1 John - Commentaries by Stanley Bruce Anstey

The First Epistle of John, Light

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(Chapters 1:5–2:11)

The problem that faced the Church in those early days was that antichristian teachers had infiltrated the Christian ranks and were corrupting many merely professing believers with their evil doctrines (chaps. 2:18-26; 4:1-6). These teachers professed to know God and to have life eternal—but they were impostors. John's concern was that they would "seduce" the saints with their erroneous doctrines and lead them "astray" (chap. 2:26). The saints, therefore, needed to be able to identify these charlatans and avoid them. To help them to know who were real and who were not, John was led to present various essential elements of God's nature (which are characteristic of the children of God) by which all false pretention to the possession of life eternal could be detected. This would provide the saints with a touchstone by which they could test, and thereby know who were false, and refuse fellowship with them, as John enjoins the elect lady to do (2 John 9-11).

Light and Darkness

(Chap. 1:5)

The first essential element of God's nature and Being that John holds up before us is light. He says: "This then is the message which we have heard of [from] Him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all." "Light" signifies absolute holiness and truth, whereas "darkness" signifies evil and the absence of the knowledge of God. By stating that "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all," John makes it clear that God is absolutely holy and that it is not possible that sin could be found in Him, or in any way be associated with Him. Every true Christian knows this.

In this passage, John states that God not only "is light" (vs. 5), but that He is "in the light" (vs. 7). Since light dispels darkness and reveals things as they truly are (Eph. 5:13), by stating that God is now in the light, John indicates that God has fully revealed Himself. This, as we have seen in verses 1-2, was done by the coming of Christ into the world. There has now been a full revelation of the Father in Christ (John 1:18; 14:9). In Old Testament times, God dwelt in "thick darkness" as to the revelation of His Person (1 Kings 8:12; 2 Chron. 6:1). Certain attributes of God were revealed in those times, but He had not been fully declared. Such a revelation awaited the coming of Christ, the Revealer of God. Thus, resulting from Christ's coming, the God who is light has set Himself in the light.

Not only is God in the light, but His children are also in the light. The coming of Christ has brought God into the light, but it is the blood of Christ shed in His death that fits us for that light (vs. 7). Before conversion, we were once "darkness" (Eph. 5:8a), but in becoming believers on the Lord Jesus Christ, we have been brought "out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9; Acts 26:18; 2 Cor. 4:6). We are now "the children of light" (Eph. 5:8b; 1 Thess. 5:5). Now, every true believer walks in the light, due to the glorious manifestation of life eternal in Christ and the work which He accomplished on the cross.

Various Pretentions to Walking in the Light Examined

Having stated that God "is light" and is "in the light," this immediately becomes a test of a man's profession. John addresses six common pretentions that a person may profess, indicated by the words: "If we say..." (chap. 1:6, 8, 10) and "He that saith ... " (chap. 2:4, 6, 9). In this passage, John gives proofs and counter-proofs by which all such pretentions to knowing God and to being in the light can be checked.

The Test of Being in Fellowship With God in the Light(Chap. 1:6-7)

John says: "If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: but if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all [every] sin." Thus, if God is light and we say that we know Him and are in fellowship with Him, but we live in a way that proves we are in utter ignorance of God, it is clear that our profession is false. All such "walk in darkness" and are not real believers at all. They have no real knowledge of God's holy nature and have nothing in common with Him, for "what fellowship hath light with darkness?" (2 Cor. 6:14) Conversely, if a man truly professes to know God, he will manifest the reality of it. He will "walk in the light" and will "have fellowship" with others who are in the light, and he will understand that "the blood of Jesus Christ His Son" has cleansed his sins away. He will be characterized by these three things:

Firstly, the believer is "in the light." Thus, he has a basic knowledge of God and of His holy nature through having divine life and believing the gospel. This sets him in the light positionally. As mentioned in the Introduction, John looks at things abstractly, He is speaking here of where the believer walks, not how he walks. He is not taking into consideration that a believer, who is in the light, may not walk at times according to the light. (We've all offended in this – James 3:2.) He is looking at light and darkness as a positional thing; everyone is either in the light or in darkness. Someone asked J. N. Darby, "What is 'darkness?' Ans. The absence of the knowledge of God, and, as to that, it is not possible for any Christian to be in darkness. As I get Christ, I get light. God is light, and if I know Him, I am not in darkness" (Notes and Jottings, p. 106). He was also asked, "What if a believer turns his back on the light?" The answer he gave was: "Then the light will shine on his back, because he is always in the light!" (Unknown and Well Known, a biography of John Nelson Darby by W. G. Turner, p. 36).

Secondly, "we have fellowship one with another." The children of God have a common interest—Christ, the Son of God—and this leads them to walk together in happy fellowship. This characterizes them. Again, John is not considering that at times a person may get out of practical fellowship with his brethren with divergent thoughts and ideas, but of what characterizes God's children.

Thirdly, “the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all [every] sin.” Thus, the children of God know the meaning of Christ’s finished work on the cross, of which His blood speaks. Their consciences have been purged as a result of resting in faith on what He accomplished there (Heb. 9:14). Hence, they have no desire to escape the light but are happy to be searched by it (Psa. 139:23-24; John 3:21) because they know that all that the light exposes, the blood has cleansed. In fact, the more thoroughly the light shines on them, the more clearly it is seen that there is no spot of sin on them! Such is the cleansing power of the blood of Christ. The word “cleanseth” in this verse is in the perfect tense in the Greek. This does not mean that the blood needs to be continually re-applied if and when a believer fails, but that the believer abides in a constant state of being cleansed by the blood, because the blood never loses its power, having everlasting efficacy.

The Test of Having a Sin-Nature(Chap. 1:8)

John goes on to examine another pretention; in this case it is in regard to the believer still having the sin-nature in him. He says: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” This false pretention shows that not only were there men associated with the Christian profession who were in darkness concerning the true nature of God, but they were also in darkness as to their own state. They professed to have “no sin” in them! That is, they said that they didn’t have a sin-nature—the flesh! John says that all such persons “deceive” themselves. To make such a claim only proves that they are not in the light, because if they were, the light would have revealed to them what they are. One of the most elementary points of Christian knowledge resulting from being in the light is that we know that we still have the flesh in us (Rom. 7:18). This shows the seriousness of holding error; if our wills are at work regarding the error, we will lose our discernment and be deceived by it. Hence, if we come across someone who professes to know God and to be in fellowship with Him, but he says that he doesn’t have a sin-nature, he is giving us a clear indication that he is probably not a real believer.

The Test of the Confession of Sins(Chaps. 1:9–2:2)

John moves on to another point—the question of having sinned. He says: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His Word is not in us” (Vss. 9-10). The confession of sins marks a true child of God. Since he is in the light, if he sins, the light will search him, and his conscience will be awakened as to what he has done. This will lead to his repentance which will draw forth a frank and humble confession of having sinned. Thus, the effect of being in the light is that we confess our sins. Every true child of God will do this. Someone asked J. N. Darby what a failing believer should do when he has been on a wayward course for years and can’t remember what sin exactly began his departure from the Lord. His reply was, “He can confess his low state generally.” If it’s genuine, it will lead to his restoration.

Confession of sins is really a believer’s exercise in regard to his restoration to communion, when he has failed. If the confession of one’s sins were required of sinners coming to Christ for salvation, then how would anyone get saved? What sinner can remember all his sins? When we take into consideration the fact that "the plowing [thoughts] of the wicked is sin" (Prov. 21:4) and that "the thought of foolishness is sin" (Prov. 24:9), it would be an impossible task. His sins might number in the thousands—maybe in the millions! A sinner seeking salvation and forgiveness of sins is to simply own or confess that he is a sinner (Luke 18:13) and to confess Jesus as his Lord (Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11), but it is not required of him to confess each and every single sin that he has committed. The abstract principle involved in the forgiveness of sins here may be broad enough to cover a person’s initial coming to Christ for eternal forgiveness and salvation (See Synopsis of the Books of the Bible by J. N. Darby, footnote on 1 John 1:9.), but the context shows that John is really speaking of those within the Christian company. Commenting on this, F. B. Hole said: “It is true, of course, that the only honest thing for an unbeliever, when conviction reaches him, is to confess his sins, then forgiveness, full and eternal will be his. The believer is in question here, however. It is, “If we confess ... .” (Epistles, vol. 3, p. 147)

Paternal Forgiveness

Upon confessing our sins, God is “faithful and just [righteous] to forgive us our sins” because the claims of divine justice have been satisfied on account of a ransom having been paid by Christ for our sins (Matt. 20:28; 1 Tim. 2:6). John does not exactly say that the failing believer should ask for forgiveness—because all believers abide in a state of having been eternally forgiven—but he does say that we need to own what we have done by confessing our sins to God the Father. Hence, it is not eternal forgiveness that is in view here, but rather, paternal forgiveness. John adds: “And to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” This has to do with being cleansed from the influence of the sin that we have committed and getting deliverance from its servitude (John 8:34). This is in view of helping us not to fail in that way again.

(Vs. 10)

However, if one who professes to be in the light says that he has “not sinned,” he has made it clear that he is not in the light. If he were truly in the light, the light would have manifested his sins, and he would know that he has sinned. Denying that we have sinned is the fruit of unbelief. It challenges “His Word” which states that all men have sinned (Eccl. 7:20; Rom. 3:23). We won’t contradict the Word if we truly have it abiding in us, as John says here. In the case of a believer, sin interrupts his communion with God. He will be uncomfortable all the while he is out of communion, because every true child of God craves the peace and joy and complacency that emanates from being in communion with God. To lose this is to lose his sense of spiritual well-being, and this will produce a confession of his sins, whereupon communion will be happily regained. A merely professing believer does not feel this loss because he has never known communion with God.

The Advocacy of Christ

(Chap. 2:1-2)

Having spoken of God’s gracious provision for His children who fail, lest any should think that he is teaching that it’s okay for a child of God to sin (because there is this provision), John hastens to correct this false notion. He exclaims: “My children, these things I write to you in order that ye may not sin.” This is the first time in the epistle that John addresses his audience as, “My children.” In this, we see his passion and deep concern for their preservation. In no way would he have believers look lightly on sin. It is a very serious thing indeed for a child of God to be found sinning; we should shrink from the very thought of it. If we truly saw what was required to righteously put away sin—the agonies of the atoning sufferings of Christ on the cross—we would repudiate it!

The KJV says, “My little children ... .” However, the word “little” should not be in the text in chapters 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21. “Little,” refers to those who are young in the faith, but John is addressing the whole family of God here, not just the new converts. Using “little,” in this verse, implies that the young in the faith are the only ones who are in danger of sinning. This is not true; all saints (even an apostle) can fail if

they don’t keep close to the Lord.

John goes on and says: “And if any one sin, we have a Patron [Advocate] with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He is the propitiation for our sins; but not for ours alone, but also for the whole world.” This explains how it is that failing believers come to confess their sins; it is through Christ’s work as an “Advocate with the Father.” Note: John does not say, “When any man sin ... .” This would suggest that sinning is a normal thing for a Christian, which is not true. With Christ interceding for us as our High Priest, we are kept from sinning—if we come to Him for help (Heb. 7:25; 2 Peter 2:9; Jude 24). Hence, in reality, not sinning is normal Christianity. But “if,” through self-will, a believer does sin, there is this provision of God to be restored. This is John’s point here. To say that we haven’t sinned denies our state and the need for Christ’s advocacy, but to say that it’s normal for us to sin denies Christ’s high priesthood.

Christians who fail don’t lose their salvation (as some mistakenly teach); if this were true, then John would have said, “If any man sin, he needs to receive Christ as his Saviour again.” But referring to Christ as our Advocate as he does, indicates that he is dealing with the subject of restoration, not salvation. Note also: Christ’s advocacy is “with the Father.” This shows that a believer’s sin doesn’t affect his relationship with God. God is still his Father and he is still His child, even though he has failed. Similarly, in an earthly family, the child that disobeys his father doesn’t cease to be his child. While our relationship to God cannot be affected by sin, our communion with God most certainly will be, and it will remain suspended until we confess the sin that has broken communion. The problem is that we can get into such a poor state of soul that we are not even conscious that we are out of communion with the Lord and can be like Samson who “wist not that the Lord had departed from him” (Judg. 16:20). We are not to think from this that the Lord forsakes us when we sin; He has promised never to do that (Heb. 13:5). But He does withdraw the sense of His presence with us.

“Advocate” could be translated “Patron,” which means, “one who takes up the cause of another.” In Scripture, it is applied to the Lord (1 John 2:1) and also to the Holy Spirit (translated as “Comforter” in John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). It is important to understand that Christ’s work as an Advocate begins immediately upon a believer sinning, not when he turns back to God in repentance and confesses his sins. John does not say, “If any man confesses his sins, he has an Advocate with the Father.” This would make the working of Christ’s advocacy consequent upon the failing believer’s turning to Him, and that would be putting the “cart before the horse.” If Christ’s work as an Advocate was dependent upon our turning to God and confessing our sins, then no one would ever get restored, because no failing believer can turn back of his own accord—such is the enslaving power of sin (Prov. 5:22; John 8:34). The truth is, we can’t save ourselves, and if we fail, we can’t restore ourselves. Restoration is purely a work of the Lord (Psa. 23:3). It is what Christ does as an Advocate that leads us to turn back to God and to confess our sins.

Four Things Involved in Christ’s Advocacy

We may ask, “What exactly does Christ do as an Advocate that results in the believer being restored?” There are four things involved in this work:

- Firstly, the moment we sin, He goes to the Father and prays for our restoration. The Lord prayed for Peter in this way before Peter turned back (Luke 22:31). At the same time, the Lord maintains our cause before God against the accusations of the devil regarding the sins involved in our failure (Rev. 12:10). The Lord is not there to persuade God to excuse or overlook our sins, but as “Jesus Christ the Righteous,” He points to His blood and says, “I’ve paid for those sins on the ground of having made ‘propitiation’ for them.” Hence, our restoration is based on the unchanging efficacy of Christ’s propitiatory work on the cross.

- Secondly, He directs the Spirit of God to bring the Word of God to bear upon our conscience (Luke 22:61). The Spirit will address our state and our sinful course and will occupy us with our failure until we repent and confess our sins. He may bring a verse to mind, either by hearing, reading, or remembering it, that will speak to us. Thus, God’s Word has a part in a believer’s restoration (Psa. 19:7; 119:9).

- Thirdly, He employs disciplinary action in our lives (1 Peter 3:12). The Father will work to this end too (1 Peter 1:16-17). All of His actions toward us in this governmental way are founded on His love for us (Heb. 12:5-11). His love is such that He will even use trouble (suffering, sickness, sorrow, etc.) in our lives to get our attention and to turn us around (Job 33:14-22).

- Fourthly, He will send our brethren after us (Gal. 6:1; James 5:19-20). A brother or a sister may speak to us about our course, and it may be used of the Lord to turn us around.

These things will work together collectively to bring the failing believer back to God in heart. One who falsely professes to have life eternal does not have Christ as his Advocate (nor as his Saviour), and this is why he won’t acknowledge that he has sinned—and if he does, it will be superficial.

Propitiation

“Propitiation” (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10) is a word that tends to intimidate people because it sounds like it is something deep and complicated. While propitiation is an immensely important truth, its meaning is really not difficult to understand. It simply refers to God’s side of the cross—to what God received through Christ’s atoning work. His death satisfied the claims of divine justice and vindicated God’s holy nature in regard to sin. It has enabled God to come out in grace to man with an offer to fully pardon every sinner who believes. Hence, propitiation has to do with meeting God’s holy claims against sin. But there is also our side of Christ’s work on the cross, which Bible teachers call substitution. The substitutionary side of His work in atonement has to do with meeting the sinner’s need. We needed Someone to take our place under the just judgment of God against our sins. Christ has done this, as the Apostle Peter says—“the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18). Thus, atonement has two parts—propitiation and substitution.

We Preach Propitiation to the World, Not Substitution

John adds: “But not for ours alone, but also for the whole world.” This shows that propitiation is very broad in its application. It has been made for the whole world, and because of it, every single person in the world can be saved if they come to Christ in faith. The KJV adds in italics, “For ‘the sins of’ the whole world.” The use of italics in the KJV indicates that all such

words are not in the Greek text but have been added by the translators to give what they thought would help in clarity. However, almost always, such additions change the meaning of the passage. This is what has happened here. The truth is propitiation has been made for the whole world, but Christ has not borne the sins of all in the world. Scripture states that He bore the judgment of the sins of "many"—which refers to believers (Isa. 53:12; Matt. 20:28; 26:28; Heb. 9:28)—but not of all men. It's true that Christ "died for all;" this is propitiation (2 Cor. 5:15; 1 Tim. 2:6)—but He only bore the sins of the many who would believe. Thus, what Christ accomplished on the cross is "unto all," but only "upon all" who believe (Rom. 3:22). The seriousness of this mistake, though in most cases quite unintentional, is that it presents God as being unrighteous. If Christ has borne the judgment of the sins of all in the world, then God would be unjust to allow anyone to be cast into Hell. They would be paying for their sins which have already been paid for by Christ!

Thus, we preach propitiation to the world in the gospel. We tell the lost that God's holy claims have been met by Christ's atoning work on the cross, and that God is not only satisfied, but that He has been glorified by it. And, if they come to Christ in faith, they can be saved. On the other hand, we teach substitution to those who believe. We tell them that Christ has borne the just judgment of their sins, and therefore, God (being the just God that He is) will never punish them for their sins. To do so would be demanding a double payment, which is something that God would never do because it would be unjust. This precious truth gives the believer peace and assurance.

As a rule, when Christ's work on the cross is in view in the epistles, and the pronouns "we," "us," or "our" are used, it is the substitutionary side of His death that is in view (Isa. 53:5-6; Rom. 4:25; 5:8; 1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 1:7; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18; 1 John 3:5; Rev. 1:5-6, etc.) Sadly, many evangelical preachers, missionary workers, and Sunday School teachers, etc., have misunderstood this, and tell their unsaved audiences that Christ died for their sins, and that He has borne their judgment for them. This misunderstanding largely stems from assuming that those pronouns in Scripture are referring to the whole human race, which they are not; they are referring to believers—the Christian company. The epistles were written to Christians, not to the lost people of this world. We would be very glad indeed if the men of this world were to read them; many have been saved by doing so, but they were not written to them.

The Test of Obedience(Chap. 2:3-5)

John moves along to examine another statement of profession. He says, "And hereby we do know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth His Word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in Him." The test here is obedience. This is one of the greatest proofs of the reality of a person's profession. John mentions two things in this regard:

- Keeping His "Commandments" (vs. 3).
- Keeping His "Word" (vs. 5).

The Lord's "commandments" are the special instructions that He gave to His disciples in His earthly ministry. John refers to them several times in his writings (John 13:34; 14:15; 15:10-12; 1 John 2:3-4, 7-8; 3:22-23; 4:21; 5:2-3; 2 John 4-6). As mentioned in the Introduction, the theme in John's ministry is life eternal in the family of God. It supposes that the happy conditions of affection that exist in the fellowship of the Father and the Son also exist with the children of God, and when the smallest wish or desire is made known to the children, it has the power of a command over their hearts. It becomes something to them that they must do for the One whom they love so dearly (chap. 4:19). Hence, these things are appropriately called "commandments." (Compare 2 Samuel 23:15-17.)

These commandments are not to be confused with the Ten Commandments which God gave to Israel through Moses (Ex. 20). Some have misunderstood this and have imagined that the Lord was teaching that Christians are under the Law, and therefore, they must keep its injunctions. 1 Corinthians 14:37, shows that the Lord's commandments are not the legal Commandments given at Sinai. In that chapter, Paul instructs the saints as to God's order for Christian ministry in the assembly, and he concludes by calling those things "the commandments of the Lord." This shows that we mustn't think that every time we see the word "commandments" in Scripture that it is automatically referring to the Ten Commandments; the instructions Paul gave in 1 Corinthians 14 have nothing to do with the legal Commandments God gave at Sinai. As a rule, when the Mosaic Commandments are referred to in the epistles, they are called "the Law" (Rom. 3:19-20; 13:8-9; 1 Tim. 1:9; James 2:10, etc.)

His commandments are "not grievous" to those who love Him (1 John 5:3) because His "yoke is easy" and His "burden is light" (Matt. 11:29). Thus, the things He has asked us to do in Christianity are not burdensome, as was the Law of Moses (Matt. 11:28; Acts 15:10).

Keeping "His Word" is something higher than keeping His commandments. It has to do with knowing the mind and will of God when there is no specific Bible verse that addresses our matter of concern. Such things are discerned through abiding in Him—that is, by being in communion with the Lord (John 15:4, 7). In such situations, "the love of God" is "perfected" in us. The enjoyment of His love through being in communion with Him has led us to discern His mind, and in that sense the love of God has reached its divine end in us. Hence, as believers, we not only "know Him" by faith (vs. 3), but we also "know that we are in Him" through the personal experience of communion (vs. 5). Our obedience proves the reality of our relationship with Him and shows that we truly know Him.

Conversely, if someone says that he knows God but doesn't keep his commandments (much less His Word), it is clear that the love and obedience that John is speaking about are not in him. The person has manifested his real condition; he has no real knowledge of God and shows himself to be "a liar, and the truth is not in him" (vs. 4).

The Test of Walking as Christ Walked(Chap. 2:6-8)

John then speaks of another test: "He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked. Brethren [beloved], I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning. The old commandment is the Word which ye have heard from the beginning." ("Beloved," is a word that is not used in Scripture for the lost. God loves sinners (John 3:16) but reserves this term of endearment for the children in His family.) Having spoken of keeping His Word through abiding in Him, John anticipates that there will be some who will profess to abide in Him. He shows that all such persons can be tested as to the reality of their profession by the way they walk. True believers will walk "even as He walked"—that is, as the Lord walked when He was here on earth. Thus, the life of Christ is the Christian's standard of living. This goes beyond simple obedience to include the manifestation of the moral features of Christ in our lives—His meekness, His lowliness, His kindness, His compassion, His sympathy, His faithfulness, etc. These graces will be manifested in real believers.

They may not be as distinct in us as they were in the Lord, but nonetheless, they will be seen in every believer in some measure.

(Vs. 7)

With Christ as the example for our walk, John says that he has “no new commandment” for the saints. The “old commandment”—which is to love one another—was perfectly expressed in the Lord’s life. John had no additions or addendums to make to it because you can’t improve on perfection. This stood in stark contrast to what the false antichristian teachers were propounding. They were known for giving a new twist on things—which was not the truth at all. How refreshing it is to hear John say that we have all that we need in Christ!

Just before the Lord returned to His Father in heaven, He gave this commandment to the disciples, calling it “a new commandment” (John 13:34). This is because the kind of love that they had been familiar with under the Mosaic system was loving their neighbour “as” themselves (Luke 10:27). But now in Christianity, we have a new and different reference point; we are to love one another “as” Christ has loved us (John 15:10-12). From the perspective that John was writing—being long after the Lord walked in this world—he referred to it as “old.”

(Vs. 8)

Having stated that, John says: “Again, a new commandment I write unto you, which thing is true in Him and in you: because the darkness is past [passing], and the true light now shineth.” This sounds like John is contradicting himself. He has just said that he had no new commandment to deliver to the saints, but now he says that he does! What does he mean? It is simply that the old commandment to love one another was now to be applied in the new circumstances of the new dispensation that had been introduced with the coming of the Holy Spirit. The new commandment does not differ from the old in substance. As it had been expressed in Christ, it now was finding its expression in the children of God. Accordingly, John says, “Which thing is true in Him and in you.” J. N. Darby remarked, “In another sense it was a new commandment, for by the power of the Spirit of Christ, being united to Him and drawing our life from Him, the Spirit of God manifested the effect of this life” (Synopsis of the Books of the Bible, Loizeaux edition, vol. 5, p. 497). Hence, the old commandment hadn’t lost its freshness; it was the circumstances in which it was to be applied that made it a new commandment.

This manifestation of love in the children of God is the firstfruits of a whole new age of moral regeneration on earth which will be established when Christ reigns in His kingdom—the Millennium (Matt. 19:28). In anticipation of that day, John says, “The darkness is passing, and the true light now shineth.” The KJV says that the darkness is “past,” but the ignorance of God in this world is not past yet; we must wait for the establishment of the Millennium for that, when the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord (Isa. 11:9). When one looks around at the conditions in this world today, he might be inclined to say that the moral and spiritual darkness is increasing, not passing. But to those who have faith, they see that the darkness is in the process of passing because “the true light” has begun to shine in Christ and the children of God, and it is the harbinger of what is to come. That light which has begun to shine now will never be extinguished.

The Test of Divine Love(Chap. 2:9-11)

John examines one more characteristic of being in the light—a genuine love for our brethren. He says, “He that saith he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loves his brother abides in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hates his brother is in the darkness, and walks in the darkness, and knows not where he goes, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.” In keeping with John’s style, he speaks abstractly here. He is not taking into consideration that a true Christian may allow the flesh to rise in his soul and have bitter feelings toward one of his brethren. He is supposing that this is the habit and character of a person’s life because he is in darkness and not saved at all.

If one is truly in the light, he will walk in the light and will not seek an occasion to cause his brother to stumble. He will thus prove his love for his brother and that he truly abides in the light. On the other hand, he that hates his brother “walks in the darkness” and is “blinded” by the darkness that he walks in. He will manifest this by falling for the erroneous doctrines in Christendom, and thus, by departing from the truth; he will also seek to stumble others in the same way. By this, he proves that he has no real love for his brother and that he himself is not a real child of God.

A Summary of the Characteristics of Those in the Light

- They walk in the light, in fellowship with one another, with the knowledge that the blood of Christ has cleansed away their sins (chap. 1:6-7).
- They know what they are in themselves—still having a sin-nature (chap. 1:8).
- If they fail, they confess their sins because they have an Advocate with the Father (chaps. 1:9–2:2).
- In obedience, they keep His commandments and His Word (chap. 2:3-5).
- They exhibit the moral features of Christ in their walk and ways (chap. 2:6-8).
- They love their brethren and prove it by being careful not to stumble them (chap. 2:9-11).

The First Epistle of John, Growth in the Family of God

A PARENTHESIS

(Chapter 2:12-28)

At this point in the epistle, John breaks away from examining the characteristics of God’s nature being replicated in His children to speak of various stages of growth in the family of God. He seems to anticipate someone asking, “Why is it that some of the children bear the features

of the divine nature quite distinctly and others don't?" In a lengthy parenthesis (vss. 12-28), John shows that the children are all at different stages of growth. Those new to the faith (recently saved) will still bear some of the marks of the world in their walk and ways, and this tends to obscure the characteristics of the divine nature in them. It doesn't mean that they aren't real believers, but that they lack moral development due to their spiritual infancy. Moses is a picture of this. When he rose up in faith and forsook Egypt (a type of the world), he came into the wilderness where he was mistaken for being an Egyptian (Ex. 2:19; Heb. 11:24-27). He was a true child of God, but there was something in the way that he dressed and acted that led those who saw him to think that he was an Egyptian.

Verses 12 and 28, act as bookends to this parenthesis. Verse 12 touches on the fact that those whom John is about to address are truly God's children—proved by the fact that their sins are forgiven, a common blessing of all in the family. Verse 28 confirms that they are such and is an exhortation to abide in Him in view of His coming. In both verses, the word "little" (in the KJV) should not be in the text. John is addressing the whole family of God, not just those young in the faith. He uses the word "children" in these two verses as a term of endearment, not to denote spiritual infancy.

(Vs. 12)

He says, "I write to you, children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake." The forgiveness of sins is a Christian blessing that we have in Christ (Acts 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18; Eph. 1:7; 4:32; etc.). It refers to the judgment of our sins being eternally lifted through faith in Christ's finished work on the cross. As a result, we have a conscious knowledge that our sins are gone before the eye of God because our consciences have been purged of guilt (Heb. 9:14; 10:2, 22). The Old Testament saints didn't have this blessing. Through the forbearance of God, their sins were atoned for by Christ's work on the cross (Rom. 3:25), but they had no knowledge of it in their lifetime, because Christ hadn't yet come to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself (Heb. 9:26). As a result, they lived with a degree of uncertainty as to the judgment of their sins (Psa. 25:7, etc.). The only kind of forgiveness they knew was governmental (Lev. 4, etc.).

Various Stages of Growth in the Family

In the parenthesis, John addresses the various ones in the family twice. The first time is to identify the various levels of spiritual attainment that each has reached. The second time, he exhorts each according to the specific dangers that they were likely to face at their level. He uses the terms, "fathers," "young men," and "little children" as figures to denote various stages of growth in the family. He is not speaking of them literally; hence, sisters would be included in these categories. It is of note that while John mentions young men, he makes no mention of old men, which would imply spiritual decline. Eternal life enjoyed in fellowship with the Father and the Son knows no decline. In divine things, a person may be of great age physically, but still be full of spiritual vitality. Caleb is a type of this (Josh. 14:10-11).

Fathers(Vs. 13a)

John says, "I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known Him that is from the beginning." "Fathers," represents those in the family who are full-grown, mature Christians. This word to the fathers shows us that the highest attainment that one can reach in Christian experience is personal acquaintance with Christ—"Him that is from the beginning." Note: he says, "Ye have known Him." He does not say, "You are full-grown because you have a lot of Bible knowledge." We don't mean to minimize Bible knowledge, for understanding the Scriptures is an important component of spiritual growth (1 Peter 2:2)—but that in itself does not produce Christian maturity.

Knowing Him that is from the beginning, coupled with knowing the truth is what leads to Christian maturity. The young men and the little children know Christ too, of course. They know Him as their Saviour, and are thankful that they do, but the fathers know Him in a deeper way, through having spent time with Him in communion. They have reached a stage of spiritual growth in their lives where Christ is everything to them. They have let go of worldly ambitions and goals and are focused on one thing—Christ and His interests. Paul exemplifies this; he said, "This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark [goal] for the prize of the calling on high of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14). The goal of a full-grown Christian is threefold:

- To "know Him" (Phil. 3:10).
- To be "like Him" (1 John 3:2).

To be "with Him" (1 Thess. 5:10).

Thus, in speaking of fathers, John is not referring to how long a person has been a Christian, but of one's level of maturity in divine things. It is quite possible for a person to have been a Christian for many years, and yet not be a father in the sense in which John speaks here. There are many who have been saved for a long time, but they are still spiritual babes because they have given little time and exercise to spiritual things.

Young Men(Vs. 13b)

Next, John says, "I write unto you young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one." This refers to a class of believers who are not babes in Christ, yet they have not had the depth of personal experience with Christ that the fathers have. They are marked by spiritual vigor and have "overcome" Satan, "the wicked one." This does not mean that Satan is no longer a force to be reckoned with, but that they have escaped the wiles of the devil. Verse 14 tells us how—by "the Word of God." Thus, by their obedience to the principles of the Word of God they have defeated his ruses, as did the Lord when He was tempted of the devil in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11). This requires an acquaintance with the Scriptures which they evidently have.

Little Children(Vs. 13c)

Lastly, John says, "I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father." The Greek word translated "little children" here, and in verse 18, is not the same word translated "children" in verses 12 and 28. Here, the word is in the diminutive, and therefore, "little" should be in the text. It is referring to those who are young in the faith—new converts. Again, he is not speaking of physical age; a person could get saved late in life, and would in this sense be a babe in Christ, for we all enter upon the Christian life as little children.

The little children are marked by knowing God as their Father. Those at this stage do not have a working knowledge of the Word of God (the Scriptures) as the young men do, simply because they have not had the time to get established in the Word, being new to the faith. But they have the most elementary thing in Christianity—they know God as their Father. Hence, knowing the Father (as the little children do) marks the beginning of Christian experience, but knowing Christ (as the fathers do) is the pinnacle of Christian experience.

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The second time that John addresses these ones in the family, he exhorts them as to the dangers that they would most likely be susceptible to. These are the first exhortations in the epistle.

Fathers(Vs. 14a)

John says, “I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known Him that is from the beginning.” It is interesting that his word to the fathers is the same as what he said to them the first time. He adds nothing because nothing can be added to what is the pinnacle of Christian experience. When Christ becomes the sole Object of our hearts and we are filled with the joy of communion with Him, we can’t get anything higher than that! There is no need for John to give them a word of caution as to the dangers in the way because the enemy cannot touch those who habitually abide in Christ (Deut. 33:12; 1 Sam. 22:23). This shows that being filled with this blessedness is the best safeguard against the enemy’s seductions.

Young Men(Vss. 14b-17)

Moving on to the young men, he says, “I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the Word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one.” They are commended for two things: being “strong” (spiritually) and having “overcome” the devil’s stratagems (Eph. 6:11 – W. Kelly’s translation). John has spoken of the young men overcoming the wicked one in verse 13, but here he gives us the secret of their victory—having the Word of God abiding “in” them. This goes beyond simply knowing the Word to digesting it, and consequently, having it as an integral part of our beings, so that it governs our movements in this world. When that is the case, the devil’s attempts to trip up the believer are defeated. When the Word of God abides in a believer in the way in which John speaks, he will not relinquish the truth even though others around him may be capitulating. Their strength in overcoming the wicked one is derived from their adherence to the principles of the Word of God, not from human fortitude and clever reasoning.

A Warning Against Worldliness

(Vs. 15)

Getting the victory over the wicked one does not mean that the young men were out of danger. In fact, it has often been said that the child of God is never in a more dangerous position spiritually then after he has gained a victory over the enemy. This is because we tend to let our guard down at such times, and we become vulnerable. Having overcome the wicked one, there is another enemy that they need to be wary of—the world. Hence, John warns: “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. The “world” is used in Scripture in three ways:

- As a place—the planet Earth (John 1:10; 9:5; 13:1; 16:28; 18:37; Acts 17:24; Rom. 1:20; 1 Tim. 1:15; Heb. 11:3; Rev. 13:8).

- As a society where Christ is excluded (John 8:23; 15:19; 17:14b-16, 18; Rom. 12:2; Gal. 1:4; 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:10; James 4:4; 1 John 2:15-17; 4:5a; 5:19). The world, in this sense, refers to the system of affairs and activities on earth which man in his alienation from God has arranged in an attempt to keep himself happy without having to face God about the question of his sins. It started when Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and his posterity developed various pursuits in this life which absorb the interests of men even to this day (Gen. 4). It is now a vast system with many departments—the arts, the sciences, education, literature, religion, commerce, politics, professional sports, etc. It all operates on the false principles and values that are based on the desires of the flesh.

- As the people who are part and parcel of the society that man has built for himself in his alienation from God (Psa. 17:14; John 1:10b; 3:16; 4:42; 6:51; 15:18; 17:14a; 1 John 4:5b, 14).

The aspect that John is warning about here, in verse 15, is the society where Christ is excluded. Even if a believer has made considerable spiritual progress, he still needs to be on guard against this enemy. The world’s values, principles, and goals are all centered around self—doing what we want to do to please ourselves. We are led to believe that pursuing those things will make us happy and satisfied, but those who do always feel empty and unfulfilled. Following those worldly goals and ambitions will surely waste our lives on passing things, and thus, we will be hindered from doing the will of God. Hence, John’s cautionary word is: “Love not the world.” By saying, “If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him,” he makes it clear that we can’t enjoy fellowship with the Father and with the world at the same time; it must be one or the other. It’s true that we have to pass through the world, and in doing so, we use “the things that are of the world” in our everyday responsibilities (1 Cor. 7:31, 33), but we don’t have to love the world and march to the beat of its drum. The right-minded Christian, therefore, ought to view the world-system as it truly is—an enemy—and separate from it. The Lord prayed for us that we would be preserved from its influences (John 17:14-17).

Three False Principles on Which the World Operates

(Vs. 16)

To help us see what the world really is in its essence, John points to three false principles on which it operates. He says, “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.” Firstly, there is the “lust of the flesh.” This refers to lusting after things that would gratify illicit bodily appetites. Secondly, there is the “lust of the eyes.” This refers to the evil desires of covetousness, wanting to possess what we see. Thirdly, there is the “pride of life.” This is wanting to be recognized as being someone important in this life. It has often been pointed out that these three things were used successfully by the devil on Eve in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:6) and unsuccessfully on the Lord in the temptations in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11).

(Vs. 17)
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John concludes his remarks to the young men by saying, “The world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever [for eternity].” Worldliness could not be defined more succinctly—it is the love for passing things. Those who live for those things will lose it all when they pass out of this world. Lot is an example here. He lived for worldly things in Sodom, and they were all burnt up when God’s judgment fell on that city. He lost everything that he had lived for! (Gen. 19) On the other hand, the person who does the will of God abides in the blessedness of it for “eternity.” The results of doing the will of God will be carried with us into eternity (Luke 10:42; 12:33; 16:9). It should be obvious to all what we should be living for. No sober person invests in a company that is about to go bankrupt! Neither will a sober Christian live for the world that is soon to pass away. It would make as much sense as re-arranging the deck chairs on the sinking Titanic!

Three Reasons Why We Should Not Love the World

John has given us three cogent reasons as to why Christians should not be living for the world:

- The things of the world spoil our enjoyment of the love of the Father (vs. 15).
- The things of this world excite the baser instincts of our fallen natures (the flesh) which lead us on a course of sin away from God (vs. 16).
- The things of the world are transient; the person who lives for them is the loser, because he can’t take them with him into the next world (vs. 17).

Little Children(Vss. 18-27)

John passes on to exhort the new converts. He says, “Little children, it is the last time [hour]; and as ye have heard that Antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time [hour]. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.” As in verse 13, “little” should be in the text here because it is describing those who are new to the faith. John does not speak of their spiritual infancy disparagingly; there is nothing wrong with a person being a spiritual babe in Christ, if he is new to the faith. The Apostle Paul, on the other hand, chides the Corinthians and the Hebrews for being “babes” (1 Cor. 3:1-3; Heb. 5:12-13). They had been on the Christian path for quite some time and should have progressed; but had failed to do so because of carnality (the Corinthians) and the interference of earthly religion (the Hebrews). Whether one is a babe through his lack of progress or because he is a new believer, all such are vulnerable to the deceptions of the enemy (Eph. 4:14) and need the cautionary warning that John gives here.

A Warning Against Spiritual Seduction

The favourite targets of the enemy are those new to the faith. It is, therefore, imperative that new converts are made aware of the fact that there is a spiritual battle being waged over their heads, and that the enemy of their souls has designs on taking them down through his seductions. Since new converts tend to look up to teachers—often to the point of seeing them above what they are (Mark 8:24; 2 Cor. 12:6-7)—the enemy cleverly employs teachers who are heterodox in doctrine to lead the young “astray” (vs. 26). Thus, John informs them that even though the “Antichrist” of Bible prophecy has not yet appeared—a corrupt man who will lead the masses astray through his blasphemy (2 Thess. 2:2-12; Rev. 13:11-18)—the spirit of Antichrist had already begun to work in the Christian testimony. “Antichrist” means “against Christ.” Any teaching that is against Christ, either in that coming day, or now, has the spirit of Antichrist. He says that there were many antichristian teachers at work in that day, and their presence was a proof that it was “the last hour.” How much more so in our day!

John says, “They went out from us.” The “us” here is referring to the apostles. These charlatans didn’t go out of the Christian testimony—they still called themselves Christians. What they “went out” from was “the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship” (Acts 2:42). He says that the fact that they didn’t continue in the truth manifested that “they were not of us.” They didn’t lose their salvation by becoming defective (as some would teach)—they were never real to start with! The KJV says, “They were not all of us.” This could be misleading; it implies that some of them were true believers. But it should be translated: “That none are of us,” meaning that they were all false.

The Unction of the Spirit

(Vss. 20-21)

In view of this assault on Christianity, John directs these little ones to the great resource they have in the Holy Spirit. He says, “But ye have an unction [anointing] from the Holy One, and ye know all truth” (W. Kelly’s translation). The “unction [anointing]” of the Spirit is a special aspect of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling which gives the believer discernment regarding truth and error. This shows that the newest child of God has the indwelling presence of the Spirit. It is received the moment we believe the gospel (Gal. 3:2; Eph. 1:13). In John’s Gospel, the Spirit of God is given to believers to enhance their understanding and enjoyment of the truth (chaps. 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-15), whereas in John’s epistle, the Spirit is given to the saints more for the purpose of protecting them against being misled by the enemy (chaps. 2:18-27; 3:24; 4:1-6, 13; 5:6-7).

It is noteworthy that John doesn’t turn these young ones to the Word of God and tell them to use the Scriptures to refute the evil teaching. Had they been at the level of the young men who had the Word of God abiding in them, he could have said that. But these little children were new to the faith and didn’t have a working knowledge of the Word of God yet, and therefore, would not be able for such a task. This being the case, John points to the “unction [anointing] of the Spirit” that would give them to “know all things.” He says, “I have not written unto you because ye know not the truth, but because ye know it, and that no lie is of the truth” (vs. 21). John does not mean that these new believers knew all the various tenets of the Christian revelation of truth, but having the unction of the Spirit, they had the capacity to discern the truth when it was presented. Thus, they would “know it” when they heard it. The Spirit would give them a sense in their souls that what was being put forth was indeed the truth. Conversely, if someone put forth error, they would also be able to discern that there was something wrong with it. Perhaps they couldn’t explain what exactly was wrong with the false doctrine, but they would know enough to avoid it, and thus, they would be preserved.

(Vss. 22-23)

John pauses to mention the two main forms of error with which the saints will meet before continuing on with his remarks on the unction of the Spirit. These are:

- The denial that “Jesus is the Christ [Messiah].” This is the blasphemy that is held among unbelieving Jews.

- The denial of the eternal relationship of “the Father and the Son.” This is the blasphemy that is held among many false teachers in the Christian testimony.

To deny that Jesus is the Christ is to deny the essential message of the Old Testament (Acts 17:2-3), and, to deny the Father and the Son is to deny the essential message of the New Testament (Matt. 3:16-17). We see from this that the attacks of the enemy are usually, if not always, aimed at the Person of Christ. In fact, it will be found that at the bottom of every antichristian system of teaching is some kind of blasphemy in connection with the Person of Christ. These religious systems may use Biblical terminology in their teachings, but the real test is in what they hold in relation to “the doctrine of Christ” (2 John 9). H. Smith said, “When the Antichrist appears, he will unite the lie of the Jews with the lie that arises in the Christian profession, denying both that Jesus is the Messiah and that He is a divine Person” (The Epistles of John, p. 17). The Apostle John brands the one who puts forth these false doctrines as being a “liar.”

(Vss. 24-26)

John then adds an important condition in connection with the working of the unction of the Spirit. He says, “Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father. And this is the promise that He hath promised us, even life eternal.” This shows that the spiritual discernment imparted by the Holy Spirit is not an automatic thing. John’s use of the word “if” shows that the Spirit’s work as the unction is contingent upon the believer’s abiding in the Christian revelation of the Father and the Son (received when we believe the gospel) and continuing in conscious fellowship with the Father and the Son, which is the essence of “life eternal” (John 17:3). We mention this because there are many who are truly saved and indwelt with the Holy Spirit who have been deceived by erroneous teachers, because they haven’t gone on in communion with the Father and the Son. This shows how important it is to maintain communion with God; it is our spiritual “lifeline.” John explains that he was giving this warning because of the very real danger of those who were trying to “seduce” them (vs. 26).

(Vs. 27)

John then re-states the great resource that they had in the Holy Spirit: “The anointing [unction] which ye have received of Him abideth with you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in Him.” Some have thought that what John is saying here is that the way to solve the problem of imbibing error from false teachers is to refuse all teaching from men. They think that what he is saying is that we don’t need men to teach us the truth because we have the Holy Spirit who teaches us, and that this is all we need. Consequently, they reject the reading of all written ministry (commentaries). But that is not what John is saying. This verse does not mean that we don’t need Christian teachers in the Church. If that were so, why has God raised up “teachers” and sent them to teach the Church? (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11-14). This verse simply means that when truth or error are presented to us, we won’t need someone to tell us that it is such. If we are in communion with the Lord, the unction of the Spirit will give us to know whether it is truth or error. Accordingly, we will reject the error and hold fast the truth, and thus “abide in Him,” and thus be preserved.

(Vs. 28)

F. B. Hole states: “Verse 28 of chapter 2 stands as a short paragraph by itself, and the second chapter would more fittingly have ended with it” (Epistles, vol. 3, p. 158). The Apostle herein returns to addressing the whole family of God, and in doing so, he brings his digression on growth in the family to a close. (As mentioned earlier, the word “little,” in the KJV, should not be in this verse.)

It is a simple exhortation to the family as a whole (all three categories) to “abide in Him.” It is our great safeguard against all antichristian teaching. This shows that there is no substitute for communion, whether we are mature Christians, or new converts. John looked on to the day of manifestation (the Appearing of Christ) when the results of our service will be displayed. His work as an apostle will be manifested and the labours of the saints will be too. He shows that it is possible that we could be put to shame at that time because we didn’t go on well in the path of faith. His desire is that we would all have “confidence” in that day and that none would be “ashamed before Him at His coming.”

The First Epistle of John, Life

(Chapter 2:29–4:6)

(Chap. 2:29)

This verse begins a new paragraph which extends into chapter 3. It would have been better if those who have set the divisions of the chapters and verses in our Bibles had placed it in the third chapter; it belongs to the subject developed there.

Various Moral Attributes of the Divine Nature

At this point, John resumes his proofs and counter-proofs regarding those who are the children of God and those who are not. The next thing that he holds up are the moral features in the divine nature. Hence, being “born of God,” which is the means by which we receive divine life, is fittingly alluded to several times in the latter part of the epistle (chaps. 2:29; 3:9 twice; 5:1, 4, 18 twice). The characteristic features of the divine nature were manifested perfectly in Christ when He was here and can be seen in the children of God now, though sometimes obscured in us.

J. N. Darby states that there are three such proofs of a person’s possession of divine life in this passage (Synopsis of the Books of the Bible, Loizeaux edition, pp. 508-515). These are:

The Proof of Practising Righteousness

(Chaps. 2:29–3:10)

The first proof of divine life that John touches on is righteousness. He says: “If ye know that He is righteous, ye know that everyone that doeth [practices] righteousness is born of Him.” Righteousness is “doing what is right.” Unrighteousness is “doing what is not right.” It is beyond question that God is absolutely righteous. Nevertheless, John states this obvious fact and uses it as the test of a person’s profession. His point here is that since God is righteous, all who have His life will also be righteous, because they are “born of Him.” Hence, the children of God will manifest themselves as such by their practice of righteousness, for the moral characteristics of the Father will be seen in them. This, then, can be used as a benchmark to test every person who professes to be a child of God. Simply put, a child of God will practice righteousness and one who is not a true child of God will not.

John uses the word “practice” repeatedly in these verses in connection with righteousness (doing what is right) and lawlessness (doing our own will in independence of God). He is speaking of the over-all tenor of a person’s life—something that is habitual and characteristic of him—not what he may do that is out of character. Thus, the children of God, though not perfect in their ways, practice righteousness characteristically. It is the same with those who are unbelievers; their life is characterized by practicing lawlessness. They may do something, now and then, that seems to be righteous, but what characterizes them is the pursuit of the things of the world; it is the habit of their life.

Loved of the Father

(Chap. 3:1)

John digresses slightly to explain where the children of God get the moral power to practice righteousness—it is produced through contemplation of the Father’s love. Hence, he says, “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons [children] of God.” (The KJV says “sons,” but it should be translated “children.” Sonship, which is Paul’s distinctive line of truth, is not the subject here.)

In John 3:16, John dwells on the measure of God’s love to the lost; here in 1 John 3:1, he dwells on the manner of the Father’s love to His children. We are the objects of His love! He wants us to not only know this wonderful fact, but to live in the enjoyment of it. Living in the conscious sense that we are loved perfectly and eternally by the Father is a strong motivation for practicing righteousness. In fact, He loves us just as much as He loves His own Son! (John 17:23).

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Having this connection with the Father and the Son through the possession of life eternal, disconnects us morally from the world—for the two are diametrically opposed to one another (chap. 2:15-16). The world did not know Christ when He was here (John 1:10); so blinded were they that they thought He had a demon! (John 8:48) And, the world does not know the children of God either. John emphasizes this, stating: “Therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew Him not.” This means that we cannot expect the people of this world to understand our inner springs and motives for living for Christ and practicing righteousness. To be guided and controlled by the unseen heavenly realities which have captured our hearts’ affections is a complete mystery to the man of the world. All such realities are hidden from him, for the springs of our life are “hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3).

(Vs. 2)

John adds, “Beloved, now are we the sons [children] of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is.” Thus, our relationship with God as His “children” is not something that we are waiting for—we are that “now.” Physically we don’t look any different from the people of this world because we are still in our bodies of “humiliation” which show the signs of aging, sickness, pain, sorrow, etc., as do all in the human race (Phil. 3:21). But when Christ appears out of heaven to judge this world in righteousness (Psa. 97:13; Acts 17:31), we will come with Him (Zech. 14:5; 1 Thess. 3:13; 4:14; Jude 14; Rev. 19:14), and will be manifested “like Him” in glory (Phil. 3:21; Col. 3:4; 2 Thess. 1:10). The world will know then that we are the children of God and that we are loved of the Father! (John 17:23)

John says that our assurance of this reality is in the fact that “we shall see Him as He is.” This will occur at the Rapture, some seven years before the Appearing of Christ. Note: he doesn’t say that we are going to see Him as He was, but as He is. Thus, we will see Him as a glorified Man, and at that very moment, we will be transformed instantly into His likeness in glory! The Apostle Paul said, “As we have borne the image of the earthly, we shall bear the image of the heavenly” (1 Cor. 15:49). This wonderful transformation will take place “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump” (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16). What a moment that will be!

(Vs. 3)

John goes on to speak of the practical effect that this hope (of seeing Christ as He is) has on the children of God. He says, “And every man that hath this hope in Him purifieth himself, even as He is pure.” Thus, knowing that we are shortly going to be made like Christ (morally and physically) produces an exercise in us to be morally like Him now while we wait for Him to come. Every true believer who has this hope before him “purifies himself” by removing things from his life that are inconsistent with the holiness of God (2 Cor. 7:1; 1 Peter 1:15-16). The standard at which we aim in this practical purification of our lives is Christ’s own purity—“even as He is pure.” He “knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21), He “did no sin” (1 Peter 2:22), and “in Him is no sin” (1 John 3:5). Note: John doesn’t say that we purify ourselves as Christ purified Himself, because Christ never needed purification—He is pure and could not be purer! Hence, this hope, if held rightly, has a sanctifying effect on the believer.

Righteousness and Lawlessness

(Vs. 4)

While the true child of God will be known by “perfecting holiness” in his life as he waits for the Lord to come, one who merely professes to be a child of God will have no concern for such a thing. It will be evident in his life. This was the case with the Gnostic teachers. They made great

pretention to having higher spiritual knowledge but were quite careless in personal holiness. John, therefore, proceeds to define the true nature of sin, and in doing so, he exposes these charlatans. He says, “Every one that practices sin practices also lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.” In stating this, John is not speaking of a failing believer committing a sin, but of a person who “practices” sin as a characteristic thing in his life. His over-all character proves that he is not a real child of God at all, even though he may profess to be one.

The KJV incorrectly renders this verse: “Sin is the transgression of the Law.” If this were true, then we would have to say that there was no sin in the world until God gave Moses the Law! This couldn’t be true; it contradicts Romans 5:12-14, which states that sin was in the world before the Law. The J. N Darby Translation footnote says, “To translate this ‘sin is the transgression of the Law,’ as in the A. V. [Authorized Version — the KJV] is wrong, and gives a false definition of sin, for sin was in the world, and death as a consequence, before the giving of the Law.” It should be rendered: “Sin is lawlessness.” Lawlessness is doing our own will in independence of God. It is the exercise of self-will.

(Vs. 5)

John adds the happy antidote that even though we have sinned and have come short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23), Christ was “manifested to take away our sins,” and to bring us into a relationship with God. He came to settle the question of sin for the glory of God and for the blessing of mankind. His work of atonement on the cross has put away sin before God judicially (Heb. 9:26), and in a coming day, He is going to take away every effect of sin from this world literally and bring in an eternal state of sinlessness (John 1:29; Rev. 21:1-8). In the meanwhile, He is taking away the guilt of sin from those who believe by saving their souls and purging their consciences (Heb. 9:14). In speaking of Christ as the great Sin-bearer, John is careful to distinguish Him from all other men, stating: “And in Him is no sin.” This means that He didn’t have a fallen sin-nature as other men do; His nature was (and is) holy (Luke 1:35).

(Vs. 6)

Having had our sins taken away when we received Christ as our Saviour, John gives God’s simple way by which we are kept from sinning thereafter. He says, “Whosoever abideth in Him sinneth not.” Abiding in Christ is to live in constant communion with Him (John 15:4). We will not sin when we are in the Lord’s presence in communion with Him. In keeping with his style, he speaks in absolutes—stating the normal state of the children of God. (Sad to say, it’s when we get out of communion with Him that we sin.) On the other hand, “Whosoever sinneth hath not seen Him, neither known Him.” John speaks here of a person who lives in a continual state of lawlessness, which is the normal state of unbelievers. He says that such a person really doesn’t know the Lord at all. Note: John does not say, “Whosoever committeth a sin...” because he is not speaking of individual acts of sin, but of the over-all tenor of a person’s life.

The Two Natures Contrasted

(Vss. 7-10)

On account of the presence of sin and sinful men in this world, John goes on to exhort the children of God to be on their guard against the deceptions of false teachers who were looking for opportunities to slip in among the saints and “lead” them “astray.” To help them identify these false workers, John gives a short dissertation on the basic characteristics of the two natures—the old nature inherited in natural birth through our parents (Psa. 51:5) and the new nature imparted by God in new birth (John 3:3-8). He does not view these two natures in one person (i.e. a believer), but abstractly—by what characterizes believers and unbelievers.

He gives us a simple test by which all pretention to having the divine nature can be tried. He says, “He that doeth [practices] righteousness is righteous, even as He is righteous. He that committeth [practices] sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning” (vss. 7-8). Thus, those who are real can be distinguished from those who are false by looking at the general practice of their lives, for a man’s “practice” will indicate his character. The real will practice righteousness and the false professor will practice sin (lawlessness); by this their true character will be manifested. This shows that the possession of the new nature is not proved by the profession a man makes, but by the way he acts as a matter of practice. Hence, we mustn’t be naïve and be deceived by an off-handed comment that a person might make that sounds like he has faith in Christ. His real identity will be known by the character of his life.

If a person characteristically practices sin, it is clear that he is “of the devil.” The devil is characterized by lawless rebellion against God and has practiced sin “from the beginning.” The beginning that John is speaking of here couldn’t be Satan’s beginning as a creature. If that were the case, then God could be charged with creating an evil creature, which is not true. God did not create Satan as the devil; he became that through rebellion. John is referring to the beginning (the origin) of sin in the moral universe, which began with Satan’s revolt against God (Ezek. 28:11-19). Some think that sin had its beginning in Adam’s fall (Gen. 3) because Romans 5:12 says, “By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin.” However, that verse is not referring to sin and death entering the primeval creation, but to sin and death entering the human race (the Adamic world). It is a mistake to think that sin did not exist until Adam fell. Satan and his angels fell before Adam fell and are clearly the first sinners. That Satan was a sinner before Adam can be seen in the fact that he was working sinfully in the garden of Eden, lying and deceiving the woman before she and her husband had sinned. In Romans 5:12, Paul traces sin’s entrance into the human race, whereas John takes us all the way back to the origin of sin.

(Vs. 8b)

He adds, “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy [undo] the works of the devil” (vs. 8b). The devil has worked in the hearts of men through the old sin-nature, filling men with unbelief and lawlessness. The Lord has come to “undo” those evil works in the hearts of men by giving life eternal to those who believe on Him (John 10:10).

(Vs. 9)

Those who believe can live a sinless life above the evil influence of the devil, because “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit [practice] sin; for His seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God” (vs. 9). Many sincere believers have been troubled by this verse. They have not understood John’s abstract style of writing and have concluded that they must not be born again, as they thought they were, because they have sinned after they received Christ. However, this verse does not mean that a believer cannot sin. John’s word in chapter 2:1 would be pointless if that were the case. He indicates there that a believer can sin if he is not careful. John’s point here is that the new nature in a believer, received in new birth, cannot sin. This means that if we live after the appetites and desires of our new nature, we

will not sin. Thus, he views the believer as wholly identified with the new nature.

(Vs. 10)

John then sums up the basic characteristics of the two natures. He says, “In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth [practices] not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother.” From a moral and spiritual perspective, John traces two seeds among men: those who are “children of God” (John 1:12-13) and those who are “children of the devil” (Matt. 13:25; John 8:44; Acts 13:10). These are two distinct families, each having a character that bears a moral resemblance to their father. One is “of” God, and the other is “of” the devil. Having stated in verse 7 that a person who habitually practices righteousness shows clearly that he is righteous, John concludes with the converse here in verse 10. A person who habitually “does not practice righteousness” manifests that he is not of God. Morally, he has the same nature as the devil, and in that sense, is a child of the devil. Many such persons may not live outrageously wicked lives, but they do not “practice righteousness,” nor do they have divine “love” in them.

The Proof of Love

(Chap. 3:11-23)

Having mentioned “love” in verse 10, John expands on this essential characteristic of the divine nature in this next series of verses. It is the second great proof that a person possesses divine life. He says: “For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother’s righteous.”

Love For the Brethren

The old commandment, which in a sense is new (chap. 2:7-8), which is to “love one another,” is revisited as evidence of divine life. As was the case with practical righteousness, love was perfectly manifested in the life of the Lord Jesus. Cain is brought forward as the antithesis of these two things. He manifested lawlessness and hatred—the two opposite characteristics of righteousness and love. He killed his brother because his brother’s sacrifice was accepted by God and his was not. God’s approval of Abel stirred up jealous hatred in Cain’s heart which led him to murder him. This shows what unchecked hatred can lead to.

(Vs. 13)

John then reminds us that in manifesting these two characteristics of the divine nature—which we will do if we truly are children of God—we will have the world’s hatred vented upon us. He says: “Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you.” This should be of no surprise to any child of God; the Lord forewarned the disciples of it (John 15:18–16:4). The evil principles that were first manifested in Cain have marked the course of the world ever since.

(Vs. 14)

In the presence of the world’s hatred, we know that we have “passed from death unto life” (John 5:24) because we love the brethren. The activity of divine love is the practical proof of divine life. On the other hand, if a person who professes to be a child of God does not love his fellow brethren, he proves that he is not a child of God at all—in actuality, he “abides in (moral) death.”

(Vss. 15-16)

John then contrasts the extreme example of hatred with the greatest example of love. He says: “Every one that hateth his brother is a murderer; and ye know that no murderer hath life eternal abiding in him. Herein we know love, because He laid down His life for us; and we ought for the brethren to lay down our lives” (W. Kelly Translation). Hatred leads to murder, but love leads to self-sacrifice for the good of others. Christ’s sacrifice is the perfect example of the latter—“He laid down His life for us” (John 10:11). Both acts of extreme hatred and of extreme love led to death! But it was for entirely different reasons—one was on account of violence and the other was pure submission. John says that this same expression of love should be seen in the children of God because they have that same divine life. If we are real believers, our love will express itself in activity. We will “by love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13) and will “lay down our lives” in service for our brethren. Practical love is a genuine proof that we are real.

(Vs. 17)

In contrast, he says: “But whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?” Someone who professes to have divine life but does not manifest love and compassion toward his brother—if it is the habitual practice of his life—proves that he is not a real child of God.

(Vs. 18)

Knowing the deceptiveness of the human heart (Jer. 17:9), John cautions us about having mere superficial expressions of love. (Compare James 2:15-16.) He says: “Children, let us not love with word, nor with tongue, but in deed and in truth.” The Apostles Paul and Peter exhort the saints to this end as well (Rom. 12:9; 1 Peter 1:22). This shows that God wants reality in His people.

Confidence in Prayer

(Vss. 19-22)

John adds: “And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence [boldness] toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of [from] Him, because we keep His commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.” Speaking strictly of believers here, he shows that by having genuine love for our brethren, we have a personal confirmation in our souls that we are “of the truth.” And since this is so, we have confidence in the presence of God to make bold requests in prayer. The assurance that John speaks of here is not the assurance of our soul’s eternal salvation, but the assurance of having our prayer requests granted.

He adds an important condition that mustn't be overlooked—"if our heart condemn us not." This shows that when approaching God in prayer, we need to have a good conscience. This is achieved by judging ourselves and confessing our sins (1 Cor. 11:31; 1 John 1:9). If we have something on our conscience that we haven't confessed, our heart will condemn us, and we will not have this confidence. Assuming that we have judged ourselves, which is the normal Christian state, we are assured that we will "receive of Him" all that we ask for. This is the result of walking in fellowship with Him as a habitual thing. Our hearts' desires are formed by His blessed influence and the enjoyment of the things which He enjoys (Psa. 36:8), and thus, our requests are only for those things that work toward the accomplishment of those divine desires. Living in His presence, He lays on our hearts the things that He is about to do, and we ask for those things, and they are granted. We receive "whatsoever we ask" because we ask according to the will of God (chap. 5:14-15). Our confidence in His presence is a result of our obedience—we "keep His commandments" and "do the things that are pleasing in His sight." Christ, as a dependent Man on earth, is a living example of this. He always did those things which pleased His Father (John 8:29), and He always prayed in concert with the will of God, and He was "heard because of His piety" (Heb. 5:7).

(Vs. 23)

John has spoken of the Lord's commandments (plural), now he speaks of God's "commandment" (singular). It is to "believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as He (Christ) gave us commandment." We see here two essential elements of the new nature—faith and love. These things will be seen in every believer, though sometimes only faintly. One who is not a real child of God will not manifest these things.

The Proof of Having the Indwelling Holy Spirit

(Chaps. 3:24–4:6)

As a third proof of one possessing the divine nature, John goes on to speak of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer by which God Himself dwells in us. He says: "He that keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He is in him. And hereby we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit which He has given to us." There are two abidings here:

- Our abiding in Him—This is a practical thing, having to do with holding intimate communion with Him. As John indicates here, this is the result of personal obedience—the keeping of His commandments (John 14:21, 23; 15:4).

- His abiding in us—This is a permanent thing resulting from our having the divine nature (John 14:20).

Both aspects of abiding are a result of the presence of the Holy Spirit in us. This, then, is another proof by which all pretention to being a child of God can be tested. A person who is not a real child of God will not have the indwelling presence of the Spirit. Consequently, he will not abide in communion with the Lord, nor will he have God's abiding presence in him. This will be evident in his actions.

False Teachers

(Chap. 4:1)

Having introduced the subject of the Holy Spirit dwelling in the children of God in chapter 3:24, John hastens to caution us in this 4th chapter about the many false spirits that are abroad in the world who are attempting to imitate the Spirit of God. He says: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world." His point here is that since it is "the last hour" and many antichrists are at work (chap. 2:18), we need to be careful who we listen to. We are not to "believe every spirit." This means that we mustn't be naïve and think that just because a man speaks from the Bible that he is necessarily speaking the truth. It is one thing to speak from the Scriptures and another thing to speak according to the Scriptures. Satan is never more satanic in his activity than when he uses the Scriptures to deceive people. He is well able to quote from the Word of God and to wrongly apply it to achieve his end in leading people astray (Matt. 4:6). The Apostle Paul warned: "No marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

With this in mind, John exhorts us to "try the spirits." He does not use the word "spirits" to denote the teachers' attitude or demeanor (Dan. 5:12; 6:3), but rather, to indicate that behind every teacher is an actual spirit—either the Spirit of God (Acts 2:4) or an evil spirit (2 Chron. 18:21). Paul foretold that in "the latter times" there would be "seducing spirits" in the house of God who would introduce doctrinal error, and that false teachers would imbibe and propagate these erroneous doctrines and lead many astray (1 Tim. 4:1). These teachers often have a pleasant exterior with which people get enamored and are thereby deceived (Rom. 16:18). They may look like sheep, but they are really "wolves" in "sheep's clothing." The Lord forewarned us of these evil workers (Matt. 7:15). Thus, it is not only their manner that we are to test (which John has done in his previous proofs and counter-proofs), but also their message. This is especially so when it comes to "the doctrine of Christ" (2 John 9), for this is where the evil spirits that animate these false prophets expose themselves. The moment they open their mouths and teach on the subject of the Person of Christ, they betray their true character.

Three Tests for Detecting False Teachers

John goes on to give three tests by which every teacher can be checked. These tests will manifest those who are true, and will also expose those who are false, for a man's doctrine will reveal what spirit is energizing him. Note: this is not done by delving into the false doctrines that are afoot in Christendom. Such an occupation will only defile us, and we could be stumbled in the process. (Compare Deuteronomy 12:29-32.) Likewise, we don't find out whether a dozen bottles contain poison by taking a drink from each one!

(Vss. 2-3)

The first and greatest test has to do with what the teacher holds on the Person of Christ. As mentioned, this is where these seducing spirits expose themselves, for they cannot bring themselves to speak well of Christ and to exalt Him (1 Cor. 12:3). John says: "Hereby ye know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses Jesus Christ come in flesh is of God." Thus, the distinguishing mark of ministry that emanates from the Holy Spirit is that Christ will be exalted.

Confessing “Jesus Christ come in flesh” is more than a mere confession of words from our lips; demons can confess Christ as the Son of God in that way (Matt. 8:29). The confession of which John speaks indicates that the person is sound in his doctrine regarding Christ’s deity and His perfect humanity. To “come in flesh” means that He pre-existed His incarnation, and thus, is an eternal Person. The word “come” implies that He was somewhere else before He was here in this world as a Man (1 Tim. 1:15, etc.). Scripture teaches that He was with the Father in heaven before His incarnation (John 8:42; 13:3; 16:28). In fact, John’s Gospel portrays Him as the “Sent” One of God (John 3:17; 4:34; 5:23, etc.). “Come in flesh” is something that could not be said of us, for we did not pre-exist our conception and birth. However, at the incarnation of Christ, He took humanity into union with His Person and became a Man (John 1:14). There was a union of the divine and human natures that is inscrutable to the human mind (Matt. 11:27). To “come in flesh” indicates that when the Lord Jesus became a Man, He did not have the fallen sin-nature. “Flesh,” without the definite article “the” refers to humanity, without the implications of the sin-nature. The article “the” before “flesh,” in the KJV, is not in the text in the J. N. Darby Translation. This helps to guard against any inference that the Lord partook of the fallen sin-nature when He became a Man. He had a holy human nature, not a fallen human nature (Luke 1:35).

John then gives the opposite side: “Every spirit which does not confess Jesus Christ come in flesh is not of God: and this is that power [spirit] of the antichrist, of which ye have heard that it comes, and now it is already in the world.” If a man professes to be a Christian but does not believe in the deity and/or the full humanity of Christ, he is giving a clear indication that he is not a real believer. He preaches “another Jesus” (2 Cor. 11:4). That is, the Jesus which he presents is not the same Jesus that the Bible presents. Hence, the question to ask which will reveal a person’s true colors is: “What does he hold concerning the Person of Christ?” All such false teaching will be immediately exposed as being the “spirit [power] of Antichrist” by this simple test.

(Vss. 4-5)

The second test by which all prophets and teachers can be checked has to do with how the lost and lifeless people of the world treat their message. John says: “Ye are of God, 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; for this reason they speak as of the world, and the world hears them.” The children of God “overcome” these teachers and their false doctrines through the indwelling Holy Spirit. “He” (the Spirit) who is “in” us is “greater” than “he (Satan) that is in the world.” John has already spoken of how this is done in chapter 2:20-27. The unction of the Spirit gives us discernment to know that what these false teachers are putting forth is spurious, and consequently, we reject it, and are thereby preserved. In that way, we are victorious over the enemy’s ruses.

On the other hand, if the teachings of these men are received by religious people of this world who are not born of God, it is clear that their message is false. The things which they teach under the banner of Christianity agree with the outlook of the natural man of the world, because they are founded on worldly principles that worldly people understand. Therefore, they receive them. Thus, a couple of simple questions will reveal all that we need to know about these false teachers—“Are they popular with the world? And, do the natural men of the world receive their teaching?” If they do, then what is being taught could not be the truth of God, because “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14).

(Vs. 6)

The third test by which all teachers can be checked has to do with where they stand in relation to the teachings of the apostles. John says, “We are of God; he that knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” The “we” and the “us” in this verse are the apostles. John includes himself in their collective voice. They are “of God,” and every true child of God will receive their teachings as being that which comes from God. This, then, is a benchmark by which all who profess to teach the truth can be tested. The great question here is: “Does their teaching coincide with the teaching of the apostles?”

Having in our hands the divinely inspired epistles of the New Testament wherein the apostles’ doctrine is carefully unfolded, we can “judge” the source of all ministry as to whether it is from God or not (1 Cor. 10:15; 14:29). We have to be careful here because the enemy (Satan) is very subtle. His false ministers will use the Scriptures to propound their errors, and we could be deceived by their clever misinterpretations. It is, therefore, important to have “good teaching” on which we have “fully followed up” in a thorough study of all Biblical subjects (1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 2:15).

In conclusion, if the Spirit of God truly dwells in a person, he will be sound in his doctrine as to the Person of Christ (vss. 2-3). Also, he will not be deceived by the antichristian teachings by virtue of the unction of the Spirit (vss. 4-5). And, he will hear and receive the apostles’ doctrine (vs. 6).

Summary of the Proofs of Having the New Life and Nature

- We practice righteousness (chaps. 2:29–3:10).
- We love the brethren (chap. 3:11-23).
- We have the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God (chap. 3:24–4:6).

The First Epistle of John, Love

(Chapter 4:7–5:12)

John carries on with his proofs and counter-proofs in connection with another attribute of God’s nature and Being—love. He has touched on the subject of love already in the epistle, contrasting it with hatred (chap. 2:5-11; 3:11-23), but now he revisits it to take it up in depth. With love being mentioned about 35 times in this short section of the epistle, we are left without doubt that the subject before us is the love of God.

Genuine Love For One Another

(Vss. 7-8)

John begins this last section of the epistle with a simple exhortation for the children of God to love one another. He holds this up as a proof of a person having the divine nature. He says: “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.” As is so often the case with John’s abstract style, his point here is profoundly simple; those who love their brethren with genuine love prove that they are real believers, and those who don’t are not real. “Let,” means that we are to allow the new life in us to express itself naturally, which will be to “love one another.” This shows that it’s possible for us to get in the way of the new life acting in our lives, and thus, hinder its expression. The chief culprit is the flesh, but if we walk in the Spirit, it will not lift up its ugly head in our lives (Gal. 5:16). John concludes his short exhortation to love one another by stating the reason: “For God is love.” It is quite so that God is love, but that does not mean that the reverse is true. God is love, but love is not God. This kind of reasoning is dangerous; it can become a mystical thing wherein a person looks for a subjective experience within himself. Such endeavours have led men away from the truth.

The World’s Love Is Not Divine Love

The problem that the saints were facing in those days was that many false persons had entered the Christian ranks who professed to love the brethren—but they were not real. These persons were making a fair show of love, and the saints were in danger of being deceived into thinking that they were real children of God—but their love was not divine love that emanated from the divine nature. The Lord told the disciples that the world has its own love, but it largely loves for selfish reasons. It loves for what it gets in return (Luke 6:32; John 15:19). It sees something in its object that is worthy of its love and pity and loves on that basis (Rom. 5:7). Hence, we mustn’t think that every act of kindness and love among men is necessarily a proof that they are born of God and possess the divine nature. (There is also natural love that all men have, more or less—e.g. the love that parents have for their children. This, too, though amiable, is not divine love.)

Divine love (Greek – “agapeo”) loves even when there is nothing in its object that is worthy of its love. God’s love emanates from a settled disposition of His heart toward us; He sets His love upon man, seeking his blessing as a matter of choice (Deut. 7:7-8). God loved us when we were ungodly sinners! We were once “haters of God” and “enemies,” yet He commended His love toward us and in due time “Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 1:29-31; 3:10-18; 5:6, 8).

The Qualities and Characteristics of Divine Love

Having stated that “God is love” (vs. 8), the question is: “How are we to know divine love from the love of the world? John, therefore, is led to speak of the qualities and characteristics of divine love by which we are given a benchmark to test all pretention to a person’s being born of God and having the divine nature. He speaks of the love of God in three ways:

- His love “to us” in regard to our past (vs. 9).
- His love “in us” in regard to the present (vs. 12).
- His love “with us” in regard to the future (vs. 17).

The Love of God to Us

(Vss. 9-10)

The first and foremost mark of divine love is that it sacrifices itself for the good and blessing of others. This is seen in God’s love to us in the sending of His Son to die for us. John says: “In this was manifested the love of God toward [to] us, because that God 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.” This was the greatest display of love that there ever was! God gave His Son as a sacrifice for sin to bring believers into the blessing of salvation. There has been no greater gift of love than this! (John 3:16) The price that the Lord Jesus paid to redeem us (His atoning sufferings) only magnifies the greatness of His love. Reflecting on this incredible gift, the Apostle Paul said, “The Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). Every believer can echo the same thankful sentiment (2 Cor. 9:15).

In these verses, John touches on two things for which God sent His Son into the world—that we might “live through Him” (vs. 9) and that He might be “the propitiation for our sins” (vs. 10). The first involves Christ’s incarnation and the second involves His death. In order for men to have life eternal, Christ had to come and reveal the Father (John 1:18; 14:9), for knowing God as our Father is the essence of that life (John 17:3). But divine love didn’t stop at Christ’s coming. It carried Him on to the cross where He demonstrated its greatness in the supreme act of self-sacrifice (Heb. 9:26). Christ willingly became the Sin-bearer; His atoning sufferings rendered a full satisfaction to the claims of divine justice in regard to sin (the meaning of “propitiation”). John’s point here is that divine love would not stop at anything to save sinners. It found a way to overcome the great barrier of sin that stood in the way of man’s blessing, even though it cost God the giving of the dearest Object of His heart! This love did not originate with us; its source is God Himself, for He is love. Hence, John says, “Not that we loved God, but that He loved us.”

The Love of God in Us

(Vss. 11-16)

John proceeds with a second characteristic of divine love—it manifests God, and when enjoyed in the soul, it leads the believer to testify of the grace of God to others. This has to do with the love of God being in us. He says: “Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is perfected in us. Hereby know we that we dwell in Him, and He in us, because He hath given us of His Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.” Knowing that we are objects of God’s love should create a response in us to “love one another,” and in doing so, we manifest the invisible God, because “God is love” (vs. 16).

When Christ was here, the unseen God was manifested in Him (John 1:18; 14:9). But now since Christ has gone back to heaven, John tells us that we are to manifest God here in this world. This, he says, is done by loving one another. When we love one another, “the love of God is

perfected in us" (vs. 12), and we are thus given a profound sense in our souls that we "dwell in Him" and "He in us" (vs. 13a). Could there be anything more blessed than to dwell in God through communion and to have God dwell in us through possessing His life and nature? John says that this is made possible "because He hath given us of His Spirit" (vs. 13b). The love of God in us quite naturally wells up and overflows in grace and benevolence toward others, and thus, leads us to "testify" to all around that "the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world" (vs. 14).

As a result, people are led to "confess that Jesus is the Son of God," and those that do so prove that "God dwells in them" and they "in Him" (vs. 15). And they know from their own experience that "God is love" and abide in His love (vs. 16).

We see from this second great feature of divine love that it reproduces itself in those who receive it. We are not the terminals of God's love; we are the channels of it. What a privilege it is to be able to commend God's love to this poor world!

The Love of God With Us

(Vss. 17-21)

The third characteristic of divine love that John focuses on is its power to give the believer peace and confidence concerning the judgment of his sins. This has to do with God's love with us. He says, "Herein has love been perfected with us that we may have boldness in the day of judgment, that even as He is, we also are in this world" (vs. 17). As we look ahead to the judgment seat of Christ ("the day of judgment"), we have perfect peace and boldness in regard to our sins. As we have seen in verses 9-10, divine love has undertaken to settle that account righteously once and for all in the atoning death of Christ. The Spirit, received upon believing the gospel of our salvation (Eph. 1:13), has made us conscious of our eternal security in Him (John 10:27-28). Thus, we do not have to wait for that day to know this blessed truth because "as He is, so are we in this world." That is, as Christ sits accepted in heaven with all the favour of God resting upon Him, "so are we" likewise accepted, even though we are still here "in this world." This is because His acceptance is the measure of ours and we are "accepted in the Beloved!" (Eph. 1:6). The KJV says that "our" love is made perfect in this, but that word should not be in the text. John is not speaking of our love, but of God's love being made perfect in us. Enjoying His love, we can look to the future with the utmost confidence, knowing that as He is beyond judgment, so are we!

(Vs. 18)

John explains how this is so; he says: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." Living in the enjoyment of God's love, the believer cannot possibly have fear, for the love that fills his heart displaces all fear and doubt; the two can't exist there at the same time.

(Vs. 19)

Having given us some of the great qualities and characteristics of divine love, John brings us back to its beginning. He says, "We love because He first loved us" (vs. 19). God is the source of love; it is the activity of His nature. His love has begotten love in us, for as we have seen, divine love delights in reproducing itself in its objects. As a result, we love others with that same love. (The KJV says, "We love Him ... ." But it should simply read: "We love ... ." It's true that we love Him, but the manifestation of divine love in us is broader than that; it goes out to others as well.) Thus, divine love will express itself in genuine love toward others. I do not love my brother because of what he is, but because of what I am. He might have some irksome fleshly traits that are quite unlovable, naturally speaking, but because I have the divine nature which loves with agape love, I love him undeservedly and unconditionally.

Divine Love Proved by Our Love for One Another

(Chap. 4:20–21)

Since divine love expresses itself in the children of God by their love for God and their love for His children (their brethren), this can be used as a test for all who profess to be such. John says: "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, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" (vs. 20). The test is simple; if a person cannot love his brother in this divine way, there is good reason to question whether he is a real child of God. But when a person loves even a fleshly brother, it is evidence that he has the divine nature, for only those who have that nature can love with agape love. By doing so, he proves that he is a real child of God.

In verse 21, John brings in an additional reason as to why we are to love our brother. He says, "And this commandment have we from Him, That he who loveth God love his brother also." We love our brother not only because agape love dwells in us, but also because we have a "commandment" from God to do so. In other words, we love our brother, firstly because we have a nature in us that wants to, and secondly, because we have a command from God to do so.

Divine Love Proved by Our Obedience

(Chap. 5:1-3)

This naturally leads to John's next proof—the test of obedience. He says: "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and everyone that loveth Him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not grievous." If a person is truly born of God, he will believe in Christ and love God; he will prove his reality by loving all who are begotten of God—i.e. his brethren (vs. 1). Note: John does not say that a person becomes born of God through believing that Jesus is the Christ. That would be "putting the cart before the horse." It would be making new birth a result of a person's receiving Christ. The truth is that a person does not believe on the Lord Jesus to get born again; he believes on Him because he has been born again (John 1:12-13). As to the order of these things, God begins the work in a person's soul by sovereignly imparting life through new birth, whereupon the person is given faith to believe the gospel and be saved (Eph. 2:8). Without this initial work of God in souls in new birth, no one would come to Christ to be saved (John 6:44).

We prove that we love God and His children by our obedience to the commandments of God (vs. 2). Love that compromises principles is not divine love. Divine love will never supplant obedience. If we truly have the love of God in us, we will obey the principles of His Word, even if it means that we have to rebuke or separate from a self-willed fellow-believer. To the person who loves God and possesses His nature, His commandments will not be “grievous” because he has a new nature that wants to do the will of God (vs. 3). When His will is made known to us through His commandments, the new life in us delights to do it. To be asked to do something that we want to do is not burdensome.

Thus, we have three things here that mark every true child of God:

- Faith in Christ (vs. 1a).
- Love for God (vs. 1b).
- Love for those born of God (vs. 2).

Divine Love Proved by Overcoming the World

(Chap. 5:4-5)

John passes on to speak of one final thing that is a proof that the love of God dwells in a person and that he is a real child of God—when enjoyed in the soul, it delivers the believer from the world and its attractions. John says: “For whatsoever [all that] is born of God overcometh [gets the victory over] the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh [gets the victory over] the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?” (The word “For,” here, connects these two verses with the foregoing passage concerning the love of God.)

We learn from this passage that “victory” over the world and its power to draw us away from doing the will of God is effected by two things: Firstly, there is what God does in communicating divine life to us through new birth. This new life has the capacity to enjoy divine things which are infinitely better than the things of this world. Secondly, there is what we are to do, which is to have the eyes of our faith fixed on Christ the Son of God, the center of the world above. This shows that our overcoming the world is not all God’s doing; we have a responsible part in it too. We are to participate with Him in this victory.

We see from this that possessing divine life is not enough in itself to deliver a person from the world; that life needs an Object—“Jesus ... .the Son of God.” When the believer’s faith lays hold of that scene above, which the Lord called, “That world, and the resurrection” (Luke 20:35), this present world loses its charm. Having a brighter Object before our souls, the attractions of this poor world lose their pull on us because we have tasted something incomparably better.

L.F. #16 App.

The “faith” that John speaks of here in this 4th verse is not the faith to get saved from the penalty of our sins, but faith to live the Christian life (2 Cor. 5:7; Gal. 2:20), which has for its goal Christ in glory (Phil. 3:14). We also learn from this that victory over the world is not accomplished by withdrawing ourselves from society—i.e. secluding ourselves in a monastery. Isolation is not the answer. Nor is it secured by binding legal injunctions and rules of conduct upon ourselves, which are mere outward appliances. As John shows here, it is a matter of the heart being engaged with Christ and the love of God. When faith is operative in our lives and we, through communion with divine Persons, enjoy heavenly things, the influence of the world loses its power over us, and we gain victory over it by turning away from it.

God’s way of victory over the world can be seen in the life of Moses. “By faith he forsook [left] Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing Him who is invisible” (Heb. 11:27). His faith laid hold of Him who is invisible, and he esteemed it to be “greater riches than the treasures of Egypt,” and thus, he was led to step away from Egypt (a type of this world). Having something before him that was greater than anything Pharaoh had to offer, the choice to give up Egypt and to separate from it was simple.

This divine principle can be used to test a man’s profession. If divine love enjoyed in the soul delivers the believer from the world, the converse will be true as well. If a person professes to be a child of God but lives habitually in the pursuit of worldly things and lives on worldly principles, it is a strong indicator that he may not be real, but an empty professor.

A Summary of What the Love of God Does

- It brings life eternal to us (chap. 4:9).
- It effects propitiation for our sins (chap. 4:10).
- It reproduces itself in its objects, causing them to manifest God and testify of His grace (chap. 4:11-16).
- It gives us boldness and confidence regarding judgment by casting fear out of our hearts (chap. 4:17-18).
- It delights in loving the brethren (chap. 4:19-21).
- It takes pleasure in obedience (chap. 5:1-3).
- It overcomes the world (chap. 5:4-5).

The First Epistle of John, Epilogue, The

(Chap. 5:6-21)

Confirmation of the Work of God in Believers Whereupon They Know They Have Life Eternal

The saints in John's day were being bombarded by antichristian teachers who sought to shake their confidence in the truth they had received from the apostles and in the relationship that they had with the Father and the Son through life eternal. John is, therefore, led to close the epistle with a number of witnesses and proofs that confirm the reality of these things into which they had been brought. J. N. Darby said, "Seeing that there were seducers who endeavoured to turn them aside as deficient in something important, and presented themselves as possessing some superior light—he points out to them the marks of life eternal, in order to re-assure them; developing the excellence of that life, and of their position as enjoying it; and in order that they might understand that God had given it to them, that they be in no wise shaken in mind" (Synopsis of the Books of the Bible, Loizeaux edition, vol. 5, p. 536).

In the body of the epistle, John has given a number of proofs and counter-proofs to help the saints identify those who were real and those who were not. Now, before closing the epistle, he takes time to give them a number of witnesses that confirm the reality of the work of God in their own souls, and thus, gives them assurance as to their possession of life eternal.

The Threefold Witness of the Water, the Blood, and the Spirit

(Chap. 5:6-8)

John begins by pointing to the threefold witness of God's work in the soul of every Christian. He says: "This is He that came by water and blood, Jesus the Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that bears witness, for the Spirit is the truth. For they that bear witness are three: the Spirit, and the water, and the blood; and the three agree in one" (vss. 6-8). (The 7th verse, which appears in the KJV, has very little Greek manuscript support and should not be in the text. It speaks of a witness in heaven, but those in heaven do not need a witness.)

Coming by "water" and by "blood" means that the Lord Jesus came to effect moral and judicial cleansing for men—of which the water and blood signify. These two things flowed from the side of the dead Christ, showing that cleansing for mankind could only be secured through what He accomplished in His death. The historical account in John 19:34 mentions the blood first, because it is viewing things from the perspective of what was required to put away sin before God. Only the blood (what it signifies) can do that. It, of necessity, must come first, for without it, the water could not be applied.

In this passage, John mentions the water first because he is speaking of the order in which we come into the blessedness of these things. In God's work with men, cleansing by water occurs first. This is effected by new birth, wherein a person is washed from his unclean state and made "clean every whit" (John 3:5; 13:10; 15:3; 1 Cor. 6:11). Cleansing by blood is something more; it results when a person who has been born of God rests in faith on Christ's finished work on the cross. The believer is thereby washed judicially from his sins (1 John 1:7; Rev. 1:5) and has his conscience purged of its guilt (Heb. 9:14). The "Spirit," who "is the truth," bears witness to these things in the believer by coming to dwell in him, and thus, he is "sealed" for the day of final redemption when the Lord comes (Eph. 1:13; 4:30; 2 Cor. 1:21-22). Hence, the water has to do with purification and the blood has to do with expiation. The consecration of the priests in the Old Testament illustrates this same order by way of type. They were first bathed in "water" (Ex. 29:4), then they were sprinkled with "blood" (Ex. 29:20), and lastly, they were anointed with "oil"—a type of the Holy Spirit (Ex. 29:21).

John then repeats these three things in verse 8, but the order is different; the Spirit is put before the water and the blood. This is because when it comes to knowing and enjoying these blessings, it is the Spirit of God (our Guide and Teacher) who leads us into the good of them, making them a living reality in our souls (John 16:13). Thus, with the Spirit of God dwelling in our hearts, we know that we are born of God because we have an interest in divine things which we never had in our unconverted days. Such a capacity can only result from having a new life and nature which is imparted through new birth. We also know that God has put our sins away. This is proved by the fact that we have peace in our souls regarding the question of our sins; this is something that used to trouble us before we were saved. Besides these two things, we now live in the enjoyment of these wonderful truths on a daily basis in fellowship with the Father and the Son. This could only be possible through the work of the Spirit of God who dwells in us (John 4:14). John says, "These three agree in one."

Let the child of God who has these three witnesses be told that what he has believed is not true, and he will dismiss the idea straightway. He knows that he has been born again and knows that his sins have been put away. Moreover, he is genuinely happy in his relationship with the Lord, enjoying his blessings. These things prove that he has been converted, and no one can convince him otherwise.

The Witness of Men and the Witness of God

(Chap. 5:9-12)

John brings in something more; he says, "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which He hath testified of His Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made Him a liar; because he believeth not the record [witness] that God gave of His Son." John points to two more witnesses: "the witness of men" and "the witness of God." The witness of men is the objective testimony that has come to us through the gospel concerning Jesus, the Son of God (Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39). Men have announced the glad tidings to us and have told us that in receiving Christ as our Saviour we would have eternal salvation. Having received their witness and believed on Christ, we have proved it to be true, because it has been confirmed in our souls by an even greater witness—the witness of God. God has borne witness of His saving grace in His Son by giving the believer a profound and undeniable sense in his soul that he has passed from death unto life (John 5:24; 1 John 3:14). This is what John means by saying that the believer has this witness "in himself." It is a subjective testimony confirmed in our souls by our enjoyment of life eternal—which is to have conscious fellowship with the Father and the Son (John 17:3). Hence, John says: "This is the witness that God gave to us life eternal, and this life is in His Son" (W. Kelly Translation). Thus, life eternal enjoyed in the soul is a practical proof of the salvation of our souls.

Again, let the believer living in happy fellowship with the Father and the Son be told that what he is experiencing is not real, and the opposer's suggestion will be rejected immediately. Every believer who walks in the Spirit in communion with God knows from practical experience that it is false; he has the living proof in himself.

On the other hand, the person who merely professes to be a child of God will not have this witness in him, because he has not truly believed "the record [witness]" that God gave of His Son (vs. 10). In keeping with John's abstract style, he gives the simple conclusion: "He that hath

the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life" (vs. 12).

Three Cardinal Truths Concerning Life Eternal

- It is a gift; it is not something earned (vs. 11a).
- It is only found in the Son (vs. 11b).
- It is a present possession of the believer (vs. 12).

The Witness of the Divinely Inspired Epistle of John

(Chap. 5:13)

John brings in another witness to the reality of the work of God in our souls by which we know we have life eternal—what he had written under divine inspiration. He says, "These things have I written to you that ye may know that ye that believe on the name of the Son of God have life eternal" (W. Kelly Translation). In the clearest terms he states why he wrote the epistle; it was so that the saints would have a written document, inspired by God, to which they could refer and be assured of their possession of life eternal. This is an even greater witness than what God works in our hearts subjectively, for the divinely inspired Word of God is greater than personal feelings and experiences, even if those feelings and experiences have been produced by God Himself.

The Word of God gives the believer a solid foundation on which to rest in faith. What God has written by the Spirit in His Word can be trusted implicitly because it is impossible for God to lie (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews calls this the Spirit's "witness to us." (Heb. 10:15-17). He quotes Jeremiah 31:33-34 to show that when God brings people into blessing, He puts away their sins and their iniquities, and will not remember them anymore. What the Spirit has written concerning the believer's sins can be consulted wherever a Bible is found. When opened, and passages regarding the believer's salvation and security are read, we get the witness of the Spirit to us concerning our eternal relationship in Christ. All we have to do is believe the witness! This the true child of God will do, for he not only believes in God, but he believes His Word. This is illustrated in Abraham; he "believed God" and it was counted unto him for righteousness (Rom. 4:3). Thus, we have in God's infallible Word the greatest proof of all, for He has "magnified" His "Word" above His "Name" (Psa. 138:2).

At this point, John introduces a different word for "know," from that which he has been using in chapter 4. He had been using "ginosko" (chaps. 4:2, 6 twice, 7, 8, 13, 15, 5:2), which is objective knowledge derived from facts about someone or something. But now he switches to "oida" (chap. 5:13, 15 twice, 18, 19, 20a). This word (also translated "know") refers to an inward conscious knowledge of something or someone that is acquired through intimate, personal acquaintance and communion. Using "oida" as John does here, indicates that he wanted them to know the truth of these things not just by what he had written, but from personal experience with the Lord.

Again, if a believer is challenged as to how he knows that he has life eternal, he could point to various passages of Scripture that state emphatically that he indeed has life from God and salvation in Christ (John 3:14-16, 36, etc.).

Boldness in Prayer

(Chap. 5:14-17)

John brings in yet another proof of the blessedness of life eternal. Having intimate communion with the Father and the Son through that life results in knowing the mind and will of God. This produces confidence in God which translates into a bold prayer life that receives the things for which one asks. John says: "This is the confidence [boldness] that we have in Him, that, if we ask any thing according to His will, He heareth us: and if we know that He hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him." The Apostle Paul tells us that this boldness of access into the presence of God is the result of having received "the Spirit of adoption." It gives us liberty to cry, "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15), which denotes intimacy and intelligent communion with God. He also says that when entering God's presence with such holy boldness, the Spirit of God "bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:16). It is a living proof that we are His children because only those who are His children can approach Him with such liberty and receive the petitions for which they ask.

John is not saying that every prayer request that we make will be granted. It's quite possible for a believer to request something that would only minister to his flesh, and of course, such a request would not be granted (James 4:3). John, therefore, qualifies his remark by saying that our prayer requests must be "according to the will of God." He gives us what we ask for only when "the Father" is "glorified in the Son" in the thing that He grants (John 14:13-14). In keeping with John's abstract style of absolutes, he does not take into consideration a believer asking for anything other than what would be the will of God, for he views the believer as living in an ideal state of soul. Hence, he says: "Whatsoever we ask, we know ("oida") that we have the petitions that we desired of Him."

(Chap. 5:16)

While on the topic of prayer, John adds that we need to have discernment when interceding for others. He says: "If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and He shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it." The circumstance that John has in mind is when one of God's children has sinned, and as a consequence, God has stricken him in His disciplinary ways with sickness. Under normal circumstances, John says that we should pray for his spiritual restoration and physical healing. Divine love will do that. However, if the nature of the failure is a course of things that publicly dishonours the Lord's name in a marked way, their sin may be what John calls "a sin unto death." That is, it may be that the Lord is going to take the person away from the earth through death (John 15:2; 1 Cor. 5:2; 11:30; James 5:20; Eccl. 7:17). In such cases, we should have discernment not to pray for his healing, but to leave him in the hands of the Lord. Ananias and Sapphira are an example of believers sinning unto death, except that their case did not involve sickness (Acts 5:1-11).

Being taken away from the earth in such a way does not mean that the believer has lost his salvation, but rather, that he is being called home to heaven from his place of testimony on earth. The privilege of representing Christ on earth is being taken away from him because he has behaved so poorly while bearing the name of Christ before the world. As Christians, we are here on earth as "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:20). Our lives are to commend Him to the world, but if we behave in such a way that it seriously compromises the testimony of the

Lord, we may be called home to heaven through death.

To illustrate the point here, suppose the children of a family go out to play in their yard after supper, and one of them gets into a fight with the others, and a great fuss develops. The mother calls the child at fault to the door, and warns him that if he doesn't behave properly, he'll have to come in. The child accepts the warning and goes back to play with the others. Not long afterward, a fuss breaks out again, and the mother calls the same child to the door and gives him another warning. But after he goes back to play again, he is found to be in the middle of another fuss. The mother calls him to the door again, and this time she tells him to come in and get his pajamas on, because he is done playing for the evening.

Having spoken of God's governmental ways in judgment with His children (1 Peter 1:16-17), we mustn't think that every sickness that the children of God incur is a stroke of governmental judgment from God on account of sin in their lives. Lazarus is an example; his sickness was for the glory of God, not because he was living carelessly in a sinful way (John 11:4). John also allows for the possibility of God's hand in discipline not being unto death, stating: "All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death" (vs. 17). That is, all unrighteousness is sin and carries its governmental consequences, but those consequences may not always be unto death.

Summary of the Witnesses to Life Eternal

• The witness of the "water"—The cleansing effect of the water resulting from new birth has produced in us a capacity for divine things through having a new life. Being genuinely interested in the things of God bears witness to the fact that we have a new life and nature.

• The witness of the "blood"—The cleansing effect of the blood (a token of the finished work of Christ) is witnessed in the fact that we have peace with God and peace in our souls regarding our sins—and thus, that we possess life eternal.

• The witness of the indwelling "Spirit"—The fact that we live in the happy enjoyment of our blessings in Christ is a proof of the Spirit's witness that we have life eternal.

• The witness of "men"—The servants of God who have gone forth announcing the gospel have told us that in believing we have life eternal, and we have proved their witness to be true.

• The witness of "God"—God Himself confirms the witness of men by giving believers the enjoyment of life eternal—which is to have conscious fellowship with the Father and the Son.

• The witness of the Word of God "to" us—The Scriptures testify of the fact that believers have life eternal.

• The Spirit of adoption bears witness "with" our spirit that we are the children of God. Our liberty in His presence and power in prayer bears witness to the fact that we have life eternal.

The First Epistle of John, Closing Remarks

(Chap. 5:18-21)

John concludes by reiterating some of the grand truths that he has touched on in the epistle. In summing things up, he mentions three items in particular—each beginning with the words "we know" ("oida"):

(Vs. 18)

Firstly, "We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and the wicked one toucheth him not" (vs. 18). We learn from this that even though there are many antichristian teachers at work, sowing their seeds of evil in men, they cannot thwart God's work in souls. Those in whom God has wrought have been born of God, and thus, they have a new life and nature that cannot sin (chap. 3:9). By living in the good of that life, in fellowship with the Father and the Son (the essence of life eternal – John 17:3), it is not possible for the wicked one to influence the believer, because the new life will not respond to his evil overtures. Thus, regardless of how dark these last days may get and how spiritually perilous the times may be, Christians are still able to live godly lives for the glory of God. We, therefore, have no excuse for not going on well for the Lord.

(Vs. 19)

Secondly, John says: "We know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in the wicked one" (vs. 19). Using the proofs and counter-proofs that John has given in the epistle, we are able to identify those who are real believers and those who are false. Not only do "we know that we are of God," but we also know those who are of the world and under the power of "the wicked one." This affords us with a clear understanding as to whom we should walk with (2 Tim. 2:22) and whom we should avoid (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

(Vs. 20)

Thirdly, to be sure of not leaving them with uncertainty regarding the truth of the Person of Christ (which was under assault from the false teachers – chaps. 2:22-23; 4:1-3), John states: "We know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we might know Him that is true, and we are in Him who is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and life eternal" (vs. 20 – W. Kelly Translation). In saying this, John has brought us back to the point at which he started the epistle—the incarnation of Christ. With the coming of Christ, there has been a full revelation of the Father and the Son. John calls this an "understanding." As a result, through faith we are able to have a living relationship with "Him that is true." John then states emphatically that God's Son, "Jesus Christ," is "the true God and life eternal." This confirms His deity and the fact that He is the personification of Life Eternal.

(Vs. 21)

John ends the epistle in a rather unusual fashion. He gives no closing salutations, nor is there any mention of God’s grace being wished upon the saints, as Paul and Peter do in their epistles. (“Amen,” in the KJV, should not be in the text.) Instead, he gives a warning exhortation: “Children, keep yourselves from idols.” John is not referring to literal objects of veneration that the heathen make out of wood and stone, etc., but to the principle of idolatry. An idol, in principle, is anything that captures our hearts’ affections and displaces Christ from His rightful place there. It could be a hobby, a recreation, a sport, a pursuit in business, etc. Whatever the interest is, if it engulfs our attention, our time, and our energy—it is an idol. A characteristic feature of idolatry is that the one engaged therein becomes blinded to it (Psa. 115:4-8). It steals our hearts away, and we don’t know it! Let us, therefore, heed John’s warning.

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