

## A Taste of First John – *Intro to the Epistle*

**Introduction** – We'll be going verse by verse through the epistles (letters) of John and, of course, spending most of our time in 1 John. Unlike Paul's letters, we will find John mixing teaching with exhortation, truth with consequent application, assurance with challenge. To begin with, we'll fly over the book and get a taste of the first letter.

**Authorship** – Like the letter to the Hebrews, this letter does not have an announcement of the author's name or title. However, from early in church history, it has been received as a letter from John the son of Zebedee, the brother of James, the author of the fourth Gospel. Terms and styles abound in parallel between John's gospel and this letter. "*In the beginning...*" John uses this phrase in both (John 1:1, 1 John 1:1), and in both we learn that the "*only-begotten*" Word (John 1:1, 14, 3:16, 1 John 4:9) that was in the beginning came in the flesh (John 1:14, 1 John 4:2) and "*laid down His life*" (John 10:11-18, 1 John 3:16) so that we might "*have life*" (John 3:15, 1 John 5:11). The author of the epistle announces with particular emphasis that he was an eyewitness right at the beginning of the letter (1 John 1:1-3). He assumes His apostolic authority without apology as he calls those who waver from his teaching as "liars," "deceivers" or "antichrists." He also addresses his readers as "*dear children*." Early church writings also describe this letter as having been sent to Ephesus or the churches in that surrounding area, where John had ministered in his later years. This also bodes well with Paul's prophetic warning to the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:26-29, also in 2 Tim 3:1-7, 4:3-4).

**The Pastoral Occasion** – John writes as a pastor to protect the church from deceivers, false prophets, and antichrists that had gone out into the world and were showing up in Ephesus with their false teachings. Those believers who had not been deceived were overcomers (4:4) but clearly were shaken from the battle. They were in need of pastoral comfort, assurance, and encouragement. (Maybe you have felt that way). He writes so that their joy may be complete (1:4), so that they will not sin (2:1), and so that they might know that they have eternal life (5:13).

**Propaganda** – "*These things I have written to you concerning those who try to lead you astray*" (2:26). He exhorts them, "*little children, let no one deceive you*" (3:7). It was "*the last hour*" and "*the Antichrist is coming*," in fact "*many antichrists have come*" (2:18). Most of the major battles the church has faced have been from within her own walls. Those battles are almost always entwined in one or both of two areas: theological and ethical errors. What we should believe and how we should live. And John's letters are entwined in just these battles.

**Are You Sure About What You Believe?** – How often is your personal faith questioned, or the doctrine of your church? Throughout the life of the first-century church the teachings of the apostles were attacked, questioned, or twisted on a number of occasions. The theological errors seem to concern the person of Jesus. Some were denying that Jesus was the Christ (2:22), and whether God had actually come in the flesh (4:2). According to Polycarp, John stood against one false-teacher, Cerinthus, whose many false-teachings centered around denying the full divinity of Christ. That God could take on flesh bothered both Jewish and pagan sensibilities (1 Cor 1:23). Wanting to acknowledge the Father, some were denying the Son (2:22-23).

**Are You Sure About How You Are Living?** – But these were not the only false-teachings; there were many antichrists, John wrote. And some of these false-teachings had similarities to what would develop into a full blown system of teaching later called Gnosticism. Hard to encapsulate in its entirety, two foundational presuppositions of this heresy were (1) the essential impurity of matter and (2) the supremacy of knowledge, especially a spiritual, mysterious knowledge. Freedom/salvation came from being released from the material world and into an esoteric knowledge. While this sounds bizarre, you can see the practical outworkings in the concerns John raises. "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves*" (1:8), "*He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar*" (2:3), "*He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in the darkness*" (2:9). These kinds of concerns are found in our day as well. It is not enough to say you know God or say that you are in the light – as Jesus says elsewhere, we are known by our fruits.

**Assurance and Concerns** – And this leads to the practical study and meditation through this book. In one sense, this book is about being assured that you are in Christ (5:13) and so our study should produce such reassurance in our hearts. At the same time, there are sober exhortations that those who are in Christ are able and willing to keep His commandments (5:3) and so our study should prod us to honestly confess our shortcomings and return to our faith in Christ and all that produces in us (5:4-5). Our study in John will cause us to consider what it means that "*God is light*" (1:5), that "*God is love*" (4:8, 16), what has been since the beginning (1:1), what it is to "*walk in the light*" (1:7) and how the world was "*passing away*" (2:17).

John will urge us to "*Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God*" (3:1) and then challenge us to find our purifying hope that we are being purified until one day "*we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is*" (3:2). Seeking to join with the overcomers, let us plunge into the study of John's letters to Christians who fight the good fight.