

THE MESSAGE OF 1-3 JOHN

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The Epistles of John include some of the most highly valued and most frequently quoted verses by today's Messianic Believers. Without knowing that much about their original setting and background, the brevity of the Apostle's words allow readers of the text alone, to easily deduce that he has to admonish various ancient Believers—or those who *thought* they were Believers—to return to a proper path of faith. Many of these people were not living the life that Yeshua the Messiah requires, evidenced in proper works. Composed in the late First Century C.E. for those in Ephesus and Asia Minor, the Johannine Epistles likely confronted various Gnostic sentiments where physical matter was perceived as evil, and spiritual things or the intangible were perceived as good. Such an ideology runs highly contrary to the world that God has made (cf. Genesis 1:31), most importantly as His people are to control what they do with their bodies. In the case of the ancient Gnostic problem, those influenced largely thought that they could do anything they wanted with their bodies, because somehow only spiritual things mattered. While ancient issues do abound in trying to understand parts of 1-3 John, modern parallels and connections are also easily made.

John opens his main letter, **1 John**, with a greeting that praises God the Father and thanks Him for the eternal life He has provided in His Son (1 John 1:1-2). He exclaims, "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, Yeshua the Messiah. We write this to make our joy complete" (1 John 1:3-4). The important thing not to overlook is not only how fellowship with God brings great joy to His people, but how Yeshua Himself was One who physically entered into the world (1 John 1:2; John 1:14), and was not some kind of untouchable phantom or hallucination on the part of those who followed Him. John asserts how "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you..." (1 John 1:5), not only in how the Apostle and many others actually encountered the Messiah as a real man, but how He taught on the differences between light and darkness, and what true fellowship with the Creator means (1 John 1:6-7). More than anything else, a key thrust of the gospel is that forgiveness from sin—which people genuinely recognize as being a problem—is available to those who truly cry out for it:

"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" (1 John 1:8-10).

In **1 John**, it is most easy to detect how the Apostle John is very concerned about the behavior of his audience. He pleads with them, "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—Yeshua the Messiah, 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" (1 John 2:1-2). A final price has been paid for human transgressions of God's expectation of us, but as John further states, if one is reconciled to Him then it will be surely evidenced in obedience to His commandments:

"We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Yeshua did" (1 John 3-5).

Before we jump ahead of 1 John's original audience, remember that the Apostle is not writing to modern-day, conservative evangelical Christians who largely have an incomplete or under-informed understanding of God's Torah—but who truly do desire to live the life of the Messiah. John is writing to admonish people who think that what they do with their physical selves does not really matter. Surely, there are people throughout history since who have followed such a sordid and worthless ethic! The first and most important thing redeemed children of God are to do is make sure that they are demonstrating His great love to each other. As John records, this was apparently a problem for a number of the purported "Believers" in and around Ephesus:

"Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded him" (1 John 2:7-11).

John is clear that the instruction he will deliver the families who hear his letter (1 John 2:12-14) is not "new," but it will certainly be as though it is "new" to certain people, because it will get them to come out of the dark influences of sin and into the light of the Lord. He specifies, "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” (1 John 2:15-17). Whatever bad behavior was present within the various groups or assemblies, was likely associated with sexual immorality and a worldly way of approaching the daily responsibilities of life. Such things, as John is most direct to say: **“just isolates you from him”** (1 John 2:16, The Message).

One of the most intriguing sections of 1 John, undeniably because John uses that dreaded term “antichrist” (or “antimessiah”; Grk. *antichristos*), appears when he informs his readers, “Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antimessiah is coming, even now many antimessiahs have come. This is how we know it is the last hour” (1 John 2:18). While he later specifies how the main persons who may be considered “antimessiah” deny that Yeshua is the Messiah (1 John 2:22-23), it should also be remembered that they will to some degree imitate the True Messiah, claiming to be anointed just as Yeshua’s followers are anointed (1 John 2:20).

It is not enough to relegate the “antichrist” to just being some future man totally empowered by Satan, who will lead some one world government, even though he will come. The sober word John gives is, “They [various antimessiahs] went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us” (1 John 2:19). Those whom John has been able to disciple and nourish in the faith have been trained adequately enough to spot the lies and various counterfeit messages, when they encounter power of an antimessiah nature (1 John 2:21, 24-27). They will continue steadily in their faith, and be able to enter into the Messiah’s Kingdom (1 John 2:28-29). John can only issue great thankfulness on their behalf, and remind his audience of the great things coming to God’s people:

“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And is this what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:1-3).

It is easily observed that perhaps the most difficult verse for many readers to understand, and one which doubtlessly drew a few blank stares in the late First Century, in this letter, is 1 John 3:4: **“Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.”** The CJB renders this as “Everyone who keeps sinning is violating *Torah*—indeed, sin is violation of *Torah*.” While the most severe sins that 1 John’s original audience would have had to definitely face down with were those of hatred, lies, slander, sexual immorality, and discord—John’s definition of sin is **much more specific** than what one may find in some theological dictionaries today. The *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* defines sin as, “The fundamental unbelief, distrust, and rejection of God and human displacement of God as the center of reality.”¹ This is, to be sure, **entirely true**, but is also very incomplete. The Apostle John would not tolerate God’s people throwing out the Law of Moses as a way to regulate their lives, being lawless (Grk. noun *anomia*)—especially so if they claimed to be Messiah followers! He testifies, “you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. Now one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin either has seen him or known him” (1 John 3:5-6). A life of faith in the Messiah *without* the instruction of Moses’ Teaching, **is no faith at all!**

Those who are mired in lives of sinful behavior are those whose true master is the Devil, they are not born of God, nor may they be considered God’s children (1 John 3:7-10). Such strong words are not given to those who are still striving to know God, or are like the hypothetical sinner of Romans 7 who is still struggling with some sinful habits he knows need to be overcome. *John directly attacks those whose behavior is dominated by sin, with no likely intention of ever changing.* While a Gnostic background behind the problem would explain a great deal, how many purported Believers do you know who justify various things they do by saying, “It is just who I am” or “It is how I was raised”? Surely, every person’s background or upbringing can surely instill in them many positive and worthwhile traits, but when utter lawlessness is manifested: **check to see that you are one of God’s children!** For the Apostle John—no different than his Lord Yeshua—manifesting love to one another is the first critical sign that those claiming Him truly are redeemed (1 John 3:11-15). This “love” (*agapē*) is not just some intangible concept, but is to be demonstrated by significant acts of service and sacrifice among born again men and women:

“This is how we know what love is: Yeshua the Messiah laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. 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? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and truth. 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 everyone” (1 John 3:16-20).

Ultimately the loyalty and guidance we are to have finds its source in the Creator, as His sons and daughters love and obey Him (1 John 3:21-22). The most crucial commandment that anyone is to follow, “his command,” is “to believe in the name of his Son, Yeshua the Messiah, and to love one another as he commanded us” (1 John 3:23). The various antimessiah figures cannot bring salvation to a person; only trust in Yeshua (Jesus) can! They are the ones who will truly be able to obey, itself a consequence of being filled with God’s Holy Spirit (1 John 3:24).

A relationship with the Lord does mean much more than rote obedience, as it involves being able to employ the various supernatural giftings that one has been granted by Him. The Apostle John most seriously instructs his audience to test all of those who come into their midst, specifically to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God,” to distinguish various evil forces from the true Holy Spirit (1 John 4:1, 2). This most especially concerns those who deny the Incarnation of Yeshua from the Father in a human body, something to be considered antimessiah/antichrist: “Every spirit that

¹ Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 107.

acknowledges that Yeshua the Messiah has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Yeshua is not from God" (1 John 4:2b-3). The spirit inside of one who does not testify to such a truth may be considered of the fallen world (1 John 4:4-5). Unfortunately, the many who do not confess Yeshua as Redeemer often fail to listen to those who do know Him, and through whom the real Holy Spirit communicates (1 John 4:5-6). In spite of this predicament, John issues the steady encouragement: "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:3a).

The Apostle John is most serious about Messiah followers truly demonstrating, embracing, partaking, and above all coming to a conscious experience of God's love filling and working through them (1 John 4:7-12). Being imbued with the love of God comes only through a recognition that the Heavenly Father sent His Son to be fallen humanity's Savior, and that resultant of people acknowledging this they can be filled with the Holy Spirit (1 John 4:13-16). They can be assured of their redemption by this (1 John 4:17), especially because "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" (1 John 4:18). When people partake of the great love that God can demonstrate to His children, then any phobia they may have of future judgment can be halted—because they will come to know Him ever closer day-by-day. Yet John issues another reminder to those who refuse to be changed by love: those who claim to love an unseen God, but hate a brother or sister, are guilty of lying:

"We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:19-21).

Love goes far beyond a mere attitude demonstrated toward others, but is the sure motivation, or supernatural compulsion, for obedience to God's commandments (1 John 5:1-3a). John categorically states how "**his commandments are not burdensome**" (1 John 5:3b), because love for the Lord and one's fellow human beings guides a Believer's conscience, thoughts, and deeds. When such a person can *always keep* the Messiah's saving activity at the heart of his or her faith, providing redeemed men and women with the gift of eternal life, then the proper faith in action will undoubtedly come (1 John 5:4-12). While John largely communicated to those who thought that a proper belief in Yeshua did not have to necessarily be followed by the right actions—how often do today's Messianics place the right actions *before* belief in Yeshua? When one makes the Torah or Torah observance more important than Yeshua the Messiah, obedience to the Lord becomes a *forced action*, rather than something that naturally ushers forth as a Divine act of the Holy Spirit and power of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27). Furthermore, if in a Messianic's Torah observance one does not learn how to **love God and neighbor even more proficiently**, what does this communicate about such a person's spiritual maturity?

The Epistle of 1 John has some direct words, and John himself knew this. But he says, "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. This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him" (1 John 5:13-15). Many of the requests to be asked of the Lord concern the presence of sin in the lives of (close) people we know (1 John 5:16-17), a definite manifestation of the love of Yeshua working in our hearts via a sincere concern for them generated from such love. The battle between good and evil, sin that should not be present within Believers, and the ultimate control of the evil world—can only be stopped by remaining true to one's trust in the Messiah (1 John 5:18-21).

It is understandable that in comparison to a five-chapter letter like the Epistle of 1 John, the two Epistles of 2 and 3 John often do not receive a great deal of attention. Some think that the main reason 2 and 3 John are included in the Bible, is that they were regarded as being genuine pieces of correspondence from the author of 1 John, although they may not have that much to add to theology as a whole. While 2 and 3 John are short, it would be wrong to conclude that there is nothing to be understood from these pieces of writing, as both can inform us as to the different kinds of on-goings present in the late First Century *ekklēsia*.

When one reads the thirteen verses of **2 John**, they are a bit ambiguous, as they are directed from an unnamed "elder, To the chosen lady and her children" (2 John 1). It is easily questioned as to why the letter was addressed this way. While not identifying any people by name is not a problem, as if the letter were intercepted by any Roman authorities no Believers could be persecuted, the identity of the recipients could also simply be a way to demonstrate the closeness of the author to the audience, perhaps addressing a home assembly with a female leader. After extending greetings (2 John 2-3), the recipients are encouraged to walk in the truth of God's love, obeying His commandments, and recognize that the spirit of antimessiah/antichrist is present out there denying Yeshua's Incarnation in the flesh (2 John 4-7). This instruction repeats what appears in the much larger Epistle of 1 John, but to this is added the rather poignant,

"Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Any one who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Messiah does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and Son" (2 John 8-9).

It is obvious that the Believers who would hear this, quite probably in a kind of home congregation, have strongly dedicated themselves to the Lord and have grown well. *Yet the threat of this being deterred is strong*. It is so strong that John warns, "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" (2 John 10-11). This is an attestation that whatever Gnostic-esque troublemakers were present in Ephesus and the region of Asia Minor, were having a degree of success, going about from home assembly to home fellowship, getting people away from the truths that the Apostle John (and likely the Apostle Paul before him) had helped see established. Within various parts of the independent Messianic movement today, the

phenomenon of various traveling teachers—with no other significant daily and weekly (research) responsibilities to keep them occupied (and disciplined)—could possibly be a modern occurrence of what 2 John 10-11 warns. Such teachers do tend to peddle various wares and sensational messages that confuse people, who need to instead be shored up in the essential truths of the Bible.

2 John ends rather abruptly with the note, “I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete” (2 John 12). We may never know the reason for this, other than what John wants to communicate could only be delivered in person. Regardless of what the circumstance specifically was, another group of Believers extend this audience greetings (2 John 13).

Unlike 2 John, the Epistle of **3 John** takes on a much more personal tone, being directed to the Apostle’s “dear friend Gaius” (3 John 1). The letter opens by John being rather pleased to hear that Gaius’ is in good health (3 John 2), but most importantly about his faithfulness to the truth (3 John 3-4). Gaius has apparently been doing some rather important work for the Believers, including many he does not know personally, although he will be sure to give them hospitality when he meets them (3 John 5-8). Unlike 2 John, 3 John does indicate that there were various persons in the faith communicate of Asia Minor who would occasionally go to places in order to declare forth the good news, and help out with other needs of fellow brothers and sisters.

Within this, though, were obviously those who went around the area to serve their own ends. This included a certain Diotrephes, who will have nothing to do with those like John or Gaius (2 John 9). John says that should he be able to come to Gaius, he will make light of Diotrephes’ gossip and other misgivings (2 John 10). Still, Gaius is to be on the lookout for those who do genuine good, which includes people like Demetrius (3 John 11-12). Just as 2 John ended, so does the Apostle have various thing that he can only communicate to Gaius in person (3 John 13-14a). Those friends who are with John also extend Gaius greetings (3 John 14b).

It is to be lauded that the Johannine Epistles are highly appreciated among many of today’s Messianic Believers. But as true with all books of the Bible, our improvement with these letters can certainly improve. How much of our reading of 1 John is only limited to various emphases on keeping God’s commandments, and is not counter-balanced with the admonition of the Apostle to love Him and each other? How many of us have not tested the spirits, or taken the warnings against the presence of antimessiah/antichrist individuals in our midst, as seriously as we should? Have we at all listened to the short words of 2 and 3 John? Thankfully, most of today’s Messianics only need to sit down, and just expel a little more effort reading 1-3 John through all the way. Some of this will involve familiarization of the various background issues, but most of all simply seeing the whole letters from start to finish. If we are able to do this, then we will be able to hold 1, 2, and 3 John’s main themes all in high regard, and allow its special words to transform us to be those who most ably serve Yeshua the Messiah.