

Chapter Summary: 1 John

The letter known as 1 John was written to a group of believers in crisis. False teachers had begun preaching that Jesus was not the Messiah and claimed their teaching was based on a revelation from the Spirit of God. Many followers of Jesus began believing these teachers, and the community was being torn apart.

In response, John wrote a letter to all of the churches in the community. (As in the Gospel of John, the author doesn't state his name in this letter. But tradition ascribes it to the apostle John, and much evidence in the letter supports it). John urges the remaining believers to stay faithful to what they had "been taught from the beginning." He combats the claims that the false teachers were making, showing how their lives discredited their own message. John reassures the faithful believers: "The Holy One has given you his Spirit, and all of you know the truth."

One thing the false teachers denied was that "Jesus Christ came in a real body." Like many people in the first century who were influenced by Greek philosophy, they thought that spiritual things were good but physical things were bad. They believed that if Jesus had really been the Son of God, He could never have come to earth in a physical body. But John offers eyewitness testimony that Jesus was both genuinely human and the One sent by God into the world. John warns the recipients of his letter to test all those who claim to speak by the Spirit. If they deny these basic truths about Jesus, then they are false prophets and are following the spirit of the antichrist, which John says is already present in the world.

John adds that the people who are leaving the community of faith are also discredited by the way they live. For one thing, they are living impure lives, possibly because they now believe that whatever they do in their physical bodies doesn't affect their spiritual condition. The false teachers and their followers also lacked Christ-like compassion for the poor and suffering. They didn't care about the practical needs of others. The true path had been taught and shown by Jesus. Those who claim to know and love God will obey His commands; they will faithfully live in the light and love of the Messiah's way.

It can be somewhat difficult to track John's pattern of thought in this letter, as he seems to move back and forth between ideas. He sometimes raises a topic briefly, then shifts to another thought, followed by a return to the previous topic. However, both his desire to maintain the integrity of the gospel message and his attentiveness to living in the light permeate the entire letter. He summarizes his entire message at the end of the letter this way: "And we know that the Son of God has come, and He has given us understanding so that we can know the true God. And now we live in fellowship with the true God because we live in fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ."

Near the end of each section, the author describes how people did or did not believe in Jesus after everything they had seen and heard.

A recurring theme in the Gospel of John is the number seven. For Jews, this number indicates a consummate work of God and recalls the completeness represented by the seven days of creation. Often called the "Book of Signs", this first part of the Gospel details how Jesus performed seven mighty "signs" that "revealed His glory." The Gospel also contains seven discourses, which are longer speeches in which Jesus unveils more about who He is. Finally, we find Jesus presenting seven "I am" statements in the Gospel. These statements draw on a rich stock of imagery from the Old Testament, including the bread of life, the good shepherd, the gate, and the vine.

The second part of the book (John 13-20) essentially tells the story of Jesus' final days. It begins with His last Passover meal with the disciples followed by a long presentation of His instructions to them. Jesus speaks of the meaning of His death as a battle against "the ruler of this world." And He prays to the Father for the unity of His followers, which will enable the world to believe their message about Jesus after He departs. Jesus then enters into His "glory" through His obedient death, which is why this part of the Gospel is often called the "Book of Glory."

Before its brief epilogue, the Gospel closes by telling of Jesus' resurrection on Sunday morning, the first day of the week. With Jesus, the life and peace of God's new creation truly has broken into this world.