

A Journey through 1 John

1 John 1:1-5:21

January 14, 2018



Please open your Bible to the New Testament book of 1 John. It's just a little ways before the book of Revelation. Today we are beginning a new series, "A Journey through 1 John." You may be asking...

Why dig into 1 John? Well, I've been praying for weeks now, (some of you have been praying with me) asking God to direct me where He wants our church to go, what He wants us to learn, and where He wants us to grow together as Christ followers. There are at least 3 compelling reasons why 1 John is a good book for us to dig into:

1. The apostle John gives an eyewitness account about Jesus. And, our church is all about Jesus. We are here to "promote the supremacy of Christ." 1 John 1:1 begins, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life." That Word of life is referring to Jesus. There's an odd saying that's been going around in our culture lately, "I smell what you're stepping in." Well, the Apostle John literally knew what Jesus smelled like! (If anyone sitting around you is a close friend or family member, lean in real close and give them a sniff.) John was an eyewitness, and an "earwitness," and even a "nose-witness" of Jesus. Therefore, he is just the right person to teach us about following Christ.

The apostle John is referred to as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." This doesn't mean Jesus didn't love the other disciples, of course, but rather that John was particularly close to Jesus. In fact, when Judas was about to betray Christ, we read in the Gospel of John 13:23-25, "One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, "Ask him which one he means." Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Back then they'd eat meals while sitting or lying next to a short table. John was positioned right next to Jesus; close enough lean back and whisper in His ear. Therefore, certainly John is more than qualified to give an eyewitness account about Jesus.



A 2nd compelling reason to dig into 1 John is really just pragmatic:

2. We've never really studied 1 John as a church. At least, not comprehensively. We tend to dip into 1 John from time to time when we want to hear verses like 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." Or, from 1 John 4:8 which tells us that, "...God is love." I have this tendency myself as a pastor; cherry picking the "fun stuff" or the easy stuff.¹ One author calls 1 John one of the "most loved and least understood" parts of the NT.² He may be right. So, even though 1 John is a relatively short in terms of books of the Bible, we're going to take some time to examine all 104 verses. That's how many verses make up the 5 chapters of 1 John, 104. In fact, take some time this week and read 1 John all the way through in one sitting. It will probably only take you about 10-15 minutes to read through it.

A 3rd compelling reason to dig into 1 John is that:

3. John's perspective challenges Christians who've grown comfortable. As one author puts it, John's way of presenting things³ "often challenges the perspective of modern Christians who have grown comfortable in their faith."⁴ He goes on to explain that John's approach is "harder and more

¹ According to Wikipedia, "The term [cherry picking] is based on the perceived process of harvesting fruit, such as cherries. The picker would be expected to only select the ripest and healthiest fruits. An observer who only sees the selected fruit may thus wrongly conclude that most, or even all, of the tree's fruit is in a likewise good condition. This can also give a false impression of the quality of the fruit (since it is only a sample and is not a representative sample). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cherry_picking

² *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed., #13: Hebrews-Revelation*, Ed. by Longman & Garland, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006, p. 415. (1 John notes by Tom Thatcher.)

³ A Johannine (JO han neen) perspective on Christianity simply means seeing from his particular vantage point.

⁴ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 415.

skeptical” than that of the Apostle Paul for example.⁵ So, I’m going to be so bold as to suggest that this likely describes many of us at Efree Bemidji, including myself. We need to be challenged and lovingly prodded a little, because it’s so easy for us to grow comfortable in our faith and to stop growing in our Christian maturity.

As we begin this journey together, I’d like us to answer some basic questions. The first question may seem a little odd when you first hear it:

Who wrote 1 John? “Well, duh Pastor Jerry, do you think it might be John?” Actually, yes, I do think it’s John; in fact, I’m pretty convinced of it. But, it’s not quite as obvious as you might think. The book is titled “1 John,” but one thing we need to notice is that the text itself, all 104 verses, fail to ever mention the name John. Hum... “Unlike most NT letters, 1 John does not tell us who its author is. The earliest identification of him comes from the church fathers.”⁶ Guys like Irenaeus, Origen, and Tertullian. But we can be pretty certain John wrote 1 John. There is very good evidence, from the style of the original Greek, from similar phrases between 1 John and the Gospel of John, from the authoritative nature of the letter, and other things as well. If you have access to a good study Bible, it likely has a discussion of this in the introduction to 1 John. John is actually the author of five New Testament: his gospel, 1-3 John, & Revelation.

In terms of authorship, another interesting thing to note is that 1 Jn. 1:1-4 uses the pronoun “we.” 1 John 1:4 says, “We write this...” As we dig into 1 John, what we’ll soon discover is that John actually goes back and forth throughout his letter between using “I” and “we.” The reason for this is that “while the author writes this letter as an individual... [when] he testifies to ...Christ, he always associates himself with other firsthand witnesses.”⁷ That is, the other apostles and the other earliest disciples of Jesus. So, we find John opening his letter with 1 Jn. 1:4, “We write this...,” as more of a corporate witness. In essence, John is saying, “when the other apostles and I write our letters and our Gospels, we are proclaiming together, the same thing, the same truths.” Later on, John says in 1 John 2:1, “My dear children, I write this to you” and several other times including 1 John 5:13 he says, “I write these things to you...” So, as we work our way through 1 John together, it may get a little confusing grammatically, IF we don’t remember THIS: John is the solo author of 1 John but he is also one of many eyewitnesses who proclaim what they “have seen and heard.” (1 John 1:3)

John may have worded his introduction this way, to indicate that other eyewitnesses could corroborate his teaching as authentic. In essence, John may be saying, “you can compare what other eyewitnesses have said and written down with what I’m writing to you now.”⁸ This may become important for us later as we consider John’s words about false teachers who have infiltrated the churches of his day.⁹ So, while John was not the only eyewitness to Jesus, he was most certainly one of them. John was part of what some call, the “Inner Circle,” which included Peter, James, and John.

Interestingly, James and John were brothers, and their reputation preceded them by their moniker, the “Sons of Thunder.” This sounds like something from a monster truck rally or a worldwide wrestling event. My Study Bible politely explains this as “Probably descriptive of their disposition.”¹⁰ One piece of evidence for this is an incident that happened when Jesus encountered some resistance from the Samaritans. James and John see them disrespecting Jesus, so they ask Him, “...Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” (Luke 9:54)

John was a fisherman. In fact, he was in a boat with his dad, Zebedee, preparing the nets when Jesus called him to follow. John went on to live a life of unquestionable devotion to Jesus and to zealously love him to the very end. John’s youthful eagerness was a little over the top at first and it earned him Jesus’ rebuke. But John went on to follow Jesus for many, many years. In fact, John may have been the youngest of all the apostles and he was probably the apostle who lived the longest after Jesus’ death. Many scholars believe that 1 John was written around 90 A.D. It’s hard to be exact

⁵ *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, p. 415.

⁶ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 2121.

⁷ Kruse, C. G. (2000). *The letters of John* (p. 61). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos.

⁸ See discussion by Kruse, C. G. (2000). *The letters of John* (p. 61). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos.

⁹ See 1 John 4:1 for example.

¹⁰ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1658. See also Mark 10:37.

because early writers did not write the date on the top of their letters, like we do today. Doing some quick math, we can conclude that John was likely around 70-80 years old when he wrote 1 John. We get the number 80 by guessing his age to be a little under 20 when he met Jesus and then adding the approximate 60 some years that have passed since Jesus' death. Therefore, John had been faithfully following Jesus for some 60 years by the time he wrote 1 John. How many people do you know who could honestly say that they've been following Christ for over 60 years? Praise God for those who have! May the rest of us carry our faith to completion in the years to come.¹¹ Clearly, despite his age, John's passion for the Lord had not diminished. And, it is out of that devotion and zeal that he wrote 1 John.

Well, now that we've probed the question of authorship a little bit, let's consider one other question...

Who read 1 John? 1 John doesn't mention the names or locations of any of his readers. Very likely 1 John is what we call a circular letter, meaning that it was passed around to various churches throughout Asia Minor; places like Ephesus and Colossae and others, including those that John lists in the early chapters of Revelation. But, despite not having these details, there are 3 things that we can know about John's readers:

1. The readers are believers being pressured by false teachers. 1 John 5:13 says, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God..." But, 1 John 2:26 warns, "I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray." What we'll come to learn as we go further in our journey through 1 John, is that these believers are under some significant pressure from false teachers. There are itinerant preachers who are going around spreading lies and teaching heresy about Jesus. For example, questions are being raised about whether Jesus Christ was fully human. This is why 1 John 4:2 says, "...Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God." We'll need to talk more about this in a future sermon.

A 2nd thing that we can know about John's readers is that...

2. The readers are dear to John. John has a close spiritual relationship with them. He refers to them as his "children" 9 times (1 Jn. 2:1, 12, 14, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; & 5:21, which is His closing word to them, his "Dear children"). He calls them "Dear friends" 6 times (2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11), showing his deep affection for them. This explains why 1 John 1:4 says, "We write this to make our joy complete."¹² This may seem strange at first. Shouldn't John be writing to make THEIR joy complete rather than his OWN joy with the other early witnesses?¹³ But, this is consistent with what he writes in: 2 John 4, "It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth..." and 3 John 4, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth."

Parents may understand this best. When we see our children doing right and doing well, it makes our own joy complete. So we pour ourselves out and spend much of what we have on our children's behalf, because whatever brings our kids the most benefit, is likely what brings us the most joy. For example, imagine getting a call from your young adult son or daughter. You pick up the phone and say, "hi, is everything ok?" They respond, "yes, I was just calling to tell you about what happened at work today." You pause and then say, "oh no, did your car run out of gas again? Did it make you late for work?" They reply, "no, actually, my car has over half a tank. I took your advice and now I make sure it never gets below half a tank when the weather gets this cold. Plus, I decided to go ahead and spend the money on an engine block heater, like you suggested, so I wouldn't be late for work anymore."

At this point, you need to sit down. You didn't even hear the last thing your child said. You are still stuck back at the: "I took your advice." Did you hear them right? You almost dropped the phone! You mean, they really, actually took my advice? Then, you realize, the phone has gotten really quiet, "dad,

¹¹ See Philippians 1:6.

¹² Some Bible translation, including the NKJV, say "your joy." Either way John's joy and the joy of these Christians would be shared by all as they have mutual fellowship together with God. Further, "To bring them joy and to preserve them from sin is one and the same thing." (William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, Rev. Ed., Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1976, p. 13.)

¹³ Ultimately, perhaps John is actually including his readers in the phrase "our joy." Consider John 15:11 for example. In other words, "since this oneness in [fellowship] is presumably mutual, the joy is likely mutual as well: **your joy as well as ours.**" (Akin, D. L. (2001). *1, 2, 3 John* (Vol. 38, p. 60). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.)

are you still there? You seem really... quiet.” You reply, “yes, I’m still here. I was just thinking about something else. Um... so everything is fine with your car...and... (you swallow hard, barely able to believe what you’re about to say) ...and you took my advice...that’s great! ...So, you said you are calling about work?” They reply, “yes, I have really good news! My boss says that I’ve been such a good worker and been so reliable lately that they want to promote me to assistant manager and give me a raise!” You reply, “that’s SO great. I am REALLY happy for you!” And together, your joy has now been made complete. All that you’ve been saying and teaching and passing along has made a difference after all!

Your child is experiencing joy and so are you!

This is how John felt about those he was writing to. As one commentator puts it, John recognizes that his own joy in Christ will only be complete if these fellow believers, for whom he feels responsible, are enjoying the same genuine fellowship that he enjoys with the Father and the Son. His “joy comes from knowing that others walk in the truth.”¹⁴ These readers are clearly very dear to John.

A 3rd thing that we can know about John’s readers is that...

3. The readers are sinners. John makes this clear early on in 1 John 1:8, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves...” In fact, the word sin/sinning/sinful occurs 27 times in the 5 chapters of 1 John. We’ll need to take some time to talk about the topic of sin later on in our series. So, let’s do a quick review...

1. The readers are believers being pressured by false teachers.
2. The readers are dear to John.
3. The readers are sinners.

We have some things in common with these recipients; at least 2 out of 3. They are like us in some significant ways! Even though the apostle John doesn’t know any of us personally... You and I have the privilege of reading 1 John. We’ve begun our journey today through this part of God’s Word. We’ll be on this journey for a few months. So, let’s agree to dig in! Acts 17:11 says, “Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” Have you heard this verse before? Do you think we should put this advice into practice every time anyone preaches or teaches a Bible Study or a Sunday School class? Yeah, me too. So... did you check my math earlier when I said that there are 104 verses in 1 John? How many verses are actually in 1 John? NOT 104! There are either more than 104, or less. Please pay attention to whoever is up here preaching. Brother or Sister in Christ, dig in for yourself; be a Berean in 2018! Read your Bible every day and bring YOUR own Bible to church!¹⁵

Proverbs 27:17 reminds us that, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” Let’s sharpen one another spiritually this year! Let’s allow the truth of God’s word to penetrate our hearts and minds. May the witness of 1 John sharpen us and help all of us to grow in spiritual maturity together!

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on January 14, 2018 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

¹⁴ Kruse, C. G. (2000). *The letters of John* (p. 59). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos.

¹⁵ Hebrews 4:12-13 reminds us, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Amen.