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Session 33 - John's Epistles

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Alright, let's dive into a real-life mystery, one that's been puzzling people for nearly 2,000 years. We're talking about a series of anonymous letters that threw an entire early Christian community into a total crisis. And today, we're going to be the detectives, piecing together the clues to figure out exactly what went down.

So let me ask you this: what if you got a letter in the mail? It's super passionate, it's urgent, it feels incredibly important, but there's no return address. No signature. You'd be asking yourself, right? Wait, who on earth sent this? And who is it even for? Well, that's the exact puzzle we have with the letter of 1 John.

It doesn't have a normal opening; it just jumps right in. One scholar even said a postal carrier would have no clue where to deliver this thing. But luckily for us, the clues are all inside the letter.

And if we look closely, we can totally piece this story together. Okay, so to solve any good mystery, you need to know who the bad guys are, right? Or at least, the antagonists of the story. You see, this letter was written right after a huge split in the church.

A bunch of really influential teachers, we'll call them the secessionists, had just up and left. And believe me, they did not go quietly. So what was their deal? What did these secessionists actually believe? Well, they were really into this early version of what later became a full-blown religion called Gnosticism.

You can think of it as Gnosticism with a small g. The main idea was that salvation wasn't for just anybody. Nope. It was only for an elite few who had access to secret spiritual knowledge.

The Greek word for that is gnosis. And for them, the whole point was to escape this physical world, which they basically saw as a prison for the soul. So you can see the conflict brewing.

These Gnostic-like teachers were saying the body is bad, the physical world is bad. They even taught that Jesus only seemed to be human. That's a belief called Docetism, like he was some kind of phantom.

But the author of 1 John comes back swinging. He insists, no, the physical world is good, salvation is for everyone through faith, and maybe most importantly, he hammers home the point that Jesus absolutely 100% came in the flesh. And you have to understand, this wasn't just some abstract theological debate.

It had a real devastating human cost. I mean, imagine this. When these elite teachers packed their bags and left, they basically looked at everyone who stayed behind and said, "You guys don't have the secret knowledge."

You're not really part of the club. They left behind a community that was just spiritually abused, beaten up, and totally doubting everything they believed in. And that's why this letter is so important.

See, 1 John wasn't really written to attack the people who left. It was written to heal the people who stayed. The author's main goal is crystal clear.

He says, I'm writing this so that you can know for sure that you have eternal life. It's all about reassurance. It's a rescue mission for their faith.

So how does he do it? How do you restore that kind of confidence? Well, not with some super complex philosophical argument. He gives them three simple practical tests. Three ways for this hurting community to just look at their own lives and go, okay, yeah, we're the real deal.

We're okay. So here they are, the three tests. First up is the moral test.

Basically, are you actually trying to live an obedient life? Second, we have the social test. Do you genuinely love other people? And third, the big one, the doctrinal test. Do you believe that Jesus was a real physical human being? What's brilliant is that each one of these tests is a direct shot at what the secessionists were teaching.

But hold on. Just when you think the case is closed and everything makes sense, we hit a snag. There's a puzzle inside the puzzle.

The author makes two statements about sin that seem to completely flat-out contradict each other. And honestly, this is where things get really interesting. I mean, just look at this.

On the one hand, he says in no uncertain terms that a person born of God cannot sin, period. It's an absolute. But then just a couple of chapters before that, he says that if we claim we haven't sinned, we're literally calling ourselves liars.

So which is it? Did the author just have a really bad memory? No, the solution is actually pretty profound. It's this key theological idea called the already but not yet tension. The author is basically saying two things can be true at the same time.

On the already side of things, Christians have already been spiritually changed. They've been freed from sin's ultimate power. That's the ideal, the ultimate reality.

But on the not-yet side, they haven't reached perfection. They're not yet living in that perfect state. They're still struggling.

They still fail. And this beautiful idea explains both the perfect goal we should aim for and the grace that's there for us when we inevitably fall short. But wait, there's more.

The drama didn't just stop with one John. We actually have two other, much shorter letters. Two John and Three John.

You can think of them like follow-up case files from the same investigator. This mysterious figure who only calls himself the elder. Okay, so Two John is the short, sharp warning shot.

It's addressed to an elect lady, which most people think is a metaphor for a local church. And what's the problem? Well, guess who's back? Those same secessionists are now acting like traveling preachers. And they're trying to get back in the door.

So the elder gives a very stern command: do not receive them into your house. And he's not talking about their literal homes. He means, don't let them into your house church.

Don't give them a platform. Then we get to Three John. And this one shows us the crisis wasn't just coming from the outside.

Now we've got a problem on the inside. There's this one guy, Diotrephes, who's a real piece of work. He loves being in charge.

He's power-hungry. And he's trying to build up his own little following by dividing the church from within. It's a classic internal power struggle.

So when you put all three of these letters together, what you get is this incredible snapshot of a real community in crisis. They're fighting off threats from the outside and trying to deal with troublemakers on the inside. And it all boils down to this timeless question, one that we still wrestle with today.

When new ideas and difficult personalities threaten to tear a community apart, how do you decide who truly belongs?