The Letters of John Bible Study Guide

By Shawna Carpenter

How to use this Bible Study Guide

1. Take your time. This notebook is set up to allow you to take a whole week to digest a Bible Chapter. Spend time in prayer as you study. Invite the Holy Spirit into your study time. We can really only understand God’s Word as the Holy Spirit reveals it to us (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).
2. Observational Phase: This phase of the study is to simply look at what the passage says taking it at face value. Read and re-read the passage, perhaps using different translations. Write down or highlight any observations in your Bible or journal. This could include interesting phrases, metaphors, if/then statements, or “therefore” statements. Identify any cultural distinctive that are foreign to our time and culture. This is also a good time to ask open ended questions. You don’t need to have the answers right now. Taking the passage at face value, what seems to be the theme? Try finishing this sentence for the author, “I am writing about…” Try to sum up the theme in one sentence.
3. Interpretation Phase: At this point you begin to define what the author meant by what he wrote. Using a study Bible, commentary, or online program start defining key words, investigating culturally obscure elements or metaphors of the passage, and answering some of your open ended questions you asked during the observational phrase. This is a good time to do word studies, cross-reference studies, or map out the verse. I have included some questions to help you think through the passage. Answer what you can and make notes about what you still don’t understand.
4. Meditation Phase: Spend a good amount of time meditating on the passage. You can do this by praying through the passage, memorizing the key verse, engaging the Holy Spirit in conversation about the passage, or thinking about the passage as you go about your day or as you worship. I encourage you to keep a journal about what you hear the Holy Spirit saying.
5. Application Phase: The last step is what makes this passage relevant to you. With the help of the Holy Spirit, determine how you should respond to the passage. Is there a command you should obey, a sin you need to confess, a promise you need to believe, or something more you need to study? Write down how this passage applies to you and a plan of action for responding to God’s Word. Be specific. What will you do and when will you do it?

# Context

## **Introduction**

Have you ever felt that we live in a spiritually confusing age? What does it really mean to be a Christian? What does one have to believe and do in order to be a true Christian? Can one have a true knowledge of God apart from Jesus Christ? These questions are very relevant for our lives today, and there are no clearer answers to them than are given in 1 John.

Judging from John’s letter, things apparently weren’t much different in the church of the first century. The author of 1 John writes his epistle to assure Christian believers who were being confused by conflicting views about who Jesus was and what is important to believe about him for eternal life. First John 5:13 says, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” John wanted the people he pastored to live with the confidence of knowing that they had the truth about eternal life when apparently there were those in the congregation who identified themselves as Christians but were speaking a very different message about what it meant to know God and to have eternal life. John’s epistle defines what one must believe in order to know that he or she has eternal life. (Taken from *Letters to the Church: A Survey of Hebrews and the General Epistles* by Karen H. Jobes)

## **Authorship, Audience, and Date**

Although the epistle itself is anonymous, the style of language and the testimony of early manuscripts reliably attribute this epistle to the author of the fourth gospel, John the Beloved Apostle. Early church fathers report that John was among those Christians who fled from Jerusalem before its siege and destruction in the late 60’s A.D. Tradition places him in Ephesus where he helped to pastor the churches in that region who were the most likely recipients of this letter. In some ways, the epistle is more like a sermon than a letter and was intended to be read aloud to churches all over present day Turkey. It was from here that John authored all of his books in the New Testament during the second half of the first century.

## **Theme and Purpose**

The theme of 1-3 John is true faith and doctrine in the face of false teaching about Jesus. Every chapter tells us about who Jesus really is and how those who believe in him will reflect his nature. Traditionally, 1-3 John is seen as a response to early Gnostics in the church. Gnosticism was a “religious mysticism that pirated Christian motifs to propagate an understanding of salvation based on esoteric ‘knowledge’. According to this view, redemption is through affirming the divine light already in the human soul, not through repentance of sin and faith in Christ…” (ESV Study Bible Notes). Gnostic belief didn’t truly arise until long after this epistle was written, however, it could be that John was already encountering heresies which would give birth to Gnosticism. It is interesting to note that we are still encountering these kinds of heresies in the church today as it is infiltrated by New Age beliefs and eastern mysticism.

# Week 1: 1 John Chapter 1

## **Observation Phase**

Key Words:

* Word of Life, Life, Eternal Life
* Fellowship
* Light, Walk in Light, Truth
* Darkness/Sin, unrighteousness
* Words that John uses to establish the credibility of his testimony, i.e. “we have heard and seen.”
* “If we say…”

Key Verse: “But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7, NLT).

Cross-References: John’s Gospel 1:1-18; Acts 2:42; 1 Peter 1:2; Psalm 32

How would the author finish this sentence: “I am writing about…”

**Interpretation Phase**

1. Compare 1 John 1:1 with John’s Gospel 1:1-18. Who is “the Word” that John is talking about and what do these two passages tell us about the Word?
2. How would you define “fellowship”?
3. What does John use the word “light” as a metaphor for and what does he contrast light with in this passage?
4. How does John establish the credibility of his witness and the validity of what he is writing to his audience?
5. What does this passage tell us about who Jesus is and how we are to reflect his nature?

**Meditation Phase**

What is the Holy Spirit Saying?

## **Application Phase:**

How will I respond to this passage?

Command to Obey

Sin to Confess

Promise to Believe

Something to Study

What am I going to do and when am I going to do it?

Week 2: 1 John Chapter 2:1-14

**Observation Phase**

Cross-References: John’s Gospel 8:1-20; 13:1-20, 31-35; Romans 3:21-31; Psalm 111

Key Words:

* “I am writing…”
* Sin/s
* Commandment/s
* Light/Darkness
* Love/Hate

Key Verse: “Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6, NLT).

How would the author finish this sentence: “I am writing about…”

**Interpretation Phase**

1. John says 11 times “I am writing…” in chapter 2. How do the different reasons he is writing relate to one another? (See verses 1, 7, 8, 12-14 in our assigned passage, see also 2:21,26; 1:4; 5:13).
2. Some translations use the word “propitiation” in verse 2 where the NLT translates “the sacrifice that atones for our sins.” What does the word atone mean?
3. What does John use the word “light” as a metaphor for and what does he contrast light with in this passage?
4. What is the difference between “the law” that Paul writes about in Romans 3, and the new commandment that Jesus gives in John 13, and John writes about here in 1 John 2?
5. What does this passage tell us about who Jesus is and how we are to reflect his nature?

**Meditation Phase**

What is the Holy Spirit Saying?

**Application Phase:**

How will I respond to this passage?

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Week 3: 1 John Chapter 2:15-29

**Observation Phase**

Key Words:

* Love
* Antichrist/s
* Anointing (ESV, NIV); Spirt (NLT)
* Abides (ESV); Remain (NLT, NIV)
* “From the beginning”

Key Verse: “And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever.” (1 John 2:17, NLT).

Cross-References: John’s Gospel 3:16-21; 15:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:20-2:12; Psalm 91

How would the author finish this sentence: “I am writing about…”

**Interpretation Phase**

1. In verse 15 John changes the focus from loving people and God to loving the world. Why is loving the world so contradictory to loving people and God?
2. Who is John writing about in verse 19 and how do they relate to the antichrists mentioned in verse 18?
3. What does the word anointed mean and what does John say about the anointing in this passage? Note: The NLT translates the word anointed as “the Spirit” changing the word from a adjective to a noun.
4. John has used the phrase “from the beginning” several times in chapters 1 and 2 (see 1:1; 2:7, 13-14, 24; see also 3:8, 11). Why do you think he repeats this phrase? (See John’s Gospel 1:1)
5. What does this passage tell us about who Jesus is and how we are to reflect his nature?

**Meditation Phase**

What is the Holy Spirit Saying?

**Application Phase:**

How will I respond to this passage?

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Week 4: 1 John Chapter 3

**Observation Phase**

Cross-References: John’s Gospel 3:1-15; 15:12-17; Genesis 4; Psalm 51

Key Words:

* Children of God, Born of God
* Sin, Sinning, Evil
* Love
* Hate, Murder
* Heart
* Commandment/s

Key Verse: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” (1 John 3:16, NLT).

How would the author finish this sentence: “I am writing about…”

**Interpretation Phase**

1. In verse 2 John writes that we will become like him when we see him as he is. How does seeing Jesus change us and how should we respond to the hope of knowing that we will be like him?
2. What does verse 6 tell us about the hope that was expressed in verses 2-3? Is “seeing” him just a future event and what impact does “seeing” him have on you here and now?
3. In verses 17-21 John writes about different postures of the heart: the closed heart, the reassured heart, and the condemned heart. Describe these three different postures and how they relate to our relationship with God.
4. What does this passage tell us about who Jesus is and how we are to reflect his nature?

**Meditation Phase**

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**Application Phase:**

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Week 5: 1 John Chapter 4

**Observation Phase**

Cross-References: John’s Gospel 14:1-31; Romans 8:26-39; 1 Corinthians 13; 1 Timothy 1; Psalm 133

Key Verse: “Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God.” (1 John 4:7, NLT).

Key Words:

* Spirit, spirit/s
* World
* Love
* Abides
* Perfect, perfected
* Fear

How would the author finish this sentence: “I am writing about…”

**Interpretation Phase**

1. According to 1 John 4:1-6, what is the litmus test for false prophets and teachers?
2. Where did love start and how does this enabled us to love others?
3. How do we know if we are abiding in God?
4. In verse 18, John contrasts love and fear. How do love and fear contradict each other and why can’t you be afraid and love at the same time?
5. What does this passage tell us about who Jesus is and how we are to reflect his nature?

**Meditation Phase**

What is the Holy Spirit Saying?

**Application Phase:**

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Week 6: 1 John Chapter 5

**Observation Phase**

Key Words:

* Believe/s
* Born of God, Children of God
* Commandments
* Jesus, Son of God, Christ
* Overcomes
* Water, Blood, Spirit
* Testify, testimony
* Life
* Ask, Hears, Have
* Sin, Death

Cross-References: John’s Gospel 1:19-36; 16:1-33; 1 Peter 1:13-25; Hebrews 13:10-21; Psalm 119

Key Verse: “For every child of God defeats this evil world, and we achieve this victory through our faith” (1 John 5:4, NLT).

How would the author finish this sentence: “I am writing about…”

**Interpretation Phase**

1. What does this chapter say about all those born of God?
2. What is John referencing when he talks about the water and the blood testifying? What are they testifying to? What does the word testify or testimony mean?
3. According to verses 14 & 15, what is the contingency for having what we ask?
4. How do we know which sin leads to death and which does not? Why would John tell us not to pray?
5. What does this passage tell us about who Jesus is and how we are to reflect his nature?

**Meditation Phase**

What is the Holy Spirit Saying?

**Application Phase:**

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Week 7: 2 John

**Note on Context**: Scholars agree that 2 John is written by John the Apostle around the same time that he wrote 1 John. However, his greeting “to the elect lady” has generated some debate. Many scholars see this as a metaphor for the church since most of 2 John is written in second person plural. Some scholars have seen John’s three letters as having been delivered together by Demetrius (see 3 John 12) to Gaius (see 3 John 1) and that as 3 John was addressed specifically to Gaius, 2 John was meant for Gaius’ church, and 1 John meant to be circulated among the churches. You will find many themes from 1 John referred to in 2 and 3 John.

**Observation Phase**

Cross-References: John’s Gospel 8:31-59; Ephesians 5:25-32; Hebrews 10:19-39; Psalm 1

Key Words:

* Truth
* Walking, Walk
* Commanded
* Abides
* Love
* Teaching

Key Verse: “Love means doing what God has commanded us, and he has commanded us to love one another, just as you heard from the beginning” (2 John 1:6, NLT).

How would the author finish this sentence: “I am writing about…”

**Interpretation Phase**

1. How does John connect truth with love in this passage?
2. What does the metaphor of walking imply?
3. How do we abide in the teaching of Christ?
4. What does this passage tell us about who Jesus is and how we are to reflect his nature?

**Meditation Phase**

What is the Holy Spirit Saying?

**Application Phase:**

How will I respond to this passage?

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Sin to Confess

Promise to Believe

Something to Study

What am I going to do and when am I going to do it?

Week 8: 3 John

**Observation Phase**

Cross-References: John’s Gospel 5:19-47; Romans 16:23; 12:9-21; Hebrews 13; Psalm 34

Key Words:

* Truth
* Imitate
* Good
* Testimony

Key Verse: “Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.” (3 John 1:11 , ESV).

How would the author finish this sentence: “I am writing about…”

**Interpretation Phase**

1. How is Gaius putting into practice what John has been teaching about love?
2. How is Diorephes doing evil?
3. What does this passage tell us about who Jesus is and how we are to reflect his nature?

**Meditation Phase**

What is the Holy Spirit Saying?

**Application Phase:**

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