

MATTHIAS BIBLE GUIDES

**The Letters
of John**

*Matthew
Jensen*

New Testament Series Editor
Geoff Robson

“I have found myself returning to these letters time and time again because they are able to say the most profound things about God’s act of salvation in simple and memorable ways.”

Matthias Bible Guides exist to help Bible teachers of all levels engage with the word of God and prepare themselves to teach the Bible to others. This series is for the **Bible study leader** who wants to equip himself or herself to prepare and lead studies that are faithful to the Scriptures and to answer questions with confidence. It’s for the busy **preacher** who’s faced with the wonderful but daunting task of writing a new sermon series. And it’s for **any interested Christian** who wants a reliable companion as they read through a book of the Bible, alone or with others.

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Series Editors

Old Testament: Kamina Wüst

New Testament: Geoff Robson

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 **matthiasmedia**
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

The Letters of John
Matthias Bible Guides
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About Matthias Bible Guides

Matthias Bible Guides exist to help Bible teachers of all levels engage with the word of God and prepare themselves to teach the Bible to others. This series is for the Bible study leader who wants to equip himself or herself to prepare and lead studies that are faithful to the Scriptures, and to answer questions with confidence. It's for the busy preacher who's faced with the wonderful but daunting task of writing a new sermon series. And it's for any interested Christian who wants a reliable companion as they read through a book of the Bible, alone or with others.

A Matthias Bible Guide is not a commentary. It's a good place to start *before* you read any commentaries. Like many commentaries, each guide gives some big-picture information on the book's authorship, date, genre, purpose and theological themes. From there, its aim is to equip you to understand the book for yourself and apply it to your pastoral context.

To create a series that's informed by serious scholarship yet accessible to all, the guides are written by authors who are both academically accomplished and pastorally experienced. All our contributors have academic qualifications in their area of the

Bible, and we've worked with them to distil their expertise into an easily digestible resource. The guides include tools such as suggested breakdowns for sermon and study series, plus recommended reading lists both at entry level and from more advanced academic sources. There are also free daily reading plans available online to accompany most guides, making the guides well suited to personal devotional use.

The guides assume a degree of biblical literacy while aiming to be accessible to Christians with and without formal theological training. That's why, for example, they include Greek and Hebrew words but make sure to translate them, and they use academic terminology while including a glossary of these terms in case any are unfamiliar. The guides are designed to be stimulating to those who already have a Bible college education, while opening up a new world of scholarly thinking to those who don't have such training.

While the guides reflect the theological convictions and, to some extent, the personal interpretations of the authors, they aim to *teach you* how to read the book instead of simply *telling you* what it says. The series operates within an unashamedly evangelical framework where the Bible is treated as the inspired, infallible and inerrant word of God and the supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and conduct. Within this framework, we aim to uphold what is certain from the text while stimulating your thinking around any areas of ambiguity, confident that the Spirit is working as you wrestle with God's word. In all this, our aim is to assist you not so much to master the Bible as to be *mastered by* the Bible.

As with all material published by Matthias Media, the aim of these guides is to help make and grow disciples of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Every Matthias Bible Guide is rich with

Christian application and ideas for illuminating the gospel in a way that's faithfully grounded in the unique qualities of each book.

In this volume, Dr Matthew Jensen leads us through the letters of 1, 2 and 3 John. The length and canonical placement of these books means they are easily overlooked, but Dr Jensen shows that this should not be the case. Just as the fourth Gospel has a style of its own, so John's letters have a style all their own and are an indispensable part of God's revelation of his Son, Jesus Christ, and of the life that he offers. Dr Jensen shows himself to be a reliable and compelling guide to John's writing. His approach to the letters—particularly 1 John—is fresh and nuanced, questioning some of the assumptions of evangelical scholarship, but always carefully grounded in the text of Scripture. From beginning to end, readers will be led into a deeper experience of the “blessed assurance” that John intended his readers to have.

Kamina Wüst and Geoff Robson
Series Editors

Getting started with John's letters

The three epistles of the apostle John, tucked away at the end of the New Testament, could be easily overlooked. For one thing, they're short—in fact, 3 John and 2 John are the shortest and second-shortest books in the Bible respectively.¹ Their shorter length—especially in comparison with long and theologically rich New Testament books like Romans or Hebrews—often results in them being unconsciously treated as second-class documents. Their apparent structureless collection of pithy sayings means they are sometimes hard to understand. They can seem circular, or may appear to lack the same type of careful argument that we are used to in the writings of Peter or Paul. As a result, the Johannine letters are left to be dipped into during breaks in the 'regular' sermon program, maybe during

1 Based on the number of words in the original Greek (the ESV translation of 2 John contains 300 English words; the translation of 3 John contains 302 English words).

school holidays. Perhaps we treat them in a similar way in our personal Bible reading, using them to fill a gap between much longer books, or excitedly knocking them off quickly before getting to the intense conclusion offered by Revelation.

Yet as anyone who has spent time pondering these wonderful books knows, they should not be taken lightly. John's letters pack some punch.

And thankfully, despite the reasons they are sometimes overlooked, they are known and loved by many. One of the reasons they are well loved is their large number of pithy and memorable statements. For instance:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9)

He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:18)

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:10-11)

God is love. (1 John 4:16)

Little children, keep yourselves from idols. (1 John 5:21)

But their theological and pastoral impact goes well beyond a smattering of quotable quotes. Having spent years studying

John's letters, I can confidently say that these works are theologically rich and clear in their purpose, and should be understood and cherished by every Christian. I have found myself returning to these letters time and time again—in personal study, in academic settings, and at church—because they are able to say the most profound things about God's act of salvation in simple and memorable ways. They are every bit as significant as the letters of Paul or Peter, or any other part of Scripture.

I am delighted that you have picked up this guide, and I hope that it gives you a clearer understanding of these wonderful letters, which should result in assurance of salvation for everyone who trusts, loves and serves the Lord Jesus.

The central message of John's letters

1 John

When we consider John's use of the verb 'write', we find that he has provided three explicit statements about his purpose for writing. The first of these (1:4) expresses his purpose with respect to himself—he was writing to complete his joy: "And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete" (1:4). This statement is not explicitly about how 1 John will affect its readers.

In contrast, the second statement indicates his purpose in writing for his audience: "My little children, I am writing these things to you *so that* you may not sin" (2:1). While this statement could possibly indicate the purpose of the book as a whole, it is better to see this verse as completing the argument of 1:6–2:2 and thus referring to the purpose of that section, rather than the whole document. This is because the theme of *sin*, while occurring in several places throughout the letter, is not as broad as the themes contained in the third purpose statement.

This third and final statement is found in 5:13. It is best to view this as the purpose of 1 John because the themes mentioned here run across the whole book. What's more, its placement near the end of the document matches John's writing style in his Gospel, where the purpose statement is found towards the end of the book (John 20:30–31). A simple comparison of the two statements shows their similar themes but different purposes:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30–31)

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:13)

Whereas the purpose of John's Gospel is to convince the reader that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus, so that by believing they might receive life, the stated purpose of 1 John is to provide assurance to those who *already* believe in the name of the Son of God.

So, when 5:13 is understood as expressing the purpose of 1 John, we can conclude that the central aim of the book is to *generate assurance* for its readers. This assurance is that those who believe in the name of the Son of God—those who believe that the Christ is Jesus—possess eternal life.

This statement ties together several key themes throughout the book. First, 1 John starts with the theme of eternal life as it testifies to the resurrected Jesus having conquered death (1:1–2).

It continues the theme throughout the book, even referring to eternal life as something God has promised to his people (2:25). This is in the face of some of John's fellow Jews denying that the Christ is Jesus (2:22–23, 4:2–3). The book's purpose is to assure believers that even in the face of denials of Jesus by those they know and love, they have eternal life—which will be revealed when Jesus returns to judge (3:2, 4:17).

The other material in the letter should be understood within this overarching purpose. The explanation of the present situation, the commands about how to live, the warnings of danger and discussion of how to respond—these are all part of John's wider purpose that his readers would be assured that they possess eternal life.

2 John

The letter of 2 John does not contain the same kind of explicit purpose statement as 1 John. While it would be easy to assume that it has the same purpose as 1 John given the similarities in content between the two books, it is better not to make that assumption, but to read the letter on its own terms. When we do that, we find that 2 John was written to encourage the “elect lady” (v 1; more on the identity of the “lady” below) to continue loving others (v 6), but to watch out that this love does not extend to the ‘antichrists’ (vv 8, 10–11) who deny the physical resurrection of Jesus (v 7).

3 John

The letter of 3 John contains the elder's encouragement to Gaius to continue to welcome and supply those involved in the mission of Jesus (vv 6, 8)—in contrast to Diotrophes, who has stopped such behaviour (v 10).

Big ideas

With all this in mind, we could summarize the big idea of each of the three books like this:

1 John

Those who believe that the Christ is Jesus possess eternal life.

Key verse: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13).

2 John

Continue to love others, but not those who deny Jesus.

Key verse: “And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it” (2 John 6).

3 John

Support those who are involved in the mission of Jesus.

Key verse: “Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth” (3 John 8).