



UNIT 3 NEW TESTAMENT

LESSON 10

FIRST JOHN

The Epistle is dominated by two great thoughts of God - God is light - (1:5) and God is love (4:8, 16). God is the sun in the spiritual sky, the source of light to the minds and of warmth to the hearts of His children. (R.J. Drummond and L. Morris)

Whilst the first Letter of John is entitled a letter, characteristics of normal letters such as an opening address and closing greetings are absent from this work - yet it is extremely personal in character. First John is more like a tract or homily addressed to a particular situation.

Relationship To John's Gospel, Author etc

The Epistles which bear the name of John are anonymous. The first Epistle has neither address nor signature. But there are such close affinities with the fourth Gospel in style and subject matter that most scholars agree that all four writings are from the same hand.

There are differences between John and 1 John, yet most scholars explain these as the difference of audience and purpose, John being essentially a profound study of the incarnation of Christ addressed to the outside world, where as 1 John is a tract called forth by a particular situation in the Church.

Dr Ramsay once said, "No two works in the whole range of literature show clearer signs of the genius of one writer".

Some of the more notable extended parallels in language are found in the following comparisons between the Gospel of John and 1 John:

1 John 1:2,3	John 3:11	1 John 3:16	John 10:15
1 John 1:4	John 16:24	1 John 3:22	John 8:29
1 John 2:11	John 12:35	1 John 3:23	John 13:34
1 John 2:14	John 5:38	1 John 4:6	John 8:47
1 John 3:5	John 8:46	1 John 5:9	John 5:32
1 John 3:8	John 8:14	1 John 5:20	John 17:3
1 John 3:13	John 15:18	1 John 4:15	John 6:69
1 John 3:14	John 5:24		

If the Gospel and the Epistle were written by the same author, who was he? Most scholars agree he is John, the closest of all the apostles to Jesus, the son of Zebedee.



Occasion and Purpose

It is important, in grasping the purpose of I John, to understand something of the background of thought to which it belonged.

John was writing to correct a subtle and dangerous idea that the spiritual is always good and the material always evil. Such a philosophy is what we call "dualism".

In the days when this letter was written, those who held such views often prided themselves on their special knowledge. It was they who 'knew' because they were essentially spiritual in nature, while the rank and file of people were doomed to be materially minded and ignorant of the truth.

Among such people who troubled the Early Church were the so-called "Docetists", a word which means "Seemists". These Docetists taught that Jesus could not have been the spiritual son of God and have had a real human body at the same time, since the body was material, and hence evil. He must have only "seemed" to be in a body. They also taught that moral distinctions between good and bad did not really make any difference; they only seemed to.

The trouble which 1 John seeks to combat did not come from men who were out to destroy the Christian faith; it came from men who thought they were improving the Christian faith.

John's method of confuting these errors is largely through the presentation of the truth. In other words, he spends little time in denouncing the wrong but conserves most of his writing for a positive presentation of the right.

Message

Against the above heresies, 1 John insists that the apostles did not preach an intangible, unreal Jesus, but One whom they had seen with their own eyes (1:1-3). They did not teach a God who was withdrawn and known only to a select few, but One whose very nature was light (1:5). This God was, as revealed in Christ, the very source of life itself (5:11, 12). His inner nature is love, and the very fact that He loves is both the source and dynamic of our love to one another (4:8, 16, 19). Jesus Christ did not 'seem' to die; His death was effective in the washing away of our sins so that we might have true life (2:2).

Jesus Christ was sinless, and therefore it is His will that we shall turn away from sin; it is not a matter of indifference whether we sin or not (2:29). He gave His life because of the love of God for all people, and this is enough to make it necessary that we, too, should love all people (3:16).

The Christian must distinguish between love of the world and love of God and His will, for love and goodness are ever interrelated (2:15-17). Christian love is active helpfulness meeting genuine human need (3:16-18).



Plan

The following is one attempt at analysis:

1. The Prologue: The Word We have Seen 1:1-4
2. The Theme of the Letter: God is Light 1:5-2:29
The Theme Stated: God is Light 1:5
God is Light: Tested by a Righteous Walk in Light 1:6-2:6
God is Light: Tested by the Life of Love 2:7-17
God is Light: Tested by True Belief 2:18-29
3. The Theme Developed: What it Means to be Children of God 3:1-4:6
The Theme Restated: what it Means to be Children of God 3:1, 2
Being Children of God means Living in God's Purity 3:3-10
Being Children of God means Living in Love 3:11-24
Being Children of God means Distinguishing Truth from Error 4:1-6
4. The Unifying Summary: God is Love 4:7-21
5. The Relation of Love and Faith 5:1-12
6. The True Knowledge 5:13-21

(J P Love)

SECOND JOHN

This letter, like 3 John, is so brief that it could have been contained on a single papyrus sheet. Yet both letters have been preserved for their importance for the Christian Church. They make a contribution to our knowledge of contemporary affairs, even if it is not more than a glimpse that is given.

2 John is addressed from 'the elder' to 'the elect lady and her children'. This is in all likelihood a symbolic manner of addressing a church (cf. 1 Peter 5:13), perhaps intending to baffle any hostile people into whose hands the letter might fall (1-3).



The occasion of this letter is similar to that of 1 John (cf. 2 John 7 with 1 John 4:3); false teachers were travelling from church to church and denying that the Son of God had really been incarnate.

The elder issues a warning against such teaching; those who 'go on' to accept this new and higher teaching are abandoning their faith in God, the Father of Jesus Christ. He cautions his friends not to extend hospitality to false teachers, and he encourages them to follow after the truth which already abides in them and to fulfil the command of love (4-11). Finally, he expresses the hope of seeing them soon and adds greetings from his own church (12f.).

THIRD JOHN

3 John is a private letter (like Philemon) addressed to the elder's friend Gaius, who was a leading member in another Church. He is commended for his attachment to the truth and for showing practical love to travelling preachers who depended on the churches for their keep (1-8). His attitude is the reverse of that of Diotrephes, who was seeking to be the leader in his church, and resisting the advice of John.

It is likely that we see here the difficulties caused by the development of a local church leadership alongside the existence of the apostolic overseers and travelling preachers, and that Diotrephes was aspiring to the position of 'bishop' in his own Church and resented any interference from outside. Such difficulties were no doubt bound to arise as the apostles passed on, but it is clear that Diotrephes was not handling matters in a Christian manner. The elder warns that he will come and deal personally with Diotrephes if necessary (9-11). Finally a word of commendation is added for Demetrius (the bearer of the letter, or a travelling teacher?), and the letter concludes with warm greetings (12-14).

JUDE

This little fiery tract against certain 'Libertines' is largely unknown and seldom read.

In style it is original and picturesque. In tone it is intense, vehement, and denunciatory. It abounds in strange allusions, Jewish teachings and apocryphal incidents. It cites a Jewish apocryphal work, the book of Enoch.

Occasion, Purpose and Message

The Epistle itself indicates that it was written by 'Jude', a servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James. This generally is considered to be an indication that not the Apostle Jude, but Jude the Lord's brother (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3) was the author.

The recipients of the Letter may have belonged to a single church, or small association of churches, for whom the writer had some kind of immediate pastoral responsibility.



It had been Jude's intention to write a treatise on the faith which all Christians share; but that task had to be laid aside in view of the rise of false teachers whose conduct and whose thought was a threat and a menace to the Christian Church (v3). In view of this situation the need was not so much to expound the faith as to rally Christians in defence of the faith. Lying behind the immoral practices of these false teachers was a fundamental error concerning the Christian doctrine of grace. They were essentially 'libertines' who disregarded the restraints of God's grace (v4) and considered the immoral indulgence was perfectly legitimate (cf. Galatians 5:13; Romans 3:5-8; 6:1ff.). Their moral unworthiness seems to have been of such a character that Jude is deeply shocked by it (cf. vs. 4, 7, 8, 10, 16, 18, 23). Jude thus felt it to be immediately necessary to warn his people against such hypocrites.

The imagery under which he attacks the false leaders in the Church is gruesome at times, but it has an originality and fire and finality about it that makes it ever memorable. At the close (v. 17ff.) he suddenly seems to realise the need for being positive in his approach to his readers and gives a series of exhortations which were clearly intended to offset the evil effects of the false teachers. Indeed, even these exhortations finish with a direct challenge to them to rescue any who are not yet in the grip of the evil, like brands snatched from the fire (v.23).

Plan

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| 1. | Salutation | v1, 2 |
| 2. | Jude's purpose in writing | v.3, 4 |
| 3. | False teachers denounced and their doom foretold | v.5-16 |
| 4. | Exhortation to Christians | v.17-23 |
| 5. | Doxology | v.24, 25 |

REVELATION

"The Gospels tell how in the fullness of time Jesus brought God's promised salvation to men. The book of Acts relates how the Apostles brought the good news of it from Jerusalem to Rome. The Epistles apply its truth to the multifarious problems of everyday life in the world. But there is one note in the 'new song' of salvation still to be heard in its fullness, and Revelation supplies it. For the final note is from the trumpets of Heaven, and the New Testament ends with a 'Hallelujah Chorus' - with the sound of the great multitude of the redeemed singing their songs of redemption in the presence of God and the Lamb."

There is no doubt that the Revelation of St. John is the most misunderstood of all the books of the New Testament. This is because the book abounds in symbolism of a type we do not use. Yet this kind of imagery was well understood by the people of the day and therefore the author did not need to make explanations.



Author

The author tells us that his name was John, and he describes himself as God's servant (1:0, as one of the 'prophets' (22:9) and as 'your brother and companion in tribulation' (1:9). Tradition has affirmed this John to be identical with John the Apostle, the author of the Fourth Gospel and 1, 2 and 3 John.

Occasion and Date

Most writers today support the earliest Christian tradition that Revelation was written towards the close of Domitian's reign, i.e. about AD 95, 96.

The book reflects the beginnings of a storm of persecution soon to burst in full fury on the Christians in Asia, and ultimately on the Church everywhere. John had been 'banished', a very common form of persecution during Domitian's reign; the Church had already endured persecutions in the past (20:4); and the Roman Empire, as such, had become the great antagonist of the Church (17:9). Believers were being severely and bitterly persecuted. Their blood was being shed (6:10; 7:14; 19:2). Some were about to be imprisoned (2:10). They were suffering from hunger, thirst or famine (6:8; 7:16). Some had been cast before the wild beasts (6:8). Many had been beheaded (20:4). The Roman Government encouraged persecution; its Emperor-worship inspired false religion; its capital was the centre of lust (13:7, 15; 17:18). False teachers and sects were troubling the Churches (2:2, 13, 20, 24). The conditions described in Revelation are in accord with the circumstances of the Christian Churches in Asia in the last decade of the first century.

Purpose

The book of Revelation is an answer to the crying needs of persecuted Christians in the first century. John wrote as a pastor with a very practical purpose - to fortify his fellow Christians to stand fast in the face of this threat, assured that God would deliver and vindicate his saints.

John desired to comfort the Church in its struggle against the forces of evil. Revelation is full of help and comfort for persecuted and suffering Christians. To them is given the assurance that God sees their tears (7:17; 21:40); their prayers are influential (8:3, 4) and their death is precious in His sight. Their final victory is assured (15:2); their blood will be avenged (19:2); and their Christ lives and reigns forever. He governs the world in the interest of His church (5:7, 8). He is coming again to take His people to Himself in 'the marriage supper of the Lamb' and to live with them forever in a rejuvenated universe (21:22). But as these truths are considered, there is too, the realisation that the Son is already in the midst, in the Spirit (1:12-20).

The real Author of the book was not John but God. This book spans the entire church age and is intended for us as well as believers in the first century AD. But it was occasioned by the need and suffering of Christians in the first century AD.

It would seem, therefore, that in the book as a whole the writer thinks primarily of the immediate needs of his Asiatic churches, but that he foresees that the message of Christian triumph over the adverse forces of evil would have a much wider relevance.



Interpretation

Several important principles of interpretation (principles that are equally important for interpreting any book of the Holy Scriptures) if kept in mind in approaching Revelation, will help save the book from being used merely to justify a variety of peculiar doctrines.

- a) The literary class to which Revelation belongs;

Revelation belongs to the class of literature known as apocalyptic. There is one book in each Testament to which the Greek name "apocalypse" (unveiling) is given, Daniel in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New Testament. Jews and Jewish Christians were fond of this type of book and produced many, especially in the period 100 BC to 100 AD. Revelation therefore is almost unique in the New Testament, although there are apocalyptic elements in the Gospels (Matthew 24:25; Mark 13). When it was felt that they might throw some light on the Christian book, the Jewish apocalypses began to be studied rather exhaustively in modern times, and it is found that they were written in periods of stress to encourage readers to persevere in faith and good works. They often warn that further tribulation is yet to come, after which the patience of the saints will be rewarded by their receiving the Kingdom of God.

Characteristic of this type of literature is the thought that God is Sovereign, and that ultimately He will intervene in catastrophic fashion to bring to pass His good and perfect will.

There are two reasons why this type of literature is used:

- (i) These books attempt to utter the unutterable - to peer into the future and the unseen world, and it is only in the language of symbol that man can do that.
 - (ii) They carry a dangerous message. The writer dare not deal in plain speech; he must resort to symbols, trusting that his readers will be able to understand.
- b) The second accepted principle of interpretation is the recognition first and foremost, the book was written to meet a need in its own day. We must ask, "what did this mean to the original readers?"

Once we have grasped something of the message of Revelation for its first readers we shall then be ready to ask what is its message for us today?

- c) Finally, one should always bear in mind that it is wise to proceed from the clearer passages of Scripture to the more obscure and never vice versa. obvious as this principle should be - all too often it is ignored and relatively obscure books such as Revelation and Daniel become the starting point. Once the reader has poured into these books his own meaning, the clearer teaching passages of Scripture are distorted to suit interpretations he has brought to, not derived from, the Scriptures.



Message

The dominant note throughout the entire book is the certain victory of Christ and his oppressed people, stated in the words: "They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb shall conquer them, for He is Lord of Lords and King of Kings, and they also shall conquer that are with Him, called and chosen and faithful" (17:14). It is a book of encouragement and exhortation.

Plan

There would seem little point in providing an outline of the book as there are as many outlines as there are commentators on the book of Revelation.

Question 1

What are the similarities between these verses in the Gospel of John and 1 John?

1 John 1:4	John 16:24
1 John 2:11	John 12:35
1 John 3:5	John 8:46
1 John 3:13	John 15:18
1 John 5:20	John 17:3

Question 2

What does "docetism" mean? Why could this be a problem for Christians for both their beliefs and their actions?

Question 3

In "Jude", what did the 'Libertines' do that was wrong? How did they excuse their bad behaviour? What do these verses have to say about it? Galatians 5:13; Romans 3:5-8.; 6:1M Jude v4, 7, 8, 10, 16, 18, 23.

Question 4

What comfort did John offer in Revelation?

Question 5

What is Apocalyptic Writing and why was it used in Revelation?

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY

What comfort does John give in Revelation 1:12-20; 7:17; 21:4; 8:34; 15:2? Why can we claim these as comfort in our day? Which one is most comforting to you?