

1 John

Introduction

Let's imagine for a moment. You live in a world where people do not believe in absolute truth. There are a plurality of religions, some with one god and some with many. New forms of spirituality are emerging combining paganism and philosophy. There is a religion of the state where the chief political leader is a god. Even people who call themselves Christian are rejecting what the apostles taught for new doctrines and new forms of morality. And the concept of one way of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is considered too strict, ignorant and arrogant.

The world I'm describing sounds a lot like our own, doesn't it? But I'm talking about the world of the apostle John, near the end of the first century. The Christians to whom John wrote were living in uncertain and changing times, just like the time in which you and I live. There was a lot of speculation and questioning and rejecting of biblical truth in John's day, just as in ours.

Today people ask, "Why should we believe the Bible is actually true? Might not the Bible be a hoax? Maybe it's just a book of folk stories and mythology. Perhaps it is filled with the fanciful, or even worse, deceitful ideas of men." Today the Bible is attacked as historically unreliable. And it's moral standards are rejected as outdated.

But, again, as I said, this kind of criticism is not new. It goes all the way back to the earliest days of Christianity. And really, even further back than that. Didn't Satan challenge the accuracy of God's Word when in the Garden of Eden he asked Eve, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?" Critics of the Bible find fault with Scripture and set themselves up as judges of it, because, in reality, they simply do not want the Word of God to judge them.

The apostles faced harsh criticism of their message. But in defense the apostle Peter wrote,

For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty.
(2 Peter 1:16)

Nevertheless, near the end of the first century there were many who doubted what the apostles taught. They did not reject Christianity outright. They simply said that the apostles got it wrong. These people were called Gnostics from the Greek word for knowledge. The Gnostic teachers asserted that they alone had the secret, advanced knowledge that would bring you into contact with the Divine.

Some of the Gnostic teachers were extreme legalists. And so they taught you could be perfected only by following strict rules: Don't eat that. Don't touch that. Don't get married. Have no home comforts so go live in the desert. These people were strict and austere. But other Gnostics said it didn't matter how you lived. You can't perfect your life anyway. So go ahead and sin and have a good time. God will forgive you. After all, He's a good guy.

And both groups rejected either the person or the complete work of Jesus Christ. They claimed that Jesus Christ's death on the cross did not fully pay for our sins. There is something more that you need to do in order to be saved. And so some said Jesus was not really the Christ; God's Messiah or Anointed One. The Christ, they taught, is a pre-existent, spiritual being who came into Jesus at his baptism and left him before he died on the cross.

These false teachers caused many people to have questions and to doubt their faith in Christ. And today, because there are so many Christian denominations and theologies, Christians today sometimes have questions and doubts. So, by the inspiration of God¹ the apostle John wrote his letter to correct wrong teaching and to assure believers that everything the apostles taught about God and Jesus Christ was accurate and true.

Therefore it is important that we read and study and understand this letter of 1 John so we can learn the truth and have our hearts assured about our salvation. It is important to know the truth so we are not deceived by cunning and faithless people. Several times in John's letter he tells us why he wrote. So let's look at his reasons.

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may *continue to believe* in the name of the Son of God.
(1 John 5:13)

John wrote his letter so that those who trust in Jesus Christ for salvation can know, without question or doubt, that they have everlasting life. There are

¹ 2 Timothy 3:16, 17

certainties you can be assured of, John said. Be comforted, the apostle is telling us. You will never be condemned by God as unworthy of everlasting life. Your salvation is secure by faith in Jesus Christ.

Many of the false teachers in John's day were saying that unless you understood secret knowledge that even the apostles did not know, you couldn't be saved. But John wrote that if you believe in the name of the Son of God, if you trust Jesus Christ to cleanse you from sin, you can know for sure that you have everlasting life.

When Jesus died on the cross his sacrifice was complete. And God raised him up from the dead to prove that he accepted the sacrifice and to demonstrate that we are justified.² Therefore the New Testament declares,

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.
(1 Peter 3:18)

And

For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.
(Hebrews 10:14)

John wrote so that we can know for certain, without any doubt, that when you believe on the name of the Son of God you have everlasting life. What a comfort there is in knowing the truth. Here is a second reason why John wrote.

Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵ And this is the promise that He has promised us—eternal life. ²⁶ These things I have written to you concerning those who *try to* deceive you.
(1 John 2:24-26)

John's letter reminds us of the truth so that we are not seduced and led astray by deceivers. Now, remember, these deceivers were not only false teachers from outside the church, many of them were church leaders who defected from the truth. The apostle John was an old man when he wrote this letter. And he was probably either the pastor or an elder of the church at

² Romans 1:4 and 4:25

Ephesus. And it was at Ephesus, many years before, that the apostle Paul warned about this defection from the truth and those who would deceive. Here is his warning from Acts 20.

And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I *am* innocent of the blood of all *men*.

²⁷ For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.

²⁸ Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of [the Lord] which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹ For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

³⁰ Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. (Acts 20:25-30)

Isn't that amazing and stunning? Even from among leaders in the church, some will pervert and twist the truth. It wasn't very long for the simple truth of one God to the false idea of the Trinity. It wasn't long before the kingdom of God on earth was replaced by heaven. It wasn't long before the hope of resurrection was replaced by an immortal soul. All of the truths that the apostles taught and that we hold so dear can be lost in only a few short years. We need to be valiant for the truth and make it known boldly and in love.

Truth matters. Truth is important. Jesus Christ and almost all of the apostles gave their lives for the truth. Truth matters. Truth is important. What a person believes in the depth of his or her heart is how he or she will think and feel and behave. John will tell us what it means to be a Christian. He will tell us how a Christian thinks and lives. He will show us how you can tell a real Christian from a counterfeit. And if we are not deceived and we know the truth and we obey it, then hopefully we will not be hypocrites who bring shame on the name of Christ. Rather we will shine as lights in a dark world bringing hope.³ Now, John gives us a third reason for his letter.

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. (1 John 2:1)

³ Matthew 5:14-16; Philippians 2:14, 15

John's letter reminds us that true believers do not live a life of continual sin. Yes, we do sin at times. But when we do we should seek forgiveness and we can, because we have an Advocate or defense attorney in Jesus Christ. Then through the renewing of our minds through Scripture⁴ and through the power of God's Spirit in our hearts⁵ we can master sin and live noble, beautiful, holy lives.

The false teachers in John's day either taught that you could not master sin so you need to live like a hermit or that it didn't matter how you lived. A lot of modern day Christianity is like this today. They will either put a lot of rules and regulations on you or they will say things like, "Yes, we're Christians, but we are not hung up on all those old rules."

John will set the record straight by teaching by teaching us to love God and to love and serve one another. Finally, let's look at the first reason John gave for his letter.

And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.
(1 John 1:4)

A great question comes before us as we begin 1 John. What does the Bible have to say to people living in a world like ours? Here is the answer: in a world of financial troubles, political conflicts, wars, family problems and sickness; in a world that is not always righteous or good, it is possible for us to know the truth about God and life. It is possible for us to know the truth so as not to be deceived. It is possible for us to know how to live the best life possible—a life of love. And it is possible for us to have joy that is unquenchable!

Joy—this is the amazing thing that is offer to us. Sure, we have a realistic view of life. We don't minimize trials and difficulties. We know what the world is like. But we have something—joy—that enables us to live victoriously.

Nehemiah 8:10 encourages us saying, "Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." Psalm 16: 11 promises us that in God's presence "is fullness of joy." And in Romans 15:13 we have this blessing,

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What the Bible offers to you and to me is divine joy that does not lead to despair. Joy is a response of the heart that knows you are loved by God. Joy

⁴ Romans 12:1, 2

⁵ Philippians 2:12, 13

comes from knowing that your life has meaning and purpose. Joy comes from knowing the truth. Joy is the response of our hearts, because we are certain of everlasting life. Fullness of joy is the gift of God when we are in fellowship with Him and Jesus Christ. This is why John wrote his letter and why, by the grace of God, we get to read it.