

# 1 JOHN: Gospel freedom

*In John's day there were people who said that Jesus was not both God and man. The same is true today. John's letter wants to get us straight on the basics, so that we can be sure.*

## What you should feel

### Read 1 John 1:1-4

- ❓ *John's opening words seem a little cryptic. What is he saying, do you think?*
- ❓ *Why might he need to emphasise this?*
- ❓ *What should we feel at the end of reading this letter (v 4)?*

Today people are more likely to say that Jesus was really just a man who taught us about God or gave us some insight into God. In John's day, it seems to have been the opposite. The Greek world thought flesh was dirty or corrupt, and so they could not get their heads around the idea that Jesus was God *incarnate*. John tells them in plain language, *We saw him, heard him, touched him*. Jesus, the Word of life, who lived with the Father, appeared in human flesh. Grasping this truth is vital because it is intimately connected to experiencing the truth of the gospel—to enjoying fellowship with God and being joined to his people. It's only when we embrace this truth that our joy will be complete (v 4): full and never-ending.

## Apply

False teaching will often come down to this: Jesus was not both fully God and fully man. Ask a Jehovah's Witness or a Mormon, (and sadly, many members and leaders in mainline churches) and you will discover that this life-draining, Bible-denying, joy-sapping heresy is alive and well in our

generation. We must be aware of it and sure of our ground to oppose it and to defend the truth; because only the truth about Christ can bring real life to people.

- ❓ *Which are you most likely to tip over into: forgetting that Jesus is really God or forgetting that he is really man?*

## A message that matters

### Read 1 John 1:5-7

- ❓ *What lie is John talking about here? Why is this lie an attractive one to believe?*
- ❓ *What is the test for whether our walk with Christ is genuine or not? What do you think this means?*
- ❓ *What benefits do we experience when we walk in the light (v 7)?*

Light and darkness simply do not mix. So don't think you can know God and continue to live your way. How can you expect to be friends with God and rebel against him at the same time?! Notice that this is the message of Jesus himself (v 5); how we live really matters and is the test of whether or not our faith is genuine. Living in the light is striving to be holy as we please God—and as we do so, we can be confident of forgiveness through Jesus and enjoy a genuine connection with his family.

## Pray

Thank God for the gospel of light; and pray you would make a genuine response to it.



# Freely forgiven

*John is addressing two opposite errors: first, that you can know God and still walk in darkness; second, that you do not sin and therefore do not need God's forgiveness.*

Both of these views are alive and well today.

- ❓ *Have you heard or seen these two views expressed? What form did they take?*
- ❓ *Which of these two false views are you most prone to believing (and living)?*

## Self deceit

### Read 1 John 1:8-10

These are glorious verses, often used in church liturgies before a prayer of confession. Let's think carefully about them.

- ❓ *How easy is it, do you think, to deceive ourselves about just how sinful we are?*
- ❓ *Why would we think that way?*
- ❓ *What is the first step in the remedy for this false thinking?*

It might be our pride, a sense of our own guilt, or the result of comparing ourselves with others who we think we are “better” than. Whatever the cause, claiming to be without sin is self-deceit and a denial of the gospel truth about ourselves. *You and I are sinners.* And the first step towards finding forgiveness is to recognise that—to confess our sins, not just in a general sense but in specific detail (v 9).

## Wonderful grace

### Re-read 1 John 1:8-10

- ❓ *Why does John also say that God is just, do you think?*

- ❓ *What two things does God offer to those who come to him knowing that they are unworthy sinners deserving of judgment?*

God is faithful (v 9) to his promises and to his wayward people. But perhaps supremely, he is faithful to the willing sacrifice of his Son, the Lord Jesus. At the cross, both justice and mercy were satisfied. Not only does God's grace forgive us, but it works in us to “purify us from all sin”—the lifelong process of walking away from sin towards a life of righteous holiness.

## Undeniable realities

- ❓ *What conclusion do these verses tell us we should draw if someone denies the reality of sin?*

## Apply

People tend to hate the idea of sin! It is seen as old-fashioned, repressive, guilt-inducing, and destructive—especially if we dare say that children are sinners! And yet these claims fly in the face of God's word, our own experience and common sense. God does not lie about this painful truth because he loves us and wants us to know the joy and freedom that forgiveness brings.

- ❓ *What will it mean for you to take these verses seriously in your view of your own life, your prayers to God, and your words to others?*

# Free to sin?

*John uses the language of opposites to press his point home—light and darkness, truth and lies, love and hate—but his purpose is to help us see the issues at stake.*

## What grace has done

### Read 1 John 2:1-6

- ❓ *Do you think it is possible not to sin and to “live as Jesus did” (v 1, 6)?*
- ❓ *What two wonderful truths about Jesus does John lay out for us in verses 1-2?*
- ❓ *Why do we need both?*

John is aiming these words at two different sorts of people: *the complacent*, who think that because God forgives them, it doesn't matter how they live; and *the fearful*, who think that because they sin, they cannot truly know God. John's concern is to reassure the fearful without making the complacent more complacent; and to challenge the complacent without making the fearful even less assured. The answer for both is to understand the work of Jesus, both on the cross *then* and in heaven *now*.

First, Jesus was an atoning sacrifice *then* on the cross. Literally, Jesus is the “propitiation for our sins”—his death satisfies and turns away God's wrath from us.

Second, Jesus is also an advocate for us *now*. Imagine you're standing before a king, trying to explain your rebellion against him—and then the king's own son steps forward and speaks on your behalf. Or imagine a law court in which you're in the dock, and there's no doubt you're guilty—but then your lawyer plays his trump card: an argument no one can refute. He has already paid

the penalty for your crime in full. Jesus is that advocate for us before the Father now.

## Responding to grace

### Re-read 1 John 2:1-6

- ❓ *How do we know that our faith is genuine, and that we have truly been forgiven (v 3-6)?*
- ❓ *What does it mean to “love ... God” in these verses (v 5)?*

## Apply

When we truly love someone, it is more than a feeling; we will genuinely want to please them, and we will change in order to do so. And we will want to grow like them in the things we admire about them. It is the same for true believers in Christ. It might seem that we can grab his forgiveness and then carry on as normal. But the sign that we have truly understood the gospel message is that it is changing us. It's a hard test to apply to ourselves, and even harder to others. But the important thing is not so much how obviously sinful or holy you are, but rather your direction of travel: towards love and purity, and away from sin and pride. That is true love for God.

- ❓ *Looking at yourself, how do you stack up against this test?*
- ❓ *If you fear you do not come out very well, what does 1:9 and 2:1-2 encourage you to do and to know?*

# Free to love

At first, John seems to be a little confused in this passage. Is what he is talking about new or isn't it?

## Old yet new

### Read 1 John 2:7-11

- ❓ *What new “faith test” does John give us in verse 10?*
- ❓ *How is this both an old and a new commandment, do you think?*

In verses 3-5, John has been saying that we must walk our talk. The sign of being a Christian is obedience. Now he imagines someone responding, *Hang on a minute—when I signed up to Christianity, I was told it was all about grace and mercy: that it wasn't what I did that counted but what God had done for me. Now you're springing something new on us.*

So John reminds his readers that obedience has always been the sign of belonging to God's people. It is nothing new. The gospel calls us to faith and to repentance—turning from sin to obey God. It was the message of the Old Testament and the message that Jesus preached (Micah 6:8; Mark 1:14-15).

## ▼ Apply

- ❓ *Is the call to repentance and obedience part of the way you present the gospel to others?*
- ❓ *What happens when it gets left out?*
- ❓ *How can we talk about repentance and the obedience of faith without giving someone the impression that we in some way earn salvation?*

## For the old and young

### Read 1 John 2:12-14

In these verses, the style suddenly changes, and the repeated phrase “I am writing to you...” shows us that John is summarising what he has said so far in his letter.

- ❓ *What three important points does John want to impress upon us all?*
- ❓ *Who is “him who is from the beginning” (v 13, 14)?*
- ❓ *What new perspective does John introduce in the last line of verse 14?*

His summary is simply this: we are sinners, God forgives us through Jesus, and because of this, we should strive to live a sin-free life. This is the message as it has *always* been, because it is the message of the Father and Son, who are from the beginning. But this life is also new, because it is the life that shows we are part of the new age that Jesus ushered in. Love towards God and other believers is characteristic of the new age of light, which has overcome the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom of Satan.

## ▲ Pray

Thank God that you can be part of this new era through the cross of Christ.

And ask God to help you walk in the right direction: to live like Christ and to overcome the evil one.

# Free to be different

*Christians belong to the dawning new age of the rule of King Jesus. But for the time being, we still have to live in the real world of rebellion and hatred.*

It's a tension with which we all struggle.

## For God so loved...

### Read 1 John 2:15

- ❓ *What are we being called to do in this verse?*
- ❓ *How does this square with what is said about "the world" in John 3:16, do you think?*

The word "world" in the Bible can be used in very different ways. (The seventeenth-century theologian John Owen listed no fewer than 16 different nuances of it!) It can simply refer to everything that God has made—the planet we live on and the people who live on it. John 3:16 tells us that God loved the rebellious people he made so much he sent his own Son to die. But in this letter, "the world" is shorthand for the way of thinking and living that dominates a world that is hostile to God—and all social and cultural pressures on believers to conform to those sinful patterns of behaviour. God hates this sinful way of life—and he expects us to hate it too—even when we see it in ourselves.

## Rejecting the world

### Read 1 John 2:16-29

- ❓ *What three characteristics of worldly thinking and living does John point out for us in verse 16?*

- ❓ *Struggling against the world is hard, so why bother (v 17, 27)?*
- ❓ *What else will make it difficult for us to live in this world (v 18-19)?*
- ❓ *What does John encourage us to do as we face this hostility (v 28)?*
- ❓ *What have we been given to help us with this (v 20, 21)?*

The pressure of sin is everywhere. From within ourselves (the lust of the flesh, v 16), from outside (the lust of the eyes) and from the arrogant pride in ourselves that defaults to boasting about ourselves with no dependence on God or gratitude towards him. But these are all part of a world that is dead and passing away (v 17). Those who truly belong to Christ have received the truth about him, have been anointed by the Holy Spirit and have the sure hope of eternity to look forward to. John encourages us to "continue in him" as we reject false teachers and the pull of worldly sinfulness. We walk away from these things towards the goodness and light of God's new creation.

- ❓ *How do we recognise antichrists (v 22)?*
- ❓ *Why can it sometimes be difficult to spot them (v 21)?*
- ❓ *What do you think it means in practice to "continue in him" (v 28)?*

## Pray

Turn your answers to the questions above into prayers.



# Free to obey

*"He's got his mother's eyes... I'm afraid she's going to have her father's nose... She looks just like her Great-aunt Mabel..."*

We all know the routine. Everyone coos over the newborn, trying to work out who they resemble, when all the time they look like... well... like a baby! John says we have become God's children. The question is: do we show the family likeness?

## What we are and will be

### Read 1 John 3:1-3

- ❓ *List out the things that show how God has lavished his love on us.*
- ❓ *What can we look forward to?*
- ❓ *What should knowing this cause us to do now?*

#### TIME OUT

The language is so familiar to us that it's easy not to be amazed by it. John, however, half expects his readers not to believe it, so he adds, "And that is what we are!" Take time to reflect on the lavish love of God. You might find it helpful to meditate on these verses: **1 John 4:9-10; John 13:1-17; Romans 8:31-39.**

Even John acknowledges that precisely what will happen to us in the new creation is a bit of a mystery (1 John 3:2). We don't know what we will be like when Christ returns and we are transformed. But John *does* know that we will be like Jesus and we will see Jesus as he really is—the glorious Lord over all creation.

In the meantime, out of gratitude for the love God has lavished upon us, our goal should be to bridge the gap. With the certain hope of one day being pure like Christ, we try to purify ourselves now. John knows we can't be sinless yet (see 1:8). But he expects us to try as hard as we can to become as pure as we can.

## What sin really is

### Read 1 John 3:4-6

- ❓ *How does verse 4 make sin so much bigger than simply law-breaking?*
- ❓ *Why will true Christians not keep on habitually sinning in the same way again and again (v 5-6)?*

Sin is not just rule-breaking; it is a rejection of the rule-giver: God. It's not simply that I know a law but fail to keep it. Sin's essence—"lawlessness"—is that we make ourselves the arbiters of the law, deciding whether or not we will keep it. You can be a lawless lawkeeper! And that's why we need the new hearts that God gives us when we trust in Christ and as he pours out his Spirit on us. We've been born of God. We have God's genes, and so we *cannot* go on sinning. But we need a constant reminder of this in the face of the pressure of the world and our own sinful nature.

## Pray

Think of a couple of specific ways you want to grow more like Jesus. Then speak to God about them—today, and every day.



# Free to follow

*You cannot continue to sin? But hang on, we want to say, hasn't John already established that each of us does sin? And isn't that our daily experience?*

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## He breaks the power

### Read 1 John 3:7-10

- ❓ *What simple equation does John want us to understand from verses 7-8 and 10?*
- ❓ *What does it mean that someone is "of the devil", do you think?*
- ❓ *Why did Jesus come (v 8)?*

In one sense it is inevitable that we will sin. But in another sense it's not. Jesus has destroyed the work of the devil. The power and penalty of sin are broken, even if we still live with its presence. So we don't have any excuse. We can't give up the struggle against sin because we think that it's inevitable that we succumb to it. The tempter still tempts, but he can be resisted. John is saying that in general terms believers will think and do right, and unbelievers will not.

### ▼ Apply

- ❓ *Is there something wrong that you keep on doing?*

Don't despair! Every Christian sins, but a true Christian can't go on sinning without being concerned—without struggling to be right. So to struggle with sin is not a sign of unbelief but a sign of true life. Most unbelievers couldn't care less whether they sin or not. Only a true child of God struggles against sin, confesses their sin, and enjoys knowing they are forgiven of their sin.

Talk to the Lord about that now.

## Murder in church

### Read 1 John 3:11-15

- ❓ *Why does John quote the example of Cain and Abel? What does it illustrate?*
- ❓ *What are we told we should expect if we are living for God?*
- ❓ *Why is it so vital to love one another?*

Cain's hatred came to a climax in murder. Of course, few of us go that far. But before we let ourselves off the hook, John says that anyone who hates his brother is just as bad as a murderer! The difference is in degree, not in nature. This teaching comes straight from the lips of the Lord Jesus (see Matthew 5:21-24). Those who love Christ are our family and our future. Loving our brothers and sisters is a mark that we truly belong to the family and have the same shared future.

And don't be surprised if people hate you because you're a Christian. Cain hated Abel because Abel was righteous. Now that you've been made right with God, people will hate us in the same way. After all, the world hated Jesus (John 15:18-21).

### ▲ Pray

Pray that God would give you a deep, passionate and sincere love for your brothers and sisters in Christ. Ask him to make you willing to suffer rejection for your faith, and to give you the joy that comes from knowing you're following in the steps of your Master.

# Free from guilt

*According to my dictionary, love is “warm affection, attachment, liking, or fondness, paternal benevolence, affectionate devotion”. Not bad, but not good enough for John.*

## Real love

### Read 1 John 3:16-18

- ❓ *Where does John point our attention so that we can see what real love is?*
- ❓ *So what kind of love should Christians be showing to others?*

Real love is seen in costly, practical action—and so real love is seen supremely at the cross. Intentions and warm feelings towards others are good, but only if they result in practical action—in doing something. Talk is cheap unless it is accompanied by deeds.

### Apply

A third of the world does not have access to basic sanitation. Hundreds of millions of Christians are not able to get an education. Many are persecuted because of their faith. What are you doing for your brothers and sisters in need? John isn't interested in words—he's after practical action (v 18).

- ❓ *So what are you going to do about it?*

## Real peace

### Read 1 John 3:19-24

- ❓ *What should we do if our hearts condemn us before God (v 20)?*
- ❓ *What happens if our hearts do not condemn us before God (v 21)?*
- ❓ *What do you make of verse 22?*

Conscience is that God-given sense that tells us that what we're doing is right or wrong. But sin has messed it up. Some people's consciences are almost dead, while others have hearts that condemn them unnecessarily. In the latter case, we look at our lives and wonder how we have the nerve to call ourselves Christians when we are so sinful. John reminds us that Jesus has delivered us from condemnation through his death in our place.

Our love for others is one reassuring sign of his work in us. But at the end of the day, it is God who reassures us. He is greater than our hearts (v 20). Christ bore our judgment on the cross. The answer to a condemning heart is the gospel—the message of freedom and forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

And when we truly understand that we are accepted by God through Christ, we can stand confidently in his presence and ask boldly. God gives us what we want when we want what God wants (v 22). So ask away for what pleases God—especially that your friends, family and neighbours would believe in the name of his Son (v 23).

### Pray

Use verse 23 as a basis for prayer. Pray for all those you normally pray for (including yourself), and some whom you don't pray for. Ask God to grow their faith in his Son and their love for others.

# Free to overcome

*Spirituality is far more popular than religion these days. And we tend to see what is “spiritual” as by definition good. John does not agree...*

## Test the spirits

### Read 1 John 4:1-3

- ❓ *What are the “spirits” that John says we should test (v 1)?*
- ❓ *What test should we apply?*

Whether it’s teaching, prophecy, a new spirituality or whatever, the key issue is Jesus. How does this “spirit” answer these kinds of questions: Is he the Son of God? Is he fully human? Is he the only Saviour? Is his work sufficient to save us? Did he die as our substitute? Is he unique? Is he the King? Will he judge the world?

### ▼ Apply

In John’s day, the main issue was whether Jesus came “in the flesh”—was Jesus really fully human (see 1:1-3)? The issue will vary from one generation to another, but always it will be about who Jesus is and what he has done.

- ❓ *What do you think the issues are for us?*

## Oppose the spirits

### Read 1 John 4:4-6

- ❓ *What great truth in verse 4 helps us in our battle against these various spirits?*
- ❓ *Who listens to whom, according to verses 5-6? How is this both an explanation and a challenge for us as we seek to share the truth with others?*

Whether “the spirits” are demonic forces or alternative spiritualities or worldly viewpoints, we have already overcome them. We don’t need to fear them or their arguments because God is greater. Verse 6 might sound arrogant at first glance, but John is talking about the apostolic testimony to Jesus—“what we have seen and heard” (1:3). It is a further refinement of his truth test. There are many different versions of who Jesus is and what he has done, but the only version that counts is the apostolic one, which we have in the New Testament. After all, the apostles were there. They saw Jesus and they heard him for themselves.

It is not arrogant to claim that we know the truth. It is not arrogant to say that other people are wrong. We don’t know the truth because we were clever enough to figure it out or good enough to attain it, but because God was gracious enough to reveal it to us.

### ▲ Pray

- ❓ *Are you ever frightened to speak out and put a Christian point of view? Do you worry that you’ll be laughed at or argued down?*

Remember that the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

Pray for opportunities to humbly and gently but confidently tell others about the real Jesus, who can rescue us from our sins for a glorious future.

# Free to love others

John has been talking about a truth test—we can test the spirits by what they make of Jesus. Now he talks about a love test.

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## God is love

### Read 1 John 4:7-8

- ❓ *Where does love come from?*
- ❓ *Is John saying that people who aren't Christians cannot love? If not, then what is he saying, do you think?*
- ❓ *What is the difference between saying "God loves" and "God is love"?*

God is *always* loving. Everything he does is characterised by love. He doesn't act in love sometimes and in wrath at other times. So even when he is acting in judgment, it is a loving act. When God judges sin in sinners, he is showing that he loves those that their sin has hurt, and loving the world he has made. He doesn't have a split personality or changeable moods. All his actions have complete integrity with every part of his character. He never compromises his love for the sake of his holiness or his justice for the sake of his love.

By God's common grace, non-Christians can be loving, sacrificial and generous—sometimes more so than some who would call themselves Christians. But they will never love God's people or God himself in the same way that those who truly belong to him do.

## The love test

### Read 1 John 4:7-12

- ❓ *How would you summarise the love test from these verses?*

No one has ever seen God, John says (v 12).

- ❓ *But in what two places can people see God's love?*
- ❓ *What does this tell us about our priorities as Christians?*

God is love, and love comes from God. So if we claim to be born of God, then we must be characterised by the kind of sacrificial love that we were shown at the cross. God's love has a purpose for us—eternal life. And it didn't wait for someone else to make the first move.

We see God's love at the cross. But we can also experience it in the fellowship of the church family (v 12). That's why the quality of our life together as Christians is so vital if we are to bring the forgiveness and mercy of God to those who are lost without him.

## Pray

Pray that people will be able to see God and his love in the relationships that you have with one another in your church.



# Free to believe

*John tells us that the Spirit gives us confidence in the gospel and in our salvation. But how can we know whether our faith is the real thing?*

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## Truth plus love...

### Read 1 John 4:13-21

- ❓ *How do we know that we live in God and that he lives in us (v 13)?*
- ❓ *And how do we know that the Spirit lives in us (v 14-21)?*
- ❓ *What does it mean to “rely” on the love of God, do you think (v 16a)?*

It should come as no surprise to us that these are not separate tests, as though we can get some right and others wrong. They are all part and parcel of the same thing. The sign that we have truly been given the Spirit is that we “testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world” (v 14) and that Jesus is God’s Son (v 15). But acknowledging the truth isn’t enough. The truth must also make a difference in our lives. It’s not that we attract God’s love by being loving. Quite the opposite—we love because he first loved us. Our love is the fruit of his love at work in our lives.

Many people pit “spirituality”, “love” and “truth” against one another. Doctrine divides while love unites, some say. Other churches are strong on spirituality but weak on truth, we might say. But such divisions don’t make sense to John. And that’s because his definition of love is the same as his definition of truth. Neither can be real unless they come together, from the indwelling Spirit. This is the only true “spirituality” that counts.

## Apply

- ❓ *Do you ever treat love and truth as alternatives? What about your church?*
- ❓ *How would you push back at a brother or sister who makes a comment that pits these qualities against each other?*

## ... equals confidence

### Re-read 1 John 4:16-18

- ❓ *Who might we be fearful of, and why (v 17-18)?*
- ❓ *What link is John drawing between love and this kind of fear (v 18b)?*

Without Christ we would still fear the day of judgment. It would rightly terrify us. But God’s love for us means we can have confidence—confidence that on the day of judgment we will be acquitted. If we are still unsure about the completeness and finality of our forgiveness in Christ, it will compromise our love for God, and our ability to enjoy everything Christ has given to us.

## Pray

Are you confident that the day of judgment holds no terror for you—because of Christ? If so, give thanks and approach his throne with confidence in your prayers.

If not, read 1 John 1:8-9 again, and ask God’s Spirit to give you reassurance.

# Truth, love and obedience

*John seems to be repeating himself—going round and round in circles. But that’s the whole point. Truth, love and obedience all lead to each other and all belong together.*

## A virtuous circle

### Read 1 John 5:1-5

- ❓ *Try to draw a diagram of how each of the things John mentions leads to the next thing. (Hint: It’s a circle!)*

John says that the commands of God are not burdensome (v 3).

- ❓ *What commands is he talking about?*
- ❓ *Why are they not burdensome?*
- ❓ *Why do we feel they can be sometimes?*
- ❓ *Is it God or our faith that has overcome the world (v 4-5)?*

We may struggle with God’s command to love others and to speak the gospel to those who are hostile, but neither command is burdensome in the sense of being too big for us or an irrelevant thing to do. God has been victorious over the world and the devil at the cross of Christ. It’s a victory we can share in and get a taste of as we put our trust in him. We may feel that our lives are a series of difficult skirmishes and battles that we mostly lose, but the truth is that, in Christ, we are victorious. It’s a victory that was won 2,000 years ago at Calvary.

## Blood and witnesses

### Read 1 John 5:6-12

- ❓ *What might it mean that Jesus came by “water and blood” (v 6)?*
- ❓ *What testimony is there that this is true?*

- ❓ *How does John sum up the stark choice we face, and the promise of the gospel?*

In verse 6 John is most likely talking about the baptism and death of Jesus. We’ve already seen that some people in John’s day were saying Jesus wasn’t fully God. They said that Christ, the Son of God, came on the human person Jesus at his baptism and left just before he died. They said the man Jesus was filled with the Spirit of Christ during his ministry, but he wasn’t really God. By contrast, John says that Jesus was truly and fully God in baptism and in his death. And what John literally says is that Jesus was the Son “through” water and blood—before, during and after his baptism and death. And so with the Holy Spirit, two establish the truth that Jesus is God.

But there’s more. These first three witnesses are all the testimony of God towards Christ. But we believe because of the testimony of men (1:1-3; 4:6): the apostolic witness. For us, that means trusting that the Bible gives us an accurate account of that testimony about Jesus: that it is reliable history.

## Apply

This is what we have to share with the world: a story from a book about a man who claimed to be God—with excellent and compelling reasons to be taken seriously.

- ❓ *Are you able to articulate them to a sceptic? How could you get better?*

# How to be sure

*John has written this letter because he wants his readers to be sure they're Christians. Throughout the letter he's given them—and us—a number of ways to tell that.*

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## Are you sure?

### Read 1 John 5:13

- ❓ *Do you believe in Jesus (see v 1)?*
- ❓ *Do you love other Christians (3:14)?*
- ❓ *Do you continue in your struggle to obey God's commands (2:3)?*
- ❓ *Do you know the testimony of the Spirit (3:24; 4:13)?*

These signs are not a checklist. They merge into one another. But together they show whether we're children of God and whether the gospel has begun to transform our lives.

### Apply

- ❓ *Review these signs. How do you match up? If you're not sure, make it your top priority to talk with an older or more mature Christian about these things.*

## Confident prayers

### Read 1 John 5:14-17

- ❓ *How can we be confident in approaching God in prayer?*
- ❓ *Why is it important to know that God will hear our prayers (v 14), do you think?*
- ❓ *What example does John give of praying in confidence?*
- ❓ *What is "the sin that leads to death" (v 16), do you think?*

If you're a child of God, you can talk to your Father. It's as simple as that. A good father will always take the time to listen to his children; and our Father is always there to listen to his children.

Does prayer change things? We instinctively want to say yes. But does that mean we make God change his mind? The relationship between our prayers and God's will is a mystery. Praying according to God's will can sound a bit like "God answers us when he was going to do it anyway". But we have to remember that our prayers are also part of God's will. God works in us as we pray, just as he works to answer our prayers.

But not all of God's will is mysterious. In the Bible, God has revealed all we need to know of it. And this is John's main concern here. We do know God's will. And so we should pray in the light of God's word. We should remind him of his promises. We should ask for what we know pleases him.

The sin that leads to death is most likely to be rejecting Jesus—turning away from him. God's will is that believers should be continually repenting of sin and finding life in Jesus. God's will is that believers should be holy. That is what we should pray for.

### Pray

Use this understanding to pray for yourself, your friends and family, and your church family.



# What you can know

*John ends his letter with three great affirmations of faith: "We know... we know... we know..." Confidence in salvation leads to confident prayer and confidence in the truth.*

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## He will keep us

### Read 1 John 5:18

- ❓ *Who will keep us safe?*
- ❓ *Who cannot harm a genuine believer?*

It's one thing to have assurance of salvation now, but will it last? What about tomorrow? What about when I face death? John says we can be sure that God will keep us. Satan cannot touch us; he cannot wrestle us out of God's grip. Neither can our sin, because the power of sin in our lives has been decisively broken.

## We belong to God

### Read 1 John 5:19

- ❓ *How do the two halves of this verse fit together?*
- ❓ *What happens when we forget that the world is under the control of the evil one?*

It can be tough being a Christian. Sometimes it seems that the rest of the world thinks we're crazy. But being sure of our salvation means that we *know* we belong to God. The rest of the world may think we're mad, not because we are but because they are in the grip of Satan's lies. When we forget the truth about the world or the truth about what Jesus has done, we are in danger of falling in love with the world or feeling hopelessly overwhelmed by the opposition.

## We know the truth

### Read 1 John 5:20

- ❓ *What things do we "know"?*
- ❓ *Why is it not arrogant to be confident about the gospel truths about Jesus?*
- ❓ *Why is it unpopular to be confident about these things today?*

## And finally...

### Read 1 John 5:21

- ❓ *Why do you think John ends his letter in such a strange way?*
- ❓ *What do you think the idols are that he is referring to?*

Idolatry is making your priority something other than God. Idolatry is settling for a god, or a view of God, that is less than the true God, who can only be found in Christ. Letting the views of the world shape your view of God is idolatry. But Christians have been freed from the lies of Satan. We know the truth. Our confidence in salvation leads to confidence in the truth. For John, this isn't just about reassurance. It's also a challenge not to compromise the truth.

## Pray

Have you got what John is driving at repeatedly in this letter? Pray that you would grasp it firmly—and never let go.

# 2 JOHN: Truth and love

*Two tiny letters give us a window into the long-term struggle we face as Christians. How do we sustain the gospel life of our fellowship and message for the long term?*

## Letter to a dear lady

It's likely that the "lady" being written to is a particular local church, and that her "children" are the Christians who make up the church. The anonymity of the letter may be a reflection of the fact that they were a persecuted minority, and that this was a way of keeping the identity of the recipients secret.

### Read 2 John 1-6

- ❓ *What privileges does the "lady" enjoy?*
- ❓ *What is John confident about (v 2-3)?*
- ❓ *What has never changed, according to John?*
- ❓ *Why do you think it's important for the "lady" to know this?*

This elect (chosen) lady can be confident that she enjoys the grace, mercy and truth of God because she has received Jesus. Note the confidence here. These things "will be with" those who have embraced Jesus Christ. Christians can also be completely confident that all true Christians accept and love them. These are facts, not things to aspire to or earn.

Note that truth and love *always* belong together, and that the truth lives in us and will be with us for ever. John is concerned that the dear lady understands this because, if she loses her grip on either, she will lose her confidence in both. And both are under assault by false teachers.

## Beware deceivers!

### Read 2 John 7-13

- ❓ *What do the deceivers deny?*
- ❓ *What will happen if we listen to them?*
- ❓ *Why is it important to "continue" in the commands?*
- ❓ *Why do you think false teachers remain so prevalent, and why do many find their teaching so compelling?*

False teaching does not often look obvious. False teachers will often dial down the volume of the parts of the gospel we find difficult, or else they offer a strength and confidence in areas where we feel weak and helpless. But their appeal is a sweet-smelling trap that will enslave us and ruin our faith. False teaching drags us from God.

## Apply

- ❓ *What do we need to keep confident in?*
- ❓ *How should we respond to deceivers?*
- ❓ *How should we warn others?*

John wants us to know that the stakes are extremely high: life or death, truth or lies, Christ and antichrist. When we lose our grip on Jesus, the only Son of the Father, who came in the flesh, we lose our grip on reality and eternity. We should not welcome false teachers, however positive they seem or widely accepted they are, full stop: not their books, their TV broadcasts or their podcasts.

# 3 JOHN: First and last

*The church has been rocked by many scandals involving those who seek power, prestige and status over loving, humble, open-hearted service. It was always so.*

## Staying healthy

### Read 3 John 1-8

- ❓ *What does John pray for Gaius?*
- ❓ *What brings John the greatest joy?*
- ❓ *What does he encourage Gaius to do?*

Physical health is important, but spiritual health is of far greater significance. Group prayer times can often become an “organ recital”, where we pray for an endless list of people’s ailments. But John is brought greatest joy when he hears that Gaius is spiritually healthy. Likewise, John told the dear lady in 2 John not to welcome those who twist the truth. Here in 3 John, we are encouraged to welcome, support and encourage those who are fellow workers for the gospel. (In the ancient world, many gospel workers were itinerant preachers.)

### ▼ Apply

- ❓ *How should the priority of spiritual health shape your prayers together?*
- ❓ *How do you support gospel work? Do you need to change the way you give hospitality, finances and encouragement to those who are fellow gospel workers?*

## Healthy leaders

### Read 3 John 9-14

- ❓ *What behaviour and attitudes does Diotrophes show that mark him out as a bad thing?*

- ❓ *By contrast, what qualities does Demetrius show that confirm he is the genuine article?*

There is no suggestion in these verses that Diotrophes is a false teacher. Instead the problem is that of a powerful personality who wants to be first. He refuses to accept the authority of John (v 9) or to welcome the itinerant teachers (v 10). He undermines the position of others and expels perceived rivals (v 10) so that he can be first. He may not have a problem with truth, but he has a problem with power. The result is almost as destructive as false teaching.

By contrast, the goodness of Demetrius’ character is acknowledged by everyone. “Even by the truth itself” (v 12) means that he taught what was true and his life matched his message. This is the sort of person we must imitate (v 11).

### ▼ Apply

Someone may be “a great teacher”, have bags of personality, be a decisive and strong visionary, and command a lot of respect. And yet, if they have a bullying or dominating personality, it will be toxic to the health of the church.

- ❓ *Can you think of people or situations where this has happened?*
- ❓ *Whose example are you following?*
- ❓ *What will you pray for as a result?*