

Dr. Robert Yarbrough, The Johannine Epistles

Session 2A – Theological Themes in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John

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Abstract:

This lecture, delivered by Dr. Robert Yarbrough, provides an **overview of the theological themes** found in the New Testament books of **1st, 2nd, and 3rd John**. Dr. Yarbrough aims to synthesize key ideas from these letters, highlighting topics such as **God, love, and knowing**. He approaches the material by examining how John's message speaks to two contrasting groups: **Christians facing persecution and potential martyrdom** and those experiencing a "bloodless religion" in affluent, peaceful settings. The lecture emphasizes that John's perspective on faith, love, and suffering is informed by his own **traumatic experiences**, including witnessing Jesus' crucifixion and the martyrdom of fellow believers, making his writings profoundly relevant to believers facing hardship or complacency.

Briefing Document: Here is a detailed briefing document reviewing the main themes and most important ideas or facts in the provided source, including quotes where appropriate:

Briefing Document: Theological Themes in the Johannine Epistles (1, 2, & 3 John)

Subject: Overview of Theological Themes in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John and their application to different Christian contexts.

Key Takeaways:

Dr. Robert Yarbrough's lecture provides a framework for understanding the theological themes in the Johannine Epistles (1, 2, and 3 John) by examining the most frequent words used by the author. He frames this discussion within the context of two contrasting Christian experiences: those facing persecution and potential martyrdom ("faithful dying") and those living in comfortable circumstances with a superficial faith ("bloodless religion" or "lax"). John's letters, informed by his personal experience of trauma and loss, offer relevant messages to both groups.

Main Themes and Important Ideas/Facts:

1. The Context of the Johannine Epistles:

- The letters are addressed to Christians living in varied circumstances, ranging from intense persecution and the threat of death to ease and spiritual complacency.
- The core question guiding this analysis is: "what does John have to say to Christians who are dying for their faith? ... And on the other hand, to Christians who are living with their bloodless religion." (p. 2)
- John's writing is viewed as an "encouragement to the very highest level of courage, loyalty, and sacrifice in Christ's service" for the persecuted, while also a "warning to weak or false believers and to call them back to the costly but glorious truth of Christ" for the lax. (p. 2)

1. John's Credibility and Insight:

- John's insights are rooted in several factors:
- **Divine Inspiration:** Like all Scripture, the letters are "inspired by the Holy Spirit" and "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness." (p. 2)
- **Pastoral Concern:** John is deeply concerned about Christians who may be "deceiving themselves about the sin and darkness in their lives," particularly those whose "bloodless religion" allows them to avoid persecution by straying from Christ. (p. 2-3)
- **Personal Experience of Trauma:** John was a witness to significant trauma, including:
 - Witnessing Jesus' crucifixion and the spearing of his side ("I saw this. His testimony is true..." - John 19, quoted on p. 3). This event, and others during Jesus' arrest and trial, were "events out of control, and they just kept getting worse." (p. 3)
 - Experiencing personal arrest, imprisonment, beating, and the threat of death for gospel proclamation (Acts 5, discussed on p. 4). He also knew "the miracle of divine deliverance." (p. 4)
 - The martyrdom of his brother, James (Acts 12:1, quoted on p. 4). John likely would have been next in line for persecution.

- The martyrdom of his co-pastor, James, the half-brother of Jesus. This was a traumatic event for John, having served alongside James for many years. (discussed on p. 5)
- Experiencing impulsive sinful desires, such as wanting to call down fire on the Samaritans (Luke 9:55, discussed on p. 5-6). These "shameful memory" moments also informed his understanding of human nature. (p. 6)
- Potentially witnessing the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in the late 60s AD, where "many thousands of his fellow Jews died, and doubtless many Messianic Jews died with them." (p. 6-7)
- John's experiences of trauma make him a "credible guide for people facing real or possible trauma due to their commitment in Christ." (p. 3)
- John "well understands real life and well understands the quality of community life when the stakes are high." (p. 7)

1. **Identifying Theological Themes Through Word Frequency:**

- An "empirical approach" is taken to identify themes by focusing on the "frequency of mention" of words in the Greek text. "The more they talk about something, the more that's probably what we should pay attention to." (p. 8-9)
- The top 12 most frequent words in John's letters provide a "summary of his theological message." (p. 9)
- The first three prominent words discussed are God, Loving (verb), and Knowing (ginosko - experiential).

1. **Analysis of Prominent Words:**

- **God:** Most frequent word (62 times in 1 John).
- **Message for the Faithful Dying:** The "eternal one defeats the evil one" through His word, which abides in believers, enabling them to "overcome the evil one." (1 John 2:14, discussed on p. 9-10) This word conveys God to us and opens our hearts.
- **Message for the Lax:** Those who claim to know God but "does not keep his commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him." (1 John 2:4, quoted on p. 10) Saying one thing and living another way is self-deception, and God is not fooled.
- **Loving (verb, agapao):** Second most frequent word (28 times in 1 John).

- **Message for the Faithful Dying:** Deep love for God is evidenced by love for "fellow believers, or what he calls hoi adelphoi, the brothers, which is inclusive of both men and women." (p. 11) This love is a "sign of deep love for God" and assures us of "eternal life beyond death in this world." (p. 11) "We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers." (1 John 3:14, quoted on p. 11) This love involves solidarity and putting one's life on the line for others in persecuted contexts. (illustrated with the example from Sudan, p. 11-12)
 - **Message for the Lax:** Lack of love for fellow believers indicates a state of abiding "in death" and a lack of assurance of eternal life. "Whoever does not love abides in death." (1 John 3:14, quoted on p. 11-12) A "lukewarm or absent" regard for fellow believers is a significant "check." (p. 12)
 - **Knowing (ginosko - experiential):** Third most frequent word (25 times in 1 John).
 - **Message for the Faithful Dying:** Christ's death for us empowers us to trust the Father and, if called, to "give our lives in his service." (p. 12) "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." (1 John 3:16, quoted on p. 12-13) Laying down our lives includes selfless "servant mode of care and expression of love for other people." (p. 13)
 - **Message for the Lax:** Those who do not listen to or "appropriate the full apostolic word" follow the "spirit of error" and do not truly "know God." (p. 13) "We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us. Whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this, we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." (1 John 4:6, paraphrased on p. 13) A failure to listen to the apostolic message, which includes core beliefs like the blood atonement and biblical gender identity, indicates not being "from God." (p. 14) Jude's letter is cited as a parallel warning against "godless people" who deny Christ and live in "sexual immorality," following a "spirit of error." (p. 13-14)
1. **The Importance of God as the Central Focus:**
- While social context is important, John's primary focus is "riveted by God, especially God the Father and God the Son." (p. 11)
 - His address to people stems from "that relationship with God and those convictions about God and the knowledge of God." (p. 11)
1. **Continuing Analysis:** The lecture will continue by examining the remaining frequent words in John's letters in subsequent sessions.

Conclusion:

Dr. Yarbrough effectively introduces the core theological themes of the Johannine Epistles by linking the frequency of key words to John's overarching message. He demonstrates how these themes offer both powerful encouragement to those facing persecution and stern warnings to those whose faith is superficial. John's own history of trauma provides a backdrop that makes his words resonate with practical relevance for Christians navigating challenging or complacent circumstances. The emphasis on God, love (especially for fellow believers), and a genuine, obedient knowing of God are presented as central to John's message for all believers.

Study Guide: Theological Themes in the Johannine Epistles

Overview:

This study guide is based on Dr. Robert Yarbrough's lecture, "The Johannine Epistles Session 2A – Theological Themes in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John." The lecture explores the major theological ideas found in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John, specifically addressing two audiences: Christians facing persecution and death for their faith, and those living a "bloodless religion" with low demands. The approach taken is empirical, focusing on the most frequently used words in the Greek text to identify key themes. The lecture highlights John's unique insight into suffering and faith, stemming from his own experiences of trauma and witnessing the persecution of others.

Key Concepts and Themes (Based on Most Frequent Words):

The lecture focuses on the first three of the twelve most frequent words in the Johannine Epistles:

1. **God (mentioned 62 times in 1 John, 2 times in 2 John, 3 times in 3 John):**
 - **Message for the Faithful Dying:** The eternal one (God) defeats the evil one. Overcoming comes through God and His word (which can be understood as both Scripture and Christ).
 - **Message for the Lax:** Those who claim to know God but do not obey His commandments are liars. True knowledge of God is evidenced by keeping His word, which perfects God's love in them. Claiming to know God is easy, but true knowledge is about character and action, not just a general idea of divinity.

1. **Loving (verb, I love - occurs 28 times in 1 John, twice in 2, and once in 3):**

- **Message for the Faithful Dying:** A deep love for God is demonstrated by love for fellow believers ("the brothers," inclusive of men and women). This love provides assurance of eternal life beyond death. Such love can be costly and dangerous in persecuted contexts, as it fosters solidarity among believers.
- **Message for the Lax:** Lack of love for fellow believers indicates abiding in death and a lack of assurance of eternal life. Lukewarm or absent regard for other believers challenges the authenticity of one's faith.

1. **Knowing (ginosko - occurs 25 times in 1 John, often experiential):**

- **Message for the Faithful Dying:** Christ's death for us empowers believers to trust the Father, even to the point of giving their lives in His service. Christ's selfless love inspires our own selfless love for others. "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 John 3:16). This doesn't primarily mean seeking martyrdom but embodying Christ's servant-hearted love in daily life.
- **Message for the Lax:** Those who follow the "spirit of error" do not truly know God and are not from God. Not listening to the full apostolic word is a sign of not being from God. Customizing one's understanding of God and church life outside of the apostolic tradition indicates a spirit of error.

John's Credibility (Based on His Experiences):

The lecture emphasizes that John's message is not abstract but grounded in real-life experience, particularly trauma. His credibility as a guide for those facing suffering and those living laxly is rooted in:

- **Inspiration by the Holy Spirit:** All Scripture is inspired and profitable.
- **Pastoral Concern:** John is concerned about those who deceive themselves about sin and walk in darkness to avoid persecution.
- **Personal Experience of Trauma:** Witnessing Jesus' crucifixion and the spear in His side (John 19).
- Witnessing Jesus' arrest and His protection of the disciples (John 18).
- His own arrest, imprisonment, trial, and beating (Acts 5).
- The martyrdom of his brother, James (Acts 12).

- Serving alongside and witnessing the martyrdom of James, the half-brother of Jesus (Galatians 2:9, Acts 15).
- His own impulse to call fire down on the Samaritans and Jesus' rebuke (Luke 9:55).
- Witnessing (perhaps from a distance) the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.

These experiences shaped John and give his words weight and relevance for those facing similar trials.

The Two Audiences:

The lecture consistently frames the theological themes in relation to two distinct groups:

- **Christians Dying for Their Faith:** Those who are committed, courageous, and willing to sacrifice for Christ and each other. John's letters offer encouragement, assurance, and affirmation of their costly faithfulness.
- **Christians Living with a Bloodless Religion:** Those in affluent or peaceful areas whose faith makes low demands. They may be lax, lukewarm, or even self-deceived, potentially walking in darkness or following a "spirit of error." John's letters offer warning, challenge, and a call back to costly truth and balanced Christian life.

Empirical Approach:

The lecture's methodology involves identifying the most frequent words in the Greek text of the Johannine Epistles. This approach assumes that frequency of mention reflects the biblical writer's focus and emphasis. By analyzing the prominence of words like "God," "love," and "know," key theological themes are revealed.

Quiz: Theological Themes in the Johannine Epistles

1. According to the lecture, what is the definition of a theological theme in the context of the Johannine Epistles?
2. The lecture identifies two main audiences John is addressing in his letters. Who are these two groups?
3. What does the lecture mean by "bloodless religion"?
4. Besides divine inspiration, list two reasons why the lecture suggests John has special insight into the question of facing death for one's faith or living a lax life.
5. Name one specific traumatic event from Jesus' life that John witnessed and that the lecture uses to illustrate John's credibility.

6. According to the empirical approach discussed, how can we identify the most prominent theological themes in a biblical book?
7. Regarding the theme of "God," what is the message for the faithful dying according to the lecture?
8. Regarding the theme of "God," what warning does John give to the lax?
9. Regarding the theme of "loving," what does John say is a sign of deep love for God and provides assurance of eternal life?
10. Regarding the theme of "knowing" (ginosko), how does the lecture connect Christ's laying down His life to the believer's life?

Quiz Answer Key:

1. A theological theme is a topic or idea that identifies a truth about God (Father, Son, or Spirit), deals with God's saving work, or addresses any aspect of man in the world as God views them, learned through revealed Scripture.
2. Christians who are dying for their faith and Christians who are living with their bloodless religion.
3. "Bloodless religion" refers to a faith practiced in a peaceful or affluent area where it does not require significant sacrifice or cost to the believer.
4. John had a pastoral concern for those deceiving themselves about sin, and he had personal experience of trauma and suffering. (Any two of the listed reasons for his credibility are acceptable).
5. Witnessing Jesus' crucifixion and the spear in His side, or witnessing Jesus' arrest and His protection of the disciples. (Other valid answers from the list of John's experiences are acceptable).
6. By analyzing the Greek text and identifying the most frequently repeated words, assuming that frequency of mention implies focus and emphasis.
7. The eternal one defeats the evil one, and believers overcome evil and fear through God and His word.
8. Those who claim to know God but do not keep His commandments are liars, and the truth is not in them; they are not deceiving God.
9. Love for fellow believers ("the brothers").

10. Christ laid down His life for us, equipping His followers to trust the Father and laying down their lives for the brothers, which can be understood as selfless service and love, not necessarily seeking martyrdom.

Essay Format Questions:

1. Discuss how John's personal experiences of trauma and suffering, as described in the lecture, inform and enhance the relevance of his theological themes for both persecuted Christians and those living in comfortable settings.
2. Analyze the contrasting messages regarding the theme of "God" that John delivers to the faithful dying and the lax, explaining how these messages address the specific challenges and temptations faced by each group.
3. Explain the significance of "love for the brothers" as a theological theme in the Johannine Epistles, detailing its role as an assurance of eternal life for the faithful and a stark warning for the lax.
4. Drawing on the lecture's discussion of "knowing" (ginosko), differentiate between a superficial claim of knowing God and the experiential knowledge that aligns with the apostolic message, and discuss the implications of this distinction for evaluating the authenticity of one's faith.
5. Evaluate the effectiveness of the empirical approach, focusing on the frequency of specific words, in revealing the central theological themes of the Johannine Epistles as presented in the lecture.

Glossary of Key Terms:

- **Theological Theme:** A topic or idea in Scripture that identifies truth about God, His saving work, or His view of humanity and the world.
- **Diakonia:** The Greek word for service or ministry in Christianity.
- **Bloodless Religion:** A term used to describe a faith that makes low demands and does not require sacrifice, often practiced in affluent or peaceful areas.
- **Spirit of the Antichrist:** A force or influence that opposes Christ, which John warns against.
- **Trauma:** A deeply distressing or disturbing experience that can have lasting effects on an individual.
- **Beloved Disciple:** A title often attributed to the Apostle John, highlighting his close relationship with Jesus.

- **Martyr:** A person who is killed because of their religious beliefs.
- **Sanhedrin:** The high court of ancient Israel.
- **Messianic Jews:** Jews who accept Jesus as the Messiah.
- **Empirical Approach:** A method of study based on observation and experience, in this context, analyzing the frequency of words in the biblical text.
- **Ginosko:** A Greek word for "knowing" that often implies an experiential or relational understanding.
- **Oida:** A Greek word for "knowing" that tends to refer to knowledge of principles or truths.
- **Hoi Adolphoi:** A Greek term meaning "the brothers," used inclusively in the New Testament to refer to fellow believers, both male and female.
- **Apostolic Word/Message:** The teachings and message delivered by Christ to His apostles and faithfully transmitted through them.
- **Spirit of Error:** An influence or teaching that is contrary to the truth of God and the apostolic message.

FAQs: What is the overarching question guiding Dr. Yarbrough's exploration of the Johannine Epistles?

- Dr. Yarbrough frames his discussion around a question posed by leaders of a persecuted church: "What does John have to say to Christians who are dying for their faith, and to Christians who are living with their bloodless religion?" This question highlights the stark contrast between believers facing intense persecution and potential martyrdom, and those in affluent, peaceful settings whose faith demands little sacrifice. John's letters are seen as offering guidance, encouragement, and warning to both groups, emphasizing the need for a balanced Christian life that may involve significant costs.
- **Why does Dr. Yarbrough believe John's letters offer special insight into navigating faith in the face of persecution or laxity?**
- Dr. Yarbrough provides several reasons for John's unique insight. Firstly, the letters, like all Scripture, are inspired by the Holy Spirit and are profitable for equipping

believers for good works and upholding them in trials. Secondly, John has a pastoral concern for those who might be deceiving themselves about their spiritual state, particularly those walking in darkness to avoid drawing attention or persecution. Finally, and significantly, John has personal experience with trauma and suffering. He witnessed Jesus' crucifixion and arrest, experienced his own arrest and beating, and endured the martyrdom of his brother James and co-pastor James (the half-brother of Jesus). He also lived through the trauma of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. This firsthand knowledge of high-stakes faith makes him a credible guide for believers facing similar circumstances.

- **How does Dr. Yarbrough approach identifying the theological themes in John's letters?**
- Dr. Yarbrough takes an empirical approach, focusing on the most prominent and frequently mentioned words in the Greek text of John's letters. He argues that the frequency of a word indicates emphasis and focus, thus revealing the core theological message. By analyzing these key terms, he seeks to understand what John prioritizes and how these themes speak to the different scenarios of Christians facing persecution versus those with a less demanding faith.
- **According to Dr. Yarbrough, what is the message about "God" in John's letters for those facing death for their faith?**
- For faithful Christians facing the threat of death, John's message regarding God is one of ultimate victory and overcoming evil through God's eternal power and His word. Referencing 1 John 2:14, Yarbrough highlights the idea that the eternal God defeats the evil one. The word of God abiding in believers empowers them to overcome evil and fear, even in the face of death. This emphasizes God's sovereignty and the security believers have in Him, even when their earthly lives are threatened.
- **What is John's warning concerning "God" for those with a "bloodless religion"?**
- For those with a bloodless religion, where outward profession is not matched by obedience, John issues a stark warning. Referencing 1 John 2:4, he states that whoever claims to know God but does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in them. Simply saying "I know God" is easy, but true knowledge of God is demonstrated through obedience to His word and commandments. This message confronts self-deception and the superficiality of a faith that lacks genuine transformation and commitment.
- **How does the theme of "love" relate to assurance of eternal life for faithful believers in John's letters?**

- John's letters emphasize that a sign of deep love for God is demonstrated through love for fellow believers. This love for the "brothers" (hoi adelphoi), encompassing both men and women in the congregation, provides assurance of having "passed out of death into life." According to 1 John 3:14, this selfless love is a tangible indicator of genuine faith and a connection to eternal life. In persecuted contexts, this love and solidarity among believers is particularly crucial for survival and mutual support.
- **What is the message about "love" for those whose faith is described as "lukewarm or absent"?**
- For those whose regard for fellow believers is lukewarm or absent, John's message is a sobering one: they "abide in death." The same verse (1 John 3:14) that speaks of the assurance gained through love for the brethren also warns that a lack of such love signifies a state of spiritual death. This serves as a check for individuals whose religious practice might be superficial or self-focused, lacking the outward expression of care and devotion for others within the Christian community.
- **How does John connect the theme of "knowing" experientially with the willingness to lay down one's life for others?**
- Dr. Yarbrough explains that the experiential kind of "knowing" (ginosko) in John's letters relates to believers being equipped through Christ's death to trust the Father even unto death in His service. Christ's selfless act of laying down His life for humanity serves as the ultimate example and foundation for believers to also be willing to "lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 John 3:16). While this may not always mean physical martyrdom, it encompasses a servant-hearted mode of care and self-sacrifice for the spiritual and physical welfare of other believers, mirroring the selfless love of Christ.