

# THE EPISTLES OF JOHN

## *Assurance and Evidence of Eternal Life*

**AUTHOR:** Merrill Tenney observes: "If the criteria of vocabulary and style are ever adequate for pronouncing judgment on authorship, these three short letters must be attributed to one author who is also the author of the Fourth Gospel. All four of these writings were probably produced about the same time and at the same place." Although none of these three short letters attributed to John actually bear his name, the similarities within all the writings and a strong early church tradition identifies the author as the Apostle John, "whom Jesus loved." The strongest evidence is for John the Apostle as the author of all three letters, the Gospel of John, and Revelation. He was the son of Zebedee. Some scholars argue for another John (the elder or presbyter). Every piece of evidence points to John the elder being the same person as John the apostle and author of this letter.

**DATE:** All three were written about A.D. 85, or late 80 s 'and early 90 s.' These letters were probably written after the Gospel of John and before the persecution under Domitian in A.D. 95.

**PLACE OF WRITING:** Probably from Ephesus because there is a strong tradition that John spent his old age in Ephesus. He had been exiled not far away on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9).

The first epistle opens by summarizing the Fourth Gospel (I John 1:1; cf. John 21:31). The stated purpose of the First Epistle is found in 5:13, and carries the reader one step beyond the Gospel. "The Gospel was written to arouse faith; the First Epistle was written to establish certainty," observes Tenney.

E. J. Goodspeed suggests the Second and Third Epistles may have been written as "covering letters," one to the church, addressed under the figure of the "elect lady" (II Jn. 1), and the other to Gaius, the pastor (III Jn. 1). They were intended to be private notes of counsel and greeting, whereas the main body of teaching was contained in the Gospel and in the First Epistle.

## FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

**RECIPIENTS:** The lack of personal references in this letter indicates that it was written in sermonic style to Christians all over Asia Minor. It was probably a circular letter, much like Ephesians.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this letter was to tell believers how they might know they have eternal life. This epistle deals with the same heresy that Paul confronted in his Epistle to the Colossians: Gnosticism. (See the handout on [Gnosticism: The Colossian Heresy](#)). The readers were preoccupied with a secret "knowledge" which is evident by how many times John uses the word "know" in this letter. He writes to strengthen their faith and fellowship and warn them about the false teachers with their "secret" knowledge.

**KEY VERSE:** I John 5:13

**KEY WORDS:** know, believe, life, light, love, and fellowship. Study the opposites in this letter (cf. "light" and "darkness," "life" and "death," "truth" and "lying," etc.). These same themes are developed in the Gospel of John.

The English does not bring out the differences in the tenses in the Greek verbs in I John 1:8, 10 and 3:9. The original brings out the fact that the born again believer does not sin habitually, though he may commit individual sins. He does not continually live in sin.

## SECOND EPISTLE OF JOHN

**PURPOSE:** The second epistle is a personal letter from the Apostle to the "elect lady." Much discussion has been around who this "lady" is. Should this salutation be translated "the lady Electra and her children," "the elect Cyria and her children," or "the elect lady and her children"? Is the word "lady" used figuratively for a church or an individual Christian friend? If it is figurative then the "chosen sister" in v. 13 would mean a different church, other wise, the "sister"

would be a natural sister. I think the best approach is to consider the letter as addressed to a Christian woman who was a friend of the Apostle. Did John write other letters that we do not have (cf. I Jn. 2:14; III Jn. 9)? II John is just long enough to be accommodated on a standard sized sheet of papyrus (10" x 8"), conforming to the pattern of letters in the first century.

**OCCASION:** John sends this postcard to the "elect lady" to correct a situation that had developed from the normal practice of showing hospitality to itinerant teachers and preachers. It was common practice for people to open their homes to those in the ministry. Jesus was a frequent guest in the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany. Some Christians were inadvertently providing this type of support to the false teachers. Loving believers (II Jn. 5-6) must not be construed as the encouragement of false doctrine.

**THEME:** Practice the truth and have nothing to do with false teachers.

**KEY VERSE:** v. 9

**KEY WORD:** truth

## THE THIRD EPISTLE OF JOHN

**RECIPIENT:** The letter is addressed to Gaius which is a very common Greek name. He is described as a "dear friend" who was loved by the aged apostle (vv. 1, 2, 5, 11). Perhaps Gaius had been a dear loyal friend of John's for a long time.

**PURPOSE:** Gaius, a Christian friend, had contributed to the missionaries who had desired to visit his church. One Diotrephes, the self-assertive church boss had an anti-missionary spirit, and influenced the church not to receive missionaries. Diotrephes had succeeded in having Gaius excommunicated from the membership. John condemns Diotrephes and commends Gaius for his faithfulness. Demetrius may have been a traveling teacher and probably delivered the letter to Gaius. There are words of praise to Gaius for his hospitality for missionaries, and condemnation for Diotrephes.

**THEME:** A healthy believer will follow the truth, help others and do good.

**KEY VERSE:** v. 4

**KEY WORDS:** truth, walk, good, evil

**STYLE:** This letter is a very personal letter.

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