

The Letters of John

Paraphrased,
explained,
for today.

GOOD NEWS

The Letters of John

Paraphrased, explained, for today.

Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf

Because I live, you also will live.

John 14, verse 19

The letters of John are paraphrased in my own words, that is, rendered with explanation. The text is roughly three times the length of the original biblical text in a classic Bible translation.

1st edition June 2020

© Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf – all rights reserved

www.hans-joerg-ronsdorf.de

Albis 6 ½

87477 Sulzberg

hj-ronsdorf@t-online.de

ISBN of the German edition 978-3-9820715-4-1

Cover design: Tobias Stricker

Why Read the Bible?

This little booklet has made it all the way into your hands. It is about one longer and two short letters written by a man named John. Almost 2,000 years ago. Can a text like this from antiquity matter today? Absolutely, because the writer experienced something special: He knew Jesus of Nazareth. He experienced him personally. That gives his letter unparalleled value. That is why it was included almost from the very beginning in the collection of writings we know today as the New Testament.

Do you want to get to know God? Does the truth about God matter to you? Truly getting to know God is the overarching theme both in the Gospel of John and in these letters.

Put in human terms, this letter of John crosses boundaries. Boundaries that no one can cross who has not been informed from the other side. This letter is like the clearest lake, the highest mountain, the most beautiful flower, the most magnificent lion, the most beautiful painting. No literary masterpiece comes even close, not even within sight of this letter. No Socrates, no Plato, no Xenophon, no one. This letter is a fireworks display of God's love. And of his holiness.

Whatever theologians today may suspect from their best research, whatever theses they construct and combine: This letter is not bothered by it. If we did not have it, the New Testament would be missing an essential building block. Thank God we have this letter!

How Current and Relevant Is the Letter for Today?

The thoughts and experiences of first-century Christians matter for believers today. After all, they too were people trying to live faithfully in their own complex and pluralistic societies. Then as now, it is not always easy to know exactly how to live faithfully. These early Christians can be our role models.

In a world already crowded with conflicting religions and philosophies, and in that way similar to our own, Jesus said: “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Jesus defines eternal life as knowing God. For only through our response to God’s self-revelation to humanity can each of us get to know him. And then begin life with him. Enjoy it. Now and for all eternity. That is an important theme for every human being in every place in history. And the theme of this letter!

Closer Circumstances and Occasion for the Letter

Any reader can get the impression that they were written in a time of division and confusion. Which arose above all in the circle of recipients that is called the Johannine community. Still, we make no concrete attempt – that has been done and is being done more than enough – to reconstruct the false teachings and errors. The truths presented in the letters could speak against a whole range of false teachings about Christ and be brought into the field against them. They existed in the forms of Gnosticism, Docetism, or the teaching of Cerinthus. There is not enough evidence to reconstruct the false teaching with that kind of precision. That is why it seems wisest to refrain from doing so. **The letters address a whole range of false convictions, many of which are still among us today.**

Three themes of the letter stand out in view of the situation into which it was sent:

Christology – Who Jesus Is and Why That Matters

The confession of Jesus as the divine Christ and Son of God who has come in the flesh stands at the center of the letters. Christology is the teaching about who Jesus is. From the very beginning it was clear to the disciples that the truth about Jesus was untouchable and could not be given up. With a false teaching about Jesus, the whole Christian faith would collapse. Denying that Jesus was truly human would mean denying the saving significance of the man Jesus and of his saving suffering.

What exactly the false teachers and deceivers who had come out from among these Christians were spreading, we can only guess. A second-century tradition reported by Irenaeus says that church leaders opposed a man named Cerinthus, who argued for a sharp distinction between the human Jesus and the spiritual Christ. Cerinthus believed Jesus was an excellent and wise teacher, but nothing more than that. The Christ, on the other hand, was a spiritual being who came down on the man Jesus at his baptism and left him again before his death on the cross (see 5:6-8).

Ignatius, another second-century Christian, warns believers against a “docetic” Christology. The term Docetism comes from the Greek word *dokeô*, which means “to seem.” The Docetists taught that Jesus only “appeared” or “seemed” to be human, and only “seemed” to suffer and die. Then there was another, somewhat later movement that challenged Christianity: Gnosticism. Perhaps the letter is aimed at these three movements in their earliest stages of development.

God's Love, Love for God and for One's Neighbor

Another great theme, if not the greatest, is divine love, “agape.” This theme is inseparably interwoven with John’s christological agenda.

The author reminds us of the non-negotiable central importance of keeping Jesus’ command to love one another. Love is the test of truth and of genuine life from God.

Duality – Twofoldness

Whoever takes in the letters attentively keeps coming across opposites. John's perspective is fundamentally shaped by a dualism between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, life and death, love and hate, ... of the (or this) world against what is "not of the 'world.'" John's world of experience is simply divided into two different camps. On the one side there is God, Jesus (God's representative), the Spirit, and the children of God. On the other side there is the camp that opposes God. These opponents include the devil and his children (1 John 3:8), the antichrist(s) (2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7), the spirit of the antichrist (1 John 4:3), and the world that has come under the influence of evil. For John it is easy to determine where a person's loyalties lie. A person's actions speak volumes, as 1 John 3:10 shows: "The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: All who do not do what is right are not of God, any more than those who do not love their brothers and sisters."

So in his way of speaking and in his worldview, John knows no gray areas. Black or white, as we would say today. Almost a digital way of seeing things. To us that sounds unfamiliar. But if we try to understand John, his approach is helpful for us today in some respects as well.

A reaction often heard, and an understandable one, was that one can hardly fulfill what matters so much to John. For him, active, selfless love holds spot No. 1 in the rankings. No ifs, ands, or buts. Non-negotiable. How is anyone supposed to love like that? And how not to sin? John has high standards. Actually unattainable. Whoever does not meet them 100 percent is out. Yes, this stark way of putting things can unsettle us. Because our life is not perfect. Not completely without sin. John knows that. Although he says that whoever is born of God does not sin (3:6; 5:18), he knows only too well that we still sin (2:1). In John's way of thinking this is no contradiction, and it does not need to be one for us either.

Who Is the Writer?

Although the documents are traditionally associated with someone named John, we have no internal evidence that confirms this tradition. **In fact, all three writings are anonymous.** Without greeting or address, John jumps straight into the argument; 2 and 3 John follow the old, familiar letter form and simply identify the sender as the elder, without giving a personal name. It is probably the same author as that of the Gospel of John and also of Revelation. Although much suggests that it was the disciple of Jesus, that is, one of the Twelve, it may also have been another John. That is, someone with the same name who was also a disciple of the Lord. Perhaps one of the seventy.

Structure and Purpose of the Letter

The text probably first served as a sermon in the author's church and was then distributed to other churches in the area. It was written with the aim of protecting, strengthening, or calling for the hearers' commitment to the Johannine tradition as it is laid down in the Gospel of John.

Theologians suggest that the letter can be regarded as "epideictic rhetoric." A kind of speech that aims to strengthen the hearers' commitment to values they already hold. Kruse's thought is illuminating: "The upshot of all this is that we should read 1 John without trying to discern the thread of an argument, as we would in a letter of Paul. He is not trying to prove anything; on the contrary, he is trying to strengthen the readers, in the face of the threat posed by the teachings and the ethics of the false teachers, to hold fast to the traditional truths of the Christian community."

I have read the letter many times and have always struggled to find a structure, a line, or a thread of argument. The structure is just as hard to pin down as its genre, that is, its literary type. There is no obvious overall design. Efforts to find a tight structure generally prove artificial and unconvincing. **Some fall back on the image of a spiral to explain the structure. The thoughts are more circular than linear.** He keeps returning to the same interwoven themes – sins, love, and sound Christology – and develops them further and further in the light of what has been said about the other two.

An outline might look like this:

	Cycle I	Cycle II	Cycle III
	1:1 – 2:28	2:29 – 4:6	4:7 – 5:21
The revelation	The revelation of the life of God (cf. 1:2)	The revelation of the Son of God and of the children of God (cf. 3:2, 5)	The revelation of the love of God (cf. 4:9)
The tests	The claim to fellowship with God, tested by a) righteous living (1:5 – 2:6) b) genuine love (2:7-17) c) right teaching (2:18-28)	The claim to be a child of God, tested by a) righteous living (2:29 – 3:10) b) genuine love (3:11-24) c) right teaching (4:1-6)	Divine life and love shown by a) love (4:7-21), b) obedience (5:1-5) and c) faith of the children of God (5:6-21)
The obstacle to overcome: the world	The world tries to draw us away from the Father's heart with its attractions. (2:15-17)	The world and its hatred of the children of God (3:13-15)	The world makes it hard to keep God's commands (5:3-5)
The warning	Warning against false christs (2:18-29)	Warning against false spirits (4:1-6)	Warning against false gods (5:18-21)

Diagram: Alois Wagner

The First Letter of John

Apostolic Testimony About Jesus, the Word: Come from the Father and Leading Us to Him 1:1–4

When Jesus called us Twelve to be his disciples, something completely new began. We heard it, saw it, and touched it. The beginning of real life. The way God intended it for us. The beginning of something that changed everything. And never ends. It is about Jesus, who is the Word, the LOGOS. He revealed the true life. For us.

We testify and report what has happened from the beginning. What we heard from him, the Word of life. It was more than just words. You could see that life and marvel at it – yes, touch it and embrace it. He was a **human being** like us, and we followed him for three years. We experienced him up close. We are witnesses, and we proclaim it to you. There is no doubt: He came from the Father.

The life of God, his very own eternal being, came to us in Jesus, the builder from Nazareth. We apostles, and many others too, have seen it. We are witnesses who proclaim this tremendous news to you. He, the Son, who is eternal life in person, came from God. He himself told us again and again that he had been sent by the heavenly Father. The Father wanted his Son to come to us. He who carries within himself this glorious, intense, eternal life of God. That is why the Son became a human being. The only way the divine life can reach us. To become our life. All people urgently need this gift of life. We are at the mercy of death. All those among you who deny that the Son of God truly became human and brought us life should know this too. **Eternal life was with the Father. Turned toward him. The life of the Father and of the Son. Through Jesus it becomes our life and connects us with the Father. As his children!**

We must report to you everything we have seen and heard of Jesus. When you hear it and believe it, Jesus becomes our shared center. The heart of all things, which binds us together. In Jesus, and in no one else, we have fellowship with one another. And, as unbelievable as it sounds: fellowship with the

heavenly Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. For he has given us a share in the life of God.

Through Jesus all of us, you and we, simply all who follow Jesus, are one in heart and soul. One family that belongs together and has everything in common. Shares everything. Into this togetherness the eternal joy of the triune God has come. Arrived in God's family. A joy that leaves earthly and worldly joy far behind. A joy that could not be greater. That all sense and that inspires all who live with alert hearts, active and hands-on, in the fellowship of God's family.

God Is the Purest Light – Life in God's Light – Forgiveness Under Jesus' Blood 1:5–10

But watch out! As special and unique as all this is, there is something that threatens this fellowship. There is something that does not fit at all with this fellowship and with God's nearness. Jesus' message was always clear and plain. He pointed us apostles to something very important that we absolutely have to pass on to you. If we did not do that, we would be guilty toward you: **God, the Eternal One, is holy. He himself is the purest and brightest *light*. He dwells in light. In him there is not a trace of darkness.** He does not accept sin and never compromises with anything that contradicts his glorious nature. That destroys people and his good creation. For example, lovelessness, ingratitude, selfishness, and disregard of or rebellion against his good commands, which are the best thing for us. Nothing of this kind of darkness is found in God – nor in Jesus. Of course this does not mean darkness in the literal or physical sense. It is about the darkness that spiritually darkens our hearts. That leaves our whole outlook on life without direction. A condition infected by sin and unrighteousness, separation from this glorious God, who is light.

So if we were to claim – as some among you do – to have fellowship with this glorious God, yet live in darkness, that is, in self-will, without asking about God, that would be a flat-out lie. And never the truth. But if we live in God's light, into which Jesus has brought us once and for all, then we have living and lasting fellowship with one another and with the Father and his Son. In his light, in his love, and in the joy of the Father's house.

Can we even live and remain in this holy light of God? We keep failing and sinning! Yes, we can. Thanks be to God forever. This is the reason we can be at home in his light forever: **His blood! His Son, Jesus Christ, sacrificed his blood, his life, on the cross. Through that we are cleansed from our sins forever. This precious blood, shed once, cleanses us for as long as we will still sin. Back then, today, and in the future!** We are always in fellowship with God. Even when we still sin. Even when our joy is clouded or gone altogether, we will not be thrown out of God's family.

Jesus' blood is our eternal security and guarantee. It is not our obedience or disobedience that makes fellowship with God possible or destroys it. God looks at the precious blood of his Son – that alone is why we are eternally secure. Forever. Just like the blood of the Passover lamb back then, which protected all the Israelites from judgment. **We are cleansed from *all* our sins. Even from the ones we overlook, forget, or are not aware of. And the ones we sadly will still commit.**

But if anyone should think, as the false teachers claim, that we have no sin at all and do not need cleansing through Jesus' blood, that is a great error. We would then be living past the truth and past reality. We would be leading ourselves astray. Our sins would plunge us into ruin.

There is only one way to be set free from this lie of sinlessness and self-deception. **Only when we *recognize* our sins and confess them to God do we get free from our sins. Only in this way do we receive the forgiveness that God wants to give us through Jesus' blood.** Only by recognizing and confessing, that is, by putting into words the sins we are aware of, do we come into true and living fellowship with God. With the Father and the Son. And so also into the fellowship of all followers of Jesus who live under Jesus' cleansing blood. Forgiveness is given to us for all sins. Once again: Even for those we have forgotten or are not aware of. And those we will still commit.

Have we earned it, or do we have any claim to God taking our sins away? No! But Jesus, who gave his life for us, is the certainty that God forgives. The precious blood of Jesus means his holy and sinless life. **He sacrificed it for us. This selfless, obedient sacrifice for us is of inestimable worth to God. That is why he gladly forgives anyone who confesses his sin to him sincerely, openly, and honestly. He has committed himself to do this. On**

the basis of this blood of his Son. God always keeps his word! For he is faithful and just!

Once more, and because everyone needs to know it: Whoever claims that we as human beings, the way we are born, or even as children of God, automatically live without sin is deceiving himself. Even more tragic is the self-deception when we sin and think it is not sin. For then we make God a liar. For he has shown us clearly what sin is. Whoever really believes he has no sin and lives without sin is lost. For he does not lay claim to Jesus' blood. He does not confess his sins! Whoever believes we are sinless, in thought, in mind, or in body, is mistaken. This is a false teaching that leads to ruin.

When Christians Sin: Our Advocate, Jesus the Righteous One 2:1-2

My dear friends, my little children in the faith, it goes without saying for us, and I should not even have to write it: **Do not sin!** When the eternal, holy, and glorious God takes us created and fallen human beings into his fellowship, then sin should be off-limits for us. It should be exactly the same for us as it is for him, namely darkness. Let us think and feel about it the way he does. May our no to sin grow and increase.

Being in fellowship with God also means honestly seeing and admitting our failure. For, we have to ask ourselves honestly, is there anything at all we do that is absolutely pure and holy? Sadly, we sin every day. Unconsciously and sometimes consciously too. We know what sin is and do it anyway. But if we as God's children have sinned once again, we are never lost because of it. Even if we think so, the Father and the Son do not. Fellowship with them is not interrupted. Nor reduced. If anything, it is our awareness, our realizing of this fellowship. But not the connection, the belonging, and the family bond. **For everything has already been forgiven. We do not need forgiveness all over again.** No one less than Jesus, the Father's Son, who died for us, is also there for us with the Father. He is our advocate, supporter, and helper with the Father. The one who lifts us up again. He, the Righteous One, is our security, our guarantee that we are and remain his children. The only one who was perfect, just as the heavenly Father is perfectly righteous.

Jesus has wiped out all our sins through his blood. Destroyed them. **He is the perfect and once-for-all *atoning sacrifice* for our sins.** And for those of the whole world. For everyone, for the whole creation.

God no longer finds anything unrighteous or impure in us. For all our sins, our unrighteous deeds against God and people, were atoned for in Jesus' death: Forgiven and taken away. **His sacrifice is so great and precious that it can wipe out all the sins of all the people of the world.** Everyone who seeks refuge with Christ and his sacrifice is granted forgiveness.

The Truth Test: Unity of Confession and Conduct 2:3–6

How can we know, then, that we know Jesus and follow him? Simply by loving and doing his *commands*. If someone claims to have a living and life-changing relationship with Jesus but does not do his commands, does not even try, he is lying to himself. And to others. God's truth cannot be present in someone like that. But whoever does Jesus' words, in him God's love is at home – yes, has reached its goal. He has not only received God's love but has also given it back and passed it on.

If we keep and do his word, we are in Jesus. Whoever claims to live with Jesus, to follow him, has no other choice than to live as Jesus lived. People will then see that Jesus' love, mercy, truth, and holiness can be seen in us too.

The Old and New Command: Love Remains the Greatest – the Darkness Is Passing 2:7–11

Dear friends, I am not really writing you a new command. It was new when Jesus gave it to us disciples. Looking back, it is the old, original, but still valid command. You received it when you received Jesus in faith. At the same time it is forever a *new command*. For **through Jesus it has gained an absolutely new dimension – as the command of love.** There had never been anything like it before. This command of love lived truly in him – and today in us. His life has become our life too. Yes, he lives in us! That way, and only that way, can we live and love like him. In Jesus the true light came into the world. With that, the new age of the future had dawned. The darkness has to give way more and more. It has also been driven out of our hearts and lives. We live in God's light. That is our home. There we feel at ease. And the day is coming soon when the darkness will disappear completely and Jesus will light up everything.

Whoever claims to live in this light but does not love his neighbor, but hates him, inevitably belongs to the darkness. Hate is at home in the darkness. That is where hate lives itself out. But whoever loves his neighbor belongs to the light.

In God's light he is safe and can see. Does not stumble and will not fall away from the faith. I have to say it once more: Whoever hates his neighbor is in the darkness. That is disastrous, for whoever walks around in the dark does not see where he is going. In the dark he is blind.

God's Family and the World 2:12–17

I am writing to you, **little children** loved by God: All your sins, even the ones you will still commit, are forgiven! The only reason for this is God's mercy and faithfulness, promised and given to us in Jesus. His name guarantees it!

You who have grown spiritually into *fathers and mothers* in the faith: You know and love Jesus more than anything.

You *young people*, you too will be fathers and mothers like that. Now, through Jesus, you have overcome the evil one, the devil, in faith. You have faced the battle and stood firm.

You **children**, who have not been in the faith for long, you have recognized the most important, the most basic thing: God, the Eternal One, is your heavenly Father. You live in his fatherly love.

I have written to you **fathers and mothers** because your knowledge of Jesus, your love and enthusiasm for him, make you what you can now be for others.

I have written to you **young people in the faith** because you are strong in Jesus. Above all because God's word, everything Jesus said, matters to you. You do it. With Jesus and his word you have managed to overcome the devil. All the false teachings he spreads and the people he has led astray could not take you by surprise.

All of you, watch out and do not love what people love and do who do not care about God and Jesus. That is the world. Do not set your heart on the world. True love can embrace only one thing. Whoever wishes for a life like the unbelievers have, or is envious of it, does not know the great **love of the Father** in heaven. The Father's love cannot possibly be at home in a world far from God. It is not welcome there. It never was, it is not today, and it never will be.

You want to know how you can recognize the world, what drives it, yes, what keeps it alive and pushes it on?

Giving in to and acting out every kind of **craving** – whether love of money, craving for recognition, alcohol addiction, gossip and rumor, sexuality, a thirst for sensation, gluttony, and much more.

The **lust of the eyes**, which looks only at what is of this world, what is visible and seductive. And so literally loses sight of true fulfillment.

The pride of life – such as showing off, pride, overestimating oneself and comparing, bullying, bragging about abilities and wealth, and much more.

Like an incurable disease, this plagues people. This is how you live when you are lord of your own life. Without God, many regard themselves as king of their own life. They take everything for themselves, as if God did not exist. Cravings like these never come from the heavenly Father. And so one day they will vanish forever along with the world system. Doing what Jesus says is the only rescue, the only way to escape the downfall of the world. Doing God's will is the only prospect for the future. The only way to experience God's new, eternal, holy, glorious world to come, in the light. Forever in eternal life.

The Antichrist and the Antichrists 2:18–19

You children of God, with Jesus the **last hour** has dawned. He said that the **antichrist, the false bringer of salvation**, will come. But now many antichrists are already appearing who put themselves in Jesus' place like a would-be Christ. They have taken a stand against him and against us. That is why we can say that the last hour has come. The revolt against the truth is what marks the last hour, the last time, until the true Christ comes. It is sad that these antichristian people even came from us originally. From our midst. They claimed to belong to God's family. But that was not true. If it had really been true, they would have stayed with us. But God has unmasked them: They are not from God, but from the evil one. They have no business being among us. For all of them teach and spread what is untrue.

The Anointing with the Holy Spirit and the Truth About the Father and the Son 2:20–29

All of us have **the anointing from Jesus**. From the Holy One. It is the Holy Spirit. Jesus poured him out on us. He has taught us that Jesus is the Christ. The eternal Son of the Father. I have not written to you so that you hear these

connections for the first time. For you already know them. Hold on to them. The lies of these people have absolutely nothing to do with the truth.

So which people who talk about Jesus must be called liars? **Why, those who deny that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah chosen by God! Someone like that is the antichrist, who denies the Father and Jesus, his Son. He says that God is not a Father at all and cannot have a Son.** So whoever denies that Jesus is the Son of the Father can neither know the Father nor have him as Father. But whoever holds that Jesus is the Son of the Father, and stands by it and testifies to it, has God, the Father. He is truly a child of God. That is also what you heard from the beginning. If you hold on to it as truth that is not for sale, then you are in God's light. Connected with the Father and the Son.

For us who hold on to this and stand up for it, the Father's unique promise applies. He fulfilled it in his Son, the Word of life, in the man Jesus: Eternal life. As mortal human beings, as sinners, we are to receive eternal life! Sin and death will be defeated.

I have to write all this to you. For these people are on the move, traveling preachers who want to lead you astray and rob you of these glorious and vital truths. I want to come back once more to the anointing you have received from Jesus. That is God's Spirit, after all, who remains in you and with you. So you do not need to let yourselves be taught by these deceivers and liars. Do not lend them your ears. Trust the Holy Spirit. He teaches you what is true. Stay close to Jesus, the Son of the Father.

And now I look ahead, my friends. I see the day when Jesus will appear in the sky, visible to all. That will be a day of the greatest joy. An incomparable day of celebration, when at last we meet our Lord Jesus with all our senses. If we want to experience this glorious day like that, then let us live with Jesus even now as if he were visibly with us. And follow him faithfully and eagerly until that day. If we do not, that day will take us by surprise. Or frighten and shame us. And hopefully it will not then become clear that some of you never belonged to him at all.

When we have recognized how absolutely righteous God is, then we can also tell whether someone is born of God and is a new creation. Namely when he loves and lives and does God's righteousness.

What a Gift: We Are Children of God, on the Way Home 3:1–3

Can you really grasp the *boundless love* with which God, the Father, loves us? For he has made us his children! Out of himself. It was his eternal plan and will. No one, not even an antichrist or a false prophet, can rob us of this or call it into question. It is true: **We have really become children of God.** He wanted it.

This new status as children cannot be detected from our outward appearance, from our bodies or our abilities. For now all of this is still invisible. People did not recognize Jesus outwardly as the Son of God either. He and we did not look any different from everyone else. To the world we are like everyone else. When it comes to faith, we are strangers to them. Look, we are children of God! Even though all the glorious qualities of being God's children that we will have in the future are not yet visible on the outside.

One thing is certain already now: **All children of God will soon be *like* the glorified Jesus Christ.** Like the one who appears in the sky and comes to the earth. Visible to all people. We will see him as he is. And be amazed. Stay with him. To experience this moment and what comes after it, this long-awaited encounter, is the center of our hope. That is what we live for. Every day it motivates us to remove from our lives, without compromise, everything that does not fit with him. With his holiness and glory and righteousness. In this way we are becoming more and more like him even now. And ready for his coming.

Sin, the Devil, and the Son of God 3:4–10

Whoever lives as if there were no God is in truth a sinner. Someone who misses his eternal goal. For God created him. He keeps him alive. He ought to be grateful to him. Such a lifestyle is also called lawlessness. Whoever denies God and his authority lives in anarchy. Through lives without God, people have piled up an unbelievable number of sins. No one can undo these sins against God and people. They can never be made good by human means. But that is exactly why Jesus came, to take away our sins. He can take them away as if they had never happened. No one could do that! Only he alone. Why? Because he was in no way infected by sin and never sinned. **He was the Righteous One who bore our sins and destroyed them.**

Whoever follows Jesus and wants to do what he says does not obey sin. All who live as if God did not exist have neither understood Jesus nor submitted to him as Savior and Lord of their lives.

Children of God, make no compromises! From God's perspective there is only ever an either – or! That is why I do not talk about gray areas. So that you understand, I emphasize a literally black-and-white contrast of the truths I am passing on to you. Whoever wants to obey God and lives by his commands is righteous. Just as Jesus was righteous in his life. Whoever lives as if God did not exist sins and misses the goal of his life. People like that then do what the devil has always done. He rejected God's authority from the beginning. He spreads this anarchy. Yes, he has led angels and people astray to do the same. Everyone who sins ultimately lets himself be inspired by the devil and stands on his side.

But God's Son came to destroy everything the devil has done. All his evil handiwork, everything he has left behind in people's lives. The works of the devil do not have the last word! You can already see that now. For every child of God is born of God and so is no longer ruled and controlled by sin. That a child of God does not have to keep on sinning – that is God's work in us alone! The life of God, his word and his Spirit, are present in his children. That is why it is not even possible for his children to love sin and live as if the Father did not exist. In the end no one can deny his true nature. It is either from God or from the devil. That is why no one may fool himself in this matter. All who do not ask about God and live accordingly cannot possibly be born of God and be children of God. A child of God is recognized above all by love for one's neighbor. Whoever does not love his neighbor selflessly and with deeds, as Jesus did, is not born of God. He is a child of the devil.

Love as the Sign of Life of Being God's Children 3:11–18

When you first heard about Jesus and his good news, love for one another was what mattered most. That made the big difference. It should always stay that way, that we love one another. A shocking example of the opposite is the old story of Cain. At the very beginning. He acted from the devil, the evil one, by murdering his brother Abel. Why did he do that? What he did was evil. Because he was from the evil one. But his brother was righteous. Abel was not from the devil, but from God.

So do not be surprised when something like this keeps happening today too. It is in the nature of evil to hate what is good and holy and righteous and loving. Yes, to destroy it. The people who live without God hate us, more or less. For they sense that we want to do what God wants. The difference between them and us could not be greater. **Because we are born of God, we have been rescued and brought over from death to life.** Death wants to destroy life. To kill. That is nothing other than hate.

The true and genuine sign of life of a child of God is that we love our neighbor. Above all the children of God. Turned around, that means beyond doubt: Whoever does not love his neighbor is still in death. He is not a child of God. Anyone who hates his neighbor is even a murderer like Cain – whether he actually kills someone or hates him with head and heart. It should be clear to everyone that someone who hates his neighbor cannot have eternal life. Even if for a short time it may have looked that way.

How do we recognize what is really meant by love? **We see the greatest example, and also the measure of what genuine divine love is, in Jesus.** Out of love he laid down his life for us. Sacrificed it on the cross. If he did that for us, it cannot be any other way: We will do the same for the children of God. For our neighbor too. Living out love does not have to mean immediately sacrificing your life for others. It means, for example, quite simply that I come to the aid of someone in need with my possessions. Give him what he urgently needs. If someone is not moved in his innermost being by his neighbor's need, then the love of God cannot be present in him. After all, it is the nature of God's love that you notice your neighbor's need, are moved by it, and do everything you can to help.

Children of God, stop just talking about love and making many words about it. Live out genuine love from God in deed. With an open heart and an open hand. Without selfish motives.

A Generous Heart Can Trust the Heavenly Father 3:19–24

Instead of helping our neighbor, our heart often clings to what we ought to give away. When we let go of our life and our possessions for our neighbor's sake, then we are in the truth. When our selfish heart does not let go, and even condemns selfless giving, then we set ourselves above God's command, which is greater than we are. That is the case when we consider it unnecessary to love

our neighbor, or when it stays at mere words. God sees exactly the motives behind our failure to act and our heart's objections to helping. We must learn to resist these feelings and doubts of our hearts. And to value the command of God's love more highly. **When our heart *lets go* in order to help our neighbor generously and selflessly, then we have free and joyful confidence toward the Father.** After all, we are loved by him as his children. We may bring our requests to him and experience that he gives us gifts. When we gladly give to our neighbor to relieve his need, then the Father also gladly gives to us. For his command matters to us, and we gladly keep it. In this way our life is a joy to him. **He gladly gives to us when we gladly give!**

God the Father gives us this twofold command: **To put our trust completely in his Son Jesus Christ** – in his glorious greatness and in the fact that he is enough for everything, and I mean really everything. In life and in death. **And to love one another**, just as Jesus also said. Whoever keeps this command remains in Jesus and Jesus remains in him. Can we know that Jesus is in us? Yes, through the Holy Spirit. He testifies to his presence in a mysterious way that only someone who experiences it understands. He gives us inner certainty and peace about it. The Spirit does not only testify to it. Jesus has given him so that he is with us always and at all times.

A Real Conflict – the Battle for the Truth: Who Jesus Is 4:1–6

Dear friends, many **false prophets** are out there in the world. Lying prophets, of whom I have already spoken. Who went out from us. In contrast to God's Spirit, whom you have, lying spirits speak through these prophets. So do not believe every person who wants to teach you. Test whether it comes from God. You recognize the true Spirit from God by the fact that he proclaims the truth about Jesus. Namely, that Jesus Christ truly became a human being. That he was on the earth and remains human forever. **He took on our human existence. With everything that goes with it. Except sin.** Although he was and always is the eternal Son with the Father. Whoever does not believe this and confess it before others is not from God. He is filled with a spirit of deception, the spirit of the antichrist. This spirit will one day appear publicly, in a big, spectacular, and seductive way. But even today this spirit is at work through such false prophets and would-be messiahs. They spread lies about the true Christ.

Children of God are born of God. You have seen through the lying prophets and overcome them. For in you is **God's Spirit**, who is stronger than the spirit of the world. Although they went out from us, their spiritual origin is not in God. Their origin is in the godless, yet still religious world. They speak what comes from the world and what pleases the world. The world gives them its attention. We, on the other hand, are from God. Whoever knows and loves God understands us. Whoever is not from God does not understand what we say.

It is a contested and embattled situation. It is about an either – or: Either the Spirit of truth is speaking, or the spirit of lies and error.

Love, Love, Love 4:7–16

Friends loved by God! Let us love one another. Why? Because love is divine. It comes from God. He is the source of the purest and deepest love. Everyone who loves as God loves is born of God. He knows and loves God. Whoever does not love as God does, does not know him. **For God's deepest and eternal nature is pure, holy, spotless love.** It is exactly this holy love that God has turned toward us. Given freely. By sending his one and only, his unique Son into the world. Because he became a human being, we human beings have received life. He brought it to us, who were in the land of death and darkness.

This love is completely undeserved. It was not a response to any love we might have had for God. There was nothing positive in us that moved God. There were our countless sins. Which we could not get free from. Those he wanted to remove. **So he loved us first and sent his Son to remove our sins through his sacrifice. Sent to bridge the endless distance to us. His Son as an atonement for our sins. To destroy them in his death. The cross is like the meltdown of God's love.**

Dear friends, if we have been loved like this, beyond all expectations, undeservedly, then we are downright obligated to love one another. If we love one another, then God remains in us. His incomparable love is then alive in us. It burns in us. Has reached its goal in us. God is Spirit, and no one, no human being, has ever seen him. **But today you can see and grasp something of him without seeing him with your eyes! Through the love with which God's family loves one another. In this love God is present.**

How can we understand that we are in him? And he in us? Through his Spirit we can understand it. Through his Spirit this living fellowship of love, rooted in him, is possible.

We apostles and disciples of Jesus have seen it and testify to you: The Father really saw our lostness. Our hopelessness. And he sent his Son. As Savior of the whole world. The Father sent his Son for all people.

Whoever believes and confesses that Jesus is the Son of God has fellowship with God and is connected with him. We have come to know and have believed what a great love God has for us. **For God is love. His whole nature is the purest love, love that gives itself away. He loves to love. No god has ever shown himself like this. That is what defines him completely. Everything he does and is comes from love.** Whoever lives in this love remains in God and God in him – recognizable by the fact that we are thankful to the Father from the heart and love our neighbor.

God's Love and the Day of Judgment 4:17–19

God's love has changed us completely. We have been given the gift of boldness and confidence before God. That is why we are not afraid of the day of judgment, when everyone will have to give account before God, the Holy and Righteous One. What counts then and stands firm is solely the fact that we have lived in the world as Jesus lived. That is true when we do his word; which is a matter of course for all who are born of God. Even if that may never succeed one hundred percent. But even so, because of this shortcoming and the sins in our lives, we do not need to be afraid. **Fear of God is never in the nature of God's love. On the contrary, God's perfect love drives out fear of the day of judgment. And also the fear of failing, of not living like Jesus.** After all, fear is already a kind of judgment, which can lead to despair. Whoever is still afraid of God and his judgment does not yet trust. He has not yet come to rest through God's love and Jesus' forgiveness.

Born of God in Order to Love 4:20–5:3

We love God and our neighbor. For he loved us first. It is important, never forget it: If someone claims to love God but hates his neighbor, he is a liar. Whoever does not love his brother, whom he can see with his eyes, how can he love God, whom he cannot see? We have this command from God, that

whoever loves him naturally also loves his neighbor. Love for God shows itself in the visible world. There, and not in abstract, invisible theory, it must prove itself.

Everyone who believes and confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, that is, the Christ, is a child of God. Born of God. The Father and his children are bound together in love as a family. Everyone who loves God naturally also loves the one who is born of him. They are brothers and sisters, after all! How can we see whether we love the children of God? By loving God and doing his word and his commands.

In us, God's children, God's love is the power, the motivation, and the gratitude to act. To know his commands and to do them. For those who have life from God, they are not hard. God's love is like fuel. That never runs out and burns in them. They gladly do God's commands.

Victory over the World Through Faith 5:4–5

For whoever is born of God overcomes the world. The world, which rejects God and his commands, also wants to conquer our hearts. So that we conform. Go along. Become like it. But we resist, standing firm and victorious. Stay with Jesus. Our trust in the Father, the Son, and the Spirit is the victory over the world. By faith we hold on to it. Who can overcome the world that is far from God and fend off its claim to own us? Only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God. This faith changes us and connects us with the Word of life. The world and the false prophets do not believe this. We do, and we stand by it.

Which Christ We Believe In 5:6–10

Jesus Christ came for us. He became fully and completely human. False teachers claim that at his baptism the “divine Christ” came down on the man Jesus of Nazareth. And that shortly before his death it left him again. But Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was baptized in water by John. He insisted on it. He himself let himself be executed. Nailed to the cross. Through his shed blood he has cleansed us from our sins. The Holy Spirit of truth testified this to you from the beginning. Yes, as the law of Moses requires, I can name two or three witnesses for you: water, blood, and Spirit. With one voice they affirm that God's Son became fully human. He stepped into public life and began to serve people. That started with his baptism in water. And the same one, the Son of

God, died at Golgotha. People can claim anything, but God's testimony is and remains greater. That is why it is trustworthy. The final authority. God has testified about Christ exactly what the three witnesses have testified. With one voice they describe the life of Christ: Spirit, water, and blood. Whoever believes in this Christ carries and keeps this unanimous testimony in his heart. Whoever rejects God's testimony about his Son makes God out to be a liar.

Only Faith in This Christ Gives Eternal Life 5:11-13

What God testifies about the Son is true and reliable. It concerns us very concretely. He has given us eternal life! This life is in no one else but his Son. In Jesus Christ, who became human, died for us, and rose again. And whoever has received the Son trustingly in faith into his heart and life possesses eternal life. It has become his new existence. With the Son, who is life, he received a new existence as a child of God. Whoever has not received the Son can never have eternal life.

I am writing this to you so that you know once and for all – not just hope or feel timidly or waveringly – and also do not doubt that you have eternal life. Not as something you can lose. Eternal life is comparable to your soul, which is your earthly life. In the same way, God's eternal life is your life and your indestructible existence as children of God. You are God's children who have God's life.

Provided you believe in the Son of God. In his name, which contains so much and stands for so much of what he is and was: He is eternal. He became human. He died for us. Was raised. Was taken up into glory. From where he is coming back. All of this and more is contained in the name of Jesus, in whom you believe.

Prayer That Is Heard 5:14-15

Everything I have written to you about God, our Father, invites us to be in his presence. We always feel drawn to him. We can have open confidence. **Come before him full of childlike trust and carefree confidence. In faith, as if he were only a step away.** Before his kind face. Above all when we ask him for something. He hears us and answers us. After all, we ask for what he wants. For we know him and his will – what pleases him. We can ask him for absolutely anything. For we know that he will answer us. When what we asked for is

granted by God, then we know that this is the answer to our request. God's good answer. He forgets no request and answers at the right time. Even when our prayer of intercession was long ago and we have forgotten it.

Sin and Death, the World and the Evil One, the True One 5:16–21

Children of God are a praying family. Especially when a family member is obviously and persistently acting against God's will. That is a serious matter. That is why the brother or sister needs our prayer, so that they recognize the sin, confess it, and leave it behind. Our prayers are absolutely necessary in a case like this. For they will give the brother or sister life when God hears us. In this way he or she returns, as God wants: into conscious and lived-out fellowship with the Father and the Son. And into the togetherness of God's family.

There is sin that leads to death. A brother or a sister, children of God, cannot commit such a sin. This sin marks the false prophets and the whole world, which lies in death. All unrighteousness is sin. No matter whether a child of God does it or a false prophet. But the sin of a child of God does not mean his death. But the sin of the world – it leads to eternal ruin. For it rejects Christ and his sacrifice for sin.

Whoever is born of God and has become a child of God does not keep on sinning. Not constantly, deliberately, and with delight. That is why the sin of a child of God is not a sin that leads to death. It cannot be. In my letter I have sharpened the truth into clear opposites. Explained it in black-and-white contrast. Whoever is born of God does not sin, because Christ protects him and holds on to him. Christ is always stronger. He is the victor over the evil one. That is why the evil one can neither touch nor ruin the one who is born of God.

We know for certain that God has given us new birth. People who reject God, on the other hand, are on the side of the evil one, the devil. They are in death. This difference, yes, this opposition, did not come about through ourselves. It happened through Jesus. The mission of the eternal Son of God was to show us God – his holy nature, his light, and his love. And to reveal to us why he had to come for us. For the believer it is vitally important to know Christ, the True One. For he is different from all the gods and idols of the world. Everything stands or falls with the Jesus we proclaim to you. With him

we are inseparably connected forever. We are in him. In the True One. Safe and secure. At home with him, no matter where we are in our earthly existence.

And I will say it once more, as clearly as possible: **He is the true God and eternal life. The builder from Nazareth is God. The Indescribable One, the Incomprehensible One, the Eternal One, who always was, the Creator. He is the life we have now. The one in whom we live.**

In view of this truth about the Son of God, all I can do at the end of my letter is emphasize: **Everything that belittles, weakens, or calls into question Jesus Christ and his honor – those are idols and remain idols.** My friends, watch out that no visible images of idols, and no “inner” ones either, such as honor from people or wealth that we cling to, are tolerated or admired by you in any form.

The Second Letter of John

John, the elder, is writing to you. One who cares for you as a shepherd. To you, the chosen lady and her children. To you, a small community of believers whom I love with all my heart. I mean the love that comes from God's truth. But also from Jesus Christ. All who have recognized Jesus Christ as the truth and love him love you too. The truth that Jesus is, is the foundation, the direction, and the measure of this love! The truth will remain in us, because Jesus Christ is in us. Always and forever! All believers will be in the fellowship of God's love forever. In eternal life.

God's grace, his mercy, and his peace will be with us. With each one of you – day after day. Given by God, our Father in heaven. And also by Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father. He too is God. God the Son. Who became human and revealed God's truth and love to us human beings. In this truth and love we live as children of God!

I was so very glad when I saw some of your children living in the truth. They keep the Father's command that Jesus brought us. **That is why I ask you to do what we have heard from the beginning. Not a new command that should surprise you, but the old one: That we should love one another.**

To remain and live in the Father's love means keeping his commands: To believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and to love one another. His commands are an expression of his love for us. They also serve as protection. Against the false teachers who travel around. Many deceivers are out and about today, full of missionary zeal, to spread their lies. They confess and proclaim that Jesus has not come in the flesh. **They deny that God the Son became fully and completely human – just as we are: Born in Bethlehem. Grew up in Nazareth. Worked for many years as a builder. Died on the cross outside the gates of Jerusalem. As atonement for our sins. Rose bodily. And was taken up into heaven as a human being. Whoever denies these facts in part or in whole is a deceiver and an accomplice of the coming antichrist.**

These deceivers are a real danger. So watch yourselves. Be on your guard! So that we do not lose what we have worked for. You are the fruit of our

missionary work! You yourselves have worked for eternal life. Done the work of God and believed in his name for eternal life. We do want to receive the full reward that is promised to us. It is given only if we hold on to the truth, live in it, and do not go beyond what has been revealed about Christ from the beginning.

Anyone who does not remain in the teaching of Christ as you heard it from the beginning – God does not live in someone like that. Anyone who remains in the teaching about Christ, the Son of God who became human, is connected with the Father and the Son. They live in him.

If someone comes to you and does not bring the teaching about Christ as I explained it to you from the beginning, do not take him in. Do not even let him have his say. Do not greet him and receive him the way you otherwise welcome a guest. For whoever still greets someone like that in this hospitable way shares in his evil deeds. Whether he wants to or not. If a traveling teacher comes to you and you do not know whether he speaks the truth about Christ, then clear that up first. Once that is cleared up, take him in. **Always take a clear position when it comes to our Lord Jesus Christ. Here there must never be neutrality or indifference. Otherwise our whole reward is at stake.**

I ought to write much more. With ink and paper. But it is much better and more beautiful to talk with you in person. For in that kind of fellowship, where we talk face to face, there is always great joy.

Warm greetings also from here, from the believers here where I am at home.

The Third Letter of John

I, John, the elder, the presbyter, am writing to you, my dear Gaius, whom I love in the truth. In the truth that came to us through Jesus Christ and has won our hearts, so that from now on we live in God's love.

Dear Gaius, how much I wish for you, and pray for it, that all may go well with you in everything. With your outer as well as your inner self. That you may have a good, smooth path.

How glad I was when brothers who had met you reported how much you shape your life by the truth. It makes me glad that the fruits of the truth in your heart can be seen by everyone. I have no greater joy than to see that my children are living in the truth. Those whom I was privileged to lead to Christ, the truth, and who are now filled with him. Who also hold on to the truth in love and love their brothers and sisters in the faith and their neighbors.

Dear friend, it is faithfulness to the truth, the way you have treated the brothers. Men you do not even know. They have testified here among us in the house church to your faithfulness in hospitality and celebrated it. When brothers like these are traveling as missionaries, equip them for the next stage of their journey. That pleases God and honors him. They serve him. In this way their ministry is supported. For they are not traveling for their own sake. They have set out for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. To proclaim him. In doing so they do not rely on support from pagans, but always look for their fellow believers on the spot. These are obligated, yes, indebted, to take them in. But do not take deceivers into your houses. Only the genuine missionaries. **In this way we become co-workers for the truth and are active participants in the work of the Lord. In his kingdom.**

I have written to the house church to which you, dear Gaius, belong. So that these brothers would be welcomed. But Diotrephes does not take our concern seriously. He loves to be first among them. And to decide things on his own authority.

When I come to you, I will remind him of this dismissive attitude and call him to account. That absolutely has to be cleared up. For he accuses us without reason with wicked words. He is not content with words, but simply turns away

the brothers who serve all of us and are looking for a place to stay. And he hinders those who want to give them lodging. He even threatens to throw them out of the house church. That is behavior that does not belong in the fellowship of believers.

Dear Gaius, do not let behavior like that provoke you into acting the same way. **Do not imitate what is evil, but what is good.** There is a simple and clear rule: Whoever does good is from God. For God is good. Whoever does evil has not seen God. He overlooks what God is like. He overlooks that God accepts us and that we should accept one another.

Demetrius is one of those who were turned away. Even though he, as the bearer of this letter, is well spoken of by everyone. There is nothing against taking him in. The truth is his priority. He stands up for it. He lives in agreement with it. We testify to that as well. And you know very well that we speak the truth.

There would be much more to write. But it is better to talk face to face and to share with one another in the fellowship of believers.

The peace of God be with you. The friends here send you greetings. Greet each of the friends who share your mind, personally from us. Each one individually.

In Closing

I very much hope that while reading you have sensed how God speaks to you. How he encourages, teaches, but also warns against everything that does not come from him and therefore harms us.

Thank him for all the good things he has said about you and also directly to you.

If you have questions, write to me: hj-ronsdorf@t-online.de

You can find more texts of the New Testament at www.hans-joerg-ronsdorf.de.

Here are a few more important tips:

Read the Bible. Regularly, if possible.

Read the Bible together with other people – and talk about it with one another.

Pray that God will make his word come alive for you – as if he were speaking directly to you.

Read the text aloud, twice in a row.

Ask the following questions of the text:

What heading would you give this text?

What does the text say about God and Jesus?

What does the text say about people?

What do we learn from the text?

What should we do?

How does the word encourage us?

When you meet again, talk about your experiences.

Seek contact and fellowship with Christians who love and honor Jesus Christ and who value, read, and take the Bible seriously.