

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF

1, 2, 3 John

What and where? A letter and two “postcards” from Apostle John; nearly identical in length, 2 and 3 John are Scripture’s shortest “books,” found just before Jude and Revelation — the Bible’s end.

- First John’s favorite forms of address are “my little children,” “beloved,” and “brethren” (18 times). The letter answers “How can I know that I am a Christian and have eternal life?” The word *love* occurs over 40 times, half of them in chapter 4.
- Second John is written to an unknown family or church, urging them to continue in the Father’s love and commandments, and not to listen to those who deny the doctrine of Jesus Christ (1-4, 5, 6, 7-13).
- Third John is written to an Elder Gaius, asking him to receive and bless ministers who walk in truth and love, and warning him of Diotrophes, who abuses the church (1-4, 5-8, 9-14).

First John’s prologue (1:1-4), like that of John’s gospel, bears witness to the eternal life and physical reality of the Word made flesh. Called “the tests of life,” the book is a treasure of teaching on faith, love, and obedience, leading the reader to assurance, fullness of joy, and victory (5:13; 1:4; 2:1). *Weyou know* occurs 25 times in five chapters.

It was written when the purity and simplicity of Christian belief were being threatened by gnostics’ teaching salvation through knowledge. They offered a distant, imperfect God, a Christ who only “seemed” human, and an optional morality. John challenges gnosticism by exposing its lies and declaring God’s truth:

- God is light: He who claims fellowship with God while living in darkness is a liar (1:5, 6).
- God is love: He who claims to love God while hating his brother is a liar (4:8, 16, 20).
- Christ came in full humanity: He who denies that Jesus Christ came in the flesh is a liar (2:21-23; 4:1-3).

We can know we are God’s children (3:2), not by secret *gnosis*, but by three spiritual tests. Hereby we know, if . . .

- we believe God loved us and gave eternal life through His Son, Jesus Christ, the world’s Savior (3:23; 4:14-16; 5:10-13)
- we love others (2:9-11; 3:11-18; 4:7-21)
- we obey His commandments: He who claims to know God while walking in disobedience is a liar (2:3-6; 3:3-10).

Each test of life — faith, love, obedience — provides check and balance to the others. They are repeated and intertwined by John in ascending spirals: The first spiral uncoils in “light” (1:5—2:11); the second, in begetting to “life” (2:25—3:16); and the third, in the Spirit (3:24—5:9). Positive test results are confirmed by the Spirit within and are summarized as “our faith” (3:19-24; 5:1-5).

No fear, no shame: Confidence and boldness are the rewards to those who pass the tests, i. e., those in whom God’s love has been perfected (2:5, 28; 3:2, 3; 4:17, 18).

1 John’s ABC’s

- *A* is for *abide* (12 times): We abide in God and He in us; let it remain so.
- . . . *anti-Christ* (4 times): Denial of the Father and the Son is dangerous.
- *B* is for *beginning* (9 times): This may refer to creation or to the gospel.
- *C* is for *commandments* (14 times): Loving God = obeying Him.
- *D* is for *declare/testimony/witness* (11 times): The Word who came from God was confirmed by the Spirit, water, and blood, and is carried by His disciples

About sin, John says . . .

- To deny sin is to call God a liar and deceive ourselves; to confess sin is to be forgiven and cleansed (1:7-10).
- Getting past sin is the Christian’s goal; falling short is often his experience (2:1).
- Sin goes against God’s law and does what isn’t right (3:4; 5:17).
- Jesus had no sin; He removes/destroys sin and cleanses us by sacrificing Himself in love (2:2; 3:5, 8). His people are known by love and their practice of righteousness — not sin (2:29; 3:6-10; 5:18).
- The Devil sinned always and now dominates the world; his children are known by lack of love and their practice of sin (2:2; 3:5, 8; 5:19).
- Sin without faith and repentance toward God leads to death (5:16-18); sin that is confessed and forgiven through Jesus Christ does not lead to death, though it may cloud the heart (3:20, 21).
- John insists over and over on two truths: 1) Christians are not sinless, but they are forgiven; 2) Christians have received the seed-life of God and therefore do not practice, or continue in, sin.

1 John in a sentence: We may know that we have eternal life if we believe in God’s Son continually, if we love our brethren truthfully, and if we walk in His commandments faithfully.