

Introduction to I, II, III John and Jude 2009 October 7th for 29th

There's a joke dad used to tell about a man who came to evening service one Sunday and when the preacher asked how people were doing with their Bible reading, he replied, "Why, I read three books of the Bible just this afternoon!" People, thinking of Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus or Matthew, Mark, and Luke, or Psalms, Proverbs, and Job were amazed at this feat. Turns out it was I, II, and III John, six short chapters among them all. He might as well have said "four" and thrown in Jude.

Apparently, it is widely held that all three letters of John were written by the same John who wrote the Gospel of John, that is, John the disciple of Jesus, in his old age. Jude calls himself the (half) brother of James and this causes us now to believe that he too was a brother of Jesus.

An aside: Catholics do not believe that Jesus had siblings. Mary, "mother of God" was too holy to be touched and therefore to bear other children. Protestants believe that Mary and Joseph had other children after Jesus was born, including James and Jude.

Apparently, all four books deal with heresies arising in the youthful, but no longer brand-new church, mostly gnosticism and hospitality related issues. On the latter, it was common for preachers and missionaries to receive hospitality from the churches they visited. The direction here is to extend such hospitality to those who are accepted (that is, those sent by John, the author) and to deny such hospitality to heretics.

A heresy is a belief within an established religion that does not conform to the widely accepted set of beliefs in that religion. For example, a belief that Jesus was not God incarnate is a heresy to Christians and a belief that Moses is just a myth is a heresy to both Christians and Jews.

Gnosticism is the belief that the spiritual is inherently good and the physical is inherently evil, the two are independent, and that nothing that happens within the physical really matters. This is used, for example to discount the sinfulness of many fleshly pursuits.

Gnostics are thus Christian heretics.

With these definitions out of the way, we now turn to the letters of John and Jude.

I John 1

2009 October 7th for 30th

John writes this letter to make his own joy complete. He writes it to confirm and proclaim the Word of life, Jesus, who he knew and lived with, saw, heard and touched. By joining in the belief in the real Jesus, we gain fellowship with God the Father and the Son.

The next verses are quite famous:

“This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

“If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.”

I John 2

2009 October 6th for November 2nd

“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

If a man claims to be a Christian or to know Christ but does not do as Christ commanded and does not walk as Jesus walked, he lies. Christ brings the light of truth but many are in darkness. True Christians love the brothers. Those who hate are in darkness. John writes to his children in faith, to the young men, and to the fathers because of their knowledge of God, their triumph over evil, and their strength.

“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world -- the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does -- comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”

It is the last hour; many antichrists have come; some have come from John. They weren't really from John, however, because they weren't really from God and didn't believe the truth they were taught but distorted it in their own teachings. What is an “antichrist?” Anyone who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Those who receive this letter know the truth and they know this.

“See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us -- even eternal life.”

John writes because others are trying to lead them astray, but they are truly anointed and will not believe counterfeit things. Part of the teaching was to “remain in him,” to be firm in the faith. By continuing in him, by being righteous, by doing right, they demonstrate having been born into Christ.

I John 3

2009 October 9th for November 3rd

“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.” We know God and will know him when he appears.

To sin is to break the law. The devil has always sinned. To keep on sinning is to not know God. The Son of God came to destroy this work of the devil. The message is that we “should love one another.” Cain was evil. He murdered his brother. Cain was evil; Abel was righteous. Murder is sinful. Christ laid down his own life for us. That is our example.

“If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”

“This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything.” To obey God’s commands and not be condemned by our own hearts gives us confidence that we are in and with God.

I John 4

2009 October 9th for November 4th

Test every spirit to see whether it is from God or not. A spirit from God will acknowledge that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. People who are from God listen to this. Those who are not, do not.

Love comes from God so we should love one another. No one can at the same time hate his brother, who he has seen, and love God, who he has not seen. Hate is a sign of not being in God. “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”

To say that you love God while hating your brother is lying.

I John 5

2009 October 9th for November 5th

God’s commands are not burdensome. “Everyone born of God overcomes the world.” Believing in God and his son is demonstrated by our love for his other children. Jesus comes by both water and blood. (Water from birth, blood by sacrifice.) God’s Spirit testifies to this. To not believe it is to call God a liar.

God will do whatever we ask of him that is within his will. If brothers commit sins, other than those leading to death, pray for and restore them. When anyone is born of God they do not continue to sin. Evil cannot harm them. This understanding comes from Jesus.

Stay away from idols.

II John

2009 October 12th for November 6th

This addressee of this letter, a “lady,” could be a church, or a person within a church. It is unclear. Note at the end that the writer does not want to go on and on (as on the internet or on the telephone) but wants to continue in person. Perhaps the matters in the letter are more urgent than will wait for a visit.

“The elder,

“To the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in the truth -- and not I only, but also all who know the truth -- because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever:

“Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, will be with us in truth and love.

“It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us. And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.

“Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.

“I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.

“The children of your chosen sister send their greetings.”

III John

2009 October 12th for November 9th

Although not very easy to work with by modern standards, paper and ink were widely available at the time of the writing of these letters and literacy was high at that time and place in the ancient world. This facilitated the early missionary work of Paul, John, Peter, and others, as we have seen.

In this case, John seems to be mediating some sort of dispute.

“The elder,

“To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.

“Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

“Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth.

“I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.

“Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God. Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone -- and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.

“I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and in. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.

“Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.”

Jude

2009 October 23rd for November 10th

Jude is a brother of James and probably of Jesus. He writes to those called by God. He writes urgently because, “certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.” He urges the believers to “contend for the faith” against this.

God brought the people out of Egypt but destroyed the non-believers. Some angels had lost their positions. Sodom and Gomorrah suffered punishment of fire for perversion. These contemporary contenders did the same sorts of things, rejecting authority and “slander[ing] celestial beings. But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him,” but just called on God for rebuke.

Here Jude has quoted from some text not in our canon.

These people err in the same way as Cain, Balaam, and those in Korah's rebellion. "These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm -- shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted -- twice dead."

Enoch (another extra-Biblical reference) prophesied against such ungodly acts and ways. Their desires were evil.

Jesus himself foretold this, that there would be scoffers and ungodly, divisive leaders without the Spirit but following their own desires in the end times. You, friends, should persevere and not fall to or be led astray by this. Be merciful. Save some.

But when are the "end times?" Then or now, or both?

"To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy -- to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen."

Conclusion of I, II, III John and Jude 2009 October 23rd for November 11th

These short letters share doctrinal teaching and exhortation with the longer more complicated earlier letters in the Bible, those of Paul (mostly) and Peter. They emphasize, more than the prior ones, the corruptions that were creeping into the church. As they got past the early years where everyone lived communally, selling all their own possessions and waiting for the imminent return of Christ, the institution of the church began to formalize while continuing to extend benefits to the membership that were too hard for the apostate charlatans to resist.

These letters all urgently address this problem in the growing and aging church. Natural leaders who were not true believers were there to impose their own beliefs, or lack thereof, on the trusting, sometimes easily deceived, faithful. This could not be allowed and it led the early faithful into conflict with those who would take them to a more worldly or otherwise deceptive religion. This separation must have been problematic for the accepting believers in whose culture hospitality was paramount.

© 2009 Courtney B. Duncan.