

1 John

Get close to the Source in being, saying and doing

Seeing his brothers and sisters getting led astray by false teaching and losing hope, John puts pen to paper once more. Having recorded the life and teachings of Jesus in his gospel, he now writes to counter the dangerous teaching of Gnosticism - a distortion of the Christian faith that elevated knowledge and intellectual understanding and that separated spirit and matter. Gnostics believed that all matter, including bodies, was evil and that the spirit was good. John, in contrast, emphasises the flesh and blood reality of Jesus throughout his letter. Jesus was a real human who lived among us, not an abstract idea or theory. And John knows that because John knew Jesus. This Messiah was also his friend.

And for John, it is all about Jesus. His letter starts and ends with how Jesus offers us eternal life, and is full of what Jesus has done for us. John wants his readers to be secure in their identity as children of God, to be able to speak with confidence the truth about Jesus and to be able to demonstrate in practical ways the life-changing love of God.

John writes passionately and almost repetitively about the love of God. You'll read a lot about God's love over the next few weeks! But that's not because John had run out of anything else to say. He wants his fellow Christians to be absolutely convinced about the love of God, to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that they are saved by that love and then to extend that love generously and faithfully to others. For him, it's a nonsense for people to say that they love God but don't love their brothers and sisters in Christ. You can't have one without the other and there needs to be complete integrity between our words and our actions.

John didn't write this letter as a systematic text to be studied, covering different topics neatly in sequence. We'll cover every verse in the letter over the six sessions, but some of the sessions pull together different passages that have similar themes.

SESSION 1 : It's all about Jesus

AIM : *To discover Jesus as the central subject of John's letter.*

Reading together: **1 John 1:1-4**

¹We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— ²this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— ³we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

⁴We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

1. Starting with Jesus, what gives this letter credibility or authority?
2. Read John 1:1-4. What similarities are there between the two passages?
3. John refers to Jesus throughout his letter – see 1:7, 2:6, 3:16, 2:2 & 4:10, 2:28 & 3:2. Look them up to see what they say about Jesus.
4. What difference do these verses make to our lives?
5. In verse 3: 'Fellowship' is in danger of becoming a Christian jargon word – one we use but not quite sure what it means. How do you define fellowship?
6. In what ways does our church 'do fellowship' well? In what ways would you like the church to become more authentic? How could you help to make that happen?

Before the next session

Make a note of ways in which you see, hear or encounter Jesus this week – not as an eyewitness, in the flesh experience like John had but through reading the Bible, through other Christians, in prayer, by being sensitive to God's Spirit at work in the world. How can you help people who don't know Jesus to see, hear and encounter him this week?

For further study

Read through the whole of 1 John two or three times, allowing the words to sink into your heart and mind.

There are so many books that have been written about Jesus. Ask around the group to discover personal favourites. Or take a look at *The Jesus I Never Knew* by Philip Yancey.

SESSION 2 : Be

AIM : *To explore how encountering Jesus changes who we are.*

Reading together: **1John 1:5 – 2:2, 1 John 3:1-3**

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

2 ¹My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ²and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 John 3:1-3

3 ¹See what love the Father has given 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. ²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

1. What does it mean to say that God is light, and Jesus is light?
2. Reading 1 John 2:5-7; think of a (hypothetical) example of someone walking in darkness. What would they need to do to walk in the light?
3. Verse 9 speaks of confession – what place does this have in your life? When and how do you confess?
4. How do fellowship and confession overlap? Is there place for being honest with others about our sins?
5. How does a relationship with Jesus change our nature? What new identity do we find in Christ? Look at 1:7; 2:2; 3:1-3
6. How has Christ changed the way you see yourself?

Before the next session

Spend some time thinking about your identity in Christ, using these questions as a guide.

- ***Who I am***
What does Scripture say about who I am in Christ?
How can I more fully embrace this identity?
- ***Who I am not***
What assumptions about identity do we need to leave behind?
What are the alternative sources from which we draw our identity?
How does our encounter with Jesus challenge these other sources?
- ***Coming to God in the stillness***
How does prayer impact our identity?
- ***Loved to show love, blessed to be a blessing***
How can we make receiving from God a source of giving to others?

For further study

- *Life of the beloved* by Henri Nouwen is a wonderful explanation of how much God loves us.
- Ephesians 1:1-14 is a rich description of our new identity in Christ. Spend some time drinking it in, dwelling with one phrase or verse at a time.

SESSION 3 : Say

AIM : *To consider how we communicate the truth about Jesus.*

Reading together: **1 John 2:3-27, 1 John 4:1-6**

³ Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. ⁴Whoever says, 'I have come to know him', but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; ⁵but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: ⁶whoever says, 'I abide in him', ought to walk just as he walked.

⁷ Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. ⁸Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. ⁹Whoever says, 'I am in the light', while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. ¹⁰Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. ¹¹But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.

¹² I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven on account of his name.

¹³ I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young people,
because you have conquered the evil one.

¹⁴ I write to you, children, because you know the Father.
I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young people,
because you are strong
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.

¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; ¹⁶for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live for ever.

¹⁸ Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. ¹⁹They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us. ²⁰But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge. ²¹I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth. ²²Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. ²³No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also. ²⁴Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵And this is what he has promised us, eternal life.

²⁶ I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you.

²⁷As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.

4 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. ⁴Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

1. Look at the verses where John says he is writing:
2:7, 2:8, 2:12, 2:13, 2:14, 2:21, 2:26
What is he writing about and why is he writing?
2. Verse 4 highlights integrity, in speech and action.
Who do you know that puts words into action and what impact does that have on those around them?
3. In what ways is the truth about Jesus shared in church?
What role do you have to play?
4. Write a list of do's and don'ts for a church or small group that wants to tell their culture or community the truth about Jesus.
5. Do we need to talk about Jesus any more?
Or do we only need to show the love of Christ in what we do?
6. In 1 John 2:15, John says 'do not love the world....'
What is meant by 'World' in each of the verses in occurs?

Before the next session

Something to think and pray about.

- 1 Peter 3:15 says 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you about the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.'
Peter assumes that believers will provoke such questions.
- What kind of questions does your life provoke?

For further study

The gospel of John records conversations that Jesus had with people where he talked about who he was and what he had come to do.

What can you learn from these about communicating effectively and appropriately the truth about who Jesus is to those you meet?

- Nicodemus: John 2:1-21
- The woman at the well: John 4:1-42

SESSION 4 : Do

AIM : *To explore how we can love with actions and in truth.*

Reading together: **1 John 2:28 – 3:24**

²⁸ And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.

²⁹ If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him.

3 ¹See what love the Father has given 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. ²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

⁴ Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.

⁵You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. ⁸Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. ⁹Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God. ¹⁰The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.

¹¹ For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. ¹²We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him?

Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. ¹³Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. ¹⁴We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. ¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

¹⁸ Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²²and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

²³ And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

1. Pick out the verses about believer's actions or behaviours.
How would you summarise John's message?
2. From 1 John 3:1-3 how can we purify ourselves?
What does this look like in practice?
Why is it important?
3. 1 John 3:18 seems central to this letter.
When have you received loving actions of others?
What impact did it have on you?
4. In what ways does our church love in actions and truth, both within and beyond. How do you discern what God is calling you to do?

Before the next session

Reflect on how true 1 John 3:18 is of you. Do you love with actions and in truth?

- Consider your own inner life – how obedient to God's commands are you? How well do your attitudes mirror those of Jesus?
- Within our church community – how do you demonstrate God's love? Is our church a welcoming redeeming community?
And how do you contribute to that?
- How do you bring light and hope to those around you?

For further study

Look through John's gospel for ways in which Jesus showed love for people in actions and truth.

- Ask God to show you how you can follow this example.

SESSION 5 : All you need is love

AIM : To take another opportunity to focus on the love of God and how it might spur us to prophetic action.

Reading together: **1 John 4:1-21**

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. ⁴Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us.

²⁰Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

1. How would you summarise John's words in this passage?
2. For many, love is something that comes and goes in things like films, books and songs. Read 1 Corinthians 13 – from this how may you communicate that the love that God gives us is more than just a feeling?
3. 1 John 4:7 says everyone who loves is born of God – perhaps everyone in the world.
How might this help our evangelism, the ways we share the good news of Jesus with others?
4. These sessions have picked up on three themes; Be, Say and Do.
Be – who we are as loved children of God
Say – what we say about God's love
Do – how we live out God's love.
It can be hard to separate these, but
 - a. Which may you want to see increase in your life?
 - b. How do they flow into each other?
5. In 1 John 4:4-6, John highlights the need to be distinctive.
In what ways are we being called as a church to be distinctive?
And in what ways do we need to share a common life?

Before the next session

Take time to think through the challenges facing you and / or our church community. Building on the earlier sessions, identify three issues in each of the following areas that need a Jesus-centred prophetic response.

- In the personal sphere
- In our congregation
- Across the town
- Globally

For further study

- C S Lewis' classic book The Four Loves.
- Meditate on 1 Corinthians 13 or Ephesians 3:14-21 – soak in God's love.

SESSION 6 : Back to Jesus

AIM : To reflect on what we have learned through these studies.

Reading together: **1 John 5:1-21**

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. ²By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, ⁴for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

⁶ This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. ⁷There are three that testify: ⁸the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. ⁹If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. ¹⁰Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. ¹¹And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

¹⁴ And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. ¹⁵And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him. ¹⁶If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one—to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that. ¹⁷All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal.

¹⁸ We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them.

¹⁹We know that we are God's children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one.

²⁰And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

²¹ Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

1. In 1 John 5:3, John says that God's commands are not burdensome.
 - a. Is this your experience?
 - b. How would you advise someone who is finding God's commands burdensome?
2. Echoing John 3:16, John mentions eternal life several times (vs 11,13 & 20 of this sessions passge). Eternal life is a big topic – we are used to life being limited.
 - a. How should the fact that believers have eternal life affect the way that we live now?
3. Over the last six sessions we have looked at being, saying and doing – how our relationship with Jesus affects who we are, what we say and what we do. John ends his epistle with three 'We know...' statements in verse 20.
 - a. Write your own 'I know ...' statements that reflect what God has impressed on you through these studies.