

# 1, 2 and 3 John...



**Prepared by:**  
William Joukhadar  
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# **1, 2, and 3 John, *an Investigation***

## **Preface**

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### **Introduction**

The author of 1 John claimed to be an eyewitness of Christ (1:1-3). Throughout the letter, he wrote with an authoritative tone that is virtually apostolic.

There is no date given, but it seems likely the three letters of John were written after his Gospel account, and before his exile on the island of Patmos, where he was called by God to write the Book of Revelation. There is no reference to Domitian's (Roman Emperor) horrendous attacks on the church, which commenced in AD 95, so a date of AD 90 is likely.

There are two types of letters in the New Testament. Some are general, circular letters with no specific recipients, while others are personal, reflecting what the readers needed to hear.

John's letters are a mixture of the two. His first is general, at five chapters, and is much longer than the others, as John addresses particular concerns that he has for his readers. The second and third are more personal and are the shortest books in the New Testament. In these John addresses two separate individuals, using just one sheet of papyrus for each.

In his letters, John recognises two categories of human being: those who believe in Jesus Christ and all others (who belong to the spirit of the Antichrist). Believers confess when they sin, but their lives are not characterised by sin (1:7-9; 5:16-18). They live in fellowship with God and with one another. Those who continue to live in sin are giving evidence that they have never known God (3:6).

### **Person**

John was one of the twelve apostles called by Jesus during his earthly ministry, and the only one to live to an old age - The other apostles were martyred. Extra-biblical records state that John looked after Mary, the mother of Jesus, in Ephesus until she died. He too died there. John's letters breathe with the authority not just of an elder, but of *the* elder. John had enjoyed a very close, special relationship with Jesus (see 1:2; 2:1; 4:6, 14).

### **Purpose**

It is clear that John's first concern in writing is pastoral. On a number of occasions, he refers to his readers as "dear children" (2:1). He has great affection for them, but is unable to visit them.

Now probably in his eighties, these letters were written at a time when the church was being affected for good or ill by travelling teachers. John is quite concerned about the damage that some false teachers are causing, but is too elderly to travel – unlike the troublesome teachers who, it seems, were able to promote their heresy with considerable vigour. Hence these letters were his best way of addressing the problem.

Although we can discern John's motives in writing, it's quite challenging to find a pattern in the way he arranged his material. First John is almost impossible to analyse because he seems to go round in circles. His thinking is 'cyclic' rather than linear. However, his particular style of thinking can be beneficial to believers by being repetitive... underscoring essential theological truths that should be clearly understood, firmly grasped, and applied.

**Basic Principles (1 – 2:11)**

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**Introduction**

The first four verses of this letter constitute its introduction. Here the writer affirmed the tangible reality of the *Incarnation* of Christ (God embodied in flesh) and announced that the goals of his letter were fellowship and joy.

Since fellowship is an objective of John's letter, it was natural for him to begin with a discussion of this subject. So, in 1:5-2:11 he presented several fundamental principles which lie at the root of all genuine fellowship with God. These principles are of great practical value to the everyday lives of all Christians.

By these principles believers may taste the reality of their personal communion with God. They may also discern whether they have come to know the God with whom they commune.

**Investigation Impact**

Investigations reveal more when conducted at the best available place that is free of distractions, and at a time of the day when you are feeling quite refreshed. Your mind needs to be open and uncluttered... available to receive new truths from the Holy Spirit.

**Investigation Action****A. Basic principles of FELLOWSHIP (1:5 – 2:2)**

**Q1.** What does John say of a Christian who 'says' he is in fellowship with God (who "is light") but who's lifestyle is spiritual darkness (disobedience)? (v. 6)

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**Q2.** As "God is light," how should we be living to have fellowship with each other? (v. 7a)

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**Q3.** At the end of verse 7 we learn that something very important takes place continually 'as we remain in fellowship' with God. What does John say about this?

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**Q4.** What does verse 8 say about those who claim, "we have no sin"?

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**NOTE:** If Christians understand the truth that God's Word teaches about the depravity of the human heart, they know that just because they are not *conscious* of failure does not mean they are free from it.

**Q5.** Verse 9 says that God is "faithful and just" to forgive believers of their sins and to cleanse them from all wickedness. On what condition is God willing to do this?

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**Q6.** In your own words, what does ‘confess’ mean? (Give an example of something you have confessed to God.)

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**Q7.** How does Jesus involve Himself when we confess our sins to the Father? (2:1-2)

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NOTE: The consequences of a believer’s failure, his restoration, and future usefulness are all urgent matters which Jesus takes up with the Father when sin occurs. His own personal righteousness is what uniquely suits Christ for His role as a Believer’s Advocate after he sins.

## **B. Basic principles of KNOWING GOD (2:3-11)**

Chapter 1, verse 5, says that “God is light.” In ancient thought, the concept of “light” readily suggested the idea of “vision,” “perception,” or “knowledge.” It seems obvious that a life of fellowship with God in the light ought to lead to knowing Him.

**Q1.** Verse 3 simply states how a believer can be *sure* they ‘know’ God? [John 14:21-23]

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**Q2.** Any person can say they ‘know’ God, but what proves they really do ‘know’ Him? (v. 4)

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**Q3.** What does our obedience to God’s Word “truly show”? (v. 5)

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**Q4.** How does verse 6 imply the importance of ‘*life service*’ over ‘*lip service*’?

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**Q5.** In verse 7, John said that the command to “love one another” was an old commandment. Then he said in verse 8, “*Yet it is also new*” [John 13:34]. What did he go on to say in verse 8 that made it “new”?

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**Q6.** What two actions (‘do’ and ‘do not’) prove that a believer is “living in the light”? (v. 10)

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**Q7.** Describe the condition of a believer who “*hates another brother or sister.*” (v. 11)

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NOTE: A Christian who harbors hatred for a fellow believer has lost all real sense of direction. Like a man wandering aimlessly in the dark, he faces potentially grave dangers.

## The Purpose of the Letter (2:12-27)

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### Introduction

To appreciate any of the New Testament letters it's important to learn as early as possible 'why' the particular letter under review was written... to know the intended purpose in the mind of the writer.

In the prologue of his letter (vv. 1-4), John had expressed the general aim and goal of his letter. Now he tells his readers the specific concerns which motivated the letter. In that sense he expressed the precise purpose of his letter.

### Investigation Impact

Less haste and more attention result in valuable discoveries being made. Quality of discoveries should be your aim, not quantity of Scripture covered.

### Investigation Action

#### A. The readers' spiritual condition (2:12-14)

In the light of all the warnings John gave (1:5-2:11), his readers may have thought that he was disappointed with their spiritual condition. But this was not so. John assured them that he wrote because of the spiritual assets which they possessed.

**Q.** In verse 12, John addressed his readers as "children," "fathers" (mature in faith), and "young men" (young in faith). What did John say of their spiritual condition (assets)?

**Children** (vv. 12-14):

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**Fathers...** mature in the faith (vv. 13-14):

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**Young men...** young in the faith (vv. 13-14):

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NOTE: By repeating the three categories under which he addressed his audience, John suggested not only that they possessed spiritual 'assets' worthy of being called *children*, *fathers*, and *young men*, but also that they possessed these attainments in ample measure.

#### B. The world's allurements (2:15-17)

John warned his readers of the dangers that always exist, no matter how far one has advanced in their Christian walk. They must never become complacent.

**Q1.** For the safety of believers, what great danger does John signal in verse 15?

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**Q2.** What three things does the world offer that we should guard ourselves against? (v. 16)

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**Q3.** In verse 17, what does John say about the ‘condition of the world’ and “anyone who does what pleases God”?

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### **C. The deceptions of the last hour (2:18-23)**

**Q1.** Who does John say “is coming” and who are “the many who have already appeared” that we should beware of? (v. 18)

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**Q2.** What reason does John give in verse 19 for “these people” leaving the church?

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NOTE: When a church teaches the pure Word of God it’s no surprise that some will leave. Unless they are “living in the light” they don’t ‘belong’ to God... So, let them leave.

**Q3.** What makes it possible for every believer to “know the truth”? (vv. 20, 27)

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**Q4.** In verse, 21, what reason does John give for writing to his readers?

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**Q5.** Many people today deny that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah). In verses 22-23, what is said about those who says “Jesus is not the Christ”?

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### **D. The readers’ responsibilities to abide (2:24-27)**

**Q1.** How important is it for believers to **remain** faithful to the truth they have been taught? (v. 24)

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**Q2.** What is promised to those who **remain** in fellowship with the Son and with the Father? (v. 25)

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**Q3.** Why is it that believers don’t need any human agent to teach them what is true? (v. 27)

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The Lord has promised that He will never abandon us nor fail us (Heb, 13:5). However, at any time we can abandon Him and fail Him. That’s why John concluded this section by saying, “So just as he (the Holy Spirit) has taught you, **remain** in fellowship with Christ. To remain is to abide... to stay... never to leave! Don’t be a hit-n-mis, hot-n-cold believer!

## The Body of the Epistle (2:28 – 4:19)

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### Introduction

In Session 2, John wrote both to assure his readers of the validity of their spiritual experiences and to warn them against the antichrists (false teachers) who denied that validity. In what may be described as the ‘body’ of his letter, John then explored the true character and consequences of that form of experience which the readers already had and needed to maintain.

### Investigation Impact

Beware of unreliable, changing ‘feelings’ that may interfere with your discipline to investigate at regular times. Faith, not feelings, is what drives investigators to making valuable discoveries.

### Investigation Action

#### A. The theme stated (2:28)

**Q1.** In keeping with his basic theme about fellowship (1 John 1:3), what important matter did John instruct, in verse 28a, his “dear children” to do?

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‘Abide’ and ‘remain’ are synonyms... they have the same meaning. John was big on the usage of the word ‘abide’... 66 of the 112 times in the New Testament. *Remaining* in Christ is what makes the Christian faith workable. There’s no place in God’s family for ‘visitor believers’, but only for those who **belong**... those who **remain**!

**Q2.** What practical benefit results from “*remaining* in fellowship with Christ”? (v. 28b)

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#### B. Discerning the children of GOD (2:29-3:10a)

**Q1.** In light of Christ’s righteousness, as children of God, how do we show ourselves to be righteous in His likeness? (v. 29)

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**Q2.** John invited his readers to contemplate the greatness of God’s love for them. What does he say in chapter 3, verse 1, that demonstrates how special we are to God?

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**Q3.** What can we look forward to when Christ returns? (v. 2)

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**Q4.** What does John say in verse 3 of those who live with an “eager expectation” of Christ’s return?

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**Q5.** Concerning sin, verses 8-10a make a clear distinction between those who belong to the devil and those who belong to God. How does John express this distinction?

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### **C. Discerning love for the brethren (3:10b-23)**

This section defines righteousness primarily in terms of Christian brotherly love and shows how such love properly expresses itself.

**Q1.** Love is the appropriate expression of 'born again' believers. What does "loving our Christian brothers and sisters" prove? (v. 14)

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**Q2.** A believer who "hates a brother or sister" is guilty of what offence? (v. 15)

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**Q3.** How far should our love be stretched towards our Christian brothers and sisters? (v. 16)

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**Q4.** State how the Ten Commandments are simply summed-up in verse 23?

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### **D. Discerning the indwelling God (3:24-4:16)**

**Q1.** Under what condition does the Holy Spirit live in believers? (v 24) [cf. Jn. 15:4-5, 7]

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**Q2.** John says in chap 4, verse 4, that those who belong to God "have already won a victory." A victory over WHO, and HOW?

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**Q3.** In verse 8, John declared that "God is love." In verse 12, John reveals how believers are impacted when they love each other? (v. 12)

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### **E. The theme realised (4:17-19)**

**Q1.** Living (remaining) in God saves us from what fear? (v. 17)

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**Q2.** If, as John says, "perfect love casts out all fear" what does he say in verse 18 about those who live with fear?

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*"We love each other because God loved us first"* (v 19). A believer who loves other believers also loves God, and in facing his Judge one day he is simply facing the One whom he loves. There is no fear in such an experience; yet he recognises that his love for God originated in God's love for him.



**Conclusion (4:20-5:21)**

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**Introduction**

The high watermark of John's letter was reached in 4:11-19. But the experience described there, with its outstanding concept of boldness on the day of judgement, can be reached only in a most practical way.

In his conclusion, John crystalised what he meant by love and how that love can be realised in one's life.

**Investigation Impact**

It's OK for your hands to get dirty in your investigation efforts, but your heart and mind must remain clean. Use the 'Christian's bar-of-soap' when necessary (1 John 1:9).

**Investigation Action****A. Love clarified (4:20-5:3a)**

A claim to love God cannot be substituted for love for other believers. This gave John his point of departure.

**Q1.** What does it show of a believer who says they love God but hate a Christian brother or sister? (v. 20)

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**Q2.** There is only one way that love for an 'unseen' God can be proved... what is that way? (v. 20b)

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**Q3.** In your own words, what does loving God mean? (5:3)

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A person who obeys God's commands is doing what is right, both toward God and toward his fellow believers and is thus loving God and them. But it must be remembered that this includes the willingness to sacrifice for one's brother or sister [cf. 3:16-17].

**B. Love empowered (5:4-15)**

Love for God and one's fellow Christians is not beyond the capacity of a believer. In this section John pointed to faith as the secret of a victorious, obedient life.

**Q1.** How is victory for a believer achieved over this evil world? (v. 4)

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**Q2.** 'Faith' in whom is this victory promised? (v. 5)

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**Q3.** How was Jesus Christ revealed as God's Son? (v. 6)

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**Q4.** Name the 'three' witnesses that together attest that Jesus is God's Son. (vv. 6-10)

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**Q5.** Where does eternal life originate? (v. 11)

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**Q6.** What must a person have in order to have eternal life? (v. 12)

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**Q7.** God answering our prayers is conditional. What is that condition? (v. 14)

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John was thinking of a believer's right to ask God for help in keeping His commands. That kind of prayer is transparently "according to His will." Thus, in victorious living a Christian is relieved of any burden through prayer that is based on faith in the name of God's Son.

### **C. Love practiced (5:16-21)**

A Christian who truly loves his brothers and sisters cannot be indifferent to their spiritual needs.

**Q1.** What are believers called to do when they "see a brother or sister sinning" in some way that is not punishable by death? (vv. 16-17)

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**Q2.** God's children do NOT make a "practice" of sinning - Why not? (v. 18)

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**Q3.** The world around us is in what condition? (v. 19)

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**Q4.** What has Christ given to us that makes it possible for us to know God? (v. 20)

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**Q5.** In verse 21, John gives a very important warning. In your opinion, what do you think Satan may use today to tempt believers to replace God from their hearts?

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Moral compromise with worldly perspectives eventually leads to some involvement with idolatry, since, in John's days, idolatry permeated pagan life at every level (as does today).

To adhere to "the true God and eternal life" (5:20) – and to seek to express one's basically sinless nature as a child of God – would necessarily mean avoiding idolatry and the moral laxness which went with it.

John's closing admonition was thus relevant to his readers back then, and to us today.

### Preface

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#### Introduction

The 1 and 2 John letters are very short. They would each have fitted onto one piece of papyrus, probably A4 size. They are both concerned with the subject of hospitality towards spiritually-gifted itinerant teachers. The letters were probably written together.

Hospitality was especially important in the early church because Christians weren't by and large welcome in the general pagan community. There were no church buildings, and so they met in each other's homes. Furthermore, the inns often doubled as brothels, so they weren't suitable for travelling preachers. Also, most would have depended upon believers for financial support.

The church needs both local ministries and travelling ministries. Some churches are locked into their own local ministry and are shut-off from listening to ministries from outside. Others live on visiting preachers all the time. But in the New Testament God gave the church both local and travelling ministers: pastors and teachers, apostles, prophets and evangelists (Eph. 4:11-12).

John wrote these two letters because he believed the attitude to hospitality had been inappropriate. Each church reflected the weakness common to their gender. Second John is addressed to Kyria, which means 'lady', but we don't know if this was the title of a prominent lady or not. She had thrown the door wide-open and the 'man' (subject of 3 John) had kept the door to the church tightly shut. They represent the typical responses that we can learn from.

The lady's danger was that she had too much love (heart) and not enough truth (mind). She was welcoming people she ought not to have welcomed. She was giving hospitality, but her attitude was that she was too soft-hearted and accommodating to anyone who wanted to stay. She was unwittingly being used to introduce bad teaching to the church. John had to rebuke her mildly that in doing this she was neglecting the truth.

Many heresies have been promoted within the church through women. Generally, the woman's heart goes with the teacher, but she needs to spend time evaluating the teaching of scriptural truth as well. Paul's second letter to Timothy show us that heretical teachers were especially successful in deceiving widows and weak-willed women.

The opposite danger is found in John's third letter. This letter is addressed to Gaius, but contains a warning about a man called Diotrephes. This 'man' was too jealous for his ministry and not welcoming to any other teacher. Good teachers were being refused entrance into his church. He was a man who was so focussed on truth that he had forgotten *love*. As his attitude was too hard-hearted, he had shut the door to spiritually-gifted travelling ministers. Truth and love are essential to gaining a right and balanced understanding of God's Word.

Second and Third John emphasise the importance of teamwork between men and women. God made us for each other, though it doesn't mean this partnership can only be found in marriage. Jesus is a perfect example of a single man who had perfect relationships with women. He appreciated them, ministered to them and allowed them to minister to Him. But He still made clear distinctions between the roles and responsibilities of men and women. Both are equally made in the image of God and are equal in dignity, depravity, and destiny. We need a balance of *love* and *truth* in the woman, and we need a balance of *truth* and *love* in the man.

## 2 and 3 John, *an Investigation*

### 2 John (Verses 1-13)

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#### Introduction

John's second letter began in the way ancient letters usually begin. The writer announced himself, stated the identity of the recipient, and offered a greeting. John did not specifically name "the chosen lady" and the text naturally reads if a church were being addressed.

Getting to his point immediately, John expressed his concerns (a) that the church would continue to be obedient to God and (b) that the believers would resist all inroads by false teachers. These two objectives, of course, are inseparable.

#### Investigation Action

##### A. The truth PRACTICED (vv. 4-6)

**Q1.** What reason did John give for his happiness? (v. 4)

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**Q2.** What important reminder did John give to the church? (v. 5)

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**Q3.** State the meaning of 'love' that is given by John in verse 6.

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Believers who are "walking in the truth", that is, living in obedience to what God has revealed, love each other. Brotherly love is part of the truth God has revealed and commanded.

##### B. The truth PROTECTED (vv. 7-11)

**Q1.** What's the basis of John's concern in verse 7a?

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**Q2.** Sounding quite harsh, what label does John give to false teachers/deceivers in verse 7b?

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**Q3.** After cautioning the church to "watch out" not to lose what they have worked so hard to achieve, John urged them to be "diligent". What incentive did John give? (v. 8)

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**Q4.** How serious is it for those who "wander away" from the teaching of Christ? (v. 9)

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**Q5.** What firm response are we to take against those who teach heresy? (vv. 10-11)

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John concluded his letter by saying he had more to share with them but would wait until he was able to meet face-to-face with them.

## 2 and 3 John, *an Investigation*

### 3 John (Verses 1-15)

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#### Introduction

Third John is a personal letter written to a specific person; a man named Gaius. If, as seems probable, 2 John was written to a church, 3 John and Philemon are the only personal letters in the New Testament.

The Pastoral Letters (1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus) though addressed to individuals, were probably intended for public reading. Thus, the apostle John's letter to Gaius is a precious fragment of early Christian correspondence. Its spiritual character is evident.

#### Investigation **Action**

##### A. Commendation of Gaius (vv. 5-8)

John's love for Gaius was "in the truth", that is, it was genuine and in accord with God's truth. In the same way Gaius was to express his Christian love by a hospitality that supported the truth [cf. v8]. As in John's two earlier letters, the thought of this letter is dominated by concern for truth and love in Christian experience.

**Q1.** How important was it to care for traveling teachers? (v. 5)

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**Q2.** What feedback had John received from the teachers who had visited the church? (v 6a)

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**Q3.** State the 'standard of care' to traveling teachers that is mentioned by John in verse 6b.

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**Q4.** Support of traveling teachers is not without its reward. What does this make us? (v. 8)

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##### B. Condemnation of Diotrephes (vv. 9-11)

**Q1.** What serious allegations did John make against Diotrephes? (vv. 9-10)

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**Q2.** Diotrephes was a bad example who John warned his readers about. What is proved by those who do 'good' and those who do 'bad'? (v 11)

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##### C. Recommendation of Demetrius (v 12)

**Q.** John recommended Demetrius to Gaius. Note down the glowing 'threefold' testimony that John gave in verse 12 of Demetrius?

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## 1, 2 and 3 John, an *Investigation*

### Epilogue

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There's a story about John in his old age we know from church records. The story reveals John's balance of truth and love. He stood firmly for the truth, refusing to compromise, especially concerning the Person of Christ. But at the same time, he was a most loving old man.

An early church writer, Jerome, tells a story about John from the AD 90s. By this time John was very old, and used to being carried into church at Ephesus every week on a chair with carrying poles through it. The church members would often invite him to share something. He would then sit in the chair at the front and he'd just say, "Little children, love one another!"

The next Sunday, they brought him in and exactly the same thing happened. They began to think he was getting senile. Didn't he realise that he kept repeating the same words? They finally went to the old man and said, 'Master, why do you always say, "Little children, love one another"?' He said, 'Because it is the Lord's command, and if this only is done, it is enough.'

When Jesus first met John, he was one of the most bad-tempered men around. Jesus called John and his brother James 'Boanerges', which means 'sons of thunder' – not a flattering nickname. John's reaction to the Samaritans was not untypical. When the Samaritans spat on them as they walked through Samaria, he said, 'I'm going to call fire down from heaven, if you give me permission, Jesus, and we'll burn up the whole lot of them!'

Some suggest that his later, milder manner came because he mellowed with age. But not everyone mellows with age alone! This was the man whom Jesus loved, and bit by bit his character was made like his master.

These letters display none of the less pleasant characteristics of a former period in his life. Here is a man who is now full of love and truth, and longs that others should be too. Jesus has changed him, and he is concerned in these letters that his readers should come to know and value the Saviour in the way that he does.

I hope you have enjoyed your investigation of 1, 2 and 3 John.

William

### Acknowledgment of thanks

I extend my deepest thanks to the following sources from which I have drawn valuable insight, as expressed in my *"1, 2, and 3 John, an Investigation"* discovery guide:

- a. Hodges, Zane C. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: 1, 2, and 3 John*, Editors: John F. Walvoord and Roy Zuck, SP Publications, Victor Books, 1983.
- b. Holman Illustrated Bible Handbook, Holman Publishers, Nashville Tennessee, 2012.
- c. Pawson, David. *Unlocking the Bible: 1, 2, and 3 John*, Harper Collins Publishers, Croydon, UK, 2015.
- d. The Bible. New Living Translation, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Illinois, 1996

**Investigations continue...**