

1 John - Background and Overview

The Apostle John: He was the son of Zebedee and Salome, and the younger brother of James. "John" means "Yahweh has been gracious". He records himself in his gospel as being "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*": **Jn 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7,20**. His family were on good terms with the high priest: **Jn 18:16**. His mother Salome ministered to Jesus with other women: **Lk 8:2-3; Matt 20:20; 27:56**. It appears John's mother Salome, was sister to Mary the mother of Jesus: **Matt 27:56; Mk 15:40, 16:1; Jn 19:25**. This means John was Jesus' first cousin.

Jesus called John with Peter, Andrew and James when they were fishing: **Mt 4:18-22**. Jesus called them to become "fishers of men". On a number of occasions, Jesus selected Peter, James and John to be with him to experience Divine power. With Peter and James, John was selected to view the resurrection of Jairus' daughter (**Mk 5:37**), the transfiguration (**Matt 17:1**), to hear the Olivet prophecy (**Mk 13:5**); and to be with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane (**Mk 14:33**).

John was the disciple who was particularly close to Jesus. He sat next to Jesus at the last supper, reclining with his head lovingly resting on his Lord: **Jn 13:23-25**. In that position he whispered to Jesus a request for him to reveal who would betray him.

He was later entrusted with caring for Jesus' mother Mary. For Jesus to do this, John must have been a highly suitable person to take Mary into his own home and care for her: **Jn 19:26**.

John wrote the Gospel of John and his three Epistles, and then was of all men most privileged to receive the book of Revelation on the isle of Patmos. These final visions of glory would have been of great comfort to the aged, lonely apostle who had been banished by the authorities to Patmos.

John was a man of great natural energy and zeal. He was given the title of "Boanerges" meaning "Son of Thunder": **Mk 3:17**. An example of this is in **Lk 9:54**. He also, with James, asked that each of them could sit on Jesus Christ's right hand in glory, for which he was gently corrected: **Mk 10:35-37**. He was however a man who had a great loyalty for his Lord and a sympathy for others: **Jn 13:23**.

At Jesus' trial, John came to the aid of Peter: **Jn 18:15-16**. John was the first apostle to believe Mary Magdalene's account of the empty tomb: **Jn 20:2**, although he no doubt failed to yet understand its full significance: **Jn 20:7-8**.

John learns to be a Father and Shepherd of the flock:

John learnt to reflect the love of Christ towards his brethren and this is seen by addressing his readers as "little children". Jesus addressed his disciples in this way when Judas left the upper room to betray him.

This was a time of great sadness for Jesus. This is an expression used nowhere else in the Gospels, but in **Jn 13:33**. He uses this constantly in his first epistle: **1 Jn 2:1,12,28; 3:7,18; 4:4; 5:21**. Paul uses this word similarly in **Gal 4:19**. John also calls them "little children" in **1 Jn 2:13,18** by a different word meaning *infants*.

John calls them "little children" at a time when the spirit of Judas was in the ecclesia: **1 Jn 2:19**. The influence of Christ mellowed John's character. No longer assertive and aggressive, he came to understand **the lesson of Elijah's life**. That is to be a father and a shepherd to his flock. In **Lk 9:54** John was initially more like Elijah in Elijah's early years. Christ says to John that "the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." John was to learn what Elijah learnt at Sinai. This being that the **still small voice** of gentle persuasion is more powerful than earthquake, wind and fire. John's writings show him to be a gentle, humble and patient man with the real love for his brethren that Christ showed to him.

When Elijah was taken at the end of his life, the young man Elisha calls him "**my father, my father**": **2 Kgs 2:12**. Elijah learnt to be a **father**, as God is to us: **Ex 34:5-8; Psalms 23; 103:7-13**. Jesus is the perfect example of this: **Isa 9:6; Mt 23:37**. He showed what it means to **know the Father**: **Jn 10:15**.

To **know God** is to **be like Him**: **1 Cor 4:15; Jn 10:15**. If we love Jesus we will feed his lambs and sheep: **Jn 21:15-17**. A father **cares, loves, nurtures, protects**: **Isa 40:11; Mt 18:3-14**. This is how God is described in **Isa 49:15** and **Hosea 11:3**.

John however rebukes those who were enemies of the gospel. He does so, **writing this in love** to protect the flock, cp. **Jn 10:10-16**.

Significantly, John *concludes* his 3rd epistle with "Greet the friends by name": **3 Jn 14**. He says the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep **knows his sheep by name**: **Jn 10:3,11-15**. A true shepherd has a personal relationship with his brothers and sisters. He cares for each and every one of them and takes **a personal interest** in them. He felt for each of his brethren as if they were his own children.

At the end of his life, John received the grand climax of the Bible in the book of **Revelation**. Here he reveals the love that Christ has for his ecclesias. John there describes himself as "your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ." **Rev 1:9**.

John's work is not yet complete. In **Rev 10:11** he is given the assurance that in the future he must "prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings". He will rise from the dead to personally take part in the glory spoken of in that final prophecy. John concludes **Revelation** by saying "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen" **22:21**. We must show to others the grace our Lord has shown to us. That's real love.

Why did John write this First Epistle?

It was most likely around AD90. John would have been the only surviving apostle at the time of writing. Two problems that threatened ecclesias were **Judaism** and **Gnosticism**.

Gnosticism was in its early stages at the time John wrote. Paul describes it as "oppositions of science (*gnosis*) falsely so called": **1 Tim 6:20**. This was a supposed "higher form of knowledge" that challenged the foundations of faith. These people sought to supposedly "improve" the gospel to make it more "intellectually respectable" to those in the world. This involved speculation and philosophy.

A significant emphasis is the warning of wilful, deliberate sin (**2:1**) and the importance of keeping Christ's commandments **in daily life**. Jesus warned that in the last days "the love of many shall wax cold": **Matt 24:12**. By John's time, the zeal of these early ecclesias had waned. Has ours?

A Continuation of John's Gospel: The first epistle of John is like an appendix to John's gospel due to the close links between them (cp. **Jn 1:1** with **1 Jn 1:1**). John's epistle was written to those who already believe, to deepen their assurance in a time of difficulty and danger. John consistently insists that he was an eyewitness of the events he records (eg. **1:1-3**)

Reasons for John writing his first epistle: To proclaim what he saw and heard concerning Christ (**1:3**); To increase their joy (**1:4**); To assist them in avoiding sin (**2:1**); To remind them of their privileges (**2:13-17**); To warn of false doctrine developing in the ecclesia (**2:21-24**); To warn of false teachers (**2:26**); To reveal the hope of eternal life in Christ (**5:13**).

There are many contrasts presented in 1 John:

Light v Darkness (**1:5-2v11**); The Father v The World (**2:12-17**); Christ v Antichrist (**2:18-28**); Right v Wrong (**2:29- 3:24**); Truth v Error (**4:1-6**); Love v Hypocrisy (**4:7-21**); Being begotten of God v The Thinking of the Flesh (**5:1-21**).

Acknowledgement: Some of the information in this summary is from "*The Test of True Love*" by HP Mansfield. For a PDF file of this summary, email acdangerfield@webshield.net.au

