

THE LETTERS OF JOHN



God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all

TRUTH AND LOVE

(6 BIBLE STUDIES)

EXAMINATION APPLICATION

BIBLE STUDIES

CONTENTS

Contents	page 02
Getting the most out of these studies	page 03
Introducing John's Letters	pages 04-05
Study 1: 1 John 1:1-2:6 – Marks of being a Christian	pages 06-07
Study 2: 1 John 2:7-28 – Practicing God's truth	pages 08-09
Study 3: 1 John 2:29-3:24 – Authentic Christianity	pages 10-11
Study 4: 1 John 4 – Living in God's love	pages 12-13
Study 5: 1 John 5 – Sharing God's Victory	pages 14-15
Study 6: 2 & 3 John – Walking in truth and love	pages 16-17
Memory Verses	page 20

THE SMALL PRINT

THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Co

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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THESE STUDIES

Your Commitment

I would encourage you to make a commitment to attending your group regularly. I realise that sometimes there are things that get in the way, but do prioritise studying the Bible with other. This will involve sacrifice, and effective use of your time, but I really believe that in doing so you will get the most out of studying the Bible and praying together in your small group.

Your Contribution

What you put into the group is going to determine what you get out of the group. I encourage you to contribute honestly to the discussion and workings of the group. I understand people come from different backgrounds with unique personalities & life experiences. But, we all have a big part to play, so I encourage you to be fully present and take ownership of your group.

Your Preparation

These materials are primarily for use in preparing and/or leading group discussions, but they will also be useful in keeping your thoughts together in one place. The materials provide you with the passage so that you can identify and highlight recurring themes and note down your own thoughts and questions. Also, the materials include questions designed to provoke thought, and help you reflect on what the passage meant, both at the time it was written, and also what it means for us now.

I would encourage you to make good use of these materials, as doing so will help you contribute and get the most out of the group discussions. The materials are, however, only “tools” – they are there to help you, and not to restrict you, or force you to think in a certain manner. I want to see God speaking to you through these passages, and if the questions or notes don't help you, simply don't use them!

I have also included within these materials an introduction to the book. Make of this what you will, but I hope that it is helpful in getting you started with these studies!

Your Leadership

Here are some useful pointers in how to lead your Bible study group. Be aware that included in this study guide are more questions than you can possibly ask and/or answer in one session. They are not designed to be used rigidly, and there will rarely be a need to ask every question! Make sure that you spend some time praying at the start and ensure you read & re-read the passages as much as possible. In relation to the passages, then consider the suggested questions with an open mind. There is rarely “a single right answer” and I would encourage you to share your thoughts with your group.

I have also included a number of quotations from relevant Christian literature, most of which are readily available online if you want to do further thinking or study. My prayer is that as you study together you would grow to love Jesus and experience Him more deeply.

I would appreciate your feedback and suggestions on how to make these materials even better!

*Steve McClure
Spring 2019*

INTRODUCING JOHN'S LETTERS

"John does not attempt a detailed analysis or critique of error; he has no need to do so. He proclaims the truth in the characteristic apostolic confidence that where the truth is declared and believed, error will be undermined and will ultimately collapse."

The Message of John's Letters, BST, David Jackman, © IVP, p17

John's letters do not tell us who wrote them but some of the early Church Fathers attribute them to the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee. The language used in the letter has many similarities with John's gospel which adds credibility to the idea that John wrote them. A good example of this is the first three verses of 1 John which has certain similarities to the beginning of John's gospel. Specifically these verses lay claim to the author being an eye witness to Jesus:

1 John 1:1-3 ¹ *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.* ² *The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.* ³ *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.*

In the same way that no author is mentioned so also no specific recipients are mentioned either. The letter does make clear that it was written to believers and it was most likely a circular letter shared around a number of churches in the province of Asia. It is thought that all the letters were written from Ephesus where John was based from around 70-100AD. The second and third letters identify the author as *the elder* while the recipient of the letters is said to be *To the lady chosen by God and to her children* (2 John) and *My dear friend Gaius* (3 John). Most would date all of the letters between 85-95AD and more than likely after the gospel of John.

Themes in 1 John:

Truth (or Light) and Love

Two of the biggest themes in the letter are truth (light) and love. Indeed 1 John includes two classic statements on this about the nature of God: God is light (1:5) and God is love (4:8, 16). The main purpose of 1 John is to confront heretical teaching that present at the time. Specifically this was an early form of Gnosticism. The word Gnosticism comes from the Greek word Gnosis and means knowledge. A key teaching of Gnosticism was *spirit* is entirely good while *matter* is entirely evil. John wanted to expose these false teachers and point people back to Jesus. Time and again John makes clear what it means to walk in the light and contrasts that with what it means to walk in the darkness.

Love is also a really big theme and there are lots of references throughout the letter. Two references in particular make clear that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was the ultimate demonstration of love. This should not surprise us given that John writes that God is love, the very source and definition of love.

3:16 *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.*

4:9-10 *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

Assurance of Salvation:

John also encourage his readers with an assurance of salvation. Throughout the letter John uses the expression *we know* and I have included some good examples of this below. Each statement serves both as a challenge (this is how we should live) but also as assurance of our Salvation.

2:3 *We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands.*

3:14 *We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other...*

3:19 *This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence*

3:24 *...And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.*

4:13 *This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.*

5:2 *This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands.*

Towards the end of the letter John makes clear why he is writing the letter: specifically so that they would know that they have eternal life (5:13). Eternal life says John is in Jesus: whoever has Jesus has life and conversely whoever doesn't have Jesus does not have life. We could have all the secret knowledge in the world but John is clear that what really matters is whether we have Jesus!

Themes in 2 & 3 John

Unsurprisingly John's second and third letters contain similar themes! 2 John also encourages us to live in truth and love. Indeed both letters contained a comment about how John has been given great or greater joy to hear that they are walking in the truth.

2 John 4 *It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us.*

3 John 4 *I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*

In these letters, John writes to remind them to continuing walking in truth and love. These letters are intensely practical and exhort their readers to remain true to God's truth and to serve one another in love. John also writes to warn Diotrephes (3 John 9-10) from whom he was facing opposition.

My prayer is that these studies would be a blessing to you in helping you grapple with the words that John has written and begin to apply them to your lives.

To Him be the Glory,

Steve

"Whoever claims to live in him [Jesus] must live as Jesus did" 1 John 2:6

STUDY 1 – 1 JOHN 1:1-2:6 – THE MARKS OF BEING A CHRISTIAN

INTRODUCTION: With false teaching rife in the churches to whom John is writing, he wastes no time in getting to the heart of what is on his mind. In this first section John points us here to the truths about Jesus Christ in order to put the record straight and glorify this 'Word of Life'.

SETTING THE SCENE: What is surprising about the way that John's begins his letter? What do we learn about why John is writing this letter (esp. v4, 2v1)?

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THE MESSAGE PROCLAIMED (v1-4): What is it that John is proclaiming here especially related to the Word of Life? Why do you think that John goes to such lengths to explain how they had seen, heard and touched the "life"? Why is Jesus' 'incarnation' (becoming flesh) so important here?

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LIGHT AND DARKNESS (v5-10): What does John mean by saying that 'God is light' and why is it such an important foundation to all that follows? How do you understand what John is saying about what it means to walk in the light and to walk in the darkness? What do these verses imply about the heresies that were rife in these churches?

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AUTHENTICITY (v6-10): Identify the various "if" statements that John makes here (every verse). How do these statements help us to understand what it means to live out an authentic Christian life?

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CONFESSION OF SIN (v9): What is your experience of confessing your sin to God? What does it look like (e.g. should it be general or specific) and how often do you do it? Has God proved to be both 'Faithful' AND 'Just' as John claims here? How does Jesus blood purify us from all sin (v7)?

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THE BASIS OF OUR HOPE (2:1-2): John says he writes so that we will not sin but also says that if we claim not to have sinned we are liars (1:10). How do you make sense of these strong words and the hope John spell out for us in Jesus Christ our 'advocate' and 'atoning sacrifice' (see definition)?

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NB: John says that Jesus is the 'propitiation' or atoning sacrifice for our sins. This conveys the idea that the wrath of God is turned away from us as sinners to Jesus as our substitute.

LIVING AS JESUS DID (2:3-6): What further marks of being a Christian does John detail in these last few verses? In what ways is God's love made complete in us through obedience? What are the areas of your life in which you find it particularly challenging to walk as Jesus did?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: How do you understand John's seemingly "black and white" statements about God's character and Christian life? How would you summarise the 'knowledge' (i.e. the things John says "we know") John seeks to impact to us in this section?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Give thanks together for the truths God we have been learning about in this chapter; i.e. truths about the nature of God, about Jesus' incarnation and all that He achieved for us at the Cross. Spend some time together in confession and ask God to help you not to sin.

MEMORY VERSE: 1 JOHN 1:8

STUDY 2 – 1 JOHN 2:7-28 – PRACTICING GOD’S TRUTH

INTRODUCTION: John fleshes out what it means to practice this truth that he introduced in chapter 1. We see how lives characterised by love and obedience help give us assurance and confidence for the future. John also warns us about the distractions of loving the world and distorting the truth.

SETTING THE SCENE: Why is it so important that what we believe about the world transforms how we live? What are the consequences if this is not the case (e.g, in faith, politics or ethics)?

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OBEDIENCE AND LOVE (v7-8): What are the commands to which John is referring here (see v3-6)? In what sense is this command both new and old (see also John 13:34-35 and 1 John 3:11)? Why is it so important that love and obedience go hand in hand? What do you think it might look like to really love like Jesus did and still does?

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LIGHT AND DARKNESS (v9-11): How do you understand the stark contrast John makes between how we walk (light/darkness) and how we treat one another (love or hatred)? What are the consequences of hate rather than love (note the contrast between what John says in v10 & 11)?

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Is there anyone in your life right now who you are failing to love? What small steps could you take to help you move forward with this particular person?

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WHY JOHN WRITES (v12-14): What is the structure of what John says in this digression? How might these words be an encouragement to all and specifically to the groups mentioned?

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DISTRACTION #1 – LOVING THE WORLD (v15-17): What does John mean here by the ‘world’ (contrast with John 3:16)? What does “loving the world” look like and why do you think that John is so adamant that it should have no place in our lives? Is there a sense in which we should love the world?

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DISTRACTION #2 – STICKING TO THE TRUTH (v18-27): What do you think John means when he talks about ‘antichrists’ (meaning opposite of Christ)? Why are they so dangerous and how does John suggest we can go about identifying them?

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If this is the last hour (v18), how do we ensure that we live in the truth and are not led astray? Specifically what is this anointing we have (v20 & 27) and how does it help us to know the truth? What steps can we take to ensure that what we have heard from the beginning remains in us (v24)?

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CONFIDENCE FOR THE FUTURE (v28): How can we as dear children make sure that when Jesus appears we can be confident and unashamed? In what ways might doing what is right (look on to v29) help to give us such confidence?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: In practical terms what would it take in order for us to truly live in the light (v10), continue in Him (v24, 27) and be confident and unashamed at His return (v28)?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Thank God for His truth and ask Him to help you to stick closely to it without getting side tracked by distractions. Share together the one thing that God has been saying to you in this study and pray for one another in these things.

MEMORY VERSES: 1 JOHN 2:15-16

STUDY 3 – 1 JOHN 2:29-3:24 – AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY

INTRODUCTION: John's focus here is what it means to be an authentic Christian. In 2:29-3:10 he examines what it means to be children of God; namely continuing in obedience and not putting off sin. In 3:11-24 John shows us how love is the ultimate test and assurance of our salvation.

SETTING THE SCENE: In what ways are you like your parents? More specifically what character traits do you think that you have inherited from them? In a similar way how are you becoming more like your heavenly Father? How does your answer help you know assurance of salvation?

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IN THE FAMILY LIKENESS (v2:29-3:3): From where do we tend to derive our sense of value and identity? What has John got to say about our identity in Christ here? How does knowing that we are children of God help us get our heads around the extent of God's love 'lavished on us'?

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In what ways should this hope (v3) about Jesus' appearing cause us to put off our sin? What do you think John means when he talks about being made like Jesus when He appears? Practically what difference should this hope make in our lives day by day?

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CONTINUING TO SIN (v4-10): Why is sin completely incompatible with being a child of God? How can we reconcile the apparent contradiction in John's "black & white" statements about sin and the fact that we clearly still sin (1v8, 3v3)? How does this motivate and encourage us to stop sinning?

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THE TEST OF NEW BIRTH (2:29 & 3:9-10): Bookending this section is a test of whether we are born again as children of God. What exactly is this test? How do we evaluate whether we are children of God or children of the devil? What things need to change in your life to demonstrate this?

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LOVE AND HATRED (3:11-15): Why do you think God was displeased with Cain's offering (v11-15 and Genesis 4:1-16)? What does this example teach us about what characterises the children of the evil one (v12)? What does Jesus have to say about hate in Matthew 5:21-22?

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AUTHENTIC LOVE (v16-18): What is so incredible about the kind of love that John is describing here? What then would be your definition of authentic love and why must it be more than mere words? What is your experience of giving/receiving this quality of love to/from those around you?

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ASSURANCE & DOUBT (3:19-24): How might these verses help us find assurance during times of doubt? Why might cause our hearts to 'condemn' or not to 'condemn' us (v20-22)? What are the consequences of each? How does the Spirit help us have confidence and assurance (v24)?

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DRAWING THINGS TOGETHER: In summary how should these truths about our "identity in Christ" and the nature of the "love of God" motivate and transform our Christian lives? To what extent do you agree that v23 sums up not only the chapter but John's entire letter?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Share something that has stood out for you as we have talked about what it means to live and grow authentically as children of God. Spend some time thanking God for His sacrificial love for us and ask Him to be a conduit for that love in your own lives.

MEMORY VERSE: 1 JOHN 3:16

STUDY 4 – 1 JOHN 4 – LIVING IN GOD'S LOVE

INTRODUCTION: This chapter begins with John continuing to insist that authentic Christians are those who believe in the truth about Jesus (v1-6). Then he reasserts that authentic Christians are those who love others (v7-12, 17-21) and have God's dwelling in us (v13-16). Love is the remedy for fear.

SETTING THE SCENE: In this chapter John uses the word 'love' 27 times to refer either to God's love or the love that He wants us to show to others. At the outset can you describe your current understanding of love and how that contrasts with the quality of love you experience from others?

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TESTING SPIRITS (v1-6): What are the "spirits" that John speaks about and what kind of things that are saying either to you or more generally to your generation? How do we know if they are from God; i.e. what is the test John gives us? What experience do you have of testing spirits?

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MOTIVATED TO LOVE (v7-12): What reasons does John give in these verses as to why we ought to love one another? Why is God's love working in us and through us (v8 & 12) so distinctive that John says that if we do not love we cannot know God (see also v20-21)?

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GOD IS LOVE: How do you understand John's statement here that 'God is love' (v8 & 16)? In what ways does the example of Jesus' death for us on the cross (v9-11) help us to get an idea of what God's love is like? How does this help grow your motivation to love others?

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LOVE MADE COMPLETE IN US: What does John mean by saying that “God’s love is made complete” in us (v12 & 17)? On the flipside how might God’s love be incomplete in us? What is your experience of God (who no-one has seen) becoming visible through your life or the lives of others?

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GOD’S DWELLING IN US (v13-16): What are the implications of the mind blowing fact that God lives in you? What do these verses have to say about how we can know that we live in Christ and He in us? How do you think we can know God better and rely more on His love (v16)?

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PERFECT LOVE DRIVES OUT FEAR (v17-21): How does love being “made complete among us” help give us confidence on the last day (v17)? What does John mean when he says that “perfect love drives out fear” (v18)? Why is fear so opposed to love?

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LOVE AND HATE: In the context of all that we have read how do you get your head around John’s very strong statement in v20 that if we claim to love God and yet hate our brother or sister then we are a liar? In what kind of situations do you find it most difficult to love your brothers and sisters?

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DRAWING THINGS TOGETHER: How practically do you think we should go about “living in love” (v16)? What practical steps can we take to be more loving towards one another? How would you summarise the grounds of assurance (that which we know) Jon gives us in this section?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Share together about your observations about the love of God and how this overflows through your own lives. Pray that God’s love would indeed be made complete through your lives and share together about any situations where you are finding it hard to live in love.

MEMORY VERSES: 1 JOHN 4:13-14

STUDY 5 – 1 JOHN 5 – SHARING GOD’S VICTORY

INTRODUCTION: In this final chapter John addresses the confidence we can have as Christians. He shows how we share in God’s victory as we believe in Jesus Christ and demonstrate such faith through obedience and love towards both God and our brothers and sisters in Christ.

SETTING THE SCENE: What are the things that the world around us looks to for confidence and assurance? How does this contrast to the message John has been giving to us throughout this letter?

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OBEDIENCE, LOVE AND FAITH (v1-5): John has woven these three themes throughout his letter: how in these verses does he connect them? What do you understand John to mean when he says that God’s commands are not burdensome (v3)? What does it mean to overcome the world (v4 & 5)?

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THE THREE TESTIMONIES (v6-12): How do you identify and distinguish the three witnesses (see Deut 19:15) John mentions? How does the symbolism of the Spirit (John 15:26-27), water (Matt 3:16-17) and blood (Matt 26:27-28) help us understand these things? Why should we accept this testimony?

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What is/was important evidence for you in your journey of faith? How does your own experience testify that “God has given us eternal life and this life is in His Son” (v11)?

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TO KNOW WE HAVE ETERNAL LIFE (v13-15): How have the things John has written helped us to know that we have eternal life and given us confidence in approaching God?

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What does it mean to ask in accordance with God's will and what does John promise if we do (v14)? How do you understand times when it has seemed as if God hasn't answered your prayers?

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BELIEVERS WHO FALL INTO SIN (v16-17): What does John mean when he talks about sin that does and doesn't lead to (literally moving in the direction of) death? What is and isn't John asking us to pray for such people and how can we possibly distinguish between them (see also Matt 12:22-32)?

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VICTORY OVER THE EVIL ONE (v18-21): What do these verses say about the agenda of the evil one (see also 1 Peter 5:8)? What has been your experience of spiritual warfare in the past?

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How does the "One who was born of God" keep us safe? What idols tend to distract you from walking with Jesus (v21) and what steps have you taken to overcome them?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: In summary what from this chapter helps assure that you have eternal life (see esp. v3, v13-15 and v18-20)? In what ways has your sense of assurance about your salvation grown from studying this letter? What difference will this make in your life going forward?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Share together about how this study has helped you to grow in assurance of your salvation. Talk and pray about areas in which you struggle to believe Jesus and follow Him in faith. Pray about any idols that distract you from this and pray for protection from the evil one.

MEMORY VERSES: 1 JOHN 5:11-12

STUDY 6 – 2 & 3 JOHN – WALKING IN TRUTH AND LOVE

INTRODUCTION: In his second and third letters, John writes to remind them to continuing walking in truth and love. These letters are intensely practical and exhort their readers to remain true to God's truth and to serve one another in love.

SETTING THE SCENE: What are the things that bring you great joy in life? What do these things reveal about what is important to you? What do the opening/closing verses (2 John 1-3 & 12-13, 3 John 1 & 13-14) reveal about the 'what', the 'why' and the 'who' of these letters?

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TRUTH & LOVE IN THE CHURCH (2 JOHN 4-6): Why do you think that finding some to be walking in the truth is such a source of joy to John? What is your experience of such parental joy? How does John perceive the relationships between love, obedience and God's commands?

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TRUTH & LOVE IN THE WORLD (2 JOHN 7-11): What was the substance of the kind of teaching that these deceivers were sharing with others in the world? What might be good examples of this today? What does John want them (and by implication us) to do or not to do in response to such people?

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What steps does John want us to take in order to continue in the teaching of Christ? What do you think he means when he talks about not losing what we have worked for but rather being rewarded fully?

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OPEN HEARTS & HOMES (3 JOHN 2-8): What is commendable about John's dear friend Gaius? What do you imagine John means when he says that Gaius continues to walk in truth (v3) and love (v6)? Why is serving others faithfully (v5) and offering hospitality (v8) so important for the gospel?

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What has been your experience as a steward of all that God has entrusted you with (e.g. our homes, cars, money and possessions)? What practical steps could you take to grow in this area?

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DIOTREPES & DEMETRIUS (3 JOHN 9-12): How does John contrast these two men and the two very different ways that he says they should respond to them? What do you think that others would say about your own love and hospitality? How could you grow in these areas?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: If John was writing a follow up letter to you what do you think he would say to you specifically? What would help you to derive greater joy from seeing others continuing to walk with Jesus and share His love?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Share together your own experiences of helping others and ask God to help you offer a good example to them. Pray for one another that you would each be fruitful and invest in those who would also continue to walk in truth and love.

MEMORY VERSE: 2 JOHN 4

MEMORY VERSES

STUDY 1: 1 JOHN 1:1-2:6 – MARKS OF BEING A CHRISTIAN

⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:9

STUDY 2: 1 JOHN 2:7-28 – PRACTICING GOD’S TRUTH

¹⁵ Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. ¹⁶ For everything in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world.

1 John 2:15-16

STUDY 3: 1 JOHN 2:29-3:24 – AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY

¹⁶ This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

1 John 3:16

STUDY 4: 1 JOHN 4 – LIVING IN GOD’S LOVE

¹³ This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world.

1 John 4:13-14

STUDY 5: 1 JOHN 5 – SHARING GOD’S VICTORY

¹¹ And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

1 John 5:11-12

STUDY 6: 2 & 3 JOHN – WALKING IN TRUTH AND LOVE

⁴ It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us.

2 John 4