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1 John

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1 John

A. Overview and Summary.

1. The author is not mentioned in the epistle, but the consensus among all of the church fathers is that it was written by the Apostle John. John humbly wrote of himself in the gospel attributed to him, as the disciple “whom Jesus loved”. As John does not identify writing this epistle to a particular church or individual, it is considered a general epistle to the church at large. John wrote towards the end of his life from Ephesus, and his writings included this and two other epistles with the simple titles of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John. This is the longest epistle and the most significant. He wrote the gospel of John, which is unique from the synoptic gospels and the viewpoint of his eyewitness presence throughout Jesus’s earthly ministry. He also wrote the book of Revelation during his imprisonment on the island of Patmos. All of his writings are dated towards the close of the first century. At that time, John was the sole remaining Apostle of the original twelve, the others having died by martyrdom. John died of natural causes but survived being boiled in oil as well as his imprisonment on Patmos.
2. John writes with the authority of an aged Apostle. He tackles the heresy of Gnosticism, which says there are two states of existence: material and spiritual. In that viewpoint, material is evil, and spiritual is good. For this reason, it denies that Jesus was both human and divine. It teaches that Jesus only had the appearance of a physical nature and that His spirit descended upon Him at His baptism but left Him before His crucifixion on the Cross. That is why John hits that concept hard in his opening words: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life” (1:1).
3. John is very concerned that the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith are being lost and presents them in simple, yet profound statements. His tone is of a father speaking to his children (2:1). Yet he addresses those who attempt to destroy sound doctrine in very negative terms. It is an excellent book to read and study.

B. Chapter One.

1. After the greeting, mentioned in the overview above, John continues with: “the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that

eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us— that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full” (1:2-4). Again, John is firmly stating that he and the other apostles saw and bear witness to the reality of Jesus in the flesh.

2. John declares that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all (1:5b). Then he writes: “But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us” (1:7-10). John uses the analogy of the Christian life as walking in the light. If we walk in the light, the Holy Spirit will reveal our sins, causing us to repent and ask for forgiveness. This statement should cause us not to be negligent about confessing our sins to God. Forgiveness of our sins is not a one-time event. It is a lifetime manner of walking in the light with the resulting confession.

C. Chapter Two.

1. John writes: “My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (2:1-2). John is stating the essentials of the faith, which in Christ we have an Advocate, Jesus who is the “propitiation for our sins”. This phrase references the cover to the ark of the covenant in the Temple called the “Propitiatory Cover” or “Mercy Seat”. In Greek, the word is “hilasterion” or “that which makes propitiation”. The High Priest would once a year go into the Holy of Holies and carry with him the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkle it on the cover or mercy seat. By Christ’s sacrifice, He once and forever accomplished this by shedding His blood on the Cross for our sins. The phrase “for the whole world” implies that forgiveness of sins is available to anyone who accepts Christ as Savior.
2. John gives us a test by which we can know if we are in Christ: “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this, we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked” (2:3-6).

3. John then gives insight to those who walk in the light of God: “He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes” (2:9-11).
4. He confirms the spiritual state of those walking in the light by their sins being forgiven, knowing the Father, and overcoming the wicked one (2:12-14). He gives us caution about loving the world: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever” (2:15-17).
5. John gives a word about “antichrists”: “Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us” (2:18-19). There will be an Antichrist who will be manifested at the time of the end. In John’s time, it was a common belief that he would appear shortly as they thought it was “the last hour”. These “antichrists” were false believers that went out of the fellowship of the true believers and began to spread false teachings.
6. John tells us how we know truth and how to identify antichrists: “But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son, does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also” (2:20-23). In the Old Testament, oil, symbolizing the Holy Spirit, was sprinkled on the heads of priests, signifying their empowerment. True believers have the anointing of the Holy Spirit within them and thereby know the truth.
7. He then writes about letting the anointing abide within us as truth (2:24-25). He gives a strong word to guard against those who try to deceive them: “These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you. But the

anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him” (2:26-27).

8. He concludes the chapter with: “And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him: (2:28-29). This is an often-overlooked admonition. To “not be ashamed before Him at His coming” indicates the possibility of being ashamed when He comes. Many Christians do not realize that although saved from hell, they are still accountable for how they live their lives after being born again. As Paul tells us, “We all will appear before the judgment seat of Christ to account for the things done in our bodies, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10). The key to not being ashamed is to abide in Christ.

D. Chapter Three.

1. John opens with these words: “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore, the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (3:1-3). That we shall be like Jesus is a magnificent promise. We do not know fully what we shall be, but to be like Him is sufficient.
2. He then writes something that is difficult to understand: “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him” (3:4-6). Some say that we can achieve sinless perfection. That is not what this passage means. To abide in Him is to remain firmly attached to Jesus as the vine (John 15). If we continue in this abiding, we will not desire to sin. This thought of not sinning is continued: “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God” (3:9). But John has already told us earlier in this epistle “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:9). The Amplified Bible helps interpret these seemingly contradictory passages: “No one who abides in

Him [who remains united in fellowship with Him—deliberately, knowingly, and habitually] practices sin. No one who habitually sins has seen Him or known Him” (1 John 3:6 AMP). The key is that believers do not habitually continue to sin. As we grow in Christ, we should desire to spend more time in abiding, which removes the desire to sin.

3. John continues about the imperative of love and its outworking: “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (3:16-17). He continues: “And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment” (3:23).
4. He closes the chapter with these words with instruction on how to abide: “Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us” (3:24).

E. Chapter Four.

1. John gives us a means by which we can test false and deceiving spirits: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world” (4:1-3). This simple test exposes the multitude of false religions that abound.
2. He continues with what has become a great saying among His people today: “You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are of the world. Therefore, they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (4:4-6). To know that the Holy Spirit is dwelling in us and is greater than what Satan can throw at us is of great comfort.
3. John’s writings are full of his desire that “his children” love one another: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this, the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His

only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (4:7-11).

4. He continues in later passages with the understanding that confession of Jesus as the Son of God abides in Him as well as the theme of love: “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him” (4:15-16).
5. John gives us assurance for the day of judgment: “Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us” (4:17-19). We love God, because He first loved us. We should not fear the day of judgment.
6. He concludes the chapter with: “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also” (4:20-21).

F. Chapter Five.

1. John speaks of the love of God and of the brothers: “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him. By this, we know that we love the children of God when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (5:1-5). John is not speaking of legalism here. But our love for God should cause us to keep His commandments as a child of God just as we kept our parent’s commandments when we were young.
2. John gives another passage that can be difficult to understand: “This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness on earth: the

Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one” (5:6-8). The best interpretation is that Jesus’s baptism was the “water”, and the Cross was the “blood”. John mentions three witnesses: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit. Together they testify of the truth. In Jewish culture, only two witnesses were needed to validate something.

3. John states the certainty of God’s witness of our eternal life: “And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 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” (5:11-13).
4. John gives a word about assurance of prayer but then, another difficult passage about sin that leads to death: “Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death” (5:14-17). God purges His church. The best interpretation of a sin leading to death is repetitive unrepentant sin. There is a point where God says of those types of believers, “that is enough” and takes their lives.
5. He closes with a word about one who is born of God keeps himself and then says: “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life” (5:20).

G. Discussion Questions, Application and Passing it On.

1. John was the last remaining apostle who was an eyewitness to Jesus’s ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. Does that knowledge give you any more incentive to read and understand his writings?
2. Are you walking in the light? (1:5-10) We can deceive ourselves by saying we are not sinning. By whose standards are you walking? Is it the culture you live in or the Word of God?
3. Christ will come back soon for His believers. Are you ready or will you be put shame away from Him at His presence? (2:28). What is the secret of being ready?

4. John was deeply concerned about false teaching creeping into the church. This is also a problem today. What is the test he gives us to determine truth or falsehood?

This New Testament survey was provided by Joshua Nations (JoshuaNations.org)