It appears that 1, 2, and 3 John are letters written to different churches in the region of Ephesus in response to a group of heretics whom we call Gnostics. Most scholars believe that John wrote these letters before he wrote the Gospel of John. We don’t know a great deal about the particular group of Gnostics with whom John is concerned (there were a variety of kinds of Gnosticism); but based on the content of the epistles, this group seems to have denied that Jesus’s life in the flesh was essential to his role as Christ, and they seem to have believed that moral behavior is irrelevant to salvation (which does not necessarily mean they condoned immoral behavior, though they may have). (Paul repeatedly confronts a similar though even more serious false belief. See Romans 3:8, 31 and 6:1.) These Gnostic Christians seem to have thought themselves better than non-Christians, and they may have even thought themselves better than other Christians (which explains John’s constant reiteration that they should love their brethren). John’s overall intent in the letters seems to be combating this heresy by explaining Christ.

It is important to remember that these letters were written when apostasy was a very real threat, something happening before their eyes. Like Paul, Peter, and Jude, John could see the difficulty of keeping the new Church on course. In
these letters we see him giving what counsel he can before the end of his ministry.

Given the context in which these letters were written, how might they be particularly applicable to us today? How does their original context give them added meaning for us?

These notes will concentrate on 1 John 4:7–21.

1 John 4

In the previous chapters, John has emphasized two signs of a good relation with God: faith in Christ and love of the members of the Church. In this section (which continues into the first part of chapter 5), he shows how those two signs are related to each other.

Verses 7–8: John says that all who love are born of God and know him (verse 7). In this context, *knoweth* means “have an intimate relation with.” What does John mean?

How is he using the word *born*? How can what he says in either verse 7 or verse 8 be true? In what sense is someone outside the Church who loves (for example, Mother Teresa) born of God? In what sense does a person like that have an intimate relation to God? How is it that those who have made their baptismal and temple covenants and continue to keep the commandments, but do not love, don’t know God? What does it mean to say that a person doesn’t know God?

John has described those reading the letter as “little children” (e.g., 1 John 2:1), as the offspring of God. What does verse 8 imply about those who do not love?
What does it mean to say “God is love” (verse 8)?

Verses 9–10: To what does this refer in the first part of verse 9?

What is the point of verse 10? Can you explain verse 10 in your own words?

Verse 11: This is also a common theme in Paul’s letters (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 8:12), and we saw it in 2 Peter 1: God’s love for us obligates us to love one another. Some have argued that this means that when we don’t love another, we deny the atonement (since we implicitly say that Christ made a mistake in dying for that person). What do you think of that argument? Is it too extreme? Is it wrong? Is it right? In what sense or senses?

Verse 12: Joseph Smith’s inspired revision of this verse amends the first sentence. (See the footnote in the LDS edition.) Even with the emendation, however, it is odd. Why is it part of John’s discussion of love?

Is it possible to see God and not be loving? Why or why not? If we are loving, do we necessarily see God? Where or in what do we see God? What does seeing God have to do with our obligation to love one another?

In this context, what does “see God” mean?

What does it mean to have God’s love dwelling in us?

What does it mean to have his love perfected (in other words, completed) in us?

Verse 13: What is the connection between having the Holy Ghost and loving one another?
Does this verse explain why John said, “No man has seen God at any time, except them who believe” (JST verse 12)?

Verses 14–16: Why does John insert his personal testimony here? What has it to do with his discussion of our obligation to love?

What does it mean to confess that Jesus is the Son of God (verse 15)?

What does it mean to dwell in love (verse 16)?

What does it mean for God to dwell in a person (verses 15 and 16)? What does it mean for a person to dwell in God?

Verses 17–19: Does the word herein (in other words, “in this”) refer to what came before verse 17 or to what follows in it?

Remember the connection between perfection and completion or wholeness as you read verse 17. In the scriptures perfect rarely means “without flaw.” Instead, it means something like “ripe” or “whole.” In what is our love made perfect? How does the perfection of our love make us bold (confident)?

What does John mean when he says “as he is, so are we in this world” (verse 17)?

Why does perfect love cast out fear (verse 18)? This seems to imply that when we fear we do not love. If that is true, then when we lack confidence (when we fear we cannot do something or we fear to make a mistake), it is because we do not love sufficiently. Does that make sense? Is it true? Compare Doctrine and Covenants 121:45. How are these teachings related?
John says that fear carries with it punishment (verse 18). See the footnote to *torment* in the LDS edition. What does that mean?

Verse 19 is probably intended as a contrast to the last sentence of verse 18: “One who is afraid has not yet been perfected in love. But we love him because he first loved us.” What is the connection here? What is John’s point?

Verses 20–21: Why does John think this warning against self-deception is necessary? How do we say that we love God while, at the same time, we hate our brother? When and in what ways, by what acts, does that happen?

**Textual Note**

1 John 5:8–9 contains what scholars call the “Johannine comma.” (Besides referring to the punctuation mark, the word *comma* refers to a short phrase or word group.) The Johannine comma appears to be an insertion from a much later time. (The earliest manuscript containing the comma is from about AD 700.) Thus, most scholars believe that the verses should read as follows, omitting the part that is struck out:

> 7 For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. 8 And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.
What difference does it make to the meaning of these verses if we remove the comma? Are there other scriptures with a similar theme?

What does it mean to say that there are three that bear record? Bear record of what? (See 1 John 5:6.) Why such an emphasis on the physicality of Jesus’s birth?