

**Life, Light and Love
in the
Letters of John**

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**Life, Light
and Love
in the Letters
of John**

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1

The First Letter of John

INTRODUCTION

Begin by reading the letter right through. This is a letter written in the past, that has come into our hands. As we read it, we can ask ourselves (as we would with any letter we receive):

- Who is it from? How is the writer related to the ones written to?
- What is the purpose for writing?
- What is the situation that the letter is written into?
- What does it say?
- Is this a letter to us?

Who is it from? How is the writer related to the ones written to?

Look for the phrase 'little children' throughout the letter (see 1:1–4; 2:1).

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It is from one who has seen and experienced something wonderful, to be shared with the ones written to, that they may have fellowship and joy together. It is written by one with authority, in a family relationship with those written to.

What is the purpose for writing?

Look for: 'I write to you . . . ' (for example 1:4).

The purpose for writing is given as: that joy may be complete; that you may not sin; to affirm where you are and what you know; to warn concerning those who would deceive; that you may know that you have eternal life.

What is the situation that it is written into?

Look for: 'If we say . . . ' or 'Whoever says . . . ' (for example 1:8; 2:4; see also 2:19, 26; 4:1).

There are those who say that they have a relationship with God, while their lives belie this, in that they do not obey God's commandments or show love towards others. Yet they say they have no sin. These have separated from those written to. They deny that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God come in the flesh. They are still abroad with their deceitful teaching, and this calls for testing and discernment.

What does it say?

Look for: 'We declare/proclaim to you . . . ' (1:3), or 'This is the message . . . ' (1:5), or 'We know . . . ' (5:2).

This covers the whole content of the letter, including: the word of life; eternal life; God is light without darkness; we can know that our sins are forgiven; Jesus Christ the righteous is the propitiation for our sins; we can be sure we have a relationship with God as we obey His commandments and walk as Jesus walked; the world and the antichrist are opposed

The First Letter of John—Introduction

to God as Father; we can know what is true; we are God's children; sin has no place with those who belong to God; sin is of the devil; the Son of God has destroyed the works of the devil; we should love one another as he has loved us; God is love; we know God's love in the Father's sending of the Son to be the propitiation for our sins; He has given us of His Spirit; we abide in God and God abides in us; we may have boldness on the day of judgement; our faith in Jesus as the Son of God is the victory that conquers the world; we are to keep ourselves from idols.

Is this a letter to us?

As has been said, this is a letter written in the past that has come into our hands—it has not been written directly to us. To that extent, we are listening in on someone else's conversation. But it is in our hands, and not by accident. A whole chain of events has occurred for this to be so. The Holy Spirit of God has been operating in that chain of events. The Spirit was with John as he wrote. The Spirit saw to it that this letter was kept and copied, and included in the New Testament, preserved, translated and passed on, as a message for the whole church. The Spirit has brought us to belong to Jesus Christ, into the same reality that John was writing in, and has brought us here so we can read and hear what has been said. So we are receiving this letter from John, along with the original recipients, and we, like they, are being addressed, not just by the apostle, but by the One who sent him and gave him what he had to say—God Himself.

Having read the whole letter through, with the above in mind, we can come then to these questions:

- What things fall strangely on our ears?
- What things do we relate to as relevant to us?

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What things fall strangely on our ears?

Possibly statements like: those who are born of God do not sin; there is sin that is not mortal; you know all things; do not love the world; you have conquered the evil one; Jesus Christ is the propitiation for our sins; love is not that we loved God; you may know that you have eternal life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

It could be that these were confronting issues for the original hearers as much as they might be for us.

What things do we relate to as relevant to us?

These may include: the distinction between walking in the light and in the darkness; the distinction between the world and those who belong to God; the prevalence of false teaching; the requirement for righteous living; and for loving one another in practical ways.

We need to be sure that we are hearing these things in the way that John is saying them, and not as we might construe them.

For Group Discussion:

The form of this whole section, as set out above, can be the basis for a group activity. There is benefit in reading through the whole first letter of John in one sitting, as a letter addressed to the group. As it is read, look out for and note the telltale phrases that give answers to the first four questions:

- *Who is it from? How is the writer related to the ones written to?*

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- *What is the purpose for writing?*
- *What is the situation that it is written into?*
- *What does it say?*

Then consider the question: 'Is this a letter to us?' and ask members of the group to answer the questions:

- *What things fall strangely on our ears?*
- *What things do we relate to as relevant to us?*

This should help to whet people's appetites for a detailed study of the letter together. Conclude with prayer that arises from the issues raised.

Assignment:

Draw up your own outline of the first letter of John, using chapter and verse numbers to indicate sections in which different issues are addressed. Note especially where any issue is addressed more than once, and what is added each time.

2

The Word of Life

1 John 1:1-4

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—² this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—³ we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

We declare to you what was from the beginning: What a way to start! Astronomers look through their radio telescopes across the light years to try to get back to the ‘Big Bang’ when everything started, and think that by doing so they will unlock the secret of the universe and its origins. Here we have a revelation, direct from the Creator, of this secret, that turns out to be deeply personal and relational—something no merely scientific investigation could ever unravel. Compare Genesis 1:1–3; John 1:1–3, 14, 18.

The Word of Life

what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands: The writer, whom we take to be the apostle John,¹ is a witness who has experienced this reality in his life with his physical human senses. There is nothing ‘super-spiritual’ or mystical, metaphysical or philosophical about this. See, for example, the following references in Mark’s Gospel: ‘he called them’ (1:16–20); ‘the fever left her’ (1:29–34); ‘Your sins are forgiven’ (2:9–12); ‘he appointed twelve’ (3:13–19); ‘he was transfigured’ (9:2–3); ‘all will be thrown down’ (13:1–4); ‘Sit here while I pray’ (14:32–36), and in John’s Gospel: ‘they remained with him’ (John 1:35–40); ‘reclining next to Jesus’ (13:21–30); ‘standing near the cross’ (19:25–27); especially ‘he saw and believed’ (20:1–10); ‘Peace be with you’ (20:19–23; compare Luke 24:36–43); ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’ (21:20–24).

concerning the word of life: ‘eternal life’ (v. 2). This is what the wise and learned have sought for through the ages. Wouldn’t all the New Agers love to know this—to say nothing of the health product companies! ‘Eternal life’ is first of all the life of God, and not of any of us (see 1 Timothy 6:16: ‘It is he alone who has immortality’). But God’s intention is that we should participate in His life—God’s own being and action—with Him! This is what Jesus brings to us, and brings us to. See John 6:63, 67–69 (‘You have the words of eternal life’). This is present in Jesus’ ministry. But, as Peter indicates here, it goes back further than that: see John 1:1–5, 12–13 (‘In the beginning was the Word . . . ’). This is life that has to contend with sin (Romans 6:21–23: ‘the wages of sin . . . the free gift of God’) and death (John 5:24–27: ‘those who hear will live’).

¹ See in other commentaries; for example, John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (IVP, Leicester, 1983).

this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us: ‘was revealed’ is a specific one-off happening (aorist tense)—it has historical reality. This manifestation is an action of God, coming into our sphere of cognition, and could not be otherwise.

we declare to you what we have seen and heard: What has been received is not to be kept, but to be passed on. One who has physically witnessed these things is the one who must ‘testify’ (v. 2) to them, and whose testimony is authoritative. The word ‘declare’ indicates that this one has also been commissioned to do so: see John 15:26–27: ‘You also are to testify’; 20:21–23: ‘I send you’; Acts 1:8–9: ‘you will be my witnesses’ (compare Luke 24:46–49: ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed’; Matthew 28:16–20: ‘make disciples of all nations’); Acts 4:18–20: ‘what we have seen and heard’.

so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ: The purpose and effect of the testimony and proclamation is ‘fellowship’—communion, union with one another in practical love. That is because this ‘life’ that has been from the beginning has always been relational, between the Father and the Son; so its outworking at the human level cannot be otherwise. See John 17:3, 20–24, where ‘eternal life’ is constituted by a relationship with the Father and with Jesus as Messiah, and a oneness with each other. This is the only way human beings can truly and freely relate with one another in love.

The human Jesus is here mentioned for the first time, in direct relationship with the Father who is God. He is also named as ‘Christ’ or Messiah, which gathers up all that the

The Word of Life

Old Testament had to say about this high and holy one that was coming. This is another revelation: see Matthew 16:15–17: ‘flesh and blood has not revealed this to you’.

We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete: This joy is in God Himself: see Psalm 16:11 (‘In your presence there is fullness of joy’). This was Jesus’ own experience of being with the Father, in trouble and in achievement: see Luke 10:21 (‘Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit’); Acts 2:24–28 (quoting Psalm 16). This is what Jesus longed for his disciples to participate in: see John 15:9–11 (‘so that my joy may be in you’); 17:13 (‘my joy made complete in themselves’). See also Luke 15:10 (‘joy in the presence of the angels of God’). John now has the same joy that he has received from his Master, as he seeks to bring others into it by this testimony and proclamation.

We will see later why it was important that John should begin this letter by expressing these things in this way. For the moment, let us just be glad that he did!

For Group Discussion:

Let members of the group look up and read out the passages listed above under the words ‘what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands’. These speak of some of John’s actual experiences of Jesus. Ask of each one:

- *How is this a manifestation of the eternal life that was with the Father from the beginning?*
- *How are we brought here into joyful fellowship with the Father and the Son, and with each other?*

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Assignment:

What personal experience was John referring to when he spoke of 'what we have heard . . . seen with our eyes . . . looked at . . . touched with our hands'? How does this relate to 'the word of life' that 'was from the beginning'? How has this 'word' touched you in your life? (1:1-4).

3

God Is Light

1 John 1:5

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you: Now we are about to hear the core content of this word, which has to do with the eternal life that was from the beginning, that John and the apostles have witnessed and experienced in Jesus Christ, which issues in joyful fellowship with the Father and the Son, and with each other. What is it to be? We might expect the revelation, ‘God is love’, that comes later in the letter (4:8, 16). While that is included, the opening revelation in this letter is deeper and more far-reaching even than that.

that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all: What is meant by ‘light’? Often ‘light’ is taken to refer to ‘the light of knowledge’: sometimes a burning torch or rays of light will appear on the badge of an educational institution. This is a Greek notion, which still infects our western

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ways of thinking that derive from the humanistic ‘renaissance’ of Greek thought in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the rationalistic ‘enlightenment’ of the eighteenth century. We still operate largely on the basis that if only we had correct and sufficient knowledge we could solve all problems and ensure right living. This may be akin to some of the thinking that was present in the churches John was writing to. While light here is equated with truth (vv. 6, 8), mere knowledge is not what is meant by ‘light’ here.

We can be helped in understanding what ‘light’ is here by seeing what it is contrasted with—what constitutes the ‘darkness’. Here the opposite of light is sin and unrighteousness, that is, moral evil, from which we need forgiveness and cleansing (vv. 6–9). So ‘light’ here designates righteousness and strong moral purity. Compare 2 Corinthians 6:14, where light is equated with righteousness and darkness with lawlessness. It is active and behavioural: hence the truth is something you *do* (v. 6); light (or darkness) is something you *walk* in (vv. 6, 7). See Ephesians 5:1–14: ‘live as children of light’.

The good news, this ‘word of life’ that John declares, is ‘that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all’. All are aware of the darkness of evil in the world. Many religions seek to seed the darkness back into the deity or the ultimate fabric of reality: for example, the ‘yin’ and the ‘yang’ in Taoism, or ‘the dark side of the Force’ in *Star Wars*. The art of living then becomes a balancing act between the two. This always involves some acceptance or accommodation of or compromise with evil. This has the supposed advantage of avoiding moral rigour on the part of those who prefer to retain some moral ambiguity in their lives; that is, those who wish to continue to sin. This is all swept away by John’s revelatory declaration that God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all: that evil has absolutely no part whatever in the being and action of God. All that God is and does is

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consistently ‘very good’ (Genesis 1:31). Compare James 1:17: ‘no variation or shadow due to change’. This is the very nature of God: see Psalm 104:2: ‘wrapped in light’; 1 Timothy 6:16: ‘unapproachable light’. It is thus also true of any revelation of God or His word: see Proverbs 6:23: ‘the commandment is a lamp’; Psalm 119:105: ‘a light to my path’; 2 Peter 1:19: ‘a lamp shining in a dark place’.

This ‘light’ of God is also very dynamic. Sources of light in the ancient world were fire and the sun. These have a sanitising, disinfecting or cleansing action—like a wildfire that burns up accumulated rubbish, or the effect of sunlight on clothes or bed linen hung out to dry. Hence verse 7. See Deuteronomy 4:11 (RSV): ‘burned with fire to the heart of heaven’ and Hebrews 12:29: ‘our God is a consuming fire’. Thus the ultimate outcome of God’s purpose will be all light—righteousness and strong moral purity: see 2 Peter 3:13: ‘where righteousness is at home’; Isaiah 24:23: ‘he will manifest his glory’; Revelation 21:23–27: ‘the glory of God is its light . . . nothing unclean will enter it’; 22:5: ‘the Lord God will be their light’—with evil relegated to the ‘outer darkness’: see Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30. God’s light is the equivalent of His glory and holiness: see Isaiah 6:1–7. P. T. Forsyth describes God’s holiness in this way: ‘the whole concrete righteousness of existence, self-sustained at white heat. For our God is a consuming fire.’²

God being light also includes God’s love, as we shall see in this letter: for example 2:9–11. Forsyth has this to say: ‘The holiness of God is a deeper revelation in the cross than His love; for it is what gives His love divine value . . . Even a loving God is really God not because He loves, but because

² P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1984, p. 159, n. 1).

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He has power to subdue all things to the holiness of His love, and even sin itself to His love as redeeming grace'.³

John has been able to say all this, because he has come to see and know this light of God fully embodied and enacted in Jesus Christ: see:

- a great light (Isaiah 9:1–2).
- a light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6).
- light has dawned (Matthew 4:12–17).
- the dawn from on high (Luke 1:78–79).
- a light for revelation to the Gentiles (Luke 2:32).
- the light of all people (John 1:4–5).
- The true light (John 1:9).
- the light has come into the world (John 3:19–21).
- the light of the world (John 8:12; 9:4–5).
- blind (John 9:41).
- the light is not in them (John 11:9–10).
- believe in the light (John 12:35–36).
- I have come as light (John 12:46).
- turn from darkness to light (Acts 26:18).
- proclaim light (Acts 26: 23).
- the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4; cf. v. 6).
- the reflection of God's glory (Hebrews 1:3).

It simply remains for us to live totally in that active, cleansing, dynamic light of God: see Romans 13:8–14: 'put on the armor of light'.

³ P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, pp. 205, 60.

God Is Light

For Group Discussion:

Often 'light' is taken to refer to 'the light of knowledge'. We still operate largely on the basis that if only we had correct and sufficient knowledge we could solve all problems and ensure right living:

- How do we do that in the community?*
- How do we do that in the church—even in Bible studies?*
- How is that different from what John is saying here?*
- What difference does it make to us personally whether 'light' here is knowledge or is holy righteousness and moral purity? What then does it mean for us that God is all light and no darkness?*
- Look up each of the references above to the light of God being fully embodied and enacted in Jesus Christ. Speak together of the difference Christ has made to us personally and to the world.*

Assignment:

John's first letter says both 'God is light' and 'God is love'. What is the meaning of each, and the relationship between the two? What is the impact of each on the other?

4

Walking in the Light

1 John 1:6-10

If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷ but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

If we say: Three times this phrase introduces things that are being said among those written to, presumably by false teachers later referred to as ‘false prophets’ (4:1) and ‘those who would deceive you’ (2:26; see also 3:7 and 2 John 7). It is perhaps this false teaching that has occasioned the writing of this letter, and caused John to emphasise the things that he has said. Further elements of this false teaching will emerge

Walking in the Light

as we go through, but for the time being we will focus on what was being held with regard to sin and righteousness. This is: (i) that fellowship with God is compatible with living in sin (1:6); (ii) that it is possible to say that sin is not part of our present make-up (1:8); and (iii) that we can claim never to have sinned (1:10). This is clearly the position of those who wish to continue in sin after coming to Christ, and to justify themselves in so doing. That such people were present in the churches John was writing to can be seen from Revelation 2:6, 14–15 (the ‘Nicolaitans’. This can have a pseudo-religious or occult manifestation even within the church: see Revelation 2:20–25).

That this is not just an old problem can be seen from the ingenious attempts, often along the same lines as are given here, to accommodate the church’s teaching and practice to our current moral laxity.

In each instance, John counters what is being said with a positive rejoinder, grounded in what he has already said about God being light: total righteousness and strong moral and relational purity in dynamic action against all that is evil.

If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true: ‘walking in darkness’ means habitually living in sin and evil. It was being claimed by some who persisted in living in this way that they had a close relationship with God. Either they are blind and self-deceived, or they are relating not to God as He is but to some ‘god’ of their own making. What has just been said about God being light gives the lie to such deceit.

The widespread acceptance or tolerance of such things as sexual immorality and unfaithfulness, or self-promoting greed and acquisitiveness, among Christian congregations today, often apparently without turning a hair, is a reappearance of this same phenomenon.

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Note here that truth is something that we do, not just something that we know or believe. This is in keeping with the way God is, and the way He has made us to be.

but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin: This is the antidote to the previous false claim. To ‘walk in the light as he himself is in the light’ is to participate with God in His righteous action. This righteous action is not only that which is perfectly holy and righteous in conduct. It is also that which moves out to bring forgiveness and cleansing to those who are in sin and evil. This is in keeping with God’s nature as Redeemer (see Exodus 33:18–19: ‘show me your glory’, and 34:6–7: ‘a God merciful and gracious . . .’—after the covenant had been broken in the incident of the golden calf—and Isaiah 63:16b: ‘our Father; our Redeemer from of old’). This has been effected by ‘the blood of Jesus’—his life taken violently on the cross in his action, in obedience to the Father, of giving himself to be a propitiatory sacrifice for our sin (see further on 2:2). This is not just some pardon that lets you off the hook with impunity to go and sin again. It is an effective cleansing that not only removes the penalty but also purges the pollution and disarms the power of sin in a person’s life (as in John 8:34–36: ‘the Son makes you free’). This cleansing is here said to be an ongoing action (present continuous tense) for those who are living in this dynamically active light of God. This taking-away of sin has the effect of removing all sin-barriers between people and of forging true ‘fellowship with one another’, such as is known in God between the Father and the Son (see 1:3).

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us: Claiming we have fellowship with

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God while still living in sin is one thing. To move from there into saying that we have nothing sinful in our nature is to take a further step into denial and self-deception. This is a life that continues to issue in false words and actions.

The present propensity to make excuses for ourselves as victims on the basis of our heredity, environment and circumstances is just such a denial of responsibility for our own condition and actions. Even to speak of ‘the infection of our nature’ is to place the responsibility outside ourselves. The apostle Paul’s estimate is more realistic: see Romans 1:20–22: ‘they did not honor him as God’, 24, 26, 28: ‘God gave them up to . . .’ No restoration of human beings to true nobility is possible without a full and honest facing of this unpalatable reality.

If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness: ‘confess our sins’ here does not mean to recite a list of our misdemeanours. It means simply to acknowledge the fact of our sinfulness as having given rise to sinful actions. Psalm 51 is the classic expression of this. Such an honest facing of the truth puts us in the way of receiving all that God has done to release us from the guilt of our sin and to eradicate its defilement and its hold on our lives.

While we may be glad that God does this to us, how can we say He is ‘faithful and just’ in doing so? Surely the just desert of our sin is anything but that! We can see that by acting in this way God is being faithful to His nature as Redeemer (see above on 1:7) and to His covenant promises (such as Jeremiah 31:34: ‘I will forgive their iniquity’; Ezekiel 36:25: ‘I will cleanse you’; Zechariah 3:9: ‘I will remove the guilt’; 13:1: ‘a fountain shall be opened’). But how could such an action ever be ‘just’? God’s righteousness or ‘just-ness’ is such that, by neither abrogating His law nor mitigating His

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necessary wrath against sin, but by pressing both right through to their completion in His Son as a human being on the cross for us all, God has made a propitiation for our sin. By this the just requirement of the law is fulfilled in us and the favour and good pleasure of God is upon us (see Romans 3:21–26: ‘justified by his grace’; 8:1–4: ‘no condemnation’; 2 Corinthians 6:2: ‘now is the acceptable time’).

If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us: The final step in self-deception and abasement is the blatant denial that we are doing anything wrong at all (see Proverbs 30:20: ‘an adulteress’; compare Romans 1:28–32: ‘applaud those who practice them’). This is to fly in the face of God’s revelation of our condition as given to us in His word (e.g. 1 Kings 8:46: ‘there is no one who does not sin’; Psalm 14:3: ‘no one who does good’; Ecclesiastes 7:20: ‘no one on earth so righteous’; Isaiah 53:6: ‘all . . . have gone astray’; 64:6: ‘all become . . . unclean’). This is tantamount to saying that God is a liar, and ensures that His word of truth and true speaking have no place in our lives. We are thereby cut off from the forgiveness and cleansing He has so freely provided at total cost to Himself.

For Group Discussion:

What experience have we had in our own lives, or in the life of the church, of:

- *habitually living in sin and evil while claiming to have a close relationship with God?*
- *denying that we have anything essentially sinful in our nature?*
- *denying that we have done anything wrong?*

How do these go against the truth of God and the gospel?

Walking in the Light

What experience have we had in our own lives, or in the life of the church, of:

- *Being in fellowship with one another, and having the blood of Jesus cleanse us from sin?*
- *Acknowledging our sin and sinful actions and knowing forgiveness and cleansing?*
- *Being convicted through God's word of our participation in universal sinfulness?*

How are these an expression of the truth of God and the gospel?

- *Look at Psalm 51. What actions are being asked for here, and who is to do them?*
- *Pray Psalm 51 together.*

Assignment:

How is it that God is 'faithful and just' in forgiving our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness?

5

An Advocate with the Father

1 John 2:1-2 (1)

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ² and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin: Rather than give another neat rejoinder to the third false claim, John reasserts his close and responsible love-relationship with those he is writing to, and makes clear that his purpose in writing is that they may not be among those who want to continue in sin and think nothing of it. His desire for them is that they ‘not sin’. This is not to be on the basis of any pretended or asserted self-righteousness. Nor can it be achieved by any self-implemented attempt to ‘clean up our act’. It can only be in the thoroughgoing fullness of God’s atoning action in Jesus Christ, effective for the sins of the whole world. So John is not setting out an ideal (‘that

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you may not sin'), and then letting us know that we are still covered if we fall short of it ('But if anyone does sin . . .'). That could leave us pretty much where we were, with a thin veneer of so-called 'forgiveness' over the top of our still radioactive sin. Rather, he is making the bold declaration that our possibility not to sin is fully secured by the very action that has wiped all our sins away (compare 2 Peter 1:3–9: 'the cleansing of past sins').

But if anyone does sin: This indicates a one-off instance (aorist tense) in the life of a believer, as distinct from a habitual practice (present continuous tense, as in 3:6, 8, 9; 5:18). This is not to excuse it, to allow any extenuating circumstances for it, or to allow it any place in the life of a believer, since this sin, along with all the others, is rightly consumed in the conflagration of the Cross. It is rather to urge the main task of living in the light: that is, with God in His righteousness of action that is ours in Christ.

we have an advocate with the Father: 'advocate' is primarily a legal term, of one who is called to stand with us in defence against accusation in court. Who is the accuser? Not God or His Messiah (see Romans 8:31–34). It is the Father in His love for the world who has sent the Son for this very purpose of freeing us from the condemnation of sin (John 3:16–17, Romans 8:1–4). For us, the judgement has already taken place (John 5:24, compare 1 John 3:14; 5:12). The only accuser mentioned in the New Testament is Satan, and he is thrown down by this joint rule and authority of our God and His Messiah (Revelation 12:9–11). It is perverse to see Jesus as in any way seeking to convince the Father against His better judgement to let us off or go easy on us. He is an advocate *with* the Father in a concerted way (the same expression as is used in John 1:1: 'the Word was *with* God'), not

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over against Him. Jesus used the same word, ‘advocate’, to denote the ministry of the Holy Spirit in John 14:16, 26; 15:26 and 16:7, as advocate, helper, counsellor, comforter or encourager, and as one who promotes the cause of the Father and the Son in the world.

Jesus Christ the righteous: ‘righteous’ is the same word as ‘just’ which is applied to God in 1:9. Jesus the Messiah, in whom the ‘light’ that God is, is fully embodied and enacted (see above on 1:5), participates fully in the righteous action of the Father (see e.g. John 3:34–35: ‘speaks the words of God’; 5:17–20: ‘I also am working’; 8:28–29: ‘I always do what is pleasing to him’; 10:17–18: ‘I have received this command’, 10:27–30: ‘The Father and I are one’). He himself is without sin (see 3:5, compare Matthew 27:3–4: ‘innocent blood’; Luke 23:13–22: ‘done nothing to deserve death’; 23:41: ‘nothing wrong’; 23:47: ‘innocent’; 1 Peter 2:21–23: ‘he committed no sin’), as is fitting for one who is to be a sacrifice for sin (1 Peter 1:18–19: ‘without defect or blemish’) and who is to help others in need (see Hebrews 4: 15–16: ‘without sin’; 7:25–27: ‘able for all time to save . . . holy, blameless, undefiled’) as the one whose blood ‘cleanse[s] us from all unrighteousness’ (1 John 1:9). He is without sin, yet he fully entered into our sinful condition and the terrible judgements entailed there through the total identification of death-bearing love, to bring us into nothing less than the righteousness of God (see 1 Peter 3:18: ‘the righteous for the unrighteous’; 2:24: ‘bore our sins’; 2 Corinthians 5:21: ‘made him to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’).

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For Group Discussion:

'I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin . . . ' How might this be interpreted in such a way that expects and allows us to go on sinning? Why would we want to do that? How is that interpretation closed off by what is written here?

What is the difference between having an advocate with the Father and having an advocate over against the Father?

How is the righteousness of Christ related to God being 'faithful and just' (1:9)?

How does this save us from any pretended or asserted self-righteousness, or any self-implemented attempt to 'clean up our act'?

Assignment:

Trace in Scripture the nature and significance of 'Jesus Christ the righteous' as 'an advocate with the Father'.

6

The Propitiation for Our Sins

1 John 2:1-2 (2)

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ² and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins: ‘atoning sacrifice’ brings us back to Leviticus 1:3–9, where the elements of an atoning sacrifice under the law of Moses are set out. The animal to be sacrificed is to be ‘without blemish’. By an act of laying-on of a hand, the offering is identified with the offerer, ‘and it shall be acceptable in your behalf as atonement for you’. The animal is then slaughtered ‘before the LORD’, and its blood is thrown against all sides of the altar. The offering is cut up, and its parts appropriately washed and laid on the altar, where they are burned as ‘an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the LORD’. The movement here on the part of the offerer is from a position of being an offender before

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God—out of fellowship with Him, and deserving of death (see e.g. John 3:36: ‘must endure God’s wrath’)—through the thoroughgoing carrying-through of a slaughter and washing and offering by fire, to a position of being accepted by God and ‘pleasing . . . to the LORD’. The movement on the part of God is from being offended and opposed in wrath against the offender to being in a favourable and propitious relationship with the offerer on account of the full offering made.

This new relationship of propitious favour with God through an offering which has fully attended to the requirements of God’s offended wrath and His holy righteousness is the basis of the older translation: ‘the propitiation for our sins’. The related word is used in Genesis 32:20, when Jacob was expecting Esau to come against him to destroy him (see Genesis 32:6–8): ‘I may *appease* him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me’. It is translated in Zechariah 7:2 and 8:22: ‘to *entreat the favor of the LORD*’, and in Malachi 1:9: ‘*implore the favor of God*’. The tax-collector in Jesus’ parable prayed: ‘God, be merciful to me [*lit.* make propitiation for me], a sinner’, and was ‘justified’ (Luke 18:9–14). The notion of propitiating or pacifying an offended person, or placating angry deities with gifts and sacrifices, is common to many religions and cultures. Christian theologians and scholars rightly reject any projecting onto God of defective and changeable human propensities, which seek to wheel and deal in a self-serving way. But God’s holy opposition to all that is evil remains, and must be taken into account in any appreciation of His love (see 4:8b–10).

The unique feature in the Old and New Testaments is that, unlike the pagan deities who must be cajoled or prevailed upon, it is God who acts to initiate and carry through the atonement or propitiation with regard to the ones He loves (see e.g. Psalms 65:3: ‘you forgive’; 78:38: ‘forgave their

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iniquity'; 79:9: 'forgive our sins'; 85:2-3: 'you pardoned all their sin. You withdrew all your wrath'). The whole system of prescribed sacrifices in the Old Testament was given to Israel by God as a means of being restored to fellowship and favour with Him. In offering the sacrifices, the Israelites were simply taking up and participating in God's gift. The sacrifice 'is given *by* God before it is given *to* him'.⁴ This comes through particularly in Leviticus 17:11: 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and *I have given it to you* for making atonement for your lives on the altar . . .' Yet the slaughtering, the blood, the washing and the fire indicate something of what must be entailed, and the cost to God, in dealing with sinful humanity to bring us to fellowship with Himself (see Romans 8:3: 'condemned sin in the flesh'; Galatians 3:13: 'by becoming a curse for us'; Matthew 26:26-28: 'my blood of the covenant'; 26:31: 'strike the shepherd'). The implications of this are brought to bear when we see that it is Christ's own heart-blood, his dearest life, his whole self, in willing human obedience and holy, loving devotion, that is given from God and to God, in and for us, in the ultimate sacrifice to end all sacrifices.

and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world: Whether or not all people end up repenting and being forgiven by virtue of this atonement (and the Bible indicates that there will be those who resist it to the end, and out into eternity), nevertheless it is necessary that 'the sins of the whole world' be completely dealt with if there is to be 'new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Peter 3:13, RSV), fully purged of all that is evil (Revelation 21:27: 'nothing unclean'; 22:3: 'nothing accursed'), open and accessible to all who are called (1 Timothy 2:1-6: 'a

⁴ P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, p. 185.

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ransom for all'; Acts 17:30–31: 'commands all people everywhere to repent'; 13:48: 'as many as had been destined for eternal life').

For Group Discussion:

Trace how John personally came to experience this forgiveness and cleansing, out of which he writes:

- *the lamb of God—John 1:29*
- *where are you staying?—John 1:35–42*
- *Sons of Thunder—Mark 3:17*
- *we tried to stop him—Mark 9:38*
- *command fire to come down from heaven—Luke 9:51–56*
- *do for us whatever we ask of you—Mark 10:35–45*
- *close to the breast of Jesus—John 13:23 (RSV)*
- *he came and found them sleeping—John 14:32–42*
- *known to the High Priest—John 18:15–16*
- *standing near the cross of Jesus—John 19:25–27*
- *he saw and believed—John 20:8–9*
- *Peace be with you—John 20:19–23*
- *the disciple who is testifying to these things—John 21:20–24.*

How does this relate to our own experience?

Assignment:

Starting from Leviticus 1:3–9 and 17:11, expound what it means to say that Jesus Christ is the 'atoning sacrifice' and 'propitiation' for our sins.

7

The Love- Commandment

1 John 2:3-II

Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. ⁴Whoever says, 'I have come to know him,' but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; ⁵but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: ⁶whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk just as he walked.

⁷Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. ⁸Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. ⁹Whoever says, 'I am in the light,' while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. ¹⁰Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person

there is no cause for stumbling. ¹¹ **But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.**

Now by this we may be sure that we know him . . . By this we may be sure that we are in him: Knowing God is not just knowing about God. To ‘know him’ is to be relationally intimate with Him: it is the same as to be ‘in him’ or to ‘abide in him’. It is the ‘fellowship . . . with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ’, which is spoken of in 1:3, by which we also have fellowship with one another (compare John 17:3, 20–26). There were those who claimed that they had this knowledge of God (as in 1:6) but whose lives did not reflect the moral–relational fullness that such a relationship entails. In particular, it would seem that those who claimed this were not in a close relationship of love with other believers (see 2:7–11). Perhaps they were claiming some kind of spiritual superiority over the others, while overlooking matters of sin (as in, for example, 1 Corinthians 4:6–7; 5:1–2: ‘puffed up in favor of one against another . . . sexual immorality . . . arrogant’). John here gives the ‘ordinary’ believers simple and reliable ways of knowing that they are in the right relationship with God.

Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments: True relationship with God is shown by living in keeping with the way God has revealed Himself—His own being and nature—in His commandments: how God is in Himself, and in relation to us, and how we are to be in relationship with Him and with each other (compare John 14:15, 21, 23; 15:9–10: ‘love me . . . keep my commandments’). Obvious as this is, it is deliberately obscured

by those who wish to continue in sin, and in this self-deceit they become unable to see it, as John goes on to say.

Whoever says, ‘I have come to know him,’ but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist: The inconsistency here between profession and behaviour shows up the falseness of such a person’s position. Nothing of actional truth (see on 1:6, 8) issues from such a life.

but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection: On the positive side, whoever is living in obedience to the word of God is displaying the fullness of relational intimacy with God. ‘The love of God’ here can mean either God’s love for us, or our love for God, or both. Since any love we may have for God issues in the first place from God’s demonstrated love for us (see 4:7–10), then it must primarily refer to God’s love for us. But such is His effectual love in us that we are enabled to say truly, ‘I love God’ (see 4:19–5:2). The words ‘in this person the love of God has reached perfection’ really mean ‘in this person the love of God has been brought to its goal’. The emphasis is not on any supposedly independent moral perfection on our part, but on the action of the love of God coming to its true fulfilment in us. This ‘perfection’ is shown in 4:17–18 to be grounded in the atonement that has been made for us, by which we have already been taken through the judgement and no longer need to face it on the last day (see also John 5:24, and 1 John 3:14: ‘passed from death to life’).

By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, ‘I abide in him,’ ought to walk just as he walked: This reiterates what has just been said in a more intimate and personal way. The ‘he’ here must be a reference to Jesus

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Christ himself (as also in 2:28; 3:2–3; 4:17), emphasising our oneness with Christ in his relationship with the Father.

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining: The ‘new commandment’ that Jesus gave in John 13:34–35 (see also John 15:12, 17) is the commandment to love as he has loved. This is ‘old’ in the sense that it has always been in the heart of God from before the worlds were made (see John 17:24: ‘you loved me before the foundation of the world’). It is also ‘old’, so far as the readers are concerned, because it was part and parcel of the original gospel message that came to them from the beginning (see 3:11), that is, it was not some innovation that the disclaimers might say was added to the original gospel later on. It came to light in Christ: not only in his teaching (e.g. Mark 12:28–31: ‘love the Lord your God . . . love your neighbour’), but also in the living out of his mission (see 3:16). He is ‘the true [genuine] light’ that has come into the world (John 1:4–5, 9; 8:12), that we also might participate in the light (see Matthew 5:14–16: ‘let your light shine’; Ephesians 5:8–14: ‘now in the Lord you are light’—see on 1:5 above). This is like the dawning of a new day (Isaiah 9:2: ‘on them light has shined’; Romans 13:11–14: ‘the armor of light’), the beginnings of the new age to come (Galatians 1:4: ‘the present evil age’; Hebrews 6:5: ‘the powers of the age to come’).

Whoever says, ‘I am in the light,’ while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness: Compare 1:6–7. This spells out that love and living in love with one another is part

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and parcel of living in relationship with God. The ‘light’ or holiness of God is always full and strong moral–relational purity. So also the ‘darkness’ of sin and unrighteousness is always full of hatred.

Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling: A person living in the light of God, which means living in love with others, not only sees and lives in a straightforward and non-obstructed way, but also makes the way easier for others, by removing unnecessary obstructions (as in 1 Peter 4:8: ‘love covers a multitude of sins’; Proverbs 10:12: ‘love covers all offences’).

But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness: This states the obverse. See also Proverbs 4:19 (‘like deep darkness’); John 8:12 (‘never walk in darkness’); 11:9–10 (‘those who walk at night stumble’); 12:35 (‘you do not know where you are going’). On the matter of ‘blindness’, see Romans 1:18–22 (‘senseless minds were darkened’); Isaiah 59:10 (‘We grope like the blind’); 56:10 (‘Israel’s sentinels are blind’); 42:18–20 (‘sees many things, but does not observe them’); 42:16 (‘I will lead the blind’); John 9:39–41 (‘that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind’); 3:19–21 (‘come to the light’).

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For Group Discussion:

How do we know whether we and others are in a good relationship with God ('we know him')? We tend to expect that we will have attained a certain spiritual stature—whatever that may be—which will mark us out from those who do not know God so well. Such a self-centred sense of spiritual superiority can still give rise to forms of unrighteousness (see e.g. 1 Corinthians 4:6–7; 5:1–2)—often without even realising it. What experience have we had of this delusion? What does John say here that puts a stop to it?

The simple test that John gives by which we can be sure that we are in close relationship with God is the keeping of God's commandments, especially in the matter of loving one another. How are we disconcerted by that? How are we warmed and encouraged by it?

John insists that this is part and parcel of the original gospel and not an added extra. How is keeping God's commandments and loving one another 'grounded in the atonement that has been made for us, by which we have already been taken through the judgement'?

Assignment:

Expound the meaning of 'whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection' (1 John 2:5), with reference to 1 John 4:17–19.

8

God's People and the World, the Flesh and the Devil

1 John 2:12-17

**I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are 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 conquered the evil one.**

¹⁴ **I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.**

**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 abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.**

¹⁵ **Do not love the world or the things in the world. The
love of the Father is not in those who love the world;** ¹⁶ **for**

all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷ **And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.**

I am writing to you, little children . . . fathers . . . young people: Because John in other places addresses all his readers as ‘little children’ (2:1, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21; see also 3:2; 5:19), some commentators (including the Greek fathers, Luther, and Calvin) have taken ‘little children’ here to be addressing all, and ‘fathers’ and ‘young people’ to be two groups within that. Others, however (including Augustine and some Latin commentators), take the three groups to belong to three different stages of Christian growth, and it is instructive to take it this way.

I am writing to you [*present tense*] . . . **I write to you** [literally **I have written to you** *aorist tense*]: John writes to each group twice, in much the same terms, to emphasise what he has said, and so to affirm it as true and reliable, so that those to whom he is writing may have assurance as to where they stand with God. So he is saying: I am writing this to you, and this is what I have written to you, so stand firm in it!

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven on account of his name . . . I write to you, children, because you know the Father: Two different words for ‘children’ are used here: the first (*teknia*) emphasises the affinity of relationship of a child with its parent; the second (*paidia*) refers to the child’s upbringing under discipline. This may not be significant: John often uses two different words meaning the same thing without distinction (as with ‘love’ in John 21:15–17). The ‘little children’ we may take to

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be those newly come to faith in Christ, whatever their age in years. The two experiences noted here—forgiveness of sins and knowing God as Father—are the foundational essence of Christian faith and life. Packer says, ‘were I asked to focus the New Testament message in three words, my proposal would be *adoption through propitiation*, and I do not expect ever to meet a richer or more pregnant summary of the gospel than that’.⁵ See 1 Peter 3:18 (‘suffered [died] for sins . . . to bring you [us] to God’). On ‘forgiveness’ see 1 John 1:7, 9; 2:1–2. On ‘you know the Father’ see 1:3; 2:24; John 17:3 (‘this is eternal life’); Romans 8:14–17 and Galatians 4:6 (‘Abba! Father!’).

I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning . . . I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning: The ‘fathers’ are those who have been this faith now for a long time, and have matured in it. It is a long time since they received forgiveness of all their sins and came to know God as their Father. In this respect nothing has changed: this is still fresh and strong for them. But for them it has become a settled and unassailable reality, reinforced time and again by their experiences of God’s faithfulness in untoward circumstances. They have come to a sense of God as ‘our Father; our Redeemer from of old’ (Isaiah 63:16), as an awareness of an eternal reality, as they come nearer to the end of their earthly lives. In this instance, exactly the same thing is said to this group each time, indicating the settledness and constancy of what they have come to.

I am writing to you, young people, because you have conquered the evil one . . . I write to you, young people,

⁵ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1975, p. 239.

because you are strong and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one: The 'young people' are those who are in the prime of their life and ministry as Christian believers. They are in the thick of the battle, and have personal experience of the conflict within and without. They need to be reassured that the battle is already won by virtue of what God has done in Jesus on the Cross (see 4:4; 5:19, 4–5; also John 12:31–32: 'the ruler of this world . . . driven out'; 14:30–31: 'He has no power over me'; Luke 22:52–53: 'the power of darkness'; Colossians 2:13–15: 'disarmed the rulers and authorities'; Hebrews 2:14–15: 'destroy . . . the devil'). This victory is theirs by virtue of the word of the gospel which has come to them, that they now speak out (see Revelation 12:10–11: 'conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony'). This word is that which secures them and advances them in an ongoing way in the moral–relational life of God (as in Psalm 119:9–11: 'How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word'). Remembering that 'you are strong' may not mean that they have come to some place of strength in themselves, but is more likely to be spoken in the spirit of what God said to the frail and fearful Gideon: 'The LORD is with you, you mighty warrior . . . Go in this might of yours . . . I will be with you' (Judges 6:12, 14, 16).

Do not love the world or the things in the world: The word for 'love' here is the same as the word used for the love of God. We have been made and structured to love God, and to be in God's love. When this love that belongs with God is set, not on God, but on anything that God has made, then that love is misdirected, perverse, wrongful and destructive. The 'world' here is the world of people and of evil powers that is deadset against God and is seeking (impossibly) to live its own life apart from and over against God (see 2:16). This

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‘world’ is that which does not know or recognise God or those who belong to Him, and hates them (3:1, 13; John 1:10: ‘the world did not know him’; 14:17: ‘the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive’; 15:18–25: ‘the world . . . hated me . . . hated you’). It is ‘under the power of the evil one’ (1 John 5:19); it is the realm of ‘antichrist’, peopled with ‘false prophets’ (4:1–6). It is this rebellious world that is the object of the saving love of God (see 2:2; 4:9, 14; John 3:16: ‘God so loved the world’). It is the world in which we are placed to participate in the saving purposes of God (1 John 2:17; 4:4, 14; 5:4–5; John 17:14–18: ‘I have sent them into the world’).

The love of the Father is not in those who love the world: Jesus set the contrast just as starkly: see Matthew 6:24 (‘No one can serve two masters’), as did James 4:1–4 (‘friendship with the world is enmity with God’).

for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world: This verse would appear to have some parallels with the temptation succumbed to in Genesis 3:6 (‘good for food . . . delight to the eyes . . . desired to make one wise’), and resisted in Matthew 4:1–11 (‘loaves of bread . . . throw yourself down . . . worship me’). The advertising industry continues to engage the same ploys. For ‘the pride in riches’ (literally ‘the pride of life’, that is, pride in the outward circumstances of one’s life), compare 1 Corinthians 4:7 (‘What do you have that you did not receive?’) and James 4:16 (‘you boast in your arrogance’).

And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever: Compare with 1 Corinthians 7:31 (‘the present form of this world is passing

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away'); 2 Corinthians 4:18 ('what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal').

For Group Discussion:

Identify those in the group who are 'little children', 'fathers' and 'young people' according to how long they have been in Christian faith. How well do John's addresses in 1 John 2:12–14 fit with those in each group? Let members of the groups share their experiences.

What allurements have we found or succumbed to in 'the world and the things of the world'? How satisfying or lasting have we found these? How different is it to 'do the will of God'? How does this relate to believing in Jesus (see John 6:29)?

Assignment:

What is meant by 'the world' in 1 John 2:15–17? How does what is said here relate with Genesis 3:6 and Matthew 4:1–11?

9

Antichrist

1 John 2:18-22

Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. ¹⁹They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us. ²⁰But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge. ²¹I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth. ²²Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.

Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour: To understand this, we need first to hear what Jesus taught his disciples about the end times, as John heard it: see Mark 13:3-6

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(‘many will come in my name’); 13:12–13 (‘you will be hated by all’); 13:19–23 (‘False messiahs and false prophets will appear’); Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43 (‘the parable of the weeds’). Also what the apostles understood by ‘the last days’: Acts 2:16–17 (‘In the last days . . . ’); 1 Corinthians 10:11 (‘us, on whom the ends of the ages have come’), compare 15:20–28 (‘Christ . . . the first fruits . . . then at his coming . . . ’); 1 Timothy 4:1–2 (‘deceitful spirits’); 2 Timothy 4:3–5 (‘teachers to suit their own desires’); 3:1–7 (‘lovers of themselves . . . haters of good’); 2 Peter 2:1–3 (‘there will be false teachers among you’). Here are warnings of moral decadence and false teaching that go hand in hand. John has already spoken of the false teachers who seek to continue in sin and relational apartness with impunity in 1:6, 8, 10; 2:4 and 11. Now he addresses the false teaching regarding Christ that necessarily goes with that.

antichrist . . . many antichrists: See 2 Thessalonians 2:1–15 (‘the lawless one will be revealed’). See further, 1 John 4:1–3; 2 John 7–9.

They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us: There has been an exodus of those who hold this false teaching from among these people of God. This indicates a refusal to live in the moral–relational fullness that comes with the forgiveness of sins (see 1:3, 7; 2:9–11; 3:10), and an unwillingness to persevere (see Mark 13:13: ‘the one who endures’; Hebrews 3:14: ‘firm to the end’). In any gathering of those who profess faith there may be those of this ilk (see Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43: ‘the parable of the weeds’). It is the Lord’s action to separate them out, so that those who truly belong to Him (2 Timothy 2:19: ‘The Lord

knows those who are his') may be discerned (1 Corinthians 11:18–19: 'there have to be factions among you') and not be led astray (see Mark 13:22: 'to lead astray, if possible, the elect').

But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth: The word 'Christ' has to do with 'anointing'. Thus the 'antichrists' are those opposed to the true anointing, and who seek then to substitute or add on an 'anointing' of their own. In this case it was probably initiation into some special or secret 'knowledge' by which they considered themselves at an advantage over others who did not have it. Here John specifies the true anointing to reassure those who might be deceived or confused by this. What is the true anointing? It is the anointing that came from the Father onto the Son at his baptism (see Mark 1:9–11: 'the Spirit descending like a dove'; Acts 10:38: 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit'; John 1:32–34: 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain'), which is given to us through Christ (2 Corinthians 1:21–22: 'God . . . has anointed us . . . giving us his Spirit'). See also 1 John 2:27. This is something that has come to all believers, not just to a special group: 'Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him' (Romans 8:9). According to Christ's promise (John 14:26: 'the Holy Spirit . . . will teach you everything'; 16:13–15: 'what is mine . . . All that the Father has'), the Spirit leads us relationally into all the truth of the Father and the Son. This counteracts the lies of the devil (see John 8:44: 'a liar and the father of lies'). The role of John in this is not to correct them, but to affirm them in this: to tell them what they know so they will know what they know!

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Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son: Taken together with 4:2–3 and 2 John 7, it would seem that this teaching was not a straight denial of the Messiahship of Jesus (compare e.g. Acts 17:3: ‘This is the Messiah, Jesus’), but a denial that the Spirit-filled Christ and the earthly Jesus, even though they may have ‘come together’, were actually one and the same person. According to Irenaeus (130–200 AD) there was a contemporary of John called Cerinthus, who:

... represented Jesus as having not been born of a virgin, but as being the son of Joseph and Mary according to the ordinary course of human generation, while he nevertheless was more righteous, prudent and wise than other men. Moreover, after his baptism, Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler, and that then he proclaimed the unknown Father, and performed miracles. But at last Christ departed from Jesus, and that then Jesus suffered and rose again, while Christ remained impassible [not liable to pain or injury], inasmuch as he was a spiritual being.⁶

This allows those who wish to continue in sin to dissociate their ‘spiritual’ life from their fleshly existence, and to claim a ‘higher’ spirituality than others, while conveniently ignoring the moral and relational implications for us of Christ actually suffering and dying in our flesh at God’s behest, and the consequent need for our salvation, repentance, faith and godly living. The church today is plagued with those who hold much the same position, however differently expressed.

There is an oft-repeated story told by Polycarp, as relayed by Irenaeus and Eusebius, that ‘John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving Cerinthus within,

⁶ *Against Heresies* 27.1, quoted in J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 46–7.

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rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming “Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of truth, is within!”⁷ I am not sure that the fearfulness reflected in this story matches the John we know, for whom Jesus prayed: ‘I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one’ (John 17:15), and who said, ‘There is no fear in love’ (1 John 4:18). But we all have our moments, and this could have been one of John’s.

For Group Discussion:

Go through the Scripture passages that refer to the end times, given above in connection with 1 John 2:18. How do these end times relate to our own time?

- *What experiences have we had of ‘one who denies the Father and the Son’ (1 John 2:22)?*
- *What has been our experience of being ‘anointed by the Holy One’, and so knowing the truth (1 John 2:20–21)?*

Assignment:

From the Scripture references given above, draw up a profile of ‘antichrist’ and the ‘many antichrists’. What is their place and action towards God’s people, and in the outworking of God’s purpose?

⁷ J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, p. 46.

10

Those Who Abide

1 John 2:23-28

No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also. ²⁴ Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵ And this is what he has promised us, eternal life.

²⁶ I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. ²⁷ As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.

²⁸ And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.

No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also: Compare with 5:12; 2 John 9. Denial of Jesus as the Messiah/Son of God come in the flesh is also denial of the Father who sent him. The ‘God’

whom such people claim to know and relate to is not the true God as revealed in Jesus Christ, but some humanly manufactured metaphysical being or philosophical concept—in other words, an idol. To ‘have’ the Father is to be in fellowship with the Father (see 1:3). This fellowship is only possible through the one who has ever had that relationship with the Father, and has now brought it to bear in our human flesh (see John 1:18: ‘the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known’; 12:44–45: ‘whoever sees me sees him who sent me’). Only through what he suffered and bore in our human flesh is reconciliation possible between God, who is ‘light’, and darkened sinful humanity (see 2:1–2). Only the Son who has effected this reconciliation can reveal the Father to us in a way that brings us into true fellowship with Him, thus admitting us into their eternal relationship (see Matthew 11:27: ‘anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him’; John 14:6: ‘No one comes to the Father except through me’; 1 Timothy 2:5–6: ‘one mediator between God and humankind’).

‘Denying’ and ‘confessing’ here is in a public context: see also Mark 8:38 (‘Those who are ashamed of me and of my words’); Romans 10:9–10 (‘confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord’).

Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he has promised us, eternal life: This fellowship is intimately effected by the word of the gospel. See John 14:23–24 (‘Those who love me will keep my word . . . we will come to them’); 15:7–8 (‘you abide in me, and my words abide in you’). This is not some new-fangled teaching (as in 2 Timothy 3:1, 7; 4:3: ‘teachers to suit their own desires’), but the unadulterated apostolic word of Christ that came to

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those to whom John is writing from the time when they first received it—the same word of God that was present and active at the origin of all things. This is the word that brings participation in the life that is ever truly eternal (compare John 17:3: ‘know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ’).

I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him: John warns constantly against the danger of being deceived by others, and of deceiving ourselves (see 3:7; 1:8; compare Romans 1:21–22: ‘senseless minds were darkened’; 16:18: ‘they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded’; Ephesians 5:6: ‘Let no one deceive you’; 1 Corinthians 3:18: ‘Do not deceive yourselves’; Galatians 6:3: ‘they deceive themselves’; James 1:22: ‘not merely hearers who deceive themselves’). This is because the forces of the original liar (John 8:44: ‘the devil’) are abroad, and we are only too willing to cooperate. Proof against this is the ‘anointing’ of the Holy Spirit that we have received (see 1 John 2:20–21), who brings the reality of the gospel of Christ to us, and so teaches us ‘all things’ (compare John 14:16–17, 26; 16:13–16: ‘the Spirit of truth . . . will teach you everything . . . All that the Father has’). This brings the teaching to us directly from God, human teachers notwithstanding (compare Jeremiah 31:34: ‘No longer shall they teach one another’; Galatians 1:1, 11–12: ‘I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it’; 1 Thessalonians 1:4–8; 2:13; 4:9–10: ‘God’s word . . . taught by God’).

And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame

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before him at his coming: See John 15:3–11 ('I am the vine . . . abide in me'); compare with 2 Thessalonians 1:6–12 ('those who do not obey . . . all who have believed'). If we know and relate with Jesus now, it will then be like rising up eagerly to greet a dear friend when he comes.

For Group Discussion:

Look at the four references to the Father and the Son in 1 John 2:22–24 (and John 17:3 in connection with v. 25):

- *What is the significance of each reference in the matter of denying one or both, or of abiding in both?*
- *What is the place of the gospel word in this (v. 24)?*
- *How does this relate to the ministry of the anointing Spirit (vv. 26–27)?*
- *How does this relate to the coming revelation of Jesus?*

Assignment:

Explain why knowing and abiding in the Father and the Son constitutes eternal life, and trace the effects of denying them.

11

Righteousness and Sin

1 John 2:29-3:10

If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him. ^{3:1} See what love the Father has given 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 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³ And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

⁴ Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵ You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶ No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. ⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. ⁸ Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God

was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. ⁹Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God. ¹⁰The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.

If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him. See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are: See John 1:12–13, where those who receive and believe in the word of God are born as children of God, and John 3:3–16, where this happens by the cleansing action of the Spirit for those who believe in the 'lifted up' Son of man. Compare James 1:18 ('he gave us birth by the word of truth') and 1 Peter 1:23 ('born anew . . . through the living and enduring word of God'); see below on verse 9. Children will live after their Father's likeness, in righteousness and true holiness.

The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him: Our eternal life as children of God is not outwardly obvious, but is 'hidden with Christ in God' (Colossians 3:3), waiting to be revealed in the last time (see Romans 8:19: 'the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God'). So Jesus warned his disciples that this reality would not be recognised by those who still 'belong to the world', resulting in persecution (see John 15:18–21; 16:1–3: 'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you').

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed: This is consistent with 1 Corinthians 2:9–10 ('What no eye has seen, nor ear heard'); 13:9–12

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(‘Now I know only in part’); 2 Corinthians 5:7 (‘we walk by faith, not by sight’). If the apostles themselves claimed not to know these things fully in this life, we should be no less circumspect.

What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is: This is the promise of Romans 8:29 (‘conformed to the image of his Son’), Philippians 3:21 (‘conformed to the body of his glory’) and 1 Corinthians 15:49 (‘the image of the man of heaven’), that is even now in the process of fulfilment (see 2 Corinthians 3:18: ‘being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another’).

And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure: We are to live now consistently with how we will be then, which is how Jesus is now, and ever has been. While all this comes by the action of the Spirit of God by faith, our wills, life-choices, preferences and habits are exercised in this process of making and keeping ourselves morally pure. See 2 Corinthians 7:1 (‘let us cleanse ourselves . . . making holiness perfect’); 1 Timothy 5:22 (‘keep yourself pure’); James 4:8 (‘purify your hearts’). This comes about, for those who ‘have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb’ (Revelation 7:14), on the basis that ‘our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin’ (see Romans 6:6–14), not by making efforts at moral self-improvement, but only by remembering ‘the cleansing of past sins’ (see 2 Peter 1:3–11).

Everyone who commits sin . . . Everyone who commits sin: Two parallel and reinforcing passages follow in verses 4–7 and 8–10. Each one begins with a definition of sin, with

its remedy in the first coming of Christ, followed by a practical consequence, and a conclusion.

Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness: If the law of God is the expression of God's own being and nature in relationship with us, then 'lawlessness' is not just the renouncing of certain standards. It is the total offensive rejection and violation of God as He is and of all God's relationship with us.

You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin: If sin is as we have just said, then the taking away of sin, and all its entail, is no light thing. It takes the coming of the Son of God as a human being, his living of a complete life in obedience to God without sin, the offering of a perfect sacrifice to bear all sin and its judgement, to bring it to an end, and the raising up of this person to life and lordship over all. John and the other apostles personally know Jesus as this one, and authoritatively testify of him to those who will receive this revelation and enter into this reality. See also John 1:29 ('the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world') and Hebrews 9:14, 26b–28 ('offered himself without blemish . . . to bear the sins of many').

No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him: The implications that follow are these: if Jesus has taken away our sin, and we are in him who is without sin, then sin is no longer compatible with who we have become, and no longer admissible. As distinct from 2:1, where the verb 'sin' is the aorist (punctiliar) tense, indicating one-off instances, 'sins' here is present (continuous) tense, indicating a settled, habitual persistence in sinning. Even so, this does not excuse the one-off sinning as distinct from the habitual persistence. We do not say, 'But we still do sin'. It

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is better just to say with John: ‘No one who abides in him sins’. Abiding in Christ—seeing and knowing him relationally in this way—does not make us incapable of sinning (see 1:8). It does make sin totally incongruous with who and where we are now: we will never ‘enjoy’ it, and we will not be able to keep it up for very long without a determined effort to do so.

Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous: The positive outcome is that the children born of God manifest a practical righteousness in their lives that matches that of Christ. Over against this are the devious perversions of the false teachers, who claim to ‘be’ righteous without actually doing righteous acts (see 1:6; 2:4–6), and who excuse and continue in their sin.

Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning: John now moves from the nature of sin (‘lawlessness’, v. 4) to its origin in the evil one who has renounced the truth of God, and has set out to distort and destroy all that pertains to it (see John 8:41, 44).

The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil: Jesus, by taking the guilt of human sin and its bitter condemnation upon himself, has removed the power of the devil to accuse God’s children of sin and hold us in its fearful bondage (see Hebrews 2:13–15). Jesus has freed us also from the devil’s physical and intellectual oppression (see Acts 10:38; John 8:31–32).

Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God’s seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God: The verb ‘sin’ here is again present

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continuous. Being born of God does not make it impossible for us to lapse into sin (see above, on v. 6). Jesus' temptations would have made no sense if he had been incapable of sinning. But it does make it possible for us not to sin, and leaves us without any excuse when we do (see Romans 6:6–14). 'God's seed abides in them' may be translated 'the children of God abide in Him' (plural sense; compare 2:24b, 28), but it may equally mean that the very nature of the Son of God abides in us (singular sense; see 5:12; compare Isaiah 6:13; 11:1–10), engendered through the 'seed' of the gospel word (see Luke 8:11: 'The seed is the word of God'; James 1:18: 'he gave us birth by the word of truth'; 1 Peter 1:23, 25: 'born anew . . . through the living and enduring word of God'; compare 1 John 2:24), and the anointing of the Spirit (2:20, 27) abides in us, making sin a complete *non sequitur* for us.

The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters: The lesson is summed up and reiterated. The equating of righteousness with practical acts of love leads into the next section.

For Group Discussion:

What does it mean for us to be the children of God, born of Him?

- *How do we know that, when it is not outwardly obvious?*
- *What do we hope for in the coming revelation of Jesus Christ? What has that got to do with purifying ourselves?*

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- *What is the difference between moral self-improvement and remembering 'the cleansing of past sins'?*
- *What is meant by: 'No one who abides in him sins . . . Those who have been born of God do not sin . . . they cannot sin'?*

Assignment:

In the context of the whole letter, what is meant by: 'No one who abides in him sins . . . Those who have been born of God do not sin . . . they cannot sin' (1 John 3:6, 9)?

12

Hatred and Death, Love and Life

1 John 3:11-17

For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. ¹² We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. ¹³ Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you.

¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵ All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. ¹⁶ We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷ How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another: The mention of love at the end of verse 10 leads John to expand the matter that he introduced in 2:7–10 of loving one another, which is in keeping with the old/new commandment. There it was linked with light and darkness. Here it is a matter of life and death.

As with the relationship between the Son and the Father (in 2:22–24), this has been part of the original message which was ‘heard’ by all ‘from the beginning’. This goes right back to the teaching John heard from Jesus himself in John 13:34 and 15:12, 17 (‘a new commandment . . . love one another as I have loved you’). This is in contrast to the false teaching, which relied on subsequent secret illumination given to the few.

We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous: The story of the first murder, in the first generation after Adam and Eve, is told in Genesis 4:1–16. Abel’s offering was made out of the righteousness of a faith-relationship with God, in keeping with God’s word of mercy and promise (see Hebrews 11:1–4). Cain made his offering out of an angry, sullen and mistrustful heart, where sin was lurking. Abel’s faithfulness, and his prophetic witness (see Luke 11:47–51: ‘the blood of all the prophets . . . the blood of Abel’), was an unbearable offence to Cain (see Jude 8, 10–11: ‘slander the glorious ones . . . they go the way of Cain’). As long as Cain remained in that position, in defiance of God’s warning to him, what was in him came out as murder. Murder comes from hatred, which is the opposite of love (see Matthew 5:21–26). Thus Cain was ‘from the evil one’, the one who has been ‘a murderer from the beginning’ (John

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8:44), who through his lies convinced the human race to opt for death rather than life (see Genesis 3:4: ‘You will not die’; Romans 5:12: ‘death came through sin’). John 8:37–59 (‘you are trying to kill me . . . You are from your father the devil’), with Mark 7:21 (‘from the human heart . . . murder’) and Ephesians 2:1–3 (‘following . . . the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient’) make it clear that being children of the devil, with murder in our hearts, is the state of all unregenerate human beings (see above, 3:8, 10).

Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another: Those who hear what Jesus says and believe in the Father who sent him have been brought out of this death state (see John 5:24: ‘has passed from death to life’; Ephesians 2:4–5: ‘God . . . made us alive’). They have been made children of God (John 1:12–13: ‘all who received him, who believed in his name’; 1 John 3:1–2), and so they now love as God does. John gives expression to this at this point in calling his readers ‘brothers and sisters’. The rest of the world is still in hate (compare Titus 3:3: ‘despicable, hating one another’). As Jesus warned his disciples (see John 15:18–21: ‘the world hates you . . . it hated me’; 16:2–3: ‘they have not known the Father or me’), this hatred will be directed in large measure against those who belong to God. So we should not find it surprising when this happens (compare 1 Peter 4:12–14: ‘do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal’).

Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them: This follows from what we have seen above (see especially Matthew 5:21–26). Death, which goes with sin, and life,

Hatred and Death, Love and Life

which is constituted of love, are incompatible with each other—much as darkness is with light (compare 2:9).

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another: Here John is passing on what he has heard and seen in Jesus himself: see Romans 5:5–10 (‘Christ died for the ungodly’); John 13:34–35; 15:12–14 (‘love one another as I have loved you’). This follows from what he has said in 2:6 about living in keeping with the one in whom we abide.

How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? This involves many ‘little deaths’ as well as big ones: putting the needs of others before our own (as in Philippians 2:1–11: ‘look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others’). This works out in very practical ways: compare James 2:15–16 (‘if a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food’). The singular ‘brother [or sister]’ makes this very specific. In such actions it is God’s own love that is evident.

For Group Discussion:

We tend to think that life is being alive, and that loving is a desirable adjunct to that. John, however, seems to be saying that love itself constitutes what is life, and that not to love is to be in death:

- *How do we come to make the shift to seeing and knowing it in this way?*
- *How does this change the way we understand what human living really is?*

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- *How does it change the way we live?*
- *Read through Genesis 4:1–16, and trace what was going on in Cain’s heart, and between Cain and God, in the light of what John says in 1 John 3:11–17.*

Assignment:

In the context of the whole letter, trace and explain the link John makes between death and hatred, and love and life, in 1 John 3:11–17.

13

Boldness before God

1 John 3:18-24

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹ And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²² and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

²³ And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴ All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action: This exhortation draws the conclusion from the previous verse (3:17). It is not just saying that our love needs to come out in practical ways. For the meaning here of

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the word ‘truth’, we need to start from John 1:14, 17: ‘And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and *truth* . . . grace and *truth* came through Jesus Christ’. This corresponds with the ‘steadfast love and *faithfulness*’ of God’s nature as in Exodus 34:6, and sees ‘truth’ as being of the nature and activity of God the Father, as manifested in the Son. We saw from 2:21–23 that truth has to do with the reality in relationship of the Father and the Son, as against the lie which attempts to deny this. This is not just something that you know and believe, but something you *do*, as in 1:6 (compare Ephesians 4:15 where the verbal form, literally ‘*truthing* in love’, is used). Loving in this way is truly ‘God’s love’ (3:17) abiding in us.

And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything: Here a key word is the emphatic ‘*before him*’, as also in 3:21, ‘boldness before God’. We are in the presence of God. How do we stand with regard to God, and how do we know how we stand? Our own hearts are notoriously unreliable, though sometimes, and especially in the Spirit, they are to be heeded. The word for ‘reassure’ has the sense of persuade or convince in a settled way. The words ‘by this’ refer to the previous verse: it is our loving in truth and action, seen as the working of God’s love in us, that can settle our hearts with regard to how we stand with God. It may be that hearts have been wrongly unsettled by the false teachers. Or it may be that our hearts are rightly accusing us of not loving. Either way, a good antidote is to be in the practical action of God’s loving. This brings us out of the arena of our vacillating hearts and securely into the realm of God’s operation. It could be that God, who is not fooled by

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the posturings of our hearts, reassures us in the face of the lying false teachers. Or it may be that God affirms even more strongly the heart's goadings to bring us back into true loving. Either way, knowing that we are 'before him', and answerable only to Him, is a good place to be (compare 1 Corinthians 4:3–4: 'It is the Lord who judges me'; 1 Kings 8:39: 'only you know what is in every human heart'; 2 Timothy 4:1: 'In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead'; Jude 24: 'who is able . . . to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory').

Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him: Under what circumstances can it be said that 'our hearts do not condemn us'? If we are without sin—but that is not the case with any of us (see 1:8). It can only be, then, if God has brought us to peace with Himself through justification and forgiveness of sins (see 2:1–2), and in this fellowship with Him (1:3) we are walking in the light (1:6–7), that is, in the moral–relational righteousness of God Himself. This is the state of the Son of God himself (see John 8:29: 'I always do what is pleasing to him'), whose prayers are always heard and answered by the Father (see John 11:41–42: 'you always hear me'). Those who abide by faith in this love-relationship with Jesus are in the same situation he is with regard to the Father (see John 15:3, 9–10; 14:15: 'cleansed by the word . . . As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love . . . keep my commandments'): keeping His commandments and living in a way that is consistent with being in God's good pleasure (as in 2 Corinthians 5:9: 'we make it our aim to please him'; Ephesians 5:10: 'find out what is pleasing to the Lord'; Colossians 1:10: 'lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing

to him'; 1 Thessalonians 4:1: 'how you ought to live and to please God'; Hebrews 13:21: 'working among us that which is pleasing in his sight'). Thus living in the will of God, what we desire and ask for will be in keeping with God's good will (see 5:14–15; John 15:7: 'ask for whatever you wish'; compare Psalm 37:4: 'Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart'), and consistent with faith in what God has promised (understand in this way Matthew 21:22: 'Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive'; and Mark 11:24: 'believe that you have received it') and so will be readily granted (as in Matthew 7:7–8: 'Ask, and it will be given you'). This is something very different from attempting to set up the right conditions ourselves by which prayer may be answered. Our sin and our being out of right relationship with God is what stands in the way of prayer (see Isaiah 59:1–2: 'your iniquities have been barriers'; James 4:2–3: 'you ask wrongly'; Psalm 66:18: 'iniquity in my heart'; Proverbs 15:29: 'far from the wicked'); so being in the flow of God's forgiveness (Mark 11:25: 'Whenever you stand praying, forgive') and abiding in a determined faith-relationship with God (James 1:5–8: 'ask in faith') is fundamental to all real and effective prayer (see James 5:15–16: 'The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective').

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us: John here brings together what he has said of believing in Jesus (2:23; see also 4:15; 5:5, 10; compare John 6:29: 'this is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent') and loving one another (1 John 2:7–11; 3:11; see also 4:7, 11; 2 John 5–6; compare John 13:34; 15:12, 17). John nominates these together as a single commandment. Why should this be so?

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Because it is Christ who brings to us all the love he has from the Father, and it is only in a faith-relationship with Christ that we are liberated to love one another with this love.

All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us: The link made here between obeying the commandments and abiding in him is directly what Jesus said in John 15:4a, 9–10. Again, the moral and relational are one and the same thing in us, because they are one and the same thing in God. Here the matter of mutual abiding is introduced, which will be taken up in 4:13–16. It is what Jesus prayed for in John 17:21–23 (‘that they may be one as we are one’), the reality spoken of in John 14:23 (‘we will come to them and make our home in them’). Here also John introduces the Spirit as the dynamic which secures this abiding and effects the relational and moral transformation, as he now will go on to expound.

For Group Discussion:

The words, ‘let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action’, could be taken by us in our sinful self-asserting flesh as a rallying cry to get real things done in a practical way. What is the difference between that and what John is saying here about ‘truth’ as being the nature and activity of God the Father, as manifested in the Son, and about walking in the moral–relational righteousness of God Himself?

What unsettles our hearts, wrongly or rightly? How does being in the practical action of God’s loving help to get us and keep us out of that? What examples can we think of from our own experience?

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How does having a quieted conscience enable us to love one another? What has this to do with believing in Jesus Christ?

Assignment:

What is the relationship between believing in the name of Jesus Christ (1 John 3:23), having reassured hearts that do not condemn us (3:19–21), receiving whatever we ask from God (3:22), keeping God's commandments (3:22–24), and loving one another 'in truth and action' (3:18, 23)?

Test the Spirits

1 John 4:1-6

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. ⁴Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world: Many Christians today are gullible and naive concerning the 'spirit world', or various

forms of 'spirituality', and are ready to believe that anything 'supernatural' or 'spiritual' is of God and therefore good. John has already spoken of the devil and his deceitful and murderous opposition against God, and has contrasted those who have been born of God with those who still belong to the devil (see 3:4–12). He has also said that Jesus as the true Christ is opposed by many 'antichrists', operating in the spirit of the antichrist (2:18–19), abroad in the world and among God's people. It is as well that we should be rightly aware of these things (as in 2 Corinthians 2:11: 'we are not ignorant of his designs'). We are reminded by Paul's teaching in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–15, given as part and parcel of the original message, that these powers are operative even (or especially) in the church ('in the temple of God'). All that we have been given in the Spirit of God is proof against them, if we will have it so. Along with the declaration of the gospel itself, there is a special manifestation of the Spirit given for the discerning of spirits (1 Corinthians 12:2–3, 10). These false spirits are manifested through false prophecy and false teaching. They are warned against in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 18:9–14 ('soothsayers and diviners'); 18:20–22 ('a word that the Lord has not spoken'); Jeremiah 23:9–32 ('visions of their own minds'); and Ezekiel 13 ('senseless prophets who follow their own spirit'). Jesus issued similar warnings (Matthew 7:15–20: 'in sheep's clothing . . . ravenous wolves'; Mark 13:22–23: 'False messiahs and false prophets'), as did other apostles (Acts 20:29–32: 'from your own group . . . distorting the truth'). John here adds his own warning against these powers, and shows how they may be rightly discerned.

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from

Test the Spirits

God: John has introduced the Spirit in 3:24 as the one who ensures and assures us of our moral obedience in relationship with God. He now tells how this Holy Spirit can be distinguished from the false spirits: first by assessing what they say (4:2–3), and then by knowing who we are in relationship with God (4:4–5), and who has taught us (4:6).

‘Jesus Christ has come in the flesh’ is more precisely translated ‘Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh’. This is over against the false teaching of Cerinthus and others that:

... after his baptism, Christ descended upon him [Jesus] in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler, and that then he proclaimed the unknown Father, and performed miracles. But at last Christ departed from Jesus, and that then Jesus suffered and rose again, while Christ remained impassible [not liable to pain or injury], inasmuch as he was a spiritual being.⁸

This, as we saw above on 2:22, is a convenient way of dissociating your ‘spiritual’ life from what you actually do in the body, leaving you free to go on sinning—and not loving—with apparent impunity. A spiritual ‘Christ’ did not come into the human Jesus as a kind of ‘higher power’. The man Jesus was himself, from the moment of his conception as human flesh, the Christ from God in person (see e.g. Luke 1:35: ‘the child to be born . . . will be called Son of God’; 1:43: ‘the mother of my Lord’; Matthew 1:23: ‘Emmanuel . . . God is with us’; compare 1 John 5:18: ‘the one who was born of God’), and he has maintained his humanity ever since (see 2 John 7, where the present continuous tense is used for ‘come’, as the perfect continuous tense is used here in 4:2). Apart from this total identification in love with us (as in 1:1–2), there could be no atonement and no forgiveness of sins (as in 1:7 and 2:1–2), and so no fellowship with the Father and the Son (as in 1:3 and 2:22–25). The Spirit who effected

⁸ *Against Heresies* 27.1, quoted in J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 46–7.

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this 'incarnation' (see Luke 1:35; Matt. 1:20) testifies to its truth. This truth was still being contested at the time of the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), which issued in the 'Nicene Creed'. It is no less contested today.

To 'confess' Jesus as he really is, is more than just to acknowledge his existence. Even the demons do that (see Mark 1:24: 'I know who you are'; 3:11: 'the Son of God!'; 5:7-8: 'do not torment me', Acts 19:15: 'Jesus I know . . . who are you?'; compare James 2:19: 'the demons believe—and shudder'). It is to unashamedly acknowledge him before others as the one to whom you belong (compare Mark 8:38: 'Those who are ashamed of me and of my words').

And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world: See above on 4:1; compare 2:18, 22.

Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world: The proof against the confusion perpetrated by the false teachers in the minds of believers is to come back to the original and true gospel, as in 4:2 above, and by virtue of that gospel know that you have been born again with the life that is of God in Jesus Christ, and that you belong well and truly to Him. By this the children of God 'have conquered them', in that they have been held fast in the truth, which gives the lie to all the deceits of the false teachers. Thus the devil, 'the one who is in the world' (compare John 12:31-33: 'now the ruler of this world will be driven out'; 14:30-31: 'He has no power over me'), meets his demise (see Colossians 2:13-15: 'disarmed the rulers and authorities'; Hebrews 2:14-15: 'destroy the one who has the power of death'; Revelation 12:10-12: 'conquered him by the blood of the Lamb'; Romans 16:20: 'The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet').

Test the Spirits

They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them: The false prophets and teachers operate according to the agenda of the rebellious ‘world’ opposed to God (see on 2:15–17, compare 3:1, 13; John 1:10: ‘the world did not know him’; 14:17: ‘the world cannot receive’; 15:18–25: ‘the world hates you’), and so are well received in that milieu (see 2 Timothy 4:1–5: ‘teachers to suit their own desires’).

We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error: The ‘we’ and ‘us’ referred to here is not the whole body of the God’s people, who are the ‘you’ referred to in 4:4. They are more likely to be the apostles, on whose behalf John speaks. These are the ones who have ‘heard . . . seen . . . looked at . . . touched’ and have been commissioned to testify to the word of eternal life from God that is in Jesus (1:1–5). Thus they speak with an authority and authenticity that is recognised by those who are His. It is to be hoped that all God’s people would speak consistently with the message of the apostles, and be heard. Meanwhile, whether they do or not, the apostolic word of the true saving gospel continues to unmask error, and distinguish truth from falsehood (see Hebrews 4:12: ‘able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart’).

For Group Discussion:

- *What experience have we had, in ourselves or with others, of believing that anything ‘supernatural’ or ‘spiritual’ is of God and therefore good? What dangers are there in that?*

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- *What is the attraction of 'spiritual' doctrines that are dissociated from what we do in our bodies day by day? What forms of 'Christian' belief lie in danger of falling into this category?*
- *How does an affirmation of Jesus as the Christ come in the flesh secure us in the forgiveness of sins and fellowship with God? How does a denial of Jesus as the Christ come in the flesh stand in the way of knowing the forgiveness of sins and having fellowship with God?*
- *On what basis can it be said that we have conquered the false spirits?*
- *On what basis could John and his fellow apostles say, 'We are from God'?*

Assignment:

Why is it necessary to 'test the spirits'? What are the grounds on which the spirits are to be tested? What is to be the outcome of this testing?

Love Is from God

1 John 4:7-12

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God: In 2:7–11, John has spoken of love in connection with the light, and in 3:11–18, in the context of eternal life. Here he comes to the heart of the nature of true love.

We think we know what love is, in the relational arrangements we have made with each other, with greater or lesser degrees of passion. We look on this 'love' as a 'good thing', or even as a congenial thing, that suits each of us well, and

makes for better social interaction. We need no convincing to ‘love’ one another in this way (see Luke 6:32–36: ‘even sinners love those who love them’; compare Matthew 5:46–48: ‘what more are you doing than others?’). We take what we understand to be this ‘love’, and seek to apply it to this passage, and we get it wrong. The love being spoken of here is of an order so vast and so high, that it shows up all our other ‘loves’ as self-serving manifestations of perverse and rebellious spirits. This love is not from ourselves, but from God (see 4:10). It takes a total revelation and redemption from God through the gospel (see 4:9–10) for us to know and appreciate the difference, and to be able to love others with this love that is from God.

‘Beloved, let us love’ is just two punchy words in the original Greek: *agapetoi agapomen*. When John calls his readers ‘beloved’, he is not just saying that they are loved by him. They are first of all loved by God. It is those to whom this great love of God has come in the gospel who can receive and live in this exhortation to love one another with the love that is from God.

everyone who loves is born of God and knows God: It is not the human definitions of ‘love’ that are in view here. It is not a case of saying that any who have the feelings and actions that we would characterise as ‘love’ are actually God’s children and are in touch with God—whether they know it or not! Jesus acknowledged that in our natural relations something of the image of God comes through (see Matthew 7:11; Luke 11:13: ‘you . . . who are evil, know how to give good gifts’), albeit in a perverse and ‘evil’ way. The love being spoken of here is that which we know and live in through being ‘born of God’ in a new way, by the Spirit through the word of the gospel (1 John 2:29–3:1a; John 1:12–13: ‘born . . . of God’; 3:3–15: ‘born from above . . . of

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water and Spirit'), into the relationship of faith or believing by which a person 'knows God'.

Whoever does not love does not know God: This perhaps reflects back on the false teachers (see 2:9), who have not remained in love with the other believers (2:19), because they want to remain in sin, hatred and death (see 1:6; 3:12–15). If they truly knew God and the love that is from God, in this faith-relationship with Him, they would not be withholding this love from others.

for God is love: This is not a philosophical definition or a metaphysical statement of the nature of God. It is actional, as we shall see. It is not taking 'love' as we think we know it, and defining God in those terms. It is not an answer to the question, 'Who, or what, is God?' given in terms of what we think we know love to be. It answers the question, 'What is love?' It is showing us what love and loving is, in terms of *all that God Himself is and does*. This requires a total shift in our thinking, our bearing, and our conduct of life. We stand back and make judgements on God and His actions, and say what we think is loving and what is not. We accuse God of being unloving in certain situations, and we oppose God's love to His wrath. All of that must now be dropped. True love is all that God is and does, in all His being and action. This means that the whole of God's acts of creation are a love-exercise, as are all His actions of providence and the events of history. This includes God's judgements as well as His blessings.

However, we do not come to this understanding just by changing our thinking and adopting this as an alternative theory. John goes on to speak of God's central act of revelation and redemption, in which this love consists, by which alone we enter not only into the understanding but also into the very action of this great love.

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins: The situation addressed by this act of God is made clear: 'that we might live through him' indicates that we are in fact relationally *dead* in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1), and so incapable of knowing what true love is; '*not* that we loved' shows how we have declined to 'honor him as God or give thanks to him' (Romans 1:21) but rather have become '*God-haters*' (Romans 1:30); 'the atoning sacrifice [*propitiation*']; see on 2:2] for our sins' tells of our being '*children of wrath*' (Ephesians 2:3) who need to be reconciled to God. It is into this situation of helpless weakness, worthless sinfulness, and inimical opposition (see Romans 5:5–11) that God sends His Son, His all, in love holding nothing of Himself back, to effect our cleansing forgiveness and relational reinstatement, with all the blessings that go with that (see Romans 8:32: 'with him also give us everything else'), now brought to us by the Holy Spirit in the word of the gospel. This is the true love of God, the love-in-action that God Himself is.

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another: This is not just a logical deduction which places us under obligation. The emphasis is on the '*so much*': it is an exhortation so to enter into the fullness of this love that we love *in the same way* (see Ephesians 3:14–19: 'the breadth and length and height and depth'; 1 Thessalonians 3:12: 'increase and abound in love').

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us: As we thus love one another, so God's unseen inner nature of love (as has

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always been between the Father and the Son, with the Spirit, see 1:1, 3; John 16:13–15: ‘All that the Father has’) is now out in the open and evident among us. This is the purpose for which the Son came into the world (as in John 1:18: ‘who has made him known’), and the goal for which he prayed (in John 17:21–26: ‘the love with which you have loved me’). ‘Perfected’ (*teteleiomene*) relates to what Jesus said in Matthew 5:44–48 (‘Love . . . so that you may be children of your Father’). But it also incorporates the sense of this *telos* or goal of God’s love being reached in us. If true worship is making visible in creation all that is invisible in God (see Romans 1:20–21; 12:1ff.), and this is the purpose and goal of all creation, then how truly and wonderfully this goal is reached when we are so one with God in our midst that it is in the fullness and purity of His love that we relate with one another!

For Group Discussion:

- *What has been our experience of being loved, and of loving?*
- *How then would we define love from our own experience?*
- *What is the difference between that and the love that is ‘from God’?*
- *What is the difference between saying ‘God [all that God Himself is and does] is love’, and ‘Love [as we experience it and define it] is God’?*
- *What is the significance of ‘the atoning sacrifice’ for knowing ourselves to be loved by God?*

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- *What is the significance of 'the atoning sacrifice' for our action of loving others?*
- *How does God's love come to its goal—how is it 'perfected'—in us?*

Assignment:

What does it mean to say: 'God is love'?

16

We Abide in Him and He in Us

1 John 4:13-18

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us: ‘abide’ has the sense of dwell, lodge, remain, stay, rest, permanently settle, persevere, be steadfast, indwell, be in union with. The reality of our abiding in God was introduced

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in 2:24–28. As the gospel we heard from the beginning abides in us, we abide in the Father and the Son. This is equivalent to having fellowship with the Father and the Son (1:3), and amounts to eternal life (2:25; compare John 17:3). In 3:24, this abiding is shown to issue in the keeping of God’s commandments, particularly the commandment to love (which encapsulates all the commandments: see James 2:8: ‘the royal law . . . “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”’; Romans 13:8–10: ‘love is the fulfilling of the law’). In 3:24 it is further said not only that we abide in God, but also that God abides in us. This mutual abiding is reiterated in 4:12 and is now taken up in 4:13, 15 and 16. Three ways of knowing our mutual abiding with God are given: God’s giving of His Spirit, the confessing of Jesus as the Son of God sent as Saviour of the world, and abiding in love. These things are not the conditions of mutual indwelling, as though to confess Jesus or seek to abide in love gets us to abide in God. These are the things that *come from* and attest to the mutual abiding.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit: The giving of the Spirit himself is spoken of in 3:24, and in 4:1–6 the Spirit of God is to be distinguished from other spirits by the confession of Jesus as the Christ come in the flesh, the sense of belonging to God rather than to the rebellious world, and readiness to hear the apostolic testimony. The words ‘he has given us of [literally: out of] his Spirit’ may refer to our experience of all that the Spirit brings: all that the Father has that He has given to the Son (see John 16:13–15), including the anointing in 2:20, 27, and the manifestations of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:7–11 (‘wisdom’; ‘knowledge’; ‘faith’; ‘healing’; ‘miracles’; ‘prophecy’; ‘discernment’; ‘tongues’; ‘interpretation’). This is a wonderful way of knowing our abiding!

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world: Who are the ‘we’ here: all the believers, or specifically John and the apostles? Comparison with 1:1–3 (see also on 4:6) would indicate the apostolic testimony. This was the first outcome of the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost (see John 15:26–27: ‘testify on my behalf’; Acts 1:8; 2:11: ‘you will be my witnesses . . . speaking about God’s deeds of power’) and thereafter (see Acts 5:30–32: ‘we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit’). This is the gospel, in which it is acknowledged that the world of which we are a part is helpless in its sin and enmity against God, and that God has taken action in Jesus Christ through the Cross to save rather than condemn it (see Romans 5:5–11: ‘God’s love . . . Holy Spirit . . . while we still were sinners Christ died for us’; John 3:14–17: ‘God so loved the world’). This action brings repentance, the forgiveness of sins and the enabling to love one another (1 John 4:16; see Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35: ‘everything they owned was held in common’).

God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God: The acceptance of the truth of the apostles’ testimony, in a once-for-all public acknowledgment that issues in a life transformed in the love of God that has come to them by His saving action through hearing and believing the gospel, is a sure indication that God has come to dwell in a person, and that this person is in God (compare John 14:15–17, 23–27: ‘we will come to them and make our home with them’).

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us: The receiving of the apostolic gospel in the coming of the Spirit brings to us the knowledge of all the love of God. See also Romans 5:1–11; 8:31–32, 38–39.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them: Here for the second time comes the statement, ‘God is love’ (see above on 4:8). Once again it is no philosophical or metaphysical definition, but something that has to do with the very practical matter of living in love with one another. Once again, also, it is not talking about ‘love’ as we might conceive of it at the level of sinful humanity—as if anyone who might ‘love’ in this way thereby is in the mutual indwelling—but the very love of God Himself which has come to us and in which we now live with one another.

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world: As we now live in love with one another, God’s love has reached its goal in us (see on 2:5; 4:12). This is the visibilisation of the moral–relational nature and action of God in His creation, which is true worship (see Romans 1:19–25, on false worship; contrast Romans 12:1–2ff., on true worship). This comes through in the words, so full of grace and maturing power: ‘as he is, so are we in this world’. Compare Colossians 1:15 (‘the image of the invisible God’); 1:28 (‘everyone mature in Christ’); Romans 8:29 (‘conformed to the image of his Son’); Ephesians 4:13 (‘the measure of the full stature of Christ’), where we are to be conformed together into the image of Christ, who is the image of God. Being in this way is what give us ‘boldness on the day of judgment’, because we are in what God ever intended for us. This, of course, is only made possible by the grace that has come to us in the gospel (see John 5:24: ‘anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment’), but it does not stop there, as if this salvation were just a thing in itself. It is with a view to the purpose of God, by which His life is

We Abide in Him and He in Us

visibilised through us in practical actions (see 3:14, 16–18). For us, this is to be at full stretch, and not in a half-baked or fearful way.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love: The ground of our knowledge, experience and practice of God's love is always only ever the gospel, in which the matter of judgement in the sense of punishment is already permanently settled (see Hebrews 9:27: 'die once, and after that the judgment'; Romans 8:1–4: 'no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'; John 5:24: 'passed from death to life'; Hebrews 2:11–15: 'free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death'). Fear of punishment, or fear as its own punishment, is no longer a factor in our relationship with God as Father (see 2:28–3:3). Nor need it be a consideration in our relationships with others (see Hebrews 13:6: 'I will not be afraid'; Galatians 1:10: 'am I trying to please people?'; John 12:42–43: 'they loved human glory'). Those in the fullness of love simply get on with it in such a way that, whether they succeed or not, this fear has no place in what they do.

For Group Discussion:

Speak together of the sense people have had of abiding in God, and of God abiding in them. How is this related to:

- *receiving God's Spirit?*
- *confessing that Jesus is the Son of God sent by the Father as the Saviour of the world?*
- *living in love for one another?*

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How are these things related to not having fear on the day of judgement, and in our lives now?

Assignment:

In 1 John 4:13–18, what is meant by ‘abide’, and how do we know that we abide in God and God in us? What outcome does this have in us with regard to the day of judgement, and in our lives now?

We Love

1 John 4:19-5:5

We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

^{5:1} Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. ² By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³ For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, ⁴ for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵ Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

We love because he first loved us: Compare 4:9–11. There it is an exhortation; here it is simply a description of what happens when God’s love has come to us in the action of the

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gospel of Christ: 'we love'. In the true and full love that has come to us, we love God, and we love one another.

Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars: Compare 1:6; 2:4, 9, in which virtually the same thing is said (remembering that the commandments have to do with loving one another), and 2:21–23, where the lie with regard to Jesus' relationship with the Father sets the way for being out of relationship with others.

for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen: It could be said that to love an unseen God is harder than loving a person who is visibly at hand. If that is so, then an unwillingness to do the easy thing would indicate an inability to do the harder thing. Some, however, might say that it is much easier to 'love' someone you never see—the real difficulty is to love the person at hand whom you see often! However that may be, the point is that the invisible God has been visibilised in Jesus Christ (see John 1:18: 'who has made him known'), to bring God's love to bear in our sinful human situation; and that those to whom this saving love has come are called upon to visibilise that same love of God in their practical relationships with one another (see 3:16–18; 4:10–12, 16). Unwillingness to do this is an indication that they still have not 'seen' or received this love and the God from whom it comes (compare Matthew 18:23–35, where refusal to forgive another arises from failure to recognise the extent to which forgiveness has come to oneself from God).

The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also: 'from him' would refer primarily to God, from whom the commandment to love has first come (as in Deuteronomy 6:5:

We Love

‘love the LORD your God’ and Leviticus 19:18: ‘love your neighbour’); and specifically to Jesus, as the one who brought these together (in Matthew 22:37–40), and the one in whose life and work this commandment was enacted, established and exemplified (see John 10:14–17: ‘I lay down my life’; 10:27–30: ‘The Father and I are one’; 14:31: ‘I love the Father’; 13:34–35: ‘love one another’; 15:9–10: ‘abide in my love’; 15:12–14: ‘as I have loved you’; 15:17: ‘love one another’).

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God: On the new birth through faith in Jesus as the one sent from God see 4:2, 4, 6, 14–15, in the light of John 1:12–13; 3:3–8, 14–18 (‘all who received him, who believed in his name . . . born from above’). ‘Believes’ is present tense; ‘has been born of God’ is present perfect [completed] tense: faith is the evidence, not the precondition, of having been born of God (see 4:13–18, compare Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 1:29, where faith is part of the ‘gift’ that is ‘granted’).

and everyone who loves the parent loves the child: The intimate affinity of God with His reborn children created in His image (Genesis 1:27; Ephesians 4:24) comes through here, and the impossibility of loving one and not the other. In practical terms, anyone who comes into a love-relationship with the Father is bound to a love-relationship with all those whom He has made His children (as Jesus is: see Hebrews 2:11–14a: ‘my brothers and sisters . . . the children God has given me’).

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments: Jesus spelled this out with regard to his own relationship with the

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Father (John 14:31: ‘I do as the Father has commanded me’; 8:29: ‘I always do what is pleasing to him’), and in our relationship with the Father through him (John 14:15, 21–24: ‘They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me . . . Those who love me will keep my word’).

And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world: Compare Matthew 11:25–30 (‘my burden is light’). God’s commandments are burdensome (and worse—condemnatory and deathly: see Romans 7:8–13: ‘the commandment . . . proved to be death to me’) only outside our proper relationship with God as our Father. Within that relationship, they simply spell out our true and normal mode of operations, for which we have abundant provision. This is more than proof against the false and lying ways of the world, which seek to direct us in other ways (2:15–17; 3:4; 5:18–20).

And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This proof and protection against the world is not anything in or of ourselves, but lies wholly in our faith-relationship in dependence and love with Jesus as the one sent from God to take away sins and thereby destroy the works of the devil (see 3:5, 8; 2:1–2; 4:9–10).

For Group Discussion:

‘His commandments are not burdensome’ (1 John 5:3). Speak together of times when we have found people ‘difficult to love’, and have considered it a hardship to make the effort to do so. Then speak together of times when love has come easily, fully, and almost unexpectedly.

We Love

What is the significance of 'We love because he first loved us' simply as a description of what happens when God's love has come to us in the action of the gospel of Christ, rather than as a command that follows from it?

How is our loving of one another related to:

- *God's love for us?*
- *our love for God?*
- *God being unseen?*
- *knowing God as Father?*
- *keeping God's commandments?*
- *conquering the world?*
- *believing that Jesus is the Christ/the Son of God?*

Assignment:

'We love because he first loved us'. Make a study of the passages in John's letters that speak of loving God and loving others, and show in each instance how this derives from God's saving action of love for us in Christ.

The Testimony Of God

1 John 5:6-13

This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. ⁷ There are three that testify: ⁸ the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. ⁹ If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. ¹⁰ Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. ¹¹ And this is the testimony: God gave 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. 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.

The Testimony of God

This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood: This speaks of when Jesus ‘came’; that is, his historical coming in the flesh, as one who could be heard, seen, looked at and touched (see 1:1–3; 4:2; 2 John 7). This coming is said to be ‘by water and blood’. What two events associated with the coming of Jesus in the flesh are most likely to be represented by these two elements? Jesus was baptised in water, and died through the shedding of his blood. So we take it that John is here referring to Jesus’ baptism and death as two crucial elements in his coming.

Why does John insist that it must be both: ‘not with the water only but with the water and the blood’? We need to be reminded again of the issue he is addressing, as represented by the teaching of Cerinthus that:

... after his baptism, Christ descended upon him [Jesus] in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler, and that then he proclaimed the unknown Father, and performed miracles. But at last Christ departed from Jesus, and that then Jesus suffered and rose again, while Christ remained impassible [not liable to pain or injury], inasmuch as he was a spiritual being.⁹

The false teachers, it seems, made much of the baptism of Jesus as the coming of the ‘Christ’, but refused to associate their ‘Christ’ in any way with Jesus’ death on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. John has already made clear that this is essential and central to the gospel (as in 2:2; 4:10), and that there is no gospel without it. It was the lack of this element that gave the false teachers and their disciples the licence to live immorally and without love for their fellow believers (see on 2:22; 4:3). This refusal to take seriously and centrally the event of the Cross at the heart of the

⁹ As relayed by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* 27.1, quoted in J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 46–7.

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gospel—as God’s final judgement on human life, that in the one action both condemns and liberates us, and so shuts us up wholly to the grace of God—the evasion of this truth has always sought to bedevil the true proclamation of the gospel. Jesus contended with it in John 6:51–66 (‘unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood [i.e. relate intimately with Jesus in his death by faith—compare vv. 47, 51], you have no life in you . . . Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him’).

There have been other interpretations of the words ‘by water and blood’. One of these links them with the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper (though ‘blood’ is the thing signified there, rather than the sign, as water is in baptism, and no mention is made of the body of Christ). The word ‘came’ rather than ‘comes’, however, ties these elements to Christ’s historical coming in the flesh, rather than his present ministry. Another interpretation has linked this passage with the ‘blood and water’ that came out of Jesus’ side when it was pierced by a spear after he died in John 19:34. It is difficult to know the significance of ‘blood and water’ in that passage. The emphasis appears to be on the fulfilment of prophecy in 19:36–37. It is probably best not to try to make any connection between that and 1 John 5:6.

This is not to say that John is incapable of making subtle overtones and allusions in his writings. The cleansing and life-giving significance of water and blood, as alluded to in John 3:5 (‘born of water and Spirit’); 4:14 (‘a spring of water gushing up to eternal life’); 7:38 (‘rivers of living water’) and 6:53–56 (‘eat my flesh and drink my blood’), may also be in mind. But in the context of this epistle, the primary purpose would appear to be to affirm Jesus, in both his baptism and his death, to be the Christ come in the flesh, sent from the Father as the Saviour of the world (as in 1 John 4:2, 14–15).

The Testimony of God

And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth: Compare with 3:24; 4:2, 13, and John 14:16–17 (‘the Spirit of truth’); 14:26 (‘will teach you everything’); 15:26–27 (‘he will testify on my behalf’); 16:13–15 (‘guide you into all the truth’); also Acts 1:8 (‘you will be my witnesses’). See also Romans 8:16–17 (‘that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit’).

There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree: Taken with the interpretation given above, this would mean that the Spirit attests to the reality of the historical Jesus as Messiah come in the flesh, and the efficacy of his saving work. This would accord with Romans 5:5–11 (‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit . . . while we were still sinners Christ died for us’).

(Note: A few other authorities read [with variations]: ‘There are three that testify in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one. And there are three that testify on earth: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree.’ The few texts that read this way, and the variations among them, indicate the likelihood that these words were added later, perhaps as an affirmation of Trinitarian theology.)

If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son: Behind the threefold witness of the Spirit, the water and the blood is God the Father Himself bearing witness in this way to His Son. This whole issue is an important one for us: how are we to be sure in life, and where does our certitude come from? Jesus addressed this same vital issue in John 8:12–20 (‘the Father who sent me testifies’);

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8:54–55 (‘It is my Father who glorifies me’); 10:25–26 (‘The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me’); 10:37–38 (‘believe the works’), where it is the Father who testifies to the Son, particularly through the works He gives him to do. Also in Mark 11:27–33 (‘By what authority . . .?’). While it makes sense that we who rely so heavily on human testimony should be even more receptive to God’s testimony, yet in practice this is not the case. The testimony of Jesus can be received only by faith—a willingness to be in a relationship of meek and lowly loving dependence upon God.

Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts: How we as rebellious sinners come to receive and believe the testimony of God concerning His Son is a deep mystery of the purpose and providence and action of God, which cannot be explained to anyone outside in a way that convinces their human reasoning. Those who believe would simply say that they know because they know, and that this knowing is for all who have faith, and that this is the grace of God.

Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son: Not that believing or not is simply an option for us that we can choose or not with impunity. We have been created for this faith-relationship with God—that is what should come most naturally to us. Not to believe is a culpable denial of the truth of God and the truth of the way all things really are (see Romans 1:18–25). Sin suppresses truth, and makes God out to be false and a liar (see 1:8–10).

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

The Testimony of God

Compare John 1:4 ('in him was life'); 5:21–29 ('the Father raises the dead . . . the Son gives life'); 5:39–40 ('come to me to have life'); 6:57 ('whoever eats me will live because of me'); 6:63 ('The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life'); 6:68 ('You have the words of eternal life'); 17:3 ('this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'). Eternal life is the life that is in the eternal God. The life that the Father has is the life granted to the Son, to give life to others, even from death. Eternal life for us is to be in relationship with the Father as the only God and with Jesus Christ as the one He has sent to be the Saviour of the world. This comes to us as we receive the word by the life-giving Spirit. To 'have' the Son is not just noetic but relational, as we might say a wife 'has' a husband. This is life.

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: Here is the certainty. Those who have come to believe already have eternal life (see John 20:31: 'that through believing you may have life in his name')—how could it be otherwise for those who are in a faith-relationship with Jesus as the Son of God and Saviour of the world? The apostolic word comes to affirm them in what they know (compare 1 John 2: 21, 27), over against those false teachers who would unsettle them by seeking to put the whole thing on a different basis. On the grounds set out here by John, it is to be expected that believers will know for sure that they have eternal life. This certainty is based in God's saving action, and not in themselves. Those who say it is presumptuous to make such a claim are most likely seeking to work on a different basis: that of waiting to see if they themselves have measured up. If this is so, it is their fleshly pride, resistant to God's salvation, that is parading as false humility.

For Group Discussion:

- *How does the Father testify to the Son?*
- *What does this have to do with the coming of Christ in the flesh, and his death on the cross as an atoning sacrifice?*
- *What is the role of the Spirit in this testimony?*
- *What is the significance of John's allusion to 'the water and the blood'?*
- *What role does faith have in the receiving of this testimony?*
- *How is faith in the Son of God linked with having eternal life?*

Assignment:

Starting from 1 John 5:6–13, how would you respond to persons who claim not to know whether they have eternal life or not?

We Are God's Children

1 John 5:14-21

And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him. ¹⁶ If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one—to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that. ¹⁷ All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal.

¹⁸ We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them. ¹⁹ We know that we are God's children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one. ²⁰ And we know 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, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

²¹ Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us: Being in the relationship of the Son with the Father, we have the same boldness of access to the Father (see Mark 15:38: ‘the curtain of the temple was torn in two’; Ephesians 2:18: ‘through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father’). Compare ‘if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us’ with 3:21–22: ‘we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him’. See the notes on those verses for the whole matter of prayer according to the will of God. Think also of Matthew 6:9–10: ‘Our Father . . . Your will be done’, and Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36ff.).

And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him: ‘we have obtained’ is literally simply ‘we have’ in the present tense; compare Mark 11:24 (‘believe that you have received it’). Again, this sureness is not from ourselves, nor from anything we might do to assure ourselves, but in God alone. Knowing God as we do in all His truth and faithfulness, what could be more sure than the outcome of a prayer made in relationship with Him and in accordance with His will?

If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one—to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal: In our selfishness we might normally think of asking God for something we want for ourselves. This makes clear that John is thinking of prayer for others, particularly in the case of people being saved from sin.

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What is meant here by 'mortal sin' and 'sin that is not mortal'? We should discard from our minds the later attempts to list sins into more serious and less serious categories. All sin is sin, an offence against the holy and righteous God (see James 2:10: 'whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it'). The surprising thing is that there should be such a thing as 'sin that is not mortal', since 'the wages of sin is death' (Romans 6:23; compare 5:12: 'death came through sin'; and James 1:15: 'sin . . . gives birth to death'). To understand this, we should stop looking at sin and trying to excuse or mitigate it, and look to the mercy and grace of God. That is the only way anyone can have life from the death of sin (see Ephesians 2:4–6: 'by grace you have been saved'; Romans 5:21: 'grace . . . through justification leading to eternal life'; 6:21–23: 'the free gift of God is eternal life'; 8:2: 'has set you free from the law of sin and of death'). There is only one sin in the New Testament that is unforgivable (see Matthew 12:22–32: 'blasphemy against the Spirit'), and that is the refusal to receive forgiveness, by rejecting and misrepresenting the Holy Spirit, through whom the grace of forgiveness comes (John 3:5–6, 14–18: 'born of the Spirit . . . not perish'; Acts 10:43–44: 'forgiveness of sins . . . the Holy Spirit fell'; 15:8–9: 'giving them the Holy Spirit . . . cleansing their hearts'; Romans 5:1–2, 5–6ff.: 'peace with God . . . through the Holy Spirit'). This, it would appear, is the sin of the false teachers, who have already shown themselves in this way to be beyond redemption (as in 2:19). It is a fearful thing to see that such may be beyond the reach of prayer.

While it is true that all life is from God, 'God' is not mentioned here, so that it reads: 'you will ask and will give life . . .' Compare James 5:14–20: 'whoever brings back a sinner'. Such prayer to save people from the death of sin is truly a life-giving ministry.

We know that those who are born of God do not sin: See on 2:29–3:10. The verb ‘do not sin’ is again in the present tense (contrast the aorist in 2:1), indicating habitual practice. Sin fits not at all with those who are reborn as children of God, in His likeness; who now belong to the sinless and righteous one, who has died to take away sin, and is now their advocate (see 2:1–2).

but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them. We know that we are God’s children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one: This is a reiteration of 4:4. Christ’s protection is on the basis of the devil’s inability to find anything to accuse him of (John 14:30: ‘He has no power over me’), and the reality of our being in him (John 12:31–33: ‘the ruler of this world will be driven out’; 16:11: ‘the ruler of this world has been condemned’; hence Hebrews 2:14–15: ‘destroy . . . the devil’). The word ‘touch’ would be better translated ‘hold on to’ (as in John 20:17). The devil is not able to lay hold of them, because they are already in another’s hand (John 10:27–30: ‘no one will snatch them out of my hand’; 17:12: ‘I protected them’; 17:15: ‘protect them from the evil one’). By contrast, the rebellious world ‘lies’ in the devil’s arms, literally ‘in the evil one’.

And we know 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, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life: The third ‘we know’ in this series of unshakeable affirmations comes back to the core of the letter, as it began: the historical coming of the Son of God, who has brought us into relationship with his Father, whom to know, in relationship with His Son, is eternal life (John 17:3).

We Are God's Children

Little children, keep yourselves from idols: That John should close with these words, rather than an exhortation to 'love one another' or some such, is most instructive. False teaching images God in a false or monstrous way, gives the lie to His true moral-relational saving being and action, and wreaks havoc in the outworking of those false images in people's lives. Those who are kept by the Son of God are capable of seeing and guarding against such destructive falsehood, against which, in the fullness of what is true, this whole letter has been directed.

For Group Discussion:

- *On what basis can we be sure that God hears and answers our prayer?*
- *What does this have to do with our relationship with Christ, and God's saving action in him?*
- *What makes the difference between 'sin that is mortal' and 'sin that is not mortal'?*

Look at each of the three 'We know' statements in 1 John 5:18–20. Ask:

- *Is this what we know?*
- *How does this work out in our experience?*

Assignment:

How does the final verse, 'Little children, keep yourselves from idols' (1 John 5:21), relate to the rest of the letter?

The Second Letter of John

2 John 1-13

The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth, and not only I but also all who know the truth, ² because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever:

³ Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, in truth and love.

⁴ I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father. ⁵ But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning, let us love one another. ⁶ And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning—you must walk in it.

⁷ Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist!

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⁸ **Be on your guard, so that you do not lose what we have worked for, but may receive a full reward.** ⁹ **Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.** ¹⁰ **Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching;** ¹¹ **for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person.**

¹² **Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink; instead I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.** ¹³ **The children of your elect sister send you their greetings.**

The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth, and not only I but also all who know the truth, because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever: John does not name himself, but designates himself as ‘the elder’. This indicates that he would be known by those to whom he is writing as an authoritative person. That apostles also knew themselves to be ‘elders’: see 1 Peter 5:1 (‘as an elder myself’). One attempts to make this out to be someone other than John the apostle, see the commentaries.¹⁰ The ‘elect lady and her children’ we may take, in the context of this letter, to be a customary way of referring to a local church and those who belong to it (compare 1 Peter 5:13 [lit.]: ‘She who is in Babylon [Rome?], chosen together with you’). The rest of this address emphasises the indivisible unity of truth and love in the gospel of Christ, in a way we have become familiar with in the first letter. Again, this is over against the deceitful false teachers (see vv. 7–9), whose

¹⁰ For example, J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 35ff.

Life, Light and Love in the Letters of John

‘truth’ misrepresents the saving love of God, and so does not come through with full and sustainable love of one another. The true love from God (see on 1 John 4:7–12) comes only as we remain in the apostolic gospel by which we have been brought to the total forgiveness of all our sin and into the eternal relationship with the Father in the Son (see e.g. 1 John 2:24–27; 1:2–3; 5:20). The same reality is referred to in Ephesians 4:25 (lit. ‘trusting it in love’). In Acts 6:1–4, John with the rest of the twelve took action to ensure that ‘prayer and . . . serving the word’ was undiminished at the heart of the redeemed community, as proof against whatever would threaten the love operating there.

Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, in truth and love: This greeting (compare Paul in, for example, 2 Thessalonians 1:2; 1 Timothy 1:2) spells out this gospel in a full and sure way. God in His grace has justified us from our guilt, and by His mercy has come to lift us out of our misery, and has brought us to be at peace with Himself, in the relationship that has been eternally between the Father and the Son. This truth has freed us to know God’s love, and to participate in it. John’s focus here is on the coming Day, when he is sure these things ‘will be with us’ in fullness. This certitude enables us to live in them now, as a present reality (compare 1 John 2:28–3:3).

I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father. But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning, let us love one another: The allusions in the address and greeting are now spelled out in the substance of the letter. Note that it is ‘some’ of those in

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the church who are living in this gospel. This is a cause of great joy to John. But the command to love needs again to be reiterated (as in, for example, 1 John 2:7–11) as an express part of the original gospel that has been ‘from the beginning’. While this love is a natural outflow from the truth of the gospel, and is impossible without it, nevertheless, as a choice and action of the will, this love can and must be enjoined upon the believers.

And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning—you must walk in it: The simple link between love and obedience to God in His commandments is clearly set out once more (see on 1 John 5:2–3). The word ‘it’ here may refer either to ‘love’ or ‘the commandment’—probably ‘love’. But the point is that these are one and the same.

Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist! : Such is the value and importance of this love, which comes to sinful human beings only by the powerful apostolic gospel, that those who would seek to change or detract from that gospel must now be warned against. See on 1 John 2:18–27; 4:1–6. While ‘has come’ in 1 John 4:2 is in a past tense, here it is in the present, signifying an abiding reality: the ascended Lord is still a human being, one with our flesh. It was this assertion that was such an affront to the false teachers, who sought to dissociate their ‘Christ’ from what is human, earthy or fleshly, and from God’s saving work effected in our flesh (see Romans 8:1–4).

Be on your guard, so that you do not lose what we have worked for, but may receive a full reward: There is no

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suggestion here that their salvation may be lost, for that is dependent upon God's irrevocable gift (see Ephesians 2:8–9; Romans 11:29). The concern here is that anything built on the one foundation of Jesus Christ and his gospel that is not consistent with it will not survive the day of judgement (as in 1 Corinthians 3:9–15).

Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son: The false teachers no doubt claimed that they were more advanced than the ordinary believers, and had gone way beyond their simple level. If so, John here takes up their terminology, and says they have indeed gone beyond Christ's teaching—so far as to leave it completely behind! Whereas those who abide in it enjoy the fullness of relational blessing. See 1 John 2:22–26; 5:10–12.

Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching; for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person: We saw in 1 John that the false teachers not only lead people astray from the saving and life-giving truth of the gospel, but also cause breakdown in moral and relational living. The dissociation of their 'Christ' from the one who came in human flesh, sent by God as Saviour of the world to be the propitiation for our sins, leaves them in a position of continuing in their sin and desiring to do so with impunity, while despising others. To receive and welcome such teachers is to promote and share responsibility for these 'evil deeds'.

Does this mean we are not to associate with anyone who is immoral, or who may not share with us the fullness of Christian belief, for fear we may become contaminated? Not at all (see Luke 15:1–2: 'This fellow welcomes sinners';

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1 Corinthians 5: ‘those who are inside that you are to judge’; Acts 18:24–28: ‘explained the Way of God to him more accurately’). But any who purport to be teachers of the church who come in this way are not to receive any recognition or support as such. To ‘receive into the house’ probably refers to the house where the church meets; not to simple hospitality as such.

Does this go against what John has said earlier about loving one another? No—it is in the interests of this strong and true and full love, that comes to us only through the truth of the apostolic gospel, that such action is required.

Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink; instead I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete: John was no mean writer, as we have seen, and he had much to write that was good, even unsurpassed. Yet this apostle still saw face-to-face talking as preferable to continued writing. Was this because he knew the one who from all eternity has been face-to-face with the Father (the sense of ‘the Word was *with God*’—*pros ton theon*—in John 1:1), and that he knew this is how we will be in the end with God ourselves (as in 1 Corinthians 13:12)? Written words (especially emails!) can be easily misconstrued. Direct personal relating—the very ‘love’ that John has been exhorting his readers to—engages us in that richly textured fellowship that brings us to fullness of joy with each other (compare 1 John 1:3–4).

The children of your elect sister send you their greetings: It is in this God-engendered fellowship, enjoyed by all believers, even across differences and distances, that John is writing from a sister church and those who belong to it, in the knowledge that they together have been chosen and saved by God to love Him and one another.

Life, Light and Love in the Letters of John

For Group Discussion:

- *What is the relationship between truth, love, and obedience to the commandments in these writings of John?*
- *How do these relate to the central assertion that 'God is love' (see 1 John 4:7–21)?*
- *How is the non-receiving of false teachers compatible with the command to love one another?*
- *What are the advantages of face-to-face conversations over written communication?*

Assignment:

Discuss the connections between truth, love, and obedience to God's commandments in these writings of John, with particular reference to relationships with false teachers.

21

The Third Letter of John

3 John 1-14

The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

² Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul.

³ I was overjoyed when some of the friends arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely how you walk in the truth. ⁴ I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

⁵ Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you; ⁶ they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; ⁷ for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. ⁸ Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth.

⁹ I have written something to the church; but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. ¹⁰ So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing in spreading false charges against us. And not

content with those charges, he refuses to welcome the friends, and even prevents those who want to do so and expels them from the church.

¹¹ Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. ¹² Everyone has testified favorably about Demetrius, and so has the truth itself. We also testify for him, and you know that our testimony is true.

¹³ I have much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink; ¹⁴ instead I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face.

Peace to you. The friends send you their greetings. Greet the friends there, each by name.

The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth:

While John's second letter was written to a whole local church, this letter is written to one person, most likely a leader in a local church gathering. Again John calls himself 'the elder', as one whose authority in this situation is recognised (see on 2 John 1). Truth and love, inextricably linked in the gospel of Christ, are again spoken of together.

Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul:

John's concern for Gaius' physical well-being is rightly no less than that for his spiritual well-being, of which he is assured.

I was overjoyed when some of the friends arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely how you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth: Walking in the truth is equivalent to walking in the 'light' (compare 1 John 1:6; 2:3-6, 9-10, 22), which equates with confessing Jesus as the Christ, come in the flesh, sent from the Father as

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Saviour of the sinful world, with obeying God's commandments, and living in love. This was evident in Gaius' life, as testified to John by some 'friends' (lit. 'brothers') who had visited Gaius' church. This brings great joy to the apostle, especially as he regards Gaius as one of his 'children', perhaps as one that he himself brought to faith (though John regarded all he wrote to in 1 John as his beloved 'little children': see 1 John 2:1, 28).

Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you; they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth: It appears the 'friends' were not just paying a casual visit to Gaius' church—they were there for the purpose of ministry 'for the sake of Christ', and without any support from outsiders. Of the person-gifts listed in Ephesians 4:11, it would seem that only the 'pastor' stayed put in a local church. The others—apostles, prophets, evangelists and teachers—travelled around amongst the churches, bringing them into being and enabling them to grow. It was in this capacity, in recognition of their God-given ministry, that Gaius welcomed and supported the 'friends', and sent them on their way with what they needed, and so participated with them in this work of the gospel.

As the second letter of John warned against those false teachers who were not to be received or supported, so this letter commends the receiving and supporting of those who are genuine. Compare Matthew 10:40–42: 'whoever welcomes you welcomes me'; 25:35, 38: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me'; Titus 3:13: 'see that they lack nothing'.

I have written something to the church; but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing in spreading false charges against us. And not content with those charges, he refuses to welcome the friends, and even prevents those who want to do so and expels them from the church: Over against the faithfulness of Gaius in the truth and love of the gospel is the false and loveless self-love of Diotrephes, who presumably is another church leader, or someone who purports to exercise that authority. He is set against John and what he writes, and spreads slanderous gossip against him. He also opposes any who come from John with the same teaching. Unlike Gaius, he refuses to accept them, and virtually excommunicates any who do accept them. The fact of similar conflict and obstruction in the church today is sufficient to establish that this behaviour is not peculiar to any particular social setting or stage of church history, but comes from the rebellious human heart. John is by no means uncertain in his determination to counter Diotrephes publicly in the church gathering on this issue.

Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God: John warns Gaius against being taken in by the evil actions of Diotrephes, reiterating what he has said in 1 John 2:29; 3:6–10; 4:6; 5:18. This could call into question whether Diotrephes had yet been born again.

Everyone has testified favorably about Demetrius, and so has the truth itself. We also testify for him, and you know that our testimony is true: Demetrius, on the other hand, is commended by the apostle as one in whom the truth of the gospel and all that flows from it is self-evident. Gaius will

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take John's word for it, because he knows that his witness, too, is genuine and authentic.

I have much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink; instead I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face: See on 2 John 12.

Peace to you. The friends send you their greetings. Greet the friends there, each by name: The personal and communal nature of the peace of forgiveness that we know in fellowship with the Father and the Son, even in such situations of division and conflict, is reflected in this brief warm final greeting.

For Group Discussion:

- *What are the qualities of Gaius?*
- *What are the qualities of Diotrophes?*
- *In what situations have we seen these qualities operating, one way or the other? What can we learn from John's response to each?*
- *What does it mean that 'the truth itself' has testified favourably about Demetrius? How would this be known?*
- *Who are the 'friends' ('brothers'), and what is enjoined upon the church with regard to them?*

Assignment:

Draw on other New Testament passages to examine the nature and role of visiting ministries, and their relationship with the local church, local church leaders, and the wider apostolic oversight, as reflected in the third letter of John.