

The Letters of John

John was “the disciple Jesus loved” – perhaps the best personal friend the Lord had on this earth. He was part of the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples, and certainly had insight into the Lord’s purposes that few others did. He was described in the gospels as one of the “sons of thunder,” yet became known as the apostle of love. His entire life and demeanor was changed as a result of his association with and belief in Jesus Christ. John wrote a gospel account, and his book of Revelation closes out the New Testament. Some believe he wrote the fourth gospel to prove the deity of Christ, while his first epistle was written to prove the humanity of Christ.

John opposed the false doctrines of Gnosticism which were beginning to appear at the end of the first century, and which claimed a superior knowledge. These false teachers had been in the church, but then left, apparently calling for others to follow them in their search for “knowledge.” John’s first letter stressed the importance of the incarnation, as well as the need for living a life which reflected the gospel. Apparently these false teachers said it didn’t matter how you live.

You may note that 1 John doesn’t start with a typical salutation. We’re not given any specific person or group that it was written to. The clearest indication is in his phrase “my little children.” This letter was apparently intended as a general instruction to believers – particularly those who had been discipled by him. Since John is known to have spent his later years in Ephesus, western Turkey (province of Asia), it is likely that his readers were in that vicinity. His second letter was likely written to a local church, and his third letter was addressed to a person, Gaius.

In considering the three letters together, we see how they deal with similar themes, such as truth, love, and abiding in Christ. They also seem to work like concentric circles, drawing our attention to the center. The first epistle is more general, like a tract that is written to get your attention or give basic truths. The second is a bit more focused, helping a specific group hold to what is important. The third is the bullseye, written to an individual and focusing on personal encouragement in a specific situation. The length of the three letters fits that narrowing focus, as each is shorter than the previous. Third John is the shortest letter in the NT.

Several times in his first epistle, we are given his reasons for writing: “so that you...may have fellowship with us...so that our joy may be complete.” (1:3-4) “I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.” (2:1) “...because your sins are forgiven...because you know him...because you have overcome...because you know the Father...because you know him who is from the beginning...because...the word of God abides in you” (2:12-14). “I write to you...because you know [the truth]” and “about those who are trying to deceive you.” (2:21,26) “...that you may know that you have eternal life.” (5:13) Obviously he had multiple reasons for writing, but they all center around a proper understanding and application of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and defending against false teaching. His second letter was also written to refute heretical beliefs and to encourage love and truth, and the third was written to encourage one believer while rebuking the bad example of another.

What was the basis of his instruction and encouragement? “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that

which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

John is saying here that he is writing as an eyewitness. From the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, he was there, observing and hearing all that Jesus did and said. He knows from personal experience the things he is speaking of. When we consider he is refuting some false teachers, this is a major authentication factor. He’s not putting out theoretical ideas or personal opinions – he’s saying what really happened. He testifies that what he says about Jesus is factually true. The false teachers weren’t there – he was.

In this opening paragraph, we see parallels to the opening of the Gospel of John. He speaks of the word of life which was made manifest. John 1 begins with “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. ...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Why was the Word made manifest? To “proclaim to you the eternal life”. Why do we proclaim it? So others can enjoy the same fellowship with the Father and the Son that we enjoy.

“And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.” You would think it’s enough that we are able to know the joy of sins forgiven, and to have restored fellowship with our Creator God. John writes that our joy is complete when we are able to share that joy and fellowship with others. That is why you feel encouraged and uplifted when you gather with other Christians – you are sharing one another’s joy in fellowship with God. That’s something we don’t want to keep to ourselves – we want to share it with others, and then our joy is multiplied. John’s letters talk about the love, joy, and fellowship that we should experience as a result of our faith in Christ – as well as the dangers of a false faith.