THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN

The King's Love

1 John, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Love: The First Letter of John, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. John, who wrote this letter, was probably a teenager or barely older when Jesus called him. He spent the rest of his long life learning one lesson, and this letter is what he learned.

First John uses simple words. A lot of first-year Greek students read it first because the vocabulary is so easy. But simple doesn't mean shallow. In just five short chapters, John tells you that God is light, that God is love, that you can be forgiven for anything, that you can know for sure you belong to God, and that love drives out fear.

John wrote to a church that had been ripped apart. A group had walked out, claiming to have special knowledge about God, and the people left behind were confused and shaken. Were they wrong? Did they really belong to God? How could they tell? If you've ever wondered whether your faith is real, or felt shaken when people you respected walked away from it, this letter is for you.

John's answers are clear: believe in the real Jesus, keep living His way, and love each other. Those three things go together, and you can't have one without the others.

So read it like a letter from an old man who once wanted to call down fire on people and ended up being remembered as the apostle of love. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all five chapters of 1 John, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what John is saying in plain language and adds background about the church he was writing to and the ideas he was answering.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains the debate over who wrote the letter, introduces the split in the church that prompted it, and describes the early teachings about Jesus that John was answering. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes 1 John sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each chapter of the letter first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, Hebrews, James, and Peter's letters, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes, walking through 1 John chapter by chapter. I've quoted the letter sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase, background, and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

I've presented the debate about whether the letter was written by John the apostle, by John the Elder mentioned by Papias, or by a circle of John's followers, without forcing a verdict. I've also explained the background of the group that left the church, and early ideas about Jesus that John seems to be answering, such as Docetism and the teaching of Cerinthus.

First John's tests of genuine faith can trouble sensitive readers. I've included a gentle box for teens who worry about whether they're truly saved, pointing them to John's own purpose: that believers may know they have eternal life (5:13). The difficult passages on

sinlessness (3:6–9) and the sin that leads to death (5:16–17) are presented with the main Christian views. The antichrists (2:18–22) are explained in John's own sense, not as a platform for speculation, and the Johannine Comma (5:7–8) is explained as a late addition that doesn't appear in the NIV text.

Passages highlighted as especially relevant for teens include walking in the light and confession (1:5–2:2), not loving the world (2:15–17), God's lavish love (3:1), love in action (3:16–18), God is love (4:8, 16), perfect love driving out fear (4:18), and assurance (5:13).

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will know, not just hope, that they are loved by God and belong to Him.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

A Letter Without a Name

Most ancient letters started the same way: the writer's name, the readers' names, and a greeting. First John doesn't have any of that. It doesn't name its writer or its readers, and it doesn't end with personal greetings either. It reads more like a sermon or a pastoral letter sent around to several churches. The writer clearly knows his readers well. He calls them dear children, dear friends, and brothers and sisters, and he speaks with the authority of someone who knew Jesus personally. But he never tells us his name. The title The First Letter of John was added later, based on early Christian tradition.

The Johannine Writings

Five books in the New Testament are traditionally connected with John: the Gospel of John; the three letters of 1, 2, and 3 John; and Revelation. Scholars call them the Johannine writings. The Gospel and 1 John are especially similar. Both open with the beginning and the Word (John 1:1; 1 John 1:1). Both love big, simple contrasts: light and darkness, truth and lies, life and death, love and hate. Both use favorite words like abide, or remain; know; believe; witness; and world. Both talk about being born of God, and about Jesus as the one and only Son. Most scholars agree that the Gospel and the letters come from the same writer or from the same circle of Christians. Revelation is written in a very different style of Greek,

and many scholars, ancient and modern, have thought it may come from a different John.

Which John?

For most of church history, Christians believed that 1 John was written by John the apostle, the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve disciples, whom many identify as the disciple whom Jesus loved in John's Gospel. Irenaeus, a church leader writing around AD 180, said he had heard Polycarp, who had known John, tell stories about him. Irenaeus says that John lived to an old age in Ephesus, in what is now Turkey, into the reign of the emperor Trajan, which began in AD 98.

But there's a puzzle. An early church leader named Papias, writing around AD 100–130, said he liked to ask people what the Lord's disciples had said, and he listed Andrew, Peter, Philip, Thomas, James, John, and Matthew. Then he mentioned what Aristion and the elder John were still saying. The historian Eusebius, writing in the fourth century, read this as describing two different men named John: John the apostle, and another disciple of Jesus called John the Elder. Second and Third John both come from someone who calls himself simply the elder (2 John 1; 3 John 1).

The Main Views

Scholars hold several views. Some believe John the apostle wrote the Gospel and all three letters, and point to the writer's claim to have heard, seen, and touched Jesus (1:1–3), the strong early tradition, and the possibility that Papias was simply mentioning the same John twice, first among the apostles and then among those still living. They note that Peter also called himself an elder (1 Peter 5:1), so an aged apostle could easily call himself the elder.

Others think the writer was John the Elder, a disciple of Jesus who wasn't one of the Twelve, possibly the beloved disciple himself, who became a respected leader in Ephesus. Still others think the letters were written by a leader within a community of believers shaped by John's teaching, sometimes called the Johannine community or school, who wrote in the voice of the eyewitnesses. Christians who love the Bible hold each of these views. Whatever the answer, the letter claims to pass on the testimony of people who knew Jesus personally, and the church has recognized it as Scripture from the beginning. It was quoted by Polycarp and accepted without serious dispute. In this book, I call the writer John. Most scholars date the letter late in the first century, around AD 85–100, and many think it was written in or near Ephesus.

The Son of Thunder

If the writer is John the apostle, his story is worth knowing. John and his brother James were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, working with their father Zebedee, when Jesus called them (Mark 1:19–20). Jesus nicknamed them the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17), probably because of their fiery personalities. When a Samaritan village refused to welcome Jesus, James and John asked if they should call down fire from heaven to destroy it. Jesus rebuked them (Luke 9:51–56). Another time, they asked Jesus for the most important seats in His kingdom, which made the other disciples furious (Mark 10:35–41).

But John was also one of Jesus' closest friends, with Peter and James. He was there at the Transfiguration and in the garden of Gethsemane. If he's the beloved disciple, he leaned on Jesus at the Last Supper, stood at the cross when the other disciples had fled, and was given the care of Jesus' mother (John 19:26–27). He ran to

the empty tomb, believed, and later became a leader in the church (Galatians 2:9). The angry young man who wanted to burn a village became the old man who wrote that God is love.

Little Children, Love One Another

There's a famous story about John's old age, told by the scholar Jerome around AD 400. Jerome says that when John was very old in Ephesus, he was too weak to walk and had to be carried into church meetings. Each time, he would say only one thing: little children, love one another. Eventually, the believers got tired of hearing the same words and asked him why he always said that. He replied that it was the Lord's command, and if this alone was done, it was enough. We can't be sure the story is true. But it captures the heart of this letter.

The Split

Something painful had happened in John's churches. A group had left. John says they left the fellowship, which showed they had never truly been part of it (2:19). Scholars sometimes call them the secessionists, which simply means the people who withdrew. We don't know exactly who they were, but from what John says, we can piece together some of their claims. They seem to have denied that Jesus was the Christ who came in a real human body (2:22; 4:2–3). Some claimed to have no sin (1:8, 10). Some claimed to know God and live in the light, while ignoring His commands and failing to love other believers (2:4, 9). And they seem to have claimed special spiritual knowledge or anointing, and were still trying to lead others away (2:26–27).

Imagine being one of the people left behind. Maybe some of your friends, or even church leaders, had left. They seemed confident

and spiritual. Were they right? Were you missing something? John writes to reassure the believers who stayed, and to give them ways to tell truth from error.

Docetism and Cerinthus

Many scholars think the people who left were influenced by early ideas that later became widespread in the second century. Many Greek thinkers believed that the physical world was inferior, even evil, and that only the spiritual world was truly good. If you thought that way, it might seem impossible for God to become a real human being with a body that got tired, bled, and died. One group of early Christians, later called Docetists, from a Greek word meaning to seem, taught that Jesus only seemed to have a physical body. He was really a spirit who appeared to be human.

Irenaeus describes a teacher named Cerinthus, who lived in Asia Minor around John's time. Cerinthus taught that Jesus was an ordinary man, the son of Joseph and Mary, and that the divine Christ came down on Him like a dove at His baptism, empowered His ministry, and then left Him before the crucifixion. So the man Jesus suffered and died, but the Christ didn't. That may be why John insists that Jesus came not by water only, meaning His baptism, but by water and blood, meaning His death (5:6). Irenaeus also tells a story, from Polycarp, that John once ran out of a public bathhouse in Ephesus without bathing when he learned Cerinthus was inside, afraid the building might collapse on the enemy of the truth. That story may be legend. And we can't be certain that John was answering Cerinthus or Docetists specifically. But these ideas help us understand why John emphasizes that he touched Jesus with his own hands.

Why John Wrote

John tells us several reasons why he wrote. He wrote so his readers could share fellowship with the apostles and with God, and to make his joy complete (1:3–4). He wrote so they wouldn't sin (2:1). He wrote to warn them about people trying to lead them astray (2:26). And most important of all, he wrote so that believers would know that they have eternal life (5:13). John's Gospel was written so that people would believe (John 20:31). His first letter was written so that people who believe would know they belong to God.

How John Writes

John's writing style is unusual. Instead of building a step-by-step argument like Paul, he spirals. He introduces a theme, moves on, and then comes back to it from a different angle, like a melody that returns throughout a song. His main themes are truth about Jesus, obedience to God's commands, and love for each other. Scholars sometimes call them the tests of life: a doctrinal test, a moral test, and a social test. John also loves black-and-white contrasts. You're in the light or in the darkness. You love or you hate. You're a child of God or of the devil. That can sound harsh, but John isn't describing people who struggle. He's describing two completely different directions for a life.

The Map

Chapter 1: The Word of life, walking in the light, and confession and forgiveness.

Chapter 2: Jesus our advocate, keeping His commands, not loving the world, and the antichrists.

Chapter 3: Children of God, why believers don’t keep on sinning, and love in action.

Chapter 4: Testing the spirits, God is love, and perfect love driving out fear.

Chapter 5: Faith that overcomes, the testimony about Jesus, knowing you have eternal life, prayer, and idols.

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CHAPTER 1

Walking in the Light

1 John 1

John begins his letter without any greeting. He jumps straight into the most important thing he knows. He wants to tell his readers about something that existed from the very beginning, something he and others heard with their own ears, saw with their own eyes, studied closely, and even touched with their own hands. He's talking about the Word who gives life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **In the Beginning**

John's opening sounds a lot like the start of his Gospel: In the beginning was the Word (John 1:1). Both echo the first words of the Bible, In the beginning God created (Genesis 1:1). In John's Gospel, the Word is Jesus, the eternal Son of God, who was with God and was God, and who became a human being. John is saying that the One who existed before the universe began is the same person he ate meals with, walked beside, and watched die and rise again.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Touched with Our Hands**

Why does John stress hearing, seeing, looking, and touching? Remember the people who had left John's church. Some of them seem to have believed that Jesus only looked human, that He didn't really have a physical body. John answers: I touched Him. He wasn't a ghost, a hologram, or a vision. He was real flesh and blood. After the resurrection, Jesus invited Thomas to touch His wounds (John 20:27), and He ate fish in front of His disciples to prove He

wasn't a spirit (Luke 24:39–43). Christianity stands or falls on the claim that God really became human, really died, and really rose again.

John says this life became visible. He and the others saw it, and they're telling others about it: the life that lasts forever, which existed alongside the Father and was shown to them. They're passing on what they saw and heard so that their readers can share in their fellowship. And that fellowship includes God the Father and Jesus Christ, His Son. John is writing this, he says, so that their joy can be full.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fellowship**

The Greek word for fellowship is koinonia. It means sharing something in common, a partnership, a deep connection. It's much more than hanging out at church and eating snacks, although that can be part of it. John says that through Jesus, we share life with God Himself, and with everyone else who knows Him. Think about how amazing that is. The God who made the galaxies wants a relationship with you, and He brings you into a family of people who share it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Complete Joy**

John says he's writing to make joy complete. The NIV footnote mentions that some manuscripts say your joy instead of our joy. Either way, John's point is that joy grows when it's shared. Think about watching a great game, hearing amazing news, or seeing something beautiful. It's better when someone's with you. John's joy wouldn't be complete until his readers shared what he had found.

Then John gives the message he heard from Jesus. God is light, and there's no darkness in Him at all, not even a little.

BACKGROUND CHECK **God Is Light**

Light is one of the Bible's favorite pictures of God. Light shows things as they really are. It exposes what's hidden. It gives life and warmth. It shows the way.

When John says God is light, he means that God is completely pure, holy, true, and good. There's nothing shady about Him, no hidden agenda, no mixture of good and evil. That's both comforting and challenging. Comforting, because you can trust Him completely. Challenging, because when you come close to Him, His light shows your heart as it really is.

If we say we're close to God but keep living in the dark, John says, we're lying, and our lives don't match the truth. But if we live in the light, just as God Himself lives in light, we share life with each other, and Jesus' blood washes us clean from every sin.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Walking in the Light**

Walking in the light doesn't mean being perfect. Notice what John says happens when we walk in the light: Jesus' blood keeps cleansing us from sin. If we were perfect, we wouldn't need cleansing. Walking in the light means living honestly before God, not hiding, not pretending, and letting Him see everything. Walking in darkness means living a double life: saying one thing on Sunday and doing another on Saturday night, hiding things from God and from the people who love you. Living in the light is scary at first. But it's the only way to be truly free.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Secrets**

Secrets grow in the dark. Maybe it's a habit you're ashamed of, something you've done that no one knows about, or a struggle you've never told anyone. Keeping it hidden can feel safer. But shame thrives in secrecy, and the longer something stays in the dark, the more power it has over you. Bringing it into the light, first to God, and then to a trusted person, is often the first step toward freedom. One important note: if someone has hurt you and told you to keep it secret, that's not your sin to hide. Tell a trusted adult. Some secrets should never be kept.

If we say we have no sin, John says, we're fooling ourselves, and the truth isn't in us. But if we admit our sins, God, who is faithful and fair, will forgive us and wash away every wrong. If we claim we've

never sinned, we're calling God a liar, and His word has no place in us.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Three False Claims**

In verses 6, 8, and 10, John answers three claims that may have come from the people who had left. First: I'm close to God, even though I live in darkness. Second: I don't have sin in me. Third: I've never sinned. Some of them may have thought that, since they had special spiritual knowledge, what they did with their bodies didn't matter. John says that all three claims are lies. We all sin. The question isn't whether you sin. It's what you do about it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Confess**

1 John 1:9 is one of the most freeing verses in the Bible. Confess means to agree with God, to say the same thing about your sin that He does. Not making excuses. Not blaming others. Not saying, it wasn't that bad. Just being honest: God, I did this, and it was wrong. And look at His promise. He will forgive. Not maybe. Not if He's in a good mood. He is faithful, so He keeps His promises. He is just, so He forgives fairly, because Jesus has already paid for your sin. And He doesn't just forgive. He cleans. He washes away all of it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Confession in Different Traditions**

Christians practice confession in different ways. Catholic and Orthodox Christians confess their sins to God in the presence of a priest in the sacrament of reconciliation or confession, and receive words of forgiveness. Many Protestants confess directly to God in private prayer, in prayers of confession during worship, or to a trusted friend or pastor, following James 5:16. All agree that God forgives those who honestly confess, and that forgiveness comes through Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **When You Don't Feel Forgiven**

Sometimes you confess a sin, but you still feel guilty. You might confess the same thing over and over, wondering whether God has really forgiven you. Feelings are real, but they're not always reliable. God's forgiveness depends on His promise, not on your feelings. If you've confessed, you're forgiven,

even if you don't feel it. Sometimes lingering guilt is a sign that you need to make something right with someone you've hurt. Sometimes it's just a lie from the enemy. And sometimes it's connected to anxiety or depression, and talking to a counselor can help. Either way, God's promise stands.

KEY VERSE

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why does it matter that John says he touched Jesus?
2. What does walking in the light look like for a teenager?
3. Why do you think it's so hard to admit when we've done wrong?
4. Is there something you need to bring into the light, to God or to a trusted person?

TRY THIS *Spend ten minutes alone with God this week. Ask Him to show you anything you need to confess. Write it down, confess it to Him honestly, and then read 1 John 1:9 out loud. Then tear up the paper or throw it away as a reminder that you're forgiven.*

CHAPTER 2

Light, Love, and Liars

1 John 2

John calls his readers his dear children. He's writing so they won't sin. But if anyone does sin, he says, we have someone who speaks to the Father on our behalf: Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. Jesus is the sacrifice that takes away God's anger against our sins, and not only ours, but the sins of the entire world.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Our Advocate**

An advocate is someone who stands beside you and speaks for you, like a defense lawyer. John says that when you sin, Jesus doesn't abandon you. He stands up for you before the Father. That doesn't mean God the Father is angry and Jesus has to talk Him out of punishing you. The Father sent the Son because He loves you. It means that Jesus, who died for you, is your representative. When the accuser points at your sin, Jesus points to His wounds. In John's Gospel, Jesus uses the same word for the Holy Spirit, the Advocate (John 14:16). So you have an Advocate in heaven and an Advocate in your heart.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Atoning Sacrifice**

The phrase atoning sacrifice translates a Greek word that has been debated. Some translations say propitiation, meaning a sacrifice that turns away God's anger against sin. Others say expiation, meaning a sacrifice that removes or wipes away sin. The NIV's atoning sacrifice can include both. Either way, Jesus' death deals completely with our sin. John adds that Jesus' sacrifice is for the whole world. Christians have different understandings of exactly what

that means. Some believe Jesus died to make salvation available to every person. Others believe His death was intended to save those God chose from every nation. But all agree that no one is beyond the reach of the gospel, and that the offer is for everyone.

How can we be sure we know God? John says it's when we obey His commands. If someone says, I know Him, but ignores what He says, that person isn't telling the truth, and the truth has no home in them. But if someone keeps His word, God's love has truly reached its goal in that person. The NIV footnote offers another reading: God's love is made complete. That's how we can tell we belong to Him. If you say you live in Jesus, you should live the way He lived.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Obedience Test**

This is the first of John's tests. If you really know Jesus, it will show up in how you live. Not perfectly, but genuinely. You can't claim to know Jesus while ignoring everything He said. Think about it this way. If someone says they're your best friend but never listens to you, never shows up for you, and constantly does things that hurt you, you'd wonder whether they really know you at all. Knowing Jesus means more than knowing facts about Him. It means walking with Him, and that changes your direction.

Dear friends, John says, what I'm writing isn't a brand-new command. It's an old one, which you've had from the start. It's the message you've already heard. And yet it's also new, because the darkness is fading, and the real light has already begun to shine, in Jesus and in you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Old and New**

What command is John talking about? Love one another. It's old, because it goes back to Leviticus 19:18, and because John's readers had heard it from the beginning of their faith. But it's also new, because Jesus called it a new command and gave it a new standard: love one another as I have loved you

(John 13:34). And it's new because a new age has begun. The light has come, and the darkness is on its way out.

If someone says they live in the light while hating a fellow believer, John says, they're still in the dark. Whoever loves their brothers and sisters stays in the light, and nothing in their path will make them trip. But whoever hates a fellow believer is living in the dark and walking around in it. They don't know where they're going, because the dark has made them blind.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hate Is Blinding**

John says hatred blinds people. Think about what happens when you're really angry at someone or hold a grudge. You can't see them clearly. Everything they do annoys you. You assume the worst. You might even do things you regret. Hatred distorts everything. Love, on the other hand, helps you see clearly. That doesn't mean you have to like everyone or be best friends with people who hurt you. Love means wanting what's best for them and refusing to let bitterness take over your heart.

Then John writes a little poem to different groups in the church. He writes to the dear children, because their sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake, and because they know the Father. He writes to the fathers, because they know the One who has existed from the beginning. He writes to the young men, because they've defeated the evil one, they're strong, and God's word lives inside them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Children, Fathers, Young People**

John might be speaking to three age groups, or to three stages of spiritual growth, or he might be using all three to describe every believer from different angles. Every Christian is forgiven like a child, knows God deeply like a father, and fights evil like a young warrior. Notice what John says about young people: they're strong, God's word lives in them, and they've overcome the evil one. John doesn't talk down to young people. He sees them as strong and capable in God's strength. So does God.

Then John gives a warning. Don't love the world or the things in it. If anyone loves the world, the Father's love isn't in them. The NIV footnote offers another reading: love for the Father. Everything the world offers, cravings of the body, desires of the eyes, and arrogance about what we have, doesn't come from the Father. It all comes from the world, and the world is fading away, along with everything it craves. But whoever does what God wants will live forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Loving the World**

Wait, doesn't God love the world? Yes (John 3:16). John uses the word world in different ways. Sometimes it means the people God made. Here it means the system of values and desires that leaves God out: greed, pride, selfishness, lust, and the endless chase for more. John names three of them. The cravings of the body: wanting to satisfy every physical desire. The desires of the eyes: wanting everything you see, which advertising and social media are designed to fuel. And pride in possessions or status: wanting to impress people with what you have or who you are. None of these will last. Ten years from now, the phone you want, the brand you're wearing, and the drama everyone's talking about will be gone. God's will lasts forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Three Temptations**

Some Bible teachers notice that the three desires John lists match the temptation in the garden. Eve saw that the fruit was good for food, pleasing to the eye, and desirable for gaining wisdom (Genesis 3:6). They also match Jesus' temptations in the wilderness: turn stones into bread, see all the kingdoms of the world, throw yourself down from the temple (Matthew 4:1–11). Where Adam and Eve failed, Jesus won. And He can help you win too.

Then John turns to the people who had left. Dear children, he says, it's the last hour. You were taught that an antichrist would come, and many antichrists have already come. That's how we know it's the last hour. They left us, but they never really belonged to us. If

they had, they would have stayed. Their leaving made it clear that none of them truly belonged.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Antichrists**

The word antichrist appears in the Bible only in John's letters (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). Many people think of the antichrist as a single evil world leader at the end of time. John's readers had apparently heard teaching that such a figure would come, and many Christians connect that with the man of lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2 and the beast in Revelation 13. But notice what John does with the idea. He says many antichrists have already come, and he defines them clearly: whoever "denies that Jesus is the Christ," which means "denying the Father and the Son" (2:22), and anyone who refuses to acknowledge Jesus as truly come in the flesh (4:2–3). For John, antichrist doesn't mean a mysterious figure to speculate about, or a label to throw at politicians you don't like. It means anyone who opposes or replaces the real Jesus with a fake one. The prefix anti can mean against or instead of.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Last Hour**

John says it's the last hour. That was almost two thousand years ago. Was he wrong? The New Testament writers believed that with Jesus' coming, death, and resurrection, the last chapter of history had begun. Everything between Jesus' first coming and His return is the last days. The point isn't to set a date. It's to live alert, because the decisive event has already happened, and the end could come at any time.

BACKGROUND CHECK **When People Leave**

It's painful when people leave the church, especially if they were friends, leaders, or people you looked up to. You might wonder: were they right? John says something important. People leaving doesn't prove that the truth is false. In John's situation, their leaving showed they didn't really share the church's faith. That doesn't mean everyone who leaves a particular church is an enemy of Christ. People leave churches for many reasons, some good. Some who wander away come back, like the prodigal son. If someone you

know has walked away from faith, keep loving them, keep praying for them, and keep the door open. And keep your own eyes on Jesus.

But the Holy One has anointed you, John says, and every one of you knows what's true. The NIV footnote mentions that some manuscripts say that you know all things. I'm not writing because the truth is new to you, but because you already know it, and you know that lies never grow out of truth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Anointing**

What is the anointing? Most interpreters think it's the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would guide His followers into all truth (John 16:13). Some think it's God's word, the message they had heard from the beginning, taught and applied by the Spirit. The people who left may have claimed a special anointing or secret knowledge that only the spiritual elite had. John says: you all have the anointing. Every believer has the Spirit. You're not second-class Christians.

Who's the liar? John asks. It's anyone who says Jesus isn't the Christ. That person is the antichrist, rejecting both the Father and the Son. If you reject the Son, you don't have the Father either. But if you openly confess the Son, you have the Father as well. So make sure the message you heard at the beginning stays in you. If it does, you'll stay in both Son and Father. And He has promised us something: life that never ends.

BACKGROUND CHECK **You Can't Have the Father Without the Son**

Some people say they believe in God, but not in Jesus. Or they say Jesus was a good teacher, but not God's Son. John says you can't separate them. Jesus Himself said that no one comes to the Father except through Him, and that whoever has seen Him has seen the Father (John 14:6–9). That's a bold claim, and it can sound narrow. But Christians believe that it's true, and that it's good news: God has made Himself known in Jesus, and the way to Him is open to everyone.

I'm writing these things about people who are trying to deceive you, John says. But the anointing He gave you stays in you, and you don't need anyone to teach you. His anointing teaches you about everything, and it's true, not fake. So stay in Him, just as you've been taught.

BACKGROUND CHECK **No Need for Teachers?**

Does this mean you don't need pastors, teachers, or books? No. John himself is teaching in this very letter! And the New Testament says God gives teachers to the church (Ephesians 4:11). John means that his readers didn't need the false teachers, with their new, secret knowledge. They already had the truth and the Spirit. They didn't need some new teaching to complete their faith. Be careful of anyone who says that what you learned about Jesus isn't enough, and that you need their special insight to really know God.

And now, dear children, stay in Him, so that on the day He appears, we can be confident and not ashamed in front of Him. If you know that He's righteous, you can be sure that anyone who lives rightly is His child, born from Him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Remain**

John's favorite word in this letter is often translated remain, abide, live, or continue. He uses it more than twenty times. It means to stay, to stick, to make your home somewhere. Jesus used the same word when He said, remain in Me, as I remain in you, and compared Himself to a vine and us to branches (John 15:4–5). A branch doesn't produce fruit by trying harder. It produces fruit by staying connected to the vine. Following Jesus isn't mostly about trying harder. It's about staying close to Him.

KEY VERSE

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 John 2:1–2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. How does it feel to know that Jesus is your advocate when you sin?
2. Which of the three desires in 2:16 do you think is the biggest temptation for teens today?
3. What does John mean by antichrist? How is that different from how people often use the word?
4. Have you seen someone walk away from the faith? How did it affect you?

TRY THIS *Take a one-week break from something that feeds the desires of the eyes for you: a shopping app, a particular social media feed, or ads that make you want more. Each time you feel the urge to check it, pray instead, or read 1 John 2:15–17. At the end of the week, notice what changed.*

CHAPTER 3

Children of God

1 John 3

Look how much the Father loves us, John says. He has poured out so much love on us that we get to be called God's children. And it's not just a name. It's who we really are! The reason the world doesn't recognize us is that it didn't recognize Him either.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Lavished**

The NIV says that God has lavished His love on us. Lavish means to pour out generously, more than enough, over the top. God doesn't ration His love or hand it out in tiny portions to people who earn it. He floods us with it. And His love makes us His children. Not employees. Not servants. Not barely tolerated guests. Children. John seems so amazed by this that he adds: and that's what we are! If you've ever felt unwanted, unloved, or like you don't belong anywhere, read 3:1 again. God calls you His child.

BACKGROUND CHECK **When Family Is Hard**

For some people, the words father and family bring up pain. Maybe your dad left, or your home isn't safe, or your family is falling apart. If that's you, hearing that God is a Father might be complicated. God isn't like the worst fathers you know. He's the perfect Father, who never leaves, never abuses, and never stops loving. Psalm 68:5 says He's a father to the fatherless. If your home situation is hurting you, please talk to a trusted adult, a counselor, or a pastor. God's family is meant to be a place where you find people who care for you.

Dear friends, John goes on, right now we're God's children, and we don't yet know what we'll become. The NIV footnote offers another reading: when it is made known. But we do know that when Jesus appears, we'll be like Him, because we'll see Him exactly as He is. Everyone with this hope keeps themselves pure, because He is pure.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **We Shall Be Like Him**
>
> John doesn't know all the details of what we'll be like in eternity. But he knows the most important thing: we'll be like Jesus. When we finally see Him face to face, the transformation God started in us will be complete. No more sin. No more shame. No more struggling with the same temptations. This hope isn't just a nice idea for later. John says it changes how we live now. If you know you're going to be like Jesus forever, you start becoming more like Him today.

Sin, John says, is breaking God's law. At its core, it's rebellion against God's rules. But Jesus came to carry our sins away, and He Himself has no sin at all. People who make their home in Jesus don't keep living a life of sin. People who keep on sinning as a way of life have never truly seen Him or known Him.

Dear children, John says, don't let anyone fool you. Whoever does what's right is righteous, just as Jesus is righteous. Whoever practices sin belongs to the devil, who has been sinning since the start. That's why God's Son came: to tear down everything the devil has built. "No one who is born of God will continue to sin," because God's seed stays inside them. They can't keep on sinning, because God is their Father.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Can Christians Sin?**
>
> This passage can be confusing, even frightening. In chapter 1, John said that anyone who claims to have no sin is lying. Now he seems to say that people born of God don't sin. How can both be true? Christians have offered several

explanations. Many point out that the Greek verbs here describe ongoing, habitual action, which is why the NIV says keep on sinning and continue to sin. In this view, John isn't saying that Christians never sin, but that they don't live in sin as a settled lifestyle without repentance. Others think John is describing the ideal, or what's true of our new nature, the part of us born of God, even though our old nature still struggles. Others think John means a specific kind of deliberate, defiant sin, like that of the people who had left. Some in the Wesleyan tradition teach that God can free believers from willful, known sin in this life, which they call Christian perfection or entire sanctification, while still acknowledging mistakes and weakness. All agree that John isn't saying Christians will be perfect, but that a life born of God will be changed.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Struggling Isn't the Same as Not Caring**

If you're struggling with a sin, maybe one you keep falling into again and again, this passage doesn't mean you're not a Christian. Notice that John is talking about people who keep on sinning without caring, who see nothing wrong with it, and who aren't fighting it. The very fact that you're bothered by your sin and want to change is a sign that God's seed is in you. Keep confessing (1:9). Keep fighting. Get help from a trusted adult or mentor. Paul struggled too (Romans 7:15–25). God isn't finished with you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Destroying the Devil's Work**

John says that Jesus came to destroy the devil's work. Think about what the devil does: he deceives, accuses, divides, tempts, and destroys. Jesus came to undo all of it. He tells the truth, forgives, unites, frees, and gives life. Every time someone is forgiven, healed, freed from addiction, reconciled to an enemy, or rescued from despair, Jesus is tearing down the devil's work. And He'll finish the job when He returns.

Here's the difference between God's children and the devil's, John says. If someone doesn't live rightly, they aren't God's child, and the same goes for anyone who doesn't love their fellow believers. From the very beginning, you were taught to love one another. Don't

follow Cain's example. He was on the evil one's side, and he killed his own brother. Why? Because his own deeds were wicked, while his brother lived rightly.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Cain and Abel**
>
> The first murder in the Bible was a brother killing his brother (Genesis 4:1–16). Cain and Abel both brought offerings to God. God accepted Abel's offering but not Cain's. Instead of changing, Cain got jealous and angry. God warned him that sin was crouching at his door, ready to pounce, but that he had to master it. Cain didn't listen. He killed Abel. John says Cain hated Abel because Abel's goodness exposed his own evil. Sometimes people resent those who do right, because it makes them look bad. Jealousy, left unchecked, can lead to terrible places.

So don't be shocked, John tells them, when the world can't stand you. Our love for each other is how we know we've crossed over from death into life. Without love, a person is still dead inside. Hating a fellow believer is murder in the heart, and as you're well aware, eternal life doesn't live in a murderer.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Hate Is Murder?**
>
> John echoes Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment (Matthew 5:21–22). John goes further. Hatred is murder in the heart. That doesn't mean hating someone is legally the same as killing them. It means that murder starts in the heart. Every act of violence begins with contempt, bitterness, or rage. That's why it's so important to deal with hatred early, before it grows. If you're holding hatred toward someone, bring it to God. Ask Him to help you forgive, even if it takes time.

Want to know what real love looks like? John asks. Look at Jesus, who gave up His life for us. And so we should be willing to give up our lives for one another. Suppose someone has more than enough and sees a fellow believer going without, but refuses to care. How

could God's love possibly be living in that person? Dear children, John says, let's not love with talk alone, but with action and honesty.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Love Is a Verb**

John's definition of love isn't a feeling. It's an action: Jesus laid down His life. That's the standard. Most of us won't be asked to die for someone. But we're asked to lay down our lives in smaller ways every day: giving up our time, our comfort, our money, our preferences, and our pride for others. John gives a practical example. If you have more than you need and someone else doesn't have enough, love shares. Love isn't just saying, I care. It's showing up. It's texting the friend who's struggling. It's giving to the food bank. It's helping your younger sibling with homework even when you'd rather play video games.

BACKGROUND CHECK **3:16**

Most people know John 3:16: God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son. But 1 John 3:16 is its partner. John 3:16 tells us how God loved us. 1 John 3:16 tells us how we should love others. God's love doesn't stop with us. It flows through us.

Loving like this, John says, shows that the truth is where we belong, and it lets our hearts rest when we come before God. Even when our own hearts accuse us, God is bigger than our hearts, and nothing is hidden from Him. And, dear friends, when our hearts aren't accusing us, we can come to God boldly and receive what we ask, since we're obeying Him and doing what He loves. What does He command? That we trust in the name of Jesus Christ, His Son, and that we love each other, just as Jesus told us to. People who obey Him make their home in God, and God makes His home in them. And the Spirit He has given us is how we can be sure of it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **When Your Heart Condemns You**

This is one of the most comforting passages in the Bible for people who struggle with guilt. Sometimes your heart accuses you. You feel like a failure,

like you're not good enough, like God must be disappointed in you. John says: God is greater than your heart. He knows everything, including your sin, but also your love for Him, your desire to change, and everything Jesus has done for you. Your feelings don't have the final word. God does. When your heart condemns you, look to Jesus, not to your feelings.

KEY VERSE

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

1 John 3:1 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What does it mean to you to be called a child of God?
2. How would you explain the difference between struggling with sin and living in sin?
3. What's one way you could love someone with actions, not just words, this week?
4. When your heart condemns you, what helps you remember that God is greater?

TRY THIS *Look for someone who has a need you can meet this week. It might be a classmate who needs help, a neighbor who could use a hand, or a family that's struggling. Do something practical to help, without being asked, and without telling anyone.*

CHAPTER 4

God Is Love

1 John 4

Dear friends, John says, don't trust every spirit. Put them to the test to see whether they're really from God, because lots of false prophets are out there now.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Test the Spirits**
>
> John's readers lived in a world full of spiritual voices: prophets, teachers, and people claiming visions and revelations. Some came from God. Many didn't. John says: don't believe everything you hear just because it sounds spiritual. Test it. That's still good advice. You'll hear a lot of spiritual-sounding messages: from influencers, books, songs, self-help gurus, and even preachers. Some will be true. Some won't. The question isn't whether it sounds inspiring, makes you feel good, or has lots of followers. The question is whether it's true.

Here's how you can recognize God's Spirit, John says. Any spirit that openly confesses that Jesus Christ came in a real human body comes from God. Any spirit that refuses to confess Jesus doesn't. That's the antichrist's spirit. You were told it was on its way, and it's already here.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Jesus Test**
>
> John's test for spiritual teaching is simple: what does it say about Jesus? Remember the people who had left John's church. Some of them seem to have denied that Jesus truly came in the flesh. John says that any teaching

that denies who Jesus really is, fully God and fully human, isn't from God. Today, you might hear people say that Jesus was just a good teacher, that He was one of many ways to God, that He didn't really die or didn't really rise, or that He was a spirit and not a real man. John's test still applies. A real Jesus with a real body who really died and really rose is the heart of the Christian faith.

Dear children, John says, you belong to God, and you've already beaten these false prophets, because God's Spirit living in you is stronger than the devil, who is at work in the world. The false teachers belong to the world, so they talk like the world, and the world is happy to hear them. We belong to God, and people who know God pay attention to what we say. People who aren't from God tune us out. That's how we can tell the Spirit of truth from the spirit of error. The NIV footnote mentions that spirit could also be translated as Spirit.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Greater Is He**

First John 4:4 is a favorite verse for many Christians facing fear or temptation. The One in you, God's Spirit, is stronger than the devil, who's at work in the world. You don't have to be afraid of evil. You don't fight in your own strength. That doesn't mean life will be easy, or that you'll never struggle. But it means that the final outcome isn't in doubt. God is stronger.

Then John reaches the heart of his letter. Dear friends, he says, let's love each other, since all love has its source in God. Anyone who loves is God's child and truly knows Him. If someone doesn't love, they don't know God, because "God is love."

BACKGROUND CHECK **God Is Love**

These three words, found in 4:8 and again in 4:16, may be the most famous description of God ever written. John doesn't just say that God loves, or that God is loving. He says God is love. Love is His very nature. Everything God does flows from love, even His justice, His discipline, and His judgment.

Christians have often connected this with the Trinity: before the world existed, the Father, Son, and Spirit were already loving each other. God didn't create us because He was lonely. He created us to share the love He already had. But be careful: this doesn't mean that whatever we call love is God. John defines love by looking at God, not God by looking at our ideas of love.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Love Defined**

Our culture uses the word love for lots of things: I love pizza, I love this song, I love you. Often it means a feeling, an attraction, or something that makes us happy. John's definition is different. Love isn't mainly a feeling. It's self-giving action for someone else's good. Real love isn't selfish. It doesn't use people. It doesn't manipulate or control. It's patient and kind (1 Corinthians 13:4–7). If someone says they love you but hurts you, controls you, or pressures you to do things you don't want to do, that's not love, no matter what they call it.

God made His love visible to us, John says, by sending His only Son into our world, so that we could have life through Him. That's what love is. It isn't that we first loved God. It's that God loved us first, and then sent His Son as the sacrifice that wipes away our sins. Dear friends, since that's how much God loved us, we should love each other too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **He Loved Us First**

John says real love didn't start with us. It started with God. We didn't love God first, and then He decided to love us back. He loved us when we didn't love Him at all. That's the foundation of everything. You don't have to earn God's love. You don't have to clean yourself up first. He loved you before you were born, and before you ever thought about Him. And when you understand how much He loves you, it becomes possible to love other people, even difficult ones.

Nobody has ever laid eyes on God, John says. But when we love each other, God lives within us, and His love reaches its full goal inside us. His gift of the Spirit is how we can be sure that God's home is in

us and ours is in Him. And we've seen with our own eyes, and we tell everyone, that the Father sent His Son to save the world. If anyone openly confesses that Jesus is God's Son, God makes His home in that person, and that person makes their home in God. So we've come to know God's love for us, and we lean on it. God is love. People who make their home in love make their home in God, and He makes His home in them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **No One Has Seen God**

John says that God has never been seen. But people can see God's love when Christians love each other. Think about that. You might be the closest some people ever get to seeing what God is like. When you love someone who's unlovable, forgive someone who hurt you, or include someone who's been left out, you show them a glimpse of God. Jesus said that people would know we're His disciples by our love for one another (John 13:35).

This is how love reaches its goal among us, John says, so that we can be confident on judgment day: in this world, we're like Jesus. Then he writes words that have comforted millions. Love has no fear in it. "But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment." Whoever is afraid hasn't been completely transformed by love.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Perfect Love Drives Out Fear**

Many people relate to God mainly through fear. They're afraid He's angry at them, afraid of being punished, afraid they're not good enough, afraid of hell. John says that God's perfect love drives out that kind of fear. When you really understand how much God loves you, and that Jesus has taken your punishment, you don't have to be terrified of God anymore. That doesn't mean you don't respect Him. The Bible still speaks of the fear of the Lord, meaning reverence and awe (Proverbs 9:10). But you don't have to cower before Him. You can come to Him like a child running to a loving father.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fear and Anxiety**

This verse is about fear of God's punishment, not every kind of fear or anxiety. Some fears are healthy and keep you safe. Others, like panic attacks, phobias, or anxiety disorders, have physical and psychological causes. If you struggle with anxiety, it doesn't mean you don't love God enough or that your faith is weak. God's love is a powerful comfort, and prayer helps. But talking to a counselor or doctor is also a good and wise step. Faith and good care go together.

We love because He loved us first. If someone says they love God but hates a fellow believer, they're a liar. If they don't love a brother or sister they can see, they can't love God, whom they've never seen. And God has told us plainly: if you love Him, you must love your fellow believers too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Love God, Love People**

John says you can't love God and hate people. They go together. It's easy to say you love God. He's invisible, and He never annoys you. It's harder to love the people right in front of you: your siblings, your parents, the kid who sits next to you, the person at church who drives you crazy. John says loving them is the proof that you love God. Jesus said the same thing when He named the two greatest commandments: love God with everything, and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:29–31).

KEY VERSE

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

1 John 4:18 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. How can you test whether a spiritual message is true?
2. What's the difference between how John defines love and how our culture defines it?
3. Do you relate to God more out of fear or out of love? Why?
4. Who's the hardest person for you to love? What would it look like to love them this week?

TRY THIS *Read 1 John 4:7–21 every day this week. Each day, write down one thing it teaches about God's love, and one way you can show that love to someone. At the end of the week, look back at what you wrote.*

CHAPTER 5

Know for Sure

1 John 5

Anyone who trusts Jesus as the Christ is God's child, John says. And if you love a parent, you'll love that parent's children too. We can tell we love God's children when we love God and do what He commands. Loving God means keeping His commands, and His commands aren't a heavy weight, because God's children win out over the world. Our faith is what wins the victory over the world. Who defeats the world? Only the person who believes that Jesus is God's Son.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Not Burdensome**

John says that God's commands aren't a crushing weight. That might surprise you. Doesn't following Jesus mean following a lot of rules? John's point is that when you love someone, doing what pleases them isn't a burden. Think about doing something for someone you love: planning a surprise, buying a gift, helping them move. It takes effort, but it doesn't feel like a burden because you love them. Jesus said His yoke is easy and His burden is light (Matthew 11:30). God's commands are a gift, showing us how to live well.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Overcoming the World**

The world, as John uses the word, is the system of values that leaves God out: pressure to fit in, to chase money and status, to give in to every desire, and to follow the crowd. John says faith overcomes it. Faith doesn't mean escaping the world or pretending it doesn't exist. It means trusting Jesus more than the

world's promises and threats. Every time you choose to trust God instead of going along with the crowd, you're overcoming the world.

Jesus Christ, John says, is the One who came through water and through blood. Not through water alone, but through both water and blood. And the Spirit is a witness to this, since the Spirit is truth itself.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Water and Blood**

What does John mean by water and blood? Most interpreters think water refers to Jesus' baptism and blood refers to His death on the cross. Remember Cerinthus, who taught that the divine Christ came on Jesus at His baptism and left before He died. John insists that the Son of God came through both His baptism and His death. The One who died on the cross was the Son of God. Others connect the water and blood with the water and blood that flowed from Jesus' side on the cross (John 19:34), or with baptism and the Lord's Supper. Whatever the details, John's point is that Jesus really lived, really was baptized, and really died as the Son of God.

So there are three witnesses, John says, and the three tell the same story: the Spirit, plus the water and the blood. If we trust what people tell us, we should trust God's word even more. And God Himself has spoken up for His Son. People who trust God's Son carry God's testimony in their hearts. People who refuse to trust God are treating Him like a liar, because they've rejected what He has said about His Son. And here's what God has said: He has given us life that never ends, and that life is found in His Son. If you have the Son, you have life. If you don't have God's Son, you don't have life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Johannine Comma**

If you read 1 John 5:7–8 in the King James Version, you'll find some extra words: in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one, and there are three that bear witness in earth. These words are called the Johannine Comma, from a Latin word for a short clause. They aren't in

the NIV text, and almost all modern translations leave them out or put them in a footnote. Why? Because they don't appear in any Greek manuscript of 1 John until very late, and none of the early church fathers quote them, even when they were arguing about the Trinity and would have loved to use them. The NIV footnote explains that they're found in late manuscripts of the Vulgate, the Latin Bible, and in no Greek manuscript before the fourteenth century. They seem to have begun as a comment written in the margin of Latin manuscripts, perhaps in the fourth century, and were later copied into the text. When Erasmus published the first printed Greek New Testament in 1516, he left them out. After criticism, he added them to his third edition, and from there they made their way into the King James Version. Today, scholars across Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions agree that they weren't part of what John originally wrote.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Does That Change the Trinity?**

Some people worry that if the Johannine Comma isn't original, the doctrine of the Trinity is in trouble. It isn't. Christians believed in one God in three persons long before these words were added. The Trinity is based on the whole of Scripture: Jesus' command to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19), the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:16–17), and many other passages (2 Corinthians 13:14; 1 Peter 1:2). And the fact that scholars can spot a late addition like this is actually good news. With thousands of manuscripts to compare, we can be confident about what the original text said.

Then John explains his purpose in writing. "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."

BACKGROUND CHECK **So That You May Know**

This is the key to the whole letter. John didn't write so that you'd always wonder, hope, or guess whether you belong to God. He wrote so you could know. Not because you're good enough, but because of who Jesus is and what He's done. John's tests in this letter are like signs on a road. Do you

believe that Jesus is God's Son, who came in the flesh? Are you trying, however imperfectly, to follow Him? Do you love other believers? If so, these are signs that God is at work in you. And if Jesus is yours, so is life. It's that simple, and that solid.

BACKGROUND CHECK **If You Doubt Your Salvation**

Some people read 1 John and become more anxious, not less. They read the tests and wonder: Do I love enough? Do I obey enough? Am I really saved? If that's you, take a breath. John wrote this letter to people who believed, so that they could have confidence. His tests weren't designed to make sincere believers miserable. They were designed to show that the people who left, who denied Jesus, didn't care about obeying Him, and didn't love others, were the ones on the wrong path. Your assurance doesn't rest on how strong your faith feels today. It rests on Jesus, His death for you, and God's promise. If you've put your trust in Jesus, He is yours. And if you're worried that you haven't, you can trust Him right now. Feelings of doubt are normal. Many great Christians have struggled with them. If doubts keep troubling you, talk to a pastor or a trusted Christian adult. And if your fears feel constant or overwhelming, a counselor can help, too.

John goes on. We can come to God with confidence. If we ask for anything that fits His will, He listens. And since we know He listens to whatever we ask, we can be sure that our requests are already granted.

BACKGROUND CHECK **According to His Will**

Does this mean God will give you anything you ask for? Not quite. The key phrase is according to His will. Prayer isn't a way to get God to do what we want. It's a way to bring our desires to Him and line them up with what He wants. Jesus prayed in the garden, not My will, but Yours (Luke 22:42). That doesn't mean prayer doesn't matter. It matters enormously. God loves to hear from you, and He answers. Sometimes He says yes, sometimes no, and sometimes wait. But He always hears.

If you notice a fellow believer committing a sin that isn't the kind that leads to death, John says, pray for them, and God will bring them life. I'm talking about those whose sin isn't deadly. "There is a sin that leads to death." I'm not saying you should pray about that. Every wrong thing is sin, but not every sin is deadly.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Sin That Leads to Death**

This is one of the most puzzling passages in the Bible. What is the sin that leads to death? There are several views. Some think it refers to physical death: some sins are so serious that God ends a person's life as discipline, as with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11) or the Corinthians who abused the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:30). Others think it refers to spiritual death, a final rejection of Christ. In the context of this letter, that might mean what the people who left had done: denying that Jesus is the Christ and walking away from the truth. Some connect it with Jesus' warning about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:28–29). In Catholic teaching, the distinction between mortal and venial sin draws partly on this passage. Mortal sin is a grave sin, committed knowingly and deliberately, which breaks a person's relationship with God until they repent and are restored, especially through confession; venial sin is less serious. Notice that John doesn't forbid praying for anyone. He simply doesn't command it in that case. And he emphasizes that most sin isn't deadly, and that we should pray for each other.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Afraid You've Committed It?**

If you're worried that you've committed the sin that leads to death, or the unforgivable sin, here's something important. People who have truly and finally rejected Christ don't usually worry about it. They don't care. The fact that you're worried shows that God's Spirit is still working in your heart. Come to Him. Confess your sins. He has promised to forgive (1:9). And talk to a pastor or trusted Christian adult about your fears.

God's children don't make a habit of sin, John says. Jesus, God's own Son, guards them, and the evil one can't lay a finger on them. We're

sure that we're God's children, while the rest of the world lies in the evil one's grip. And we're sure that God's Son has come and opened our minds, so that we can know the true God. And we live in Him, the true One, by living in His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus is the true God, and He is life without end.

BACKGROUND CHECK **We Know**

In the last few verses of his letter, John says we know three times. In a world full of uncertainty, doubt, and opinions, John gives us three solid facts. We know that God protects His children. We know that we're His. And we know that Jesus has come and given us understanding of the true God. John ends by calling Jesus the true God and life that never ends. Most interpreters think this phrase refers to Jesus, though some think it refers to the Father. Either way, it's a powerful ending.

Then, out of nowhere, John ends his letter with a final instruction. "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Idols**

Why does John end with idols? In Ephesus, where John likely lived, idols were everywhere. The temple of Artemis there was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. But John might also mean anything that takes God's place, including the false Jesus of the people who had left. An idol is anything you love, trust, or serve more than God. Today, idols rarely look like statues. They look like money, popularity, relationships, success, appearance, sports, grades, followers, gaming, or even our own image of ourselves. Good things become idols when we make them ultimate things. Ask yourself: what do I think about most? What do I spend most of my time, money, and energy on? What would devastate me to lose? Those questions can reveal your idols. John's final word is a loving warning: keep the real God, the real Jesus, at the center.

KEY VERSE

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.

1 John 5:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God's commands aren't burdensome for people who love Him?
2. Does it surprise you that some words in older Bibles weren't in the original? How does it make you feel about the Bible?
3. Are you sure you have life that never ends? What does John say that gives you confidence?
4. What are the biggest idols in your life or in your culture?

TRY THIS *Make a list of five things that compete with God for first place in your life. Pick one, and this week, give it a smaller place: spend less time on it, put it down, or give some of it away. Each day, read 1 John 5:13 and thank God that you can know you belong to Him.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read 1 John, a letter written so that people could know for sure that they have eternal life. John says that God is love, and that He showed it by sending His Son. That love is for you.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you more than you can imagine. He wants you to know Him.

> *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (NIV)**

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. John says that if we claim to have no sin, we're fooling ourselves. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus came for you.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. God didn't wait for us to love Him first.

> *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You for loving me first. Thank You that Jesus died for me and rose again. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me and make me clean. I trust Jesus*

as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Help me walk in the light, love other people the way You love me, and know that I belong to You. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 1 John straight through. Then read the Gospel of John, which John wrote so that people would believe that Jesus is God's Son.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Love someone. John says love is the proof that we know God. This week, show God's love to someone in a practical way.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. John wrote down what he saw and touched so you could check it out for yourself. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if John is right, God is love, and He loved you first.

We love because he first loved us.

1 John 4:19 (NIV)