

Overview

1st John is a pastoral letter written to encourage believers to walk in love, truth, and obedience. In it, John warns against false teachers who deny Jesus as the Son of God, emphasizing that genuine faith must be actively demonstrated in our relationships with God and others.

To help believers evaluate their spiritual walk, the letter highlights three key tests of genuine faith:

- **Belief** in Jesus as the Son of God.
- **Obedience** to God's commands.
- **Love** for one another.

Throughout the epistle, John uses stark contrasts—light versus darkness, love versus hatred, and truth versus deception—to remind believers that they can have absolute confidence in their salvation. Ultimately, 1st John teaches that those who truly abide in Christ will live in love, walk in obedience, and remain anchored in the truth.

Key Verse

*These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you *may continue* to believe in the name of the Son of God. (1 John 5:13)*

Key Truth

Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh. Those who reject Him operate under the spirit of the antichrist, while those who receive Him become children of light, blessed with the absolute assurance of everlasting life.

Background

The early church in the first century was under attack from the outside and from the inside. And you might say, “So what’s changed?” Not much. The same pressures are at work today.

It shouldn’t surprise us that the Holy Spirit anticipated every conceivable kind of assault, distraction, and counterfeit. These three epistles are full of timely insight—both for us personally and for the ekklesia collectively.

John was the brother of James and likely the younger son of Zebedee and Salome (not the Salome most people think of). He was born in Bethsaida, and his father appears to have had some means. John would have received the normal education of a Jewish boy, and when he grew up he became a fisherman with his family on the Sea of Galilee. That wasn’t a menial job—this was a real business with partners and multiple boats.

When John the Baptist began his ministry in the wilderness, John (the apostle) was drawn in, deeply influenced by the call to repentance. That’s where he first heard the announcement, “Behold! The Lamb of God!”—a distinctly Jewish title pointing back to Passover.

On Jesus' invitation, John became one of His disciples. For a time, he and his brother likely returned to fishing, but eventually Jesus called them again, and they left everything behind to follow Him fully—not just believing, but traveling with Him and belonging to the company of His disciples.

John became one of the three “insiders” in Jesus' ministry. Because of his zeal and intensity, Jesus even gave John and James a nickname: Boanerges, “Sons of Thunder.” John is often portrayed as soft and passive, but Scripture paints him as bold and intense.

John was present at key moments:

- The raising of Jairus' daughter
- The Transfiguration
- The inner circle at Gethsemane
- The Olivet Discourse briefing (with Peter, James, and Andrew)

He is also “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” a phrase John uses with humility rather than naming himself directly—especially in the closing chapters of his Gospel. Of course, Jesus loved all of His disciples. But John's repeated use of this description shows that he lived with a deep awareness of Christ's love and treasured it. It wasn't a boast; it was his identity—he knew he was loved, and he never got over it.

At Jesus' betrayal and trial, when most of the disciples scattered, John stayed near. He followed Jesus into the courtyard and apparently had access into places others didn't. At the cross, Jesus entrusted the care of His mother Mary to John—not to Jesus' half-brothers. That detail will matter when we come to Second John.

After the resurrection, Mary Magdalene brought news to Peter and John, and they ran to the tomb. John outran Peter, but Peter pushed ahead inside—classic personalities. Later, they returned to Galilee where the risen Lord revealed Himself again.

In the years that followed, John appears among the leadership in Jerusalem (Acts 15; Galatians 2), but his later movements aren't recorded in detail. Tradition places him in Ephesus, from which these epistles were likely written. He was later exiled to the prison isle of Patmos, where he received the Revelation of Jesus Christ, and afterward returned to Ephesus, where he eventually died—likely near the close of the first century.

There are many colorful traditions about John, but we should hold most of them loosely. Some may be true; others are simply stories without reliable support.

John's Writings and His Distinct Emphasis

John wrote five New Testament books:

- The Gospel of John
- First John
- Second John

- Third John
- Revelation

John's Gospel is unique: it's simple enough for a new believer to grasp, yet deep enough for the greatest theologian to keep making discoveries. John is not merely recording events—he is writing with a stated purpose: that we would believe and have life in Jesus' name.

And the same “high altitude” perspective shows up in his letters. Second and Third John are personal notes. First John, though, reads almost like a sermon addressed to the church at large.

Third John is the shortest book in the New Testament (in the original Greek). It was written to commend Gaius, a faithful believer who supported traveling Christians—missionaries who came preaching the gospel.

In Third John you'll see witness-language over and over: *testify, report, bear record, record*. That's deliberate. Every Christian is a witness—either a helpful witness or a harmful one. We're either part of the solution or part of the problem.

And in this brief letter, John places three lives in front of us:

- **Gaius** — the encourager (service in love)
- **Diotrephes** — the dictator (a warning example)
- **Demetrius** — the exemplar (a model worth following)

Each one represents a choice we can make with our own lives.