

The Johannine Epistles: Session 2A – Theological Themes in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John

Session Number: Session 2A (Balancing Life in Christ)

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Abstract

In Session 2A of the Johannine Epistles series, Dr. Robert Yarbrough explores the overarching theological framework of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John through two contrasting pastoral contexts: faithful believers facing martyrdom and lax Christians practicing a low-cost, "bloodless religion." Drawing from John's personal witness to profound trauma—including the crucifixion of Christ, apostolic persecution, the martyrdom of his brother James and co-pastor James, and the horrific destruction of Jerusalem—Yarbrough establishes John's authority as a credible guide for suffering believers. By conducting a linguistic frequency analysis of key Greek terms in the epistles, Yarbrough introduces a structured examination of twelve primary themes, focusing in this session on God, love, and experiential knowing. Ultimately, the lecture highlights how John's writing challenges superficial claims of faith while providing profound assurance to those called to endure trial and self-sacrifice.

Outline

I. Introduction to Session 2A and Theological Themes

- A. Course context and lecture placement within the series ("Balancing Life in Christ")
 - 1. Overview of lectures for exposition of individual epistles (1 John, 2 John, 3 John)
 - 2. Objective: Synthesizing theological themes across 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John
- B. Defining theological themes
 - 1. Truths about God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)
 - 2. Truths regarding God's redemptive work and human status in the world as revealed in Scripture
- C. Methods of recognizing theological themes
 - 1. Intuitive reading of Scripture accessible to all believers
 - 2. Advanced study for equipping believers for diakonia (service/ministry; Ephesians 4)

II. The Dual Pastoral Audience and Core Question

- A. Origin of the central thematic question from a persecuted church community
- B. Contrast between two Christian contexts:
 - 1. The faithful dying: Believers facing severe trial, persecution, and martyrdom

2. The lax believers: Those practicing a "bloodless religion" in peaceful or affluent environments with low personal cost

C. John's balanced message

1. Upholding high courage, loyalty, and self-sacrifice for faithful believers
2. Warning weak or nominal believers against compromising integrity to avoid trial

III. John's Credibility and Insight into Suffering and Trauma

A. Divine inspiration of Scripture

1. Scriptural authority equipping believers in trial (e.g., Jesus quoting Deuteronomy in temptation and Psalms on the cross)

B. Pastoral concern for self-deception and compromise

1. Addressing those walking in darkness while claiming fellowship (1 John 1)
2. Warning against the spirit of the antichrist (1 John 4:3)

C. John's personal witness to trauma and physical suffering

1. Witnessing the crucifixion and physical desecration of Jesus (John 19:34)
2. Experiencing the chaotic, traumatic arrest of Jesus (John 18:10) and divine protection
3. Imprisonment, trial before the Sanhedrin, and corporal beating in Jerusalem (Acts 5)
4. Martyrdom of his brother James by Herod (Acts 12:1–2)
5. Execution of co-pastor James, brother of Jesus, after decades of shared ministry (Galatians 2:9)
6. Personal shameful memory of wanting to call down fire on Samaritans (Luke 9:55)
7. Traumatic witnessing of the Roman siege, fall, and destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70)

D. Psychological and pastoral implications of trauma

1. Trauma as a lasting bodily and memory reality ("The Body Keeps the Score" by Bessel van der Kolk)
2. Modern parallels: Sudan persecution, natural disaster trauma, and wartime destruction
3. John's gentleness and authority in ministering to high-stakes faith communities

IV. Empirical Approach to Theological Themes: The 12 Prominent Greek Words

A. Methodology of frequency analysis

1. Frequency of occurrence indicating divine and authorial focus
2. Establishing the top twelve recurring words in the Johannine Epistles

B. The Twelve Prominent Words:

1. God (Theos)
2. Loving (Agapao - verb)
3. Knowing (Ginosko - experiential knowledge)
4. Abiding / Remaining (Meno)
5. World (Kosmos)
6. Son (Huios)
7. Love (Agape - noun)
8. Sin (Hamartia)
9. Knowing (Oida - knowledge of principles/truth)

- 10. Hearing (Akouo)
- 11. Commandment (Entole)
- 12. Father (Pater)

V. Detailed Examination of Selected Themes in Session 2A

A. Theme 1: God (Theos)

- 1. Frequency: 62 times in 1 John, 2 times in 2 John, 3 times in 3 John
- 2. Message for the faithful dying: The eternal God overcomes the evil one through His abiding word (1 John 2:14)
- 3. Message for the lax: Rejection of false profession; keeping God's word vs. self-deception (1 John 2:4–5)

B. Theme 2: Loving / Love (Agapao / Agape)

- 1. Frequency and significance in the epistles
- 2. Message for the faithful dying: Love for fellow believers as tangible proof of passing from death to life (1 John 3:14)
- 3. Personal illustration: Pastoral self-sacrifice during ministry in Sudan
- 4. Message for the lax: Lack of active love for brethren indicates abiding in spiritual death

C. Theme 3: Knowing (Ginosko)

- 1. Experiential knowing grounded in Christ's self-giving death (1 John 3:16)
- 2. Message for the faithful dying: Call to lay down lives for the brethren modeled on Christ's sacrifice
- 3. Message for the lax: Warning against the spirit of error; alignment with apostolic teaching as the test of knowing God (1 John 4:6; Jude 3)

VI. Conclusion

- A. Recapitulation of John's authentic, trauma-tested testimony
- B. Preview of upcoming session continuing the analysis of remaining prominent theological terms