

New Testament Epistles: 1 John

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!

1 John 3:1

- 1. Historical Context/Occasion:** For a series of small epistles, 1-3 John have a rich and robust history. Although there have been many skeptical or critical scholars who have maintained that these epistles were written much later in the 2nd century, or that they were written by someone other than John, based on the New Testament internal evidence, early church witnesses, and tradition of the church, there is no reason to doubt that John is indeed the author. And not only of these three epistles, 1-3 John, but also the Gospel according to John, and the Revelation of St. John. The five together make up what has been known as the Johannine Corpus. One commentator calls the writings of John “a creative theological achievement of a unique order” (Bruce G. Schuchard, Concordia Publishing House, 1-3 John).

We first hear about John the son of Zebedee in the Gospels, even in the Gospel that bears his name where he refers to himself humbly as the disciple whom Jesus loved. John is also known as the only one of the twelve disciples who did not die a martyr’s death. Several other facts about John’s life are also witnessed by several (Irenaeus, Eusebius, Polycrates). Eventually, John made his way to Ephesus where he lived, died, and was buried. John lived to be an old man, and saw the days of Roman Emperors Domitian (A.D. 81-96) and Trajan (A.D. 98-117). Domitian exiled John to the isle of Patmos and worked in the labor mines. After Domitian’s death in A.D. 96, John returned from Patmos to Ephesus (according to Clement of Rome and Jerome). He was then released from exile in A.D. 96 by Emperor Nerva. Most New Testament scholars agree that John wrote his three epistles when he returned to Ephesus following his exile on Patmos.

The three Epistles together – 1-3 John – form a triad or trio of letters; and while each letter is different they also share a common purpose. 1 John is a general letter. 2 John is somewhat like a cover letter for 3 John, which is in the form of a personal letter. All three were meant to be read aloud and written for a common purpose. John’s common purpose in writing these three epistles is for his hearers to continue alongside John with his life-long work, the truth of the proclamation of Christ. John continues to lead his hearers (then and now) back to the firm foundation of the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ over and against all heresies, sects, or false teachers who would lead Christians astray from the truth of God’s promises.

1 John, in particular, goes into great detail, outlining several errors of the false teachers that John is concerned about (4:1). They denied that God’s Son had really become a real human being (4:2-3) who actually died for human sin (5:6-8), so that his blood could cleanse them (1:7). They believed that, since they were sinless (1:8,10), they were not bound to keep the commandments (2:4; see also 4:20-21).

- 2. Date:** Some date 1 John to a timeframe of A.D. 60-65. Some date 1 John somewhat later and wider in scope, A.D. 70-100, or A.D. 85-95.
- 3. Author:** John the apostle and evangelist, also known as “the elder” in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1.
- 4. Primary Theme:** See 1 John 1:1-4

5. Purpose(s):

- a. To assure them that they have complete joy (1:4) and eternal life in Jesus (5:13)
- b. To keep them from sinning and assure them of forgiveness (2:1)
- c. To remind them to love each other (2:7-11; see also 2:12-14)
- d. To warn them against the gnostic heretics (2:26; see also 2:21)

6. Theological Themes:

- a. Participation in God's eternal life through faith in God's Son (1:2; 2:25; 5:11-13)
- b. God's abiding (3:24; 4:12-13,16)
 - i. with his anointing (by the Spirit) (2:27)
 - ii. his word (2:14,24)
 - iii. and his 'seed' (3:9) in the believers who abide in him (2:6,10,24; 3:6; 4:13,16)
 - iv. and his love (4:16) by keeping his commandments (3:24)
- c. Walking in the light by loving fellowship with each other (1:5-7; 2:3- 11; 3:14-18)
- d. Criteria for testing of false prophets (4:1-6)

7. Outline/Structure:

Thematic Outline:

Incarnational Christology	1:1-4
Righteous Conduct	1:5-2:6
Mutual Love	2:7-17
Incarnational Christology	2:18-18
Righteous Conduct	2:29-3:10a
Mutual Love	3:10b-24a
Incarnational Christology	3:24b-4:6
Mutual Love	4:7-5:3
Righteous Conduct	5:4-21

Chapter/Verse Outline:

- a. Prologue: apostolic testimony to the humanity of Jesus: 1:1-4
- b. Living in the light Of God's presence: 1:5-2:29
 - i. Fellowship with God and each other (1:5-7)
 - ii. First condition : break with sin (1:8-2:2)
 - iii. Second condition : keeping the commandments (2:3-17)
 - iv. Third Condition : avoidance of heretics (2:18-29)
- c. Living as God's children: 3:1-4:6
 - i. Our identity as God's children (3:1-2)
 - ii. First condition : break with sin (3:3-9)
 - iii. Second condition : keeping the commandments (3:10-24)
 - iv. Third condition : avoidance of worldly heretics (4:1-6)
- d. Living in love and faith: 4:7-5:13
- e. Epilogue: praying for sinners and summary of contents: 5:14-21

8. Key Passages:

- a. 1:5-9
- b. 2:1-2, 7-11, 18
- c. 2:24-25
- d. 3:1-3, 11-24
- e. 4:1-19
- f. 5:6-8, 18

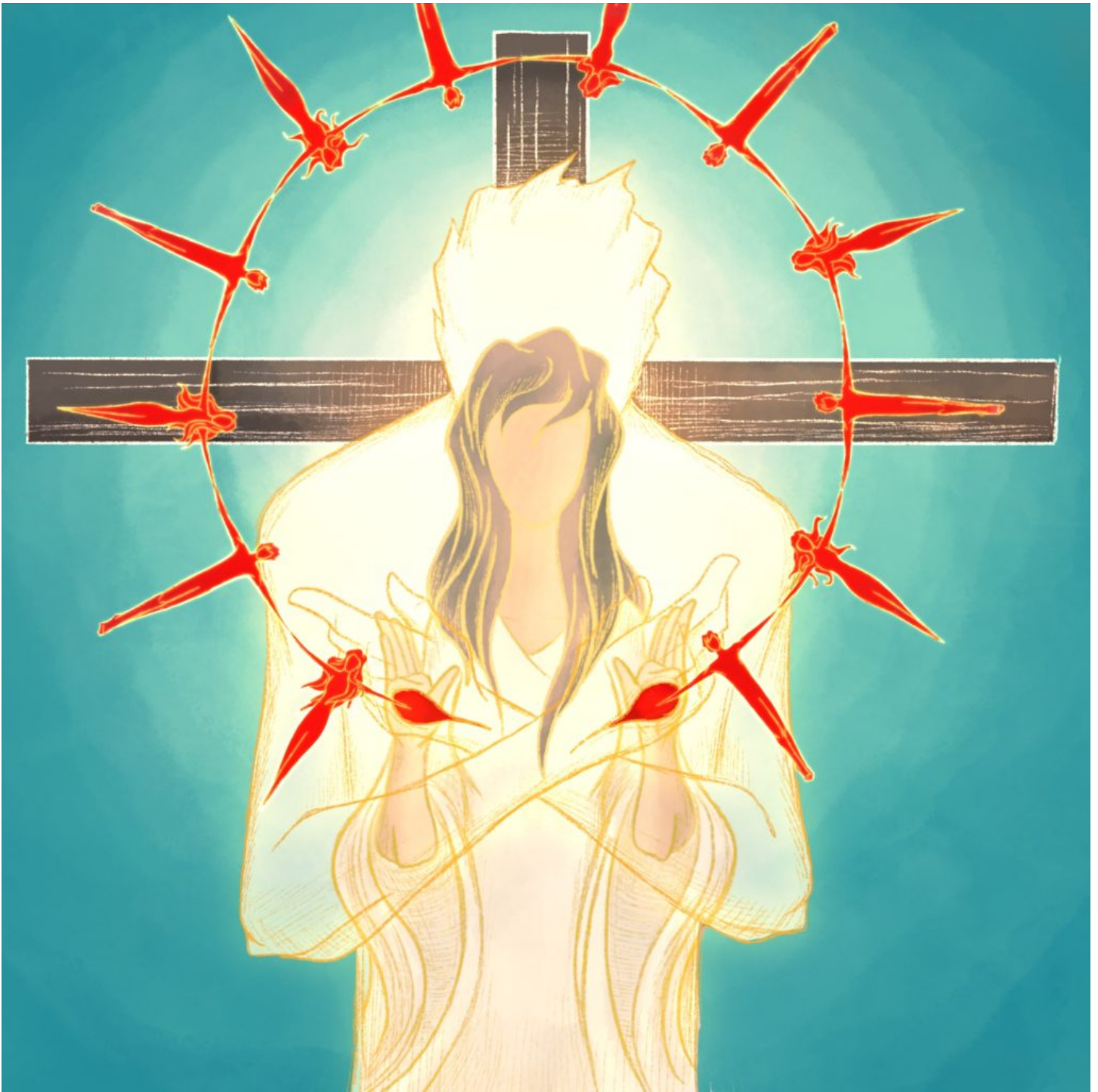
9. **Luther's Preface to 1 John:** *The first epistle of John is a genuine apostolic epistle and ought to follow right after his gospel. For as in the gospel he promulgates faith, so here he opposes those who boast of faith without works. He teaches in many different ways that works are not absent where faith is; and if they are absent, then faith is not genuine but is lies and darkness. He does this, however, not by harping on the law, as the epistle of James does, but by stimulating us to love even as God has loved us.*

He also writes vigorously here against the Cerinthians, against the spirit of Antichrist, which was beginning even then to deny that Christ has come in the flesh, and which is today for the first time really in full sway. For although people do not now publicly deny with their lips that Christ has come in the flesh, they do deny it with their hearts, by their teaching and life. For he who would be righteous and saved by his own works and deeds is as much as denying Christ, since Christ has come in the flesh for the very purpose of making us righteous and saving us without our works, by his blood alone

Thus the epistle fights against both parties: against those who would live in faith without any works, and against those who would become righteous by their works. It keeps us in the true middle way, that we become righteous and free from sin through faith; and then, when we are righteous, that we practice good works and love for God's sake, freely and without seeking anything else. (Luther's Works volume 35)

10. Liturgical Use:

- a. 1:1-2:2 – Easter 2 B; Feast of St. John
- b. 1:5-2:2 – Day of Supplication and Prayer
- c. 3:1-3 – All Saints' Day
- d. 3:1-7 – Easter 3 B
- e. 3:16-24 – Easter 4 B
- f. 4:1-21 – Easter 5 B
- g. 4:7-16 – Christmas Eve A B C
- h. 5:1-8 – Easter 6 B
- i. 5:9-15 – Easter 7 B



“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.” 1 John 4:7-9

The Passage Considered

The deepest ground in this passage is the fundamental character of God, namely: love.

As the nature of a seed determines the sort of tree that grows from it, or the nature of a foundation determines the shape and quality of the tower built upon it, similarly the character of the Creator of reality determines what is Good, True, and Beautiful in the reality that He creates. Once we have come to know that God is love, all of reality necessarily changes.

And how do we know God is love? Because we'd like Him to be? No, because He manifests that love in the sending of the Son. In binding humanity to Himself, suffering under our plight, bearing our sin, and swallowing the wrath that we deserve, God the Son has perfectly declared the love of God to creation—the love that God is.

And note, this means that “love” has an objective definition. Love is not a malleable concept that we can mold to our liking, love has a definite shape, and it is cruciform. Yes the “shape” of love is self-giving unto death, and it is a shape that we cannot discern apart from the reality of Love's War against all that opposes it, aka “wrath.”

At the cross, Love's Holy War against the enemies of the Beloved is swallowed up into the Beloved so that those same enemies might be loved in the Beloved. And this is love...this whole act is love, and in so being it is the revelation of God which to receive is to live (John 17:30).

This reality—God revealed as fundamentally love in the wrath-absorbing crucifixion of the Beloved—this reality is the overflowing spring of glory that lies at the heart of all John's theology. And as an out working of that, he calls the disciples of Christ firstly to know themselves as beloved ones (in the Beloved), and secondly—from that place of sure belovedness—to love as they have been loved.

The Picture Explained

That is what I've tried to portray in this image. Note that the cross stands behind everything since it is at the crucifixion that God reveals Himself climactically and definitively to the world. All our thinking about God, self, and reality begins and ends here; “the cross of Christ is the...purest theology” (Luther, on Psalm 6:11).

Next notice the risen Christ whose sovereignly wounded hands embrace His Bride with an unshakable and inseparable love (Rom.8:37-39). The Bride is pictured as literally in Christ since it is only by union with Him and hiddenness in Him that she too is the Beloved of God, loved with an infinite self-outpouring even as the Son is loved (John 15:9,13, 17:23).

Note also that the Bride's hands are lifted to meet Christ's so that His wounds overlap her own palms. This is an attempt to show that those who have received the dying and rising love of God in Christ will—of Spirit-wrought necessity—join in and embody that same love (1 John 7-8).

Flowing, as it were, from Christ's own wounds of love is the community of the saints (who are themselves members of the Bride). They are red and in cruciform position to indicate that they are marked by the love of God as defined on Calvary. Their hands are linked to show that their cruciform lifestyle is the means of their unity (1 John 1:7, where “light” is synonymous for “love”), and they form a “halo” around the crucified and risen Christ since, A) the Name of God as manifest in the Son is the gravitational center around which His disciples are united by the Spirit (John 12:32, 16:14, 17:11), and B) the ongoing, Spirit-enabled, Christ-like love of the Church is the present display of God's glory in Christ on the earth (compare John 1:18 and 1 John 4:12).

Beloved, if God has so loved us, we also ought to love one another...

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1 John 4:18, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.”

What exactly does this verse mean? Why does John say that “fear has to do with punishment”? Really? Fear has to do with punishment? When I’m afraid that a sickness will take me or someone I love, when I’m afraid that suffering will come, when I’m afraid that an opportunity will be lost, when I’m afraid that my finances will fail or my plans will collapse or my life will be wasted—when I’m afraid of these things, how does that “[have] to do with punishment”?

Something pastor Tim Keller once said revolutionized my understanding of this verse—and of fear in general. He said (essentially) “all fear is fear of hell.” Now....that sounds strange. None of those things I listed above are fears of hell. So, was Keller just being overly spiritual? upon further reflection, I don't think so.

FEAR is that chilling, creeping, suffocating veil that paints a bleak—indeed, a hopeless—future scenario and bids us to live in it. Fear says, “_____ will happen and it will define you.....the cancer will be agony, the relationship will shatter, the shame will be suffocating, the pain will be too much, the abandonment will be complete, you will have no where to turn...” It tells us a story that ends with horror and says, “that's true of you.”And when we believe it, we get scared.

But what is “a story that ends in horror”? The ONLY scenario where the end is horror is hell. So another way to say Keller's insight might be: “the fires of every fear are drawn from the fires of hell.” Fear “burns” only with hell's fires. And what is hell but “punishment”?

Thus, John is—unsurprisingly—right. Fear has to do with punishment because the fearful heart is believing that, in the end, they will get hell....in the end, they will be sorrowful....in the end, they will be left alone, abandoned, ashamed, yoked with leaden regrets. Fear believes that—in the end—I am not loved.

But perfect love CASTS OUT fear...how? By dealing with the punishment. What is love? John tells us just a few verses earlier in 1 John 4:10:

“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

“Propitiation” means “wrath-absorbing sacrifice,” or we might say, “punishment-absorbing sacrifice,” or even “hell-absorbing sacrifice.” The love of God in Christ swallows up the wrath of God against us...the ocean of Christ's love-spilled blood extinguishes hell for His people....which means that no punishment remains for those in Him.....The end of the story is JOY, it is GLORY, it is the release of laughing, weeping astonishment at what the God of Love has accomplished. THAT is what stands before the Christian, and THAT is why receiving the perfect love of God in Christ—rightly understood—casts out ALL fear...

Fear believes that, ultimately, I am not loved. Hope believes that, ultimately, I am loved. And because the venom of damnation has been siphoned from the fangs of our suffering into the veins of our God, Fear's promises are the empty boastings of a slain foe....Christian, believe Love.

“I believe, help my unbelief...” – Mark 9:24

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