jesus' physical death on the cross.
* Possibly a precursor to Gnosticism

### THE GNOSTIC DIVISION (DUALISM)

The Gnostic view is that the material is evil and the spiritual is good. *"gnosis"* means *"knowledge"*. They believe salvation from the world is achieved by the special insight that is revealed only to the intellectual elite. Knowledge is the "password" to being able to get past spiritual obstacles in the universe on the way back to "the great heavenly spirit".

### GNOSTIC VIEWS OF JESUS

1. It just looked like he had a physical body, but he was just a spirit.

2. The divine Christ came upon the man Jesus of Nazareth in baptism but left him before the crucifixion.

Johannes probably encountered the second view, which then becomes most relevant for the interpretation of the letter.

### WHO WAS THE AUTHOR?

Church fathers and writing style point in the direction of the apostle John. If the Gospel of John goes against Gnosticism, it is quite possible that 1 John also corrects a Gnostic view of Jesus and salvation. John talks a lot about the readers being able to know, perhaps to go against the Gnostics' claims about the necessity of special knowledge.

### JOHN’S PURPOSE

1. Preserve the church and make them adhere to the message they had heard from the beginning (2:24)

2. Reassure them that they have eternal life (5:13)

*"Originality is the last thing one should expect from a theologian. Heresy arises from the itch for something new."* Bishop Ireneus (130-200 AD; the quote has been translated)

### STRUCTURE

"Eastern" structure. Circular with increased intensity. The themes unfold more and more.

1:1-4 Opening: His authority as an eyewitness

1:5-5:12 Abide in Christ

5:13-21 Conclusion

## OPENING (1:1-4)

*“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. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.”*

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT GOD IS LIGHT? (1:5)

**1. In glory (associations to physical light)**

Psalm 104:1b-2a: *“you are clothed with splendor and majesty. The Lord wraps himself in light as with a garment”*

1 Tim 6:15-16: *"...God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.”*

**2. In truth (intellectually)**

John 1:9: "*The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world."*

**3. In holiness (moral)**

John 3:19-21: *"This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God."*

God and darkness (falsehood, evil) are mutually exclusive.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO WALK IN THE LIGHT? (1:6-7)

**Have fellowship with God (1:6, 1:3)**

* Knowing Him (2:4)
* Keeping His commandments (2:4, 3:24)
* Believe in Jesus and love one another (3:23)

**Have fellowship with one another (1:7, 1:3)**

* Love your brothers and sisters in the faith (2:9-11)

**Be cleansed from all sin (1:7)**

* Admit and confess our sins (1:8-10)
* Jesus Christ is our Advocate (2:1)

## 3 TESTS TO DISCOVER FALSE TEACHERS

### 1. Correct doctrine (2:22-23, 4:2-3)

2:18: *“Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.”*

4:1-3: *“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize 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. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.”*

Mark 13:22: *“For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.”* (1 John 2:26)

2:22-23: *"Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. 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 distinction between the human Jesus and the divine Christ.
* Those who deny that Jesus is the Christ/Messiah cannot possibly have fellowship with the Father. Jesus is the only way.

4:2-3: *"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.”*

* Both directions in Gnosticism? Jesus did not just appear in His full-grown bodily appearance; it is necessary to accept the incarnation. And there is no separation between Jesus and Christ.

The Incarnation is fundamental and decisive.

### 2. Keep God's commands (1:5-6, 2:3-6, 2:29, 3:6-10)

2:3-6: *"We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did."*

3:4-10: *“Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God’s child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.”*

### 3. Love (2:9-11, 3:10-19, 4:7-8, 4:20 - 5:2)

4:7-11: *"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."*

## 5:6-8

The Gnostics could not believe that Jesus was both God and man. They believed that the divine Christ came upon the man Jesus of Nazareth in baptism but left him before he died on the cross.

Quite possibly, these verses mean that Jesus Christ was both baptized (water) and died (blood) without anything being separated from each other. The Spirit testifies of this in every believer (2:27).

## 5:13

I have written this to you so that you may know that you have eternal life, you who believe in the name of the Son of God.

## SIN THAT LEADS TO DEATH (5:16-17)

**Physical death?**

* The phrase *"sin that leads to death"* always means physical death in the OT and other Jewish literature.
* Jesus said about Lazarus: *“This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory”* (John 11:4a)
* As in Acts 5, 1 Cor 11:30.
* In that case, John does not want them to pray for the dead.

**Spiritual death?**

* An unknown sin that causes you to lose your salvation would go against everything he has written in this letter so far. It is bound to be that one denies that Jesus is the Son of God. Then one rejects the only way sin can be forgiven.
* They have forgiveness for all sin (1:7, 2:12). Deliberately opting out of the Christian community by denying Jesus, as the defectors have done, will then lead to spiritual death.
* They do not need to spend time and effort praying for those who have left the congregation. They have known the truth, but then they have chosen to go another way. But he does not forbid prayer for this either.

## 5:20

*"We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.”*

*"the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us."* (1:2b)

Eternal life is found only in Jesus whom they have known from the very beginning because he is the true God himself.

## 14 THINGS WE CAN KNOW FROM 1 JOHN:

1. That we know God since we keep his commandments. (2:3)
2. That we are in God because we keep his word (2:5)
3. That we shall become like Jesus when he appears (3:2)
4. That Jesus revealed himself to take away our sins (3:5)
5. That we have passed from death to life because we love each other. (3:14)
6. That we belong to the truth when we love with actions and in truth, and we can let our hearts rest in his presence. (3:18-19)
7. That he is in us, we know that because he has given us his Spirit. (3:24 and 4:13)
8. That every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in flesh and blood is of God. (4:2)
9. That we love God's children when we love God and keep his commandments. (5:2)
10. That we have eternal life, we who believe in the name of the Son of God. (5:13)
11. That He hears us—whatever we ask—and that we already have what we asked of him. (5:15)
12. That everyone who is born of God does not continue to sin. (5:18)
13. That we are of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. (5:19)
14. That the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. (5:20)

Main theme:

Abide in Jesus and you will have eternal life (2:6, 2:24, 2:27, 28, 3:6, 3:24, 4:13, 4:16)

## REFLECTION ON THE 3 TESTS TO DISCOVER FALSE TEACHERS

### 1. TEST: CORRECT DOCTRINE (A. CHRISTOLOGY AND THE BIBLE)

Eternal life is found only in the true Jesus. We have this life when we adhere to what the apostles wrote in the NT. The NT consists of the testimony of the apostles because it was the apostles who had been eyewitnesses, were chosen, and had been given authority by Jesus. The Bible gives us the right teaching, not people who have received special knowledge or revelations apart from the Bible. Are you standing firm on this?

### 1. TEST: CORRECT DOCTRINE (B. FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD)

John says we can know Jesus, who is the true God (2:23, 5:20), and have fellowship with the Father and the Son (1:3). Have we realized what this means? Do we live in this community? How does this work in your life? Do we take care of it?

### 2. TEST: KEEP GOD'S COMMANDS - CONFESS SIN

To have this fellowship with God, we must let Jesus be our defense attorney, but then we must confess our sins (1:8-2:2, 3:3,6). Do we say we have “no sin”? Are we redefining sin to excuse ourselves?

### 3. TEST: LOVE - THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Do we accept others into God's community? Do we accept Christians who think otherwise or annoy us? Perhaps the previous point is central? When we allow Jesus to cleanse us of all sin and we have fellowship with God, it becomes natural to love others. (1:7)

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe firmly enough in what the Bible says about Jesus?

2. How do you have fellowship with God? What is challenging?

3. Are we redefining sin? Are we taking it seriously enough?

4. How is the situation with the Christian community?