



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

New Testament Survey

Lesson 37 – The Three Letters of John

The Life of John

John and Andrew were once disciples of John the Baptist (John 1:35). When John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and said: **“Behold the Lamb of God”**, they went to see Jesus and became His first followers.

John and his brother James were fishermen. They were sons of Zebedee and Salome. Jesus called them to be His disciples at the Sea of Galilee. John (together with James and Peter) was one of the three in the inner circle who went into Jairus’ home, accompanied Jesus on the Mountain of Transfiguration, and went with Him into the Garden of Gethsemane. John and James were called the Sons of Thunder, probably because they wanted fire to come down from heaven to destroy the Samaritans who rejected Jesus (Luke 9:54).

John sat next to Jesus at the Lord’s Supper. Jesus told him privately that Judas Iscariot was the betrayer. In his Gospel John calls himself **“the disciple whom Jesus loved”**, or **“the other disciple”**; he does not use his own name. We can consider John to be the most intimate friend of Jesus. He was no doubt a very young man during Jesus’ ministry, probably in his twenties. John witnessed Jesus’ crucifixion. While He was hanging on the cross, Jesus placed His mother Mary into John’s care.

After Jesus rose from the dead, John and Peter ran to the grave and found it empty. John was with the other disciples when Jesus appeared alive during the forty days after Easter. After Jesus ascended into heaven, John was with the others when God gave them the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. John became a leader in the Jerusalem congregation. He was with Peter when the lame man was healed at the temple gate, when they were summoned before the Council, and when they traveled to Samaria. John’s brother James was the first of the twelve to die for his faith.

John probably remained a leader in the Jerusalem congregation together with Peter and Jesus’ brother James until about 65 AD. It seems John then left Jerusalem and became the leader of the Christians in Ephesus. By this time Peter and Paul were dead.

Before 96 AD John was exiled to the island of Patmos. He returned to Ephesus in 96 AD and remained there until his death around the year 100 AD. He lived to be a very old man, probably the only one of the twelve to die a natural death. Tradition tells us that in his last days John kept telling the Christians: **“Little children, love one another.”**

John's Gospel, his three letters, and Revelation were probably all written between 90 and 100 AD. Thus, John wrote considerably later than when the rest of the New Testament was written. By this time Jerusalem had been destroyed (70 AD) by the Roman armies under Titus. The Christians had already undergone several persecutions.

John's Three Letters

John wrote his first letter to counter the influence of false teaching. Some Christians had left John's congregations and claimed to be better Christians than John. These false teachers taught that Jesus was true God, but not true man, or at least not true God and true man at the same time. Their leader was a man named Cerinthus. Cerinthus taught that Jesus was a mere man until His baptism. Then the Christ of God came upon Him and enabled Him to do miracles. This Christ then departed from Jesus again before His suffering. In other words, these teachers made a distinction between Jesus and the Christ. They claimed that Jesus was not the Christ, and that God's blood was not shed for us.

John addressed his second letter to an elect lady, probably meaning a Christian congregation. In this letter John encouraged the Christians to show brotherly love. He also warned them against the false teachers.

In his third letter John wrote to a friend named Gaius. John had sent some missionaries to Gaius' church and Gaius had received them kindly. But another man in the congregation, Diotrophes, had refused to welcome John's missionaries and even wanted to put anyone who did accept out of the congregation.

First John

John asks us to test our lives to see whether they are truly Christian lives.

Read all of First John. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to ask them.

1 John 1:1-4: Introduction

"That which we have seen and heard we declare to you" (v. 3).

1 John 1:5 – 2:28: Test yourselves to see whether you are walking in darkness or light

Are you walking in true righteousness?

"God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all" (v. 1:5).

"If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar" (v. 1:10).

"The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (v. 1:7).

"If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (v. 2:2).

"He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and ... also for the whole world" (v. 2:3).

"He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (v. 2:6).

Are you walking in true love?

"He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now" (v. 2:9).

"Do not love the world or the things in the world" (v. 2:15).

Are you walking in true belief?

"Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either" (v. 2:23).

1 John 2:29 – 4:6: Test yourselves to see whether you are true children of God

Are you walking in true righteousness?

"Beloved, now we are children of God. ... We know that ... we shall be like Him" (v. 3:2).

"Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (v. 3:3).

"Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God" (v. 3:10).

"He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning" (v. 3:8).

Are you walking in true love?

"Whoever hates his brother is a murderer" (v. 3:15).

"He laid down His life for us. We also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (v. 3:16).

Are you walking in true belief?

"Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God" (v. 4:1).

1 John 4:7 – 5:12: Test yourselves to see whether you are loving children of a loving God

Are you walking in true righteousness?

"This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments" (v. 5:3).

Are you walking in true love?

"In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son" (v. 4:10).

"If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (v. 4:11).

"God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him" (v. 4:16).

"We love Him, because He first loved us" (v. 4:19).

"If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar" (v. 4:20).

Are you walking in true belief?

"Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God" (v. 4:15).

"He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (v. 5:12).

1 John 5:13-21: The certainties of a Christian

“These things I have written to you ... that you may know that you have eternal life” (v. 13).

“If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us” (v. 14).

“We know that whoever is born of God does not sin” (v. 18).

**“We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one”
(v. 19).**

“We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding” (v. 20).

“Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen” (v. 21).

Second John – the letter to the elect lady

Read all of Second John. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to ask them.

“He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son” (v. 9).

“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house” (v. 10).

Third John – the letter to Gaius

Read all of Third John. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to ask them.

“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (v. 4).

Diotrephes **“does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to” (v. 10).**

“Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good” (v. 11).

The Testimony of Eusebius – the first church historian

“At this time (the reign of Emperor Trajan), the disciple whom Jesus loved – John, apostle and evangelist – still lived on in Asia (Minor) and directed the churches there, following his return from exile. That he survived this long is confirmed by two reliable and orthodox witnesses: Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. Irenaeus writes: ‘All the elders in Asia associated with John, the Lord’s disciple, testify that John taught them the truth, for he remained with them until the time of Trajan.’ ‘Now the church at Ephesus was founded by Paul, but John remained there until Trajan’s time, and it is a true witness of the apostolic tradition.’”

Questions

1. What does John call himself in his Gospel?
2. What three tests does John propose to his readers in his first letter?
3. What does he say about those who do not pass his tests?
4. What is the only way we can be cleansed from our many sins?
5. What does John have to say about the devil in his first letter?
6. What is the difference between God's love for us and our love for God?
7. What are some of the ways in which we show love to our neighbor?
8. What is all included in the term "idolatry"?
9. Which false doctrine is John warning about in his second letter?
10. What was the sin of Diotrephes that John spoke of in his third letter?