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THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE IN THE BIBLE

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• STUDY GUIDE •  
WITH LEADER'S NOTES

# 1 JOHN

RELYING ON THE LOVE OF GOD

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SCOTTY SMITH

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# 1 JOHN: RELYING ON THE LOVE OF GOD

Scotty Smith

STUDY GUIDE WITH LEADER'S NOTES



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# INTRODUCTION

If the apostle John had been an Old Testament psalm writer, we might easily imagine him composing this ode to the love of God and the God of love: “Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you” (Psalm 63:3). John’s New Testament writings—his gospel, three epistles, and the book of Revelation—aren’t just a storehouse of rich theology. They are a theater in which we see John coming alive to the only love better than life, the love God lavishes on us in Jesus.

It’s not just what John says that grabs us; it’s how the truth grabbed John that intrigues us. Many vignettes in his story endear John to us. He was the disciple who leaned against Jesus at the Last Supper. He was the one to whom Jesus, from the cross, committed the care of his mother. On the morning of Jesus’s resurrection, John outran Peter to the empty tomb, saw evidence of the resurrection, and believed.

John referred to himself as the disciple Jesus loved. Surely, this was not because John felt Jesus loved him more than the others, but because John treasured the love of Jesus so deeply. We identify ourselves by the things we treasure. They become the things that most define us. For John, nothing defined him more than the love God has for us in Jesus.

By studying 1 John, you are stepping into that same experience. John wants nothing less for his readers than for them to be defined by the love of God. As with all the small-group resources in this

series, this study guide is written to keep you looking at God's love for you in Christ. John's purpose in writing will be met if you too come to see yourself first of all as someone intensely, astonishingly loved by Jesus.

## HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This guide will help you do this in a group study. John wrote his letter not to a single believer, but to an entire church family. It is meant to be studied alongside other believers. Doing this lets you benefit from what God is also teaching them, and it gives you their encouragement as you apply what you learn.

In his letter, John insists that believers be people who admit their sin as they grow in confidence that Jesus saves them from that sin. Therefore, this study guide will encourage you not to gloss over your sins and struggles. It will ask you to share both deep needs and deep hopes. Expect differences in how people participate. It's okay if some in the group are eager to share right away while others take it slowly, or if some find 1 John cheerful while others are troubled. But because John is training us to "know and rely on the love God has for us" (1 John 4:16), also expect to be drawn closer to Jesus. Expect your time in 1 John to change those in your group—starting with you!

Each participant should have one of these study guides in order to join in reading and be able to work through the exercises during that part of the study. The study leader should read through both the lesson and the leader's notes in the back of this book before each lesson begins. Otherwise, no preparation or homework is required from any participant.

There are eight lessons in this study guide. Each lesson will take about an hour to complete, perhaps a bit more if your group is large, and will include these elements:

### *2 Introduction*

**BIG IDEA.** This is a summary of the main point of the lesson.

**BIBLE CONVERSATION.** Your group will read a passage from 1 John and discuss it. As the heading suggests, the Bible conversation questions are intended to spark a conversation rather than generate correct answers. In most cases, the questions will have several possible good answers. The leader's notes at the back of this book provide some insights, but don't just turn there for the "right answer." At times, the group may want to see what the notes say, but always try to answer for yourselves first by thinking about the Bible passage.

**ARTICLE.** This is the main teaching section of the lesson, written by the book's author.

**DISCUSSION.** The discussion questions following the article will help you apply the teaching to your life. Again, there will be several good ways to answer each question.

**EXERCISE.** The exercise is a section you will complete on your own during group time. You can write in the book if that helps you, or you can just think about your responses. You will then share some of what you learned with the group. If the group is large, it may help to split up to share the results of the exercise and to pray, so that everyone has a better opportunity to participate.

**WRAP-UP AND PRAYER.** Prayer is a critical part of the lesson because your spiritual growth will happen through God's work in you, not by your self-effort. Your group will be asking him to do that good work.

By studying 1 John, you are about to encounter both John's authoritative truth and his transformative experience. Writing to friends under duress, John boldly declares, "God is love." This is profound theology, indeed. But it is also an open invitation to have that truth redefine you. John bids you, "See what great love the Father has



lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1).

Lesson

# 1

## MADE FOR INTIMACY WITH GOD

### BIG IDEA

God created and redeemed us for a rich, joyful relationship with himself and his Son, Jesus.

### BIBLE CONVERSATION *20 MINUTES*

The readers of John's epistle—believers in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) near the end of the first century—were facing challenges that would require a greater reliance on God and his love than they had even known. They were under assault, externally and internally.

**External assault.** Persecution of Christians was becoming systematic. As a faithful pastor, John worked to prepare his beloved friends for life in an increasingly hostile world. Quite probably, within a few years John himself was arrested by the Roman government and sent into exile on the island of Patmos, where the aging apostle would write the book of Revelation.

**Internal assault.** False teachers had infiltrated the church, seeking to combine elements of Gnosticism with Christian spirituality. Gnosticism taught that physical matter is evil and only immaterial

spirit should be celebrated as real, valuable, and lasting. The Gnostics spoke of God as existing above the molecules and messes of the world and known only by initiates who acquire special knowledge (*gnosis*) which transports the soul closer to God through multi-layered tiers of heaven. This meant that for Gnostics, salvation was achieved by knowledge, not received by grace. They viewed distance, not their sinful depravity, as their biggest obstacle to knowing God. They championed personal enlightenment, not transformation into Jesus's image. They sought freedom through celestial transcendence, not heartfelt repentance. But any addition to the gospel is always a subtraction. By rejecting a physical Savior and downplaying sin, these false teachers denied the reality of Jesus's incarnation, his substitutionary death for sin on the cross, and his bodily resurrection. Take these away, and you gut the gospel.

With this background in mind, have someone read **1 John 1:1–4** aloud. Then discuss the questions below.

Look closely at how John describes the Word of life, Jesus. How is John's description of Jesus better than what the Gnostics imagined? How is it better than many people today imagine?

John describes eternal life as “fellowship” both with God and with each other. The original Greek word is *koinonia*, which also can describe intimacy between spouses. How is this different, and better, than the way you might describe eternal life if you were asked about it?

John says his reason for writing is “to make our [or your] joy complete.” Why is joy important in the life of a believer?

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Now read the following article by this book’s author. Have participants take turns reading it aloud, switching readers at each paragraph break.

Lesson

# 1

ARTICLE

## THE MESSAGE OF 1 JOHN

5 MINUTES

I haven't always read 1 John through the lens of the gospel. My first introduction to this epistle was on a retreat led by some rather zealous believers. Looking back, I can see that they were clearly more familiar with God's law than with his grace. It was on one of those make-Jesus-Lord-of-your-life kinds of weekends.

If those guys were writing this study guide, they would probably want to title it something like *The Marks of a REAL Believer*, or *God's Scorecard: What He's Looking for in Your Life*, or *Discipleship for the Serious, Not the Slackers*. It's possible to read any book in the Bible and miss or marginalize Jesus. It's possible, but destructive. We don't make Jesus Lord of anything. We acknowledge his lordship over everything and live accordingly, with humility and joy.

First John certainly highlights key fruit the gospel will bear in our lives—but that's the point. It's the gospel, not us, that produces the fruit. The apostle Paul put it this way: "The gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood

God's grace" (Colossians 1:6). We are to grow in grace, by grace. Fruit that lasts will be produced by the Holy Spirit.

John's letter begins with a doxological burst of bold affirmations. Every phrase is meant to sabotage the false teaching gaining headway among believers in Asia Minor. Notice John's calculated reference to creation, "the beginning." It echoes both the first verse of Genesis and John's opening line in his gospel. Matter matters, because God created all things through Jesus. Consider also John's multiple-sensory experience of Jesus: hearing, seeing, touching "with our own hands."

The false teachers weren't entirely wrong. *Gnosis* ("knowledge") does save. But it is not gaining some hidden and mystical knowledge; it is knowing an unquestionably human, delightfully relatable person.

Jesus came from the Father into a real world. Gnosticism supposed that we should go up into an immaterial realm to find God. John proclaims that God came down to us in the person of Jesus Christ. The gospel is about an actual person, not a philosophical phantom. Jesus isn't a grand idea, but a great Savior. He came to us that we might share in the wonder and riches of eternal life.

God created us for a robust, deeply satisfying intimacy with himself—a relational richness that has implications for every aspect of our lives. The storyboard for this relationship is a real world of geography, flora, and fauna. The garden of Eden was the first chapter in this grand story. The new heaven and new earth, the ultimate garden city, will be its finale and fullness.

In between the two, the Bible reveals the tragic saga of our sin and brokenness, and the unfolding wonder of God's commitment to redeem and restore. As great as our sin is, God's love for his broken image-bearers is thousands of times greater. By his grace,

God is calling a family into relationship with himself from every nation, tribe, people, and language. And by his grace, he enables his children to know him better and better.

What, then, is my summary of the message of 1 John? I don't want to miss Jesus like that retreat in my youth did, so my summary flows from two key gospel truths:

**First, knowing God, not living forever, is how the Bible defines eternal life.** In his gospel, John recorded Jesus's own definition of eternal life. "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3). That we will live forever is wonderful. But that we will grow in our relationship with our Father and with Jesus, whom we too will one day be able to see and touch, is unparalleled awesomeness.

**Second, relying on God, not our own achievements, is our source of eternal life.** God's zeal to be known is powerfully captured by the prophet Jeremiah: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me" (Jeremiah 9:23–24 ESV). This is the Father who made us and is pursuing us. He delights for us to boast in him. In the Scriptures, our "boast" isn't our brag; it's what we rely on for salvation, both temporal and eternal. Because we are riddled with unbelief and addicted to self-sufficiency, we will be in the learning-to-rely school until heaven.

*Knowing and relying on the love of God.* That is as good of a summary of 1 John as I can offer, because it is taken from John's own words: "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them" (1 John 4:16–17). These words are crammed full of mystery, goodness, and invitation. First John is dedicated to unpacking the

mystery, heralding the goodness, and extending the invitation to a greater knowledge of God and his reliance-worthy love.

This is a life of grace from beginning to end. As John's friends needed to know, God's grace is sufficient for every context, contest, and crucible of life. This isn't religious cliché, a pious muse, or sentimental spirituality. At times, it is a matter of life and death. First John won't just show us the greatness of the love of God, but also how it is essential. Oxygen isn't just nice; it's necessary. It's the same with the love of God, lavished on us in the gospel.

## DISCUSSION *10 MINUTES*

For their salvation, the Gnostics relied on achieving a higher level of knowledge. What personal achievements are believers today tempted to rely on instead of solely trusting Jesus for salvation? Why is trust in these achievements so enticing?

What about spiritual growth? What personal achievements are you tempted to rely on for your spiritual growth instead of relying on the Holy Spirit? Explain why, if you can.



*Lesson*

# 1

**EXERCISE**

## TOO-SMALL IMPRESSIONS OF ETERNAL LIFE

*20 MINUTES*

You probably have some impressions about eternal life that fall short of what the Bible says. Perhaps you got these impressions from popular culture, or even from Christian culture. You might realize or suspect that these ideas are wrong, but they still affect how you react to the idea of eternal life.

A fuller sense of the wonder of eternal life can bolster your hope in Jesus. So for this exercise, consider some of the too-small impressions of eternal life that creep into your thinking. Begin by working on your own. Read through the descriptions of how eternal life is more than we sometimes think. Note some ways you most want to grow in your appreciation of eternal life, and complete the sentence at the end. When the group is ready, you'll have a chance to discuss your responses.

**I want to better appreciate how eternal life is . . .**

❑ **More than CLOUDS AND HARPS.** Eternal life is not just a *place* of ease and visual beauty, but a *person* of warmth and relational beauty. “We will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

❑ **More than an ENDLESS TIME LOOP.** Eternal life is not just living forever, but a lavish life jammed full of fellowship with Jesus. “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far” (Philippians 1:23).

❑ **More than COFFEE WITH A FRIEND.** This fellowship with Jesus is not just casual enjoyment, but deep intimacy with a perfect lover. Notice how *koinonia* is also how John describes the eternal intimacy between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

❑ **More than JESUS-AND-ME TIME.** This *koinonia* is not just private time with Jesus, but perfect fellowship and feasting with each other too. “The LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples” (Isaiah 25:6).

❑ **More than a CRUISE-SHIP LIFE.** Eternal life is not just an end to suffering with all needs catered to, but complete joy. In John’s gospel, he notes that when Jesus prayed for his disciples the night before he died, he prayed “that they may have the full measure of my joy within them” (John 17:13).

❑ **More than a GHOSTLY EXISTENCE.** Eternal life is not just a spiritual presence, but a firmly physical life with Jesus when he returns. “After my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God” (Job 19:26).

❑ **More than a TRANSPORTER-BEAM DESTINATION.** Eternal life is not just an instant escape from our physical world. Rather, it is the entire, vigorous experience of the created world we were made to enjoy and will enjoy when Jesus returns. “Creation

itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21).

**More than a DISTANT DREAM.** Eternal life is not just coming one day, but begins now. Notice how John uses present tense: “Our fellowship is with the Father and with the Son.” The *koinonia* that will soon be perfect is already a treasure today.

**More than a GOLD MEDAL.** Eternal life is not an achievement to earn, meant to pressure you now, but a gift of grace meant to delight you now and forever. Although you do run hard because you see the prize that awaits, it is all “by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

**More than \_\_\_\_\_.** (Pick your own that’s true of you.)

One truth about eternal life that would give me greater hope in Jesus if I more often remembered and believed it is \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

When the group is ready, share some of your responses. What too-small impressions of eternal life are sometimes part of your thinking? What bigger and better truths about eternal life do you most want to learn, and why?

If you more often remembered and believed these truths about eternal life, how might the way you live for Jesus today change? Try to be specific.

## WRAP-UP AND PRAYER *10 MINUTES*

Remember that John says his purpose in writing his epistle is to increase joy. As part of your closing prayer time, pray together that the Holy Spirit would use his words, spoken to you through 1 John, to increase your joy in Jesus as you complete this study.