

**SAM ALLBERRY**  
**1, 2, & 3 JOHN**  
**FOR YOU**



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## **1, 2, and 3 John For You**

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*To Chuck and Hannah Callahan,  
with much love.*

## SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *1, 2, and 3 John For You*:

**To read.** You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

**To feed.** You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

**To lead.** You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the one he is pointing you to.

*Carl Laferton, Series Editor*

### **Bible translations used**

NIV: New International Version (This is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated)

NIV84: New International Version, 1984 edition

NIVUK: New International Version, anglicised edition

ESV: English Standard Version

All emphasis in Bible quotations is the author's own.

## INTRODUCTION TO 1, 2, AND 3 JOHN

Sarah was about ten years old and had been learning the piano for a few years. Her parents were very musical and wanted her to be as well. She tried hard, but just didn't feel very good at it. One evening, her parents had friends over for a meal and asked her to play for them. When she declined, they thought she was just being shy, and insisted all the more.

She burst into tears. And the truth finally came out.

How Sarah felt about playing the piano might be very similar to how many of us feel about being a follower of Jesus. We *want* to be a Christian. We try to be. Perhaps everyone around us assumes we are. But deep down inside, it doesn't feel like it.

Some of us have agonized for many years over such feelings. I can think of two seasons in my life, each lasting several months, where I felt very little assurance that I was a Christian. I didn't doubt God's goodness, or his faithfulness to his promises. I didn't doubt the resurrection of Jesus. I was seeking to follow God's ways and actively serve his people. One of these seasons was when I was at seminary, training to be a pastor. Yet it didn't feel like I had really come to know him. When I have been in that state, needing assurance, it is to the writings of John that I have turned—especially his first, much longer letter.

In the classic romcom *When Harry Met Sally*, one of Harry's quirks is that he reads the last page of a book first. "That way," he says, "if I die before I finish, I know how it comes out." If Harry read 1 John, he would have quickly discovered John's purpose in writing. It is stated close to the end of the letter: "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).

You will already know John as one of the Gospel writers—but his purpose in writing these letters is different from his purpose in writing his account of Jesus' life. In John's Gospel, he wrote so "that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by

believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). The Gospel was written to help people believe. But John’s first letter was written to help believers *know* that they believe. As John Stott puts it:

“He wrote the Gospel for unbelievers in order to arouse their faith (20:30-31), and the letter for believers in order to deepen their assurance (5:13). His desire for the readers of the Gospel was that through faith they might receive life; for the readers of the letter that they might know they already had it. Consequently, the Gospel contains ‘signs’ to evoke faith (20:30-31) and the letter tests by which to judge it.”

*(The Letters of John, p. 26)*

John, led by the Holy Spirit, assumes there will be followers of Jesus who struggle to know if they truly, really have come to know him. It is a comfort to know that such struggles are not unexpected. God has anticipated our need and provided several chapters of **Scripture** to help us in it. This illustrates what the writer to the Hebrews understood: that our Savior is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, such that we can “approach God’s throne of **grace** with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:15-16). God is not frustrated with us for experiencing such need. Indeed, his heart is to help us. Hence this writing of John.

## John and His Readers

The John whose words we are reading is the **apostle** John—the one who traveled with Jesus and wrote John’s Gospel. Yet he doesn’t identify himself at the start of 1 John, as we might expect given that this was the practice of the other apostles, Paul and Peter. In 2 and 3 John the author simply identifies himself as “the elder.” So how do we know it was John?


It is obvious that the author knew all about his readers and had great affection and pastoral concern for them. The author is an eyewitness of Jesus (1 John 1:1), having spent considerable time with him, and writes



unselfconsciously with the authority of an apostle (someone specifically appointed by Christ). These letters also have a huge amount in common with John's Gospel, sharing thematic concerns as well as being very similar in writing style. Some of the language is identical. Early Christian evidence also affirms John's authorship.

As for who John was writing to, we know more about their situation than we know about who they were.

They, like the author, are not identified in 1 John. 2 and 3 John are addressed to "the lady chosen by God and to her children" and to "my dear friend Gaius" respectively. In none of these can we be sure who these recipients actually were. The "lady chosen by God" is likely to be a church, not an individual; and Gaiuses in the ancient world were too numerous for us to be able to identify with certainty the specific Gaius John was writing to.



God's heart is to help us—hence this writing of John.

We can be more sure about what John's readers were facing and why they needed his guidance and assurance.

Many had left the church (1 John 2:19). It wasn't a trivial departure; they were not just leaving the congregation but abandoning the truth that the congregation believed, as well as the apostle who had taught them. There were now some who were actively trying to lead the church astray (2:26) and deceive them (2 John 7). No wonder John's readers were feeling so unsettled.

It is clear, as we read through these letters, that the false teachers were in theological error concerning the person and work of Christ (1 John 4:1-3). They denied that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, who had come in the flesh (1 John 2:22-23; 4:1-3; 5:9-10). Related to this was a lack of obedience (2:4) and love (3:14). This seems to be an early expression of a movement that became known as Gnosticism, which (among other things) denied that the Christ could have become fully human. From other early Christian sources, we know of one

particular false teacher at this time called Cerinthus, whose known teachings fit the ones which John is opposing. (For more on this, see Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, p. 20.) We will encounter aspects of this teaching as John interacts with it in the course of 1 John.

In light of this, John's concern is to set out criteria to establish that these false teachers are not in the truth and therefore do not have eternal life, while at the same time assuring his readers that they are and they do. John has three particular tests that he sets out and revisits throughout 1 John, concerning **doctrine**, love, and obedience.

These tests are given to provide assurance, helping us to see the ways we sincerely do believe Jesus, seek to follow his commands, and love his people, albeit imperfectly. They have been a wonderful balm to me.

# 1. THE REAL JESUS

We all enjoy the feeling of knowing something others don't. As I write, a book has recently come out claiming to be an exposé of much of the Christian world. It has been shown to be full of falsehoods and half-truths, but its popularity hasn't waned in the slightest. For many of its fans, more important than being factually accurate is the feeling of knowing what's *really* going on—of being on the inside. It's part of why we're often drawn to conspiracy theories and enjoy hearing about leaks and whistleblowers—they give us access to secret information that we wouldn't otherwise have and that no one else knows. It can make us feel like we've managed to press further in than everyone else. It gives a sense of privilege, of importance. It can be why online disinformation can gain so much traction.

This tendency to want the inside scoop doesn't only make us susceptible to fake news; it can make us equally susceptible to false spirituality. The same dynamic is at work. We are given the opportunity to go further in than everyone else: to gain access to spiritual truth or experiences that others haven't found. We can be the ones in the know, who have the scoop. It feels good.

Which is why John starts his letter in the way he does.

The basis for all that is to come—for all we believe and can know as Christians—is the public, verifiable coming of Christ into this world. John is at pains for us to know that the **revelation**\* of Jesus is readily available to all. His appearing didn't happen in some dark, inaccessible corner and behind closed doors. He came, really and fully, into

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\* Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 137).

the world we all know and live in. His coming was not a matter of innuendo, hints, and half-glimpses. He was there for all to see and hear, and even touch.

Jesus really existed. He really was human. And everyone—not just an elite few—can get in on what he came to accomplish. Jesus is as real as the **sins** he came to save us from. I don't need a theoretical Jesus to help me with my theoretical sin; I need a real Jesus for my real sin. So John's priority is to establish, first, that Jesus really is real (1 John **1:1-4\***), and then that our sin is equally real (1:5 – 2:2).

## The Eternal One

John shows us that Jesus is divine. The figure he describes as walking around, who was seen and heard and even touched, was no less than God himself.

The opening verses show us this in two ways.

Firstly, Jesus is described as being “that which was from the beginning” (**1:1**). The Bible famously opens with the words, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). John wants us to know that Jesus was there at that very beginning. He predates all that was created. He was there before the earth was given shape and substance—before all living things were created. He is, therefore, eternal.

Jesus himself made the very same claim, albeit in a slightly different way. He was being challenged by some of his contemporary Jews, who were accusing him of believing himself to be greater than Abraham, the great father figure of Judaism. John records the exchange that followed:

“[Jesus said] ‘Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.’ ‘You are not yet fifty years old,’ they said to him, ‘and you have seen Abraham!’ ‘Very truly I tell you,’ Jesus answered, ‘before Abraham was

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\* All 1, 2, and 3 John verse references being looked at in each chapter are in **bold**.

born, I am!’ At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the **temple** grounds.”

(John 8:56-59)

Jesus claims here that Abraham was in some way longing for his coming. The Jews balk at the idea that such a great figure from so many centuries ago could have been interested in someone like Jesus. It reminds me of the time Justin Bieber visited the house of the celebrated diarist and Holocaust victim Anne Frank. In the guestbook he wrote about how inspiring it was to be there and added that he hoped she would have been a fan of his music. There was an immediate outcry. It sounded like Justin Bieber was presuming that someone so great and revered from the past would have been into him in some way. It came across as lacking any kind of perspective.

Those hearing Jesus’ words would have felt similarly indignant. How could this young hotshot preacher presume to think that the great Abraham would have been interested in him? But Jesus was on his way to making a far greater claim: “Before Abraham was born, I am!”

Jesus was saying two things here, both outrageous to those listening. One, he was claiming to have somehow been around since before the time of Abraham, itself an astonishing claim. Two, and even more offensively, he was referring to himself as *I am*—the name God gave himself at the time of the **exodus** and by which his people would know him. The magnitude of this claim is seen in how Jesus’ hearers responded: they immediately tried to stone him, which was the punishment for **blasphemy**. Jesus claimed to be ancient and to carry God’s divine name.

## The True Life

There is a second way in which John shows us Jesus’ divinity: the one who appeared and about whom John and his colleagues were preaching is “the life,” and “the eternal life, which was with the Father” (1 John 1:2). This is unambiguous. Jesus can be described not just as

*possessing* or being able to *give* eternal life, but as *being* that life in his very self.

In the Bible, eternal life is not simply a much longer version of the life we know. We do often have a deep sense that life is too short and that there is meant to be more to it than we typically experience. But the life we find embodied by Jesus isn't just an extension of what we already have. It is a different category of life altogether. "Eternal" speaks not just to its *longevity* but also to its *depth*. It is the life we were actually made for, and which can really satisfy.

My housemate has a wonderful golden retriever. It wasn't many months into his puppyhood that he showed us he knew he was a retriever. He *loves* to fetch a ball. Any moment he isn't having a ball thrown for him feels to him like an unfathomable waste of time. This is what he lives for. This is what he *does*.

Most of us have a sense that there is something that's meant to make life feel meaningful. Something that will make us realize that this is what life is for—this is why we're here. Much of life for so many people is spent trying to discover what that something is, and coming to terms with the haunting realization that we can't seem to find it.

Enter the apostle John. He says we *can* know. It *is* possible. But that ultimate, truly meaningful kind of life—the kind we've been sensing we're made for—isn't a cause or religion, or even those nearest and dearest to us (good though all those things might be). It is a *person*: Jesus Christ. He, John says, is eternal life. To find *it*, we must find *him*.

## The One Who Came

Next, John shows us that this divine Jesus has appeared:

"The life appeared; we have seen it and **testify** to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has *appeared* to us." (v 2)

"We proclaim to you *what we have seen and heard*, so that you also may have fellowship with us." (v 3)


John wants us to know that it is not simply the case that there is such a thing as a divine Jesus, and that John and his apostolic colleagues have got the scoop on who he is—that they are the only ones in the know. No. Jesus appeared. John and the rest are simply proclaiming to everyone what they (and many others) saw and experienced.

We live in a world of inner circles and of exclusive forms of access. Virtually any app or loyalty program will have some superior version for those willing to pay more. I might subscribe to a particular podcast, but if I were to pay a certain amount, I'd have access to exclusive content. If I pay *more* than that, I can access special live events for the elite subscribers, and for *even more*, I can meet the hosts at a special gathering for the innermost circle. This is the way the world works.

It's often also how spirituality is said to work. There's the baseline experience that we can all have access to. But then (so it is presented to us) there are special spiritual experiences or fuller knowledge that we can have if we become part of a more exclusive, inner grouping. We rise up through the tiers until we're part of the spiritual elite, privy to things no one else is.

Something like this seems to have been going on in church circles at the time John was writing. This was an early form of a movement that would become known as Gnosticism. *Gnosis* was the Greek term for knowledge, and this movement was based on having access to exclusive spiritual knowledge about God that no one else had. In time (many decades after the time of Jesus) the followers of this movement would have their own scriptures, the Gnostic Gospels, which portray a very different kind of Jesus—far more mystical and capricious than the Jesus we see in the New Testament.

So, at the time of this letter, there were those who were claiming a sort of inside-track Christianity—which only they could know, and which was at odds with true Christianity as it was proclaimed by the



He is eternal life. To find *it*, we must find *him*.

apostles. We'll encounter aspects of this "inside track"—and John's response to it—at various points in this letter. But for now we need to see that John understands the knowledge of Jesus to be *public*. John did not receive a special spiritual download; he saw Jesus and was now simply passing on what Jesus had taught. Everyone can get in on this.

It is hard to overstate how relevant this is to us today. We need to be clear that all of God's people can know him and have access to him. The theologian Alister McGrath raises the key questions:

"Who has authority to speak on behalf of God? Who has the right to claim that he or she has privileged access to the mind and will of God? Who has the prerogative to tell others what God is like and what He wants of His people?"

("A Better Way: The Priesthood of All Believers,"  
in Michael Horton (ed.), *Power Religion*, p. 310)

This is what is at stake as John opens his letter. If anyone claims some sort of special, exclusive insight, we should beware—particularly when their teaching leads away from the true gospel as it is preached in the Bible. Christ has appeared, publicly and openly. No believer has a special "inside track." McGrath concludes:

"God's will for truth and godliness is there for all to read, and God does not whisper secrets into the ear of the minister. Knowledge is not locked up, available only to the spiritual elite who have the key. It is not the restricted privilege of a self-selected group."

This is a not a denial of our need for pastors and teachers in the church (John himself is an example of one!); it is a denial of the idea that God's revelation of his truth is not publicly available. One of the great blessings we all enjoy as Christians is access to God's word. We can read and understand Scripture for ourselves. We can grow in our knowledge and love of Christ. No one need feel left out.



## Questions for reflection

1. Have you ever encountered someone who claimed to have an “inside track” with Jesus? What may have seemed attractive to people about that? Can you sum up why it’s dangerous to claim this?
2. “That ultimate, truly meaningful kind of life—the kind we’ve been sensing we’re made for—isn’t a cause or religion, or even those nearest and dearest to us (good though all those things might be). It is a *person*: Jesus Christ. He, John says, is eternal life. To find *it*, we must find *him*.” How do you respond to this?
3. Why is it helpful to be reminded that Jesus is eternal?