

**LEARN TO LOVE  
IN  
1 John**

**A unique, verse-by-verse,  
life-application commentary  
by Terran Williams**

## Introduction to 1 John

The apostle John, the same one who felt comfortable enough with Christ to rest his head on Jesus' chest, has been called 'the apostle of love'. This letter reveals his great love for Christ, and for the church, as well as his great vision of how Christ's love transforms us, so that we ourselves live to love.

The letter of 1 John is written by the apostle John to a church or churches in the region of Ephesus. At times he addresses them as 'my dear children', and at other times 'dear friends'. He loves them deeply. These churches had been exposed to some convincing false teachers who presented to them a totally different spin on Jesus. Although they had withstood the deception of these teachers, they were shaken by the experience. So John wrote this letter to them in an attempt to restore their confidence in Christ, their joy and assurance of salvation, their discernment of false teaching, and the quality of their love and obedience.

The most common misinterpretation of this letter is that John is trying to get his readers to test whether they really are saved. But the truth is that John doesn't at all doubt their salvation, nor does he want to undermine their assurance of salvation in anyway. What he does want them to do though is to learn to differentiate between the false teaching and inauthentic spirituality (promoted by the false teachers) and the true gospel and authentic spirituality (handed down to them by the apostles, and powerfully confirmed by the Spirit).

John writes this creatively, in the form of a series of meditations that don't always directly link to the meditation preceding or following. Though his writing style may seem simple, yet it is layered with profound meaning.

## Going through 1 John on your own

- 1) Make time every day. Allocate as much time as you need to really hear from God for your life. When possible, read until you are full - don't just *snack* on the Bible, rather enjoy a *solid meal*.
- 2) Take your time as you go through 1 John. After all, it doesn't matter if you do the whole Bible in a year, or in five years, just as long as you're *steadily* moving through it.
- 3) Trust God to speak to you every time you read the Bible. Expect to receive just what you need for each day. Invite the Holy Spirit to be your primary teacher as you read.
- 4) Keep two questions in your mind as you read: 1) What do these verses mean? 2) What do they mean for my life now? If you can't find solid answers to either of these two important questions then refer to this commentary.
- 5) Carry into your day what you sense God saying to you. Perhaps write down the main things you sense God telling you each day. Pray to God about what he has just said to you. Make any needed adjustments in your heart and life as God reveals more and more of his Word, will and ways to you.

## Going through 1 John as a group

Why not work through 1 John as a small group for five weeks?

In preparation every week, everyone in the group needs to explore the allocated section of 1 John. Encourage everyone to use this commentary for increased insight, although some may only want to use the commentary when struggling to understand a verse. When you come together, re-read the allocated portion of the Bible, and then have a conversation where people answer two questions: 'What did you find most interesting?' and 'What has God been saying to you through these verses?' Then end the conversation by getting everyone to briefly complete the sentence, 'One way I want to change my life in light of these verses is ....'. Then pray together in response to God's revelation in his Word.

Week 1: 1 John 1:1-2:11

Week 2: 1 John 2:12-3:3

Week 3: 1 John 3:4-end chapter

Week 4: 1 John 4

Week 5: 1 John 5

## Outline

FELLOWSHIP WITH JESUS, THE GOD-MAN (1:1-4)  
WALKING IN LIGHT AND GRACE (1:5-2:2)  
AUTHENTIC SPIRITUALITY (2:3-11)  
ASSURANCE OF SALVATION (2:12-14)  
THE WORLD AND ITS DESIRES (2:15-17)  
DEALING WITH FALSE TEACHING ABOUT THE SON (2:18-27)  
CONFIDENT WHEN CHRIST COMES (2:28-3:3)  
NO TO SIN AND YES TO LOVE (3:4-18)  
KEYS TO REST, PRAYER AND INTIMACY (3:19-24)  
THE DANGER OF DECEPTION (4:1-6)  
GOD'S LOVE TO US AND THROUGH US (4:7-21)  
THE EFFECT OF THE NEW BIRTH (5:1-5)  
CONFIDENCE IN THE GOSPEL (5:6-17)  
CONCLUDING AFFIRMATIONS (5:18-21)

## About this commentary

It's not enough to own a Bible. Our Bible should own us. After all, it is the main way God speaks to us. Did you know that God put every verse in the Bible so that your mind could be totally renewed, so that your life could be deeply changed, and so that your calling could be fulfilled? (See 2 Timothy 3:16-17 if you're not persuaded.) That's why reading the whole Bible again and again is one of the most important things we can do.

Sometimes, however, the Bible is hard to understand. That's why commentaries are so useful. Most commentaries help you understand the *technical* meaning of each verse. This commentary helps you do a little of that too, but more than that, it focuses on the meaning of each verse *for our lives now*.

What's unique about this commentary? Most importantly, it helps you to find *the meaning for your life now* in every single verse of 1 John. It is written with 21<sup>st</sup> century everyday people in mind. It builds on the scholarship of brilliant theologians (most notably Michael Eaton) and commentaries, but doesn't focus on the exhausting technicalities that fill most commentaries.

## Two major sources used in this commentary

- Barker, Glenn: 1994. Expositor's Bible Commentary: 1 John. Zondervan Publishers: Grand Rapids, Michigan.
- Eaton, Michael: 1996. Focus on the Bible: 1,2,3 John. Guersney Press Co: Vale, Guersney.

# 1 John 1

## FELLOWSHIP WITH JESUS, THE GOD-MAN (1:1-4)

### *The Incarnation of the Word of Life*

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. 2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

### **Jesus is fully God, fully man, fully Life.**

- The churches which John was overseeing were under the attack of a heresy: many believed that when the Son of God came to this world, he didn't really become a full human being - he only appeared to be human. Rooted in dualistic thinking, this heresy grew because people could not comprehend how God could become a human, or how Spirit could be clothed in matter. To correct the heresy, John declared who Jesus really was and is:
- 1) *He is fully God.* The Son of God existed before creation ('which was from the beginning' (v1)) and was with the Father in heaven (v2). He, being God, is Life itself (v1,2).
- 2) *He is fully man.* The Son of God became fully human. He became incarnate in a physical, tangible body - which John himself saw, heard, gazed upon, and touched (v1). John proclaimed this as an absolute fact (v2). These two points are another way of echoing John 1:14, which tells us that God became human in the form of Jesus. Jesus is the God-man. Although people throughout the centuries have constantly tended to reject or underplay either his full humanity or his full deity, John is emphatic: Jesus is fully God, fully man.
- 3) *He is fully life.* The Son of God is Life. The gospel is the message about Life (v1). He was the appearing of Life (v2). He is eternal life itself (v2). Every living thing tracks its life back to the Life-Giving God. But Jesus has life in himself. What does it mean that Jesus has life in himself? It means that he is God. It means that he is the source of life, both biological and spiritual life. It means that he has in himself 'creativeness, enabling power, holy energy, vibrant love, pure zeal, energetic animation' (Eaton: 33). No wonder death could not hold him. No wonder he is so actively involved in his church and world. No wonder we need not fear death. No wonder we can experience supernatural energy and vitality in our intimacy with him.

3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. 4 We write this to make our joy complete.

**Jesus wants you to know and experience him, and the joy that this brings into your life.**

- In these verses, John tells us the effect he was hoping the letter would have on its readers: 1) He wanted them to have fellowship with the Father and the Son, by coming into agreement with the gospel-message of the original eye-witness apostles (of which John was one). What does fellowship mean? It is the experience of closeness and partnership with another. John insisted that the way to experience closeness to the Father and the Son, was to believe the message of 'us' (v2) - which is a reference to the original eye-witness apostles. Still today, we are not free to join those countless people who imagine up their own Jesus. Those who reject the clear biblical teachings of Jesus, and the clear historical record of Jesus, will never be able to have or maintain an intimate partnership with the Father or the Son. 2) He wanted them to deepen their joy (v4). John speaks of 'our joy' instead of 'your joy' - because John would experience joy in knowing that the recipients of his letter experienced the joy of fellowship with God. Closeness to and partnership with Jesus is the way of joy.
- As we embrace the clear Bible teachings about Jesus, we will be able to draw closer to God, and experience Spirit-enabled joy. But if we begin to doubt or distort the historical basis of our faith, we threaten our very fellowship and joy with God.

**WALKING IN LIGHT AND GRACE (1:5-2:2)**

*Light and Darkness, Sin and Forgiveness*

5 This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.

**There are two ways to live: in the light or in the dark.**

- Jesus revealed that God is light. This is a powerful metaphor that highlights several things about him. It tells us that he is a good God, and that all his motivations are pure. He is a holy God, and he hates sin. He will not tolerate evil and rebellion in his universe. He is radiant and beautiful, full of glory and wonder. He is a self-revealing God who has revealed who he is to us through Jesus and the Scriptures. He is a joyful God, with joy radiating from him, like sunrays from the sun.
- There is no darkness in God. The opposite of the above descriptions are not true of God. He is not bad. He is not impure and tolerant of sin. He is not unattractive. He has not kept who he really is a secret. He is neither drab nor miserable.
- There are two ways to live: 1) We can live in the light. This means that we embrace who God is, and start to live our daily lives in light of that. We live compatibly with who he is, and what he has said. 2) We can live in the dark. This means that we are either ignorant of or rejecting of

who God is as light, and as a result live incompatibly with who he is as light.

- Shockingly, verse 6 reminds us that it is possible to think we as Christians are fine with God (enjoying so-called fellowship with him), but as long as we don't know who he is, nor make an effort to live compatibly with who he is, we can never really have a close relationship with him at all. In contrast, the next verse (verse 7) tells us that **if** we do seek to live in the light that we will enjoy grace-powered fellowship with God and with other believers.

7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

**There are two ways to deal with your sins: deny them, or confess them.**

- There are two ways to deal with our sin as believers:
- 1) *We can deny our sin (v8,10)*. It appears that many believers had been influenced by a false teaching. This teaching claimed that physical sins were inconsequential to God, because they wrongly believed that matter and body were unimportant to him. (Only sins of a spiritual nature would be bad in this view). Today, the concept of sin is popularly questioned. Some people say that everything is relative, and that there is no objective wrong and right. Others teach that God is accepting, but not holy, and sin doesn't bother him. Some discourage any sense of guilt or responsibility saying that it is psychologically destructive. Still others say that sin is just an unavoidable reality of who we are, and we might as well just go with it like everyone else. Even today, many believers believe some of these lies, and no longer think of themselves as sinners, nor own up to obvious sin in their lives. When we do this, we actually deceive ourselves (v8) and disagree with Jesus, who taught that all are sinners in need of a Saviour, thereby accusing him of being a deceiver (v10).
- 2) *We can confess our sins (v7,9)*. Part of walking in the light is not only making an effort to live compatibly with God's wonderful character, but being ready to admit it when we fail. When we sin, we should call it sin, and resist all tendencies to hide, or deny, or justify our sin. John teaches us that as we confess, we will experience the purifying blood of Jesus afresh (v7b) and this will restore both a sense of intimacy with Christ, and with each other (v7a). Although we rightly believe that Christ's blood has accomplished our eternal redemption, verse 7 and 9 remind us that Jesus' blood also achieves for us *the ongoing daily experience of his forgiveness*. Until we humbly own up to our sin, we will not experience Christ's blood cleansing our consciences. And it takes a cleansed conscience to enjoy closeness to a Holy God. Verse 9 reminds us that

Christ is ready to reveal to us his liberating forgiveness, and his ability to wash us clean by removing from us the polluting, shame-producing stain of sin in our lives. What a wonderful Saviour - so ready to give us grace! But we can only experience this if we keep living in the light, with a readiness to own up to our sinfulness.

## 1 John 2

1 My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. 2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

### **God looks at you not in the light of your sin, but in the light of his Son.**

- In 1:5-10, John has spoken of Christ's rich grace toward those who sin. But now he makes it clear that this should not encourage us to sin. In fact one of the reasons he is writing this letter is to discourage sin (v1). John is telling us that although we will never be totally sinless we should still strive to eliminate all known sin from our lives.
- But if we do fall, then we should not despair, and become paralyzed by feelings of condemnation (which are usually associated with the devil's accusation against us). John obviously wants the fallen believer to stand up again - and the key to standing up again is to remember Jesus. Jesus, unlike us, is the totally Righteous One (v1) who is pleading on our behalf before God as a kind of Advocate. Though the enemy is the prosecutor, freshly accusing us before God the Judge, yet Jesus is our advocate, freshly defending us before his Father based on the work of the cross.
- Wonderfully, Jesus death' on the cross was an 'atoning sacrifice' (some translations use the word 'propitiation') for our sins (v2). This means that our sins were put on Jesus on the cross, and God punished them there. Instead of being under God's wrath, we are now under his warm acceptance.
- If the enemy is presenting our blunders to the Father, then thankfully Jesus is presenting his blood to the Father. Amazingly, our sins are no longer counted against us. In place of God's anger and judgment, we who have trusted in Christ and his cross, are recipients of mercy and tenderness. God does not look at us in the light of our sin, but in the light of his Son.
- But is Jesus' sacrifice for all of us, or (as some radical Calvinists teach) only for some of us? John is emphatic: the benefits of Jesus' death are available to everyone (v2). There is enough blood-bought mercy and tenderness to be available and applied to all 6,8 billion people in the world! Regardless of who we are, or what we have done, if we have placed our trust in Christ and the cross, then we have acceptance with God based on Christ's atoning sacrifice.

### **AUTHENTIC SPIRITUALITY (2:3-11)**

3 We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. 4 Those who say, "I know him," but do not do what he commands are liars, and the truth is not in them. 5 But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: 6 Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

**Authentic spirituality leads to a growth in Jesus-like obedience.**

- The most common misunderstanding of this verse is that John is encouraging Christians to figure out if they are really Christians. When John speaks of 'knowing God' he does not mean 'being a Christian' but rather 'experiencing God'. John is writing to Christians who have, through their faith in Jesus, been introduced to a wonderful experience of God through the Holy Spirit. But the problem is that many people in Ephesus (where they live) claim to 'know God' usually through ecstatic experiences, mysticism, visions and whatever means. And some Christians, influenced by these surrounding false teachings, may confuse these mystical experiences with the experiences of the Spirit. John wants to help Christians tell the difference between an authentic spiritual experience of God, and an inauthentic one.
- The main point he makes is this: you know that you have known, or have experienced, God when it results in a significant change of life: you evidence an increasing Jesus-like obedience. Let us explore this Jesus-like obedience: 1) It is a willingness to do what God wants you to do in your daily life (v4). 2) It is a growing love for God (v5). 3) It is increasingly evidencing Jesus' kind of obedience (v6). On this third point we must note that Jesus' obedience was not a legalistic, external-orientated obedience, but rather a deep heart-centred obedience to the dynamic leadership of the Spirit in his life. Jesus, from the core of his being, willingly and joyfully surrendered his life to doing the Father's will. His obedience was practical, other-centred, humble, loving.
- Today spiritual experiences fill the world and the church. Millions of non-Christian people claim to have a relationship with God, and to experience him (especially in the New Age movement, and in the more mystical religions). And naïve Christians everywhere have spiritual experiences that they think are from God, but are not necessarily from God. We need a way of discerning which of them really come from God. The main way of figuring this out is to reflect upon whether the people who claim to experience God are becoming more like Jesus, full of heart-obedience and love, in their daily lives.

7 Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. 8 Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and in you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

**The essence of Jesus-like obedience is Jesus-like love.**

- John has just been speaking of Jesus-like obedience in the life of a Christian (v3-6). Now he sums up what he means by Jesus-like obedience with the phrase ‘new command’, which is to love people, especially but not exclusively ‘fellow believers’ (v10). Jesus, while on earth, said to his disciples, ‘A new command I give you. Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another’ (John 13:34). He made it clear to the original Christians that the sign of discipleship is a life of love (Matthew 5:43, John 13:35). In verse 7, John is highlighting that this command goes way back to Jesus while on the earth, which was the beginning of the Christian movement.
- But John does not want people to think that just because Jesus long ago told his disciples to love that now, decades later, it is no longer a fresh command. Indeed the call to love is, in another sense, an ever-new command (v8) - we must feel its call everyday on our lives. We just need to look at Jesus, described in the gospels, and see the truth of love in him - ‘its truth is seen in him’. We just need to look at the changes that trusting in Jesus, the light, has brought in our own lives - ‘its truth is seen ... in you’. The testimony of most Christians is that ‘darkness is passing and the true light is already shining’ (v8). Slowly but surely, Christ is replacing loveless-ness in us with his own love, much like, at dawn, a rising sun slowly but surely replaces the darkness of night. To walk in the light is to walk in love.
- Love has been around since way back in the beginning (v7). Love, though part of God’s ancient plan, comes to us as a new command right now (v8). And love will grow in our lives in the future - as the light of Christ rises increasingly over our lives. Jesus-like love should increasingly characterize our lives.

9 Those who claim to be in the light but hate a fellow believer are still in the darkness. 10 Those who love their fellow believers live in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. 11 But those who hate a fellow believer are in the darkness and walk around in the darkness; they do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.

**Authentic spirituality leads to a growth in Jesus-like love.**

- In verses 3-8, John has argued that Jesus-like obedience and Jesus-like love is the sign of authentic spirituality. Many in the surrounding culture, especially religious movements like the early Gnostics of that day, claimed to be in the light (v9), to know and experience God (v4). They claimed to have an authentic spirituality. But John has argued that true spirituality is revealed in its impact upon the kind of people we are increasingly becoming. John is aware that some Christians have been influenced by the surrounding culture and think that it is enough to have spiritual experiences. Now John insists that, if those spiritual experiences really are from God, that they make us more loving.
- As Christians, we are to live in the light - and we can see how much we live in the light by how much we live in love. When we fail to love each other it shows that we really are in the darkness - and the darkness

makes us stumble (v10), and blinds us (v11). The Christian who does not seek to be transformed by Christ into a more loving person stumbles around in confusion, and is blinded by deception. They have an authentic salvation (and John does not suggest that the people he writes to are not really saved) yet they do not have an authentic spirituality.

## ASSURANCE OF SALVATION (2:12-14)

### *Reasons for Writing*

12 I am writing to you, dear children,  
because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.

13 I am writing to you, fathers,  
because you know him who is from the beginning.  
I am writing to you, young people,  
because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you, dear children,  
because you know the Father.

14 I write to you, fathers,  
because you know him who is from the beginning.  
I write to you, young people,  
because you are strong,  
and the word of God lives in you,  
and you have overcome the evil one.

### **Christians of all stages of faith desperately need assurance of salvation and reminders of what is theirs in Christ.**

- It may appear that John is speaking to three groups of people (i.e. children, fathers, young people) but he is really speaking to two groups. 'Dear children' refers to the whole church (see 2:1); 'fathers' refers to the more spiritual seasoned; 'young men' refers to the newer Christians.
- *All Christians need to know that they have a relationship with the Father based on Christ's forgiveness.* Notice what John affirms about the whole congregation: 'your sins have been forgiven on account of his name' (v12) and 'you know the father' (v13c). Every Christian needs to know that the forgiveness they enjoy has been achieved by Jesus Christ, not by their works. We need to know that through faith in Jesus, we have a relationship with the Father. Our relationship with the Father may be at a very early stage, but we have been made children of God through faith in Christ. We may damage this relationship through sin, but this verse assures us that we will never lose it.
- *Spiritually seasoned Christians need to have their long history of relationship with Jesus affirmed.* Notice what John twice affirms about the fathers (i.e. the more spiritually mature): 'you have known him who is from the beginning' (v13a, 14a). 'Him who is from the beginning' refers to Jesus here (see 1:1). He affirms their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. The fact that he is speaking to seasoned believers implies that he recognizes a long history of relationship between them and

Christ. The phrase 'from the beginning' captures some of this sense of a long history. Today, mature believers still need basic assurance of salvation. And they need to have the long history of their faith celebrated. It is as though John has this to say to mature believers: 'All these years you have known Jesus Christ - your faith is firmly established. Wonderful!'

- *Newer Christians need to know that they have all they need to be victorious in spiritual battle.* Notice what John has to say to 'young men' (i.e. newer Christians): 'you have overcome the evil one' (v13b, 14c), and 'you are strong and the word of God lives in you' (14). New Christians need to know not just that they are forgiven (v12), but that at the moment of salvation, Satan lost his power over their lives. Christians have been translated from a realm of darkness into the reign of the Son (Colossians 1:13). The victory over Satan has already been secured by Christ's death and resurrection (see Colossians 2:15). This does not mean that they will not face the heat of spiritual battle against the enemy, but it means that all the resources for victory are available. Christians have the strength of God available to them too. 'Finally be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power' (Ephesians 6:10). And we have the 'word of God living in us'. Salvation comes when the gospel, the message about Jesus, gets planted in us as a living entity (see James 1:18,21).

#### **Assurance of salvation is the basis of vital, joyful faith.**

- The most common misunderstanding of this letter is that John is trying to give the readers some 'tests' to see if they are really saved. But these verses refute that misunderstanding totally - we see that John has no doubt that the readers of this letter are saved. His concern in 1:1-2:11 has been to help them distance themselves from the false spirituality of the Gnostic religion, which was confusing them about what real spirituality (i.e. 'knowing God', 'fellowship with God' and 'walking in the light') was really about. After warning them about false spiritualities, John may be concerned that they think he is suggesting they may not be saved - now he makes it abundantly clear that he doesn't for a moment question their salvation.
- In these verses, he reassures them of their salvation. He knows that when a Christian is deeply assured of their salvation they are free to progress spiritually. Still today, it is imperative that we know that the basis of our salvation is not the quality of our character, or our moral works, but rather the work of Christ in our lives. Undermining a Christian's assurance of salvation never does any good! On the other hand, assurance of salvation is the basis of a vital, joyful faith.
- In the verses following (2:15-17) John will call them to higher levels of godliness. It is interesting that before he calls them to that, he assures them of salvation. The reminder to us is that an assured Christian is capable of greater godliness.

#### **THE WORLD AND ITS DESIRES (2:15-17)**

### *On Not Loving the World*

15 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If you love the world, love for the Father is not in you. 16 For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful people, the lust of their eyes and their boasting about what they have and do—comes not from the Father but from the world. 17 The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

#### **Don't love the world.**

- 'World' here does not mean 'earth' or 'culture' or 'human life'. After all, God is the creator of the earth, and affirms all he has made as good. Culture, though being corrupted, still has elements of God's grace at work in it. And human life - whether eating, love, marriage, sport or whatever - is something that even Jesus embraced when he came to this planet. So what does 'world' mean? It means *the evil tendency in humans and in culture to reject or ignore God and his will, and to exalt self and sin in God's place.*
- 'Love' here does not mean the self-sacrificial giving of one's self for another, as it means elsewhere in this letter. Rather it means *that which has won our heart's affection.*
- There are two reasons to not love the world. *First, the heart that loves sin and self is not able to love God at the same time (v15).* Love for God and love for the world are mutually incompatible. Jesus' words make this point: 'Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to one and despise the other' (Matthew 6:24). *Second, 'the world and its desires pass away' (v17).* This means that all that is done in rebellion against or ignorance of God and his will, and all that is of self and sin will ultimately be judged by God and come to nothing. On the other hand whatever we do that reflects our love for God and his will, will ultimately be rewarded. 1 Corinthians 3:14-15 unpacks this thought with more detail: on Judgment Day our lives as believers will be evaluated by God, and that which reflects love for the world will 'be burned' and we will 'suffer loss' - whereas what reflects love for God and his will, will 'survive' and will continue into eternity as a 'reward'. 'Whoever does the will of God lives forever' (v17).

#### **Be aware of the three channels through which temptation comes.**

- Verse 16 tells us the three major ways that temptation comes to us, and in which we sin:
- 1) *It comes to us through our physical appetites.* The phrase translated 'cravings of sinful man' by the NIV translation, literally means 'desires of the flesh'. Our body longs for food, for comfort, for rest, for touch, for sexual pleasure and more - and very often these physical appetites lead us astray. If we just do what our body wants then we are doomed to sin.
- 2) *It comes to us through our eyes.* The phrase 'lust of their eyes' refers to the way, when we see something, we begin to want to have it though it is not ours to have. For example, Achan 'saw' something and then wanted it (Joshua 7:1). David 'saw' Bathsheba and then wanted her (2 Samuel 11:2).

- 3) *It comes to us through our ego.* The phrase ‘boasting of what we have and do’ which can also be more literally translated as ‘pride of life’ refers to the sinful desire to be applauded, exalted and admired because of who we are, what we’ve accomplished or what we possess. The desire to be esteemed will regularly cut across the will of God for our lives. Either our heart’s passion will be for Christ’s exaltation or for our own exaltation.
- Interestingly, temptation came to both Eve in the garden (Genesis 3:1-6) and Jesus in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11) through all three of these channels.

## DEALING WITH FALSE TEACHING ABOUT THE SON (2:18-27)

### *Warnings Against Denying the Son*

18 Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.

#### **This is the last hour.**

- The phrase ‘last hour’ simply means the time period between the first and second coming of Christ. It is the final epoch of human history where humanity still defies its creator. The last hour is an epoch of great conflict between God and Satan. The mention of ‘the antichrist’ refers to the many biblical prophecies of a great human figure that would powerfully resist the church and the gospel (see Daniel 7:8,24-25; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 and Revelations 11:7, 13:1-18, 17:3-17, 19:19-20).
- The point that John makes is that throughout the last hour of this epoch between the first and second coming of Christ, there will be many mini-antichrists, who are a kind of preview of the final Antichrist. John reveals that the false teachers that have damaged the church he is writing to, are in this category.
- Still today, we must remember that we are in the last hour. We’re in an age of conflict. The enemy will try to resist the forward movement of the gospel and the church through ‘antichrists’ - whether they be persecutors, or infiltrating false teachers.

19 They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

#### **Not everyone who seems to be a Christian really is one.**

- This verse helps us to understand the history and situation of the people John is writing to. In the past it appears that some non-Christian false teachers joined the church, probably in a bid to try take over the church. They were imitation-Christians really. After a period of time they left the church. Though they seemed to belong to Jesus and the

church at first, eventually it was revealed that they did not belong to Jesus or the church at all. 'They went out' (v19).

- Still today, not everyone who calls themselves a Christian, really is one. They might claim to belong to Jesus. They might have joined a church as an imitation-Christian, but eventually it will be revealed that they don't really believe in Jesus as the incarnate Son of God at all. Though they might have a form of spirituality, it is not one that has the power to transform them into people of Jesus-like obedience and love. Given enough time, what they really believe will be revealed. Eventually they will leave the church. (And it certainly is necessary that they leave if they are seeking to undermine the faith of people in the church.)

20 But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. 21 I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth.

### **The Spirit and the knowledge of gospel-truth safeguards you against false teaching.**

- In the previous verses (v18-19), John refers to the false teachers who were once part of their church. It seems that, though the church had been shaken or perhaps even deceived for a while, they eventually discerned that these false teachers were teaching lies.
- John ascribes their victory over the deception to two things: 1) they have an anointing (v20) and 2) they know the truth (v21).
- The 'anointing' mentioned here refers to the indwelling presence of the Spirit in their lives ever since they put their faith in Christ. Jesus had promised his disciples that 'the Spirit of truth ... will guide (them) into all truth' (John 16:13). One of the things that the Spirit does in the life of a Christian is to give us discernment when devil-inspired lies are at work seeking to undermine the truth of the gospel. This is what he did for the church John was writing to. And this is what he still does today.
- Why does John use the word 'anointing' here rather than the word 'Spirit'? It is because he is trying to draw the connection between the revelation the fact that Jesus is the Christ and the fact that the Spirit is in us who believe. The Greek word for Christ literally reads 'The Anointed One'. We need the anointing (i.e. Spirit) to have a revelation of Jesus as 'The Anointed One'.
- But we need more than just a Spirit-empowered discernment to overcome false teaching. We also need knowledge of 'the truth' of the gospel message about Jesus. John affirms that they know the truth about Jesus (v21) and that this knowledge is what helped them shun the false teaching about Jesus. Wonderfully, we have the truth of the gospel handed down to us in the written form of the New Testament. In the same way that a bank teller learns to discern fake money through constant exposure to real money, so we can learn to discern heresies about Jesus by inundating ourselves in the New Testament record of Christ.

22 Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Messiah. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son. 23 No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

24 As for you, see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. 25 And this is what he promised us—eternal life.

**Stay loyal to the truth that Jesus really is the Son of God.**

- So what was this false teaching that had shaken and nearly deceived the church? It was that Jesus was not the Christ (v22). Interestingly the heresy went like this: ‘We believe in the spiritual pre-existent Son of God or Christ. And we believe in the man Jesus. But they were actually two separate entities. At some point (probably at his baptism) in Jesus’ life the Christ fused into him, and then later (probably just before his death) the Christ lifted off him. Jesus only appeared to be the Christ, but he himself - a mere physical man - was not the Christ.’ What an interesting spin on Jesus! To this day people keep coming up with new theories and spins on who Jesus was. Every false teacher that distorts the person of Christ is in a sense an ‘anti-christ’ (v22).
- But there is one problem with denying that Jesus really was and is the Christ: if we fail to acknowledge the Son for who he really is, it means that we cannot have fellowship with the Father (v23). This is because the Father has revealed himself to us through his Son, and he has also made it possible for us to approach him only on the basis of his Son’s atoning sacrifice (see 2:2).
- Although the readers have already prevailed over this false teaching (v20-21), John urges them to keep holding onto the gospel-truths about who Jesus really is. After all, they have known these truths ‘from the beginning’ (v24) - since they first became Christians.
- There are two wonderful benefits if we hold onto our convictions that Jesus really was and is the Son of God. Firstly, we will ‘remain’ (v24) in an ongoing, daily experience of the Son and the Father. Secondly, we will keep on experiencing the promised ‘eternal life’ (v25), which here does not refer to ‘heaven one day’ but rather to the daily spiritual joy and vitality that Jesus brings into our lives as we stay loyal to him.

26 I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. 27 As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him.

**Stay loyal to the Spirit who has taught you that Jesus really is the Christ.**

- It appears that the false teachers were claiming some special knowledge about the Son of God, probably based on some mystical experience that

they engaged in. They were trying to persuade the church that they were lacking in their experience of God, and lacking in knowledge of the truth. But John encourages them to keep on shaking off the deceptive influences of these false teachers. He reminds them that the 'anointing' (which means 'the Spirit who lives in you since salvation') will never leave them. He reminds them that, since they already know the truth about Jesus, they don't need anyone to come and try give them some 'special spiritual knowledge' of who Jesus is. The Spirit has already revealed to them that Jesus is the Son of God, and they can trust this revelation of the Spirit as something 'real' and 'not counterfeit'. Lastly, he urges them - since the Spirit of truth will always remain in you, make the effort to 'remain in him' - to keep holding onto the truth of who Jesus really is!

- Today, we usually come to know the truth of who Jesus is, usually by hearing a gospel-messenger tell us the truth in word or in writing. *But what makes us believe it is the Spirit's confirmation of this message in our hearts.* God shines his light in our hearts through his Spirit as we hear the gospel about Jesus (see 2 Corinthians 4:6). Over and above this initial work of the Spirit, the Spirit comes and lives in us when we trust in Jesus. He then *keeps on* pointing us towards the truth about Jesus (see John 16:13-14). He is trustworthy and loyal to us, and we need to stay loyal to him.
- An extra note on verse 27: people wrongly read this verse to mean that we just need the Holy Spirit, and not earthly teachers. This is not what the verse means. The context of the verse has to do with false teachers who are trying to undermine our faith in Jesus by suggesting that they have special knowledge about Jesus that the Scriptures and the Spirit cannot provide for us. The Bible elsewhere makes it clear that we need good teachers to establish us in our faith (see Ephesians 4:11 for example). We need Spirit-empowered teachers who help us understand and apply the Spirit-inspired Bible more accurately and thoroughly.

### CONFIDENT WHEN CHRIST COMES (2:28-3:3)

#### God's Children and Sin

28 And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.

29 If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.

## 1 John 3

1 See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know

that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.  
3 All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

### **When Jesus comes you will be gloriously transformed.**

- Christ will one day ‘appear’ (2:28, 3:2). This means that he will be ‘manifested’. Right now he is hidden from sight, but the time will come when he will be in full view to everyone.
- We will see Christ ‘at his coming’. This Greek word is ‘parousia’ and means ‘arrival’. Here it refers to what Michael Eaton (pg 86) describes as his ‘sudden, unexpected, literal, visible, personal, glorious, triumphant, public return’. The word ‘coming’ was also used to describe the arrival of a great king, such as Caesar, to a town. An event like this would be marked with great anticipation and preparation, joy and festivity. How much more awesome is the final arrival of Christ, the king of kings!
- Amazingly, ‘when Christ appears, we shall be like him’ (3:2). This refers to the radical change we will experience when Christ returns. We will finally be set free from the presence of sin. As we see Jesus in his resurrection glory, we will receive a new resurrection body - one that cannot decay or die, one that is bright and beautiful! The sight of Christ ‘will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body’ (Philippians 3:21).
- Already now we carry the great privilege of being sons and daughters of the Father (3:1). But our privileged identity as God’s children is not recognized by people who fail to recognize who Jesus is (3:1). But when we receive our resurrection bodies, the reality that we are children of God will become obvious to all (3:2). Oh, we have so much to look forward to!

### **Be transformed into Christ-likeness already now.**

- Our future transformation is certain. But what is not certain is our current transformation into Christ-likeness. Yet this is so important. There are two things that should motivate us to become more Christ-like already now:
- *Firstly, we cherish the reality of Christ’s coming.* We’re urged to ‘have this hope’ (3:3) of Christ’s return. This phrase is very important. The word ‘hope’ means ‘future certainty’ not ‘future possibility’. The Greek word translated ‘have’ (Greek: echo) is stronger than our English word ‘have’. A better translation is ‘hold onto’ or ‘cherish’. The phrase therefore means to ‘cherishingly hold onto the future certainty’. Sadly, not all Christians hold onto and cherish the hope of Christ’s return! But if we do hold onto and cherish this hope, then we will be greatly motivated to ‘purify ourselves’ (3:3). We’re urged to ‘continue’ in our faith (2:28). This calls for whole-heartedness and faithfulness. If we shrink back in faithlessness, or sin, or in being corrupted by false teaching and the surrounding culture, we will be ashamed on that day when Christ appears (2:28). But if we ‘continue’ we will have no reason to shrink back in shame at all. Rather we will be able to confidently celebrate, as we should.

- *Secondly, our revelation of Christ should lead us to become more like him.* Since Christ is 'righteous' (2:2) we seek to do what is right. In this verse, John seems to be referring to the unsaved false teachers who did not put much emphasis on 'doing what is right' since they failed to perceive Christ as righteous. Also, since Christ is 'pure', we purify ourselves (3:3).

### **NO TO SIN AND YES TO LOVE (3:4-18)**

4 Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. 5 But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. 6 No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.

7 Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. 8 The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. 9 Those who are born of God will not continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God. 10 This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Those who do not do what is right are not God's children; nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.

#### **You shouldn't excuse or tolerate sin in your life.**

- John has already told us that no Christian is sinless (1:8), but that we should still strive to stop sinning (2:1). When we fail we can take comfort that he is ready to forgive us (1:9). But this availability of forgiveness should not make us tolerate sin (2:1). Though we may not be sinless, God's plan is that, over time, we sin less and less.
- These verses strongly discourage sin in the life of a Christian. Sadly, they are usually misunderstood to mean that if you keep on sinning it shows that you're not a true Christian after all. But that cannot be what it means because it contradicts entirely what John had already told us in 1:7-2:2. Let's look at this passage verse by verse.
- Verse 4: The phrases 'breaking the law' or 'lawlessness' carry the meaning of 'wrongdoing'. John is not referring to breaking of the law of Moses, or the Ten Commandments. Rather, he refers to sin as anything that is wrong, that clashes with God's will for our lives.
- Verse 5: Jesus is radically anti-sin. In fact the reason our sinless Saviour came to this world was to free us from sin through his death on the cross. As Christians then, we must never believe that sin of any kind is permissible.
- Verse 6a: 'No one who lives in him keeps on sinning' is better translated 'No one who lives in him sins'. The reason translators make it 'keep on sinning' is that it reflect the common misunderstanding that John is saying 'No one is really a Christian who persists in sin for a long time'. This view is an attempt to make sense of this verse, but it is the wrong

way of interpreting it. A better way of understanding it is to compare the sentence 'no one who lives in him sins' with the statement 'no real scout gives up'. Obviously some scouts give up, but scouts shouldn't give up. Similarly, John is not saying it's impossible for a Christian to sin, but that a Christian really shouldn't sin. He is speaking in terms of ideals not impossibilities.

- Verse 6b: When John says that a person has neither seen him or known him, he does not mean that this person has never seen Jesus or known Jesus - but that currently this person has lost sight of Jesus. In other words, intimate relationship with Christ is incompatible with a life of sin.
- Verse 7: John has the false teachers in mind in this entire letter. Part of the false teaching is that people claimed to be right with God even though there was no sign they sought to live a right life. In this verse John calls that a deception. Being right with God will always lead to trying to live right.
- Verse 8: Sin is being radically discouraged in Christians with a simple argument: the devil is the promoter of sin, whereas Jesus came to destroy sin (and the devil who promotes it).
- Verse 9: Sin is again discouraged in Christians with another argument: sin is incompatible with the new nature that you received when you were born of God. The new nature that is imparted to us is compared with the planting of a 'seed' in soil. We can only become a Christian through the experience of the new birth. Along with this new birth comes a new capacity and desire to trust, please and obey God. Sinning is no longer first nature for a Christian: now our first nature is love and obedience.
- Verse 10: The false teachers were promoting a form of spirituality that initiated people into some philosophical ideas and mystical experiences, but did not in any way call people to live right or to love people. John argues that these false teachers were not being used by God at all - but rather by the devil.
- To summarize the content of these verses: Christians should seek to avoid sin because sin is incompatible with Christ's character (v5,7), with Christ's redeeming work (v5,8), with an intimate relationship with Christ (v6), and with the new nature we have received in Christ (v9). To sin is to be devil-like not Christ-like (v7,10).

#### *More on Love and Hatred*

11 For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. 12 Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. 13 Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.

#### **Christ came to reverse the effects of the fall in your relationships.**

- In 3:8 we're told that the reason Jesus came was to destroy the works of the devil. The devil has been sinning from the beginning, and leading others into sin. Now, verses later, we're reminded of how, once Adam and Eve had been cut off from God by sin, their children Cain and Abel

had experienced a radical breakdown in relationship. Still today, the main biblical explanation for the break down in human relationships is that humans have a broken relationship with God.

- Wonderfully, the gospel-message about Christ has this one supreme impact on our lives: it undoes the breakdown of relationship by replacing animosity with love (v11)! As we are vertically reconciled to God, we are able to horizontally reconcile to other people.

**Your changed life will attract hostility from time to time.**

- John returns to the grand theme of love once again. In these verses he helps them make sense of the hatred that the false teachers seemed to be showing the church. The false teachers had, probably in hostility, left the church some time before (2:19).
- John compares the false teachers (here described as ‘the world’) to Cain, and the church to Abel (v13). Genesis 4:1-8 records how Cain, being jealous of Abel’s acceptance by God, and feeling guilty when comparing himself with Abel’s righteousness, hated and killed him.
- Still today, some people will respond really negatively to us as Christians for these same reasons. They may be bitter because they’re jealous of what we have in Christ. They may feel guilty in light of our holy lifestyles. But, rather than turning to Christ themselves, they lash out at us. ‘Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Those who do evil hate the light ...’ (John 3:19-20).

<p>14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. 15 Anyone who hates a fellow believer is a murderer, and you know that no murderers have eternal life in them.</p>
---

**When a Christian fails to love, they fail to experience the eternal life that is theirs.**

- These verses are commonly misunderstood to mean that if you hate someone rather than love them that it proves that you are not really a Christian. But this is the wrong interpretation for several reasons:
- Firstly, John has already made it clear that it is possible and common for real Christians to sin (1:8; 2:1) and this does not mean that we have lost our salvation, or that this sin shows that we have not really been saved after all.
- Secondly, the word ‘know’ (v14) can in this verse be translated ‘experience’. In other words, as we love each other, we experience the reality of how we have passed from death to life. But if we fail to love, then though we still genuinely have spiritual life in Christ, we remain in death at that time. It is one thing being translated into a new realm of life out of the realm of death, but it is another thing entirely learning how to live out this new realm of life. Sadly, we still have this capacity to fail to live out our new spiritual aliveness.

- Thirdly, the phrase ‘have eternal life in them’ (v15) in this context does not mean to ‘have salvation’ but rather to ‘experiences the reality of eternal life’. Eaton writes that the phrase ‘eternal life in them’ here refers to ‘the flowing liveliness that comes from fellowship with God’. He then adds, ‘The Christian who hates will find himself powerless, joyless, feeble in resisting temptation and ineffective in his testimony. The eternal liveliness of the presence of God has temporarily withdrawn because at the moment the Christian is frustrating the purpose of salvation and is living a life of hate’ (pg 112).

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17 If any one of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

#### **Be deeply motivated to love others.**

- There are two things that should motivate our love for others:
- *Firstly, we need to keep Jesus’ example of love in our hearts and minds (v16).* Just think how Jesus loved us. Though we had hardened our hearts against him in sin and rebellion, yet he loved us. Though there was nothing lovely or attractive about us, yet he loved us. Though we shouted ‘Crucify him’ he responded to our fists of hostility with the kiss of grace. Think what Jesus gave up in his sacrificial love of us. He left the glory and comfort of heaven to come and rescue us. He humbled himself totally, even being made naked on the cross. Think how he suffered: willingly facing false accusations, betrayal, whippings, beatings and the profound humiliation of being crucified as a God-forsaken criminal. All because of love! As we ponder afresh his love for us, we’re motivated to love others ourselves.
- *Secondly, we need to let God’s love have its impact upon our hearts (v17).* If we fail to love someone, it is because the love of God does not remain in us (v17). This does not mean that we have never experienced God’s love, but rather that at that moment our hearts have hardened towards God. Let us allow the Spirit of God to pour out love in our hearts (Romans 5:5). Let him transform our hearts to be more like his own - a heart that readily loves God and others.

#### **Be practical in your love of others.**

- Perhaps the most shocking verse in the whole Bible is that God expects us to love others as Christ loved us (v16). This must mean that God really believes that, with his help of course, we can learn to love as Jesus did. Wow! Like Jesus, we can learn to love people not because there is anything in it for us, or because of a person’s attractiveness or loveliness. Though they may hate or offend us, yet we will be enabled by God to respond to their fists of hostility with the kiss of grace! And, like Christ, we too need to be willing to lay down our comfort, our reputation, our agenda - all in the name of love. As we humble

ourselves, and if need be embrace some humiliation, we love people. Loving people will cost us time, money, energy and possibly even our lives.

- One practical manifestation of God's love through us is that we do what we can to help people in practical need (v17). But notice that John does not say 'help all poor people everywhere' (which is impossible), but rather, help those that we have relationship with: 'the brother or sister in need' that we 'see'. We must be very discerning and not throw money at anyone in need because we're motivated by guilt, or an unsanctified compassion. Rather, in the context of relationship, we get to see some genuine needs. And we should not help them in a way that creates dependency, but in a way that preserves dignity, so that they can still feel like our peer-level 'brother' or 'sister'.
- Let's be careful not to just talk about love. Talk is cheap (v18). We need to love practically ('in action'). We need to actually get our hands dirty, if need be. But we also need to love intelligently ('in truth'). This calls for a love that is wise, thoughtful, imaginative, inventive, and based on a proper assessment of every situation.

### **KEYS TO REST, PRAYER AND INTIMACY (3:19-24)**

19 This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: 20 If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

**The key to bringing rest to a guilty heart is to take your eyes off yourself and put them on God.**

- All this talk of laying down our lives for others (3:14-18) has a way of making us feel guilty as Christians, because none of us love as perfectly or consistently as we should. John knows this, so he now reminds us not to get too introspective and self-condemning.
- When our hearts begin to condemn us, and we feel feelings of falling short, what can we do? John has already told us earlier in the letter to confess our sins and freshly experience the cleansing of our consciences through faith in Jesus' blood (1:7-2:2). Now John tells us to take our eyes off even our failures for a moment, and instead lift them to God 'who is greater than our hearts and knows everything' (v20). God is a great God. He is great in mercy. Though our love falters and fails, his love does not. Our confidence is not in who we are, but in who he is. And as we ponder his great mercy, and his loving knowledge of us, we overcome the crippling feelings of guilt and self-condemnation.

21 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God 22 and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him.

**Two keys to powerful prayer are to overcome condemnation and compromise.**

- What a promise: 'we receive from him anything we ask'. This speaks of power in prayer. But this verse reveals that there are two great barriers to power in prayer:
- The first barrier to powerful prayer is feelings of condemnation (v21). It is impossible to enjoy God's presence and to confidently ask him for things when we are crippled by feelings of guiltiness. The remedy is to confess our sins, and freshly experience Christ's blood-bought mercy (1:7-2:2) - and to try take our eyes off ourselves by lifting them to our merciful and great God, to the God who is greater than our hearts (v20).
- The second barrier is compromise in our lives (v22). We fail to 'do what pleases him'. If this is the case, we must repent. We must call on God for power to do all that he wants us to do. If we want power in our prayer then we must seek the progressive transformation of our lives.

23 And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. 24 Those who keep his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

**Two keys to Spirit-empowered intimacy with God are to trust in Jesus and to love people.**

- The phrase 'live in him, and he in them' speaks of the rich experience of intimacy that a believer can enjoy with Christ and the Father. It is an intimacy that is made possible by the Spirit (v24). John reminds them that they already have the Spirit (v24), whom they received when they first put their faith in Christ. Surely, the great privilege of the Christian life is the possibility of 'fellowship' (1:7) and intimacy with God. Wonderfully, although God is invisible, we are still able to experience him because of the presence of the Spirit in our lives.
- John reminds us that to enjoy Spirit-empowered intimacy with the Father and the Son we must 'keep his commands' (v24). Verse 23 summarizes what John means by this phrase 'keep his commands'. It means to believe in Jesus Christ, and to love each other. Notice that John makes the point that it is our faith in Christ that begins to make us more loving people. Paul echoes the same point in Galatians 5:6: 'All that matters is faith (in Christ) expressing itself in love (for people)'. We learn here that two vital keys to experiencing deeper intimacy with the Father and the Son, are to deepen our trust in Jesus, and our love for people.
- Interestingly, these two verses mention the words 'believe' (v23) and 'Spirit' (v24) for the first times in John's letter - although both concepts have been implied all the way through the letter up until now. There will be more mention of both terms in the rest of the letter.

## 1 John 4

## THE DANGER OF DECEPTION (4:1-6)

### *On Denying the Incarnation*

1 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

### **Discern whether 'revelations' really are from God.**

- God is a God who has revealed, and continues to reveal himself in authentic prophetic revelations (see Hebrews 1:1). Prophecy is still happens in the church (1 Corinthians 14:1). However, there is such a thing as false prophecy. Even Christians can bring misguided prophetic words either out of their own imagination (Jeremiah 14:14) or, more seriously, because of demonic deception (1 Timothy 4:1). That is why the church is told to discern whether prophetic words really are from God (1 Corinthians 14:23). Here John tells us to 'test the spirits' - by this he means: 'try discern the source of the prophetic word that flows out of the spiritual experience the person is having.' The counsel of John is clear: just because a person has a vivid spiritual experience, and gets a revelation during that time, does not mean that the spiritual experience was necessarily God, or that the revelation was necessarily God - no matter how real and wonderful the experience may have been.
- Eaton (pg 133) summarizes Martin Lloyd-Jones' writing on the subject: 'Don't trust feelings too much, even feelings that are associated with love for God. Be willing to think, and be well-taught by the Scriptures. Beware of prophecies that are predictive - not that they are impossible, but just that they need special care. If something contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture, reject it. Beware of excessive claims of direct guidance, of anything that makes 'self' predominant. And beware of the power of suggestion.'
- Here are some more tests: 1) Just because a person can do signs and wonders does not mean that the revelations they share are necessarily from God (Deuteronomy 13:1). 2) Look at the character and lifestyle of the person who brings prophetic words (Matthew 7:16-20).
- In this verse John tells them that the false teachers who were once part of their church are indeed also false prophets. They made many claims that they received through direct revelation from God, but John lets us know that they were false revelations.

2 This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3 but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

**Test teachings with regard to their beliefs about Jesus.**

- Jesus is fully God and fully man. This is what the apostles taught. Any teaching or revelation that someone claims to have got from God must be tested with regards to whether it believes that Jesus is fully God, fully man.
- John had told them to test teachings and prophetic claims (v1) but now he gives them the supreme test: ‘Do you believe that Jesus is as much God as the Father is God? Do you believe that he was as much human as we are human, except for sin?’ John reminds us that if any teacher or prophet cannot say yes to these questions that they are deceived.
- The false teachers claimed to be convinced via spiritual experiences and prophetic revelations that the earthly Jesus was not really God incarnate. What they believed exactly is hard to figure out but it seems they believed that there was a being called ‘the Christ’ who was not exactly the physical person Jesus. They were different entities.
- Today, there are thousands of groupings that neglect or challenge either the belief in Jesus’ full humanity, or the belief in Jesus’ full deity. We must not accept the claims of these groups.

4 You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

**Though the church can be shaken, yet it will prevail.**

- Verse 4 starts with ‘you’ and speaks of the church. What do we learn about the church John was writing to (v4)? We know that they had already discerned the false teaching of the false teachers, and these people had already left the church (see 2:19). They already had achieved a victory. John here also expresses his conviction that ultimately Jesus’ church will prevail every attack from people in the world because ‘the one who is in you’ (i.e. the Spirit of God) is greater than anything or anyone in the world!
- This explains why the church over the last two millennia has overcome so much resistance - whether it was false teaching, physical persecution or intellectual assault. Though the church can be shaken, yet it will prevail because God lives in his church!

5 They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.

**People in our culture are prone to embrace spiritualities that accommodate their sin.**

- Verse 5 starts with ‘they’ and speaks of the false teachers/prophets. What do we learn about the false teachers (v5)? Apparently, though the church rejected their message the surrounding culture increasingly accepted it because the message was so accommodating to them. Their message invited people to experience wonderful spiritual experiences and listen to dazzling philosophies but did not call anyone to repent of any sin.

- Still today, people fall for messages that accommodate their sin (see 2 Timothy 4:3-4). In the West, the New Age movement and its thousands of off-shoot spiritual movements, introduce more and more people to experience an a-moral spirituality.

6 We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

**The gospel is true - take it or leave it.**

- Verse 6 starts with 'we' and speaks of John and his fellow-eyewitness apostles. Though the false teachers had a teaching that was based upon a spiritual experience they had, John and his fellow-apostles had a revelation that was based on facts, not just experience. Their message spoke of how the Son of God had come to this earth in the form of Jesus. John had even seen him transfigure on a mountain (Mark 9:2-3). They had spent much time with him (1:3). He never sinned. He had died and risen again from the dead. He ascended into the heavens before them. And he was still alive and could be accessed through the presence of his Spirit who had been poured out on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). Although, centuries later, we do not have access to the apostles themselves we do have access to their writings (i.e. the New Testament) - which is just as solid.
- Sadly, the false teachers esteemed the insights from their interior revelations over the clear historical facts of the Jesus Christ. And in so doing, they rejected the Spirit-empowered preaching of the gospel and instead listened to deceiving spirits that blinded them to who Jesus really was.
- We must make our choice: will we believe the simple gospel message about Jesus, or will we listen to voices that undermine this message. The gospel comes to us as a take-it-or-leave-it message, and Christians are those who take it. As we take it, we are introduced to the possibility of knowing God. To believe the gospel is to begin to know God. To reject the gospel, is to neither belong to God, nor get to know him.

**GOD'S LOVE TO US AND THROUGH US (4:7-21)**

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

19 We love because he first loved us. 20 If we say we love God yet hate a brother or sister, we are liars. For if we do not love a fellow believer, whom

we have seen, we cannot love God, whom we have not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love one another.

### Love people.

- 4:7-21 is quite possibly the very summit of the whole Bible, and certainly is the summit of this letter. It reminds us that if there is one word that describes the kind of God we have, and the kind of people he is making us, it is the word: love. These verses have 6 sections:
  - Love people (v7-8)
  - Ponder God's amazing love (v9-10)
  - Love people (v11-12)
  - Experience loving intimacy with God (v13-16)
  - Let love transform and liberate you and others (v17-18)
  - Love people (v19-20)
- In this point I want to comment on verses 7-8, 11-12 and 19-20 since they all make the same point: love people.
- Three phrases in verses 7-8 need some explanation: 'Love comes from God' (v7). God is the source of love. It is as we receive God's love that we are able to extend God's love. God's love first comes to us, then flows through us. 'Everyone who loves has been born of God' (v7). John is not implying that the proof that you really are born again is that you love. Not at all. Rather he is saying that being born of God, or born again, gives us the capacity to start loving in the way that God loves. 'Everyone who loves ... knows God' (v7). When John speaks of knowing God, he is referring to authentic spirituality. Many people, like the false teachers, claimed to know and experience God, but John reminds us that an authentic relationship with God will overflow in love toward people. Said the other way around, if a person is consistently unloving towards others, then regardless of what they may claim, they're not making progress in their relationship with God (v8).
- God's love first comes to us, and this both energizes and obligates us to love others (v11,19). As we understand God's love for us, we begin to understand what authentic love is toward others. It is God's kind of sacrificial, undeserved love.
- 'If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us' (v12). It is as we make the effort to love others that we more richly experience intimacy with God (he lives in us) and we increasingly become more loving (his love is made complete in us).
- 'No one has ever seen God' (v12) and 'we have not seen God' (v20). God is invisible, and it is therefore easy to deceive ourselves and others into thinking that we love this God. But John makes the point that the real evidence that we love the invisible God is that we love people who we can see. The sign that we really are growing in love for God is that we are growing in love for people (v21).
- To summarize, the priority of the Christian life is to be Christ-like in our relationships with people, starting with those closest to us (i.e. our brothers and sisters (v20)).

8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

**Ponder God's amazing love for you.**

- John is urging us to be people who love others like God loved us. In these verses he tells us how God has loved us. This will both inspire us to love, and inform our understanding of what kind of love God wants us to evidence.
- 'God is love' (v8). God has always been a loving God. Love is who he is. And who he is, is expressed in everything he does. He created the world in love. He redeemed the world in love. He is drawing the world in love. He will even judge the world in love and he will restore the world in love. 'The Lord set his love upon you because the Lord loved you' (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). Similarly, if we are to become more loving, it will be because God's loving character takes root in our hearts, not just in our behaviour.
- 'God showed his love among us' (v9). God's love is no secret. It is not just spoken about, but demonstrated in action. When God visited this planet in Jesus, and died on a cross for us he was revealing his love for us. If we are to love like God loves, it will be seen in action, not just in words.
- 'He sent his one and only Son' (v9). There is nothing more precious to the Father than the Son, and yet in his love for us, he was willing to give up his own Son! In the same way, if we love like God loves, then we should be ready to give up everything of value if need be.
- 'Not that we loved God, but that he loved us' (v10). While we had rejected and ignored God, and had turned our backs on him - neither glorifying him nor giving him thanks (see Romans 1:21) yet still, he sought us out in love. While we shouted 'crucify him' he prayed, 'Father forgive them'. He answered our fists of hostility with the kiss of grace. Our relationship with God was in total disrepair, and we made no effort to restore it, yet God assumed the role of initiator. He moved toward us as we moved away from him. That is real love. It courageously initiates towards the undeserving. That is the kind of people Christ is fashioning us into.
- 'That we might live through him' (v9). Jesus' death brought us life. It made it possible for the Spirit of God to come indwell us, and infill us. The gift of the Spirit is the sequel gift to the gift of the Son on the cross. Real love wants the very best for the one it loves. And the best thing a person can have is to be made alive in Christ, and regenerated by the Spirit!
- God 'sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins' (v10). The greatest problems humans face is not to be found on earth, but in heaven - our sin has invited the righteous anger of God, and has brought us under the shadow of God's wrath. Amazingly, Jesus became our 'atoning sacrifice' (or, as some translations put it, 'propitiation'). This simply means 'a

sacrifice that turns away God's righteous anger and judgment'. Wonderfully, God has taken the sin of us hell-deserving sinners, and has put it on Jesus the innocent one - and has punished it there. Instead of punishing us for sins, God assumed the punishment himself! This is why we can stand warmly accepted and not condemned before a Holy God. Similarly, as we ponder God's mercy toward us, we should become more merciful to those who have wronged us.

- Interestingly, these verses describe two major aspects of salvation: namely regeneration ('live through him' (v9)) and justification ('atoning sacrifice' (v10)). It is because God loves us that we are made alive spiritually, and made righteous in his sight! God's love has destroyed death and replaced it with life! God's love has removed the barrier of hostility between God and us, and has replaced it with warm acceptance! Let us never speak of regeneration or justification as mere theological terms - but rather as expressions of God's amazing love!

13 This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. 15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. 16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

### **Seek to enjoy loving intimacy with God.**

- John is not questioning whether the recipients of the letter really are saved. But he is helping them and us to develop an authentic spirituality, and an authentic relationship with God. Sometimes he uses the phrase 'know God' or 'fellowship' to describe this, but in these verses speaks of God living in us and us living in God. In fact three times this mutual indwelling is mentioned in these four verses (v13, 15, 16).
- In the TNIV it speaks of 'living in God' and 'God living in us'. But the word translated 'live' carries a deeper meaning - it speaks of 'staying' or 'remaining'. Just like the English word 'stay' it carries two meanings: 1) to continue (e.g. 'stay strong') and 2) to dwell (e.g. 'I stay in that house'). These verses therefore speak of us continuing and dwelling in closeness to God, and God continuing and dwelling in closeness to us. They speak of the two-way loving intimacy between God and us.
- These verses reveal the basis upon which we, as Christians, can experience ever-deeper loving intimacy with God. We see two things God has done, and three things we need to do that make intimacy with God an ongoing reality ...
- On God's side, there are two things he has done that make it possible for us to experience loving intimacy with him:
  - 1) *He gives the Spirit from whom life flows (v13)*. The phrase 'this is how we know that we live in him' does not mean 'this is how we can deduce that we are saved' but rather simply 'this is how we can experience intimacy with God'. In 3:24, John reminds us that God gave us his Spirit. But now this verse adds a thought: he gives

us of his Spirit. This means that the Spirit who lives in us continues to bless us and grace us with supplies. This reminds us of Jesus' teaching that the Spirit is in us like a spring that bubbles constantly (John 4:14). It is as we experience the vitality, energy, power, wisdom and grace that flow up within us from the Spirit, that we can say we experience loving intimacy with God.

- 2) *He has given us his Son from whom salvation flows (v14)*. Not only has the Father given us the Spirit, from whom life flows (v13), but the Father has given us the Son, from whom salvation flows (v14). Verse 14 affirms the gospel truths that the Father has sent the Son to this world. The Son came to the world and accomplished salvation for it. The Son is Jesus Christ. Apart from the Father giving us his Son as a Saviour, intimacy with God would never have been possible. Only saved people get to enjoy true loving intimacy with God!
- On our part, there are three things we need to do that makes loving intimacy with God an ongoing reality - and, these three things are empowered in us by God's gifts of the Spirit and his Son to us ...
  - 1) *We need to hold to our faith-filled confession of the gospel about Jesus*. In verse 14, John re-affirmed the gospel message of how God, in Jesus, came to save the world. Now, in verse 15, he makes it clear that to keep experiencing genuine loving intimacy with God, we need to hold to our confession that the gospel really is true, that Jesus really is the Son of God. The first-generation apostles (that is who John refers to in the word 'we' (v14)) experienced loving intimacy with God - through direct contact with Jesus. But later-generation Christians can also experience loving intimacy with God - through believing the apostle's testimony (which is found throughout the New Testament). Eaton (pg 157) writes that as we hold to the gospel message about Jesus, 'sooner or later, gradually or suddenly, (we) enter into the same experience of knowing God the apostles had'.
  - 2) *We need to trust that God loves us*. It is one thing affirming that God once demonstrated his love for the whole world through his Son (v9), but another thing to affirm that God loves me now, today, everyday. Yet if God so demonstrated his love in the past, he is forever a God of love. And if he loves the whole world, then that includes me. And since we have put our faith in Christ, we can 'know and rely on the love God has for us' (v16). As we continue to affirm by faith that God loves us, and is there for us, and will always be there for us, we are able to experience loving intimacy with him. But if we don't really believe that he loves us, then this will become a blockage to experiencing his intimate presence.
  - 3) *We need to extend God's love to others*. The phrase 'whoever lives in love lives in God' (v16) makes it clear that it is not enough to receive God's love - we need to intentionally and continually seek to extend it to others. This is what it means to 'live in love'. If we extend God's love to others (i.e. live in love) then we will be able to experience more of his loving intimacy (i.e. live in God,

and God in them). But if we make no effort to love others, then this will prove to be a blockage to our experience of loving intimacy with God.

17 This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. 18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

**Let love transform and liberate you and others.**

- What does the phrase ‘complete’ or ‘perfect’ love mean? Three times John speaks of it. Although the NIV translates it ‘complete’ sometimes and ‘perfect’ at other times, the same Greek word is used all three times (v12, 17, 18). Many Christian groupings historically took it to mean that a perfect sinless state was possible. But this is not what John is teaching here. Rather it means that our tendency to love people around us becomes so deeply ingrained in us, that in all situations and to all people, we respond with love. This suggests that there are degrees of being a loving person - but that every Christian should seek to be growing in our capacity to love others. Love first takes root in the garden of our lives like a small seed, but eventually it grows to be a large plant that fills the entire garden of our lives with its scent and beauty. We are transformed by love!
- John tells us what makes the plant of love grow bigger and bigger in our lives: ‘in this world we are like Jesus’ (v17). The phrase is full of depth and wonder. It does not say, ‘in this world we are like Jesus was’ but rather ‘in this world we are like Jesus is’ - right now in heaven. The verse suggests that as Christians our love is empowered by our being connected to Christ in heaven. All that he is and has, and all his empowering grace is immediately available to us. Much like a body is connected to a head, so we are connected to Jesus. Our lives on earth are powered and guided by his life in heaven! Only by learning to draw on who Christ is for us, and all Christ has for us, will we become completely loving people.
- What does the phrase, ‘so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment’ mean? It means that the more loving we become, with the help of Christ’s love for us, the more confident we will be when we stand before Christ on Judgment Day. If we let Christ’s love transform us now, we will have confidence on that day, instead of shame.
- ‘There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear... The one who fears is not made perfect in love’ (v18). How powerful this truth is. It has at least four possible meanings, all of which are permissible (after all, John’s style of writing often carries many layers of meaning) although the first meaning is emphasized:
- 1) *God’s love for us drives out the fear of God’s rejection and condemnation.* The phrase ‘fear has to do with punishment’ (v18) shows that this is the meaning John is emphasising here. It shows he is speaking of the crippling fear of being punished by God, of being rejected and

condemned by God. When we have a guilty conscience because of our wrongdoings we can easily forget that our right standing before God is based on Christ who is our atoning sacrifice. God has shown his love by letting Christ assume the punishment we deserve (v9-10). Although the Christian is to have a reverential fear before a Holy God (John is not speaking about that kind of fear here) we need not fear rejection or condemnation on Judgment Day. Ultimately, our acceptance before him is based on Christ's atoning sacrifice not on our perfect behaviour. It is God's love for us, demonstrated on the cross, that gives us 'confidence on the day of judgement' (v17).

- 2) *God's love for us drives out all kinds of fear.* We have already seen that if we have received salvation, we need not fear being rejected or condemned by God. But there are still other kinds of fear he liberates us from. As we are convinced that God loves us, so many of the fears we have in life - fear of rejection, fear of abandonment, fear of the future, fear of loss, fear of death - are pulled out, like weeds are, from the garden of our heart. Loved people are liberated to fear nothing. We know that God loves us and will always be there for us and this liberates us!
- 3) *As we love others, we no longer fear them.* You can't fear and love someone at the same time. We fear someone who has the power to hurt us, or disappoint us, or overtake us, or reject us. In fear, we develop a mental picture of the person as someone who has power over us. But, if we start to truly love that person, we will no longer see them as having power over us. We move from being their victim to being an agent of God's love to them.
- 4) *As we love others, they no longer fear us.* People who have been wounded by others live re-actively and defensively in fear. They are not sure whether they can trust people. But as we consistently extend God's love to them, they begin to trust us. Our genuine love for them liberates them from fear.

## 1 John 5

### THE EFFECT OF THE NEW BIRTH (5:1-5)

#### *Faith in the Incarnate Son of God*

1 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.

#### **The new birth awakens faith and love in you.**

- What comes first: a person putting their faith in Jesus as the Christ, or a person being regenerated by the Spirit? Amazingly, this verse tells us that regeneration (the new birth) is the cause of faith and not the consequence of faith. This is why Paul, in Ephesians 2:8-9, tells us that even faith is a God-given capacity. It is as we hear the gospel message in the power of the Spirit that the miracle of regeneration happens - which is evidenced by our readiness to believe the message and entrust our

lives to Christ. It is true that there are many verses such as John 3:16 that put it the other way around. They tell us that faith is the cause of the experience of spiritual life (whoever believes ... shall have eternal life), but then a verse like John 3:3-8 tells us that the new birth is a sovereign work of God in our lives that *precedes* any experience of spiritual life. This is a mystery that is hard to understand, but the Scripture affirms it so we must not reject it simply because we fail to grasp the wonder of it. Perhaps an illustration of a newborn baby will help: it is the baby's birth that precedes and activates the baby's first breath. Similarly, new birth precedes and activates faith.

- When we were born of God we also received a new nature, a new capacity and set of desires, a new spiritual dynamic at work in us, that makes us want to love. God's love to us awakens our capacity to love. First, our love is directed towards God, the one who has given us the new birth. But this verse reminds us that it also overflows towards other people - especially brothers and sisters who have shared the same new birth experience.

2 This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands.

**Love for people must never lose its connection to love for God.**

- We would think that John would say, as he in effect said in 4:19-21, 'This is how we know that we love God: by loving his children'. But instead he says it the other way: 'We know we love the children of God by loving God'. Why does he say this?
- The point he makes is that the love we are called to evidence in our lives as Christian is God-empowered love, and not just a human kind of love. For example there is philanthropy, which is the love of humanity for humanity's sake. There is romance, which is the love of love. These kinds of love are not wrong - they are just not what John is speaking about: he calls us to a specific love, one that flows over from our love for God.

3a In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands.

**Love for God finds practical expression in thousands of ways in your life.**

- Love for God isn't just an abstract idea - it evidences itself in loving people (v1-2), and in 'carrying out' (v2) and 'keeping' (v3) God's commands. But what commands? John has already shown us there is one supreme command - and that is that we love people, but now he speaks of 'commands' (plural). The point he is making is that as we give ourselves to love, there will be multiple expressions of love. As we walk in the Spirit of love, we will love people and respond lovingly to various situations in numerous ways - but they can all be summarized as love. The New Testament is full of exhortations, one-liner instructions about how to live and relate to people. Almost all of these can be included in

the commands mentioned here. But John does not re-list them, because the moment we list the out-workings of love, we may end up modifying our behaviour to fulfil those commands, and lose the motivation of God-empowered love. Not only that, but if we were to list - let's say - a 1000 expressions of love, there would arise situations that would not be dealt with by those 1000 commands, and would call for yet more diversified expressions of love. Michael Eaton (pg 175) uses a beautiful analogy of the many New Testament exhortations as they relate to the single love-command: 'Each practical exhortation in the New Testament is a twinkling flash of light out of the sparkling diamond of the love-command'.

3b And his commands are not burdensome, 4 for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. 5 Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

**The new birth enables you to overcome faithless-ness and loveless-ness.**

- The Christian life is impossible unless we're born of God, and receive his new nature through regeneration. If we try live a life of consistent sacrificial love toward others without being born again, it will crush us! The burden will be too great. But, if we have the Spirit living in us through the new birth, then laying down our lives in love will not crush us. It may be challenging thinking about it in advance, but we will discover that *in experience* it is not burdensome as it may seem. Jesus said, 'Come to me all of you who are tired and weary and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me ... for my yoke is easy and my burden light' (Matthew 11:28-30). Let us learn to yoke ourselves to Christ as we seek to love people. He will give us the power we need to love all kinds of people, in every kind of situation.
- What does it mean to 'overcome the world'? Here 'the world' refers to the faithless-ness and loveless-ness found in the surrounding culture, and especially in the false teachers who denied Jesus as the Son of God. When we're born again, we receive the capacity to 'believe that Jesus is the Son of God' (v5) and to love people. In the same way that an eagle, using the upward draught, overcomes the downward pull of gravity, so the Christian, born of the Spirit and yoked to Jesus, overcomes the downward pull of faithless-ness and loveless-ness. This is the victory that Christ alone makes available to the world - a victory that requires that we trust in him as the Son of God (v4-5).

**CONFIDENCE IN THE GOSPEL (5:6-17)**

6 This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.

**Jesus has come to be your Saviour through his baptism, his death and the gift of his Spirit.**

- When it speaks of how Jesus ‘came’ it does not mean ‘came into this world’ but rather ‘came to be the Saviour who gives us eternal life’. How does Jesus come to be our Saviour?
- Firstly, he came to be Saviour through his baptism in water. He came by water. His baptism was the time when he was empowered by the Spirit for the saving work he came to do. It was his earthly moment of commissioning and empowering to do the work of Saviour.
- Secondly, he came to be Saviour through his bloody death on the cross. He came by blood. Our salvation is accomplished on the cross, by his blood. His blood atoned for our sins, turning away God’s wrath from us (2:2). And his blood cleanses our consciences so that we can enjoy closeness to God and each other (1:7).
- Thirdly, and this time it is in the present tense, he *comes* to be our Saviour by the Holy Spirit who convinces us that the gospel message is true, that we are sinners in desperate need of a Saviour (see John 16:8) and that Jesus is God’s gift of a Saviour to us. Apart from the work of the Spirit, we cannot experience Jesus as Saviour since it is the Spirit who awakens us spiritually and regenerates us.
- Notice that he came, past tense, to be Saviour by his baptism and by his shedding of blood on the cross. This speaks of the historical facts of Jesus. But we need more than historical facts - we need the Holy Spirit to personally draw us and apply to us the salvation Jesus has accomplished.
- Why does it say, ‘He did not come by water only, but by water and blood’? The probable reason is that one of the common false teachings this church was exposed to was that the heavenly Christ joined the man Jesus at his baptism, but that sometime before his death separated from him. John was saying in effect, ‘No - Jesus was the Christ both in the beginning and in the end - they are not separate entities - Jesus was, and is, and always will be the Christ.’

7 For there are three that testify: 8 the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.

**It is confirmed that Jesus really is the Son of God and the Christ.**

- Jesus is the Christ and Son of God. But John wants to tell us how we can be absolutely sure of this. He points to three things that all testify that Jesus really is the Christ and Son of God:
- 1) *At his baptism (i.e. water)*: At his baptism, his Father affirmed that Jesus is his Son. John the Baptist, noticing the Spirit descending on Jesus at the time of his baptism, said, ‘I have seen and testify that this is the Son of God’ (John 1:34).
- 2) *When he shed blood on the cross*: Ancient prophecies (such as the one in Isaiah 53) told us of a coming Messiah or Christ who was going to be led like a lamb to the slaughter and would, though he was innocent, die

in our place. When Jesus, though innocent, shed his blood for us it became evident that he really is the Christ and Son of God.

- 3) *When the Spirit of God powerfully and personally confirms it to us:* It is not enough for an unsaved person to merely hear the historical facts about Jesus - how he was baptized and how he died - they need the Holy Spirit to convince them that this message is true. And this is what the Spirit does. Paul spoke of preaching the gospel 'with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with conviction' (1 Thessalonians 1:5). For example 'the Lord opened Lydia's heart to Paul's message' (Acts 16:14). The Spirit of God convinces us of our sin, and reveals Jesus to us as our Saviour. Over and above the Spirit opening our eyes to the truth of the gospel, the Spirit is also ready to powerfully immerse us in his presence in 'suddenly' moments after we already believe the gospel - like he did to the disciples in Acts 2:1-4, 8:14-17, 10:34-48 and 19:1-7. The Spirit comes to people who already believe that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God, and then powerfully affirms and confirms their faith with these unusual experiences of outpouring. He still does this today.
- In the ancient world, a matter only became established legally when two or three witnesses agreed on the basic facts. John is saying that Jesus really is the Son of God and the Christ - because at least three things (water, blood, and Spirit) all testify to it being true! We can bank our lives on this: Jesus is the Son of God and Christ. Everything about our lives is different because this is the ultimate reality!

9 We accept human testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. 10 Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony. Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son.

**The message of Jesus is declared to you by both human and divine confirmation.**

- What is the 'testimony' spoken of in these verses? It is the gospel. It is the testimony given about the Son (v9,10). It is the claims about who Jesus really was and is. It is the declaration, with evidence presented, that Jesus really is the Saviour, the Son of God, the Christ and the Source of Eternal Life.
- 'We accept human testimony' (v9). This gospel comes to us through human beings. It comes to us, first and foremost, through the eye-witness accounts of the first-generation apostles, who have recorded this testimony for us in the New Testament. And it comes to us through human beings, whether they be mothers, or preachers, or perfect strangers, who tell us who Jesus is, and what he has done. And it is backed up by history. Jesus really lived. He really was baptized. He really died and rose again. He really ascended. He really has poured out his Spirit. These are claims that can be investigated - and the evidence is not lacking!

- ‘But God’s testimony is greater’ (v9). The message about Christ is not a man-made message. It is the truth. It is a message from God himself. It is a message that God confirms powerfully through his Spirit. The only reason a person deeply believes the gospel message announced to them by a person is because the Holy Spirit confirms the message to them in their hearts. As wonderful as it is to hear someone proclaim the gospel to us, it is more wonderful to hear God himself confirming that it is true. Both testimonies - human and divine - are needed, but the divine message is yet greater! It is God who ‘makes his light shine in our hearts so that we can see ... the glory of ... Christ’ (2 Corinthians 4:6).
- The question is: what will you do with the gospel about Jesus? Will you accept it and trust in Jesus? Or will you reject it - and so doing, call those who make the claim, including God himself, liars? The gospel message divides the world in two depending on our response to it - some accept it, some reject it; some trust in Jesus, and others don’t. There is no neutral position.

11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

### **God gives you eternal life in his Son.**

- Jesus came to be our Saviour. He came to give us eternal life. What is this eternal life? Jesus himself is ‘the eternal life’ (1:2). As we are joined to him, we begin to experience eternal life. Sin killed the human race spiritually by separating us from God, our source. It severed our capacity to enjoy and experience God. But Jesus has made it possible for us to reconnect with God. Connected to Christ, we begin to experience the vitality and joy of heaven. We start to experience new desires to please God, a new sensitivity to the voice of God, a new ability to discern spiritual reality, a new power to live life in a God-glorifying way. It is as though we taste heaven already. We ‘taste the heavenly gift; share in the Holy Spirit; taste the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age’ (Hebrews 6:4-5). And we are assured that we will be with Christ for all eternity when we die, or when Christ returns - whichever comes first. This ‘frees those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death’ (Hebrews 1:15).
- How sad it is to reject the gospel of Jesus! To reject the gospel of Jesus is to reject Jesus. To reject Jesus, who himself is ‘the eternal life’ (1:2), is to reject eternal life. But to trust in Jesus is to receive eternal life. In the final analysis there are only two ways to live life: 1) to live separated from God’s life by our sin and unbelief, or 2) to live connected to God’s life by faith in the Son.

*Concluding Affirmations*

13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. 14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

**Confidence in the gospel leads to a greater experience of eternal life and to a greater confidence in prayer.**

- What are the ‘these things’ (v13) John refers to here? It is what he has just said in the previous section of 5:6-12 with regards to confidence in the gospel and Jesus. Although verse 13 is a wonderful verse to give to new Christians to assure them of their salvation, the way John writes it carries a different meaning to the one we normally give it. A better translation is ‘I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may experience eternal life’. They already have eternal life - there is no doubt about that in John’s mind. But the incident with the false teachers has left them shaken and perhaps doubtful. He reaffirms their faith in Jesus and the unshakable truth of the gospel in 5:6-12, and then tells them that being freshly convinced of the reality of Jesus and the gospel will lead to a greater experience of eternal life (v13). The word translated ‘know’ (v13) does not refer to deductive rational knowledge, but rather to experiential knowledge.
- One aspect of more richly experiencing the flow of eternal life is a greater confidence in approaching God, and a greater sensitivity to his will (v14). The experience of eternal life is connected to our prayer-life. A person who prays little only has a little experience of eternal life. We are to daily live in dependence on God. We confidently approach him knowing that he loves us. And we ask him for things. Wonderfully, there will be times when we will be able to discern his will regarding what we pray for. When we are sure that something is God’s will, then it gives us greater confidence in asking for it - and we have the promise that the answer is on its way. Of course, we will not always know his specific will when we pray, but still our confidence is in the wonderful fact that since God loves us, he also hears us (v15).

16 If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will give them life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that. 17 All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.

**Pray for the restoration of struggling Christians.**

- John has been speaking about confidence in prayer. In verse 16 we remember that we do not just pray for ourselves, but for each other.
- What is the ‘sin that does not lead to death’? It refers to the sins of fellow-Christians. In the church John is writing too, many of the Christians may have lost their confidence in the gospel because of the influence of the false teachers. Many of them, riddled with doubt, may

have been acting in unloving and ungodly ways. John tells them to pray for these people so that God can restore them to the wonderful experience of eternal life that all Christians should ideally enjoy.

- What does John mean by ‘the sin that leads to death’? A common misinterpretation of this verse is that it refers to a Christian so deeply given to sin that God may even kill them, in much the same way he took the life of Ananias and Sapphira because of their sin (Acts 5:1-11). The better way to understand this, however, is to keep in mind the situation that called for the writing of this letter: the false teachers had heard the gospel, and had even for a season been part of the church, yet had absolutely rejected the gospel. Instead, they promoted their own teaching that rejected the truth about Jesus and the need for salvation from sin. These false teachers had ‘committed the sin that leads to death’. They had rejected Jesus and the gospel, the very means of salvation, forgiveness and life. This is similar to Jesus’ teaching on the unforgivable sin in Mark 3:29 where men who, despite powerfully encountering Jesus, rejected him and his offer of life entirely. In the same way that a dangerously sick man rejects the medicine that can heal him and then dies, so the false teachers reject the gospel and are doomed to death, eternally separated from the life-source of Jesus.
- John is saying in these verses: ‘Don’t spend your energies trying to win these false teachers who have already rejected Jesus - rather spend your energies trying to restore those Christians who are struggling with their confidence in the gospel as a result of the false teachers.’
- But John is eager to encourage them with God’s readiness to forgive all other sins: In verse 16 John speaks of the fatal sin of rejecting Jesus, and then quickly re-assures the church in verse 17 that their sins, though very serious, are not unforgivable.

#### **FINAL AFFIRMATIONS (5:18-21)**

<p>18 We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them. 19 We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.</p>
--

#### **God holds you safely in his grip.**

- ‘Anyone born of God does not continue to sin’ (v18). Once a person receives the new birth they have a new capacity to overcome temptation and sin in their lives. Although they will not be entirely sinless (1:7), the new nature makes it possible to sin less and less.
- Who is ‘the One who was born of God’ (v18) referring to? It refers to Jesus. It is a unique description of Jesus - and it is just like John to use phrases in unexpected ways. It likely alludes to his miraculous conception by God, and his virgin birth.
- The evil one will seek to attack, deceive and entice Christians, but there is one thing he cannot do - and that is get them out of Christ’s grip. ‘No one can snatch them out of (Christ’s) hands’ (John 10:28). The phrase

here translated 'the evil one cannot harm them' is better translated 'the evil one cannot get a hold of them'. God promises to keep us safe in his grip (John 17:11,15).

- However, for the 'whole world' (i.e. those people who do not trust in Christ), they are 'under the control of the evil one' (v19). Though they don't realize it, Satan seeks to keep them under his influence, and away from the rescuing work of Christ. The Greek for 'under control' implies that they are relaxed in his grip. They do not struggle against his influence. Deceived, they co-operate with the one who controls them.

20 We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. 21 Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

### **Reality is found in God, the Father and God, the Son.**

- The Son of God 'has given us understanding' (v20) by his Spirit. The Spirit of God has opened our eyes to the reality of the gospel and God. We get to know (i.e. experience) the true God. We get to be intimate with the true God by being 'in him'. This intimacy with the true God is only possible because we are intimate with his Son Jesus Christ.
- What does it mean that God is 'the one who is true'? It means that God is real, genuine, not made up. To know God is to be in tune with reality. To not know God is to not know the most important aspect of reality.
- Who is the 'he' referring to in this sentence: 'He is the true God and eternal life.' Although some commentators believe it refers to God the Father, many believe it refers to Jesus. There are three reasons for this: 1) elsewhere John has directly called Jesus God (see John 1:1, 1:18, 5:18, 20:28), 2) The word 'he' immediately follows the mention of the Son Jesus Christ and, 3) John elsewhere calls Jesus 'the eternal life' (1:2). Assuming this interpretation is correct (and it certainly is compelling), we can say that John reaches a high point in his letter by directly calling Jesus Christ 'the true God'. Verse 20 makes it emphatically clear that Jesus is co-equal with the Father, and is no less God than the Father is God.
- Why does John end his whole letter with the sentence, 'Dear children, keep yourselves from idols' (v21). It is because it summarizes the whole letter. The false teachers had presented a fabricated version of Christ and had sought to entice the church to abandon the true version of Christ (as had been revealed to them by the apostles). But throughout this letter, John has urged them to hold fast to the real Jesus and to reject the made-up one. The made-up Jesus is nothing less than an idol of the mind - something made up, not real, something less than reality. Still today, we as the church must do all we can to hold an accurate understanding of Jesus as the Scriptures reveal him - and reject the idolatrous, fabricated versions of Jesus that people keep coming up with.