

## ***Loved and Loving: John's Epistles Jesus and the Johannine Letters***

Lesson #1 for July 4, 2009

Scriptures: For an overview, in one sitting read the three epistles of John.

1. Our modern world is deep with questions. We want to know about everything. Why do we sleep? Is time an illusion? What is at the Earth's core? What is the universe made of? Why can't we predict the weather? These are just some of the questions raised in a recent science magazine called *Wired*.
2. Philosophers and even Christians have been asking tough questions for thousands of years: Where did we come from? Why are we here? How can we accomplish the greatest good in life? Where do we go after we die? Have these questions been adequately answered in your mind?
3. In this series of lessons, we will focus on John's three short epistles. While we cannot be sure of the dating of these epistles, from internal evidence it is probable that they were written after the Gospel of John although scholarly opinions have certainly differed on that point. The three epistles and the gospel were probably all written after the book of Revelation. History tells us that John was arrested and thrown into a pot of boiling oil, but he did not die! The very men who threw him into the boiling oil had to pull him out. {AA 570.1,2} So they decided to banish him to the Isle of Patmos to silence his witness for God. There he wrote the book of Revelation. Later, he apparently was released from Patmos and returned to his friends in Asia Minor (Turkey) where he wrote the Gospel of John, and later still, he wrote these three letters or epistles.
4. These three small letters from John deal with some major issues: false doctrine, sin, love, apostasy, and obedience. The letters focus on the one true God and His only Son, Jesus Christ. It is from God that we have answers to our most important questions. In our classes going through the Bible book by book, we often find ourselves struggling with stories trying to determine what they say to us about God. In the Old Testament, one can read through entire books (e.g. Esther) and God is not mentioned by name even once! These three short books are very different. They openly state many wide-ranging truths about God such as, "God is love" (1 John 4:8); "Sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4); etc. In these books we have a different challenge. How did John come to these conclusions? What is the evidence that he cites? Do we agree with him? Are there important aspects of the truth that John left out?
5. If we skim through these three short letters, we will realize that many of the conflicts and questions arising in the Christian Church in our day have been around since shortly after the time of Jesus Christ. John spoke very boldly against theological errors such as deviant views on the nature of Christ (gnosticism), questions about the assurance of salvation, the necessity of obedience to the law, etc. Docetism (a branch of gnosticism) taught that Jesus Christ was merely an illusion—not a real person. Cerinthianism, by contrast, taught that "Christ" came down to inhabit the human Jesus only from the time of His baptism until just before His crucifixion.

6. Can we be sure who wrote these three short letters? Every serious student of ancient documents must struggle to try to reconstruct the context that led to the writing of the document that he is studying. If John was the author, why did he write these letters? What was happening to John at the time? Where was he? What was happening in the churches to which he wrote? To be honest, we must admit that technically each of these three letters is anonymous since John's name does not appear in the text. (The titles were added later) There is both internal and external evidence to suggest that it was the apostle John who wrote these epistles and also wrote the Gospel of John. Notice some of the many parallels in ideas and language:

The beginning —1 John 1:1; John 1 :1

The fullness of joy—1 John 1:4; John 15:11

The new commandment—1 John 2:8; John 13:34

The “born again”—1 John 3:9; John 3:1-6

Eternal life —1 John 2:25; 5:11-13; John 3:16; 10:28; 17:2-3

Denial of the Son as denial of the Father—1 John 2:23; John 15:23

Loving one another—1 John 3:11; John 13:34

The world hating us—1 John 3:13; John 15:18

“The Spirit of truth”—1 John 4:6; John 14:17

God sent His Son—1 John 4:9; John 3:1-3

These examples suggest very strongly that one person wrote both books. No other book of the Bible uses these same expressions in these ways. The author of the epistles claims that he was there and personally witnessed the life and ministry of Jesus. Thus, we have two strong pieces of evidence that it was John the disciple. Furthermore, both the gospel and these epistles are written in very simple, but elegant Greek. John's gospel and epistles are where all Koine Greek students start their study. One of the main criteria for choosing the books of the New Testament “Canon” was the answer to the question: Did this writer have a direct or close relationship to Jesus Christ or one or more of the known apostles? Therefore, the fact that the Gospel of John and the epistles of John are included in the Canon is supportive of John being the author.

7. Who was the “elder” spoken about in 2 & 3 John? What was John's relationship with the churches to whom he was writing? What do we know about the “dear lady” or about Gaius? Remember that biblical authors often used women to represent a church or the church. Who were the “little children” or “my dear children” that the author spoke about? There is considerable evidence that the “dear lady” that John addressed was actually a code name for Christian churches. The “little children” were probably intended to be the members of those churches. Why were Christians using code words for Christian ideas or people? One could be arrested, or even killed, for being a Christian! They had already tried to kill or eliminate John at least twice! The fish became a code word for a Christian.
8. Read 2 John 1-13. What can we learn about John and his relationship with that church through his statements in this short chapter? He loved his church. He continually prayed for a blessing for them. He asked that they might always be happy and that they might continue to follow God's commandments—the first of which is love. But he also clearly stated that

deceivers—whom he called “antichrists”—will deny almost every Christian doctrine. True Christians must stand for the truth as revealed in Scripture.

9. Read 1 John 1:1-3; 2:1, 18; 4:4; 2 John 1, 12; 3 John 1, 13, 14. It is very clear that the author felt a very close relationship with those to whom he was writing and to Jesus Christ. He wrote about a relationship that he saw and felt. He wrote of hoping to visit those church members soon.
10. There is much talk about “propositional truth” in these letters. What is propositional truth? Propositional truth is truth that is stated to be true without providing any supporting evidence at that point. What is the relationship between doctrinal beliefs and Christian practice? Does what we believe really affect how we behave?
11. Read 1 John 1:5-7. What is the “light” that John wrote about? How do we experience fellowship with Christ? How does that fellowship improve our relationships with other Christians and non-Christians? How does a better understanding of the life and death of Jesus purify us from sin?
12. Ellen White suggested:

No other influence that can surround the human soul has such power as the influence of an unselfish life. The strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian. (*MH* 470.1)
13. One of John’s frequent means of teaching was by showing contrasts. Light versus darkness (1 John 1:6); Christ versus the antichrists (1 John 2:18; 2 John 7); truth versus falsehood (1 John 2:4); belonging to God versus belonging to “the world” (1 John 4:4,5); the spirit of truth versus the spirit of error (1 John 4:6); love versus selfishness; and Christ versus Satan. Are all of these contrasts clearly black-and-white? Or are there areas of gray?
14. John was probably writing his last words to those churches. We do not know if he ever reached them to fellowship with them again.
15. He stated clearly that his joy would be full if they would avoid sin; if they would accept the Holy Spirit who prevents deception; if they would believe in God’s true Son, and therefore, know the wonderful experience of salvation. (1 John 1:4; 2:1; 2:26,27; 5:13; 2 John 4; 3 John 2)
16. These verses give us a clear understanding of why John wrote his letters. His intent was to warn of false teachers, false doctrines, and to encourage church members to live in a closer, more meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ and His Father.
17. What do these letters teach us about dealing with errors in the church? Could we become so consumed with “fighting error” that we lose sight of the truth? As an individual how do you deal with known errors? How does the SDA Church today deal with error? The Bible suggests that it will be harder and harder to deal with error as we approach the end of time. Atheists are becoming very “evangelistic” about their “religion.” Buses in London, England carry posters reading, “There probably is no God; now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” News networks are becoming more and more anti-Christian.
18. John did not hesitate to write against false doctrine! He was not afraid—even at the risk of his own life—to write the truth as he understood it. He was even willing to give his life for his friends. We need to get to know God so well that we cannot be fooled even by the Devil himself.

19. So, what did John say about Jesus in this short epistle? Read 1 John 1:1-3; 5:20; 4:15; 2:1,8,22; 4:14; 5:20.
20. John suggested that Jesus Christ was fully and completely human, a real person who could be touched, seen, and heard. But, at the same time, He was the infinite life of God, truly God Himself. By communion with Him, we can understand and experience Jesus as God's only Son—even having an intimate relationship with Him. This same Jesus now wants to be our personal Friend. He may serve as our High Priest, even Advocate. He is the true light, the divine Christ, the Father's only Son, a true God, real Life, and the Truth. (Compare John 14:6)
21. Do you still have questions in your mind about the divinity of Jesus? Do you think you can understand how One who is "fully human" can also be "fully God"? Why do you think the disciples (and the Jews) had such a difficult time accepting Jesus as the Messiah, and later, as God? Even Jesus found it difficult to convince His disciples that He was first of all a true son of David, then the Messiah, and finally, God Himself. It was not until after His resurrection that they really came to grips with these ideas. It is hard for sinful human beings to accept the idea that in one being, there could be Someone fully human and yet, fully divine. But that is what the Scripture teaches. What are the implications of that divine-human Life?
22. After thousands of years of Christians struggling with these questions, do we have enough evidence so that the issues are clear in our minds? Remember that in his gospel, John wrote that "to know God is life eternal." (John 17:3)
23. So, where did all those questions about the true nature of Christ and His relationship to us as human beings come from? A study of the background conditions seems to suggest that those were ideas that came out of Greek philosophy and Roman paganism. Are we, like those early professed Christians, influenced by our cultural backgrounds? How does a correct understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus help to put those questions to rest?
24. The elderly John—having been thrown into a pot of boiling oil, exiled to the Isle of Patmos, and then, apparently later released to return to his beloved friends—was saddened to see that many were turning from the pure doctrines that he had been trying to teach.
25. Why do you think those people were introducing those unchristian ideas? Were they more satisfying to their selfish natures? Were they prompted solely by the Devil?
26. Is it easier or is it more difficult for us living 2000 years later to believe the truth about Jesus as Messiah and the Son of God than it was for those at that time? What evidence do we have on which to build our faith? (1 Corinthians 10:11; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Peter 1:16-21)
27. In this series of lessons, we will see many references to traditional SDA theology. There much emphasis on what Jesus has done for you and me. John also wrote a great deal about the ministry of Jesus. What was it that Jesus' ministry, His life, and His death, were supposed to accomplish for us? Were the life, death, and ministry of Jesus for us only? Or was it also for the unfallen angels? Read 1 John 1:7; 1 John 2:25; 1 John 2:28; 1 John 3:8; 1 John 3:16; 1 John 5:18; 2 John 3.

But the plan of redemption had a yet broader and deeper purpose than the salvation of man. It was not for this alone that Christ came to the earth; it was not merely that the inhabitants of this little world might regard the law of God as it should be regarded; but **it was to vindicate the character of God before the**

**universe.** To this result of His great sacrifice—its influence upon the intelligences of other worlds, as well as upon man—the Saviour looked forward when just before His crucifixion He said: ‘Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all unto Me.’ John 12:31,32. The act of Christ in dying for the salvation of man would not only make heaven accessible to men, but before all the universe it would justify God and His Son in their dealing with the rebellion of Satan. It would establish the perpetuity of the law of God and would reveal the nature and the results of sin. *Patriarchs and Prophets* 68,69 (1890); *Reflecting Christ* 60 (1985)

28. John suggested in these three short books that Jesus is to be our Light. He is to keep us secure from sin; to provide eternal life; and He is coming again so we should be ready. More than that, He destroys what the Devil has done; He gave His life for us, and we should, in turn, give our lives for others. He asked us to stop sinning; He promised to keep us safe from the evil one; and he concluded by promising us grace, mercy, peace, all in truth and love.
29. Read Genesis 1:1; John 1:1; 1 John 1:1. How do these three “beginnings” relate to each other in significance and time?
30. Is it clear to you how the life, death, and ministry of Jesus answer the most important philosophical questions in life?
31. In our day, many Christians are suggesting that all we need is “love.” Doctrines are much less important and should not be focused upon. Is that true? Why, or why not? Shouldn’t Christians be reaching out to everyone, even Muslims and atheists? Shouldn’t we be willing to set aside our doctrinal differences so that we can more effectively reach out to the world?
32. Do we have any differences of opinion about what we should believe even as members of the Adventist church today?
33. What do we learn about God from this lesson? The apostle John believed that he had set forth sufficient evidence on which to base his claims that Jesus was not only the Messiah, but also the divine-human Friend that we all need. In these letters he focused on what he believed we should learn from those truths. Are we as happy as John appeared to be in worshiping God? Do we find our greatest joy in fellowship with Jesus Christ and His Father? Do we care enough about our fellowship with Him to spend “a thoughtful hour each day in contemplation of the life of Christ”? {DA 83.4}
34. This series of lessons will be a review of many basic Christian doctrines. We need to think these things through very carefully.

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