

## **#21. THE EPISTLES OF JOHN**

1. **First, Second, and Third John** were written to combat the eroding effect of both Gnosticism and secular, humanistic logic in the closing days of the first century.
  - First John was written to answer the doubts of those who were beginning to doubt the authenticity of the Gospel message, and to create assurance that Jesus was truly *God in the flesh*.
  - Second John was written to emphasize the importance of truth and love. There is also a strong warning against false teachers who would pervert those dynamics. *The Chosen Lady and Her Children* may refer to a particular woman whose home served as a meeting place for a congregation, or it may have been a term used to describe the Church in general.
  - Third John is a personal letter to Gaius thanking him for his exemplary life of leadership and generosity in the church.
2. **Author and date** - John, the Beloved Apostle, is the clearly recognized author of all three letters. He is one of the original twelve apostles, and is the author of the Gospel of John as well.
  - The date of writing is probably between 90-94AD, but before the persecution of Diocletian, which began in 95AD. Each letter was written from Ephesus.
  - John was at least 80 years old at this time, and was probably the only surviving apostle. We are fairly certain the Epistles were written before his banishment to the prison colony on Patmos, where he received the Revelation of Jesus.
3. **John's emphasis** is on stabilizing the church in proper doctrine, love for one another, and in the assurance of salvation.
4. **Key Verses**
  - **I John 5:13 NLT** "I have written this to youth believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life."

- **2 John 6 NLT** “Love means doing what God has commanded us, and He has commanded us to love one another, just as you heard from the beginning.”
- **3 John 4 NLT** “I could have no greater joy than to hear that my children are following the truth.”
- **3 John 5 NLT** “Dear friend, you are being faithful to God when you care for the traveling teachers who pass through, even though they are strangers to you.”

## 5. Key People

- John - one of the original Twelve Apostles, and author of The Gospel of John, The Revelation of Jesus Christ, and 1, 2, and 3 John.
- The Chosen Lady and Her Children - perhaps the leader of a house church or perhaps a designation of the Church of Jesus Christ in general.
- Gaius - probably the leader of a house church; known for his hospitality and faithfulness.
- Diotrephes - a church leader who insisted on control and exercised a manipulative leadership style.
- Demetrius - the messenger who delivered the letter known as 3 John to Gaius.

## 6. Key Place

- **Ephesus** - the writings of Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and Eusebius confirm Ephesus as the place of John’s residence for many years. It was a center of travel and commerce. Situated on the Aegean Sea at the mouth of the Cayster River, the city was one of the greatest seaports of the ancient world. Three major highways intersected at Ephesus.
- **The Temple of Artemis (Diana)** - was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The foundation and one column remains of this temple which once measured 425 feet long, 220 feet wide, and 60 feet high. Paul's ministry in this city was considered a threat to Diana’s temple (Acts 19:27). According to secular historian and Harvard graduate Ramsay MacMullin (who taught at Yale University from 1967 until 1983), John the Apostle entered the Temple of Diana years after Paul’s ministry there,

and upon the command of The Holy Spirit, prayed this prayer: “O God...at whose name every idol takes flight and every demon and unclean power: now let the demon that is here take flight in thy Name!” At that moment, the Altar of Diana split into pieces and half the Temple itself fell to the ground! (*Christianizing the Roman Empire: 100-400AD*, by Ramsay MacMullin, page 26). Paul's evangelism and John's pastoral/apostolic ministry combined to bring down the cult of Diana of Ephesus.

- **The Agora (Marketplace)** - this market area is known as the *Square Agora* because of its dimensions (360 feet square). It arose in the Hellenistic period and was surrounded on all sides by arched shops about 40 feet deep. It is located next to the harbor and was the city's main commercial center. It is probable that Paul worked here with Priscilla and Aquila in their tent-making business.
- **The Town Theater** - with a capacity of 25,000 people, this theater was built in the Hellenistic period and was renovated by several Roman emperors. Designed for theatrical performances, later alterations allowed gladiatorial contests. When Paul was accused of damaging Diana and her temple, the mob gathered together in this theater (Acts 19:23-41).

## 7. Key Themes

- **Truth and Error** - John reminds his followers that obedience to God's Word is an essential dynamic of Christianity. Any teaching that marginalizes obedience and holy living is to be categorically rejected.
- **Holy Living** - is the result of personal disciple and moral fiber. We should live as Christ lived (1 John 3:1-3). Sanctified behavior is not the basis for our salvation, but it certainly is a result of it.
- **False Doctrine** - echoing Paul's warnings to Timothy, John points out that false doctrine is not only *wrong*, it is also *deadly*. It spreads throughout the body like disease, therefore it must be aggressively rebuked and corrected. Contrasted with false doctrine is **Truth** (1 Timothy 2:4, 7; 3:15; 4:3; 6:5; 2 Timothy 2:18; 25; 3:7, 8; 4:4), **God's Word** (1 Timothy 4:5, 6; 5:17; 2 Timothy 1:13; 2:9,15; 4:2) and **Sound Doctrine** (1 Timothy 1:10; 4:6, 13; 5:17; 6:1, 3; 2 Timothy 3:10, 16; 4:3).
- **Assurance** - the end result of these epistles is to give assurance of eternal salvation through the work of Jesus. John wanted his spiritual children to *know* they had passed from death unto life!
- **Love** - is the very fabric of God, the defining trait of all true Believers, and the glue that

enables God's church to operate in unity.

## **8. The Contents of 1, 2, and 3 John**

- **First John**

- **Embracing the Incarnation (1:1-10)**
- **Four Commands of a Righteous Life (2:1-29)**
  - "Keep His Commandments" v.3
  - "Love the Brethren" v.10
  - "Do Not Love the World" v.15
  - "Abide In Him" v.28
- **Characteristics of the Righteous (3:1-4:6)**
  - Righteousness (3:1-12)
  - Love (3:13-24)
  - Belief (4:1-6)
- **The Dynamic of Love (4:7-21)**
- **A Life of Assurance (5:6-21)**

- **Second John**

- **The Church is Commended for Faithful Service and Leadership (1-4)**
- **Love One Another (5, 6)**
- **Avoid False Teachers and Their Doctrine (7-11)**
- **Closing and Benediction (12,13)**

- **Third John**
  - **Thanks to Gaius for His Generosity and Hospitality (1-4)**
  - **The Doctrine of Generosity and Partnership (5-8)**
  - **The Evil Behavior of Diotrephes (9, 10)**
  - **The Worthy Ministry of Demetrius (11-13)**
  - **Benediction and Blessing (13, 14)**

### **Worth noting about the Epistles of John**

- Though the epistles are anonymous, the earliest testimony of the church credits the writings to John. The language, style, and tone seems to confirm John as the author, and the rise of Gnosticism in the latter days of the first century confirm the general time period.
- Some early church fathers (including Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and Eusebius) testify that John lived in Ephesus until his death. Papias was a church father who had direct contact with John describing him as a lively and respected voice to the church. Since the other original Apostles had died, John was the last personal link to the earthly ministry of Jesus. His voice was greatly in demand by the church.
- For a detailed study of 1 John, contact Christian Life Church in Columbia, South Carolina for a series entitled “***Classic Christianity: Studies in 1 John***” by Pastor Stephen Chitty.

### **When Reading the Epistles of John:**

- Remember that years earlier, Paul had prophesied that false teachers would arise from within the Ephesian church as well as from the outside (Acts 20:28-31). As predicted, these teachers gravitated to a philosophical/theological system that became known as Gnosticism (from the Greek word for *knowledge*). If the first generation of Christians were challenged by the perversion of legalism, the second and third generation of Believers battled Gnosticism. That system introduced a sense of dualism which taught that while man’s fleshly nature was evil, his immaterial nature was inherently good. The resulting error was the teaching that Jesus was spirit only - that He had not come in the flesh. They also claimed an elevated spiritual knowledge, known as the *Deep Things* (see Revelation 2:24), and divided Christians into two groups: the pneumatikoi (*spiritual ones*), and the pseuchikoi (*soulish ones*). In 1 John, the Beloved Disciple reminded them of the physical nature of Jesus,

dispelling the foundational lie of Gnosticism (1:1-4; 4:2, 3). He reiterated the divine Word as the authority over men's lives, not human reasoning and logic. The error of Gnosticism resulted in either asceticism (the punishment of the flesh) or to antinomianism (a lawlessness that discounted responsibility for bodily actions).

- Second and Third John are the shortest epistles in the New Testament, each of them contain less than 300 words in the Greek text. John's words are very simple and direct. In fact, 1 John is usually the first New Testament book translated by Greek students. This peculiarity is noted by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart: "*The wonder of this little treatise is how much John can say, and say profoundly, while using a notably limited vocabulary. But it is the very repetition of words, plus the use of stark contrasts, that is so effective. His special vocabulary tells the whole story: to remain/continue/abide (24x) in the truth (9x) means to believe in (9x), or confess (5x) the Son (22x), to whom the Father (14x), and Spirit (8x) bear witness (12x); it means further to be born of God (10x), so as to walk (5x) in the light (6x), to hear (14x) and to know (40x) God, to keep (7x) the commandment (14x) to love (46x) the brothers and sisters (15x), and overcome (6x) the world. All of this is in contrast to the lie (7x), deceit, (4x), denying Christ (3x), having a false spirit (4x), thus being antichrist (4x), walking in darkness (6x), hating (5x) one's brothers and sisters but loving the world (23x), thus being in sin (27x), which leads to death (6x).*"<sup>1</sup>
- The idea of hospitality to strangers in 3 John is a difficult concept for modern Christians to grasp. In our culture, guests are first *invited* to visit! In the early days of the church and even before in the culture of Synagogue, people of faith were welcomed and provided for, since they were usually sent out by a parent church to strengthen the local congregation. These visitors would usually carry a letter of recommendation to be presented upon their arrival.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart; *How To Read The Bible Book By Book*; Zondervan Publishers; Grand Rapids; 2002; page 413