

# **Life in the Family of God**

*Seminars on the First Epistle of John*

*David Gooding*

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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## **Life in the Family of God**

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the English Revised Version (1885), the King James Version, or are Dr Gooding's own translations or paraphrases.

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## Introduction

### *1 John 1:1–4*

Thank you for coming. It's a delight to see you. Let's begin our study by reading some verses from the beginning of the first epistle by John:

That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld, and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life (and the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare unto you the life, the eternal *life*, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us); that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you also, that ye also may have fellowship with us: yea, and our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ: and these things we write, that our joy may be fulfilled. (1:1–4)

### **John's purpose in writing**

It would be a sensible thing to ask ourselves at the beginning of our studies what it is exactly we are likely to receive if we spend three weeks studying this epistle in detail. So let's begin by selecting some of the formal statements that John makes as to his purpose in writing. You may discern purposes that are implicit rather than explicit in what he says, but now and then John deliberately and explicitly tells us why it is that he has written either a particular paragraph or the epistle as the whole. Says John in verse 3:

We declare this unto you [and this is our purpose] that you also may have fellowship with us. Yea, and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

As we shall see later in our studies, when John says he's writing that we might have fellowship with him, he means not merely that we'll have a time of close, intimate communion, but that we might be and become common possessors of this thing that he writes about. And what he's talking about is enjoying common possession of eternal life.

To that end, we'll find him from time to time pointing out to us all those things that are involved in this great thing that is the very life of God himself. He'll tell us, 'and this is the message' (1:5); on another occasion, 'and this is his commandment' (3:23); and on another occasion, 'and this is the confidence that we may have' (5:14). Many times over, and you may care to notice them in your private study, he uses that phrase 'and this is . . .' Like a guide taking you round a stately home or a museum, and as you come to exhibit after exhibit, he'll say, 'And this is . . .' Or the learned demonstrator in anatomy, as he stretches out the body on the slab and points out this and that, 'This, believe it or not, is the brain, and

this is the heart, and this is the liver, and this is what they do. Put them all together when they're working and that spells the enjoyment of life.' So John is writing to us now that we might have and enjoy common possession of eternal life, and he will in the course of his writing point out to us all the elements that are involved in the enjoyment and the working of that eternal life.

Then he tells us,

My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye may not sin. (2:1)

Not only does he want us to be partakers in eternal life, but now he's writing to us that we might become progressively more holy. He writes to stop us from sinning. We must keep that as one of our main objectives in the course of these three weeks of study. Though we'll be rigorously exercising our minds, at the end of the three weeks we ought to be more holy than we are this morning. 'I write to prevent you from sinning.'

Or again, let's look to the end of the epistle,

These things have I written unto you, that ye may know that ye have eternal life, *even* unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God. (5:13)

Here's a delightful purpose in his writing. He writes to all who believe in the Lord Jesus, and he writes to assure them, not only that they have eternal life, but that they may know that they have eternal life. This is a lovely verse of Scripture to comfort and to encourage believers in the Lord Jesus, for there are some who, because perhaps of a real desire to be holy, not to be proud, not to be overconfident, have doubted whether it's possible to be certain of eternal life. So it's good to see it here in explicit and simple terms. This whole epistle is written that we may know that we have eternal life.

The tense of the verb is important. Not that we may know that it's possible to gain eternal life; not that we may know that we shall have eternal life one day; but that we may know here in the present that we have eternal life. So as we go through our studies in these three weeks, it ought to mean that all of us, if we are believers in the Lord Jesus, shall, without exception, depart these studies with the absolute certainty in our hearts that we have eternal life. But if we can grasp it quite clearly right now at the outset—that the purpose of this epistle is to minister to our assurance, that we may be certain we have eternal life—then we'll be ready to notice that a great deal of this First Epistle of John is given to provide us with tests by which we may know that we have eternal life.

### **The three tests**

If we profess to have eternal life, these are tests by which we may test ourselves and test our profession. Is it genuine? Does it carry with it the evidence that our claim is true? What is the evidence—as the lawyers would say, the *sine qua non*? What is the absolutely essential evidence to back up a profession by anyone that they have eternal life? We'll find therefore that a typical phrase in this epistle is 'in this' or 'by this, we know that we know'. For instance, 'By this we know that we know him if we keep his commandments' (2:3). What

John is doing is providing us with tests that we can apply to ourselves. I say that I know the Lord Jesus, but how do I know I know the Lord Jesus? Do I really know him, or is it something I've imagined? Is it the Lord Jesus I know, or some psychological construct that I've constructed in my mind?

It's so easy to construct ideas of the Lord Jesus. Commonly, in the world outside, you'll hear people saying, 'Ah, you know, the Lord Jesus was so loving and kind, he never would condemn anybody.' It's a very different Lord Jesus we meet on the pages of holy Scripture. Infinitely full of infinite love, but a Lord Jesus who could stand in the streets of Jerusalem or in the temple and in his holiness denounce some of his contemporaries: 'You generation of vipers, how shall you escape the damnation of hell?' (Matt 23:33).

My point is this: that we must be careful not to be following some mere construct of our own imagination. We want to know the real Lord Jesus, the objective Lord Jesus; and how do we know that we really know him? John is here giving us evidence, tests by which we may test our profession and that of other people. It will be important for our own practical spirituality that we understand clearly what John is doing—he's testing the evidence. Supposing you come out of these seminars and there I am sitting in my car, and you say to me, 'Have you got petrol in your tank?' I could, if I wanted, undo the bonnet and try to find the petrol tank, and get a tin opener and open it and prove to you that it's got petrol in. That would be one way of doing it; but there's a simpler way. If you want to have evidence that there's petrol in my tank, I just switch the ignition on and, all other things being equal, the engine starts. Of course, that isn't how I got petrol in the tank to begin with. If your tank is empty, you can try switching the engine on a thousand times but that will not put any petrol in the tank. If you haven't got any petrol in the tank then you have to go and pay and get the petrol pump man to put it in.

If you haven't got eternal life then you must come to the Saviour and ask him to give you that gift, and he gives it. But when you've got it, there should be evidence that you have it. So that if somebody comes up to you and says, 'Have you got eternal life?' you can switch the ignition on—or do something else that's laid down for us here as evidence that you really have it. Would it matter if the evidence weren't there? You say, 'Would anybody ever be so personal as to come and ask me, 'What's the evidence that you're a believer?' Well, if you should happen to meet James one of these days, walking through Belfast, he'll ask you point blank, 'You say you have faith? Jolly good. But now you show me your faith.' It would be nice to be able to say to James, 'Yes, I'm ready for you, James. I've heard about you and read about you. By this, you may know that I have eternal life.'

### **Approaching the epistle**

There is a very famous commentary on the First Epistle of John by a certain Robert Law.<sup>1</sup> Here is a brief summary (see [Figure 1](#)) of the way in which that great, godly scholar approached this epistle. He decided from his study that the epistle is in three cycles, and in each cycle John is offering us tests of eternal life. In the first cycle, the matter at issue is the Christian life as fellowship with God, and he points out that this claim to have fellowship

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<sup>1</sup> *The Tests of Life* by Robert Law, originally published 1909.

with God is thereafter tested in the epistle by three successive tests—the test of righteousness, the test of love and the test of belief or doctrine.

Figure 1. Robert Law's Three Cycles in 1 John

<b>Prologue</b>	1:1–4	
<b>1. First Cycle</b>	1:5–2:28	The Christian life as fellowship with God (walking in the light), tested by righteousness (1:8–2:6), love (2:7–17), and belief (2:18–28)
<b>2. Second Cycle</b>	2:29–4:6	Divine sonship tested by righteousness (2:29–3:10), love (3:10–24), and belief (3:24–4:6)
<b>3. Third Cycle</b>	4:7–5:21	Closer correlation of righteousness, love and belief

Then he suggests that there comes a second cycle, and this time it's a question of divine sonship: our being children of God. This claim to be children of God is tested once more by the same three tests—the test of righteousness, the test of love and the test of belief or doctrine. And he suggests that the final part of the epistle is concerned with a closer correlation of those three tests.

But just let's pause to notice what the tests are and that, according to the Apostle John, anybody who claims to have eternal life must be able to pass all three tests. It won't do simply to be able to pass one or two of them; we must be able to pass all three tests. It's obvious from our Lord's own words, 'By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another' (John 13:35), that if I claim to have eternal life and to be a child of God, one of the first and obvious tests that will be applied is whether I show in my life the love of God. If, instead of loving my brothers and sisters, my life is marked by bitterness and hatred, then John will tell me, 'It's no good you claiming to have eternal life. He who constantly hates his brother is not of God; he is in fact of the devil.' So that, if I claim to be a child of God and to be living in fellowship with God, I must be able to pass the test of love.

Yes, but I must be able to pass the test of righteousness as well. And let's take a practical instance of it to show how important it is. In the 1960s, there was a breed of theologian that told the world that, so long as we love one another, it doesn't really matter what we do, that fornication and adultery could sometimes be quite alright. So long as we love, that's the main thing. But the holy Apostle will not have it that way. We must certainly be able to pass the test of love, but simultaneously we must be able to pass the test of righteousness. For, as Paul explains, love will lead to my fulfilling the law, and if you find me constantly breaking God's holy law, then it raises a very big question mark over my profession to be a child of God.

And not only must I be able to pass the test of love and the test of right behaviour, I must also be able to pass the test of doctrine; for what I believe matters. There are some people nowadays who say that so long as we love one another, what we believe doesn't matter all that much. Some people argue, understandably, that it is doctrine which has caused all the divisions in the church. So why don't we soft-peddle doctrine? What does it really matter what you believe, so long as you love one another? Well, John will show us in the course of



our studies why it matters what we believe. His great object in writing this letter is that we might have fellowship, not only with the apostles, but with the Father and with the Son. It's nothing less than the very life of God, that God invites us to share with him, and that life is manifested in his Son. And the whole point of it is that Jesus Christ is the eternal Word; he's the Son of God; he is God incarnate; he is that eternal life.

But suppose I'm led to believe that Jesus Christ was an ordinary man like the rest of us, that he wasn't born of the virgin, that he didn't rise from the dead, that he was just an ordinary but rather holy man? Then you will perceive that immediately the whole of our salvation comes to nothing. There is no eternal life to be shared and the whole message that the apostles offer us dissolves in dust and ashes. If I'm a child of God and profess to have eternal life, of course I must show the love of God in my life; of course I must show right behaviour. But I must, in the third place, also pass the test of correct belief, of true doctrine.

It's easy to be absolutely correct in your doctrine; but the man who is absolutely correct in his doctrine but fiddles the income tax at work; the man who's correct in his doctrine but has no love and compassion for his fellow believer—'how dwells the love of God in him?' (1 John 3:17 KJV). These then are rigorous tests, and perhaps we'll need courage given to us from the Lord in the course of today and the other two seminars to bare our breasts to the Holy Spirit, and with him to apply these rigorous tests, three times over, to our own lives.

### **The structure of the epistle**

When we come to the detail, it has often been felt that the First Epistle of John is a little difficult to comprehend because there seems to be a lot of repetition, and it doesn't always immediately appear in what kind of logical order John is talking to us. By way of example, the table of contents produced by Professor Howard Marshall (see [Figure 2](#)) shows the number and variety of topics he identified as part of his study.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Marshall despairs, in fact, of having any kind of structure in the epistle, and says that we must be prepared to take the things as they come. If that is so, that's perfectly alright. For instance, I don't know what your experience is in reading the book of Proverbs. You start a chapter and think it's going to be talking about good ladies, or sometimes bad ladies, and rebellious sons. But after the first six verses, it's talking about something completely different. The answer is that it doesn't really matter. Proverbs, by their very nature, are short, sharp formulations of wisdom. We can take them, and it doesn't matter all that much in which order we take them.

### **Major movements of thought**

Some people say that the epistle of John is like that. It talks about one thing then it talks about another. If that is true, that's perfectly valid. On the other hand, some people find that kind of thing a little difficult to remember. So for the sake of our studies I'm going to divide this epistle very arbitrarily into three parts. I stress this is exceedingly arbitrary and done simply

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<sup>2</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978.

as a convenience. So, let me just explain it now to you before we go to our studies. We'll be dividing the epistle into three parts, three major movements of thought (see [Figure 3](#)).

Figure 2. **Howard Marshall's Topics in 1 John**

Prologue: the Word of life	1:1–4
Walking in the light	1:5–2:2
Keeping his commands	2:3–11
The new status of believers and their relation to the world	2:12–17
A warning against antichrists	2:18–27
The hope of God's children	2:28–3:3
The sinlessness of God's children	3:4–10
Brotherly love as the mark of the Christian	3:11–18
Assurance and obedience	3:19–24
The spirits of truth and falsehood	4:1–6
God's love and our love	4:7–12
Assurance and Christian love	4:13–5:4
The true faith confirmed	5:5–12
Christian certainties	5:13–21

Figure 3. **Major Movements of Thought in 1 John**

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>(from)</b>	The Manifestation of the Life Eternal (1:1–4)	The Manifestation of the Son of God and of the children of God (2:28–3:10)	The Manifestation of the love of God in his Son and in his people (4:7–11)
<b>(to)</b>	The Warning against antichrists who deny that Jesus is the Christ (2:18–27)	The Warning against believing the spirit of falsehood as distinct from the Spirit of Truth (4:1–6)	The Warning against putting idols in place of the true God (5:18–21)

We notice at the beginning of the epistle, John talks to us of the manifestation of the life eternal. When he comes to the end of chapter 2, and the beginning of chapter 3, he talks to us about the manifestations of the Son of God and of the children of God. Our Lord's manifestations: when he came to Earth, and his coming manifestation at his second coming. Then he talks to us about our manifestation one day, when it will be finally manifested what it means to be children of God and we shall be exactly like the Lord. And then, when we

come to chapter 4, we'll read about the manifestation of the love of God—'In this was the love of God manifested' (4:9).

Then we'll notice that at certain points in his epistle John issues very serious warnings. In chapter 2 he warns us against antichrists who deny that Jesus is the Christ. When he comes to the first paragraph of chapter 4 he warns us against believing the spirit of falsehood, as distinct from the spirit of truth. And in his final verses in the epistle he warns us against putting idols in the place of the true God. You'll see that the warning is comprehensive. First, it's a warning against false Christs, then a warning against false spirits, and finally a warning against false gods. It will help us, as we compare the manifestations the one with the other, to ask ourselves what the special point of each of them is. And likewise we'll have to ask ourselves, what the distinguishing features about those warnings are.

### **The family of God and the world**

If you'll permit me to divide up John's epistle in that very arbitrary fashion, then it could have another practical benefit. For we'll find that two of the major themes of this epistle are: the family of God and the world. John will make a great play of the fact that all who have trusted the Lord Jesus and possess eternal life belong, by God's grace, to the family of God. May God's spirit grant that as we meet in our seminars in the course of these three weeks, our studies of his word will foster in our hearts this delightful sense that we're all members of the same great family of God.

But standing over against the family of God, and opposed to it, is the world. And in each of those three parts of the epistle we'll find the family of God and the world in their different aspects. We'll see the family of God and its members united in the love of the Father—the love of the Father for us and our love of the Father in return. But over against the family of God and its delightful circle of love, John will depict the world in all its attractiveness and its seductiveness, trying to steal our hearts away from the Father. We'll be told that if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

In the second part of his epistle John will continue to talk of the family, and here he'll talk of its origin. How does the family come to be? From where does it derive its life and its character? And he will tell us it gets both its life and its character from God. The family and all its members are of God. And over against that, he'll depict the world, not now in its attractiveness and seductiveness, but in its sinister hatred of all that is of God. And he'll remind us of the solemnity of the world, its origin and character. It is of the evil one.

In the last section, he'll talk about the family and its victory. This is the victory of faith, that Jesus is the son of God. With that, he'll represent the world to us, not now in its seductiveness, nor in its hatred, but in its opposition to the keeping of the commandments of God, a world that has to be overcome.

Just let me repeat. I've troubled you with these formal analyses this morning so that in sessions to come we can use these as appropriate to help us get a clearer grasp on these great things that are being told to us, as we compare the one section and its particular emphases

and details with another section and its particular slant on the topics that it has in common. And now, without further ado, to our study groups!

Questions on this session are in the [Study Guide on page 107](#).

## Christian Fellowship

*Reading: 1 John 1:1–2*

Now that we've had opportunity to wake ourselves up, fortified with a beautiful morning coffee, let's get down to really hard work and begin to study the epistle in earnest. As we saw in our first session, John writes that we might have fellowship with him, and he adds, 'And truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son' (1:3). And already, we've seen that the fellowship concerned is a question of fellowship in the eternal life. So let's start by thinking together for a moment on what we mean by the term 'eternal life'.

### **Eternal life**

If we weren't thinking too hard, we could take the term merely to mean life that goes on forever and ever. While that is true, we should have a very poor idea of what eternal life means if that's all it meant to us. So let's look again at the opening words of chapter 1:

That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld, and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life (and the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare unto you the life, the eternal *life*, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us). (1:1–2)

So the first big description of this eternal life is 'the life that was with the Father'. And in that phrase is an infinity of meaning. We're not being told merely of its location—where this life was, where you could find it if you wanted to go and look for it. This is technical theological language, as you have in the beginning of the Gospel by John, which tells us that 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God'. This then is that eternal life that was with the Father, meaning not only was it located there, but this was the life in whom all his delight was centred, a life big enough to satisfy the heart of the Father; nothing less than the life of God himself in all its infinity.

Next we perceive that not only was this life with the Father, but this life was personal. That is to say, it isn't some sort of heavenly equivalent of a biological mechanism. The life is nothing short of a person. This life was eventually manifested. 'The Word,' as John's Gospel says, 'was made flesh'. And when the Word was made flesh, it proved to be a person. So, it is a personal life, and here's the wonder—that being personal, it made possible an eternal fellowship within the divine persons. God is not some monolith, just one solitary block. Long before humankind ever existed, within the Godhead there has been that unimaginably

glorious fellowship of enjoyment between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is the eternal life that was with the Father.

So when we think of eternal life, we rightly think of the fact that it lasts forever. But we should help ourselves even more to see that it's a quality of life. And we ought to remind ourselves of the elementary fact that eternal life, as far as we're concerned, is not something we begin to enjoy when we go off to heaven. In popular theology I know that people constantly think in those terms; so that, when we die, we can go to heaven. The New Testament very rarely talks of going to heaven. It believes in going to heaven, of course, but you won't find a phrase such as 'he that believes on the Lord Jesus can go to heaven.' Eternal life isn't something merely that we begin to enjoy in the future, when we die and go to heaven, or when the Lord comes. Eternal life is the ageless life of God—it always was, it always is, it always will be. And into that glorious, eternal and unchanging life we may even now this very moment be introduced, so that we enjoy it here and now.

If I may illustrate it from something that the Lord Jesus said. We'll remember that when the Sadducees came to the Lord Jesus and tried to prove to him that there was no such thing as the resurrection, the Lord Jesus said, 'You are wrong: you have forgotten the holy Scripture where God, speaking at the burning bush, says to Moses, "I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob"' (see Matt 22:29–33). All are alive to him! That's a glorious thing. Because God is eternal, if you and I enter into a relationship with God, that relationship is eternal. If we came to talk about the famous revivalist preacher, W. P. Nicholson, for instance, we would be likely to say to one another, at least to the older ones amongst us, 'Did you know W. P. Nicholson?' You try that question on God, and say, 'Did you know W. P. Nicholson?' and God will say, 'What do you mean, "*Did* I know W. P. Nicholson?" I *do* know W. P. Nicholson.' Because that man, in common with the humblest believer, entered into a relationship with him who is eternal, and it's an eternal relationship. What a glorious thing it is to rest one's heart upon now and for all eternity: the relationship lasts because it's the life of God himself.

If we should ask how we know about that life, John now tells us, 'That which was from the beginning concerning the word of life.' You may take that in one or two senses. You can take it in the sense of the report, the record, the gospel message that's been handed down to us from the very beginning by the apostles. But in the end it will come almost to the same thing as the other interpretation, because that message, that word, that report which all the apostles have given us is about the Lord Jesus who was himself the Word of God and revealed that eternal life when he was here on Earth.

So our enjoyment of this eternal life that always was with the Father is based on the great historical revelation of that eternal life in the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord. This then is not some mystical experience in which certain undefined and indefinable shivers run through the intellect or the emotions. 'This is an eternal life that was manifested,' says John, and manifested in concrete forms here on this earth in the person of the Lord Jesus. Says he, 'That which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, and which we beheld, and our hands handled concerning the Word of life.' You notice how real this manifestation was: it could be handled, felt, seen, heard. This is the great historical revelation given us in the birth and life, death and resurrection of our blessed Lord.

Nowadays the Holy Spirit will make this revelation real in our hearts, but we need to hold that together with the actual historical facts that God has shown us in the historical Lord Jesus Christ. You can't escape John's feeling of excitement: what a thing that was. 'We write,' says John, 'so that you may have fellowship with us.' Fancy brushing against somebody as you got into a rowing boat and going across the lake, staying in the same inn, and then waking up to the fact that the person you had just touched was God incarnate. If it sounds theological language to you, you must excuse the apostles for it's an excitement that they can scarcely contain—that they've actually seen and handled God incarnate! God forbid that in our generation we should ever lose the wonder of it.

Oh, my brother, my sister, that eternal life you have is not just the end of a theological proposition. God help us to wake up and see who it is that's in the midst of our thorn bush—twisted, gnarled and in danger of being consumed as we all may be. But what lights up your very inner man so that it glows brighter towards the eternal light, is already the person of the incarnate God in you. This is eternal life and the content of our fellowship; and the incarnation and life of our Lord is the basis of it. Let's then notice what it is that we're to experience. John says, 'that we may have fellowship with him, that you believers also may have fellowship with us, the apostles. Yes, and our fellowship is with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ.' (1 John 1:3)

## **Fellowship**

Just let's pause a moment on that familiar phrase, 'to have fellowship with', and ask ourselves how we're to understand it. The word fellowship in Greek can have all sorts of meanings. To 'have fellowship with' can mean, in Greek, to have a close relationship with somebody, to have intimate communion with—as you might talk of husband and wife in a close relationship. And Scripture does use the same expression of a man or a woman having fellowship or communion with God. But then 'to have fellowship with' can be used in another sense—to participate in something with somebody, to have a share in something with somebody else, to enjoy common possession of something with somebody. So, here you're not merely thinking of two people, and between them there's some invisible but very real current flowing that you might call communion or friendship, but there's a very concrete third thing, something which the two of them share together.

In modern terms you could talk of people who have bought themselves shares in British Airways, and all these thousands of people have this in common, that they have shares in this great operation. The New Testament uses it in that sense in Luke 5:10, where it is describing Peter in his boat, and how the Lord got into his boat, and the result of it was that when they let down the nets there was a miraculous catch of fish. And we read of James and John who were his partners (that's a noun meaning the people who shared with Peter in the boat) in the operation. They were partners, therefore, and having fellowship together meant enjoying common possessions—a boat and nets—and having common experience of the activity of fishing.

And John writes that we may have fellowship with him and the other apostles, and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. In what sense? Well, doubtless,

when we're born again there is set up fellowship in the sense of communion between our hearts. You may sit there upon your seat and raise your heart to the Lord in heaven, and that very moment there will be flowing between you that very real spiritual experience of communion. But it seems to me that the word implies something more than that here. John is telling us about this eternal life, so that we may enjoy common possession of life with God. It's the fact, isn't it, that while a believer sleeps at night, and he isn't thinking about anything in particular, he still shares the life of God. You've got your new shares in British Airways, and lovingly fingered them and read all the small print and locked them away in your strongbox. Now you're tired and you've gone to bed, but you still have your share in British Airways, don't you? And this eternal life isn't just something I have when I'm in communion with God and enjoying his fellowship; it is something that's permanent. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you receive a life that you didn't have before, and forever and forever and for all eternity you will share that life with all God's people, and with the Father and the Son. For having fellowship means that you have a common share in the very life of God himself.

Now and again on holiday, particularly when it's raining, you might be induced to go along to a stately home. Occasionally when you do it, you go into the old café and there's a very elegant looking lady who, hazard a guess, might be Lady Shuttlebotham herself. She actually serves you the scones. Wow, what a thing to be served by the Lady! And there's her pottery that she's been doing: she's an expert in pottery and she shows it to you. Oh, you don't wash your hand too soon after that, do you, where she actually shook hands with you! And his lordship comes and shows you his Bentleys and Rolls Royces, and his steam engines and whatever else he might happen to be interested in. Charming folks they are, but they're merely showing you things about their estate. They don't, you notice, offer you to come and share their life in the stately home. And they don't because they can't give you their own life.

Consider the wonder of it, my dear fellow believer. What a time you would have if God conducted you round the universe and said, 'This is the galaxy N36. This is a star cluster here. Now, I keep a lot of angels over there; just have a look at them. Aren't they interesting? See what they can do.' That would be fun, wouldn't it? And rumour is, that when we get home to glory, God is going to conduct us around the holy city, for he's provided a city for us, and he's not ashamed to be called our God, for he's provided a city. But away beyond that, and all the things and the people that God will share with us, the wonder is this: that God has shared his own very life with us, that eternal life that was ever with the Father, so that we may talk of having eternal life.

But more than that, we may speak of the blessed Lord, the Son of God, in us, and the Father making his abode in us. 'These things I write,' says John, 'that you may have fellowship with us, and surely our fellowship is with the Father and his Son. And these things we write to you, that our joy may be full.' So read some manuscripts: meaning the apostles' joy, because there's no joy like it—for an apostle to see others coming to share in the glories of the gospel. In the end it will be also true that not only the apostles' joy, but our joy, will be full. May God grant by his spirit that these things shall cease to be words, and



today, as we go on our way, and in the years to come, ever more profoundly may the joy grip our hearts that we share the very life of God.

### **Walking in the light**

But then we must ask ourselves, on what condition do we share this life? John gives the fundamental message to get hold of when we ask that question:

And this is the message which we have heard from him, and announce unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. (1:5)

It is this fundamental characteristic of God that is going to control the condition upon which we may come and have fellowship with God. God is light and in him is no darkness at all. What shall we understand by the phrase 'God is light'? I suggest that there are at least two realms in which we can think of God as light.

God is light intellectually. God is self-revealing energy. It's his very nature to make himself known. Self-revealing energy. That means he's the source of all reality and truth. The truth about a daisy ultimately is God. The truth about a sunset is God. Trace all this vast creation to its source—what's the truth about it? The truth is that it comes from God, part of his self-revelation. Therefore it's the source of meaning and purpose. He's the giver of understanding and knowledge. And if you'll allow me a little fancifulness, he's the revealer of beauty and colour. As we nowadays know, colour resides in the light. If a certain source of light doesn't include a certain element, then you'll not see the colour in the lady's dress. What you thought was red will look a very funny, pale colour because there isn't the stuff in the light sufficient to bring out that colour in the dress. It's the light that brings out the colour, and God is the source of all beauty. And God is light morally. As light, he exposes all that's not true, exposes what's false and unreal and perverse. He's pure and holy and righteous.

Not only is God light, but we read that God is in the light (1:7). That is to say, that in the person of our blessed Lord, God now stands completely revealed. When King Solomon was praying at the inauguration of the temple, he reminded God that God had said that he would dwell in the thick darkness. But nowadays, since our blessed Lord has come, God doesn't dwell in the thick darkness: God is in the light. He has been manifested. He can be seen in the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord. God is light, and in him there's no darkness at all—no cover-up, no compromise, no place where I can come in order to shield my weakness and have it compromised with. God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

If, therefore, God is light, the question arises, on what condition can I come and share God's life with him? Here I want us to notice two things about our chapter:

If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin. (1:7)

That answers our question about the condition under which we have fellowship. This condition tells us where we walk. Do we walk in the light or in the darkness? To help us

understand that and grasp what it means let's look now at chapter 2, where a similar but slightly different phrase is used:

He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also to walk even as he walked. (2:6)

Whereas in chapter 1 John talks of *where* we walk, in chapter 2 he talks of *how* we walk. Just let's impress that on our minds. Here are two things we have to grasp now as we think about this matter. On what condition do I have fellowship with God? First and foremost is the question of where we walk—walk being a Hebrew metaphor for how we live—our progress through life, our behaviour and so forth. The first important thing is where we walk; the next important thing will be how we walk, and they're not quite the same things, are they? We'll need to be careful with one another as we come to our discussions, so that we don't talk at cross-purposes. If you're thinking of where we walk, it's a question of in the darkness or in the light. If we say we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness, we lie and do not speak the truth. It's where we walk that is all important.

When we come to the end of the paragraph another thing becomes important, and that's how we walk. If we say we abide in him, that is, we're claiming where we stand, then we have a bounden duty to walk even as he walked. I could be walking in Belfast, and I could be walking very prim and proper or I could be walking very slovenly; I could be walking quickly, or I could be walking slowly. Two things then: where I walk and how I walk. If I would have fellowship with God, then the all important thing is, first, where I walk. God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we walk in the light, we have fellowship.

Three years ago I illustrated that by a model of the tabernacle, but any diagram of the tabernacle will serve the same purpose for now, to picture it in our minds. If you came by the altar and by the laver, and in through the door into the Holy Place, here there would be, on the right hand side, the table of showbread—that lovely golden table which had twelve loaves put on it at the beginning of the week, and there those loaves waited in the presence of God for God's enjoyment. They were called the Bread of Presence. At the end of the week when God, so to speak, had had his satisfaction from the loaves, the priests were allowed to come and take the bread off the table and put new baked bread in its place. They took the old loaves and there, in the Holy Place, the priests ate that bread. It was a vivid symbol: God and men eating from the same table—how about that for fellowship with God!

Now, let's suppose a priest wants to come and enjoy his privilege of having fellowship with God, and sharing the very bread of God with God. He's got to come through the door, and as he starts walking he turns right and comes to the table. Now notice where he has been walking, for there on the other side of the Holy Place is the golden lampstand with all its seven lamps pouring out their delightful but searching light, flooding that man with light. There's only one way he can possibly come and have fellowship with God at that table: he has to be prepared to come and walk in the light, as God is in the light. It's where he walks that's all important.

Suppose a man remains outside and says, 'I have fellowship with God.' He's talking nonsense. To have fellowship with God at that table he must come and walk in the light. And we likewise must come and walk in the light. It is not a question of how well the man walked. The first time some of the priests came they might have got all nervous: there in

their robes in all the solemn stillness of the presence of God. I expect they didn't sleep too well the night before the first time they were on duty, and came in all fingers and thumbs lest they did something wrong. Suppose in his worry, when he got inside, meaning to do it well, he caught his toe in the hem of his robe and fell flat on his face right in front of the table. That would be undignified, but did that mean he got thrown out? No, it's not a question here of how well he walked, but where he walked.

So it is with us. It doesn't first say, 'If you walk ever so well, and if you lead a spectacularly holy life, then you may come and walk in the light.' It doesn't say it like that, thank God, for how many of us would come if that were true? If I have received the gift of eternal life, and have it in common with God, then my condition is that I walk in the light. But what will it mean, to walk in the light? Well, mercifully for us, in the Gospel of John, chapter 8, we are treated to a long conversation between our Lord Jesus and some of his contemporaries. In that chapter our Lord announces himself as the light of the world, and we can watch various people coming to him, and we can see what happened when they came to the light of the world.

John 8 will remind us of three things (see [Figure 4](#)).

Figure 4. Walking in the Light in John 8

### **Walking in the light involves:**

1. *Continuing in the light* (v. 31) i.e., not just *coming to* but *walking in*
2. *Willingness to be exposed* by the light as having sinned and being inherently sinful (vv. 1–11, 33–59)
3. *Readiness to seek deliverance* by the light (vv. 32–36)

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We see that walking in the light involves not just coming to the light, but continuing in the light. Said our Lord, 'If you continue in my word, then you shall be really my disciples, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free' (John 8:31–32). Notice the verb 'walk'; not just come to, but walk in. It's a process. We must be prepared, not merely to come to, but to walk in the light. This is a very famous chapter because there came some gentlemen bringing an unfortunate woman to the Lord Jesus, and they recorded her sins before the Lord. She was taken in adultery, and here she was in the light of the world and terribly exposed. Then the Lord stooped down and wrote on the ground, and lifting himself up he said, 'He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone' (8:7). And the very men who had come to the light to expose somebody else, when the light began to expose them, they weren't prepared to walk in it: they turned round and went away.

That's no good. Walking in the light will mean continuing in the light, even though inevitably the light exposes us. Walking in the light, therefore, involves the willingness to be exposed as having sinned and as being inherently sinful. 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves' (1 John 1:8). That's to walk in the darkness. If we say we've not sinned, we make God a liar. I must be prepared to come and walk in the light and be exposed that I've sinned and I'm inherently sinful. And I must resist the natural inclination to run off

when the light of God's word begins to expose me. I must be prepared to be exposed. And of course, there must be a readiness to seek deliverance. 'If you continue in my word, you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.'

But some of the gentlemen said, 'we were never in bondage' (John 8:33)—so they thought. But our Lord very soon began to shine his light on their hearts and on their consciences, and show them that they were veritable slaves of sin. They got angry and threw stones at him. They weren't prepared to walk in the light, they weren't prepared to be exposed as sinners, and they weren't interested in seeking deliverance from the power of sin, though they called themselves disciples.

Walking in the light will mean all these three things. Notice it doesn't mean that I've got to be sinless before I come, and God isn't demanding that I be sinlessly perfect in order to walk in the light. All he asks is that I come and walk in the light, keep in it, let it expose me, and be willing to confess my sin. It's no good saying that I haven't sinned, but 'if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins' (1 John 1:9). Where there is willingness and readiness to seek deliverance through the truth of our Lord, 'the truth shall make you free.'

You say, 'If I come and walk in the light as you say, it will expose my sin and I'll feel so unworthy.' But John says, 'These things I write unto you that you sin not, but if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous' (2:1): he is the propitiation for our sins. Back in Old Testament days, when God dwelt in a tabernacle amongst his people, we're told that on the Day of Atonement there was atonement made for the tabernacle itself, because the very presence of the Israelites and their sinfulness defiled God's presence. How then could God righteously continue fellowship with them? How was it that the first time they sinned, he didn't depart from them immediately? How could he carry on with them in all their weakness and their sinning? The answer is that there was atonement made, 'to make atonement for the tent of meeting that dwells with them in the midst of their uncleanness' (Lev 16:16).

Oh, what a mercy it is. See that poor adulteress standing now, exposed in the presence of the very light of the world. She can't run away; there's nowhere to run to. Exposed, confessed as a sinner. And God has to abandon her? Oh, thank God, no. The dear woman can be forgiven. And so with us, when his light exposes us, and we confess our sins, our eternal life isn't broken off. It's maintained through the great atonement of Jesus Christ, our Lord. If we walk in the light, we have fellowship, and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.

You may remember that in the tabernacle, as the priest came and walked to the table in the light of the great candlestick, there was this third vessel, the vessel of intercession, at which the high priest prayed. What a lovely trilogy of fellowship they make, reminding us of what John says, 'If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship. The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son cleanses us from all sin. . . . [And] if we confess our sin, he's faithful and just to forgive us our sin. . . . For if we sin, we have an Advocate with the Father' (1 John 1:7, 9; 2:1).

That said, of course, we come back to the point with which we began. The condition of having eternal life is where we walk: do we walk in the darkness or do we walk in the light?

But suppose we're clear about that now—we've come to Christ, we're far from perfect, but we're walking in the light of his word, and when it convicts us we don't run away or try to cover up. We confess our sins. And we're earnestly desiring that the Lord deliver us from the power of sin. We're able, therefore, to go on in the common possession of eternal life. Then the next duty comes.

### **Walking as he walks**

He who says he abides in him then has a bounden duty 'to walk even as he walks' (2:6). This is how I know I'm in him. If I know God, I shall love God, and if I love God, I'll obey his commandments. Suppose I say to you that I love Beethoven's Emperor Concerto, whatever it is!

You say, 'Do you?'

'Oh yes, I'm into it in a big way: Beethoven's concerto is tremendous.'

So, one of these days, you invite me to lunch. You've remembered my likes and you put on this concerto thing. As I catch the sound of it, I say, 'Oh, turn that off, please.'

You say, 'I thought you said you like the concerto?'

'Oh, I do, but I don't like music.'

You would say, 'That man's a nitwit!'

And if I say I know God but I'm not interested in keeping his commandments, I'm just being silly. If I really know God, I shall love God, and the love of God will lead me progressively to keep his commandments.

Questions on this session are in the [Study Guide on page 107](#).

## The World

*1 John 2:12–17*

Now let's prime our minds for our study in the first part of the afternoon by reading in 1 John 2:

I write unto you, *my* little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake. I write unto you, fathers, because ye know him which is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the evil one. I have written unto you, little children, because ye know the Father. I have written unto you, fathers, because ye know him which is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the evil one. Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the vainglory of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever. (1 John 2:12–17)

You'll remember that in our first session, by consent, you allowed me to divide the epistle into three major movements of thought. Let me just remind you of their extent. We decided that we would divide the epistle into three movements of thought, each one of them beginning with the idea of *manifestation*. One of the major themes of the first movement is the manifestation of the life eternal. And in the second movement, the manifestations of the Son of God in his incarnation and in his second coming, and the manifestations also of the children of God at that glorious event, that we await with joy when we will see our Lord and will be like him. And in the third phase, we'll think about the manifestation of the love of God, both historically in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ in his life and death, and nowadays still, the manifestation of God to men through his people.

And then we noticed that at the end of these three movements, John issues a warning. A warning first against false Christs, then a warning against false spirits, and lastly a warning against false gods. We noticed also that if you take those three parts of the epistle, in each of them you will meet two major topics: the family of God on the one hand, and the world on the other. By anybody's judgment these are two major topics, and we'll have to come to terms with them today and in the ensuing weeks, God willing.

The family of God, of course, is a delightful subject, and we're going to discover not only that we have fellowship with God, but we enjoy the common possession of eternal life with one another and with the Father and the Son. That enjoyment of eternal life, that possession

of eternal life, puts us into the great worldwide family of God. And we'll see what are our joys and what are our responsibilities in the family of God.

But in each of these three major parts of the epistle, standing in vivid contrast with the family of God is what John calls 'the world'. We'll meet it in the first section in its guise as a very seductive and attractive world that's always bidding for our love. In the second part, we'll come across the world in its far more sinister form as an enemy of God and as an enemy of the people of God. A world of which the apostle says, 'Don't you be surprised if the world hates you.' We'll be thinking there of its origin—it is of the evil one. And then, in our third study, in the final week, we'll come across the world again, as a power, as an obstacle against the doing of the commandments of God; so that if as believers in the Lord Jesus we want to keep the commandments of God, nonetheless we'll find from time to time that the world puts up an opposition against our keeping the commandments of God. In order to keep them we'll have to learn to overcome the world and be true followers of him who said, 'In the world, you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.'

### **'The world' defined**

Seeing then that this matter of the world is such a leading topic in this epistle, I propose to spend this session going over with you the basic concept, asking ourselves again what exactly does Scripture mean when it talks about 'the world'? It's a term, together with its adjectives, that is to be heard commonly on the lips of believers. You'll hear parents, quietly in the home, pour out their breaking hearts to you, 'Ah, my son showed such promise, a very bright testimony for the Lord, but I don't know what happened. Today, he's in the world.' When parents talk like that, what do they mean by somebody being 'in the world'? Somebody else says, 'I wouldn't play snooker: that's a very worldly thing.' What do they mean when they say snooker is 'worldly'? I suspect you'll observe that different people at this level have different ideas of what worldliness is. I heard one man, I don't think he could have been serious, who suggested that football was worldly, but cricket wasn't. I think on the ground that cricket is a game that Englishmen play! And sometimes forms of dress have been thought to be worldly.

What does 'worldly' mean? Obviously, it's not something that we can dismiss as some outmoded concept. Nor must we unduly restrict it because the words that we've read together are exceedingly wide. 'Love not the world,' says John, 'neither the things that are in the world. For all that's in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes and the vainglory of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world' (2:15–16). How are we to understand it? All that's in the world is not of the Father? Well, butterflies are in the world—aren't we to love butterflies? Does this forbid us loving art, and good literature, and nature and people? Obviously not; but then, what does it mean?

For instance, when verse 16 talks about the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes and the vainglory of life, is it talking about the luridly sinful, evil and vicious things that people get up to in Soho in London? Is it simply immorality that John is talking about: lurid immorality, pornography and things of that order, when he talks about the world? Or is it

possible for otherwise respectable believers, even when they're sitting in their sacred moments, say, at the Lord's Supper, to be manifesting a worldly spirit? So then, I propose to make a few remarks on this matter.

### **Our affections**

We'll find some help in coming to a definition by noticing at once that it has to do with the affections of the heart. 'Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.' Apparently, these things are diametrically opposed. Worldliness is primarily a matter of the heart and the heart's affections and love. This is why it raises itself in the close context of the family, for in the family of God all comes from the Father, by definition. It's the most basic thing that holds all members of the family together; that they love, or should love, the Father. And if there's one thing above another that is disruptive of life in the family of God, it's when we lose our affections to the world, and we love the world instead of loving the Father.

It must be evident immediately that it's not enough to be unworldly—just to observe a code of rules and regulations: 'If I do this, I'm worldly. If I don't do that, I'm unworldly.' It's first and foremost a matter of the heart and the heart's affection. But let's address ourselves to another question. Didn't God make the whole world and all that's in it? In what sense is John using the term 'world' when he says, 'All that's in the world is not of the Father'? How can that be, if the Father made the world and all that's in it? And I suggest that our first way of understanding the matter is, as many have done, to go back to the fall of the human race, and remember what happened to Eve and Adam in the Garden of Eden, as we're told it in the book of Genesis.

You'll remember that in Genesis 1, as the inspired writer records the creation of the world, he tells us constantly and repeatedly, 'And God saw that it was good.' Oh, the delightful positiveness of the word of God. And, of course, as late as the epistle of Paul to Timothy, the Holy Spirit is to be heard telling us that God has given us all things richly to enjoy. It's no part of true spirituality to run away from things natural, as though they were somehow unsuitable for believers. God has given us all things richly to enjoy. How then does this word that originally described what God made—that all was very good—come to represent something that is bad and evil? Let's just recall the nature of the temptation that the evil one put before Eve. He didn't encourage Eve to go stealing Adam's store of peaches or something. He didn't tempt Eve to debauchery and wild profligacy, nor even to murder Adam or anything like that. Murder was, alas, soon to come into our world as Cain murdered his brother, but it was no temptation to murder Adam that befell Eve. What was it then?

You remember the story, how Satan concentrated her attention on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and invited her to consider how beautiful it was. Well, of course it would be: God had made the thing—how wouldn't it be beautiful? But God had said of this particular tree, 'You shall not eat of it. For in the day you eat thereof, you will die' (Gen 2:17). 'Nonsense,' said the serpent, 'absolute nonsense. My dear, you'll have to learn to grow up and be mature. That kind of thing is only for children.' And she saw that the tree was



very desirable to look at—that's aesthetic satisfaction; and she saw it was good for food—that's physical satisfaction; and she saw it was to be desired to make one wise—that's intellectual satisfaction. There's nothing wrong with those things, except this: now Satan was suggesting that Eve should take these things and enjoy them independently of God, and contrary to God's explicit word—taking God's creation and enjoying it as an end in itself, apart from God, and in disobedience to God. 'What about the word of God?' says Eve to the serpent, 'for God has said, in the day you eat thereof, you'll surely die.' 'Oh, fiddlesticks,' he says, 'word of God? You don't need that to enjoy yourself.' And she fell.

### **When good becomes bad**

Let's observe once more that when she fell, the world went on: trees were trees, apples were apples and cucumbers were cucumbers, as far as I know. What was the difference then? There was a difference as high as between heaven and hell. A creation from God to be enjoyed in fellowship with God, leading to gratitude to God, coming from God and leading back to him, had turned now into a world to be enjoyed apart from God, as an end in itself. And the serpent, as we're told, tempted Eve by her desires. Notice again that he didn't come to her desires and put in front of them something luridly vicious, the kind of thing that we normally associate with the English word 'lust'. At least, I've never heard any English speaker talk about lusting for apples or for the fruit of trees.

My brothers and sisters, it's more serious than that. Desiring anything in disobedience to God, as an end in itself, apart from God; that's worldliness. For all that's bad in the world in our sense: the desire of the eyes, the desire of the flesh and the pride of life, isn't of the Father. In this sense the world stands for a world of men and things and activities looked at apart from God, as an end in itself. There's nothing wrong in a nice home. Why shouldn't you have a nice home? But suppose in life I make a nice home an end in itself, apart from the Lord, and though I might sing my formal hymns in church, yet my heart is totally engaged in getting myself a nice home, and God is forgotten days without number. This is my goal in life. Is that not worldly? There's nothing wrong in desiring music, is there? God created it, gave us the ears to enjoy it, but suppose I'm so wrapped up in loving music that I've no time for the Lord? Then for me, music is life apart from the Lord. Isn't that worldly?

Worldliness is also the pride of life, when this world and success in this world, and the possession of things in this world becomes the standard and the goal by which I rate my value and other people's value. 'My child goes to Eton, you know.' Well, thank the Lord that he does, but what are you saying, that you're someone special now? Is this the great goal in life you've achieved, and you're better than the other chap because his son goes to Orangefield Junior School and yours has gone to Eton? We'll have to be careful how we boast like that, because the Apostle Paul is liable to come along and say, 'You fool. What have you got that you didn't receive? If the Lord gave it to you, thank the Lord. But be humble enough and realist enough to admit that he gave it to you. You've no ground for boasting over somebody else.' But sometimes a little worldly spirit creeps into us, and we make the world and its standards our goals and achievements, and we judge success, and

we pride ourselves on it, apart from the Father. 'Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.'

I realise that what I'm now saying makes it much more difficult in reaching our decisions in life, doesn't it? It's not any longer sufficient just to get out the rule book and say, 'Now, is this thing worldly or not? Let me look. Ah, number 266: the book says that's worldly, so I don't do it.' It's a much subtler and more sophisticated thing. There's a question in my heart: Is whatever I'm doing and enjoying in fellowship with the Lord, as from him? Am I thanking him for it, and letting it lead me back in gratitude to him and his service? Or has the thing got a hold of me, apart from the Lord? Do you know, it would be possible, and you'll perceive how I know it, for two theologians to be worldly! One seeing how he can compete in brilliance with the other, as though an understanding of the Bible were something that reflects credit on the man who understands it, and now he's in competition. What a hideous thing, when it all should be of the Father.

But when Satan succeeded with Eve, it's no wonder that all down the centuries he's adopted the same successful tactics. He even tried them with our Lord, didn't he? May I remind you of the famous temptation of our Lord, when Satan came along and said 'If you are the Son of God, make these stones bread' (Matt 4:3). Now, there's nothing wrong in hunger, surely; the desire for food which we call hunger. And, in and of itself, there's nothing wrong or sinful in satisfying that hunger. But on this occasion there would have been a great deal wrong in our Lord satisfying that hunger. Although God has, in the norm, given us all things richly to enjoy, there are times when he calls us to sacrifice for his sake, to wait upon his word; there will be some times when he'll withhold from us what is a good thing in itself. And then, so very often, Satan comes with his temptation to take something apart from God, simply because it's a good thing.

Our Lord, as we might expect, magnificently exposed the sophistication and cynicism of the tempter, and said, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.' That saying was not meant to be a negative, wet blanket attitude to life. Notice the term, 'Man shall not live by bread alone' (v. 4). The most wonderful thing about a meal of a piece of bread and a sausage is that it comes from God. The whole of life is meant to have that dimension, however humble the thing in itself, as a basis of fellowship with God. And Satan will do with us what he did with the Lord. He'll come in our early days, when life holds out so much that in itself is good, but tempts us to grasp it independently of the Lord, or quite in contradiction to his holy word. If I had more experience, such experience as they have who'll lead your discussion groups, I would talk to my younger brethren and sisters in Christ about the modern world's attitude to love and marriage, and how it can become very worldly when seized in independence of the Lord. But I wouldn't dare to say that in case you said, 'Well, you've gone to the other extreme, my good friend!'

There's something more sinister still in this idea of the world. So, just for a few moments, I call your attention to a phenomenon in Scripture that you may well have observed yourselves. I mention it briefly in an attempt to enrich the conceptual treasures of your mind. If you were to take some of the leading ideas in the book of Exodus and write them down in one column, and put alongside them the leading ideas from the Gospel of John in another column, you would see how many ideas the two have in common.

## Israel in Egypt—a prototype

Exodus talks about Egypt ruled by a prince, namely Pharaoh, and how that prince held Israel in bondage until a certain Moses was sent by God to deliver Israel. And how that, for Moses to be an effective deliverer, Israel had to be brought to believe in Moses; which proved a very difficult job. They began to believe at the first, and then they gave up because they said it wouldn't work. Thank God, in the end, they were brought to believe in him, and he led them out. Moses was given to do signs, signs given him of God, to provoke the faith of the Israelites so that, believing Moses had been sent from God, they might follow him out of Egypt's bondage.

Another thing he was given to do was to declare the name of the Lord to the Israelites. Moses asked, 'If I go to them and I say, "The God of your fathers has sent me," and they say to me, "What is his name?" What am I to say?' And the Lord said, 'You shall declare my name, and tell them, 'It is the I AM who sent me' (see Exod 3:13-14). So that their faith in Moses should be provoked, and their faith in God. Of course there was the issue of whether God could intervene in Egypt. Was Egypt part of God's created world or not? And then there was the judgment upon the land, and the deliverance of Israel by the Passover Lamb. And when they got out, there was manna to sustain them on their journey to their promised land.

And you'll at once see how, at a much higher level, the Gospel of John repeats those ideas. It talks about the world, as does the epistle of John. And towards the end of the gospel, we read many times of the prince of this world: 'The prince of this world is coming,' says our Lord, 'but he has nothing on me' (John 14:30). And Christ describes himself as having been sent by God and we're to have faith in him, so that having faith in the Lord Jesus we may be able to escape this world and overcome it. We're to believe on the Son. To help our faith, various signs are given us. And, supremely in our Lord's tactics for delivering us from the world, there is his declaration of the name of the Father: 'I have declared your name to my brethren whom you have given me out of the world, and I will declare it, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:26).

Therefore, when we look at that, we can see that Egypt in the Old Testament is a kind of a prototype of what the New Testament calls 'the world'. Let me remind you what Pharaoh had done to the Israelites. We think of God, the great I AM, the eternal God of the past, the present and the future. We think of God in the past with all his wonderful purposes, and his covenant with Abraham, and his promises for Israel, great and glorious and stretching right on into the far distant future. But we think how in the present, Pharaoh had put a cage round Israel. He'd got them at work morning, noon and night, so that life was nothing other than their work and their pay, eating and sleeping, and that was all there was. That was his interpretation of this world.

Moses came along and said, 'No, that isn't what life is. Life is a far bigger thing. Life is to be lived in the background of God's great eternal purpose. It's to be lived in the present in the worship of God. It's to be lived for the future—God's great, glorious future. And the whole of life is to be spent in the worship and the service of God. But when Moses told that to Pharaoh, Pharaoh said, 'Don't talk such drivel, Moses. And as for you and all your

miracles, our scientists can produce the same thing in their laboratories anyway. So go and get lost because we don't believe this God. Life for your Israelites is just what I make it in the here and now—work, sleep, and a little literature and music if they've got the time, and that's that.' It required the coming of Moses to break that prison, and to lead Israel out of it.

I'll scarce need to apply the parable, for the prince of this world has set up such a cage for mankind as a whole. Ephesians says that he has got them walking according to his principles. He has persuaded multitudes that this life is all there is. They live for this world, and as for God's purposes in the past and his purposes in the future, they're ignorant of them, and in no sense intend to cooperate with him. They know nothing but this world. Our age shall end with the biggest demonstration of worldliness that ever was seen, when the man of sin sits in the temple of God, claiming divine honours and defying a god out there, if there is one, and preaching to the world that our planet is a closed shop, a self-contained flat.

We're in this world but for us, surely, the prison house has been broken. The Lord Jesus has come, and we've really believed that he's the Son of God who came from the eternal beyond into our world, and has gone back again. He has given us an eternal life, not merely in the future, but in the present, of knowing God, of enjoying God, of sharing the life of God even now. And as we journey through life, we're living with our eye on the goal of God's eternal purpose.

Ideas of the world then, and to sum it up, what's wrong with the world? Two things. Says John in the passage before us, 'It's not of the Father' (1 John 2:16). So that, if you love the world in John's sense of that term, the love of the Father is not in you. Secondly, the world passes away. Even its best is temporary, and if I spend all my love on the world and forget the Lord, then I'll find that in the end, my love is lost. For the thing upon which I've set my love is temporary and passing away. And when it's gone, it will leave an almighty hole in my life.

### **Remedy for worldliness**

Suppose you were ever to come across anybody, or a church, that had a little dangerous tendency to worldliness. How would you cure it? How would you try to fight worldliness in people's lives? There may be many ways, for all I know. I think supremely of what our blessed Lord said, 'I have manifested your name to them' (John 17:6). You say, 'How does that help?' Oh, if only you could see God as he really is. Whatever else God may use me to do or not to do, oh that he might use me for this—I can't do it: you'll have to let the Holy Spirit do it—take the name of God and what God stands for, and make it appear to you in all his eternal and measureless glory, until your heart becomes ravished with God, and the wonder of God, and the glory of God. And then, friend, be it so, you'll be safe wherever in this far-flung world your duties for God may take you, for it shall never steal your heart from the Lord.

Questions on this session are in the [Study Guide on page 108](#).

## The Family of God

*1 John 2:7–17*

We spent our previous session considering together what the Holy Spirit means when he uses the term 'the world'. We thought in particular of the world in all its seductiveness and its attractiveness that appeals to our desires. Now let's use our last session today thinking not so much of the world but of its opposite: the family of God. In particular we'll be looking at 1 John 2:12–14, which lists for us the various members of the family of God, and the experiences that God has given to them of himself.

It is commonly thought by many serious students of God's word that verses 12–14 are a kind of parenthesis, where the Apostle John goes off from his main topic and for a while diverges to talk about the family of God. There's no reason why an inspired apostle shouldn't, if he so pleases, diverge for a moment to some other topic and then come back again. I myself sometimes diverge, though alas very often I forget to come back! But this afternoon, I'm going to suggest to you that these verses about the family of God and their experiences aren't all that much of a divergence from what the apostle has been speaking about both before and afterwards. So let's notice how these verses are put together.

Beloved, no new commandment write I unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning: the old commandment is the word which ye heard. Again, a new commandment write I unto you, which thing is true in him and in you; because the darkness is passing away, and the true light already shineth. He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in the darkness even until now. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in the darkness, and walketh in the darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because the darkness hath blinded his eyes. I write unto you, my little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake. I write unto you, fathers, because ye know him which is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the evil one. I have written unto you, little children, because ye know the Father. I have written unto you, fathers, because ye know him which is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the evil one. Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the vainglory of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.

(1 John 2:7–17)

## **A commandment to love**

Verses 7–11 are written with this major end in view, that we should love one another. We're not left long in doubt as we proceed down the verses that this 'commandment' that we've been given is the commandment that we should love one another. Then in verses 12–14 we have this topic of the family, and the various members. And when we come to verses 15–17 we come to the exhortation, 'Love not . . .'; so we see that John is doing here what we found him doing earlier in his epistle. It's a mark of the teaching of this holy apostle that it is exceedingly balanced. Eternal life produces in us, if it's allowed its way, a behaviour and outlook that's marked by healthy, mature balance. When it was a question of having fellowship with God and enjoying common possession of eternal life, John stresses the importance of where we walk and not so much, in the first instance, how we walk. But then, as he comes to the end of the paragraph that deals with this matter, he comes full circle. It's no longer where we walk, but every bit how we walk. 'We must walk in the light' (1:7), says the beginning of the paragraph, but at the end of the paragraph it is, 'He that abides in him ought to walk even as he walked' (2:6). Where we walk and then how we walk.

And now John turns from the test of right living to the test of love. If we're genuine children of God, if indeed we do possess eternal life, how shall we know it? What evidence will there be? The evidence now to be looked for is in our heart and our heart's affections. Notice the balance of it. In seven directions we'll be marked by loving. In other directions we'll be marked by not loving. Love the brethren, love our brothers and sisters in Christ and love the Father, on the one side; but on the other side, love not the world. It's perilously easy to get the balance the wrong way round—to love the world and not to love one's brethren. Loving the brethren isn't the easy thing you might imagine it to be. I've been saved and in the family of God for fifty years, so I should know! Loving the brethren isn't something that we do because they're such charming, sophisticated, elegant, educated, civilised and colourful people. If it were that, perhaps many of us could think of folks that are in the world and quite unregenerate, who are more attractive as people!

Loving the brethren is such a supernatural thing that it's a mark that we've passed from death unto life. By this we know that we've passed from death to life, because we do what before we wouldn't do. We love the brethren because they're brethren. We love the people of God because they're the people of God, not simply because they're charming, sophisticated and very attractive. So then, in the test of our eternal life, where's the evidence? It lies first of all, says John, in right behaviour. Now it's to be found in the attitude of our heart as we love the brethren and the Father, and we love not the world.

## **An old commandment**

Let's begin by thinking very briefly about these verses:

Beloved, no new commandment write I unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning: the old commandment is the word which ye heard. Again, a new commandment write I unto you, which thing is true in him and in you; because the darkness is passing away, and the true light already shineth. (2:7–8)

So this commandment to love is said to be, in one sense, not a new commandment but an old commandment. In another sense, it's said to be a new commandment. How shall we understand the apparent conundrum? First of all, in what sense is it not new but old?

People have thought two things about this. Some people have said that this command to love one another is an old commandment because it's to be found in the Old Testament. 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' is a command taken from the book of Leviticus (19:18). It's a very, very old commandment, and if we don't love our neighbours as ourselves, it's not merely that we're coming below the Christian standard, we're coming below the Old Testament standard. So when John says this command to love is an old commandment and not new, some people think that he means that this is the old commandment given us in the book of Leviticus. That's a possible explanation and we'll come back to it in the next verse.

Other people say that John is not thinking so much of the Old Testament commandment to love, but now, as a very elderly apostle—when Christianity has been on its way for several decades—John writes to his children, as he calls them, to exhort them to love. And what he's saying is this: 'My dear fellow believers, when I exhort you to love, this isn't some novelty, some new idea that I'm now introducing into Christianity, something never thought of before. This is basic, authentic Christianity. This is the word that we heard right from the beginning of our Lord's own ministry.' If that is the true interpretation it's important because, as we face that exhortation this afternoon, my wicked heart needs to be reminded that this isn't some super-duper excellence that only the especially spiritual are expected to attain to. This is absolutely basic Christianity. 'By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another' (John 13:35).

### **A new commandment**

On the other hand, John says that although it's an old commandment which we've had from the very beginning, in another sense it's a new commandment. 'Again, a new commandment I write unto you which thing is true in him and in you.' Our Lord Jesus himself described it as such, 'A new commandment I give unto you that you love one another, that you should do to your fellow believer as I have done to you.' In what sense is it new? Says John, 'Because the darkness is passing away and the true light now shines' (1 John 2:8). We pause over that adjective 'true'. What does he mean when he describes our Lord and his gospel as the true light? Well, John isn't thinking so much of true as distinct from false, but true as in real and complete, as distinct from the partial and imperfect. The Old Testament told us that we were to love one another, and that was beautiful light given us by God; nothing false about it.

But oh how different the whole thing appears when we hear this command from the lips of the Lord Jesus, for the simple reason that none ever loved like he loved. And when I think of the way the Lord Jesus loved us, then in him we have an exhibition of the love of God such as man never heard of or saw before. The true, the full, the complete exhibition of the love of God, shown us in the life, death and resurrection of our blessed Lord—setting our standards away beyond what any dreamed of in their Old Testament. And you find our Lord talking like that in the Sermon on the Mount right at the beginning of his ministry.

'You've heard it said of old time by the ancients, love your brethren and hate your enemies. I say to you, love your very enemies' (Matt 5:43–44).

So this is the true light, the full firing of the exhibition of the love of God. 'It's true in our Lord, it's true also in you,' says John. Why so? 'Because the darkness is passing away'. I'm glad he didn't say it has passed, because when I look into my heart, I can discover some murky bits, and some of my dear brethren get obscured sometimes in these murky depths of darkness. All the darkness hasn't passed from my heart yet—has it from yours? The darkness, however, is passing. As I have the life of God within me, and I see the way the Lord Jesus lived and loved, and I wake up to the fact that I have the possibility within me of loving like that, it begins to dispel the darkness from the horizon. As I see the possibilities of a light that begins to dawn and spread, and where there once was greyness and blackness, now there begins to be colour and light. A dawning of a day that shall grow more vivid unto the dawning of eternity. True light now shines, which thing is true in him, and in you. 'He that says he's in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness even until now' (1 John 2:9).

### **Walking in the light or in darkness?**

One of the questions somebody set you in your question time was a question that ran something like this, 'About whom do you think the apostle is speaking when he uses phrases like this, "he that hates his brother", or "if we walk in the darkness"? Is he talking about believers or unbelievers?' There's no doubt about this verse, is there? 'He who says he's in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness, even until now.' He never was anywhere else. He's still where he always was—he's in the darkness even until now. Now, it's a common thing and we'll meet it many times in this epistle and in our discussions, that with John the apostle, there is no grey area, no twilight. You're in the darkness or you're in the light, one or the other.

As we saw earlier, it doesn't mean that if you're in the light you're absolutely sinless. But, if being in the light you fall in sin and the light exposes you, the mark of the true believer is that he remains in the light, and allows himself to be exposed, and confesses his sin. And the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. When sometimes we fall into sin, we can act inconsistently, like King David did when he sinned so abysmally. First of all he tried to cover it up and deny it, and refused to admit it to himself or anybody else—in a practical sense he tried to be in the darkness. But in the end it had to come out and he confessed his sin. That's the mark of a true believer. Even though he acts temporarily inconsistently, he will come round to confessing his sin and seeking the Lord's forgiveness.

But if somebody lives in sin without any intention of changing, and refuses to repent, and refuses to confess, and carries on walking in darkness, John won't have it that he's a believer. If he persists in it, it raises a very big question as to whether he's a believer at all. And he who makes a practice of hating his brother, and has no intention of changing, the apostolic verdict is that he is still where he always was; he is in the darkness. 'He that loves his brother abides in the light,' says John, and what an advantage there is in abiding in the light, 'for there is no occasion of stumbling' (1 John 2:10).



What do we mean, 'occasion of stumbling'? You can read it in two ways. If I, as a believer, am abiding in the light then, as I walk, I'll not stumble. Whereas, if I hate my brother, that very attitude of heart will trip me up and lead me into doing all sorts of sinful things. Not only so, but if I hate my brother, I'll be a cause of stumbling to other people. As the world looks on and sees Christians tearing each other to pieces vitriolically, what a stumbling block it is to them. Conversely, loving my brother will keep me walking in the light because it'll keep my vision clear, and I'll not be a stumbling block to other people.

Verse 10 puts things the other way round and describes to us the benefit of loving. He that loves his brother walks in the light. I have to try, by God's grace, to keep a hold on my emotions and my heart. If I allow myself to be driven by anger or jealousy, it perverts my judgment and trips me up into doing all sorts of harmful and foolish things. Loving keeps me in God's light, and helps me see things as he sees them. Then verse 11 tells us, in terrifying language, of the opposite extreme. He that hates his brother—that is, as a practice he constantly lives in hatred of his brother—is in the dark. He has no fellowship with God, he walks in darkness and, in consequence, he can't see where he's headed.

And where is he headed? If the man could only see himself and where he will be ten thousand years from now. Sometimes we're asked by our unconverted friends, 'How could it be fair of God to take a man and, for a sin that he's done in the brief span of a few years, punish him eternally?' Very often, questioners have failed to realise that people who live life without God and die without the Saviour will not only have to face the wrath of God as the penalty of sin, but will have to face an eternity with the consequence of sin. If a man persists in hatred and dies unforgiven, he'll spend an eternity in that fearful condition, unrepentant, uncleansed, his heart full of darkness and bitterness eternally. In Christ's words, 'he perishes' (Luke 13:3). A thing that once was a human personality, existing eternally but so perverted that all you could describe it as would be a thing that once was human, but now has perished. To hate and to live in hate is to walk in darkness, and not know where you're going. Finally the darkness has blinded his eyes and perverts his moral judgment.

And we can tell that, even as believers. From time to time we get tripped up and temporarily feel ourselves blown with passions of rage. When we're in our temper we feel it right to go and do something; and afterwards we feel ashamed of ourselves. That temporary burst of temper blinded our eyes and made a thing feel right when it was, in fact, fearfully wrong. Thank God that we can come and walk in the light. Thank God for the light that will expose us, and show ourselves to ourselves; and there is forgiveness and cleansing from all unrighteousness. Knowing the truth and seeing the truth; that truth shall make us free.

Sometimes temper, when we get involved in it, and hatred and wrath, represent themselves to us as our protector. 'It protects our rights,' we say, and so we cling to it. Whereas, if we saw the truth—the light of the Lord Jesus shining in our dungeon—we should see it, not as our protector, but as our jailer. And it's when the truth and the light of God show us what the reality is that we see our lust, and we see our hatred, and we see our anger for what it is. And seeing it is the first step to going free. So, with that we have the exhortation then to love one another and not to live in hatred.

## The family

Now come the verses about the family. There are difficulties here which I just have to mention briefly. The trouble that the expositors have found when they've looked at these verses is simply as follows. 'I write unto you, little children,' says John, 'I write unto you, fathers, I write unto you, young men,' and when we look at it, our first reaction is to say, 'But he seems to have got the order wrong. He starts off with little children, why then doesn't he go to the young men next, and finally to the full grown-up fathers? Why start with the little children at one extreme, go to the fathers at the other extreme and come in the third place to the young men?

Some have noticed that whereas the word for children in this first set is the Greek word *teknia*, the Greek word for children in this second set is *paidia*. That has made them think that we ought to look a bit more carefully, and divide up the passage as follows:

Figure 5. *Teknia* and *paidia* in 1 John 2

<b>General term</b>	v. 12	I write unto you, little children ( <i>teknia</i> ) . . . sins are forgiven
<b>3 classes</b>	v. 13	I write unto you, fathers . . . you know him I write unto you, young men . . . you have overcome I write unto you, little children ( <i>paidia</i> ) . . . you know the father
<b>3 classes</b>	v. 14	I wrote unto you, fathers . . . you know him I wrote unto you, young men . . . you are strong
	vv. 18 & 21	Little children ( <i>paidia</i> ) . . . you know the truth
<b>General term</b>	v. 28	And now, little children ( <i>teknia</i> ) . . . abide in him

Viewed in this way, in verses 12 and 28 John is using *teknia* as a general term applying to all believers of whatever age in the family of God. And then after that, he has two groups of three, graded by age—fathers, young men and little children. For those of you who are interested in such things, you may care to notice the suggestion that some theologians have put forward. Even that one is not without its difficulty, and I'm not going to spend longer upon that formal analysis.

## Forgiveness

As I come now to these verses, I would like to take the first set as they stand superficially on the page of Scripture and ask what it's got to do with what John has been talking about. 'I write unto you, my little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake.' What's that got to do with loving one another? And I reason like this. Little children, how did you get into the family at all? Anybody would tell you that when they were converted, when they were born again and became children of God and entered the family of God, the basic initial experience was the forgiveness of sins. All in the family of God know the delight of having their sins forgiven—from Mary, the dissolute woman on the street out of whom the devils had gone, and all those many that came to the Lord Jesus and, in that first moment of their believing in him, heard the delightful message, 'Your sins are forgiven you.'

Let's notice what it says: 'Your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake.' For the sake of the Lord Jesus, our sins are forgiven. What a delightful thing that, when as prodigals we come home, the Father forgives us for Christ's sake. 'Now, I'm supposed to love you,' says John. Isn't that what he's been saying in those earlier verses? 'I'm supposed to love you, but you've done something against me and I don't love you; you seek my forgiveness, but I'm not prepared to forgive you.' But wait a minute, my sins are forgiven for his name's sake. I get my forgiveness, not because I deserve it, but because Christ deserves it. And the Father, having regard to the worth of the Lord Jesus, has forgiven my sins.

And you come, you've done something wrong, maybe even against me, and you confess it, and your sins are forgiven for his name's sake—but I'm not prepared to forgive them. What does that mean, then? That I refuse to acknowledge the value of Christ? I repudiate his name's sake? How can that be? How can I be in the family of God, and owe my place in the family of God to the fact that I've been forgiven for the sake of the Lord Jesus, and then not be prepared to forgive my brothers and sisters for the name's sake of the Lord Jesus?

'And I write unto you, fathers,' says John, 'because you know him that is from the beginning.' The exegetes ask themselves whether 'him that is from the beginning' is a description here of the Father or of the Son. In the end, it comes very much to the same thing. The fathers, as they've got to know the Son of God, as they've got to know the Father, they know him that is from the beginning. This matter of the Father's love for the family is not some new-fangled thing. This is something that's been true of God right from the very beginning. This is his eternal, unchanging character. The Father's love for the family goes back to the remotest ages of eternity and on into the future immeasurably. He is the eternal security of the family of God.

And then, says John, 'I write unto you, young men, because you're strong and have overcome the evil one.' What's that got to do with the family of God and loving the family of God? In chapter 3 we find how Satan moved Cain to slay his brother, and our epistle will remind us how Satan tries to disrupt the family of God and put brother against brother and sister against sister. Thank God we have the encouragement from the inspired apostle that the God of peace is going to bruise Satan under our heel one of these days. But it's easy to be deceived, for his satanic majesty is a past master at deception and we don't always see from where the attack is really coming. Satan provokes one to do this and another to do that, and presently we're all at sixes and sevens. 'I write unto you, young men, because you've overcome the evil one.' We need to be on our guard. The family of God has been taken out of the world and has overcome the world because it has found the secret of overcoming the world—faith that Jesus is the Son of God. They've heard the name of the Father declared. When first we trusted the Lord Jesus, that was the initial victory. God help us to go on achieving victory day by day.

### **A commandment not to love**

We are to love, but then, as we come to the end of the paragraph, verses 15–17 are going to tell us not to love: 'love not the world'. As we read them, here once more comes an address to young children, fathers and young men that will give us reasons for not loving the world. If,

in the first place, there were reasons for loving the family, now come the reasons for not loving the world. 'I have written unto you, little children, because you know the Father.' So, when I say, 'Love not the world,' I've got good grounds for saying it. Here's a child playing with a knife; how will you get it out of his hand? If you try to pull it out, he will grasp it and cut himself. So you come along with some beautiful toy and you give it to the child, and the child drops the harmful thing and takes the new thing. If you know the Father, you will love the Father, and automatically your love of the world will recede. If you know the Father, you know his love, and you love him. Do be careful not to hurt his love because, if you love the world, you can't simultaneously be loving the Father.

'And I have written unto you, fathers, because you know him that is from the beginning. He is the great eternal being that was from the very beginning. He is now and ever shall be.' How will that help me not to love the world? Because, as John now points out, 'The world is passing away.' What a tiny little thing this world is when all's said and done. Even in the observable universe that we see on a starry night, what a tiny little thing our world is—and it's passing. What it would be to lose fellowship with the eternal for the sake of something that's merely temporary and passing. You know him that is from the beginning: let the glory and grandeur and eternity of it save you from loving a passing world.

'I've written unto you, young men, because you're strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you've overcome the evil one. Love not the world.' Here John gives us the secret of overcoming the evil one—and that is knowing the word of God. All of us who have any hopes of being young men in the family of God should take notice of it. We have the example of our Lord. What tactics did he use when, led of the spirit into the wilderness, he was tempted of the devil? How did he overcome the evil one? In response to each temptation he cited the word of God—'it is written'.

If I may be forgiven so for speaking of him, here's a boy in the home of Mary and Joseph. And Mary and Joseph in the home read him the holy Scriptures. They read it 'as they rose up, and as they sat down, as they came in, as they went out' (see Deut 6:7)—until the word of God was part of his very fibre. When the days of testing came, he could answer the devil and overcome him saying, 'But it stands written.' If our blessed Lord needed the armour of the word of God, how much more do we need it to save us from the sophisticated temptations of the devil?

We see how skilful the devil was. He first of all tried to get the Lord to make the stones into bread, and our Lord refused—he would live in dependence on the word of God. Not being able to turn him to ungodliness, he got hold of him at the spiritual level. He said, 'I see you are a very holy, spiritual young man. You wouldn't be tempted by bread. But why don't you go in the temple, and you could have such a marvellous exhibition as you jumped off the temple and show the world how dependent on the Lord you are. Because the Bible says that God will give his angels charge; so you only have to step out in faith. Take God at his word.' It sounded so good, but it was hideously deceptive. Our Lord countered him by saying, 'Satan, it is written . . .'

To that relentless foe, our Lord posed the word of God and overcame him. Likewise, as he comes to try and drag away our love of the Father—to ourselves in things of daily life, in things of the spirit, in matters of worship, in matters of public life—we too will need the

word of God to inform our minds and to expose Satan's deceptions, so that we may constantly overcome him and serve and love the Father.

Questions on this session are in the [Study Guide on page 109](#).

## The Heresy that Destroys Fellowship

1 John 2:18–28

Let's begin our study by reading from 1 John 2, beginning at verse 18:

Little children, it is the last hour: and as ye heard that antichrist cometh, even now have there arisen many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us: but *they went out*, that they might be made manifest how that they all are not of us. And ye have an anointing from the Holy One, and ye know all things. I have not written unto you because ye know not the truth, but because ye know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, *even* he that denieth the Father and the Son. Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: he that confesseth the Son hath the Father also. As for you, let that abide in you which ye heard from the beginning. If that which ye heard from the beginning abide in you, ye also shall abide in the Son, and in the Father. And this is the promise which he has promised us, *even* the life eternal. These things have I written unto you concerning them that would lead you astray. And as for you, the anointing which ye received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any one teach you; but as his anointing teacheth you concerning all things, and is true, and is no lie, and even as it taught you, ye abide in him. And now, *my* little children, abide in him; that, if he shall be manifested, we may have boldness, and not be ashamed before him at his coming. (1 John 2:18–28)

Last week we discovered that John wrote his epistle, in the first place, that we might have fellowship with him and with his fellow apostles in that glorious manifestation that they had witnessed: the incarnation of our blessed Lord. He explained that when we have fellowship with him, and with his fellow apostles, we have fellowship also with the Father and with his Son. We noticed that when John talks about having fellowship, he's talking primarily about the enjoyment of the common possession of eternal life. The content of our fellowship is that eternal life which was with the Father and was ever his delight from the remote beginnings of an uncharted eternity. That eternal life was personal; the second person of the Trinity, as we've come to call him. So when we come to faith, we come into fellowship with the apostles and also into fellowship with the Father. We share with God the common possession of eternal life.

We noticed that subsequently John, in chapter 5, informs us that he writes that we might not only have eternal life, but know we have eternal life. We registered it in passing that if our seminars are going to have John's intended effect, it will mean that at the end of our

studies we will go away, not only in the possession of eternal life, but in the certain, God-given knowledge that we do possess here and now the great gift of eternal life. We noticed in the third place that John writes that we may not sin. The assurance of our salvation, which we have through God's gracious word, isn't intended to promote in us laxity of living; it is intended to have the opposite effect, and normally does in the life of the believer. Assurance of salvation leads him, not to wish to go out and sin all the more, but rather that he may cease from sinning.

Then last week we noticed the famous suggestions of the older commentator, Robert Law, who pointed out that in the course of this epistle John gives us tests that we can apply to every profession of eternal life. If a man says he knows God and has eternal life, then all the apostles agree together that there ought to be evidence in his life to substantiate that claim. If the evidence isn't there, it raises doubt about the validity of his claim. According to the suggestions of this commentator, there are three great cycles of thought in this epistle. In the first, we're offered tests by which we can test our profession that we have life, that we have fellowship with God, and the tests are the tests of righteousness, love and doctrinal belief. We saw that we have to be able to pass all three tests. Just passing one of them isn't good enough. All three have to be demonstrated in us simultaneously. Then he suggested that the same pattern is repeated in 2:29–4:6. The claim that we're children of God is to be tested by that same battery of tests—righteousness, love and doctrinal belief. And Robert Law's suggestion was that in the last section of the epistle, John goes into greater detail and further emphasises that cycle of three tests.

So let's now notice, as we come to our particular passage today, that after the initial prologue, the three passages—the three tests if you like—show up three vital contrasts, three irreconcilable opposites. Under the test of righteousness, we read of walking in the light on the one hand versus walking in the darkness on the other. We saw that they are irreconcilable opposites: you can't be doing both of them at the same time. Then the second test shows up a further set of contrasts and irreconcilable opposites. We read of loving the Father and our fellow members in the family of God and, opposite to that, loving the world. John himself points out that they're irreconcilable contrasts: 'If any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.'

This morning we come to the third test and we notice that it throws up likewise irreconcilable opposites. This is the test of our doctrinal beliefs. It's a question on the one hand of believing Christ and his apostles versus, on the other hand, believing antichrists of one kind and another. So this morning we're to consider an ancient and terrible heresy. That might sound a very dull and daunting thing to do on a Saturday morning, soon after breakfast! We might be tempted to think that considering ancient heresies is a very remote, historical matter—at best, only for the theologians and irrelevant to the ordinary believer. But that isn't true, so John tells us in the passage that we read.

This heresy, to start with, had one very practical result. It had resulted in a lot of people leaving the church. 'They went out from us,' says John. He probably means it in two senses. They went out from us doctrinally, and we notice that he's talking as an authoritative apostle. 'They went out from us,' he says. That is, they came to a point where they rejected the testimony and the authority of the Christian apostles. They probably went out also in a

physical sense, that having been outwardly members of a Christian church, they now seceded from that church and left the fellowship of the believers.

This was a serious matter. The false doctrine they held wasn't merely a theoretical, theological matter. If their doctrines were true, they destroyed the whole basis of fellowship with God. They destroyed the very possibility of our sharing the eternal life with the Father and with his Son. Hence the practical interest. If the prospect is that we might have fellowship with the Father and with his Son in this great and glorious gift of eternal life, then we'll feel deeply about any doctrine that denies the very possibility of such a fellowship, by destroying the factual and doctrinal basis of that fellowship.

In other words, we're not nit-picking or looking for minor differences among different companies of God's people, ready to pounce upon the slightest deviation. We are contending for the very heart of the gospel. It is always an important criterion to use of any doctrine, to ask what implication it holds for the basic doctrine of our Lord Jesus Christ—the very basic gospel by which we are saved. That ancient heresy was so important in its own time that we must ask ourselves whether there is any counterpart to it nowadays.<sup>3</sup>

With that, therefore, let's look now at a brief survey of the passage that we have to study. The contents of 2:18–28 could be summed up like this: in verses 18–19 the heretics are exposed by the apostle. In verses 20–21 he turns immediately to pointing out to the believers what resources they have against this false doctrine and those who teach it. Then, in verses 22–23, he defines the heresy. In verses 24–27, once more the apostle comforts the believers by pointing out to them again what resource they have against these false doctrines and the heretics who propound it. And then, in verse 28, he reminds us all of the final exposure of all that's false and disloyal to the Lord Jesus, which will come when the Lord Jesus himself is manifested. So, let's briefly run through these contents of our paragraph.

### **The heretics exposed**

Says John in verse 18, 'Little children, it's the last hour, and as you heard that antichrist comes, even now there have arisen many antichrists, whereby we know that it's the last hour.' These words have troubled some people. They've asked themselves, 'How could it possibly be true that almost two thousand years ago it was already the last hour, or the last season, or the last period?' And the answer would appear to be that, with the incarnation of our Lord, history did reach its last epoch, its last age. There had been many ages before, ever since God created the world. But all those successive ages—before the flood, after the flood, then the call of Israel, and so forth—were looking forward to the great climax that should be the coming of the Messiah. With the incarnation, that last period dawned: the Messiah actually came, and did what constitutes it the last hour.

When the Messiah came, he pointed out to us those prophecies in the Old Testament that indicated that the coming of Messiah must be in two parts, what we now call his first coming and his second coming. But ever since he came, the world has been now in the last epoch. Hebrews puts it doctrinally:

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<sup>3</sup> For brief information on heresies that were current, or emerging, in John's day, see [Study Guide, Preliminaries](#). The same heresies exist today, albeit usually in a different guise.



God, who has spoken in diverse manners and different proportions to the fathers by the prophets in previous ages, hath in this last age spoken unto us in his Son. (Heb 1:1-2)

Jesus Christ is God's last word. There is nothing more to be said until our blessed Lord comes again. It is the last hour. We are not to expect further revelation. Our blessed Lord is the Word of God.

We are told explicitly in the epistles and by our Lord himself that at the end of this age there shall come a dark figure known under one of his names as the antichrist, the great opposer of Christ. People have thought as to whether, in calling him antichrist, the original writers meant to imply that he opposed the Christ by straight out frontal attack and opposition, or whether he's called antichrist in the other possible meaning of the preposition *anti*—to imply that he opposes Christ by imitating Christ, by being a false Christ, and thus trying to take the place of the true Christ.

He will be the antichrist that is to come, 'But already', says John, 'there have gone out many antichrists.' He uses the plural: that is, the coming of the antichrist won't be one, sudden, unexpected or unprepared for event. The great mastermind of his satanic majesty that lies behind the coming of the antichrist is already at work and has been at work ever since the Lord Jesus came. Even now, says John, there are many antichrists, by which we know it is the last hour. The devil himself, who when our Lord came attacked him and tempted him in the wilderness, has been at his foul task all down the ages, to oppose the Lord Jesus, particularly by corrupting the truth of the gospel of our Lord Jesus. We therefore need to be wise, because whether we die soon or late, we may be sure that those movements of thought that will lead up to the coming of the antichrist are already with us. The point of being told about prophesy and what will happen at the end of the age is not merely to satisfy our curiosity about the divine timetable of things to come; it is so that we might be wise even now, and recognise going on around us those movements of thought that will contribute to the coming of the great antichrist. Men's minds are being softened up, ready to accept that terrible deception.

In this particular instance, says John, 'they went out from us.' That is, they went out from us apostles. I suggest that we ought to notice this very, very carefully. When John, throughout this epistle, uses the first person plural pronoun—talking about we and us—he is talking primarily about the apostles. Their authority isn't something that we can possibly exaggerate. They were appointed by the Lord Jesus. Said the Lord Jesus of them, 'He that receives you, receives me' (John 13:20), and conversely, to reject an apostle, to refuse to believe what he says, is to reject our blessed Lord himself. 'They went out from us,' says John, meaning not just physically but doctrinally.

You say, 'This is all very remote.' Well, let me recall to you my little experience yesterday and the day before. I have an elder brother, much wiser than I, who lives in that remote part of England known as East Anglia. He rang me up the other day to discuss with me certain correspondence he had been having in the *Times*, that is *The East Anglian Daily Times*! Somebody had been in the correspondence columns saying that the whole prophecy of the virgin birth was untrue. In the first place, said the writer, it rested on a mistranslation of the Old Testament passage in Isaiah. Secondly, the virgin birth didn't happen anyway,

not literally. Matthew made up the story in his desire to try to prove that Jesus Christ fulfilled all the prophecies of the Old Testament. So Matthew is caught out twice: he has misinterpreted Isaiah and then he's gone and made up a story of the virgin birth in order to try and prove that Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies! My noble brother wrote to the paper to protest against this denial of the truth of the New Testament. The original writer replied, as they are wont to do, Oh, but what a pity, was the effect of his words, 'that you have this kind of fundamentalist people around. They put people off from the faith, in demanding that they believe these things literally. If only they could be shown that this was a sort of myth in which the Christians were putting across their belief that Jesus was special, and that we're not expected to take the myth literally. Then we can discard the story, but we can still believe the truth of it. We can believe that Jesus is someone special, and if people see that, then of course they'll come and believe the gospel, because now they're not required to believe something that's intellectually impossible for an intelligent man or woman in the modern century.

As we talked over the telephone, my noble brother and I were led to think about these verses we have just read. Matthew was an apostle, wasn't he? So shall we now say that the story that Matthew has recorded of the virgin birth is a story that he fabricated? For if he fabricated the story and it isn't true, then of course we'll have to part company with the apostles. And now we're coming round to what the verse is talking about. These kind of teachers will say that we're getting warmed up over nothing because, while it isn't historically true, it's a myth and myths are theologically true. They seem to have forgotten that the Apostle Peter, in his second letter in chapter 1, denies it outright. 'We have not followed myths,' he says (2 Pet 1:16), and Peter knew exactly what a myth was. We have not followed myths when we tell you the story, for instance, of the transfiguration: it's not a myth, it's a historical happening.

In recent years, we've been treated to very high ecclesiastics telling the nation at large that the virgin birth is not, in that sense, historical; and the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ isn't to be understood literally either. They claim still to believe in the truth of these things, they say, but in themselves they're myths. But then, says the Apostle Paul, 'It isn't a myth, and we put our whole apostolic authority on the line.' 'This happened,' says Paul, 'and if it didn't happen, then we apostles are found to be liars. And what's more, if it didn't happen, the whole Christian gospel goes up in smoke. There's nothing in it.'

It's a curious phenomenon in modern times that certain clever scholars seem to think they can take what they've now told us isn't true, and somehow reinterpret Christianity to make it true. If the apostles say you believe this, for this is the gospel and it happened, and if it didn't happen, it's a lie, how will you come along now and say, 'It didn't happen. In that sense, it's not true, but we can rescue the Christian gospel from it, and somehow make truth of it.' The thing is intellectually nonsense. 'They went out from us,' says the apostle, and here's the great exposure of their heresy.

John then points out, and this is very serious, that they never were true believers at all. I would not have dared to have said it, but John says it. 'They went out from us, for they were not all of us' (1 John 2:19). They weren't of us. They never were. It's possible to advance great lengths in theology and yet never to have been born again. 'They were not of

us and they went out. If they had been of us, they would have continued.' An interesting note, isn't it, about apostates? Apostates aren't believers that have lost their faith: they never were of us, says John. They've gone out and their going out makes it evident and manifest.

### **The believer's first resource**

Having said that, let's move on quickly to the believer's resource, the first resource that John mentions. He's going to mention another one later on. The first resource against this false doctrine and against these false teachers is the anointing of the Holy Spirit. 'And every believer has this anointing of the Holy Spirit' (2:20). 'I've not written to you because you don't know the truth,' says John, 'you do know.' And subsequently he's going to say that you've not needed anybody to teach you. Now, obviously John doesn't mean that in the absolute sense, that no believer needs anybody to teach him, for our risen Lord has put teachers in the church. He means it, however, in a slightly different fashion.

When it comes to these fundamental matters of our Christian faith, and our gospel, and our very salvation, a true believer has already within him the witness of God's Holy Spirit, and instinctively the believer will recognise false doctrine about the person of Christ to be what it is—and that for a very simple reason. If you are a believer and rejoicing in the forgiveness of your sins, and I come to you and say, 'You know, the death of Christ wasn't an historical fact', you're not going to listen. Because if it isn't an historical fact, your sins aren't forgiven, and you know it at your very heart that this is what has made your peace with God and your living fellowship with God. The Holy Spirit's witness to that in your heart, witnesses at once that this false doctrine that I have mentioned isn't true.

When it comes to the person of our blessed Lord, it is the Holy Spirit's prime responsibility to witness to the Lord Jesus, and he witnesses in the heart of the believer, so that instinctively they know. 'And you know that no lie is of the truth,' says John, adding a twist to his denunciation. There can be no compromise in it. It's no use getting up, and in a very learned voice saying that somebody who has just come out with heresy that the virgin birth isn't true, and that the bodily resurrection of Christ isn't true, is a very enterprising thinker, and this is a valid way of approaching Christianity, and we must be broadminded enough to include it. 'No,' says John, 'the Holy Spirit will witness in you that no lie is of the truth.' There's not an alternative way of coming to the truth.

### **The heresy defined**

John writes: 'Who is the liar but he that denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, even he that denies the Father and the Son' (v. 22). You say, 'That's surely very remote from Belfast.' Not really. Let me tell you a story. In the mid-1970s there was, in Belfast, a movement that called itself the Divine Light Mission. They used to run processions through the streets. They got young people and took them to London and put them through various experiences, and these people claimed to have seen the light. One afternoon there came a knock at my door, and here was a charming young lady and she came to bring me this gospel. She told me she'd been to London to see the light. I said that was very interesting, and I had no doubt that she saw the light. For the Bible tells us that we have to be careful in these

matters, for even Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light, and therefore how would she know which light was which? She thought there was no difference: all true religions talk the same.

I said, 'What do you really believe about the Messiah, the Christ?'

She told me their leader, who happened to be an Indian, was the Messiah for this age.

I asked where he was.

'Oh, he is in Boston.'

I said, 'Well, that shows he isn't the Christ, because our Lord said that when they say "behold here, behold there, the Messiah has come" [see Matt 24:23–27], the very fact that they have to tell you where he is, is an indication that he isn't the real thing. For when the Messiah comes, everybody shall see him and you won't need to ask where he is.'

She persisted as best she could, and then her leader came up. He wanted her to move on immediately: he wasn't interested in talking and looked a little bit sour. We persisted and I said, 'I'd like to know, sir, what do you believe? Is Jesus the Christ?'

'Oh, yes, we all agree, all religions agree on that fundamental point,' said he, 'and it's you who try to make difficulty for us. But this is an equally valid knowledge of God. Jesus was the Messiah, our leader is the Messiah.'

It so happened that on my doorstep there were a couple of milk bottles. I said, 'Please allow me to use a little illustration to help me in my thinking. If I said there are two milk bottles there, you would agree. But suppose the bottles were both full of milk. You wouldn't say there are two milks there, would you? Milk is one and the same substance. Two bottles, but not two milks.'

'Yes,' he said, 'I see that.'

I said, 'Now tell me about the Christ. You say Jesus is the Christ, and your leader is the Christ. Are you not really saying that Jesus is the bottle, and the Christ has come and filled the bottle; and that your leader is another bottle, and that same Christ has come and filled the other bottle?'

'Yes,' he said, 'that's exactly so.'

'So you're saying that Jesus is not the Christ himself, simply that Jesus was filled with the Christ?'

'Yes,' he said, 'that's right: all true religious leaders have been filled with the Christ.'

I didn't help matters, perhaps, when I read him this verse: 'Who is the liar, save he that denies that Jesus is the Christ?' Not 'was filled with the Christ.' The Christ isn't the Holy Spirit. Christ is the second person of the Trinity, Jesus, our Lord. More of that in another session.

Notice how John goes on to say in verse 23, 'Whosoever denies the Son, the same has not the Father.' This gives us another slant upon this heresy. We're talking about our Lord as the Son of God, as the second person of the Trinity. If you deny his being the second person of the Trinity, the Son, by definition you deny the Father. You can't have a father if there's no son. And if there's no Son, then the whole basis of our fellowship with God is gone. The prologue has told us that eternal life is sharing with the Father that eternal life which was with the Father—that person, that second person of the Trinity, our blessed Lord, the Son of God. If you say that he wasn't the Son of God, that he was just a mere man filled with the

Holy Spirit, well then all basis of fellowship with the Father is gone. God isn't going to sit down at any table with us to share in the enjoyment of a mere man, be he ever so holy.

The thing at stake is the very fundamental of the gospel. I'll confess to you, it worries me when nowadays we hear some folks who claim to be evangelicals begin to talk of what in theological terms they call a spirit Christology. That is, they say that Jesus our Lord had no pre-existence. What happened was that he'd been born as a man, God's Holy Spirit so filled him that he was taken up into God, so to speak. But to talk like that is to come perilously near to what John is now describing. It's to deny his status as the second person of the Trinity.

### **The believer's second resource**

With that, John goes on to talk about our second resource, which now is the word of God. In the first place, it is the Holy Spirit of God. Now here it is the word of God; and we need both, not one without the other. The word of God that we heard from the beginning, that's the apostolic message. We're not only to hold it, so to speak, with our hands, but to let it abide in our hearts. The Holy Spirit himself, in fortifying the believer against these assaults upon the gospel and on the Lord, gives us that inspired word that we might have it in black and white. 'Let it abide in you,' says John, 'so that it abides in you richly.'

### **The final exposure**

And then the final exposure: the Lord Jesus is coming. Notice the term that's used: his *manifestation*—when he will appear. And John says, 'When he appears, we don't want to be ashamed before him at his coming' (v. 28). Let's think briefly of three groups that will be horribly ashamed. There are those that profess to be believers and weren't believers at all. Like Adonijah, Solomon's son, who when David was dying seized the kingship, though he hadn't been appointed king. He was having his great party, being celebrated as the new king, when King David with his last breath officially appointed Solomon to be king. And at the king's command, they came down the streets of Jerusalem with Solomon riding on the royal donkey, and sang, 'Long live the king, Solomon!' And when the true king was manifested, the false king was horribly ashamed, and all who followed him were horribly ashamed. 'The Lord Jesus is going to be manifest,' says Paul, 'the great and only potentate.' God the Father is one day going to stage the glorious appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then people shall see who the true king is. And they who have followed false things will be horribly ashamed.

And what about us true believers? The Lord is going to be manifested. Won't it be nice if in that day we can walk up to him and say, 'Yes, Lord, in my college, in my street, alas sometimes in my church, men came and preached doctrines that were disloyal to you. But I never compromised.' The Apostle Paul said, 'I have betrothed you as a chaste virgin to Christ. I am afraid that Satan will get at your thoughts, and you will become intellectually disloyal to the Lord Jesus' (2 Cor 11:2-3). How should we explain it if, when the Lord Jesus comes and we have to stand before him, he has to say, 'But in your essay, young gentlemen in college, you compromised my deity, didn't you? You were intellectually disloyal to me. In

your church, you permitted doctrines that were disloyal to me.' What shall we say, my brothers and sisters?

And finally, we think of the apostles. 'That we might not be ashamed,' John says, talking as an apostle. For he is in charge of the flock of God, and when the Lord comes, he wants to be able to say, 'Lord, you appointed me as shepherd over these sheep and I have guarded them.' God grant to all of us whom he has put into positions of responsibility as elders and shepherds and teachers of his people, that we may do our task faithfully, so that when he comes, we may render our account with joy and not with sorrow.

### **Addendum—'myth' explained**

You have asked me to explain what exactly is meant by the term 'myth' which I used when I reported that some theologians will say that the story of the virgin birth and the story of the resurrection are myths. Now, to give them their due, they're not saying that the story of the virgin birth and the story of the resurrection are nonsense. They are using the term 'myth' in a technical way, in a way it's not normally used in general conversation. They mean a story which is made up and not historically fact, but which conveys a truth.

We're all aware of such stories in our own English heritage. In my infancy, I was taught a story of a farmer and his son who set off to market, and originally the son rode on the donkey and the father walked. Some people came along the road and they said that was very bad—a bad son making his poor old dad walk. So the boy got off and the farmer got on. As they were going along the road, they met other people who said what terrible people they were, making the poor old donkey support this tremendous weight. So, the father got off and they loaded the donkey up with chattels. They went along a little bit further and met another group which said, 'Poor old donkey, fancy letting it carry that big load of goods.' So, they took the load off, got a long pole and tied the donkey upside down by its legs on to the pole, and carried the donkey. And when they were walking over a bridge, the whole thing gave way, and the donkey got lost in the river.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, it's no good saying, 'That's a very interesting story. Where did that farmer live, in County Antrim or County Down?' East Anglia, someone is suggesting—all wise stories come from East Anglia! It's no use asking where he lived and when was he born, and so forth. The story isn't historical, it's a made up story, but it conveys a lesson: namely that if you try to please everybody, you'll end up by pleasing nobody, and suffering a lot of loss yourself. So, while it isn't historically true, it conveys a truth that's permanently valid. It's in that sense that some theologians want to say that the story of the virgin birth isn't historical, it's a myth, it's a story made up by the early church to convey their belief that Jesus is somebody special.

Sometimes when people hear it explained like that, they say, 'That sounds very reasonable.' That's what makes it all the more dangerous. The apostles themselves inform us that these things aren't myths in that sense, stories made up to convey a permanently valid truth: they actually happened. 'We were eyewitnesses,' says John, 'we handled him, we touched him.' Peter says, 'We actually saw what happened on the transfiguration mount.' And all the apostles, and five hundred brethren and more, join in to tell us that, yes, Jesus

did rise bodily from the dead. Some of them actually handled him, and saw he was not a spirit but had flesh and bones.

Questions on this session are in the [Study Guide on page 110](#).

## The Manifestation of the Children of God

1 John 2:29–3:3

We come now to our passage for this second session, which begins with the closing verse of 1 John 2. Let's read just a few verses.

If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one also that doeth righteousness is begotten of him. Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God: and *such* we are. For this cause, the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we children of God, and it is not yet made manifest what we shall be. We know that, if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every one that hath this hope *set* on him, purifieth himself, even as he is pure. (1 John 2:29–3:3)

This brings us to the second major movement of thought in this great epistle. You may remember that in our first studies I suggested that we should divide this epistle into three movements of thought, each beginning with a *manifestation*. In the first, the manifestation of the life eternal; the second movement beginning with the manifestations of the Son of God and of the children of God; and the third great movement beginning with the manifestation of the love of God in Christ, historically, and in his people.

And then we noticed that each movement of thought ends up with a very solemn warning. The first one, the warning that we were considering this morning, is against antichrists who deny that Jesus is the Christ. It is a warning therefore against false Christs. In the second movement of thought there is a warning against believing the spirit of falsehood, as distinct from the spirit of truth—false spirits. And in the final verses of the book, the third movement ends with a warning against false gods: 'This is the true God and eternal life, little children, keep yourselves from idols' (5:21). And you'll now see, I hope, that these three movements of thought aren't simply repeating themselves. They're repeating the basic message, but in each one there's a slight difference of emphasis, both in the manifestations that are talked of at the beginning, and in the warnings at the end.

Then we noticed last week that when you look at these three movements of thought, they introduce us to these two opposites: the family of God versus the world. When we were considering movement one we thought of the family and its members, united in the love of the Father and in the love of one another. Standing opposite that was the world in all its seductiveness and attractiveness, constantly trying to get our love and affection away from the Lord and to itself. We're told that that world, and all that is in it, is not of the Father. 'If



any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him' (2:15). So it's very much a question of our heart attitude, and the world in its seductive attractiveness.

As we move on into this second section we notice that, though it's going to repeat the same kind of message, it has characteristic differences. So we're going to ask ourselves what things are now being taught to us about the family of God in addition to what we were taught in movement one; and similarly with the world—what additional features are concentrated on here that we didn't have in movement one?

## **Children begotten of God**

First, the additional ideas: the progress of thought in movement two when it comes to the family. The first part of the epistle referred to the people of God as children, as young men, as fathers, by referring to God as our Father. So already the idea of family was explicit in movement one. But notice how gloriously it is added to now, as we come to the beginning of chapter 3.

Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called children of God. (3:1)

We have the status of children, and we're rightly called children of God. This is not some empty epithet, some courteous description that isn't really true; it is really true. We owe that status not to the fact that we've arrogated it to ourselves and in our sentimentality said, 'All people must be children of God.' No, we've had that status conferred upon us: what tremendous love of God it is. And not only 'called', but now, as some of the manuscripts have it—and in my judgment and in the judgment of many others, rightly have it—the additional words, 'and such we are.' Meaning that we not only have the status of the children of God, we're not only *called* children of God, but that itself represents a reality. In actual fact, as to our nature, we *are* the children of God.

So now we're going to come to the heart of the matter. This fellowship we're in is not just superficially called a family, it's a real family. For consider the origin of this fact that we're children of God:

If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one also that doeth righteousness is begotten of him. (2:29)

It isn't merely that we've come to share in some interest, like two people might be brought together because they share interest in amateur photography, and we've come together with God because we share an interest in theology. No, it's infinitely deeper than that. We're brought together in fellowship because, in actual fact, every believer has been begotten of God. Just as I had a common interest between myself and my father because I had the life of my father, he begat me, so every believer in the Lord Jesus has fellowship with the Father, because he actually shares the life of the Father. He has been begotten of the Father.

## The family likeness

In the next chapter, we learn something more:

Whosoever is begotten of God doeth no sin, because his [that is God's] seed abideth in him.  
(3:9)

He cannot go on practising sin, which is the force of the Greek word, because he is begotten of God; and what's more, the seed of God abides in him. That's an interesting term because, as medicine has increased, we've come more and more to consider the wonders of our human physical life. I'm told, by those who knew my esteemed father, that I resemble him in lots of things, not only in the shape of my face—that, some people think regrettable!—but in the colour of my eyes, for instance, and in the thinness of my hair, and in all sorts of funny little mannerisms. The learned medics tell me that in great part that's because with the life of my father came my father's genes. And with those genes that abide in me come all sorts of things that control my nature and behaviour.

And the wonder of the thing is that the believer in Christ not only has the life of God, but with it the very seed of God, the very nature of God. This is no cheap salvation, my dear friends. It isn't that Jesus has been kind and loving, and now says, 'Try and behave like children of God.' It's a glorious fact of divine regeneration that when we were born again we received the very nature of God. Let's hug that gospel to our hearts and then go out and preach it! How many religious folks there are that are trying to do like Israel had to do in Egypt—they had to make bricks without straw! And these folks are trying to behave like children of God without first of all being born again as children of God. This isn't trying to score points off other denominations or anything like that. This is the fact, the glorious fact of the gospel. Why should people be deprived of it? They need to be told, not merely to try to imitate the Lord Jesus, but that there is this great regeneration available to them. They can be born again, they can receive the life of God and the very nature of God. 'His seed abides in him,' says John (3:9).

That doesn't mean that we're already perfect. Verse 3 tells us that we still have the need to purify ourselves. In spite of that we're already children of God, and when the Lord Jesus is manifested, then we'll be transformed completely. We will be like him. So you can see that we've moved on in section two: the family is not merely a fellowship, it's a real family in which the members have the very life of the Father.

## Another family

We move on as well, in this second movement, when we come to consider the world, and we have to discover something very startling and sombre. In movement one, we were thinking of the world and its seductive attractiveness that very often attracts our hearts even when we're Christians. Now, we're going to see the world in a much more sombre light, for just as there is a genuine family of God, we're going to find out that there's a family of the evil one.

Last week, when we were thinking of the nature of the world and its attractiveness, and all that's in the world—the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life—we were

thinking about the world as a state of heart and as a set-up in which people try to satisfy themselves apart from God. The things that they're interested in can be beautiful things, they can be the highest that man knows—music and literature and delightful things; home, and family, and business and hobbies. But they are in it independently of God. God isn't in all their thoughts: they're trying to satisfy themselves without God. Their goals are to be found, not in God, but in the world. Their standards, their ambitions, their criteria are of this world as distinct from the Father, and their very enjoyment of it takes them further away from the Father.

### **Rebellion against God**

A tragic beauty then about that world, but now we're to be told that worldliness involves something much more sinister in its sinfulness. It is lawlessness, says 3:4, which ought to be translated into a stronger English word—rebellion. It is not just doing without God; it is positive rebellion against God, because God has his laws. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was good to look at, but to touch it without God's permission was rebellion. In this chapter we'll need to face this sombre reality, because the Holy Spirit is intent on curing us of worldliness. And to be cured of worldliness will mean facing the diagnosis that sin isn't just a little charming eccentricity, nor a sort of a pioneer independence of spirit: it is positive rebellion. If anyone were here not saved, I should have to remind them right now that not being saved is rebellion against God—because he commands men everywhere to repent.

Then we are told something more about this world. 'Marvel not brethren, if the world hates you' (3:13). That doesn't necessarily mean that your next-door neighbour won't speak to you and will treat you abominably: perhaps they're charming people. We're talking about the world now as a great system of thought and organised ideas that lies contrary to God. It is fathered by a spirit who is in absolute rebellion against God. In consequence, that world will hate the genuine child of God. Our Lord explained it this way:

If ye were of the world, the world would love its own: but because ye are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. (John 15:19)

Why so? Because you belong to a kingdom against which, fundamentally, they are opposed. In their unrepentance, ultimately they fear the other world, they fear the one who to them has become the great enemy, the spoiler of their joy, and ultimately they hate him and all who belong to his family. They will, in that fundamental sense, hate you.

### **Children of the devil**

Now we come to what is perhaps the most sombre thing of all. As I've already hinted, we're to learn in this second movement that just as the believers' source of life and character is God—the believer is a child of God and has the seed of God in him—so the unbelievers of this world are children of the devil. Look at verse 10: 'In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil.' That's a heart chilling expression, isn't it? As real as is the family of God, with the children of God behaving because they have the very nature of God

in them, so there are children of the devil, whose behaviour finds its ultimate origin in the devil himself.

So let me now point out to you the features of these two contrasting families as we'll find them in movement two. In one family there is God as the Father; he's begotten us, he's our Father. But, similarly, there's another father: 'Cain was of the evil one' (v. 12). Children of the devil—as our Lord himself said in John 8 to certain gentlemen around him: 'you are of your father the devil' (John 8:44). So the believer is described as a child of God, but over on the other side the unregenerate are referred to as children of the devil. In the family there are brothers; the opposite is the world. 'Marvel not, my brothers, if the world hates you' (1 John 3:12). There's a whole system of thought—a society of people with its thought forms, its ideas, its ambitions which are derived, whether they know it or not, from the satanic majesty.

On the one hand we have Abel in the family of God, and on the other side, Cain. In the great family of God—we do him honour as we mention his name—we have the glorious Son of God himself, the prince redeemer, our Saviour. Standing over against him, in the family of the devil, is the antichrist. In the family of God, again we honour him as we mention his name, there is the spirit of God, spirit of truth; on the other side, the spirit of falsehood (4:6). These are sombre things but if we would understand men and women, and live holy lives ourselves, and in compassion go out to folks who are unregenerate, we must face the stark diagnosis of where the unregenerate stand. And I want to say that, while this is solemn, it's not wild talk.

It was our Lord Jesus who said it, and he didn't say it to the prostitutes and the tax gatherers, but to gentlemen who professed to be his disciples. When he pointed out to them that to be really his disciples they must continue in his word, and then they would know the truth and the truth would make them free from the bondage to sin, they grew angry. They said that they weren't going to have him coming round and interfering with their personal lives in this moralistic fashion and laying down the law. They'd never been in bondage anyway. And he said, 'But I was talking about the bondage of sin', and then they got very indignant. 'You come here telling us that we're slaves to sin? Who do you think you're talking to? We have Abraham as our father, God is our Father.' He had to tell them sorrowfully, 'You are of your father, the devil.'

And you'll remember then, from your knowledge of John 8, how our Lord impressed that on them by pointing out in their lives the family likeness. He said, 'You see, if you were Abraham's children, you would behave like Abraham, wouldn't you? Abraham didn't go around seeking to kill me, and Abraham didn't get angry when he was told the truth. If you're really children of God, you would love me because I came forth from God. If you were genuine children of God, you would bear the family likeness.' And of all those traits of family features, surely this is the most lovely: 'If God were your father, you would love me.' Oh, my friends, may I stop and ask you, in your heart of hearts, what reaction do you find? I'm not wearing my heart on my sleeve, but do you love the Lord Jesus?

So we have then this family of God, and no member of it will find it difficult to admit that his salvation, and grace, and love and power comes not from himself, it comes from God. They are his children with his seed, and life and grace. And then the man of the world,

similarly, is not just an isolated, independent, self-contained, self-motivated individual, though he might think he is: he too is influenced, empowered by a father; that is, the devil.

In Ephesians 2, Paul reminds us of what we were when we were in our unconverted days, 'We walked according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience' (Eph 2:2). It is he that sets the thought pattern of this world; he that sets a good deal of its fashions of thought. And people walk according to the fashion of this world, unknowing that it's set by the prince of the power of the air. See how conversion is described in verse 14 of our chapter: 'We know that we have passed from death into life because we love the brethren.' Conversion is nothing less than that, transferring out of a kingdom of death into a kingdom of life.

### **The three tests**

Having thus surveyed the whole movement briefly, let's come now to its formal contents. I'm going to suggest to you, leaning hard upon the commentator Robert Law, that in this movement there are three parts once more. Our profession of being members of the family of God will be tested. The mark of the family of God is that they practise righteousness. The mark of the family of God is that they love one another. The mark of the family of God is that they stand by the doctrinal belief in the deity and true humanity of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Let's come briefly then to this first thing: family likeness. The true child of God, we're told, will of necessity bear the likeness of the Father because he has the Father's life. One day we'll bear that likeness fully, for when we see him we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. While we're still imperfect and we still need to purify ourselves, yet even now that likeness is discernible. We notice once more how John keeps ideas in true balance, and we'll have to try to keep this idea in balance in our minds. Verses 1 and 2 tell us that there's a sense in which the children of God aren't yet manifest, and the world doesn't know us: you can't tell which is which by just looking at them. But then verse 10 tells us that there's another sense in which the children of God are manifest. Oh yes, you can tell them, as plain as eggs are eggs.

In the one place we're told that the world doesn't recognise the children of God. This is a ground of some encouragement to us, for we remember that when the Lord Jesus was here, the world didn't recognise him either. It's not only that they said he wasn't the Son of God and the Messiah, but when they watched him they found his behaviour shocking, actually. Some of the religious people were the ones who were most offended, and they said, 'He couldn't possibly be the Christ of God. Look at the company he keeps: he's to be found drinking coffee, or whatever else they drank, with prostitutes and tax gatherers.' And therefore they didn't recognise him because he didn't seem to them to be a true portrayal of the God that they knew. Indeed, there was one gentleman by the name of Saul of Tarsus, a fervent worshipper of God, and to him Jesus Christ was such a denial of God, as Saul understood it, that he vowed to obliterate the name of Jesus from the earth. The fact was, of course, that Saul of Tarsus was worshipping an imaginary god: he didn't really know God at all.

But if the Lord Jesus wasn't recognised, it's understandable that sometimes the world fails to recognise the true child of God, and will think we're wrong. Stand for righteousness, ladies and gentlemen, as you doubtless have heard in many discussions in the media recently, and you'll be told that it is a moralistic position. If you want to have the compassion of Jesus, he said adultery was okay. No he didn't, of course, did he? He said to the adulteress, 'neither do I condemn you' (John 8:11). He wasn't saying adultery is okay. He was saying adultery is wrong and the law demands the death of the sinner. But our Lord Jesus, in his compassion, didn't inflict the penalty. That's a very different thing from saying that adultery is okay. Our blessed Lord, in his compassion, bore the penalty for us sinners. He didn't say that sin is alright. It's an egregious confusion of thought to say that if you were Christian you would take the permissive line in morality.

Our Lord says the very opposite, 'Your Pharisees seem to be strict, but I tell you straight that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisee, you shall in no way enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 5:20). He stood for righteousness. And the world didn't recognise him, and in the end crucified him—alas, as much of the religious world as of the atheistic. So the world couldn't, or possibly wouldn't, recognise us. On the other hand, we mustn't make that an excuse for lax behaviour. For sometimes the reason the world doesn't recognise us as Christians is that we're not behaving as Christians. We're doing all sorts of horrible things to one another and to our unconverted friends, and misbehaving in business and showing evil temper and worldly standards of life. So there must be a balance here. Though, in one sense, it's not yet manifest what we shall be, already it's plain as a pike staff. Says John, 'In this the children of God are manifested, and the children of the devil.' In John's view, if a man is to be found constantly practising unrighteousness, he can say what he likes, he's not a child of God, he is of the devil.

With that in mind, the other mark of the children of God is that—if we have this hope in us that one day when the Lord appears we're going to be like him—we will purify ourselves, even as he is pure. What's the use of my saying, 'Oh yes, I do believe that one day I'm going to be like the Saviour, but I'm not worrying too much about it now.' That's a contradiction in terms. Sometimes perhaps it has happened because we've so stressed the eternal security of the believer—that he that believes has everlasting life—that we've forgotten to stress the other side. Those who do have eternal life, and have this certain hope that one day they're going to be like the Saviour, will want to be like the Saviour now. My brothers, my sisters, this isn't an exhortation. John doesn't say you ought to purify yourself. He gives it as a fact: a true believer will purify himself, even as he is pure. And thus the true believer, in spite of his imperfection, is revealed now as being a genuine man or woman. In spite of their many failings and shortcomings, come near them and you'll find that in their hearts there burns this desire—begotten of the spirit of God and the very nature of God within them—that they want to be more like the Saviour, that they discipline their lives to that end by the grace of God, even now.

Questions on this session are in the [Study Guide on page 110](#).

## The Duty of the Children of God

*1 John 3:4–24*

As we begin our session this afternoon, we should remind ourselves of exactly where we have come to. So, at the risk of tiring you, but repetition is a way of getting things in, isn't it, we have been considering how this epistle is made up of three major movements, each of them beginning with a manifestation. First, of the eternal life; secondly, of the Son of God and of the children of God; and thirdly, of the love of God in his Son and in his people. Each of those movements ended with a warning. The first one a warning against false Christs, the second one a warning against false spirits, and the third one a warning one against false gods. And then we have reminded ourselves that in each of those three movements we have the family of God contrasted with the world, and in each movement we have something extra added to what we are taught about the family of God. And similarly, in each movement something extra added in God's characterisation of the world.

In our present movement, which is movement two, we are thinking of the family of God, of the origin of its life, and therefore of its character. The children are of God. They have his life; they have his nature within them. Similarly, we thought this morning of the world and its origin. The origin of its way of life, its thoughts and its motivations. They are, says John, of the evil one. He points out that you can tell which are which, because each member of those two families has and will, from time to time, exhibit family likeness.

This prompts me now to spend just a few seconds, and I'm sure you'll permit me so to do, making an observation in the Gospel of John. You will notice how frequently in the course of our study we have had to refer to the Gospel of John, and in particular to chapter 8 where this question of the family likeness recurs. John shows himself a very diligent student of his master. It is an interesting and profitable study to trace the ideas that you find expressed by John in his epistle back to what he learnt of the Lord as recorded in his gospel.

One example of this is what John says on this matter of the family and how each member shows the family likeness. Let me just remind you of this interesting fact: that in the Gospel by John there are a number of stories in which women are prominent—stories which are not told us, or told us in such detail, by the other three evangelists. If you have not noticed this fact and have not pondered its implications, just let me steal a second or two to point out that these stories in the Gospel of John in which women are prominent have something in common: they are stories about relationship.

It is easy to see, for instance, that the story in chapter 4 is of a woman and the relationship between her and the man she was living with was not a true relationship. The woman in chapter 8 had been unfaithful to her relationship. In chapters 11 and 12, there are

Mary and Martha at the death and then the resurrection of their brother. Death had divided them, parted the relationship, and our Lord restored it. In chapter 19 there is Mary the mother of Jesus, and other women too, at the death of her son. We'll find also in the course of the stories that we have frequent reference to the fact of the new relationship that Christ creates. It starts off, of course, with the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the wedding, on which occasion he said to her, 'What have I to do with thee?' (2:4)—a question of relationship. And weddings, as we know of course, are times for the official formation of that great new relationship, which is the marriage of man and woman. The last story in the gospel, the story of Mary Magdalene in the garden, is the occasion for our Lord's announcement of a wonderful new relationship. Said he to Mary, 'Go and tell my brethren and say to them, "I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"' (20:17). His Father has become ours because of this new relationship that he has brought about between himself and us.

All sorts of things begin to spring to mind when you take these simple stories in which the women are prominent. You put them together as a bunch and you ask what they have in common and wherein they differ and show their special characteristics. The one that today interests us very particularly is this story in chapter 8, in which our Lord eventually had to tell some of his hearers, 'You are not of God. You are of your father, the devil.' It is interesting therefore that this chapter is introduced by the story of a woman taken in adultery. It was a literal case of literal adultery, but of course the effect of that particular sin is that sometimes the children have the likeness, not of their legal father, but of the actual father; and the likeness to their actual father can give them away. Thus it happened at the spiritual level to the men around the Lord Jesus. They came claiming that their father was God and Abraham was their father. In actual fact, their behaviour bore the family likeness of an altogether different father and our Lord had to say, 'You are of your father, the devil.'

Forgive me for snatching those few moments, but I thought it might interest us. With that we come again to the contents of movement two. You remember we saw that there were three parts to the movement in which our profession to be sons and children of God is to be tested—in the first place by righteous behaviour and now, in our second topic, by our love for one another. Let us turn to our chapter then and begin by noticing how John emphasises this matter.

For this is the message which ye heard from the beginning that we should love one another.

(1 John 3:11)

This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another. (3:23)

So John brackets the whole paragraph together—this is the message, this is the commandment—and both of them tell us that we are to love one another. Now let's do a brief survey of the contents of this second paragraph before we get down to it in detail. It's a paragraph that tells us of our duty to love one another. John says, 'Love is the mark that distinguishes the child of God from the child of the devil' (vv. 11–12). 'Love is the evidence



that we have been truly born again: that we do have this new life, the life of God' (vv. 13–15). And then he gives us what the mark of true love is, citing us the example of the Lord Jesus, who laid down his life for us (vv. 16–18), and telling us that we have a duty to lay our lives down for our brothers and sisters. In verses 19–22, he informs us that love, genuine loving, can be a source of confidence before God and a source of confidence in our prayers to God. Finally, as he comes to verses 23–24, he puts love in its bigger context and talks of faith. This is his commandment that we should believe—faith and love—and love will mean keeping the commandments; that is obedience. Faith, love and obedience: that holy trilogy, the secret of our abiding in God and the evidence of his abiding in us. With that, let's come briefly through those five parts of this second paragraph.

### **Love: the distinguishing mark**

In verses 11–12 is the message, he says, that you heard from the very beginning. This is not some super-duper course for the spiritually advanced. This is basic Christianity, that we should love one another. 'Not as Cain who was of the evil one and slew his brother.' With that we have a terrible warning, for Cain was no atheist, nor even agnostic. Cain on this occasion was busily involved in his religious activities, offering his sacrifice before God. But though he came outwardly religious, he was, says John, 'of the evil one'. The evidence being that he slew his brother. Why did he slay him? Says John, 'He slew him because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.'

We notice that in the gospel our Lord makes the same remark about himself. In John 7, his brothers say to the Lord Jesus, with the worldly wisdom given to them, 'If you want to start a new religion, it's no good staying around here in Nazareth. You want to go down to Jerusalem and do some miracles and get on TV and show all your disciples what you can do, and have a bit of public relations and all that, and start a new religion in a big way. You'll never start one up here. Go down to Jerusalem that the world may see your miracles and believe.' And our Lord's reply was, 'Gentlemen, you don't know what you're talking about actually. You go up to Jerusalem. I'm not going up to Jerusalem, just yet anyway, because you don't have any problem, gentlemen. The world doesn't hate you, but me it hates, because I testify of it that its deeds are evil' (John 7:3–7).

John 1 reminds us what happened historically when the Lord came, for when the Lord who is the true light of the world came into the world, he didn't come to a world that was hitherto irreligious. He came to his own and they had been exceedingly religious. There were some people who in their religion had been sincere and seeking to do the will of God—the Marthas and the Marys and the Lazarus' and the Johns and the Peters and the Nathanaels. And when the light of this world came, they came to the light that their deeds might be made manifest that they were wrought in God. As they listened to the Saviour, they welcomed him and the salvation that he had to offer them.

There were other folks that ostensibly and outwardly were equally religious before Jesus Christ came, but when the true light came, they came near enough for him to shine on them and then they rejected it completely. Why? Because he exposed them that their deeds were evil and, in spite of their Pharisaic legalism, their hearts, he said, were like a sepulchre:

whited on the outside and corrupt of dead men's bones inside (see Matt 23:27). You can imagine how they hated him. There is nothing perhaps on earth so bitter as a religious spirit that has been now exposed as not being true to God. It will easily turn into hatred and into persecution. We are not to be like that: we are to love one another.

### **Love: the evidence of life**

Now John goes on to talk about love as the evidence of life. He says we mustn't be surprised if the world hates us. 'We know that we have passed out of death unto life, because we love the brothers.' How is it that love of our fellow Christians is such a sure and necessary indicator that we have this new life? Well, for this simple reason that this life that comes from God, loves; and it loves because it is life. God hates death. You remember one of the occasions on which it is recorded of our blessed Lord that he wept. It was when he came to the tomb of Lazarus and he said, 'Roll away the stone.' Martha pleaded, 'Lord, don't do that. You know what'll have happened to the corpse in four days of summer heat: don't do that.' And Jesus wept. Yes, he knew he was about to raise Lazarus from the dead, but the thought of his dear friend, Lazarus, there in corruption and stinking. What a sorry thing death is to him who is life incarnate, the living God. Love ever promotes life; and anything that is the opposite—hatred or even lack of love—belongs to the darkness and clamminess of death, corruption and a grave.

Notice this is in the negative. John says, 'He who loves not abides in death' (v. 14). He has never come out of it: he's not yet converted. But the man who is converted and has been born again, will love. It is inherent in his life. The man who positively goes on to hate—he not only doesn't love, but he positively hates—is a murderer, for the basic nature of hatred is that it would murder if it got the chance. It destroys life. Watch hatred at work in a community and see if it doesn't destroy people emotionally and spiritually and physically. It is of the evil one.

So then love of the brothers is a mark of having been born again. But here just let me interject an observation, lest we get carried away in sentimentality. What does it mean to love the brothers? You will notice that here the test is not that we love men in general, but we love the brothers. There is a special difficulty, ladies and gentlemen, in loving the brothers and the more you get to know them, forgive me for saying it, the more difficult you'll find it to love them—because God has not chosen the wise and the powerful and the beautiful. I'm not necessarily commenting upon you—you look very wise to me! But God says he hasn't necessarily chosen them at all: he has chosen the broken and the humble.

We must therefore be on our guard against misinterpreting the Lord Jesus. For instance, he told the famous parable of the Sheep and the Goats, and told us that when the king sits upon the throne of his glory he will dismiss the goats because they failed to love and visit and clothe and feed one of the least of these. 'And inasmuch as you haven't done it to them, you haven't done it to me. But if you have done it to them, then you've done it to me' (see Matt 25:31–46). The world outside takes those words and applies them to everybody indiscriminately. 'Give your money to the poor, whoever the poor are, and you're giving it to Christ.' That is not necessarily so, ladies and gentlemen. Our Lord was saying, let me

quote him, 'In as much as you did it unto one of these, my brothers, you have done it unto me' (v. 40). Which raises the question—who are his brothers?

When the world loves its own, it isn't necessarily loving the brothers of Messiah. For all I know, Caiaphas, the high priest, was quite liberal at his dinner parties. But the brothers of Messiah? Well, first of all, he didn't accept that Jesus was the Messiah, and as for those nasty little Nazarenes that got on soap boxes on the street corner and started preaching, well, he would have readily rung their necks. When he stands at last before the king, the king shall ask, 'Why didn't you visit my brothers in prison? Why didn't you visit me when I was in prison?' 'We didn't believe you were the Messiah and we didn't recognise those people as brothers of the Messiah.' No, indeed not. The question therefore is not whether we naturally love pleasant people. We are strictly talking in this context of loving Christ's brothers, and to do that will demand, of course, that we be born again. Only then shall we discover within us the ability to love the brothers of the Lord Jesus.

Now then, just look at verses 16–18. They're not difficult to understand, are they? They're difficult to do, maybe. 'The mark of true love is that he laid down his life for us.' Literally, physically, spiritually, and therefore it puts upon us a bounden duty to lay down our lives for the brothers. We cannot, by so doing, atone for them. In his atoning sufferings our Lord stands alone and unique, but he calls upon us to follow him and, in our love and service of our brothers and sisters, to be prepared to lay down our lives. He could call us of course to the mission field and to who knows what diseases and early deaths—more difficult perhaps.

Our Lord laid down his life for us, but let's now take the means of life. For John says in verse 17, 'Whoever has this world's goods'. I don't know how your translation has it, but that word in Greek that is translated 'goods' literally means 'the means of life'. Take a situation where a believer is faced with a brother who is in need and finds in himself a certain desire to help him. And then he withdraws because it's going to cost too much. How does the love of God dwell in him? If I won't give my means of life, then with what credibility would I claim that I would freely lay down my physical life? 'Oh, brothers,' John says, 'let not love be in word, but in deed and in truth' (v. 18).

### **Love: a source of confidence before God**

Then John comes to a delightful thing that shows us his pastoral heart. John is a wise pastor and he knows in his own experiences, and the experience of others, that there come times in the heart of genuine godly devoted believers when sometimes there wells up within them a sense of failure, and doubts creep in. Middle life is a very fertile ground for them, wondering 'Am I truly a believer? Look what I've gone and done now: does it mean that I'm an old imposter? Have I got eternal life?' So John now gives us some very practical advice: 'If our hearts condemn us, one of the things that can reassure our hearts before the Lord is if there has been evidence in your life that you have loved the brothers.' 'Oh,' you say, 'yes, I don't feel much of a Christian myself, but yes, my brothers in Christ.' Ah, happy man, happy woman, if there's been evidence in your life—not just talk, but real devoted self-sacrifice for my brothers and sisters for the Lord's sake. That can serve to give you confidence before the

Lord. 'If our hearts condemn us, we have to remember that God is greater than our hearts and knows all things' (v. 20).

For myself, brethren, I read that not as a threat, but as an encouragement. For I too have to take my place with Peter, and should the Lord ask me three times, 'Do you love me?' then I should have to stammer out, 'Well, Lord, I'd like to say I do, but then what about all the inconsistencies? But Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.' Love: a source; not the only one, but a source of confidence in the presence of God, before God, when our hearts get full of doubts and begin to condemn us. And it gives us a certain basis of confidence in prayer; for if our hearts don't condemn us and we ask, we have the things that we ask of him. But if I come to God and ask, expecting God to give me something, yet when my brother comes to me in his need and I refuse to give him anything, it is obvious that I'm going to be in a little trouble with the Father, am I not? How can I come, expecting him to answer my prayers, if I haven't listened to the prayers and requests of my brothers and sisters in their need?

And finally, in our talk of loving, let's notice the sanity with which John ends. Loving, to be true loving, has to be part of a trilogy of faith. 'This is his commandment that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another' (v. 23). Faith or doctrinal correctness, love and obedience, these are, says John, the secret of our abiding in God. They are simultaneously the evidence that he abides in us.

Questions on this session are in the [Study Guide on page 111](#).

## The Faith of the Children of God

*1 John 4:1–6*

We come to the final part of the second movement. Let's begin by reading the passage in 1 John 4:

Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the spirit of God: every spirit which confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit which confesseth not Jesus is not of God: and this is the *spirit* of the antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it cometh; and now it is in the world already. Ye are of God, *my* little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world. They are of the world: therefore speak they *as* of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he who is not of God heareth us not. By this we know the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error. (1 John 4:1–6)

As the person responsible for planning these studies, I'm tempted to apologise that I began your day with a consideration of heresy and shall finish today with another consideration of heresy. That is not didactic principle, but it is how things have worked out! This first paragraph of chapter 4 would at first sight look as though it is simply repeating 2:18–28, where we were also warned against antichrists and against those who deny that Jesus is the Christ—those who deny his deity as the Son of God, and in so doing destroy the belief in the fatherhood of God. Not having the Son, they cannot have the Father either.

So our first job is once more to see and emphasise in our thinking that, though this paragraph would appear to repeat what was said in chapter 2, we must notice and impress upon ourselves the differences between the two. They are certainly dealing with a common theme, but our point will be to notice the differences. We have noted that each of the three movements ends with a warning. We are now concerned with the second of the three, so let us notice its explicit terminology: 'Beloved, believe not every spirit, but test the spirits' (v. 1). We might make this distinction at once, that here we are dealing with false spirits as distinct from the true spirit. In the first warning we were dealing with false Christs as distinct from the true Christ. Next week, God willing, we shall be looking at the warning against trusting false gods as distinct from the true God.

Whereas in the first warning in chapter 2 we were thinking about the false teachers themselves and their behaviour, and how that they had gone out from the apostles and now were teaching false doctrines, here, while we still think of false teachers, we are more concerned with the spirit that is behind them and animates them. So we are enquiring now

not merely about their doctrine, though we shall still and must be interested in that because it becomes a criterion, but about the spirit that is moving the man, be he prophet or teacher or evangelist, whatever gift he claims or has. Here the words of Professor J. N. Findley come to us still over the years—that to equate the supernatural with the divine, as though anything that is supernatural is necessarily divine, is a folly. It is a grievous error, because there are supernatural powers that are not divine.

We are warned that at the end of this age, when the antichrist shall be in full flower, he will come with miraculous signs. Miracles there will be aplenty, and many people, just because they are miraculous, will conclude that this must be of God. The very opposite will be true. They will be lying wonders, lying signs, whose coming is after the working of Satan. Supernatural, yes, but not divine, not of God. So it is important that we listen to the Apostle John and we test the spirits that lie behind any particular gift. ‘Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits’—test them. Then we shall notice another thing which links this paragraph with the earlier part of movement two.

When we were considering earlier the question of the family and the world, we were thinking of the origin of the children of God, and the origin of the world and the man of the world. The child of God is of God. Cain was of the wicked one. The question of origin was therefore very much to the fore, and so it is here. Notice with me, as we scan down these brief verses, how many times that little phrase ‘*of God*’ occurs. First sentence of chapter 4, verse 1: ‘Test the spirits whether they are *of God*’. Verse 2: ‘Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is *of God*’. Verse 4, talking to the believers: ‘You are *of God*, my little children’. And finally, verse 6, referring to the apostles themselves: ‘We are *of God*’. The question is still what it was before: a question of origin. What is the origin, the source of this particular spirit, whatever it might be?

### **Testing the spirits**

So let’s begin with the first injunction. ‘Believe not every spirit, but test the spirits whether they are of God . . . Hereby know you the spirit of God’ (4:1–2). Faith is one of the cardinal things about Christianity: we are called upon to believe. And yet, as John points out in his delightful commentary on these verses, there is another sense in which the child of God will be marked by a wariness—he will not be too quick to believe. ‘Believe not every spirit, says John. Just to be credulous and to believe everything that is told you, simply because it is accompanied by some miracle, is not a mark of spiritual maturity, or even wisdom. The gracious Holy Spirit himself calls upon us to test the spirits whether they are of God or not. With tremendous and remarkable condescension he invites us to test him himself: ‘By this we know the Spirit of God.’ He doesn’t mind being tested. If, in fact, he moved somebody to say this, to preach that, to announce the other, and if it is genuinely the Holy Spirit behind this gift, then the Holy Spirit himself will be delighted if you, in all due humility, test him to see if it is indeed the Holy Spirit. He has nothing to fear, if I may put it that way: he’ll pass all his examinations with flying colours.

Sometimes people have wrongly said that even to question somebody who claims to be speaking in the name of the Holy Spirit is to be in danger of committing the sin against the

Holy Spirit, which is the unpardonable sin. 'You'd better believe at once therefore.' 'No,' says the Holy Spirit, 'you'd better not: better that you test the spirit, if it is indeed the Holy Spirit that is speaking through this gift.' John says that this is the test you should apply (v. 3); we see once more that the test is a doctrinal test, because we are testing a message that a preacher, or other, has preached.

### **Doctrinal test—the person of Christ**

Here I must give you a little lesson in Greek. You could translate this Greek sentence as 'every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh', or you could translate it 'every spirit that confesses not that Jesus is the Christ come in flesh.' In other words, the true answer to the question, 'Who is Jesus?' is 'Jesus is the Christ come in flesh.' He is the incarnate Christ. He is not a man that has lent himself to the Christ, the great world spirit. No, Jesus is the Christ and, what is more, he is truly human at the same time. He is the Christ incarnate. He is the Christ come in flesh. It is a mark of seriously false doctrine that it will deny one or other of those two things. Jesus come in the flesh, his true humanity; the Christ, his true deity.

Now let's put alongside that a remark that John makes in 2 John 7, 'For many deceivers are gone forth into the world, even they that confess not that Jesus Christ cometh in the flesh.' The learned experts in the Greek tongue all admit that there is an interesting difference in the tense. In 1 John 4:2 it is a past tense: 'has come'. In 2 John 7, it is a present tense: 'cometh'. For my part, I believe that verse 7 is talking of our Lord's second coming—that when he comes again it will be this same Jesus that shall come. Before he went, you remember how careful he was to demonstrate to his apostles that he was not just some disembodied spirit. When he came through the doors they thought they saw a spirit and they were afraid. But Jesus said, 'Handle me and see that it is I, myself. A spirit has not flesh and bone as you see me having' (Luke 24:39). He proceeded to eat a piece of fish and some honeycomb to demonstrate the fact that he was truly human. He had flesh and bone. As the blessed Lord ascended, raising his hands in blessing, the angel came and told the apostles, 'This same Jesus shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go' (Acts 1:11). Why this double emphasis? One is on his eternal deity, the other on the fact that, being the eternal Christ, he is and has come in the flesh, truly human, and will come again in the flesh.

Let me tell you two stories. Years and years ago friends of mine and myself held some public lectures on Christianity in the town of Newmarket in England. After one of the lectures a gentleman came up to me and began to talk. His story was that he had been in India in the RAF during the war and had stayed on. In his time in India he had read deeply in all kinds of Indian philosophy, with the practical yoga that goes as part of the beginning courses towards the Hindu religion. (You won't forget that, will you? Yoga is the physical preparation for receiving spirits, according to Hindu belief!) He'd gone through all those trainings, the manipulations of his body, the manipulations of his subconscious, and had read deeply in Hindu philosophy. Being demobbed, he'd come home to England and was working at a civilian airfield where a man who was obviously a believer began to talk to him.

In the end the man who'd been in India felt a longing in his heart to trust the Saviour. He didn't know how to do it. He said he got down and recited the Lord's Prayer, which was the best he knew. But his mother, who was an exceedingly religious person, said that this being born again was all a lot of nonsense anyway, and told him to drop it completely. But he said to me, 'I would like peace. Where do I get peace of mind?' So I invited him to my rooms. I cannot tell you the long, detailed story of the tremendous convulsions, psychological and physical, through which that man went as, from time to time, he would come to consider the Word of God with me. He came telling me one night that on his road up he had had an overwhelming power within him not to come. When he came he was convulsed and looking like a ghost. As we got to know each other, and read the word of God together, I found prayer was useless; he only went off into his yoga stuff. It was the Word of God that calmed him down physically. As we got to know him, he eventually expressed faith in the Lord.

He's gone on for years as a believer, but he told me that he had borrowed some books from the theosophists in town and had lent them some of his books. He said he would like to go and take the books back but he was afraid to go back among them. I asked him, 'What did they teach you in those theosophical circles about Jesus? Did they teach you that Jesus is the Christ?' 'No,' he said, 'they say that Jesus isn't the Christ. The Christ is the great world spirit. Jesus lent himself to the Christ and the Christ used him and now Jesus is in the seventh heaven somewhere. But the great Christ is the infinite world spirit. You couldn't get the infinite world spirit into the limited body and personality of a man.' I explained to him what God's word says: 'Who is a liar, save he that denies that Jesus is the Christ?' (1 John 2:22).

So we went together, and I cannot tell the whole story. Some friends of mine, myself, and the good gentleman went to the theosophists. The leaders among them were a man and his wife who had been brought up and once had been members of the Salvation Army. Oh, my dear friends, how dreadfully possible it is for folks to get deceived. They gave me some of their theosophical literature and when I read it I found that it said that all the holy books—Christian and Jewish and Hindu—all tell us that the Christ is coming. Oh yes, of course they do: we must expect the coming of Christ. Then they add, 'but Jesus isn't the Christ.' You can see the way the thing is being prepared in the minds of people for the coming of the Christ, but it won't be Jesus. It will of course be him who's coming is after the working of Satan. As you might understand, I never forgot that experience.

Coming to Belfast, good, holy Belfast, I lodged with a lovely landlady, a delightful soul. At that time she was a member of the Christian Science belief, and naturally we got to talking. In the end that led to my being asked to visit and have conversation with some of the leaders of that particular religion here in town. They had told me that all their doctrines were based on the Bible, so I said, 'I have a question. Your book says that the blood of Christ has no more value when it was spilt than when it was coursing in his veins.'

'You're not one of those, are you, who believe all this nonsense? People go singing round the street about the blood of Christ. That's useless. That's valueless.'

'I thought you said your beliefs were founded on the Scripture.'

'Oh, not your narrow-minded interpretation of the Bible! That's what's wrong with you.'

'Could I ask you one more question before I go? Do you believe the Christ is coming?'



'Of course he is.'

'When he comes, will Jesus Christ come in the flesh?'

'Oh, don't be so ridiculous,' they said. 'What on earth would Christ come in the flesh for?'

These are very solemn matters, aren't they? And the fact that that particular set of doctrines urges people to love one another and be kindly and therefore, by its techniques, cure some illnesses, is not enough to say, 'Yes, this is of God.' When you apply this very test that John is using, they are shown to be completely on the other side. They deny that Jesus Christ is coming in the flesh, and of course deny the value and importance of his blood.

### The audience

We have thought of the false teachers and the spirits behind them. Now John goes on to talk about the audience that listens to these things, and then of himself and his fellow apostles. He makes a distinction between 'you that are of God' (v. 4), and 'they that are of the world' (v. 5). A test by which you can test the spirits, and those whom they use to spread doctrine, is by the kind of people that listen to them:

You are of God, *my* little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world. They are of the world: therefore speak they *as* of the world, and the world heareth them. (1 John 4:4-5)

We are to notice an ominous thing. False doctrine seems right, very often, to the worldly and unregenerate man. Hence, to many an unregenerate theologian, the doctrines of modernism seem right. Those who stand fundamentally by the inspired record of holy Scripture seem to them genuinely perverse and wrong-headed. But notice John's explanation. The false teachers are of the world; they speak from the world and the world hears them. That in itself is ominous. The contrary is true of the true believer, because the Holy Spirit is within him and, doctrinally and intellectually, he overcomes the world.

You must think that the part of the world I come from has not had enough missionaries, and that could be true. In my home town there was a delightful believer, very elderly and somewhat eccentric, but a gracious gentleman who, as best he knew how, tried to serve the Lord. He was often to be heard preaching in the open air. There came at one stage some preachers to our town who took public buildings and held forth their particular brand of heresy, and it was a lurid brand of heresy. At their final meeting, the leader of that particular group got up and said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, we thank you for your response. We've had a marvellous response here in the town of Ipswich and it is our intention to set up a church.' As quick as lightning, this elderly gentleman got up on his feet and said, 'Sir, and I may add, the devil won't hinder you.' He may have spoken crudely, but he spoke the truth. There is that sense of frustration we all feel sometimes, when people resist the truth so much and then fall so easily for what to us are such obvious perversions of Christianity. Preaching our gospel is a battle. It is a war in which you can win a battle here and a battle there, but every generation will find it will have to fight the battles over and over again.

Finally, says John of himself and his fellow apostles, 'We are of God: he that knows God hears us; he who is not of God, does not hear us' (v. 6). I ask you to notice how preposterous that must sound to some people. I remind you, it is being said by a holy apostle. If those of us who commonly meet in fellowship here were to stand up and say, 'He that is of God hears us. Anybody that doesn't agree with us is not of God,' that would be arrogance beyond description. But what we can't say as individual believers, the apostles have every right and authority to say. It is a mark of true teachers. 'He that is of God hears us. He that doesn't hear us is not of God.' In this they resemble our Lord. Our Lord, when he was here on earth said, 'Everyone that is taught of the Father comes to me' (John 6:45). It was he who commissioned the apostles: 'He that receives you, receives me. He that rejects you, rejects me' (John 13:20). We do well in our days to emphasise the importance of these historic apostles on whose foundation the church is built. 'We are of God. He that is of God, hears us.'

Questions on this session are in the [Study Guide on page 112](#).

## God's Love to Us

*1 John 4:7–19*

We come now to consider the third of the movements of thought in the First Epistle of John. We begin by reading some verses from chapter 4:

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is begotten of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. Herein was the love of God manifested in us, that God hath sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man hath beheld God at any time: if we love one another, God abideth in us, and his love is perfected in us: hereby know we that we abide in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit. And we have beheld and bear witness that the Father hath sent the Son *to be* the Saviour of the world. Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God abideth in him, and he in God. And we know and have believed the love which God hath in us. God is love; and he that abideth in love abideth in God, and God abideth in him. Herein is love made perfect with us, that we may have boldness in the day of judgement; because as he is, even so are we in this world. There is no fear in love: but perfect love casteth out fear, because fear hath punishment; and he that feareth is not made perfect in love. We love, because he first loved us. (1 John 4:7–19)

We noted on previous occasions that each of the movements involves a *manifestation*. In the first movement emphasis was placed on the manifestation of the life eternal which made it possible for us to have fellowship with God. In the second movement emphasis was placed on the manifestations of the Son of God which have made it possible for us to become children of God, and will one day make it possible for us to be manifested as fully perfected children of God: 'we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is' (1 John 3:2). So we have started with a progression: the manifestation of his incarnation and then the manifestation of his second coming. And John reminds us that if we have this hope, that we shall be like him when he is manifested at his second coming, then we shall endeavour to be like him as he was when he was manifested the first time. The first time, he was manifested to destroy the works of the devil and, therefore, if we hope to be like him when he comes again, we shall give diligence that by his grace and his Holy Spirit, we shall put to death the works of the flesh.

## **The manifestation of the love of God**

But now we're going to think of the manifestation of the love of God, and of course that will remind us of that love which has been manifested to its full in the Lord Jesus Christ and in his life here on earth. Now this third section is going to put its emphasis on the fact that God is an invisible God. No one has seen God at any time and still it is quite impossible for us to see God. How then shall men and women come to know God if they cannot see God? One of the answers is that, not only was the invisible God manifested through Christ when Christ visited our earth, but this very day the invisible God and the nature of that invisible God is manifested in the lives of you and me. It is not merely, as John is going to tell us, that we have learnt that God is love and therefore we better try on our side to love as well. The glorious and the marvellous truth is that, if we are believers, the invisible God dwells in us. When we love, it is the invisible God loving through us. And so, in our humbler way, we become an incarnation of the very love of the invisible God, so that the invisible God becomes visible to people here on earth.

So let us turn first of all to the early verses of this section, verses 7–11. You will notice how John brackets them together. He begins in verse 7 by saying, 'Beloved, let us love one another'. An exhortation to love. And when he comes down to verse 11, he repeats that exhortation: 'Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.' Like a diamond encased in its platinum holding, here an exhortation to love and there an exhortation to love, and the manifestation of the love of God in the middle, like a brilliant diamond. We shall pick up this repeated emphasis, 'Beloved, let us love one another'; 'Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought to love one another.' This is not empty talk and rhetoric meant to hype the exhortation a little bit. Herein lies the first secret of our ability to love, and our duty to love.

## **Loving because we are loved**

Why should I love? How can I love? Oh, but consider that you are yourself beloved of God. How then is it possible that you don't begin to show that same kind of love to other people? The first secret of our loving: we have been beloved. But now notice verses 7–8: they tell us our resources, for they tell us the source of our love. 'Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God'. That is to say, God is not asking us to make bricks without straw, like Pharaoh demanded of the Israelites. When he tells us to love, he is not exhorting us to dredge up out of the bottom of our bankrupt emotions the ability to love somebody. He's pointing out that there is a vast resource. True love comes from God and everybody who loves in this sense loves because—for this reason and by this enablement—he has been born of God.

Says John, 'You have the ability to love. You have been born of God, with the life of God and the nature of God, and therefore the great infinite resource of the love of God stands behind you.' It means that very often when we are called upon in a difficult situation to love other folks, we do well to admit to the Lord our own bankruptcy. 'Lord, I can't love these people, but you can love them. You gave your Son for them and if it is the fact that I am begotten of you and you dwell in me, God, you could love those people through me.' We are not talking of some natural bonhomie. Some people are good at being charming and kind.

They were probably born with an emotional silver spoon in their mouth and it's easy for them to be pleasant. Others of us were born like a lot of old frogs, awful and gnarled, with warts galore upon our emotional personalities. We find it very difficult to love; but we're not talking about natural love. We are exhorted to love because we have been born of God and our God is love. I can lie back upon the vast ocean of the love of God and thus learn to allow some of that ocean to flow out through me.

### **Love's supreme example**

John now goes on to talk to us in verses 9–10 about the example and the standard of our loving, and also what provokes that love within us. Notice that these two verses about the love of God are not just repetitions. The one says 'Herein was the love of God manifested' and the other says 'Herein is love'. In other words, the first one is going to talk to us about the actual demonstration of love—God demonstrated his love and the second one is going to peer behind the scenes and let us into some secrets of the very essential nature of love—the principles on which it works and the cost that it involves to the one who loves. Let's take a little analogy.

Here is a young gentleman and he's gone for his education to the States. He hasn't written home much at all: in fact, his parents rarely hear from him. But suddenly they get a letter in the post saying that he's got some marvellous opportunity of a course in Harvard which will make his whole career. So please could mum and dad fork up the ten thousand dollars necessary, and it's got to be here by next Thursday. Getting a letter like that, mum and dad have a kind of a confab together, 'Wow, ten thousand dollars, that's going to break the bank.' Can they afford it? And Father says, 'You know, I don't know whether he deserves it, the ungrateful rogue. The way he treats us: the more we give him, the less we hear from him.'

'Yes, but he is our only son, and we shall wish we had done it for him.'

'We haven't got it in the bank.'

'We've got it in the building society.'

'Ah, yes, but we were going to have a holiday, weren't we, for our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary? And I was going to get a new car actually. If we're going to give it then that will mean giving up the holiday, and going with the old banger and just getting it repaired and putting it through MOT.'

So this is all going on behind the scenes, what it's going to cost, and in spite of the lad's ingratitude. Eventually the cheque arrives, and the boy doesn't know that mother has now got to take a part-time job to make the money and they're going without their holiday. He sees the manifestation of the love. In this was manifest the love of mum and dad, that they've sent the cheque for ten thousand dollars. He little knows, perhaps he'll never know, what went on behind the scenes and the cost of it, which is the very essence of love.

It's the same as far as we're concerned. First comes the demonstration—'Herein was the love of God manifest'. And then, whether we understand it or not, the cost involved. What was involved in it? John says, 'That God has sent his Son into the world.' He didn't sit up upon his celestial throne and just send us a message or two. No, he acted, he took the

initiative, he approached us, he sent his Son into the world, and as far into the world as he could possibly come. What extraordinary manifestation of the love of God. See Jesus Christ, that sinless Son of God, sitting in the café in Palestine next to some very doubtful and disreputable woman and a few very shady men. Herein is manifested the love of God. He sent his Son into the world: love taking the initiative, making the first approach, and it tells us that we ought to be like that. We ought to be the ones that make the approach to the other people. Not standing back and saying, 'Well I didn't talk to him because he didn't talk to me.' Somebody's got to make the first approach.

And then it is said, he not only sent him into the world, notice the tense of it, *he has sent him* into the world. This was not a very brief, fleeting visit. The perfect tense of the verb, 'he has sent him' and that's that. God has never repented of it. This remains the abiding attitude of his heart and he sent his only Son that we might live. Oh, that's love, isn't it? That God would send his Son and share his life with us.

Not to compare great things with small, I remember years and years ago, at the dawn of civilisation, I was charged with transporting a little niece and nephew of mine up to the northern country to see their aunts and uncles and the other little nieces and nephews. So the little niece sat in the back of the car, and she had been provided with a large bag of sweets so that when she arrived she might give them to her opposite number. She had them clutched in her hand on the backseat. Well of course, she had to see what kind of sweets they were, so she opened them and had a look. And then, well you can't give to others what you haven't experimented with, so she took one. As the miles rolled by, well they were sweets, weren't they, and so she began to take the rest. I'm afraid when the bag came to be offered, there weren't many left in the bag. If it had been pound notes, she'd have freely given them: pound notes to her were only bits of paper! And if God had given you a stellar galaxy, well so what: he's got thousands of them. But he only had one Son, says the passage, and in this is the demonstration of the love of God. He gave his only begotten Son, that we might share the life of God, that we might live through him. What greater demonstration of love than that; that the infinite God should share with us.

### **The cost of love**

Now we're going to get the principles and the cost of it, for this will tell us of the difficulties that were in the way and had to be overcome. First of all, there was the fact that we didn't love God. We were in some senses enemies, kicking his shins when anything went wrong and blaming him all the time, and living in rebellion against his will and going our own ways and ungrateful. We didn't love God, and if God had behaved like we behaved that would have been the first and the last barrier. He could have said, 'But they don't deserve it. Look how they treat me.' But there was something worse than that. There were our positive sins and here the God of heaven had a real excuse. How could the holy God of heaven have any truck with us at all? If he came and had fellowship with us, the whole universe would want to know what the holy God of heaven was doing having truck with evil men and women. Didn't that compromise his holiness, and doesn't it compromise his holiness still, to have truck with us, because we are far from perfect?

Think then of the difficulties that lay in the way of God demonstrating his love to us and the divine ingenuity and love which overcame the difficulty. There will have to be a propitiation for our sins—a sacrifice that demonstrates to the whole universe that God, in being friendly with us, is not compromising his holiness. In order to love us, in order to be able to demonstrate his love, God had to provide a propitiation and he sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins, and it is an incredible story.

Israel in the desert, living around the tabernacle of God and having fellowship with God, were made aware of their sinfulness and the difficulty God had in staying with them, because of the uncleanness of their sins that defiled the tabernacle of his presence. So they were told to bring a propitiatory sacrifice and they took a goat, two goats in fact, and with the second of them they confessed their sins over its head and they took it out into a land uninhabited. And the verse is telling us the cost to God of loving us. That he who was the eternal word of God, who was with the Father, whose being was enough to satisfy all the infinite desires of God, was led out into the land of abandonment and forsakenness, so that God might have and enjoy our fellowship. Herein is love, and the kind of thing that love does to overcome the difficulties in the way. It is an awesome thing to think of that God of whom we have been begotten and who, as the verses are now going to say, lives in us. 'But, brethren,' says John, 'if God has so loved us, we ought to love one another.'

### **God's love expressed through us**

Now let's go on to look at the remaining verses, 12–19. I suggest that what we have in verses 12 and 13 is an explanation of what is happening when we love one another. 'No man has beheld God at any time,' says John in verse 12. But if we love one another, two things are happening: 'God abides in us', that's the one thing, and two, 'his love is [or has been] perfected in us'. It is not surely a condition that if we want God to abide in us, we must earn it by loving one another. It is surely an explanation: if we love one another, then what is happening? See one believer going to another believer and demonstrating the love of God. See a believer going to an unbeliever round the corner, or in the wilds of the Bolivian forests—what is happening? The unseen God, that nobody has ever seen, is in fact abiding in that believer, and the love of God and the nature of God are being manifested through that believer.

And then John says, 'The love of God is perfected'. In one sense the love of God is never other than perfect: these words do not imply that the love of God is imperfect but the love of God, rather, has need to find its way to come to full growth and full expression in our hearts. God is love, but he wants that love to take effect in the world and he has designed that his love should take effect through us. So when we love one another, the love of God reaches its full goal and comes to complete expression. And of those two things, he's going to speak first of God abiding in us, in verses 13–16; then, in verses 17–19, he will speak about what it means to have the love of God perfected among us.

## God abiding in us

How do we know then that it is God himself abiding in us? How do we know in fact that he does abide in us? Verse 13 tells us: 'We know that we abide in him, and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.' Yes, we shall never here on earth be infinite as God's Holy Spirit is, but we have been given of that Spirit. Let me remind you of a similar observation that Paul makes in Galatians. He says, 'Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, by which you cry Abba, Father' (Gal 4:6).

Did I ever tell you that silly story? Probably, yes. I tell silly stories, but there once was a devoted man and wife who had their first child. They were sincere believers, and they determined that the first word that this infant should ever speak would be 'Jesus'. So at suitable hours in the day, the infant was propped on Dad's knee and he said to the infant, 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,' and the infant looked as they look, you know. After many sessions of this course, 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,' the infant responded, 'Dada!' Why was that? Well 'Dada' is the natural thing for the child to say. 'Mama', 'Dada'—it's simply the nature coming out. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your heart, and naturally the believer says, 'Abba'. The Holy Spirit is within him, and from that expression to his Father you will perceive that God has given that man of his Spirit in the same way.

How do we know that God abides in us and we in God? Because you will find in believers that there are these divine instincts God has given them of his Spirit. And in that sense, the natural thing for them to do is to love. Then verse 14 goes on to say how this has all come about. The answer is that, though God himself is invisible, we have come to perceive him and to perceive what God is like. We have to perceive that ourselves, and we have perceived it at Calvary. We have beheld and bear witness that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. As our blessed Lord was hung, beaten, scourged and naked on that terrible cross, multitudes went by. They saw him hanging there. They saw nothing in it; just one more criminal, they thought, coming to his end.

But what a wonderful thing has been true of you. You stood by that same cross and, as you have looked upon that crucified form, your eyes have been opened and you have said to yourself, 'That is the Son of God hanging there. What's the Son of God doing there? Is that what God is like? If that's God's Son hanging there, what's he hanging there for?' And the Holy Spirit has opened your eyes to see what the invisible God is like. There on that cross that is God incarnate hanging. And the stunning realisation comes home, 'He's hanging there for me. That's what God is like and I've seen it.' Your eyes have seen what multitudes of eyes don't see and you say with Paul, 'The Son of God, he loved me and gave himself for me.' To see that and confess it, then see what it implies, 'Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God' (v. 15).

Please read it in its context. This is not just giving vent to some theological statement in a vacuum. This is coming to see who this Jesus Christ is at Calvary and you see he's God's Son and, with it, the realisation that he's there for you and you confess Jesus is God's Son. In that very moment the infinite love of God that he expresses abides in you and you in God. How could it be otherwise? This is God getting through to us, isn't it? The invisible God making himself known, and when I see it and believe it, then God abides in me, and we have known and believed the love that God has towards us. Not merely known it, but believed it. There



are multitudes of people around who know about the love of God, but many of them have not yet believed it. When we come to the end of this third section, John will show us how to take that necessary step of believing the love of God, but this is a position of the true believer and the Lord dwells in him.

Now, finally, what does it mean when John says that the love of God is perfected, comes to its complete expression? John says it is not merely that the love has been made perfect, but it is done with the purpose that we may have boldness in the day of judgment and all fear be banished. Notice the purpose of God for every believer: it is God's desire that all fear in light of that future judgment shall be banished. How can that be done in a practical sense? Well, not just by assenting to certain theological propositions but, in a practical sense, it is done this way: because as he is (and the personal pronoun 'he' presumably refers to the Lord Jesus), as he is, so are we in this world. If he was and is God's beloved Son, then, in a lower but very real sense, we are God's beloved children and know ourselves to be that—beloved. 'Beloved,' says John, 'as he is, so are we.' You will want to discuss in your study groups whether the verses go beyond this and tell us of the legal side of our acceptance with God. That the Saviour who died for us is now accepted in the presence of God and everyone who trusts in him is accepted with God, as the Lord Jesus is accepted with God.

### **Love casts out fear**

And it goes further, doesn't it? That with this love of God abiding in our heart and his Spirit working out the love of God, not only to my fellow believer but to God himself, then the thing is done at a practical level. For if I love God, how can I be in fear—that is servile fear, in terror of him? You can't simultaneously love somebody and be in terror of them, can you? If I love the Lord—and how could you not love him when you have seen him in our blessed Lord Jesus Christ at Calvary, for you—then with gladness and joy you shall approach him in that august day of the final judgment.

Finally, John remembers to record again that when we talk of loving God, and thus all fear of God goes, the love that we show doesn't originate with us. We love, whether it is God we love or whether it's our brethren we love, because he first loved us. One day, my brothers and sisters, we shall see God in all his glory. How fortunate we've seen him first in his Son, Jesus Christ, at Calvary, and because of that, all fear of God's glory is gone forever.

Questions on this session are in the [Study Guide on page 112](#).

## Our Love for God

*1 John 4:20–5:8*

Now let's begin this session by reading the verses that we have to consider, beginning to read in chapter 4 and verse 20:

If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, cannot love God, whom he hath not seen. And this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also. Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is begotten of God: and whosoever loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. Hereby we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and do his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous. For whatsoever is begotten of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith. And who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three who bear witness, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and the three agree in one. (1 John 4:20–5:8)

Those of you who may happen to have an older translation, such as the King James Version, will notice that I have not read a verse that appears in your translation—a verse which says that, whereas the spirit and the water and the blood bear witness on earth, there are in addition three who bear witness in heaven (v. 7 KJV). You may wonder why, in my reading, I have left out that verse. The simple answer is that that verse was never any part of what John originally wrote, nor does it occur in the manuscripts of the New Testament until exceedingly late times. It was an addition that came into the manuscripts, and into only a few of the manuscripts. It's not an original part of God's holy word and by leaving it out, therefore, we are not taking away from holy Scripture. We're merely returning to what John wrote and what the vast majority of the available manuscripts themselves read.

### **Overcoming the world**

Now in this session I propose to talk for a remarkably short time. Unless you should think that this is a miracle or something, let me explain that it is deliberate on my part. I shall be talking for a short time, and giving you much longer discussion time, because these few verses contain an exceedingly important topic—one that is important for us all to grasp, but

exceedingly important for our younger brothers and sisters in particular. It is the topic of overcoming the world. While at first sight perhaps that sounds a little bit simple, yet it would be important for us all to know exactly what this means because it has exceedingly important practical implications for our daily living. We shall need to grasp clearly what the Bible means when it talks of overcoming the world. What exactly is 'the world' and what does it mean to overcome the world? Is this talking about the valiant missionaries who go abroad and overcome the superstitions of the heathen and get people converted, which things the majority of us don't have to do at home because the neighbours both sides of us are believers to start with? Or is overcoming the world something different? What do we mean by the term 'overcome the world'?

Apparently, according to verses 4 and 5, one of the secrets of overcoming the world is our faith, and our faith in particular that Jesus is the Son of God. Many of us may want to know what that has to do with the question of overcoming the world. Normally the preachers exhort us to notice that when the Bible talks of having eternal life, it stresses the fact that we have to believe the Lord. That is, not believe merely some fact about him, that Jesus is the Son of God or that he died, but that we have to believe him. 'He that believes on the Son has everlasting life' (John 3:36). They stress the point that there are many people who believe that Jesus is the Son of God, but they don't yet have eternal life because they've not learnt personally to believe him and to commit themselves to him.

### **Believing that Jesus is the Son of God**

But here is a verse that talks to us about an exceedingly important practical thing: this matter of gaining victory over the world. Instead of talking in terms of our personal faith in him, 'he that believes on the Son overcomes the world', it seems to talk in terms of a proposition—the secret of overcoming the world is he that believes that Jesus is the Son of God. How does it come that believing a proposition that Jesus is the Son of God is the secret of overcoming the world? And if it is so vitally important to our overcoming the world that we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, we may well want to ask our passage what evidence there is that Jesus is the Son of God.

Why should I believe that Jesus is the Son of God? If it were an appropriate thing for me to do at this stage, for my own benefit as well as yours, I would love to be able to come round to you individually and ask you to tell me why exactly you believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Why do you believe? I wonder what reason would come tumbling out of your head and mouth first? I know one of the reasons why I believe he is. It's because my mother told me so. That's a very good reason for believing. And my father told me so as well. That's an exceedingly good reason for believing. But is it enough? That simply raises the question of why they believed. So these are practical things and it seems to me very important that, in your discussion groups, these matters should be fully aired and people be free to probe and ask what it really means. But let me begin my observations by pointing to the context.

'If a man say, I love God', so the passage begins, for hitherto John has been talking about the love of God, not only manifested in the giving of his Son, but now the love of the invisible God manifested through the believer, so that when the believer loves his fellow, it

is the living God loving through him. This love in the believer's heart—love for his fellow, love for God himself—is a sign and evidence that the love of God is reaching its full expression, and one of the things that it does is to give the believer confidence in the day of judgment. But then we come, as we do frequently in this epistle, to the question, the test. If a man says he loves God, by what test shall we decide whether his claim is genuine? 'For if he loves God and hates his brother, he's simply a liar,' says John, 'for he that loves not his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.'

### **Loving my Father's children**

That's a healthy reminder, because sometimes we can work up in our hearts all sorts of emotional feelings that might give us to think that they are love to God. But our hearts being as naughty and deceitful as they are, it mightn't be true love of God at all. It might be love of myself, or even love of the nice, cosy feeling that I have that might disappear in the face of reality. If you see the rock of Gibraltar from your roadside cafe or your holiday hotel in the morning mists, it looks nice and beautifully soft, when the mist's around it. It's another thing if you knock your head against it: you'll find it isn't a nice, cosy bit of cotton wool.

And sometimes our emotions can deceive us. We're full of nice, kind feelings, which we think are loving God, but when we meet the hard rock of our fellow believer, we find loving him is a very different thing altogether. But if I say I love God and I don't love my brother, then I'm not really loving God anyway, and I need this check upon my emotions. Moreover, verse 21 tells me that I have a positive commandment to love my brother, and 5:1 adds this fact: that if I am begotten of God, if I am a child of God and God is my Father, then if I love my Father, I shall love any other child of his that he has begotten.

The question then arises, how do I know when I'm loving the child of God? If I'm under these duties to love the children of God, to love all my Father's children, how do I know when I am loving and when I'm merely being soft and sentimental? The answer comes back in verse 2, 'Hereby we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep his commandments.' True love of my fellow Christian will not oblige me to break the commandments of the Lord. It is not loving my brother if for his sake I break a commandment of the Lord. For loving God is not simply a sentimental thing and a matter of feelings only, but this is the love of God that we keep his commandments.

With that, I suspect that the flow of the argument is fairly obvious to us. True love of God, our love for God, means keeping his commandments. John proceeds to tell us that his commandments are not burdensome. Keeping the commandments of God, for a believer, isn't, or shouldn't be, penal servitude—hard and difficult and burdensome. It ought to be the norm in a believer's life, so that we speak like Paul spoke: 'I delight in the law of God, in the inward man' (Rom 7:22). Yes, God's commandments are right; my intellect approves, my emotions approve. I delight in them and really want to do them. We still may have to admit, like Paul did, that in spite of that we don't always do what we should. But keeping the commandments of God, says John, is not a burdensome thing. Why isn't it? Well he gives now his reason. 'Whatsoever,' he puts it in the new term for he's thinking not so much of us

as persons, but about that marvellous life and nature that God has put within the believer: 'Whatsoever is born of God overcomes the world.'

So now we arrive at our topic. You will remember that in the course of these weeks we have thought about this many times. In each of the three major sections of the epistle, we meet the twin themes of the family of God and then the world. In the first section, it was the world in all its seductive attractiveness that comes to us and tries to get our love and affection and to draw our love away from the Father. We needed to be told that if any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. Then, in the second section, things took on a more sinister air. The world, not now in its attractiveness, but rather in its serious, demonic origin, the origin of its character: it is of the evil one and will therefore, as John says, frequently turn to hating the believer, because the believer is of God. Now in this third section we come once more to the question of the world, not so much now in its attractiveness, nor so much in its evil origin, but in its opposition to the keeping of the commandments of God.

### **A world opposed to God's commandments**

You'll not have to live very long in the world at large before you will find that it is a society that in many respects has been organised in such a way and on such principles as makes keeping the commandments of God an exceedingly difficult thing to do. For the world isn't necessarily organised to make room for the commandments of God. Very often it's organised on plainly opposite principles, and keeping the commandments of God is going to be very difficult. Our businessmen know about it, don't they? I have a brother who was at one stage an agent for a manufacturing firm and the principals of the firm came to him and said, 'Look here, you'll have to join the Freemasons.'

'No,' he said, 'I don't want to.'

'Oh, but you'll have to.'

'Oh, how is that?'

'Well because you're losing us orders by not being in the Freemasons. Our business can't afford to have you going around and losing us orders because you're not in the Freemasons. We don't care about your religious beliefs. That's nothing to do with us. Keep them if you want to, but this is business.'

It was organised in such fashion as to make keeping the commandments of God exceedingly difficult. There are all sorts of things—some outward and some more sophisticated and hidden—in the way this sorry world is organised that, in a practical sense, make keeping the commandments of God a difficult and unpopular thing to do. In some societies, permissiveness has gone so far that the young person who doesn't indulge in premarital sex is thought to be odd, because that's how the world at present is organised.

So how do we overcome the world? John says, 'Whatsoever is born of God overcomes the world.' That is, it is the power of the divine nature within us to overcome. Like a little bird has no difficulty in overcoming the force of gravity. I do, I always have done, and somehow these days even more so. I find the difficulty, particularly in the mornings, rising from the flat position to the upright position. It's become a bit more difficult than it used to

be! Birds don't: it's in their nature to overcome the force of gravity. 'Whatsoever is born of God has it within its powers and its nature to overcome the world.'

### **A faith that overcomes**

But John with his balance now gives us another side to this secret. It's not only in our nature, but it lies also in our faith—our vigorous, living, vital, active, positive faith. He says our faith overcomes the world. In fact, he uses two tenses. In verse 4, he says, 'This is the victory that overcame'; it has overcome the world—referring, doubtless, to the time when initially we put our faith in the Saviour and the war was won, won forever. We changed sides, we overcame the world. Then verse 5 reminds us that it is a constant thing, 'Who is he that overcomes?' And now it's a present tense, the constant overcoming of the world. So we come to this secret then: it's our faith. But faith about what and in what?

Shall we notice exactly what it says and what it doesn't say? It doesn't say, 'This is the one that overcomes the world, the man or woman who believes that God has forgiven his sins.' It doesn't use that phrase, does it? But the overcoming of the world lies in this: that we believe that Jesus is the Son of God. You see, good friend, it is true that if you have trusted the Saviour, God has forgiven your sins. But let me remind you that if Jesus isn't the Son of God, there isn't such a thing as forgiveness anyway. If Jesus isn't the Son of God, there's nothing in the gospel anyway. You may believe it, but you're believing a nonsense and an emptiness, if Jesus isn't the Son of God. So this matter is fundamental: everything else depends on it. To understand it, we should perhaps go back to John's Gospel, chapter 16, where our Lord introduced the topic to his disciples. He was about to leave them and he said, 'I came out from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go unto the Father' (v. 28). His disciples said, 'At last, now you're speaking plainly and by this we believe that you came forth from God', for nothing less than this is what our Lord is claiming. He's claiming not merely to be a prophet to tell us how to behave, he is claiming that there is another world out there, that he has come from that other world, from the Father into our world, and presently he went from our world back to the Father.

Say the disciples, 'We believe that.' 'Do you really believe it?' said our Lord, 'Do you really believe that? Let me tell you, gentlemen, that the time comes very soon now when you will see me hanging upon a cross, rejected, tortured, crucified and slung out of this world. When that happens, your faith that I am the Son of God is going to be sorely tested, and what will happen is that when you see me like that, you will in fact desert me and you'll go back to your own homes. You'll say, "There's nothing in it after all." And some of you are going to be very frightened to come and stand with me and stand to lose everything you have in this world, your life included. Then it will become exceedingly important whether I am or am not the Son of God. For if I am the son of God, you can afford to lose everything you've got for my sake. But if I'm not the Son of God, you'd be a fool to lose anything for my sake, wouldn't you? If I am the Son of God, you will be foolish not to sacrifice for my sake. If I am the Son of God, to bow to pressure, to go in with the world, to fail to keep the Father's commandments, that would be foolish indeed, if I am in fact the Son of God. The question will be, am I or am I not?' And thus it is in the times of our testing still.

My young fellow Christians, you've got a career before you. How will you decide it? When the world puts its pressure on and frightens you with the way it acts and if you're going to obey the Lord, you've got to make great sacrifice. How will you overcome? The vital thing is this: is Jesus the Son of God or isn't he? If he is, then no matter what you're called upon to sacrifice for him, it's worthwhile. If he isn't, kick the lot out of the window.

### The evidence

You say, 'How shall I know he's the Son of God?' I suggest to you what follows now is not merely a description of him, but a description that provides us with the evidence that he is indeed the Son of God. So what is the evidence: on what grounds do we in fact believe that Jesus is the Son of God? There is evidence galore, but now, when days are easy and we're not called upon to make great sacrifices, maybe when we sit calmly and we have no pressure on us from the world, these are the times to get the evidence under our belt so that when the difficult days come and the decisions have got to be made, we've got something to get hold of.

'I believe he is, because this is he that came by water and by blood.' Not simply *went* by water and by blood, *came* by water and by blood. That is, when he came officially into this world, he was heralded by the official forerunner and baptised by John in the Jordan. 'I bear witness. I saw the Holy Spirit descend and the God who sent me to baptise said, "Upon whomsoever you shall see the Spirit descend, this is the Son of God." This is he that baptises with the Holy Spirit' (John 1:32-33). The evidence of his official introduction by John the Baptist at Jordan.

And similarly, he came by blood, for John the Baptist announced, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (v. 29). That is, when he first appeared on the stage officially, his forerunner announced that he had come to die. Now this is an extraordinary thing, for he is the only man that I ever knew or heard of that entered this world saying that he had come to die, and that for the sins of the world. Do you know of any other? You doubtless have read of many prophets and people that have begun religions. I think you've never yet met one, except Jesus Christ, who entered this world saying he had come to die for the sins of the world. There's a very good reason why you've never heard of anybody else, because if anybody else had said it, you'd ring for the psychiatrist, wouldn't you, and say, 'The man has gone crazy? How could he die for the sins of the whole world?'

But that is precisely what Jesus Christ said he had come to do and here he stands, unique amongst men. One further piece of evidence: John tells us that at the cross, when our Lord's side was pierced there came out blood and water. And Toplady put it into hymn form:

Let the water and the blood,  
From Thy riven side which flowed,  
Be of sin the double cure,  
Save me from its guilt and power.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Augustus M. Toplady (1740-78) 'Rock of Ages' (1763).

How do I know that Jesus is the Son of God? He came by water and by blood. Coming to announce, as the Son of God, that he had come to die to take away the sin of the world.

Ah, but secondly, I know it's true, because he meets my need. How do I know bread is good? Because I get hungry and I find bread satisfies it. How do I know Jesus is God's Son, that he's the real thing? Because I have a need and that need is the great question of the guilt of sin. How does God maintain his standards and yet offer me the forgiveness that I sorely need, because I've broken those standards? And Jesus Christ has the answer. He tells me not simply to be good; he comes with the answer to this profound problem of human existence. If I'm going to say sin doesn't matter, well society can go to pot if it likes. If I'm going to say that sin matters, then I'm in a difficult position, because I have sinned. Where can I find the answer to my problem, how to maintain my standards and yet find forgiveness? At that level, Jesus Christ meets us. He came for this very purpose: to take away the sin of the world and to that, the Holy Spirit witnesses, coming down on the day of Pentecost, that this Jesus is risen from the dead and has gone to the right hand of the Father and is indeed the Son of God. And at that same moment, the Holy Spirit come down on the day of Pentecost is the fulfilment of what John said originally, isn't it? How do I know that this Jesus is the Son of God? John said, 'I baptised him and I saw the Spirit coming on him, and I testify this is he who baptises with the Holy Spirit.' How do I know Jesus is the Son of God? Because, he not only died for me to deal with the problem of my guilt, but he gives me his Holy Spirit to empower my Christian living.

Questions on this session are in the [Study Guide on page 113](#).



## The Believer's Assurance

1 John 5:9–21

So now we come to our final passage in 1 John:

If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for the witness of God is this, that he hath borne witness concerning his Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in him: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he hath not believed in the witness that God hath borne concerning his Son. And the witness is this, that God gave unto us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath the life; he that hath not the Son of God hath not the life. These things have I written unto you, that ye may know that ye have eternal life, *even* unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God. And this is the boldness which we have toward him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us: and if we know that he heareth us whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions which we have asked of him. If any man see his brother sinning a sin not unto death, he shall ask, and *God* will give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: not concerning this do I say that he should make request. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death. We know that whosoever is begotten of God sinneth not; but he that was begotten of God keepeth him, and the evil one toucheth him not. We know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in the evil one. And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, *even* in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. *My little children, guard yourselves from idols.* (1 John 5:9–21)

I suggest that we look at once at the contents for these last verses. I have simply broken them down into four elements. Verses 9–13: how we can be sure that we have eternal life. Secondly, verses 14–17: how we can have confidence in prayer. And then, thirdly, verses 18–20: the summary of God's revealed truth, which we can know with absolute certainty.

You will have remarked in your reading the tremendous effect of the repetition in verses 18–20: 'We know that whoever is born of God sins not'; 'We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the evil one'; 'We know that the Son of God is come, and has given us an understanding, that we know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ.' The summary of divine truth, revealed so that we can know it with absolute certainty. As we come to the end of this delightful epistle here is the elderly apostle, coming to buttress our faith and to shore up our hearts and to give us to understand the tremendous confidence that we can have as believers in the Lord Jesus.

We can be utterly certain that we have eternal life. 'These things are written that you may know that you have eternal life' (v. 13). It is God's declared intention that we should know it, then how we can have confidence in prayer, and then the great statement of his truth that we can know with absolute certainty—for the statement of the truth of God adds up in the end to God himself. This is the true God and eternal life. There need be no doubt about it whatsoever. In fact, it is as we have this divinely implanted confidence in our hearts, that we shall be able to give serious attention to the final exhortation, 'Little children, keep yourselves from idols.'

### **Assurance of eternal life**

So now let's go over those things briefly together and see, from verses 9–13, how the believer can be sure that he has eternal life. And we shall not forget to put this in the context. It is good in any context of course, that a believer be absolutely sure he has eternal life, but the context, as you may remember, is the question of overcoming the world and overcoming the world in order that we may be able to keep God's commandments, and thus to demonstrate that we really love God and love his people. Overcoming the world then has for its secret and its absolute key that we believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

If Jesus is the Son of God, then whatever I may be called upon to sacrifice in order to keep his commandments doesn't really matter much at all. For if he is the Son of God, in him I have everything. If he is not the Son of God, then I should be foolish to sacrifice anything for his sake. But the world will put its pressure on me to conform to its way, and make it very difficult to keep the commandments of God. If I insist on keeping them, then I'm out of step with the world and must be prepared for the sacrifice that will inevitably be involved. The key to overcoming the world is this vigorous, vital faith—that Jesus is the Son of God—and therefore I am prepared to stand loyal to him.

I suggested to you that not only does John tell us that the key to overcoming the world is this faith that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, but that in 5: 6–8 John is giving us some of the evidence that Jesus is the Son of God. Some of the heretics against whom John was writing held the view that Jesus was not himself the Son of God. At his baptism the Holy Spirit came on him, guided him and used him throughout his life and, just before he was crucified, the Holy Spirit abandoned him. In other words, they taught that Jesus was not himself the Christ, but that Christ came upon him from the time of his baptism until just before his crucifixion, and then the Christ left him. In these words, John is refuting any such notion. He says, 'This is he that came by water and by blood.' The baptism was the declaration of the Father that this Jesus who came to John's baptism was already the Christ of God. You see the Holy Spirit coming down on the day of Pentecost, giving us evidence for all time that, as Peter put it, 'This Jesus whom you crucified, God has made him both Lord and Christ' (Acts 2:36). And through that blood, as John announced, he had to come to die as the great sacrifice for sin, the Lamb of God, to take away the sin of the world.

In these things themselves we see evidence that he is indeed the Son of God. But now it comes to the practical question. I might be sure that Jesus is the Son of God, but how can I be sure that I have eternal life? Because here I am struggling with the world and the world is

making it very difficult for me to keep the commandments of God. Yes, I believe Jesus is the Son of God, but what's the sense of my sacrificing anything for his sake if I myself am not sure that, after all, I have eternal life? If haven't got eternal life, I might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb, as they say in my part of the world. If I haven't got eternal life, I might as well take the best I can get out of this world. If the knowledge that Jesus Christ is the Son of God is merely a theological tenet, but I myself don't have eternal life, what good is that going to be to me in the battle of life? This matter of being absolutely sure that I have eternal life is not some self-gratifying, idle, deluxe edition of Christianity. If I am going to face the rigours of life in serving the Lord, if I'm going to face the responsibilities of being a servant of God who one day will be called to account for his service, the first thing I shall need myself is an absolute certainty in my heart that I have eternal life.

There are some dear people of God who, upon their own confession, are busily engaged in the service of the Lord, hoping to lead other folks to Christ, and one of the reasons why they're doing it is that they feel that if they could lead somebody to Christ, that would prove to them that they are themselves believers and saved. When folks have that in their hearts, not only are they making their salvation depend on some of their own works and efforts, but when things begin to go wrong and the Lord's work in their hands doesn't go as successfully as they hoped it would, and they find they make mistakes, then the burden begins to get too heavy, doesn't it? And anyway, how shall I lead anybody into the knowledge of eternal life if I don't really have it myself? So this is an exceedingly important matter in the battle of life and in the overcoming of the world that I have absolute certainty in my heart that I do have eternal life.

'And these things are written so that we shall know' says John—written by the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit. We should be familiar with the argument by which we are to be convinced of the Holy Spirit, and we have that in verse 9. This is a logical argument so let's take it step-by-step.

'If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater'. You see, if I'm going to know that I have eternal life, I shall know it eventually on the witness of God himself, so notice the lead up—'If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater'.

Well, do we receive the witness of men? I think we all do. I want to go to London, so I get the phone and ring up British Airways, or whoever they are nowadays. Eventually, some charming voice says, 'Good morning, and what can I do for you?' I'd never met the dear lady in all my life and haven't a ghost of a notion whether she is a charming lady or whether she's given to telling a few lies now and again when it suits her.

I say, 'When is the plane to London?'

And she says, '10.30, sir.'

I take it as God's absolute truth. I do it in spite of the fact that I have on times been misled by such charming voices at the end of a telephone, but I believe them. Life would be difficult if you didn't, wouldn't it?

So if we receive the witness of men like that, and we do, then, says John, 'The witness of God is greater.' So much so that if God ever tells you anything, you ought to believe it the moment that God says it, without even turning round to God and saying, 'Excuse me, are you sure?' So the witness of God is greater. And the witness of God is this: that he has borne

witness concerning his Son. Who should know about God's Son if God doesn't? If you come to me and ask me some question on electronics I would say, 'Sorry, I haven't a clue' but if you come to me and ask me a question about the Greek language, you'd probably floor me, but I should know about it because I was paid to know about it at one stage in my life! If I come to you, madam, and ask you about computers, you may not know. If I come to you and ask you about cooking, you are the expert, aren't you? And if you tell me how long to cook the buns in the oven, I shall take your word for it.

And if you go and ask about God's Son, who would know about God's Son if God doesn't? There are two reasons why I ought to accept the testimony of God about his Son, absolutely implicitly the moment he speaks. Verse 10 says, 'He who believes on the Son of God has the witness in himself.' I take that to mean that when a person trusts the Saviour, the Holy Spirit enters and will witness with that person's spirit that he is indeed a child of God. He will have an internal witness—the witness of the Holy Spirit. But now consider what the middle of verse 10 says: 'he that believes not God has made him a liar; because he has not believed in the witness that God has borne concerning his Son.' At this point we shall have to take this seriously, for God is about to give us a witness; but before he does so, he reminds us that if we hear what he has to say, and we decline or fail to believe it, this is an exceedingly serious thing, for we are implying that God is not telling the truth.

You see, madam, if you are going out of the room and we shake hands in civilised fashion and I say, 'I have never had the pleasure of meeting you before. What is your name?'

And you say, 'My name is Eliza Shufflebotham'

I shall say, 'How very interesting.'

And then my dear friend comes up and says, 'Who's that dear lady?'

And I say, 'She said her name was Eliza Shufflebotham,'

And my friend asks, 'Is it?'

'Well, I don't know.' I'd better make my remarks under my breath because if you hear me saying that, what will you say?

You would say, 'I told you my name was Eliza Shufflebotham. Don't you believe me?'

'Well,' I say, 'madam, you must admit it sounded just a little bit odd as a name. I mean, would anybody ever have a name like that?'

You would say, 'Don't be so impertinent. If I say it's that, it is that. What do you mean, telling your friend you're not sure?'

It's curious, isn't it, that what we would never think of doing to Eliza Shufflebotham, we not only do to almighty God, but we think it's a mark of humility and godliness on our part to do it to almighty God. God says the believer can be sure of eternal life and there are multitudes of folks that say, 'Oh, but I don't think you can be sure. I mean, I think it's more humble not to be sure.' The question resolves itself, therefore, into what you think of God. What do you think of God's voracity? Does God tell the truth? And, my dear friend, excuse my warmth of expression, but we have an eternity to spend somewhere. None of us will exist in God's heaven if we can't believe what God says implicitly. To live in a heaven with a God that you couldn't trust, what kind of a heaven would it be? Ultimately this matter of faith rests not on some sentiment but on a deep-seated conviction about the very character of God, and if I don't believe him the moment he speaks, I'm implying that he is a liar.

You say, 'But I don't feel sure.' Now you have a choice to make. Are you going to trust your feelings rather than the character of God? Feelings can be terrible liars, and we have an eternity to settle. What are we going to trust? Our feelings, or what people say, or are we going to trust the character of almighty God? So we determine that we shall not make him a liar: the very first moment he speaks, we shall accept what he says. What does he say then?

'The witness is this,' says verse 11, 'that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.' Notice it doesn't say that God gives us eternal life. The tense of the verb is in the past. 'God *gave* us eternal life and this life is in his Son.' Here I have a Bible, quite a reasonable Bible, cost me all of £3.75 or something, and I say to you, 'Would you like that Bible?' You say, 'Yes, very much.' I say, 'There you are then, I have given you the Bible.' It isn't yours yet, is it? It won't be yours unless you believe what I've said and come and take it. But as far as I'm concerned, I've given it.

And this is the witness of God, that he has given us eternal life. Oh, the wonder of the thing—that life is in his Son. So it follows logically that he that has the Son has the life. Do you want this envelope and what's inside it? Ok, I give you that as well. I've given it to you and I've put the envelope in the Bible, so he that has the book, has the envelope. If you came up and took me at my word and took the book, and you didn't have time to open it and you were going out of the door with the book in your hand and somebody came up to you and said to you, with me standing by, 'Have you got that envelope?' And you said, 'Well, I got the book, but I don't know whether I got the envelope or not' then it would be my turn, not Eliza Shufflebotham's turn, to get indignant. I would say, 'What do you mean, you don't know whether you've got the envelope or not? You say you've got the book. I told you that if you have the book, you've got the envelope, because the envelope's in the book. You may not be able to see it or feel it or touch it, but I say if you've got the book, you've got the envelope. To stand there and tell your friend you're not sure whether you've got the envelope or not is to make out that you can't believe my word.'

So this is the situation. God says he has given us eternal life and the life is in his Son. He who has the Son, God says it, has the life. There's only one question to be asked, isn't there? Have you the Son of God? Oh, friend, if I hadn't, I would stop all my lecturing right now and get down on my knees before God and receive Jesus Christ as my Saviour. I would do it now, for this is life's supreme question—have you or have you not the Son of God? And you reply, 'Yes, by God's grace, I have the Son of God. I have no other hope of salvation', then let God tell you, 'He who has the Son, has the life.' And God waits to hear your response. If he should ask you, 'You say you have my Son. Have you got eternal life?' what would you say to God? John says, 'These things have I written unto you that believe that you may know that you have eternal life.'

### **Confidence in prayer**

Not only have we confidence there, but in our daily living we may have confidence in our prayers. 'This is the boldness which we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us: and if we know that he hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions which we have asked of him' (v. 14). I take it for granted that when John

speaks like this, he's meaning us to take him seriously. I could, I suppose, go home tonight and, before I go to sleep, ask God, 'Please give me a silver-plated Rolls-Royce.' But I wouldn't, I shouldn't, be surprised tomorrow morning if he hadn't done it, would you? Because we are to ask 'according to his will', not just asking for anything. How should I know what is according to his will and what kinds of things are they that I can be absolutely certain are according to his will?

There are lots of things about which I shall have to say to God, 'Now, Lord, if it is your will,' but I don't know whether it is or not. We are encouraged to come as children to a father, making such requests and being prepared to leave them with our father, who knows better than we do. There are some other things that we can ask boldly, because they are according to his will. We know it because he has told us they are according to his will, and perhaps we should pray for that type of thing more than we do. I think of the great examples of prayer that are given to us in the epistles of the Apostle Paul that, 'You should pray for this that I pray for,' says he. These things are explicitly according to the will of God—the ongoing work of God's Holy Spirit, enlightening our eyes and strengthening our hearts. This is the will of God; there need be no doubt about it. We may come constantly and ceaselessly, knowing that we are heard, and be confident that we shall be given what we ask.

### **Intercession**

John gives one example: 'If any man sees his brother sinning a sin that is not unto death, he shall ask God and God will give him life for him that sins not unto death' (v. 16). People have been divided as to what this 'sin unto death' is. I shall give you what I think. You may well hold a different viewpoint and the leader of your discussion group might even hold a third. As far as the language goes, it is important that we decide what it means when it says, 'God will give him life for him that sins not unto death.' Who's the 'him' to whom the life is given? I take it that what the verse is saying is that when the intercessor comes before God and asks life for this sinning brother, that God listens to the intercessor and grants him the gift he's asking. He gives to the intercessor the life for him that sins not unto death. An example in the Old Testament would be Abraham interceding for Lot, his nephew who had got mixed up with the ungodliness of the cities of the plain. Abraham pleaded with God to spare the city for Lot's sake. There were so few righteous in the city that the city couldn't be spared, but when at last God visited that place with judgment and Lot was delivered out of it, the Bible records how it was that Lot was delivered. It says that God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the city—giving to Abraham life for Lot.

If I understand it correctly, that encourages me to take it to mean a believer whose sin has led, at the moment, to physical chastisement from the Lord, or the danger of such physical chastisement, in which case a believer, his friend, is allowed to pray for him and God is prepared to listen to the intercessor and give the erring brother the opportunity to repent and to save his life here on earth. Other views, I know, are possible. For time's sake, I shall not deal with them now. The whole thing will come up in question time anyway.

## Truths we know with certainty

Let's come finally to the great statements of Christian truth—things that we may know of a certainty, for these are God's truths revealed to us. Verse 18 says 'We know that whoever is born of God does not go on continuing in sin.' We know the great reality of practical holiness. This is not moonshine. God's salvation makes a difference. It does work. We know it works. A genuine believer does not go on continuing in sin. Yes, from time to time he may fall, as we have seen, but he will not continue as the practice of his life therein. But 'he that was begotten of God keeps him' and in your discussion groups you will probably want to discuss whether that phrase 'he that was begotten of God' refers to the believer, so that it means that the believer keeps himself, as we are so exhorted in other parts of Scripture: 'Keep yourselves in the love of God' (Jude 21).

But John uses an unusual tense in that second expression. Not 'he that has been begotten of God keeps him', but 'he that was begotten of God keeps him.' So now it's not a question of the believer keeping himself, but the only begotten Son of God keeping him. If one is allowed preference in these things, I hope the second one is right, don't you? What match would we be in the end if we stood by ourselves against the wiles of the devil? 'He that was begotten of God keeps him.' An example I often cite, and surely one all of us remember, is that fearful occasion when Satan made his great attack on Peter. Yes, Peter fell, but Satan didn't keep him in his grip. Why not? Because he that was begotten of God kept the dear man by his intercessions and brought him through and out from the failure under Satan's attack. Oh, thank God, for he that was begotten of God, our blessed Lord, keeps us. We may know it, my brothers and sisters. This is not moonshine either. This is the real, red raw stuff of life. It is true, practical holiness with the new life within and the Saviour without. We know then, we are of God. The reality of regeneration and our personal relationship with God: we know we are of God.

Ask a little child whether it knows its parents. Of course it does. This is not imagination. They may not be able to give you some philosophic justification on the lines of epistemology, but the four-year-old knows his mum is his mum. He knows by better means than epistemology that's mum and that's dad. We know we are of God in contrast with a world that lies, as one man has put it, rocked to sleep in the very arms of the evil one. Alas, very often they don't know it, but this great world and its thought patterns are engineered ultimately by the prince of this world and the god of this world. He has them, very nice men and women many of them, in his arms and they're lost. Oh, how real the matter of salvation and our personal relation to the Lord should be. We know it.

And finally, the reality—a whole cluster of things. The reality of the historical coming of the Son of God. We know that the Son of God has come. We have the evidence. It is not humility to say that we're not sure. We know he has come and, what's more, he has given us an understanding. Like the man that was once blind, we will say to all our Pharisees who question us, 'But one thing I know, whereas I was blind, now I see.' We know the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding that we might know him that is true. And what is more, that we are in him that is true, even in his Son, Jesus Christ. The reality of his historical coming, the reality of the faculty that he has given us to know God, and the reality

of our being in God and in his Son, and it all adds up to what? Not merely to a set of beliefs: it adds up to God himself. This is the true God and eternal life.

With that, we come to our final warning: 'little children, keep yourselves from idols.' Now, for the last time, we come once more to those warnings. In the first movement, there was the warning not to be deceived by false Christs. Then, as we came to the end of the second movement, there was a warning not to be deceived by false spirits. And now, finally, we have a warning not to be deceived by false gods. An idol, of course, is something that you love more than you love God, but it's more than that. Very few in the ancient world loved their idols, but they trusted them and they feared them. The question for us is, ultimately, whom or what do I trust? This is the true God: trusting him, you have eternal life now and you have it forever. Put your trust in anything else: it is a false God and it will let you down disastrously. This is the true God. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

Questions on this session are in the [Study Guide on page 114](#).



## Overcoming

Just before we proceed to the questions, perhaps you would allow me to say a few words once more about this matter of *overcoming*. As we have seen from the epistle of John, it is a topic that looms quite large in these chapters. In chapter 2 the young men are said to be strong; they have overcome the evil one. Here, in chapter 5, we have read about overcoming the world. In the Gospel of John, chapter 16, our Lord says, 'In the world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world' (v. 33). Similarly in 1 John 4 it says that 'we have overcome the evil and false teachers' (see vv. 1–6). In the Revelation that was given to John you will remember that at the end of every letter addressed to the seven churches there is a phrase 'to him that overcomes' will I grant this or that. So this topic of overcoming is one that is of special importance in the writings of John.

I want to comment now, just for a few moments, on some of the practical implications. I suspect that if you're anything like me, and the majority of the Lord's people, there will be days when you feel, 'Yes, by God's grace I have overcome,' and other days when you feel, 'No, I haven't overcome. I have been defeated in this.' So what does it mean when the Bible talks of overcoming? Is it true that every believer by definition is an overcomer and, if so, is it all the time? Or is it that sometimes we're overcomers and sometimes we're not overcomers? Sometimes we are victorious and sometimes we are defeated? In what sense then is the Bible using the term?

So let's start by looking to the book of the Revelation, chapter 21:

And he said unto me, They are come to pass. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit these things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. But for the fearful, and unbelieving, and abominable, and murderous, and fornicators and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, their part *shall* be in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone; which is the second death. (Rev 21:6–8)

You will see from those remarks that, as far as John is concerned, there are but two classes. There are those that overcome: they inherit all things, they are God's sons; and there are the others whose part is in the 'lake that burns with fire and brimstone'. From which I deduce, and I submit to you that it is what we should deduce, that in this sense the term 'overcoming' is synonymous with being a believer—he that overcomes, as distinct from the unbelieving.

In this sense, all believers are by definition overcomers. It wouldn't be true to the gospel as we know it, to say that our being delivered from the lake of fire is dependent on our success in daily life; that if we overcome constantly and one hundred per cent, then we miss the lake of fire, but if sometimes we fail to overcome, we are defeated and must perish in the lake of fire. That would be to turn the gospel of our salvation into a gospel of works. So then, they who are delivered from the lake of fire are those, to use another phrase, whose names are in the Book of Life, or, if you like to phrase it otherwise, those who overcome.

And I take it that in this epistle this is also implied in the first verse that mentions these things: 'this is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith' (1 John 5:4). Notice the past tense. It has overcome the world. It is the accomplished fact. When someone is brought to repentance and to faith in the Lord Jesus, there is the great war won. He has overcome. Satan has, in that sense, been broken. To refer to another passage that the Son of God keeps the believer and the evil one doesn't touch him, that cannot mean that the evil one cannot tempt us—that the evil one cannot from time to time induce us to go astray—but that the evil one cannot keep the believer in his grasp.

Says Colossians, 'We have been translated from the power of darkness into the kingdom of his dear Son' (Col 1:13). It is more than the evil one can do to take back the true and genuine child of God, back into his kingdom and under his dominion of darkness. So there is a fundamental sense, it seems to me, in which every believer has overcome, as shown in 1 John 5:4, together with the verse in the Revelation.

But then I submit to you that, as with many things in the epistle of John, there is the constant overcoming. 'And who is he that overcomes?'—present tense. And here we are to think of what is characteristic of the life of a believer: it is the mark of the normal life of the believer that he overcomes. But, as John himself would tell us, whereas the normal characteristic of a believer's life is that he does not go on committing sin, there are times when he falls and fails—and if we sin, we have an advocate with the Father. To deny that we have sinned or that we do sin would be untruthful, and certainly unrealistic. But it's not the characteristic of the believer's life to carry on sinning. So much is that true that if somebody carries on constantly in the habit of sinning and constantly and constantly, then the question has to be raised: is their profession of faith genuine?

Now when we come to the letters to the churches, it seems to me that we must think in those terms. Says our Lord to one of the churches, 'I will give to him that overcomes [this that and the other] and I shall not blot his name out of the book of life' (Rev 3:5). But you say, 'No believer will have his name blotted out of the Book of Life, will he?' Well no, no believer will ever have his name blotted out of the Book of Life, but our Lord was speaking to a church in which there were some who had the name that they lived, but they were in fact dead. They had the name and profession of being living believers, but they weren't believers, I'm sorry to say. They were in fact dead. Now no true believer will have his name blotted out of the Book of Life, but then the thrust of the observation is, 'And are you living as a believer should live? Is there evidence in your life that you are indeed alive?' You say, 'Well I have fallen here and I've fallen there.' Yes, well if we sin, we have an advocate with the Father, merciful and patient, and where there is true belief

to begin with, he will bring the wanderer back. And the believer, as a characteristic, will overcome.

So in that sense, in actual practice, there are going to be differences in the consistency and the quality of our overcoming. To one church our Lord writes and he says that they have left their first love. It would be a very bad thing if they continued in that attitude completely and forever, wouldn't it? What would it suggest? A church that had lost its love for the Lord, and completely and forever lost its love for the Lord? Oh dear, what does it mean? If they are genuine believers, they will listen to the Lord's words calling them to repent, will they not? And they will repent and the matter be put right. As I'm never tired of quoting, Peter denied the Lord. That is a very serious thing. Our Lord is on record as saying that, 'If anybody denies me before men, I shall deny him before my Father' (Matt 10:33). You say, 'But Peter's denial was but a temporary aberration.' It was so, and thank God for that. Temporarily defeated, you say, but he overcame presently, didn't he? And all of us will feel ourselves very much like Peter. If I am a true believer, in one sense I have already overcome the world. I can sing with gusto the great hymn:

'Tis done—the great transaction's done;  
I am my Lord's, and he is mine.<sup>5</sup>

That's the war settled, but in the ongoing battles the mark should be that of consistency. I should be marked by overcoming, for very often I shall be inconsistent and shall need to confess it; and our Lord is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Doddridge (1702–51), 'O Happy Day.'

## Questions & Answers

*Seminar participants were invited to put written questions to DWG, which he then read out and answered. There were, in addition, some comments and questions directly from the audience.*

[Q1. How can we be sure what should be included in the Bible or omitted?](#)

[Q2. Praying for our children](#)

[Q3. The 'sin unto death'](#)

[Q4. Light—a metaphor for moral qualities?](#)

[Q5. Spirit confessing that Jesus is the Christ](#)

[Q6. False teachers going out, creeping in](#)

[Q7. Heresy about the person of Christ](#)

[Q8. Significance of italics in Authorised Version](#)

[Q9. What is meant by 'in the days of his flesh'?](#)

[Q10. Discerning the spirits](#)

[Q11. On what grounds would it be right for me to break fellowship with other believers?](#)

[Q12. Christians and 'charity'](#)

[Q13. Saved, yet so as by fire](#)

### **Q1. How can we be sure what should be included in the Bible or omitted?**

The first question is a technical thing arising from 1 John 5. You may remember I said that in 1 John 5, older versions like the Authorised Version have a verse that says 'there are three that bear witness in heaven: the father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' (v. 7 KJV). This morning I left out that verse and I said it wasn't what John originally wrote. The question is, *could you please clarify such omissions as 1 John 1:5, verse 7; also John's Gospel, 7:53–8:11* (which you may remember is the story of the woman taken in adultery, and many manuscripts omit that story completely); *and also Romans 8:1*, and the second half of the verse, which in the Authorised Version reads 'There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit'; but you'll find that most modern translations leave out that last bit and simply put 'There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.'

And the question is, *how can we be sure about such things, whether they should be included in the Bible or omitted?*

DWG: And I understand the kind of thinking that is behind that. It's confusing, isn't it? You read your Bible with all good intentions and come across a verse and think about it and learn it, and then some awkward man comes along, like your lecturer, and says that verse isn't in the Bible. How on earth are you to know, and is not the man taking away from the word of God by saying such things shouldn't be there?

The reason is not a question of translation—how you are going to translate this. The question is first, what are you going to translate? The Bible, as we know, was not issued at first in a printed edition. Every copy had to be written out by hand. I don't know how many of us would have a Bible if we had to write our own out by hand. When you write things out by hand, in the end I would defy anybody to write out a whole New Testament without making a mistake somewhere or other, however careful you are. When we look at these ancient copies that were written out by hand, I'm telling you nothing but the sheer truth, you will find that in them there are many, many mistakes. Mercifully, they're not all in the same place. They're in different places and therefore, when we come to translate the New Testament, we've first got to take those manuscripts, compare them one with another, and where they differ because of mistakes or additions, or somebody's gone and left a bit out, we first have to decide what the original text was.

Now that obviously is a task for experts. It is a gigantic task. Nowadays they use computers for it. Part of the reason is that there are so many hundreds and thousands of manuscripts. Let me tell you at once, the verdict of the great experts who know about these things is that, having compared all these manuscripts together, the amount of uncertainty as to whether this or that was what was originally written is less than two per cent. And of that two per cent, mostly it concerns little matters that don't make any difference to the sense whatsoever. And thirdly, no major doctrine of the faith remains uncertain, because in the wisdom of God no major doctrine of the faith depends on one isolated verse: the major doctrines are taught us all over the place. So if you cannot consult the manuscripts yourself, then be assured by your friends who can, that this is the situation.

Now some translations of the Bible and some editions of the Bible will themselves give you that information in the margin or in the footnotes. Here is a very ancient translation by a good gentleman known as J. N. Darby, of whom some of you will have heard. His faith in the inspiration of Scripture was second to none. Absolute, immovable faith in the inspiration of Scripture, and here in 1 John 5, he has a little note. 'To avoid any mistake,' he says, 'I add in a note at the bottom of the page what I have omitted in the text.' So if you look at his text, you'll find that that verse that I omitted, J. N. Darby omitted too. You might think I'm a little bit doubtful, but I hope you don't think his faith in the inspiration of Scripture was doubtful! As your good brother in the Lord, he is telling you what he knows from having consulted the manuscripts: that that verse was not part of the original; it was added later on. If you have a large edition of the New International Version, at that place, it too, I think I'm right in saying, will have a footnote to tell you about it. It says that late manuscripts of the Vulgate have this verse added, and that is so. It came first into the Vulgate as a result of some of the theological speculations of the theologians at that time about the Trinity and they added this verse in the Vulgate, and from the Vulgate it found its way into later manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. It never was original.

So it's not a question of cutting out some of the Bible. It is a question of doing our best to get back to what the original manuscripts had. Of course, for our missionary brothers and sisters that is a very real and practical problem. When they go out to the mission field and they've got to translate the Bible into some impossibly difficult new language, they first have to decide what they are going to translate. And for them, scholars have written quite a largish book that goes through the New Testament over such big issues as this, and they will discuss with you the reasons why you should follow this manuscript or that one, though of course they leave the decision to you. If you're interested at that level, go down to the Hibernian Bible Society there in Howard Street, and they'll gladly sell you a copy of the book and you can see the kinds of discussions that the scholars go through, as they examine the manuscripts and come to decide for this one rather than that one in any place. There is no great mystery about it, though the matters are technical and difficult.

AUDIENCE: One little question cropped up on our team, which doesn't cast any reflection on the rest of the ninety-eight per cent that you referred to. Most of us are not scholars, we're not really terribly interested in translations, but we want to know what God is saying to us. We can take the rest of it for ourselves, is that it?

DWG: Oh, amen, and let me add that I am, or was, a textual critic, not of New Testament, but Old Testament. Textual critics are animals that look after manuscripts and study them and come to decide, when they differ, which better represents the original in any place. It was my task for some years to think about these things in the Old Testament and that, I might tell you, is a far more complicated thing than the New. Having spent a great deal of my life in it, I tell you here and now, I believe in the inspiration of the word of God one hundred per cent. If I wanted to, I could tell you about difficulties, but I don't want to this afternoon. However, in spite of all the difficulties, I believe in it one hundred per cent. That said, we must be realists. It's no good saying, 'Well I believe it because it's in the Authorised Version and if you deny that, you're destroying the word of God.' The question is, where did the Authorised Version come from? From what manuscripts was it translated? Were they good manuscripts, or not so good? You can take the worst old manuscript you ever set eyes on and, if that's the only one you've got, use it, my brother. There's enough in it of the truth to get folks converted and see them home to heaven.

## **Q2. Praying for our children**

Here comes a question that arises out of our recent study:

*'Can I pray in faith for my children to be saved and be sure that they will be saved?'*

That is talking about confidence. We can have confidence before God in prayer. Well I haven't got any children so I must hear what the parents say. I can tell you what my own parents did. My own father used to tell us, his children, that when we were born, each time he kneeled down by our cradle he claimed the verse given in Acts 16 to the jailer: 'believe on the Lord Jesus Christ 'and thou shalt be saved and thy house' (v. 31). And he claimed it for us and asked the Lord that if we were ever going to grow up not to be believers, rather than that,

to take us home before we came to the age of responsibility, and he meant what he prayed. And I can tell you all his children are believers.

For my own part, it seems to me that as far as knowing what the will of God is, God has declared himself. He does not will that any should perish. That's not his will. I personally, if I were a parent, would take my stand on that and, on the positive side, that he would have all to be saved. Now for my own part, I take the words of Scripture that 'God would have all men to be saved' (1 Tim 2:3-4; 2 Pet 3:9) not to mean simply that he would have men of all kinds to be saved, but that he means what he says when he said he would have all men to be saved, and would stretch out his hands even to the disobedient. It wasn't our Lord's fault that Jerusalem wasn't saved. 'Oh, Jerusalem, I would,' he said, and presumably he meant what he said and presumably he wasn't misrepresenting the Father when he said, 'I would, and many times I would have gathered your children' (see Matt 23:37). If they're not gathered, if they're lost, it's their fault. So without discussing the great complications of man's free will, yet as far as God's will goes, if I were a parent—[interruption]

AUDIENCE: The promise is to you and your children. Is it right to rely on the promise of God as far as your children are concerned?

DWG: Yes, good question. In that chapter, strictly speaking, Peter is addressing the Jewish nation and therefore quoting from the Old Testament prophecy and promise to the Jewish nation, 'To you and your children.' It doesn't do away with the fact that many of those children chose to reject the promise, and certainly they had free will. But as far as God is concerned, I was merely asking the question, if we know that we pray according to his will, well, in praying for our children surely we pray according to his will? But I'm not a parent and so I'd better cease. There are many parents here. What do they feel?

AUDIENCE: To put it the other way round, my children prayed for me and I came to the Lord.

DWG: Oh, amen. You see, I feel a great sorrow here and I don't want to increase anybody's anguish. When genuine, dear believers in the Lord prayed years for their children and they've gone out into the world and sometimes come to their end without giving any indication of repentance, what do parents say to me when I say these things? Christian parents, come on.

AUDIENCE: It's a question of man's free will; it must be a personal choice. If you take the verse, 'Train up a child in the way that he should go: and when he is old he will not depart from it' (Prov 22:6) and to make the corollary that if a child does depart, it must be the parents' fault, I don't think that's fair.

DWG: Oh, surely not.

AUDIENCE: I think it's the parents' privilege and duty and responsibility to pray for their children from birth, or even before it, and after that, to be careful of the environment in which the children are brought up. Parents should realise that their own behaviour must reflect or recommend the gospel of Christianity.

DWG: My father, I must say, didn't leave it in that sense. He prayed on the one side, and on the other, he had us taught Scripture. By the time I was ten, I knew all about Ahab and a good deal about Jezebel as well, and all sorts of things. He had my mind stored with holy Scripture long before I came to personal faith.

### Q3. The 'sin unto death'

*What is the sin unto death mentioned in the chapter that we read, chapter 5: 'There is a sin unto death'? (v. 16).*

As you saw in the talk, I skated round it, coward as I am, hoping that you would settle it in your discussion groups! What is the *sin unto death*?

As far as I know, three suggestions have been made. First, the one I gave you, based upon such passages as 1 Corinthians 11:31–32, which says of believers that 'if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged, but when we are judged, we're chastened of the Lord so that we should not be condemned with the world.' 'For this cause,' says Paul, 'many are weak and sickly among you and some have fallen on sleep' (v. 30) meaning, presumably, under the discipline of God. If as believers we do not discern ourselves and we do not judge ourselves and we go on living carelessly, then the Lord will deal with us. Every time we take the cup of the Lord at the Lord's Supper, we are taking the cup of a covenant whereby our Lord guarantees and pledges himself that he will write God's laws on our heart.

Now normally he does that with our cooperation, as we judge ourselves and confess our sin and seek his grace to overcome it. But if we grow careless then the Lord will take us in hand. He pledged to do it so that we shall not be condemned with the world. If it is so that a believer has so misbehaved that the Lord has decided in his case he must take him home—better for all concerned, better for the testimony, better for the church he's in, better for his family—then there's a sense in which, whatever you say, the Lord won't listen to your prayers. 'I don't say that you should pray for such a one,' says John (1 John 5:16). But there are other cases where the Lord might be disciplining his people and is prepared to listen to the intercessions of some godly friend of theirs, like he listened to Abraham's intercessions and spared Lot from destruction in the city of Sodom. That's one explanation then.

Others have thought that the sin unto death is not just when a believer has sinned grievously and the Lord has decided to take him home, but it is talking about the unpardonable sin. Somebody has committed a sin and there is no possibility of renewing such a one to repentance, and therefore you waste your breath if you try to pray for them. Well I suppose it could mean that. I think the difficulty is going to be when you come to the other side. Those that don't sin unto death, then: who are they who nonetheless need life given them? For the question is praying for those who have sinned, but have not sinned unto death—in what sense therefore do they need life?

In my own thinking, someone that, in the sense of Hebrew 6, who, having tasted of the heavenly gift falls aside, I think that passage is talking of apostates, and in my book I don't think apostates were ever true believers at all. They were like the men of whom we read in chapter 2: 'they went out from us because they were not of us. They never were.' They made



a profession, but it wasn't real. They were illuminated, but they never did repent or believe. They were never born again. With their eyes open, they have turned away from the gospel. You won't renew them again to repentance even if you try. You'll never get them to change their minds.

Some have said a third case; that this is talking about the ordinary, unconverted person who, while he goes on sinning, has not yet rejected the gospel knowingly with his eyes open and that, if you pray for him, God will give you life. That is, he'll bring the man to conversion. But of course, if it's a case of a person who, having heard the gospel and had his eyes opened and has knowingly rejected it, they have committed then the unpardonable sin. Of those three, the one that seems to me to be better is the first one. Anybody here who would like to urge the other ones? Anyone feel that there is some consideration that is conclusive?

AUDIENCE: The Bible talks about those that attributed the miracles and works of Jesus to Beelzebul (see Matt 12:22–37). Was that not a sin?

DWG: Oh, it was, and it was a sin of which our Lord warned them there is no forgiveness, neither in this age nor in the age to come.

AUDIENCE: I think to my mind that is 'an' unpardonable sin. It's not 'the' unpardonable sin. Is there such a thing as 'the' unpardonable sin?

DWG: Well, sir, in the place you quote, our Lord did a miracle in the power of the Holy Spirit; and his enemies, at least some of them, didn't deny that it was a supernatural power. They couldn't deny it. There was the evidence straight in front of their eyes. They couldn't deny the miracle had taken place, but they were so determined not to believe that Jesus was the Messiah that they were prepared to attribute that miracle to the devil. And our Lord takes the occasion to argue with them and to show them that they are being deliberately and utterly perverse. In maintaining that he was of the devil, they were contradicting every axiom of thought and behaviour that they would normally apply. They were being knowingly and deliberately and utterly perverse.

I take it that if a man has his eyes opened like that and can see that this is a supernatural power, that this is the Holy Spirit, but is determined not to give in and therefore says that the Holy Spirit is the devil, then what else has God got left with which to convince the man? There comes a point, doesn't there, when God has given all he can give? The last evidence God has got to give is his Holy Spirit, directly illuminating the mind of a man or woman. When God has done that, if the person says 'no', what has God got left with which to bring them to repentance anyway? That is a very solemn thought. It is possible for God to show himself to a man or woman who finally say 'no' and go their way. I myself would think that, whether in our Lord's lifetime or subsequently, unpardonable sins—sins for which there can be no repentance—are sins of that order.

#### **Q4. Light—a metaphor for moral qualities?**

*You mentioned that light is, or can be, a metaphor of moral qualities, namely holiness and purity. Could you please show how it is used as such a metaphor in Scripture, expanding a little on what you have said already?*

Well, in our first Saturday I was suggesting that light, in the first place, has to do with things intellectual and of the mind—God’s self-revealing of himself intellectually. The opposite of darkness, of ignorance and falsity: it is truth. But I also suggested it is a matter of moral purity, not just intellectual. If you want a citation of a verse that seems to say that, Isaiah 5:20, for instance, seems to me to be using the metaphor in that sense: ‘Woe unto them that call evil good’. So now we’re in the realm of things moral—‘that call evil good and good evil’—and then illustrating it he adds, ‘that put darkness for light, and light for darkness’, and then illustrating it again, ‘that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!’

Here then, the words ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ are used in a moral context: ‘light’ standing for what is good, ‘darkness’ standing for what is evil, and God complains that the people confound the two. In the New Testament, it seems to me, its usage indicates that it’s not merely a matter of truth, but also of moral quality. John 3 is the chapter I would quote: ‘Everybody that doeth good cometh to the light that his deeds may be made evident that they are wrought in God. Everybody that doeth evil, he doesn’t come to the light, he hates the light, because his works are evil’ (see vv. 19–21). And though there is the idea of exposure, what it’s exposing is moral evil, or moral worth.

#### **Q5. Spirit confessing that Jesus is the Christ**

*The text in 1 John 4:2: ‘Hereby know you the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God’, or ‘every spirit that confesses that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh is of God’—doesn’t seem very comprehensive, especially in the light of Mark 5:6–7, which talks about the demoniac man inhabited by many demons: ‘And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and worshipped him; and crying out with a loud voice, he said, “What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the Most High God? I adjure thee by God, torment me not.” For he had said unto him, “Come forth, thou unclean spirit, out of the man.”’*

And you see what the questioner is saying. Here is a man inhabited by a legion of evil spirits. In spite of that, when they protest, he, or they, or both, acknowledge Jesus as the Son of the Most High God. Therefore our questioner asks, how is the test given us in 1 John 4:2 any good? If evil spirits are prepared to acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of the Most High God, then they would come through the test with flying colours. But that isn’t quite true, is it? We are dealing with evil spirits and we must be aware that we’re dealing with something exceedingly sophisticated. You will notice that 1 John 4:2 doesn’t say ‘every spirit that confesses that Jesus is Son of the Most High God is of God’, does it? What you’re required to confess is that he is the Christ come in flesh. You see, many spirits and many false systems like theosophy, if you ask them about the Lord Jesus, will say, ‘Of course he’s the Son of God.’ Then they’d add, ‘We’re all sons of God anyway, and God being the most high, yes Jesus is the Son of God most high. Everybody’s the son of God most high anyway.’

What they wouldn't confess, if you pressed them, is that Jesus is the Christ, because though they do believe he is in some sense, not in our sense, but in their sense, the Son of God, they hold that the Christ is the great world Spirit and they will not admit that Jesus is the Christ. They'll twist all the ways round they know how. They'll say that the Christ used Jesus or Jesus was filled with the Christ. They will not admit that Jesus is the Christ and I take it that John is being exceedingly exact when he lays down this test.

AUDIENCE: I was just looking at Matthew there and I just would like to read it out and maybe you could comment on it—it gives us quite a look into what can happen. 'Not every one that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name, and in thy name cast out devils, and in thy name done many wonderful works? Then he will profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity' (Matt 7:21–23 KJV). Now that's very strong words. Maybe you could comment on that.

DWG: I think here we must take our Lord very, very seriously. We've been thinking in our studies through the epistle of John of the tests that are given us as to whether our profession of faith is genuine. Now we are to notice that in those tests John doesn't say, 'Look, if you have prophesied, or if you have cast out a demon, you are a child of God.' It's possible to prophesy and cast out demons and not to be a child of God. Our Lord warns us about it, so that we must be very careful to listen to these tests that our Lord himself gives us. It's not because he's narrow minded or something like that. In that day, if people should come and say, 'We cast out demons in your name. We prophesied in your name' our Lord will say, 'Sorry, but that is not the test as to whether a person is a child of God or not.' I don't want to be rude, but Balaam's donkey prophesied at one stage, didn't he? It's not necessarily a test that somebody is a child of God.

## **Q6. False teachers going out, creeping in**

Another question on this same issue: *In 1 John 2:19, talking of false teachers, John says, 'They went out from us, for they were not of us.' Compare that with Jude 4, which says, 'Evil men crept in unawares.' Does that suggest the Christian community that John speaks of was in a more spiritual state than that to which Jude wrote?*

Because John says, 'The false teachers have gone out of ours,' and Jude has to say, 'Well, I'm sorry, but the bad boys have crept into ours', well it may be because the group to which Jude wrote was not being vigilant that this has happened, so it could be because they weren't so spiritual. On the other hand, be it noticed that the false teachers that John speaks of were already in the church, weren't they? And one would hesitate to attribute that to the fact that John and his contemporaries had not been as careful as they could. So I don't know that we must necessarily blame the people in Jude. Paul has to complain to the Galatians that certain men have crept in unawares, spying out our liberty and so forth. It was a trouble in the ancient church. It should remind us, I think, that being a member of a Christian church, formally and externally, is no guarantee that you are a genuine believer. So while we're not

to be heresy hunting, we take it to our own hearts that we must make sure that we are saved.

## **Q7. Heresy about the person of Christ**

*Concerning various heresies abroad today which John was aware of, could you please clarify the fact that Christ was the eternal Son?*

Well if I wanted to clarify the fact that Christ was the eternal Son, I think the first verse I would go to is 1 John 2:23: 'Whoever denies the Son, the same has not the Father: he that confesses the Son has the Father also.' Now I must be careful what I say, because there are folks about whose salvation we have no doubt, who nonetheless have decided that the term 'son', when used of the Lord Jesus, is a term that denotes an office that he took up when he became incarnate. They hold that he existed before, he was the second person of the Trinity from all eternity, but before he was incarnate the relationship he had with God was not that of son to father. So they believe in his eternal existence that he was eternally the second person of the Trinity, but they feel that the term 'son' was something that was given him at his incarnation. Their intention is not to cast any doubt upon the person of our Lord and they will quote to you verses such as 'Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee' (Ps 2:7), suggesting that this was a thing in time, rather than eternity.

With all due respect nonetheless, I would point them myself to verse 23: 'Whoever denies the Son, the same has not the Father.' I take that to be a logical consequence. If there is no Son of God then you can't have a Father, can you? You can't be a father of nothing, so if there was a time when Jesus wasn't the Son, there was a time when the first person in the Trinity wasn't the Father, surely? And therefore, if you say the relationship, father-son, was something that only happened at the incarnation, you would be obliged to hold that God wasn't a father until then and that, I should want to say, is false. According to John 5, Jesus said 'My Father is working until now, and I am working. Whatever the Son sees the Father doing, that he does in the same manner' (see John 5:17, 19).

## **Q8. Significance of italics in Authorised Version**

AUDIENCE: I have something about 1 John 2:23. The second part in the Authorised Version is in italics. Does that mean that when we see italics in a verse that that is not included in the original manuscript?

DWG: Yes, exactly right. If you are reading an Authorised Version, that was the device that the translators used when they put in words that weren't in any Greek manuscripts whatsoever. They just put them in to help out the sense.

AUDIENCE: It doesn't mean they're wrong—it's just to explain the first part of the verse?

DWG: Yes, that's the translator adding a word to try and bring out what he thinks the sense is. But the fact they put it in italics means that they didn't find it in any Greek manuscript whatsoever: they are adding it as translators to help out the sense.

### **Q9. What is meant by ‘in the days of his flesh’?**

*In Hebrews 5:7 we have the phrase in the days of his flesh—which seems to imply that for Jesus the days of his flesh are past. When it said ‘in the days of his flesh he offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears’ it is referring presumably to Gethsemane, and implying that those days are past, as distinct from what he is now. And therefore, the question says, ‘Can it then be said that, at his second advent, Christ will come in the flesh?’*

You see the point. I would suggest that here we start by listening to actual verses. In Acts 1:11 the angels said about the rising Lord to the apostles ‘This same Jesus shall so come.’ The Jesus, who in the resurrection appeared to them, was a Jesus who said, ‘A spirit has not flesh and bone, as you see me have. I do have flesh and bone’ (Luke 24:39). Even in the day of his resurrection, as he went up they said, ‘This same Jesus shall come again.’ How then can Hebrews talk about the days of his flesh? I take Hebrews to be using its term to denote that our Lord now has a resurrection body. First Corinthians 15 explains it: there is a natural body and there is a spiritual body. When our Lord was born here on earth, he had a natural body. Now he has a spiritual body which could pass through doors without the doors opening, you may remember (see John 20:19). So I take it when Hebrews is talking, using its phrase *the days of his flesh*, it is talking about the days, in other words, when he had a natural body. He doesn’t have that natural body now. I take it that the term *flesh* in that context refers to that natural body, as distinct now from his spiritual body. That spiritual body has flesh and bone, but it is predominantly energised and moves by a different principle. It is a spiritual body, hence the contrast between the days of his flesh and now, the time when he has a spiritual body.

### **Q10. Discerning the spirits**

*Does the gift of discernment still exist today when dealing with spirits, 1 Corinthians 12: 10?*

And my answer would be, well I should hope so. We need every help we can get, don’t we? And some men have been given by God the power of discernment that all is not well in certain situations. When Satan himself can turn himself into an angel of light, it needs sometimes God-given discernment to detect that ‘something is not right here: this is false doctrine actually.’ Sometimes it is difficult for people at large to see it is false doctrine and it requires God-given discernment.

### **Q11. On what grounds would it be right for me to break fellowship with other believers?**

*‘If a man has Christ and eternal life, he is my brother in Christ and we share a common life that is fellowship. What differences in doctrine, if any, should I consider important enough to cause me to break fellowship with him?’ And this question cites the gifts of the spirit and the role of women in the church and such like things.*

I think here we have to attempt by God’s grace to hold the kind of balance that John would hold. When we talk of heretics, we must be aware of what we’re talking—we’re talking

about enemies of God. We must never allow our desire to stand loyal to the Lord and to stand against heretics to topple over into hardness of spirit against true believers. The Old Testament tells us of a man whose name was Jephthah. After fighting some splendid battles for the Lord, he went down to the fords of Jordan and when fellow Israelites came across, he said, 'Say "shibboleth"', and some of them, they meant to say it, but couldn't quite say it the right way round and they said, 'sibboleth', so he cut their heads off. They were his own Israelite brethren, and gave only a slightly different pronunciation that meant the same, but he cut their heads off. He's not surely held out to us an example to follow. You must be able to distinguish between enemies of God and children of God.

That said, we must distinguish: we must go on the other side. Notice what Scripture says: that true love for the children of God will mean that we keep the commandments of God. Now surely there are bigger and lesser things? There are things that are fundamental and there are things that are not fundamental. In the governing of a church, for instance, elders will want to see that church carry out the commandments of God as they understand them. When it comes to the Lord's people, some of us don't always obey holy Scripture as we should. So I presume elders in a church have a right to ask members of the church to obey holy Scripture—at least what this church believes is the commandment of the Lord. And they who hold the different opinion will presumably respect the elder of the church and not ruin the order of a church in order to press something that even they themselves do not regard as a fundamental.

In other words, receiving all who are the Lord's people, as surely we are commanded to. On the other hand, who we allow to teach in the church—that's a different story altogether, and sometimes we confound those two things, don't we? Yes, receive all the Lord's people who are living godly lives; but who you allow to teach is a different story.

## **Q12. Christians and 'charity'**

*'In as much as you have done it unto the least of these, my brethren, you have done it unto me' (Matt 25:40). Does this mean that the good we do to others who are not our brothers, for instance to the third world, is not regarded as done unto and for the Lord?*

Now this question arises from something I said, as I say so many things in great haste and therefore lack of clarity! I was talking about loving the children of God, that it is an evidence that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren. And I said we need to be very careful: this is not loving people in general, this is loving the brethren: that is, the true children of God. I made the point rather hastily that sometimes the parable in Matthew 25 is quoted by the world at large, where our Lord says, 'Inasmuch as you've done it unto the least of these, my brethren, you've done it unto me,' and therefore, the world takes the words to mean that if they've given their one pound to Oxfam, they've done it unto Christ. What I was trying to point out was that that is not necessarily true at all. What our Lord is talking about in that parable is giving to one of Christ's brethren and doing it because he is Christ's brother. When the Lord comes he will reward that as though it were done to himself because it has been done to one of his brethren.

If you then ask how do you become one of Christ's brethren and are all men Christ's brethren, well the answer, of course, is no—they're not all Christ's brethren. He loves mankind, but they're not all his brethren. You wouldn't call Caiaphas a brother of Christ, would you? And how we become Christ's brethren is by being born again, so that was what I was trying to say.

But now my questioner very fairly comes at it the other way round and says, 'But what about a lady who's a believer and gives some money to famine relief to the third world—will the Lord not reward her? And the answer is, of course he will. You've done it unto the Lord. Says Paul to Christian slaves, who are working for the most unregenerate masters you could possibly get, 'Do your job for them and you'll get a reward from the Lord.' For in our daily life, even working for the boss, we're serving the Lord Christ and he will reward you. So if you've given to the famine relief in the third world, of course the Lord will reward you. Yes, and he'll count it as though you've done it to him.

But I was saying that the other way round isn't true. If a kindly atheist now gives his Oxfam relief to somebody who is also an atheist, he mustn't suppose that the Lord is regarding that as having been given to one of his brethren. Why that is important is this, that in that parable when the sheep are divided from the goats (see Matt 25:31–46), the criterion that is used is, 'How have you treated my brothers?' That's what John is saying. We know we've passed from death unto life, because we love the brothers. 'Yes, those that have treated Christ's brothers that way will inherit eternal life,' says the Lord. It's the evidence that they are true believers, but an atheist giving relief to a fellow atheist is no evidence at all that the man is a true believer.

### **Q13. Saved, yet so as by fire**

*1 Corinthians 3:12 would seem to indicate that one may just be saved as through fire. Could you please clarify how this teaching tallies with that of 1 John?' And there were a number of questions along that very same line. 'John writes in what seems like extreme terms. Things are either black or white. To understand what he has written, we seem to be weakening his statements. Is this correct? If so, is this what John intended?*

What these two questions have in mind is this: John says, 'He that sins is of the devil. He that does righteousness is of God' (1 John 3:7–8). And you might get the impression that there's no in between. Have we weakened it? Have I weakened it? When I said that it means he who continues to practice sin is of the devil, am I weakening what John says? I would want to say 'no' and say it on a linguistic basis. Sorry, this language thing again! In Greek a present tense can have a number of connotations. It can mean a point action, 'I do something right now,' or it can indicate a repeated and constant action, 'I am doing something,' or, 'I normally do something,' or, 'I constantly do something.' So we have to determine the meaning by the context.

Our English word is similarly difficult: 'When is your auntie coming, today or tomorrow?' 'Oh, she is coming tomorrow.' Funny, isn't it, a present tense used of tomorrow? Only we know our English well enough not to be upset by that kind of thing. We're quite happy to use a present tense of the future. So you have to know the language and which of

its uses is being used in any one context. Some Indian friends might say, 'My father is coming from Chennai', when they mean my father comes from Chennai, he originates from Chennai. They haven't got quite our English usage of present tenses!

And sometimes in the New Testament a present tense will mean one thing and sometimes it will mean another. I take it in these passages it's being used as durative, as we call it, meaning 'he that practices sin'. What strengthens me in that belief is what John himself says. Having made this remark: 'He that does sin is of the devil,' he then tells us that if we say we have not sinned, we deceive ourselves and if we say we have no sin, likewise, we make God a liar. And he adds, 'If any man sin' (2:1), John himself allows the possibility that the believer, from time to time, does slip up and fail, but then he has the advocate and the propitiation; and the believer doesn't normally go on continuing in sin.

The other question reminds me that in 1 Corinthians 3:12 it is implied that a believer can go very far into sin and still be a believer. When we stand before the judgment seat of Christ and our works are investigated, Paul envisages the possibility that a man's work shall be burnt up. That's a very poor life, isn't it? He adds, 'But he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire,' from which we observe surely how patient the Lord is, how far we can go in our inconsistencies. You say, 'Where does the line come that you could say very definitely that this man, who professes to be a believer, isn't just being temporarily inconsistent, but he's gone beyond the limit and can't be a believer at all. Where comes the deciding line?'

As far as I know, we don't know, brothers and sisters. It's not given for us to say, is it? We do well to take the advice of Paul. The foundation of God stands sure: 'The Lord knows them that are his.' That's God's side, but on our side: 'let him that names the name of Christ depart from iniquity' (2 Tim 2:19). If I want myself to be regarded by my fellow believers as a genuine believer, then I have the responsibility to depart from iniquity, and if I don't, I'm raising very severe doubts as to whether my profession of faith is genuine. The Lord is the final arbiter. 'The Lord knows them that are his.'



## STUDY GUIDE

The questions which follow were provided originally as a stimulus to group discussions following each of the seminar sessions.

### *Explanatory note from David Gooding*

This year you will see that there are more questions than there have been in other years. Most of them are quite mild, none is altogether ferocious. I've added more this year because people have suggested that some of the groups would like the opportunity, not merely to go over what I've been saying in the course of my talks, but to break fresh ground and to discuss other things beyond what has been covered in the formal session. That's why you'll find, on some of the question sheets, rather a lot of questions, and at the end some things that I've not myself dealt with in the course of the talks.

## PRELIMINARIES

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### 1. Authorship of the epistle

These studies will assume, rather than argue the case, that the author of 1 John was the same as the writer of the Gospel of John, namely the Apostle John. The terms of the Prologue (1:1) demand an author who physically touched the Lord Jesus when our Lord was on earth.

### 2. Historical background of the epistle

Scholars are much less agreed nowadays than they used to be over exactly what heresy or heresies John was combating in this epistle.<sup>6</sup> The general impression is, however, that the heretics were moving in the direction(s) of Docetism, or Gnosticism, or both.

This is a small glossary of terms that occur frequently in the debate.

#### *Cerinthus*

Cerinthus was a first-century heretic who taught:

- \* that Jesus was not born of a virgin but was the son of Joseph and Mary;
- \* that Jesus was not himself the Christ but, after the baptism of Jesus, the Christ descended on Jesus in the form of a dove;
- \* that, at the end, the Christ separated from Jesus so that the Christ, being impassable anyway, did not suffer and was not involved in Jesus' death.

Cerinthus also taught that not God, but some inferior power, created the world.

#### *Docetism*

A heresy that denied that Jesus was a real man. He only seemed (Greek: *dokeō* 'to seem') to be a man and to suffer.

#### *Gnosticism*

A heresy which, as its name implies, made superior knowledge (Greek: *gnosis*) the key to salvation. It held that 'spirit' is divine and good, and 'matter' is created and evil. The world was not created by God, but by some inferior powers. Since 'matter' was evil, no true incarnation of God was possible.

In ethics, their view of 'matter' as being essentially evil led either to asceticism or else to moral indifference.

Full-blown Gnosticism and its many sects were a second-century development.

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<sup>6</sup> For a helpful summary of the debate, see I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, 14–22.

## QUESTIONS

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### Session 1

1. Was any one in the group brought to faith in Christ by some verse in this epistle? If so, which verse?
2. Are there any verses in this epistle which you find particularly helpful in giving you assurance of salvation?
3. I am a believer; but what evidences should there be in my life to show that I am a child of God:
  - (a) according to other parts of the New Testament?
  - (b) according to this epistle?
4. Does it matter if there are no evidences in my life, or if the evidences are contradictory? Yes? Why?
5. I have been taught that if I keep looking at myself and at my life to discover evidence that I am really born again, I shall become very discouraged and it will rob me of peace and assurance. I have been told therefore that the thing to do is to forget about myself and to concentrate on Christ. Would you not agree with this advice?
6. I have heard it said that 1 John was written to oppose Docetism and/or Gnosticism. I don't know what those two ancient heresies were about, and anyway I can't see what they've got to do with us nowadays. How would knowing about them:
  - (a) help us to understand this epistle?
  - (b) help us in our daily life and in our battles for the Lord?
7. On what grounds would you argue (if you would!) that the same person wrote:
  - (a) this epistle and the Fourth Gospel?
  - (b) both the above and the book of Revelation?

### Session 2

1. In 1:3 does the phrase 'have fellowship with' mean:
  - (a) to give a Christian worker a gift, as in Philippians 4:15?
  - (b) to be a member of a church, as in, 'she is in fellowship in Maranatha'?
  - (c) to possess eternal life in common with the Father, the Son and all true believers?
  - (d) to have a time of prayer and Bible study with friends?
2. What is the meaning of:
  - (a) 'God is light' (1:5); and

- (b) 'he is in the light' (1:7)?
3. Is 1:6 describing unbelievers, or believers who share God's eternal life but are not enjoying it? What kind of people would say the things mentioned in 1:8 and 1:10?
  4. What, according to 1:7, is the sole condition for sharing eternal life with other believers and with the Lord?
  5. Does 'walking in the light' mean:
    - (a) walking sinlessly, or
    - (b) living in the light of God's Word and presence?
  6. According to 1:7, if a Christian sins does that mean:
    - (a) that he is now put out into the darkness, and
    - (b) that he temporarily loses his share of eternal life?
  7. What is the point of saying that our Advocate is the propitiation for our sins? Read Leviticus 16:16. Does that help to explain the relevance of the term 'propitiation' (atonement) in 2:2?
  8. Does 1:9 promise more than forgiveness?
  9. How well do we have to keep God's commandments before we can 'know that we know him'? (2:3)
  10. Is 2:5 talking of God's love for us or our love for God? Is it possible for God's love for a believer to be 'not yet perfected in him'?
  11. Consider John 9:41 and 15:22; then say what you think the phrase 'we have no sin' means (1 John 1:8).

### Session 3

1. If God made the world and all that is in it then:
  - (a) why should I not love it?; and
  - (b) how can 2:16 say that 'all that is in the world . . . is not of the Father'?
2. If God loves the world of men and women and Christ mixed with sinners, would it be:
  - (a) worldly for me to mix with unsaved people?
  - (b) wise for a young convert to continue to attend a club where vice is practised?
3. Were the tree and the fruit with which Satan enticed Eve evil in themselves? (See Gen 3:6)
4. Read Luke 4:2-4. Is the desire of the body for food (i.e., hunger) an evil thing or is it 'of God'? Why would it have been wrong for Christ to satisfy the desire?
5. How, according to Ephesians 2:2-3, does Satan keep his grip on 'this world'?

6. Do the 'lust of the flesh' and the 'lust of the eyes' refer solely to immorality and pornography? (2:16)
7. Whatever does 'the pride of life' mean? (2:16 KJV)
8. Define (not describe) 'worldliness'. Would 2:17 help towards a definition?
9. What aspect of 'the world', if any, does Pharaoh and his treatment of the Israelites illustrate?
10. Consider Exodus 3:13; John 17:6, 25–26; 1 John 2:13, 15–16. How does the revelation of the Father's name help people to overcome worldliness?
11. If you had to counter a tendency to worldliness in your church, how would you go about it?

### Session 4

1. In what sense is the command to love an old commandment?
  - (a) because it is contained—where—in the Old Testament?
  - (b) because it was an essential part of the Christian message right from the beginning of Christ's ministry?
2. In 2:8, in what sense is the commandment new? In what sense is it true in him and in you?
3. Which darkness is passing? The darkness of the heathen? The darkness in your heart still? The comparative darkness of the Old Testament dispensation?
4. Is the man described in 2:9 a believer or an unbeliever? What does the phrase 'even until now' imply about his past experience of God?
5. In 2:10, in what sense does loving my brother keep me in the light and save me from stumbling myself or from causing others to stumble?
6. In 2:11, are the four phrases—in the darkness, walk in darkness, doesn't know where he is going, darkness has blinded his eyes—mere repetitions, or does each add something to the description?
7. Are the experiences mentioned in verses 12–14 especially appropriate to the particular groups to which they are ascribed? E.g., is it a special mark of 'children' that their sins have been forgiven?
8. Would the experiences mentioned in verses 12–13 have any bearing on our duty to love our brethren? (2:7–10)
9. Would the experiences mentioned in verses 13–14 have any bearing on our duty not to love the world? (2:15–17)
10. This paragraph began with encouragement to love; it ends with a command not to love. Do you detect this same kind of balance in other paragraphs and sections of the epistle?

## Session 5

1. In what sense is this present age 'the last hour'? (2:18)
2. How does the rise of many antichrists indicate that it is the last hour?
3. Where did the antichrists arise? In the world or in the church? Who is the 'us' in 2:19?
4. When apostates break away from a church fellowship, is it necessarily bad publicity for the church? (2:19–29)
5. One resource against false teaching is the anointing of the Spirit (2:20). According to 2:24, what is the other?
6. Have all believers this anointing (cf. 2 Cor 1:21)? How does it work as our safeguard against false doctrine?
7. In what sense do believers 'know all things'? (2:20) Is it really true that we do not need teachers in the church? (2:27)
8. According to 2:22, what is the exact nature of the false teaching? Is it still around today?
9. According to 2:23, wherein lies its seriousness?
10. Why, according to 2:24–25, does it matter that we believe so long as we lead loving Christian lives?
11. Will some Christians feel ashamed when they meet the Lord at his coming? (2:28)
12. Observe (a) 'beginning' 1:1; 2:7, 24, and (b) 'manifestation' in 1:2; 2:19, 28. Are these chance repetitions, or variations on a common theme?

## Session 6

1. To what event does the 'manifestation' (KJV) or 'appearing' (NIV) of Christ refer in:  
(a) verses 2:28 & 3:2  
(b) verses 3:5, 8?
2. What is the point of referring to these events as 'manifestations' or 'appearings'?
3. Is 2:29 saying that everyone in Belfast who deals honestly in business is born again whether he believes in Christ or not? If not, what is it saying?
4. Christ's death for us obviously shows God's love for us. But what is it about being called children of God that makes it such a special exhibition of God's love?
5. In the middle of 3:1 the RV adds 'and such are we'; the NIV adds 'And that is what we are!' Where do these words come from? What is the point they make?
6. In 3:1 we are given the reason why the world does not recognise us as children of God. Explain this reason.
7. By what means will our final conformity with Christ be brought about? (3:2). Is anything similar going on now? (2 Cor 3:18)

8. What connections of thought lead us from the second coming in 3:2 to the first coming in 3:5, 8? Why in 3:8 is Christ referred to as 'the Son of God'?
9. What does 3:4 mean by saying 'sin is lawlessness'?
10. What does it mean to be 'of the devil'? (3:8)
11. How do you reconcile 3:9 with 1:10 and 2:11? What is meant by 'God's seed'?
12. In 3:2 it talks of something that is not yet manifest; in 3:10 of something that is already clearly manifest. Comment on this contrast.

### Session 7

1. In 3:11 it states 'from the beginning'.
  - (a) What beginning?
  - (b) What is the point of remarking that they have believed it from the beginning?
2. Compare 3:12 with John 7:7; 8:31, 38–44. Was Cain an atheist? What marks of false and inadequate religion do we find in this passage?
3. What marks of inadequate religion are mentioned in 3:18?
4. What aspect of conversion is presented in 3:14? Why is love of fellow believers such a sure and necessary sign that conversion has really taken place?
5. If the Father's love has given us life as children in God's family (3:1), what does the Son's love show us as members of the family?
6. In 3:17 the word 'good' (KJV), 'goods' (RV), 'possessions' (NIV) is literally 'means of life'. Does that help you to see the connection of thought between verses 16 and 17?
7. In 3:18–19, in what sense is practical Christian living and giving a basis for a believer's assurance before God?
8. When 3:20 says that God is greater than our hearts and knows everything, is that meant as a warning or a comfort?
9. Consider 3:21–22, along with 3:17. Is God's giving to us influenced in any way by our willingness to give to others?
10. Do you see any similarity between our double responsibility as mentioned in 3:23 and the message of James 2:14–20?
11. In 3:24, in what sense does my abiding in God (and Christ) and his abiding in me depend on my keeping his commandments?
12. If it is through the Spirit who was given me when I believed that I know that God abides in me, how do I know that I have the Spirit? (3:24)

## Session 8

1. What is meant by 'proving' or 'testing' the spirits?
2. If a prophet or teacher claims that what he says is the Lord's message, would we be in danger of quenching the spirit if we insisted on carefully judging the message? (1 Thess 5:19–20; 1 Cor 14:29, 12:1–4)
3. What kind of test is it that God tells us to apply in order to decide whether it is the Holy Spirit speaking or some other spirit? (4:2)
4. Do you think that 4:2 should be translated as:
  - (a) '... confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh'; or
  - (b) '... confesses Jesus as Christ come in the flesh'?
5. Why is the fact that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh so vitally important? Has it practical as well as theological significance? Why are evil spirits so intent on denying this doctrine?
6. Do you think 2 John 7 refers to the first coming (KJV='is come') or to the second coming (RV='cometh')?
7. We are told in 4:3 that the spirit of antichrist is already in the world. Do you know of any modern examples of this?
8. In what sense have—and do—you, as believers, overcome the false prophets, spirits and their doctrines? The world welcomes their message; how is it that you do not? (4:4–5)
9. Who are the 'we' of 4:6? What further criterion for testing prophets and teachers does this verse offer?
10. 'The spirit of error' (4:6). What, according to Matthew 24:24 and 2 Thessalonians 2:9–12, is to be the marked feature of the end-time?

## Session 9

1. Consider 4:7 and 4:11. Verse 11 tells us our duty and sets us an example and a standard. What else do verses 7–8 tell us to encourage us to fulfil our duty to love one another?
2. Consider 4:9–10. What is meant by saying that:
  - (a) 4:9 deals with the outward active expression of God's love;
  - (b) 4:10 deals with the essential character of God's love and the difficulties and cost which God had to face in loving us?
3. If 4:9 tells us how and in whom God's love was manifested in Christ's incarnation and death, how and through whom does 4:12 say God's love is manifested nowadays?
4. Is 4:13:
  - (a) laying down the condition we must fulfil in order to abide in God; or



- (b) pointing out the evidence that shows that we do abide in God?  
If (b), what is the evidence?
5. Does the 'we' in 'we have beheld and bear witness' (4:14) refer to:
    - (a) the apostles and their apostolic witness to the incarnation and cross of Christ? (cf. 1:2); *or*
    - (b) to the experience of all believers? (cf. John 6:40)
  6. Multitudes saw Jesus Christ die on the cross, and multitudes have read about it since. Few at the time saw that he was sent by the Father as saviour, and comparatively few nowadays 'see' that he was sent as their personal saviour. What makes the difference? Is there a connection of thought between verses 13 and 14?
  7. If the evidence of God's abiding in me is the active presence of the Holy Spirit in us (4:13), what additional kind of evidence does 4:15 demand?
  8. In 4:16, is it possible to know the love of God without believing it? Why does John use the perfect tense 'have believed'? Is 'abiding in love' something different from 'having believed the love'?
  9. Is 4:17–18 talking about our love for God or God's love for us? Or both? What, in any case, is the source of our love? (4:19)
  10. What does 'because as he is, even so are we in this world' mean? (4:17)

### Session 10

1. If I claim to love God (4:20–21), what evidence must I show to demonstrate that my love for God is:
  - (a) genuine love and
  - (b) love for *God*?
2. How is natural and unaffected love for God's children produced? (5:1)
3. Would genuine love for God's children ever lead us to break any of God's commandments? (5:2–3)
4. Why is it that for a believer the keeping of God's commandments is not burdensome? (5:3–4)
5. Would you be happy to paraphrase 5:5 'but he who believes that Jesus died for our sins'? If not, why is the belief that Jesus is the Son of God the key to overcoming the world? What is meant by overcoming the world?
6. Is 5:6 meant to be:
  - (a) simply a description of Christ's earthly ministry, or
  - (b) evidence that he is the Son of God?
7. What is it that the Spirit, the water and the blood are witness to? (5:7–8)

8. Can the phrase 'came by water and by blood' refer primarily to Christ's death? If not, to what does it refer? (5:6)
9. How, if at all, does his coming by water and by blood mark him out as the Son of God?
10. If believing the deity of the Lord Jesus is the secret of overcoming the world, what other evidence (aside from that mentioned in 5:5–8) is there for his deity?
11. In 5:7 the KJV has 'For there are three that bear record in heaven, The Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost: and these three agree in one.' The RV, Darby, NIV and all modern translations omit these words.
  - (a) Do they undermine the inspiration of scripture by omitting them?
  - (b) Why do they omit them?

### Session 11

1. Do you agree that 5:13 implies that 5:9–12 was written to give believers assurance that they have eternal life? If so, analyse the steps in the argument:
  - (a) 5:9: 'If we receive the witness of men'—do we? About what?
  - (b) 5:9: How and why is the witness of God greater?
  - (c) 5:10: What does 'have the witness in him' mean?
  - (d) 5:10: How can the verse say that not believing God is equivalent to making God a liar? Is it not rather a sign of humility, to be unsure of salvation?
  - (e) 5:11: 'God gave us' (RV); 'has given' (KJV, NIV). What is the point of the past tense?
  - (f) 5:12: If someone says 'I do have the Son of God but I'm not sure I have eternal life', what would you say to help them?
2. If I asked God for a Rolls Royce, could I be sure he would give it to me? (5:14–15) How can I know if he hears me or not?
3. Is the 'sin unto death' (5:16):
  - (a) the sin of a believer that leads to death under the Lord's chastisement? (1 Cor 11:28–32)
  - (b) the sin of apostasy?
  - (c) the unpardonable sin committed by an unbeliever? (Mark 3:28–30)
4. Who is the 'him' (5:16) to whom God grants life for them that did not 'sin unto death'? The one who has sinned or the one who prays?
5. Does 'he that was begotten of God' (5:18) refer to the believer who keeps himself, or to the Christ who keeps the believer?
6. Is a believer utterly untouchable by the devil? (5:18)
7. What are the elements in the great summary of our Christian certainty, as given in 5:20?

8. What is an idol? A statue? Something I love rather than God? A false idea of God?  
Something I trust rather than trusting God?

## About the Author

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