

1st John: These things I write to You

By Dan & Brenda Cathcart

The video version is available at: <https://youtu.be/3Av30tvpVuk>

The scripture reading is 1st John 1:1-2:27

The epistles of John and the book of Hebrews are the only writings among the Apostolic cannon that do not identify the author. However, since the second century, other leaders from the early church almost universally accept the apostle John as the author. Ignatius quotes from 1st John attributing this epistle to the last living apostle and eyewitness to the life and ministry of Messiah Yeshua.

John made his headquarters in the city of Ephesus and wrote this epistle at a time of great division and apostacy among the late first century believers. At the end of the first century, John's world was one of great religious and philosophical syncretism. The Greco-Roman society of the late first century was not unlike today where we see a concerted effort to force religious "tolerance" and acceptance of all belief systems into one cohesive and socially acceptable religious system. The concept of "Chrislam" and the T-shirts and bumper stickers that spell out "coexist" in the symbols of many religions and philosophies would be right at home in John's day as they are today.

The apostle John had an important message for the believers in the churches in Asia Minor of his day. If we understand the context of his time and the world religious and philosophical system in which he writes this important epistle, we will find his words resonate just as loudly today as they did then.

The city of Ephesus was not only one of the most prominent and important seaports in the ancient world but was an important cultural and religious center as well. Ephesus boasted the temple of Artemus, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. This city on the Aegean Sea played an important part in the apostle Paul's life and ministry. In the very heart of spiritual darkness, Ephesus provided Paul a stable place where he lived and worked for more than three years. Now some three decades later, Ephesus is again the home of a great man of God and apostle of Messiah Yeshua.

At the time of John's 1st epistle, the body of believers was in a great struggle. The Gentiles brought many of their pagan philosophies and religious practices with them into the body of believers. In many cases the local assemblies had been taken over by the Gentiles, rejecting the Jewish believers altogether. In other cases, entire new assemblies were formed by and for the Gentiles.

3 John 1:9 NKJV 9 I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us.

Some thirty years earlier, the Jewish believers in Jerusalem were banished from the Temple and cut off from their people by order of the Sanhedrin. They had fled the city just as the various Jewish religious and political factions descended into all-out civil war and the city became a very dangerous place. Now in John's day, many of the Jewish brethren were rejected by their Gentile counterparts as well.

If the book of 1st John can be described in a few words perhaps it can be viewed as a book of contrasts and clear choices. In his world, John witnessed the rise of what would become known as Gnosticism, a philosophy and lifestyle of moral and ethical relativism. John's epistle boils it all down to absolute choices. John opens his epistle with the most important absolute.

1 John 1:1-4 NKJV 1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life-- 2 the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us-- 3 that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. 4 And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.

False teachers were an existential threat to the body of believers in John's day just as they are today. John doesn't mess around with opening pleasantries and greetings. He hits it direct and hard right from the git-go. John opens with a list of certainties about the person and the work of Yeshua. With the philosophy of Gnosticism beginning to creep into the body, with its denial of both the deity and humanity of Yeshua, John opens by reiterating the true nature of Messiah Yeshua. The apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians about those who propagate a false gospel.

Galatians 1:6-9 NKJV 6 I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, 7 which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. 9 As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

John was an eyewitness to the word of life and experienced a direct revelation with his senses. He stated that he personally had heard with his ears, seen with his eyes, and touched with his hands concerning the word of life. For John, the word of life was manifested in Yeshua of Nazareth. The word "manifested" is from the Greek word "fan-er-o'-o", number 5319 in the Strong's Concordance meaning to make or render apparent, to make visible what was hidden. John had the privilege of witnessing the life and presence of Yeshua, the Son of God on this earth and then takes the responsibility to reveal and preserve the gospel in the fallen world around him. John proclaims and reveals the word of life so that the believers may have fellowship with God the Father and His Son Yeshua. Fellowship is the Greek word "koy-nohn-ee'-ah", number 2842 meaning a partnership, social intercourse, or communion. It implies participation in a common cause or shared life. And in this way their joy is made complete.

John next defines the basis of our fellowship with Yeshua by contrasting light and darkness.

1 John 1:5-10 NKJV 5 This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

Because God is light, as John puts it, to have fellowship with Him we can not remain in darkness; we can not abide in the false doctrines that are creeping into the body of believers. John may be addressing the leaders of the assemblies in Asia Minor when he writes these words. It is the duty of the pastors and spiritual leaders to warn their flocks about false teachers and the doctrines they spread. If we say we have fellowship with God and Yeshua and embrace and follow false teachers and their doctrines, then we are liars.

John says those walking in sin and then deny it, saying that they have not sinned, make Yeshua to be a liar, and Yeshua's words are not in them. This is a direct reference to the Gnostic concepts of moral relativism which was taking root in the congregations John is writing to.

But John says that even if one has strayed away from the light and fallen for the darkness repentance is possible!

1 John 2:1-2 NKJV 1 My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

John moves on to another topic; how does one identify those who belong to God and are walking in the light? Again, John presents a striking and observable contrast between a true believer and follower of Messiah and one who has fallen for a false gospel.

1 John 2:3-6 NKJV 3 Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. 4 He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. 5 But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. 6 He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.

It is very simple to determine who the followers and true believers are. A true believer and follower of Yeshua will be one who keeps His commandments. If he does not keep His commandments, then he is a liar, plain and simple! In the next few verses, John says that this is not a new concept. They have known or should have known this from the beginning!

1 John 2:7-8 NKJV 7 Brethren, I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you heard from the beginning. 8 Again, a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining.

Is there a confusion here between verses seven and eight? In verse seven John states he "writes no new commandment", but in verse eight he writes "a new commandment I write to you."

In our previous teachings from the book of Hebrews, we learned about the "world to come." We learned that this world is in the on-going process of coming into being. John is writing the same message to his readers. The process is continuing and is not yet complete. The light of Messiah is present and shining in the world, but darkness is still present as well. John is admonishing his readers to follow the light and shun the darkness while they still can. John next explains just how to do it.

1 John 2:9-11 NKJV 9 He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. 10 He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. 11 But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

As we come to the last sections of chapter 2, John again uses a present, active tense to describe the dangers of the things of this world. John writes of the thing of this world as passing away.

1 John 2:15-17 NKJV 15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world--the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life--is not of the Father but is of the world. 17 And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

John's warning is not about the physical creation which God called good or the people in it, but about the invisible, spiritual system of evil in the world. That which is governed by Satan. John is saying that the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God cannot coexist. They are mutually exclusive. If it is true that a true believer is not characterized by a love of the world as defined by John, then it is also true that those in the world cannot demonstrate genuine love for the gospel, for Yeshua, or their fellow man.

I am certain that talk among the believers throughout the diaspora about an imminent return of Yeshua had been at a fever pitch since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the rampant persecution of the believers under various Roman Emperors. John reminds his readers of the spirit of rebellion against the things of God that he called the spirit of antichrist. John writes of many antichrists who have come and gone in recent years.

1 John 2:18-19 NKJV 18 Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. 19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.

John briefly identifies what he means by the term "antichrist" which only appears in his letters. But the concept of an antichrist is interwoven throughout scripture, in the prophets, the gospels, and, of course, in John's Revelation. John acknowledges that there will one day be an ultimate antichrist that will arise and rule for a short time. In the meantime, there are those who are examples of an antichrist in that they are people who seek to supplant Yeshua or falsely represent Him. We had seen several examples of antichrists in the form of false Messiahs in our studies in the book of Acts over the last several months. But none were The Antichrist. It is important to note in verse 19 that John clearly identifies where these antichrists come from! They come from the body of believers! If you wish to explore the concept of antichrist further, Brenda and I have a 4-part teaching on the biblical identity of the Antichrist available in our video archives on YouTube and Facebook.

John says that the true believer has a protection that will guide and keep them focused on the truth.

1 John 2:20-23 NKJV 20 But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. 21 I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. 22 Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. 23 Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

Because of the rise of Gnosticism at the end of the first century, many false teachers rose up and claimed to have a special knowledge or anointing from God, and they alone could "teach" the people about God and His ways. In verse 21 John was telling the believers that he wasn't writing to them because they didn't know the truth, but because they did now it. That the believers were the ones with the special anointing of God which is the Holy Spirit. John MacArthur in his commentary on 1st John writes:

"The apostle (John) wrote as he did because his readers already knew the gospel and its attendant truths and would understand his appeal to the exclusivity of biblical truth."ⁱ

John ends his admonishment of the believers by reminding them that they do know the truth, that they need to stick with that which they have known from the beginning. They are not to be deceived by the spirit of antichrist in their midst.

1 John 2:24-27 NKJV 24 Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. 25 And this is the promise that He has promised us--eternal life. 26 These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you. 27 But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.

The believers throughout Asia Minor at the end of the 1st century faced persecution of a nature that we can only imagine. We see in the time of John how the ways of the world creep slowly and relentlessly into the doctrines of the assembly of believers. John's letter was a guide for them at that time, and as we see many of the same philosophies and doctrines in the world around us today, we can take the words of John to heart and guard against the spirit of antichrist slowly creeping into the body of believers today. We too can stay steadfast and focused on the thing which we have known from the beginning.

Study Questions:

1. The city of Ephesus plays an important role in the lives of both Paul and John. Each wrote numerous letters to the believers while living in Ephesus. Compare Paul's writings to those of John. How are their teachings similar? How do they differ?
2. Identify and discuss the many contrasts that John draws upon to illustrate his points in this letter.
3. How does John's unique position as the last eyewitness to the life and Ministry of Yeshua give him his perspective on the spiritual state of the believers at that time? What is that spiritual state?
4. John identifies an observable, identifiable difference between the true believer and the counterfeit believer. What is John's criteria and can, or should, the same standards be applied today?
5. John uses the term "antichrist" to describe a certain spiritual state of an individual. Identify other scripture in the prophets, gospels, or other biblical writings which describe the same or similar spiritual characteristics.
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching or this study of Hebrews? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

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ⁱ John MacArthur, New Testament Commentary, 1-3 John, Moody Publishers, 2007 p102