

PASTORAL LETTERS OF THE APOSTLE JOHN

Near the end of your New Testament there are a group of three letters written to the Church during a time of great stress and trials. Most conservative scholars believe they were written probably between A.D. 60-70. Theologians through the years have debated about the identity of the author, but for the most part it has been determined that John the Apostle, one of the sons of Zebedee is the author of all three, along with the fourth Gospel account and the book of Revelation. But, these letters are a little bit different than his previous writings, and the first of the three is totally different than the last two.

The first seems to be a straight forward writing directed at some common sense situations for every Believer – new and seasoned. The issues John deals with are **common throughout the Church of his day, as well as the Church of TODAY**. This first letter reads like a listing of **theological statements and the arguments for them**: problems dealing with false teachings are not unique to the First Century. However, many of these were raising their ugly head in the early days of the Church's formation.

Teachings such as: Gnosticism. Gnosticism comes from the Greek word **gnostikos**, "having knowledge", from the root word **gnōsis**, "knowledge". There were two main issues of Gnosticism which attacked the very basics of Christianity. First, Gnostic belief held a **dualism** in reference to the spirit and matter – in particular the physical body of man vs. the spiritual essence of man. Gnostics held that all matter was evil and the spirit was good. Because of this perceived separation, they felt that anything done in the body didn't really matter since **real life existed only in the spirit**. In essence the belief came down to being able to sin in the flesh, yet it would have no effect on the spirit – they are totally separated.

The second primary area of concern was their claim to have possession of **elevated knowledge, a "higher truth"** which only a few were able to obtain – thus the name Gnostics (or knowledge). The problem was, this higher truth wasn't obtained from the Bible, but through some mystical realm. *"Gnostics see themselves as a privileged class elevated above everybody else by their higher, deeper knowledge of the divine."*

The compatibility between **Gnosticism and Christianity is non-existent**. Whereas they believe that salvation comes through acquisition of knowledge, but the Word of God says it is by faith. Even the Pharisees had an abundance of knowledge, but Jesus said they needed to be *Born Again*. Jesus told them in John 5:39-40 –

³⁹ *"You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. ⁴⁰ But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life."*

In other words, just increased knowledge does nothing, if you do nothing with the knowledge you gain. You need to act upon the knowledge.

Along with the influx of Gnosticism, there was the teachings of **Docetism** – the belief that **Jesus didn't have a real flesh and blood body**, but only seemed or appeared that way. The problem you run into there is the denial of some of the core beliefs of Christianity:

- Jesus could not have been tempted in the same way as we are, yet being without sin (Hebrews 4:15)
- The suffering at the hands of the Romans prophesied in Isaiah 53:4-5
- The results of the crucifixion and His death would be worthless
 - *Rom 5:10 For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.*
 - *Col 1:21-22 And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight--*
- If He had no real Body, He could not have been truly resurrected
 - *Rom 1:4 (He was) declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.*
 - *Rom 6:4-5 Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection,*

The one other heresy which seems to be a point which John comes against are the teachings of a man known as **Cerinthus**. Among many problems with his teachings, there are two which stand out most directly and appear as the two which John combats in his letter. We don't have any of the original writing of Cerinthus available, but the early Church Father, Iranaeus wrote against his teachings:

First of all, Cerinthus held to a form of Gnosticism which felt that **God is so holy that He could have no direct dealings with humans**. He taught that Jesus was born only as a human the son of both Joseph and Mary, without divinity at His birth. The Divine Christ descended upon Him at His baptism. Then on the cross, before the sin of man was placed upon Him, the Spirit left Him (*“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”*).

Secondly, because God is holy, **He didn't even create the world, but a lesser god did that dirty little piece of work**.

There is so much wrong with this belief, which separates the love and care God has for us as His creation, **it does away with His personal intervention into our lives**.

These three areas were making headway into the Church even in the First Century and John, now as an older Apostle and Pastor felt an overwhelming love and concern for the Church and felt he needed to address these issues directly. As we go through the study, you will see his arguments against these forms of early heresy.

As far as the content of the first letter, John knew that **knowledge of the Truth was paramount for the Christian's growth** – he fully understood that we are not saved by knowledge, but we as maturing Believers need to *“grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18).”*

As a matter of fact, John uses the word **ginosko** (ghin-ocē'-ko), *“to know or grow in knowledge of”* **over 25 times** in the five chapters of 1 John. In addition, he also uses another word: **oida** (o'eed-a), which is very similar to *ginosko* and means *“to know, be aware of, to have knowledge of, to perceive, to understand,”* **over 15 times**. John is not

against knowledge... but he wants you to have the right knowledge, the knowledge of the Truth.

And he writes to encourage Believers to remain faithful to the Truth!

Just as another side light, the difference between *ginosko* and *oida* is very interesting. According to Vine's Expository Dictionary of the Bible, "*ginosko, frequently suggests inception or progress in "knowledge," while oida suggests fullness of "knowledge."*

Vines then give some examples:

John 13:7, "What I am doing you do not understand now (i.e. Peter did not yet perceive (*oida*) its significance), "but you will know after this." i.e., "get to know (*ginosko*) later"

John 14:7, "If you had known Me" (*ginosko*), i.e., "had definitely come to know (or grow to know) Me," "you would have known My Father also" (*oida*), i.e., "would have had perception of" (He would have been revealed).

We will find that John uses both of these words in significant ways in his letter. There are things that we as Believers need to *grow in knowledge (ginosko)*, while there are other things that as Believers, the Holy Spirit *imparts to us (oida)*. Some areas are the responsibility of the individual in the learning and growing process, while in other areas, the Holy Spirit working in our lives, supernaturally gives us a fullness of understanding beyond our experience.

So, what are the things John wants the Church to know or understand? Well, one of the clues he gives us is the reasons he states for writing the letter – he gives us four direct reasons:

1. (1 John 1:4) *And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.*

For you and I, and every Believer, when we are walking in the Truth and in the knowledge that comes from God, and experiencing Him on a daily basis, our joy becomes full. But if we are troubled by every wind of doctrine, if we are being pulled

around by every new wave of belief that comes up, there's no piece in our life – only a continual struggle to find the next new thing. This is one of the oldest tricks of the enemy. He did it in the Garden, “*God’s word wasn’t enough, it wasn’t sufficient, and in the end it wasn’t true*”. But when Adam and Eve bit into that lie, the joy they had been experiencing in their life vanished and they were left naked to the world and all of its thorns and deceits.

In response to those who are false teachers bringing in false doctrines, Jesus, Himself said that *the thief comes in to kill, steal and to destroy, but that he came to give us life and to give it more abundantly* (John 10:10).

Here in First John, John wants the Church to recognize the liars and their lies... he wants the Church to walk in the Truth... he knows that only then can we have that true *joy unspeakable and full of glory* (1 Peter 1:8)

2. (1 John 2:1) *My little children, these things **I write to you**, so that you may not sin.*

This is a great challenge for every Believer. Sin seems to hit us continually. Everywhere we turn, the opportunity or even the pressure to sin is staring us right in the face. Some are even walking in habitual sin.

When we get to this section, I believe the Lord will open our eyes to see and understand, not only His perfect will for us as His children and representatives, but also our personal responsibility as such. John’s words are challenging, but I do believe that with the right understanding we will see that they are not impossible words but words of release and freedom.

3. (1Jo 2:26) *These things **I have written to you** concerning those who try to deceive you.*

As I shared earlier, the First century Church had so many enemies. The world around them was against them and even within the Church false teachers abounded. All of this with their own personal struggles dealing with each other. How the Church ever survived is truly a miraculous work of God. But we need to remember, it wasn't just the

First Century Church... the Twenty-First Century Church has the same issues and it is still only by the miraculous hand of God that we survive and thrive.

Knowing the Truth is absolutely necessary for our maturity and growth. But we also need to know the tactics of the enemy, in order that we might guard against his deceitfulness and trickery. John wanted to be certain that the church wasn't deceived.

4. (1Jo 5:13) *These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know (oida) that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.*

Some within the Christian community declare that you cannot really know for certain that you are saved, that you have eternal life. Yet, here John says that one of the reasons he is writing to the Church the things he has written is in order that we might know our eternal state. John assures us that it's not through the parroting of some special prayer, nor is it the simply association with a particular group of people. You don't gain eternal life by signing a card.

John says there are particular things we can look at in our own personal lives that help to give us assurance of our eternal status. Even the Apostle Paul agreed when he declared:

2 Corinthians 13:5

Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? --unless indeed you are disqualified.

God has given us the ability to have assurance of our salvation. Here in First John we are going to find that John gives us several "pop quizzes". In these he will give us:

- **Doctrinal Tests** – yes, doctrine is necessary. Without the right doctrine how do you know how to be saved, what it means to be saved, who is responsible for your salvation, and what do I do now that I am saved. Doctrine is a necessary ingredient in our salvation.

There will be **Doctrine Tests**

- **Social Tests** – yes, it makes a difference in how we treat those around us. If the love of God truly abides within us, we will treat people the way God would treat them. John speaks greatly about love for the Brethren, but this test also goes on to touch how we treat those who are in the world.

It matter how you treat others – there will be **Social Tests**

- **Moral Tests** – John brings out the clear truth that how you and I live our lives in this present world just may be a **telling reality of where we live in the next world**, FOR ALL ETERNITY. He doesn't speak of gaining our salvation through good works, but along with James, Paul, and even Jesus he confirms the fact that someone who is Born Again by the Spirit of God does not continue to live a life outside of the will and plan of God.

We are not saved by how we live, but how we live will verify if we are truly saved. There are **Moral Tests**

Remember, whenever you take a test, the test is not the channel by which you gain knowledge. The test is to determine rather you have the knowledge or not. In the same way, as John writes to the Church here in First John, he wants the Church to know that they know that they are truly saved - *that you may know (oida) that you have eternal life (5:13)*.

Before we get into the study, let's look at the author, John the Apostle, one of the sons of Zebedee.

In Mark chapter 1 we read of Simon Peter and his brother Andrew being the first two who began to follow Jesus, then James and his brother John... Mark 1:20

"...immediately (Jesus) called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after Him."

James and John become what are known as the "Sons of Thunder". We find a couple of rather humorous incidents that they are a part of...

When a Samaritan village didn't receive Jesus and His disciples, it's James and John who react to the situation... (Luke 9:54-56) *"And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?" But He turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them." And they went to another village."*

It's James and John that try to sneak in to get a special position in the Kingdom of God, sitting on the right and left hand of Jesus... (Mark 10:35-37) *"Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask." And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" They said to Him, "Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory."*

I think that's why very quickly we find that Peter and the two brothers James and John become what appears to be an inner circle of confidants to Jesus. They seem to be separated from all the others by the choice of Jesus on more than a couple of occasions. I think Jesus wanted to keep His eyes on these guys!!

When Jesus went to the ruler of the synagogues house, after his daughter had died, Mark tells us... (Mark 5:37) *"And He (Jesus) permitted no one to follow Him except Peter, James, and John the brother of James."*

There on the Mt. of Olives, in the Garden of Gethsemane, once again Mark tells us... (Mark 14:33) *"And (Jesus) took Peter, James, and John with Him, and He began to be troubled and deeply distressed."*

We also read that on the Mount of Transfiguration... Matthew 17:1 *"Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves;"*

I believe this event more so than any of the others actually comes into play in the opening words of John's Gospel record as he writes... (John 1:14) *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."* It was on the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus appeared in His glorified form.

Joh is believed to be the youngest of all the disciples and the one who sat next to Jesus at the Last Supper, resting his head on Jesus – (John 13:23) “*Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved...*”

Now that phrase, *that disciple whom Jesus loved* is only used in John's Gospel account and it is used to describe himself. He never gives his own name, but he refers to himself as *that disciple whom Jesus loved*. (John 13:23; 20:2; 21:7; 21:20)

In the early pages of the book of Acts, we find that his brother James is beheaded by Herod. As John aged, God used him in a powerful way, not only writing the Gospel account and these three letters, but also the very powerful and only fully prophetic book of the New Testament, the book of Revelation.

What we have before us in this study is someone who has experienced the Lord Jesus in a close and intimate way. Who knows what it means to suffer for the truth. Someone who has lost comfort, freedom and loved ones for the cause of the Gospel. What we have before us in this study is the heart of a Pastor caring for the Sheep God had placed under his care, as well as for those who would follow in *the journey to the Celestial City, the place where God dwells*.