



# 1, 2, & 3 JOHN

## Apostle of Love

*Memory Verse*

**“God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God,  
and God abides in him.”**

1 JOHN 4:16B

**M**et John. Through the pages of this book, you will encounter the writing of sixteen friends of God, eleven prophets and five apostles. Of these, the one closest to the heart of Christ was John, under whose name the New Testament presents some of its most sublime writings—a Gospel, three letters and the Book of Revelation.

The First Letter of John begins in the first person plural, “we,” but the author is clearly one person. The letter never names its own author, but it belongs to the same world of thought and expression as the Gospel. These works display an insight into the Person and Mind of Christ that only the closest of friends could know.

Many scholars have speculated that the beloved apostle is not the same person as the Evangelist, or that the Evangelist is not the same person as the author of the letter. Such speculation may have had some justification when it was believed that the Johannine writings could be dated as much as 150 years after the death of Christ. However, discovery in Egypt of a papyrus datable to 125 AD containing a fragment of the Gospel has squashed the late composition theory, and pulled the rug out from under the hypothesis that a later Gentile wrote the works ascribed to John.

Therefore, we do not need to apologize for adhering to the ancient tradition that the author of this letter is none other than Yohannan ben-Zebedee (John, the son of Zebedee), the youngest of the apostles, who was called from his father’s fishing boat at a very tender age to witness the greatest Life of all time and of eternity.

In Hebrew, the original name reads *Yo-Hannan*. The first element of the name, *Yo* is an abbreviation of the Divine Name, the so-called Tetragrammaton, which contains the four consonants YHWH. This element appears in many Hebrew names and words, sometimes at the beginning as here, and sometimes at the end, as in *Hallelu-Yah* (“Praise the LORD”). Another person appears in the pages of the Bible with a variation on this name, with the elements reversed; that person is Hananiah (Daniel 1:7), or *Hannan-Ya*. This means the same thing as *Yo-Hannan*, but with the two parts of it switched.

The name *Yo-Hannan* or *Hannan-Ya* means, “The Lord loves,” or “The Lord is love.” Thus the theme “God is love,” found in both the Gospel of St. John and the First Letter of John, is a kind of midrashic expansion or commentary upon the human author’s name. Also, when the author of the Gospel calls himself “the beloved apostle,” this is coded language signifying John, whose name means love.



**What is an apostle?** The very first paragraph of 1 John gives an excellent description of what constitutes an apostle of the Lord: *someone who has heard, has seen with his own eyes, has looked upon and touched with his own hands the Word of Life*, and then goes on to testify and proclaim this to us, so that we may have fellowship with him. There are two aspects to this definition of apostleship: first the eye-witness experience, and second the giving of testimony. The eye-witness experience looks back to Christ's appearance in history, while the testimony looks forward to present and future generations and ultimately to the second coming of Christ at the end of history.

The whole Church through all time depends upon the testimony of those who knew the Lord Jesus in person, who heard Him preach, who saw Him work miracles, and above all saw Him crucified and risen. *Only one person meets every one of those characteristics perfectly, and that is John, because he was the only apostle who followed Jesus to the foot of the Cross and watched the Passion transpire before his very eyes.* Paul was an apostle only in an extended sense, because he meets none of the criteria here in a perfect way; Paul was an apostle the way bishops today are apostles, by succession to the apostles. Paul and bishops today testify not to what they personally have seen, but to what the apostles before them saw. There is a succession of testimony, but there was only one generation that was privileged to have the eye-witness experience. All succeeding generations are dependent upon them. That is why we affirm in the Nicene Creed that we believe in "One, holy, catholic and apostolic Church." Any church which proclaims a testimony other than the one proclaimed by the first apostles could not be the same church founded upon the apostles.

While bishops today do not have a personal experience of the historical Christ, they need to base their testimony, as St. Paul did, upon their own spiritual experience of the living Christ. Their personal experience cannot rise to the same level as the eye-witness experience of John and the others, but it can and must form the basis of their faith and their zealous witness to the reality of Jesus Christ yesterday, today and forever.

**The Goodness of God** ~ An important theme of the Johannine writings is the absolute goodness of God. John writes in this letter, "God is light and in Him there is no darkness" (1 John 1:5). With this statement, John condemns the errors of Manichaeism, a popular religious movement originating in Persia. The pre-Zoroastrian Persians believed in two gods, a god of goodness and a god of evil. The two gods were supposedly in combat with each other, and human beings were caught in the middle between them. The Manichaeans saw a world of light and darkness, both of which had absolute and divine qualities. While John draws upon the images of light and darkness, he takes care to dissociate himself from the theological errors of those who viewed darkness as a quality of the divine. For John, darkness is not the equal of light but only the absence of light.

John teaches clearly that God is all-good. No distinction exists between the goodness and the power of God. *Everything God does is motivated by pure love.* The divine positive will commands only good things; the divine permissive will allows evil to exist for some purpose not fully known to us, such as human freedom. The power of God can bring good out of evil, and thus can make all things work for the good. The mere existence of evil is no obstacle to our faith in the absolute goodness of God. John experienced this absolute goodness in the Person of Jesus Christ, and while he had seen the greatest evil of all time take place before his very eyes in the crucifixion of Jesus, this was no stumbling-block but indeed a proof for his affirmation of the ultimate goodness of God.

**The Commandment of Love—Old or New?** John starts out saying in verse 7 that he is



not writing a new commandment, but an old one. Then in verse 8 he reverses himself and says that the commandment really is new. Which is it, then, old or new? The rhetorical technique at work here is a figure of speech called “self-correction.” A writer may make a simple statement that looks true at first glance, and tricks us into agreeing with the platitude, but then he shows us that we were not looking deep enough and that the reality is different and maybe even the reverse of what we had taken for granted. Shakespeare gives an example of this in *Julius Caesar*. Marc Antony’s “I have come not to praise Caesar but to bury him,” actually ends up in praising Caesar after all.

The commandment of love is not entirely new, because several versions of it are found in the Old Testament. Jesus affirms that the greatest commandment of the law is the love of God, and the second-greatest commandment of the law is the love of neighbor. He even says that the whole law and the prophets are based upon these two commandments. At the Last Supper, however, He elevates this commandment above and beyond the whole of the old law, and says “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Jesus does not use the adjective “new” to describe the commandment on that occasion, but John, who reports Jesus’ words to us in his account, attaches the term “new” here in his first letter. The commandment of love has a new rationale that it did not have before. The love of Jesus for us becomes the positive paradigm for our behavior towards one another.

John uses Cain as the negative paradigm: “We should love one another, and not be like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother” (1 John 3:11-12). As Jesus shows us how we *should* behave towards one another, Cain shows us how *not* to behave. (If John were not Jewish, why is he using an example from the Jewish scriptures? If he were Greek, wouldn’t he use an example from pagan mythology instead? This Old Testament reference supports Jewish authorship.)

Note that the commandment of love is fully in accord with the Johannine teaching of God’s absolute goodness. The commandment uses God’s love as the basis for our behavior. If we believed in a god who was both good and evil, we would be split into two personalities, a good one and a bad one, just as our god was. Since we believe, however, in a God who is nothing but good, and has demonstrated this goodness to us in creating us and then redeeming us, we now are challenged to accord our behavior with His.

***The First Letter of John contains eight or more rephrasings of this new commandment:***

- he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked (1 John 2:6)
- he who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still (1 John 2:9)
- he who loves his brother abides in the light (1 John 2:10)
- he who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in darkness (1 John 2:11)
- we should love one another and not be like Cain (1 John 3:11-12)
- love one another, just as he has commanded us (1 John 3:23)



- let us love one another; for love is of God (1 John 4:7)
- he who loves God should love his brother also (1 John 4:21)

We could read this letter and wonder why John keeps repeating himself. If this new law is to be the be-all and end-all of our religion, though, it is important for us to cast this commandment in iron and admit of no loopholes. By paraphrasing and rephrasing the commandment, John gives the legalistically minded among us no means to slip past the commandment. John states the commandment positively several ways, and he states the commandment negatively a couple of ways, like the flip side of the coin. By the time he is finished, we have no wiggle-room left. We must love one another, period.

**The Three Witnesses** ~ John writes that there are three witnesses—the Spirit, the water and the blood (1 John 5:8). Now Jewish law required only two witnesses, but John combines in this statement two different events told of in his Gospel.

On each occasion, the baptism and death of Jesus, there were two witnesses:  
—at the baptism in the Jordan, there were two witnesses,  
the Spirit (in the form of a dove) and the water;  
— after the death of Jesus on the Cross, there were two witnesses,  
the blood and the water that flowed from His side.

One event occurred at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry and the other at the end. The common witness to both events is the water, but it is joined by the Spirit in the case of the baptism and the blood in the case of the crucifixion. Assembling the complete testimony for Christ’s ministry upon the earth, the three witnesses agree with each other. John saw all three, the Spirit, the water and the blood, and he reports to us what he has seen. The case is proven to the satisfaction of the jury: Jesus Christ is the Word of Life incarnate. The apostolic witness is about Jesus Christ, God and Man.

Eternal life is the life of God himself and at the same time the *life of the children of God*. As they ponder this unexpected and inexpressible truth which comes from God in Christ, believers cannot fail to be filled with ever new wonder and unbounded gratitude. They can say in the words of the Apostle John: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are . . . Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:1-2).

*Here the Christian truth about life becomes most sublime.* The dignity of this life is linked not only to its beginning, to the fact that it comes from God, but also to its final end, to its destiny of fellowship with God in knowledge and love of him. In the light of this truth St. Irenaeus qualifies and completes his praise of man: “the glory of God” is indeed, “man, living man,” but “the life of man consists in the vision of God.



Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, (March 25, 1995), no. 38:1-2.

1. List the people and events from the following passages. Circle the one apostle present in all.

***PEOPLE***

***EVENT***

Matthew 4:18-22

Matthew 10:1-4

Mark 14:32-33

Luke 9:28-30

John 19:25-27

Acts 1:13

2. Use the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to define and explain the role of an “apostle.”  
*CCC 858, 860* and *Glossary*.

3. Read the three short letters, 1, 2 and 3 John in one sitting and then go back and count the number of times you find the word “love” and “truth.”

LOVE \_\_\_\_\_ times

TRUTH \_\_\_\_\_ times

4. Why was the First Letter of John written? 1 John 1:1-4

5. What would you say to someone who suggests there may be a “dark side” of God?  
1 John 1:5



6. How does a sinner get forgiveness for sins? 1 John 1:6-10

7. What would you offer to a good person, who isn't aware of any personal sin? 1 John 1:8

8. How can you perfect your love for God? 1 John 2:4-6

9. Compare the following passages.

John 13:34-35

1 John 2:7-11

Matthew 5:23-24

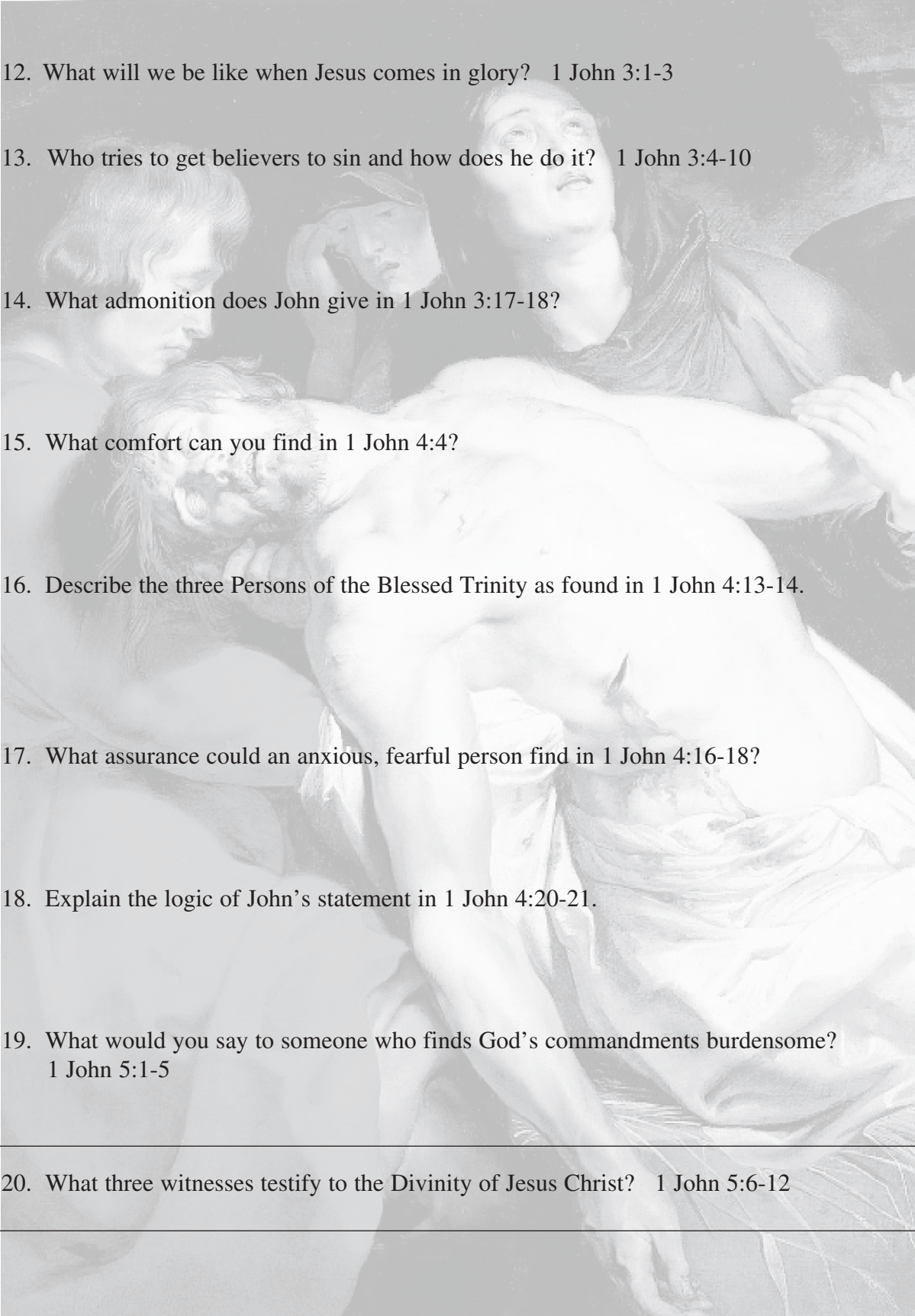
1 John 3:23-24

1 John 4:7-8

10. What does John say about "the world," our response to it and its duration? 1 John 2:15-17, 1 John 5:19

11. Who is the "antichrist?" 1 John 2:22-23



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12. What will we be like when Jesus comes in glory? 1 John 3:1-3
  13. Who tries to get believers to sin and how does he do it? 1 John 3:4-10
  14. What admonition does John give in 1 John 3:17-18?
  15. What comfort can you find in 1 John 4:4?
  16. Describe the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity as found in 1 John 4:13-14.
  17. What assurance could an anxious, fearful person find in 1 John 4:16-18?
  18. Explain the logic of John's statement in 1 John 4:20-21.
  19. What would you say to someone who finds God's commandments burdensome?  
1 John 5:1-5
  20. What three witnesses testify to the Divinity of Jesus Christ? 1 John 5:6-12



21. What did Jesus come to give us?

John 3:16

John 10:10

1 John 5:11-12

22. What commandment is restated in 2 John 5-6?

23. What brings joy to the apostle John? 3 John 4

24. Explain the truism found in 3 John 11.

25. Share a specific time in your life when you were in need (it could have been a small thing) and someone in the body of Christ met your need and demonstrated Christ-like love.