

1 John

By James West

Key message of the book: 'Abide in God's fellowship.'

Background information:

This book was written by John, the fisherman. He and his brother James were the sons of Zebedee, and were called 'sons of thunder' in Mark 3:17. John is that disciple 'whom Jesus loved', so described in the Gospel of John (by the same author) five times. Tradition indicates that John may have written his gospel and these epistles from Ephesus in his later years, around A.D. 90.

Like Revelation (penned some five years later maybe), this epistle was likely written for the benefit of the churches in Asia. Ephesus in Asia is supposed to have been the centre of the John's later ministry.

John explains his purpose for writing in 5:13: 'These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.'

J. Vernon McGee identifies a five-fold purpose revealed in the epistle: (1) 1:3 — "That ye also may have fellowship with us [other believers]; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (2) 1:4 — "That your joy may be full." (3) 2:1 — "That ye sin not." (4) 5:13 — "That ye may know that ye have eternal life." (5) 5:13 — "That ye may believe on the name of the Son of God."

To this end, John seeks to lead his readers into deep fellowship with the Father, the Son, and other believers; to ground his readers in the old truths they had learned; to help them identify false teachers and professors, which included the Gnostics, who prided themselves in higher knowledge and who denied the union of Jesus' two natures, human and divine, into one person; to understand the relationship between profession and walk; to understand the nature of assurance; to be assured of the deity of Jesus Christ as the ground of their faith.

The themes that John covers in this epistle are similar to those found in his gospel. 'Vocabulary used extensively in both the Gospel and the Epistles include: beginning, Word, believe, life, keep, love, abide, walk in darkness, children of God, children of the Devil, born of God, pass from death to life, Spirit of truth, only begotten Son, Saviour of the world and many others.' (New Testament Bible History, p. 285, H. Richard Hester)

Key words and phrases:

'Love' (33 times): Love is the great end and evidence of our religion.

'Life' (15 times): Jesus is described here as the 'Life', and it is life more abundant that God wants us to enjoy.

'Know (38 times): Knowledge is the basis for the believer's assurance of salvation. John was eager to establish the truth that the man Jesus Christ was the Son of God. The Gnostics denied the doctrine of Christ, and went about to establish their own 'knowledge'. Believers are to stand firm upon the certainties of the Gospel as revealed by the apostles, for it is only by the true knowledge of the Gospel that true life, joy, and righteousness are to be enjoyed.

Outline: (Paul N. Benware, Survey of the New Testament)

1. The Focus of Fellowship (1:1-2:17)
 - a. Its basis (1:5)
 - b. Its obstacles (1:6-10)
 - c. Its evidence (2:1-17)
2. The Destruction of Fellowship (2:18-4:6)
 - a. Arising of antichrists (2:18-28)
 - b. Children of the devil (2:29-3:12)
 - c. Hatred of the world (3:13-24)
 - d. Prophets of the world (4:1-6)
3. The Essentials of Fellowship (4:7-5:21)
 - a. Mutual love (4:7-5:3)
 - b. Overcoming faith (5:4-12)
 - c. Abiding assurance (5:13)
 - d. Victorious confidence in prayer (5:14-15)
 - e. Conclusion (5:16-21)



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