

FIRST JOHN

Author:

The author of this epistle is John, the Apostle. He is also the author of the Gospel of John, the other two epistles that carry his name and the book of Revelation.

Time and Place of writing:

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary states: “This letter seems to have been written subsequently to his gospel, as it assumes the readers’ acquaintance with the gospel facts and Christ’s speeches; also with the special aspect of the incarnate Word, as God manifest in the flesh, set forth more fully in his gospel. The tone of address, as a father addressing his ‘little children’ (the continually recurring term), accords with the view that this letter was written in John’s old age, perhaps about 90 AD In 1 John 2:18, ‘it is the last time,’ probably does not refer to any particular event, as the destruction of Jerusalem, which was now many years past, but refers to the nearness of the Lord’s coming, as proved by the rise of anti-Christian teachers, the mark of the last time. It was the Spirit’s purpose to keep the Church always expecting Christ as ready to come at any moment. The whole Christian age is the last time, in the sense that no other dispensation is to arise until Christ comes.”

To Whom it was written:

There is nothing in this epistle that helps us to establish the identity of the addressee or addressees. *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “There is, indeed, an ancient tradition that it was written to the ‘Parthians.’ Since the time of Augustine this has been the uniform opinion in the Latin church. Venerable Bede remarks, that ‘many of the ecclesiastical writers, among whom is Athanasius, testify that the First Epistle of John was written to the Parthians.’ Various conjectures have been made as to the origin of this opinion, and of the title which the Epistle bears in many of the Latin MSS. ... but none of them are satisfactory.”

From *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* we copy the following outline:

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The Text:

Part One: The Basis of Fellowship (1:1—2:27)

I. Introduction 1:1-4

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

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

4 We write this to make our joy complete.

The opening words “That which was from the beginning” form the link with the Gospel of John, which opens with the words “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”¹ This suggests that the recipients of this letter were familiar with John’s previously written Gospel. After all, this epistle was written to people who knew the Gospel message and who believing “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,” had ‘life in his name.’² John’s intention in writing this epistle was not to call non-believers to faith in Christ, but to bring believers into fellowship with one another. “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us” (v.3).

In v.1 John describes his personal experience with the Gospel; in doing this he works toward a climax. His first encounter with the Gospel was by hearing. This corresponds with Paul’s statement: “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”³ Following this, John sees “the Word” with his own eyes. What we see usually leaves a deeper impression upon us than what we hear. As the saying goes: “A picture is worth a thousand words.” Seeing is proof of the visibility of reality. What John says is, “Jesus Christ is real!”

John uses two different Greek verbs to express his visual impressions of Christ. “We have seen with our eyes” and “we have looked at” is the translation of the verbs *horao* and *theaomai*. *Horao* means literally “to stare at.” Being a Jew, John probably had in mind to express the experience of his encounter with Christ. John’s use of the Greek words shows a strong Hebrew mindset. *Theaomai* conveys the idea of “to look closely.” We could say that one form of seeing is with the eyes and the other is with the heart. “Our hands have touched” refers to a greater reality than that of everyday normal life. What we can touch removes any trace of doubt about its reality. When Thomas was told that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead, he said: “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”⁴ The great miracle of John’s statement is not that John touched Jesus. Many people did that. But John did this consciously, knowing that the person he touched was the incarnation of the great mystery of God’s revelation to mankind. John’s occupation with Jesus Christ was intentional, conscious, sober and yet overwhelming.

1. John 1:1
2. See John 20:30,31
3. Rom. 10:17
4. John 20:25

In v.2 the Apostle uses loaded words. They are like trumpet blasts: “The life appeared!” This life had been hidden before. Millions of people lived before this event, without knowing real life. Even today millions are alive without knowledge of this life. Most people live as if they are dead. Life consists of much more than mere being and movement. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “For in him we live and move and have our being.”¹ Outside God we merely vegetate. What counts is “the eternal life, which was with the Father.” This is heavenly life, the life of God. If an unbeliever can already get excited at the discovery “I am alive,” how much more ought we to be exuberant because we know we have eternal life. This is not only never-ending life; it is life that is full of eternity. This is the life that had been hidden and is now revealed. Revelation is God’s work. We can search and discover and invent, but only God can reveal. We cannot add to this; we can only be still and observe.

This is the life that we may see and of which we may testify that we have seen it and we may proclaim this message to others in behalf of God. Everyone can testify but proclaiming is for those who have been called by God.

“We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard” (v.3). In this sentence proclaiming, seeing and hearing come together. That does not mean that they are identical. A testimony is about a personal experience. We cannot proclaim if we have not experienced ourselves what we proclaim. A person who proclaims without having a personal experience of his proclamation has no message. God’s message never leaves us uninvolved. Even the Old Testament prophets experienced personally what God intended them to convey to others. Isaiah shouted to the people of his time: “Woe to you ...” and “Woe to those ...”² but when he himself was confronted with God’s holiness, he cried: “Woe to me!”³ Jeremiah expressed his emotional turmoil with the words: “O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’ his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.”⁴ For Ezekiel, the siege of Jerusalem became his own painful physical experience.⁵ God will see to it that His Word lives within us and becomes a personal experience to us before we pass it on to others. As the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: “But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.”⁶

Nothing promotes fellowship like a common experience. That is the soul of the fellowship of the saints; they know that they have all been saved by the same Jesus and washed in the same blood.

The goal of proclamation, therefore, is fellowship with one another on the basis of fellowship with God. “And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” That is only possible because life has been revealed and we have heard it, we have seen it and we have touched it.

There is a healthy dose of egoism in our motives when we testify of our experience. It gives us deep personal satisfaction and happiness. John calls this “complete joy.” God created us in such a way that we must testify in order to be happy. A Christian who keeps his mouth shut is never fully satisfied. As God has endued mankind with a natural desire for procreation, a desire that seeks to be satisfied, so He endued a Christian with a spiritual procreation urge that can only be satisfied when we talk about our hope to others. This is a natural guarantee for the spreading of the Gospel.

1. Acts 17:28

2. See Isa. 5:8,22.

3. Isa. 6:5

4. Jer. 20:7-9

5. See Ezek. Chapters 4 and 5.

6. I Tim. 1:16

This does not mean that sometimes it will not be difficult to give one's testimony. We are often more overcome by fear, shyness and a lack of liberty. Such is human frailty. It is the fullness of the Holy Spirit that will make us speak and make our joy complete. We can see John's happy face shine through these words.

II. The Conditions for Fellowship 1:5—2:14

A. Walk in the Light 1:5-7

*5 This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.
6 If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.
7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*

John passes on what he has heard of Jesus. V.5 can be seen as a condensation of Jesus' teaching about the Father. "God is light." We only know light in a modified form. The light of God is so intense and so blinding that it surpasses our imagination. God's light represents His holiness. There are no foreign elements in God; there is nothing in God that casts a shadow. There is no conceivable comparison between God and us. The conclusion that forces itself upon us is that, if God is light, we are darkness. Everything that exists owes its visibility to light. How could we see anything if there were no light to reveal it to us? Who we are and what we are can only be seen in the light of God.

We may live in a make-believe world, thinking that we have fellowship with God because we can see a glimmer of something. Nothing is so revealing as the light of God. Having fellowship with God means that sin will come to light and our face will be turned toward the truth. The more we discover that our life is full to the brim with sin and the more we perceive things changing within us, the more we will recognize that we live with God and that He is at work within us.

It is more important to experience the presence of God than to talk about it! John suggests that we can claim to have fellowship with God and yet lie about it.

John uses several sets of "ifs" in these verses. The second "if" reveals the solution. "If we walk in the light" stands in opposition to "if we claim to have fellowship." "Walk in the light" obviously means having fellowship with God. The word "walk" brings out the practical part of this fellowship. If we find ourselves standing in this discovering light of God and we make no effort to hide the darkness within us, we confess that we cannot survive this comparison with God. We must remember that John writes this to people who believed in Jesus Christ and who had received eternal life in His Name. The discovery here is not one that leaves us hopelessly and irretrievably lost with the knowledge "nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature."¹ This confession is for us the condition we have to meet in order to come to complete deliverance.

Walking thus in the light of God's discovery will promote fellowship with one another. Sin isolates and makes us lonely. If we allow the light of God to break through in us, we know that we cannot hide anything from Him and, ultimately, we will have nothing to hide from one another. We will know that we have become a part of that great family of all who have been redeemed by Jesus. It is a great experience to come out of the loneliness of sin into the open brotherhood of the saints. We will discover that we are irreplaceable members of that body. This fellowship is not limited to certain churches or groups; it is worldwide. Wherever we go we will find people in other nations, speaking other languages with whom we can exchange looks of mutual understanding and brotherly love. How much we will consciously experience this, will depend upon how much light we allow breaking through within us.

It is particularly in this fellowship with one another that the blood of Jesus becomes so effective. Sin cannot continue to flourish where the love of Christ reigns, because of the purifying strength of His blood. A greater openness before one another will also mean greater spiritual freedom.

1. Rom. 7:18

B. Confession of Sin 1:8—2:2

8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

Chapter 2:1 My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense — Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

In v.8, even more than in the darkness in v.6, sin is not so much a matter of certain sinful acts as of the nature of the beast. “Sin” is here the breeding ground of our misdeeds; it is our “old nature,” the animal within us that cannot be restrained. Before our conversion we will hardly be aware of its existence. We also have no experience of eternal life at that point. But as soon as we ask Jesus Christ to come into our life, the “old I” will demonstrate itself in all its ugly manifestations: in petrified piety, in inward resistance, in all kinds of hanging on the things which we know we should give up. If we cheerfully proclaim that we have no tendency to sin, we do indeed deceive ourselves. As long as we believe this, God’s truth will not manifest itself in us.

“If we confess our sins...” Because our own nature is the breeding ground of sin, we must constantly bring the produce to God to be rid of it. Such acts of confession will have tremendous consequences. The verse does not say: “If we confess, He will forgive.” But “If we confess our sins, he is faithful...” Our confession will open our eyes to who God is. Sin hinders our vision of God, but confession dissipates the fog and helps us to see Him. The Bible establishes a link between forgiveness of our sins and knowledge of God. Jeremiah states: “ ‘No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,’ ” declares the LORD. ‘For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’ ”¹ And Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, sang: “And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.”²

In connection with the pardon of sin, John mentions two characteristics of God, which are instructive and comforting. God is faithful and just to forgive. “Faithful” points to the stability of God’s relationship with us. But it also speaks of the loving heart that goes out to us. Faithfulness and love belong together. “Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.”³ Without faithfulness every fixed relationship bogs down because it lacks the love to keep it going. God’s faithfulness means that we can count on Him to forgive. God is not subject to mood changes; He does not get in a rut. His love for us is constant and eternal. That is why He forgives and keeps us in temptation. As the Apostle Paul says: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And *God is faithful*; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”⁴

God is also just to forgive us. This may sound strange to us. We tend to think that God would punish us for our sins because He is just. But if we fathom the depth of this statement we will enter into a world of peace and assurance of salvation. God’s justice is guarantee that He will not punish our sins more than once. If we know that Jesus Christ hung on the cross to pay for our sins, God’s justice becomes the warranty of our forgiveness. That which God has punished in Jesus Christ, He will not demand from us also. If God’s love and faithfulness fail to convince us, His justice ought to put us on a solid rock. Such is God! He forgives and cleanses. If God would only forgive, it would clear up our relationship with Him, but we would still be stuck with the misery of our sin. God’s purification of

1. Jer. 31:34

2. Luke 1:76,77

3. See Prov. 3:3.

4. I Cor. 10:13

our unrighteousness is the ultimate release of our life. We can breathe freely because the power of sin over us has been broken. God's faithfulness and justice means the end of darkness in us, as long as we confess to Him what we did wrong. We get to know God because He forgives our sins. It is all unimaginably wonderful!

If we claim we have not sinned, if we hold ourselves for good people who harm no one, we demonstrate that we have never even seen God's standards of righteousness. That amounts to saying to God: "You are a liar!" Sometimes it is difficult for us to see ourselves as sinners because our own circumstances blind us. Often, consciousness of sin only comes when we accept the Word of God as true and we see that our self-image is not realistic. Thinking that God is a liar is an act of unbelief. If we understand that God does not lie as far as our sins is concerned, we will also understand that God does not lie about His promises. "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?"¹

John's second reason for writing this letter is that we would not practice sin. A good way of stating this is to say that we would not come to the point of sinning. This suggests that there is a threshold that would we have to cross in order to start sinning. The mentality of our old life draws us into sin. The mindset of Christ makes us feel repulsion toward sin. If this state of mind is not a reality for us, it may mean that our walk with God is not sufficiently intimate and that we are not consistent in confessing our sins. The Bible does not teach that the person who walks with God will never sin. The difference between a life of fellowship with God and one without is that sin does not have a chance to mature, so that our peace of mind and our joy would be affected. In a life without fellowship with God, sin will be able to increase and exercise power to the point that we become enslaved to it.

The point is not sinless perfection but that we do not give sin a chance in our lives. When we fall in sin we must get up immediately and not even linger one moment. If we have sinned we must think of Jesus as our advocate, the One who "who speaks to the Father in our defense." This does not mean that Jesus says to the Father: "Yes, he sinned, but why don't you overlook it for once." When Jesus speaks to the Father in our defense, it means that not our sins speak for us but Jesus does. What God hears of us, He hears through Jesus; what He sees of us, He sees through Him. As far as the Father is concerned, He sees us as perfect and sanctified because He sees Jesus as the Lamb that was slain for our sins.

If nothing else this ought to be the strongest incentive for us to get up from the ground on which we were lying and to bring our life in accordance with the image God the Father has of us in Jesus Christ.

"Jesus Christ, the Righteous One." This description of Jesus is of the greatest significance for us in connection with His intercession for us. We have no stronger assurance of salvation than God's righteousness. God gave His Son for us because He loves us and Jesus died for us out of love. But what gives Jesus' sacrifice the strength and efficacy is the fact that God's demands of righteousness have been fulfilled. In Jesus' death on the cross, our sin was replaced by righteousness. The fact that Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, speaks for us means, to put it bluntly, that God cannot do us any harm, even if He wanted to! I cannot imagine a stronger argument to our conscience than the fact that, since this is our position in heaven, we ought to live accordingly on earth. When the Holy Spirit pleads in our heart, He pleads a righteous cause.

John calls Jesus Christ "the atoning sacrifice for our sins." The Greek word is *hilasmos*, which means "atonement" or "propitiation." John is the only one who uses this word.² *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines "propitiation": "to gain or regain the favor of ..." "to appease." A related Greek word is *hilasterion*, which is the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew *kapporeth*, the cover of the Ark of the Covenant. *The King James Version* calls it "the mercy seat." It was the place where God was present among the Israelites. "There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites."³ It was also the place where Aaron applied the blood of the sin offering on the Day of Atonement. We read: "He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do

1. Num. 23:19

2. See I John 4:10.

3. Ex. 25:22

with it as he did with the bull's blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it."¹ In the New Testament the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word for "the mercy seat" is used both for the cover of the ark as for the Person of Jesus Christ. In Hebrews we find it in the verse: "Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover."² And in Romans, the Apostle Paul uses the same word in the verse: "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood."³ Jesus Christ, being the propitiation for our sins is the Person in whom God reveals Himself on earth, and He is the one who paid the price for us all in taking upon Himself the death sentence that was ours.

John also explains that Jesus' sacrifice is not only for a limited group of people, "but also for the sins of the whole world." He is, in the words of John the Baptist: "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."⁴ We all live on top of a gold mine, but the majority of mankind is not aware of it. Jesus Christ sacrificed Himself for the whole world, not only for those who believe in Him, but also for those who do not. Every human being, regardless of sex, age, race, or experience is the object of God's love. The fact that Jesus died covers the sins of the whole human race. That means that now God no longer judges sin, He only judges unbelief. Only those who withdraw from the protecting coverage of Jesus' blood expose themselves to judgment over sin. For all others it is paid in full.

C. Obedience to His Commandments 2:3-6

3 We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.

4 The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

5 But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him:

6 Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

It is not up to others to decide whether we are "in Him." This is something of which we need personal assurance. Fellowship with God is, first of all, a personal experience. It is between Him and us and others cannot come in between. Although we can talk about it with other people, we will never be able to share the essence of it.

The way John puts this is very stimulating. This is not a person who asks himself "Do I really know Him?" His question is: "How practical is my knowledge of God?" Knowing God expresses itself in doing His will. Since, as long as we live on earth, there will always be the tension between our old nature and the will of God, we must always ask ourselves how practical our knowledge of God is. Keeping that question before us will tip the scales to a life of obedience.

At the same time, this verse shows us that obeying God's commands can never be separated from a personal, intimate knowledge of God. Many people know God's commandments without knowing God. For them religion is a formality. Knowing God has consequences. It is not a casual introduction or a mere acknowledgment of His existence; it entails obedience. John links knowing God to obeying His commands. It is a matter of surrender to His will. God does not share His secrets with those who are bent on doing their own will. But if we yield to Him, He reveals Himself to us.

It is also clear from John's words that obedience is not something we can produce in our own strength. We need God's help to be able to obey. Knowing God means having eternal life. Jesus says: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."⁵ We will only want to obey if we have received this new life on the basis of our faith in Jesus Christ. Before knowing Christ obedience is a sheer impossibility.

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1. Lev. 16:15
 2. Heb. 9:5
 3. Rom. 3:25
 4. John 1:29
 5. John 17:3

Every Christian has the obligation to give a testimony, that is to tell what we have heard and seen and experienced of the grace of God. We must testify to the fact that we are saved by the blood of Christ. But the Bible says nowhere that we must tell people we know God intimately. There are testimonies in the Bible in which others say that certain people know God. Abimelech said to Isaac: “We saw clearly that the LORD was with you; so we said, ‘There ought to be a sworn agreement between us’ — between us and you.”¹ The Philistines saw this and knew it, not because Isaac told them about his personal experience of faith. His life testified of the fact that he knew God.

We have two obligations to give a witness: the first one is to tell by word of mouth that we believe in the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses us of sin, and the second is that we assure ourselves of the fact that we live in fellowship with God by keeping a close account with Him and acknowledge Him in all our ways. The fruit of this kind of fellowship will be a silent witness to others that will speak more eloquently than words.

I am convinced that if we conduct ourselves in this way and resist the temptation to boast about our intimacy with God, we are less prone to fall victim to the lie that is exposed in this verse. In His priestly prayer for His disciples, Jesus said: “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word.”² The following verse states: “Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you.”³ Obedience to the Word of God is linked to our recognition of the source. It means that we acknowledge that what is written in the Bible is the Word God addresses to us. Living in fellowship with God means obeying His Word. John uses both concepts as synonymous. If we live with God we will consider the Bible to be our most precious possession. We read about Mary, Jesus’ mother: “Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”⁴ That ought to be our attitude toward God’s Word. Treasuring God’s Word and pondering it in our heart will inevitably lead to obedience. It is a prerequisite. The way in which we handle the Word of God will determine what place the love of God occupies in our life. The Jews were encouraged to bind miniature copies of the law upon their hands and their foreheads and to fix them on their doorposts. In the same way the law of God ought to be engraved in our hearts and govern our thought life; it ought to keep watch over the entrance and exit of our home. Thus God’s love will grow to full maturity in our life and make our life into a living testimony of the Gospel.

The second basis for the assurance of our fellowship with God is in the way we live. When John says: “This is how we know we are in him” he does not mean that we ought to analyze ourselves to see how holy we are. But we will stand in amazement at the discovery of how much the power of the Gospel changes our life slowly, but surely. The question to be answered in these verses is “Do I really live in fellowship with God?” John gives us two tests: obedience to the Word of God and the result of this in our daily life.

Amazingly, the question of how we feel about ourselves in all this never comes up. It is the certainty that “whoever believes in the Son has eternal life,”⁵ rather than what our emotions tell us, that gives us the assurance we need. The fruit of faith in the Word of God is the confirmation of the assurance we receive through faith in the Word of God. The order is important! The Gospel will have this effect upon our life that we “walk as Jesus did.” This statement makes the way Jesus lived very concrete for us. Life in fellowship with God is living the life of Jesus, not in the sense of trying to do what He did, but a realization “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”⁶

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1. Gen. 26:28
 2. John 17:6
 3. John 17:7
 4. Luke 2:19
 5. John 3:36
 6. Gal. 2:20

D. Love for One Another 2:7-14

7 Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard.

8 Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

9 Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness.

10 Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble.

11 But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.

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

13 I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father.

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

It is interesting to observe that, in introducing the command of love, John uses again the words “the beginning.” This expression, which is the opening of his Gospel as well as of his epistle, leads us into God’s eternity. Before the creation, there existed a love relationship between the Father and the Son. It is in this relationship that love finds its source. In that sense we can say that the command to love is not a new commandment. Even before creation, love was the ruling factor in the heart of God. The old command, the message we have heard in the Old Testament and in the New is “love.”

The commandment is old, but it is new for us because we have been renewed ourselves. Actually, it is new every day. To many people these words seem meaningless. We rarely, if ever, see this kind of love on earth. We find ourselves surrounded by darkness. John tells us that there is another reality in Jesus Christ, which is also in us. This is the real reality. Only in God’s light can we see things as they really are. Darkness covers, light reveals. The reality of Jesus Christ, in whom we are, is the reality of light. This reality of disappearing darkness and shining light will ultimately conquer the world. Where now hatred and egoism rule, “love and faithfulness [will] meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.”¹

In the tension in which we live as Christians, this tension between that which is from heaven and that which is of the earth, this is our victory, *viz.* that we live now in the reality of God’s love in Christ Jesus. The whole world will eventually be swallowed up in this victory. Halleluiah! We must live in this reality and daily renew the command of love in our life.

Several times now, John has used the expression “Anyone who claims . . .,” or “If we claim . . .” If we do not make any claims about ourselves, we will not expose ourselves either to the criticism of others. People will put our pretences to the test by observing our life. In almost every case in which John uses these words, the claim does not match the act. A lack of self-knowledge can be disastrous in spiritual life. If we know ourselves we will keep quiet about ourselves. Or we will give the same testimony as the Apostle Paul: “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.”² He who walks in the light will be aware of the fact that it is only by the grace of God and through the life of Christ poured out in him that he can do so. We have nothing in ourselves to boast about.

The grace of God that makes its light shine upon us is so powerful that it drives out feelings of indifference and hatred. It is impossible to stand in the light and at the same time harbor hatred in our hearts. John says about people who hate that they are in darkness. It is not a matter of trying to love people we hate but of standing in the light of God.

1. See Ps.85:10.

2. Rom. 7:18

Generally speaking, our lives resemble more a series of flashes of light than living in the light. God does not want us to be temporarily “enlightened,” but to be in a constant condition of being in His light. That seems to be our struggle. It means that we must constantly search our conscience and hand over to God that which belongs to the darkness. If we stand in the light of God we have the power to hand over our hatred to God so that we can love our brother. Standing in the light and loving our neighbor is a two-way street; one reinforces the other.

The Greek text of v.10 reads literally: “He that loves his brother remains in the light and there is in him no occasion of stumbling.” The Greek word used is *skandalon*, which means “a snare.” The English word “scandal” is derived from this. God’s light and God’s love in us will keep us from stumbling, will keep us from scandals.

All this sounds strange because standing in God’s light means exposing ourselves to God’s searchlight and that leads to discovery of impurity and sin. It is in God’s light that we discover how dirty we actually are. However harsh God’s light may be, it is also kind and healing. God’s light shines upon us in Jesus Christ; this means that nothing scandalous will remain because our darkness is swallowed up by His light.

“But whoever hates his brother...” (v.11) evokes images from the murder of Abel to the latest world war. This world seems to consist of hatred and darkness. This verse is a repeat of v.9, but darkness is here described in more detail and walking in darkness is more frightening. Those who live in the dark are blind. We speak of blinding light, but the Bible, which is written from the viewpoint of light, speaks about blinding darkness. If light blinds us it means that it is stronger than our eyes can take. The problem is in our weak eyes not in the strong light. We are unable to stand in God’s light because we are used to living in darkness. This is a terrifying reality for people who are created by God to live in the light. Life loses its meaning if we do not know where we are going. Our life’s goal is “God” and “my brother,” that means “love.” If we lose sight of our goal, the only thing that remains will be darkness.

In 1:4 and 5:13, John gives us the reason for his writing, which is “to make our joy complete” and “that you may know that you have eternal life.” In vv.12-14 John describes the character of the recipients of his epistle. He addresses three age groups: children, young men and fathers. It is clear from the context that John does not refer to birthdays but to spiritual maturity. If we combine the descriptions in vv.12 and 13 we see that children are those who have received forgiveness of sin and who know the Father. The Bible teaches that we learn to know the Father through the forgiveness of our sins. The prophet Jeremiah writes: “‘No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘ ‘Know the LORD,’ ‘ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,’ declares the LORD. ‘For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’ ”¹ And Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, sang: “to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.”² Even those who have recently come to faith know God because they know that their sins have been forgiven on account of the Name of Jesus Christ. This is the essence of the knowledge of God. God is known in the conflict between His holiness and His love, which found the solution in His forgiveness of sin in Jesus Christ.

But there are also fathers in the faith, of whom John says: “You have known him who is from the beginning.” John says this twice and says no more because there is nothing more to say. Knowing Him who is from the beginning is the greatest that can ever happen to a human being. This kind of knowledge is in principle the same as the knowledge children in the faith possess but it has matured into adulthood. In a natural sense, a small child knows life because life is in him and he functions in it. Yet, there is a vast difference between a child’s knowledge and adult knowledge. The difference is experience. It is possible to know God without having much experience. And the eternal God can become for us our most precious and all encompassing possession in that we have met Him on our way through life through the repeated forgiveness of our sins and through His guidance in all kinds of circumstances. This makes Moses’ confession toward the end of his life such a moving testimony. The whole experience of a forty-year desert crossing is expressed in the words: “The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”³

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1. Jer. 31:34
 2. Luke 1:77
 3. Deut. 33:27

In between those two stages are the “young men.” They represent struggle and victory. They are not fighting toward victory, but they fight from the basis of victory. He who experiences the power of Christ in his life as an ever-growing factor is, in principle, stronger than the devil. That is why John says: “I write to you, young men, because you are strong.” The secret of this strength is the fact that the Word of God lives in us. The moral strength of youth is the Word of God.

We can say a lot about the Word of God living within us. It is the same as our remaining in God. God is faithful, even if we are not. In John’s Gospel, Jesus says: “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.”¹ And: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.”² Christ’s remaining in us is constant, but the remaining of His Word in us is dependant upon our remaining in Him. We are strong if we walk in fellowship with Christ and if we take care that His Word permeates our thoughts and our acts.

God’s strength reveals itself, first of all, in our prayers. It is in connection with our remaining in Him and His Word remaining in us that Jesus says: “Ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.” This strength is released in our struggle against Satan.

In conclusion, we can say that the child stands for the forgiveness of sins. The young man represents the spreading of victory, and the fathers represent spiritual maturity in the knowledge of the Father.

III. The Cautions to Fellowship 2:15-27

A. Love of the World 2:15-17

15 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

16 For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world.

17 The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

“The world” in these verses is fallen creation, the world that has separated itself from God, the world that has rejected Christ. It is the group of people that have no place for God in their lives. “Do not love the world” does not mean do not have compassion with those who live in the world, but do not follow their way of life. There is a frame of mind that makes fellowship with God impossible. We must avoid that mentality like the plague. The love of God and for God does not allow us to be attached to this world and everything it stands for. If we cling to the mentality and lifestyle of other people we give evidence that we have not understood the love of the Father.

“Everything in the world ... comes not from the Father but from the world.” The fruit of man’s fall into sin could not have been stated more clearly than in these words. The devil did his work well when he tore the world away from God in the temptation of Eve. He fashioned a world that is unable to produce anything that is acceptable to God. The question we all have to face is to which source are we connected? Every life that is not purposely connected to God vegetates in the world, even if that life is called “Christian.” It is important that we check our resources by closely examining our acts. John sums up the content of the world as “the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does.” This condensation reveals that the world the Apostle has in mind is not the world we live in but the world that lives in us. “The cravings of sinful man” is literally in Greek “the lust of the flesh.” *The New King James Version* sticks closer to the Greek with: “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.” In Paul’s epistles we read about “the flesh” as being the human life that finds its roots in this world apart from fellowship with God. The basis for the concept of “the flesh” is the pagan philosophy that distinguishes the body as apart from the spirit, considering the spirit as sublime and the body as inferior. Paul does not make this distinction of

1. John 15:4

2. John 15:7

superiority and inferiority, but he uses the word “flesh” to distinguish between life that comes from God and life that has cut itself off from God.

The characteristic of this life without God is “the craving of sinful man,” “the lust of the flesh.” Our craving reveals the poverty of the flesh. A satisfied person has no craving, but the hungry one becomes a thief. According to the Apostle Peter, evil desires are the cause of the corruption in the world. We read: “Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”¹ This definition hits the target and explains the attitude of emptiness and dissatisfaction that characterizes life without God. Craving is ugly, selfish and passionate. It is the illegitimate child of desire. Desire can make life beautiful. Desire can make us dream but craving burns us up and chars our emotions. It is obvious that craving does not come from God. The only antidote to “the craving of sinful man” is fellowship with God through the Holy Spirit.

“The lust of the eyes” began in the first temptation mankind faced in Paradise. What catches our eye makes an impression on our soul. “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.”² Our eyes can be blinded by a fixation upon things that make the unreal real to us. This may make us lose sight of values and proportions. The object of our desire becomes obsessive and we fall into sin. As James writes: “Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”³ We must develop the habit of living so close to God that our full attention is upon Jesus and we no longer see that which is evil.

“The pride of life,” or as *The New International Version* has it, “the boasting of what he has and does” is the life that grows out of craving for the wrong things without being satisfied. If the fruit of this is pride and boasting, it means that one feels the need to cover up emptiness by boasting about things that are not worth boasting about. The person whose life is empty compares himself with his fellowmen and picks out those who are worse off than he is, so that he can compare himself favorably. If our life is genuinely filled and we are satisfied, we do not need this comparison. Comparison serves to cover up doubt.

The sad part of such an attitude is that a person will demonstrate the same pride in relationship to God. In human society we may end up comparing favorably with someone else. But if, by mere desire of satisfaction, we believe we ought to compare ourselves with God, we mislead ourselves dangerously. The only way to survive such a comparison is by using a distorted image of God. Sometimes this image is atheistic, as the man in the psalms who says in his heart, “There is no God.” The Bible calls him “a fool.”⁴

All this proves the more that we really need God, otherwise we would not rebel against God the way we do. What we acquire by means of “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life”⁵ is never our own. Unless we possess God and are possessed by Him, we do not own anything. As James writes: “You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God.”⁶ God does not come to us by craving but by surrender. If we ask for things in prayer we will receive what we need and often much more than that. By craving for things, things will take possession of us; by prayer we take possession of things.

The world will pass away! That is what makes all our busyness and excitement so ridiculous. That is also why life in the world is so cramped. Life on earth is determined by the inevitable certainty, which we refuse to accept,

1. II Peter 1:4

2. Gen. 3:6

3. James 1:14,15

4. See Ps. 14:1.

5. New King James Version

6. James 4:2

that it will come to an end. When nothing remains, everything is “vanity.” But this emptiness is unbearable and screams for compensation. This explains the above-mentioned craving. But even our cravings will pass away. This world will die and there will be nobody left to do the mourning. The death of this world will be like the death of an evil stepmother.

“But the man who does the will of God lives forever.” This word is like the clear sound of a trumpet amidst the confusion of dissonants.

What is “the will of God” that we have to do? First of all, it is the will of God that all will be saved. The Apostle Paul writes: “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”¹ And Peter adds: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”² What is eternal life other than the life God wants us to live? Whoever asks Jesus Christ to be his Savior has the eternal life God wants us to possess.

Secondly, the will of God is that we be sanctified. The Apostle Paul writes: “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality.”³ God wants the life of Christ in us to reveal itself in such a way that we stay away from all kinds of evil. Living according to the will of God means living in fellowship with Jesus Christ. The way this life reveals itself through us ought not to be a problem for anyone.

The will of God and our will are enemies. Living according to our own will means living out our cravings in a world that will pass away. It means living as an enemy of God. Living according to the will of God, therefore, must begin with the surrender of self. Our will is the strongest and deepest element of our character. If we surrender our will to the will of God we give Him the key of our whole being. This seems to be foolishness in the eyes of man, the end of our existence. But in reality it is the assurance of our eternal survival. Doing our own will means passing away. In the words of Jesus: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?”⁴

B. Spirit of the Antichrist 2:18-27

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

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

20 But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth.

21 I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth.

22 Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist — he denies the Father and the Son.

23 No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

24 See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father.

25 And this is what he promised us — even eternal life.

26 I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray.

1. I Tim. 2:3,4

2. II Peter 3:9

3. I Thess. 4:3

4. Luke 9:23-25

27 As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit — just as it has taught you, remain in him.

The last hour! The Bible nowhere gives the impression of being a book that was written two thousand years ago. The Apostle John lived in the same tension of time as we do. It is still the last hour for this world. The world passes away and its time has almost come. The fact that in the meantime twenty centuries have passed does not diminish the reality of our expectation. Our life as Christians in fellowship with God is inconceivable without our eager anticipation for the coming of Him on whom it all centers. The Bible calls this longing “hope” which is one of the three pillars on which our spiritual life rests.¹

John does not speak about the last days but about the last hour. As one of the characteristics of the last hour he mentions the predecessors of the Antichrist. He calls them also “Antichrists.” The intent is obviously that the spirit that moves these people is the same as the one that will possess the Antichrist himself. They belong to the same category.

We could ask the question that if the predecessors of the Antichrist characterize the last hour, what about the coming of the Antichrist himself? I believe that John means to say here that this is the last hour for the church of Jesus Christ, because the coming of the Antichrist himself will usher in a time when the church will no longer be salt in this world. She will have been translated into glory.

This verse reveals the remarkable principle of fulfillment of prophecy. A major part of the prophetic word awaits its fulfillment in the days that precede Christ’s return in glory. This event casts its shadow ahead and there is in prophecy a great deal that we could call “pre-fulfillment.” The prophetic word is like a ripening fruit. We can observe it as it grows and ripens. We find the imprint of the Antichrist on people like Napoleon, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Mao, and others. But when the Antichrist himself appears in his awful glory, the fruit is ripe and prophecy will be fulfilled once and for all.

John says in v.19 that it is possible to belong to the church of Jesus Christ without being part of it. The real church consists of people whose “life is now hidden with Christ in God.”² The fellowship of the saints is a fellowship of life. As a fellowship of natural brotherhood stands for the same physical life that the members of the family share, so the church shares the life of Christ with its family members. Because of the way denominations are organized, people can join the church without having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and consequently they do not share in the life of the members of the body of Christ. Much of what we call worldliness in the church is a demonstration of the mentality of the Antichrist.

Calling oneself Christian without being in Christ, John considers to be the mark of “the last hour.” The Apostle Paul concurs with John when he speaks about people “having a form of godliness but denying its power.”³

The anointing from the Holy One, mentioned in v.20, stands for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our heart. Like the anointing of kings and priests in the Old Testament, which prepared them for the task for which God had called them, we are anointed and baptized by the Holy Spirit when we call upon Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. The fact that God’s oil is poured out over us signifies that without Him we can do nothing and that the Holy Spirit renews our life in us. *The New International Version* states: “You know the truth.” The Greek text reads literally: “You know all things.” Some Greek manuscripts read: “You all know.” Life in fellowship with God through the power of the Holy Spirit is not a vague uncertainty. We cannot say: “I hope I have it.” It is a conscious dwelling in the certainty of faith. This faith is not built primarily upon what we experience but upon the certainty of God’s promise as recorded in Scripture. It does not exclude experience, but our experience is not the thermometer of the reality. Our life in fellowship with God is a conscious life, because it begins with a conscious surrender of our life to Him. I know that the Holy Spirit is in me because I have surrendered myself to Him and I have the certainty on the

1. See I Cor. 13:13.

2. Col. 3:3

3. See II Tim. 3:5

basis of His promise. John states in the next chapter of this epistle: “And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.”¹

Strictly speaking, the Bible does not teach us anything new. The Holy Spirit does not give us any new information. In Jesus Christ we have all that is new from the very beginning. That is complete and nothing can be added to it. When a tree sprouts green leaves in the spring, it is actually nothing more than the development of that which was in the seed from which the tree grew. Our life is not new; the truth of God’s Word is not new. That which makes us experience things as being new is that the Holy Spirit shows us that which we have already received. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.”²

The question may present itself: If we know the truth, what is the point of writing about it? The amazing phenomenon is that we lose our spiritual grip so easily. After moments of deep and intimate fellowship with God we find ourselves slipping back in old habits in a surrounding that offers no spiritual satisfaction. We tend to underestimate our “old man.” And when God blesses us we believe that He does so because of our own piety and consecration.

We must constantly remind ourselves that all the good things we receive are given to us for no other reason than Christ’s sacrifice in our behalf. That is why the Word of God must continuously confront us for our “teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”³

The Gospel is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. If we say we believe in God without accepting this revelation we deceive ourselves, or we try to deceive others. The only criterion is the acceptance or denial of Jesus as the Christ of God. This will ultimately be the measuring stick for recognizing the Antichrist. We can already recognize this anti-Christian principle in people and factions in the present. Because the Antichrist will present himself as being the real Christ, he will have to begin by denying Jesus Christ. And whoever rejects Jesus rejects Him who anointed Him to be the Christ. Rejection of God means rejection of salvation. Salvation consists in believing God and accepting Christ Jesus as Savior.

That which will protect us against demonic propaganda is that the Gospel, as we heard it the first time and by which we have come to faith in Christ, remains in us. We will have to come back, over and over again, to the Word of God. We must cling to it, dig into it, digest it and allow it to become part of us. We must be careful to distinguish between what God reveals to us from His Word, the new light that shines upon the old truths, from teachings that do not come from God alone. Our intimacy with God will be determined by our intimate knowledge of His written Word. Because our only responsibility is that we “remain in the Son and in the Father,” being occupied with the Bible must be a lifelong ambition.

“Eternal life” is life that rests upon God’s promises. By faith, that is by saying “amen” to God’s promises, we already live in what later will be revealed in all its fullness. God’s promises are so certain that we may reckon and work with them as if they have already been fulfilled, although we cannot yet see them. As the Apostle Paul writes: “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God.”⁴ If we have accepted Jesus in our life, eternal life is a present reality. Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life.”⁵ Further on in this epistle, the Apostle John says the same:

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1. I John 3:23,24
 2. I Cor. 2:12
 3. See II Tim. 3:16.
 4. II Cor. 1:20
 5. John 6:47

“He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”¹ This is all present tense reality.

It is clear, however, that, because of the corruption in our own life and the pressures of life upon us, this eternal life does not demonstrate itself in all the glory we can expect. The presence of eternal life in us is as the presence of the tree in the seed. What God promises is the full-grown, radiant life that will no longer be limited by our imperfection.

In concluding his remarks about “the last hour” John summarizes what the attitude of a believer ought to be. His statement in v.27 “you do not need anyone to teach you” sounds risky. Because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in us, we must receive our wisdom and insight first of all from Him. This does not mean that we must refrain from consulting books as we study the Bible. But we must understand that it is the Holy Spirit who explains to us the truth of God if we remain in Him. The amount of light we will receive when reading the Scriptures will be dependant on the measure of fellowship with God we enjoy. This explains why many people grope in the dark in their Bible reading.

Part Two: The Behavior of Fellowship (2:28—5:21)

I. Characteristics of Fellowship 2:28—5:3

A. Purity of Life 2:28—3:3

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

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

Chapter 3:1 How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

2 Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

3 Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.

The second positive result of continuing in Jesus Christ is, not only that we will be protected from the influence of false teachings and receive private tutoring by the Holy Spirit, but that we enter into such an intimate relationship with Him that His second coming will not take us by surprise. The Greek word used to describe Jesus’ return is “parousia” which is the manifestation of His presence.

At present, the presence of the Son of God in our hearts is made known in the working of the Holy Spirit in us. That is the life in Christ that we live now. We realize, though, that this life is limited by all kinds of restrictions. Jesus’ manifestation of Himself will not only mean our liberation in that those restrictions will be taken away, but it will also mean a breakthrough of the knowledge of God by those who were previously outsiders to the Gospel. The whole creation will be full of the knowledge of God. John says that we can “be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.” When He comes it will become evident what the value of our life has been. It may be that we believe we are doing well spiritually, but that at Christ’s return we will be ashamed of what we have been. There are so many, often small, things that can creep into our life, that because of a lack of intimacy with God begin to take root and settle without being pulled up and destroyed. That will make us ashamed. The parousia will reveal what the fruit of our life is. If we can stand before Christ with confidence, without being ashamed, we will experience the full joy of intimacy and oneness with Him who died for us and who now lives, from whom we received pardon of sin, to whom we owe everything we have and are. To see His face will be the fulfillment of all our hope.

1. I John 5:12

V.29 states not only the opposite of what was said about the Antichrist, but it also serves as a subtle transition to the next chapter which deals with our being God's children. John wants us to recognize Christ in others and treat those others as brothers and sisters in the Lord. This recognition is based on works. But the verse also preaches to us and tells us that, if we are born of Him, His life in us should demonstrate itself in our acts of righteousness.

John used the word righteousness first in connection with the forgiveness of our sins.¹ This is not merely doing justice to us; it is no straight, harsh application of justice. But it is the application of justice by the blood of Christ. It is justification out of love. Only the person who has experienced God's righteousness in his or her daily life will be able to perform acts of righteousness.

According to 3:1, the fact that we are children of God is due to the Father's love. We rarely realize that that what binds us to God is His unfathomable love. We are born again when we recognize Jesus as the One who died for our sins. We may be pushed to this acceptance by the heaviness of the load of guilt we are carrying and by the anguish of our heart. But what draws us out of our old way of life into the experience of being a child of God is the love the Father demonstrates to us. Hosea expressed this demonstration of God's love in Old Testament terms: "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt."²

John's way of presenting this truth to us is very convincing. To "be called children of God" suggests a lifestyle that is such that other people give us that name. When the love of God fills our life it will shine through and it will become visible to those around us. "And that is what we are!" shows the side of the coin that is turned toward God. We have this testimony of being a child of God, not because of our humane behavior, but because we are related to the living God.

Although our future condition is still hidden from us, we are not living at present in a state of uncertainty. The hidden future means that we cannot really imagine what the resurrection of our body and our being united with the Lord Jesus will be like. It is at present not a reality as is the fact of our being children of God. We do have the certainty that, what is presently lacking in our life as children of God, will be a glorious reality. At present we are not like Jesus, but we will be then. Our present vision of Christ is still vague and partial, but then we will see His face, and we will be able to look Him straight in the eyes. In as much as our experience of being a child of God is a present reality for us, we will long deeply for the moment when we will see Him as He is.

Our metamorphosis will be the result of our clear vision of the Lord. We may conclude from this that as we begin to see Jesus Christ more clearly in the revelation the Bible gives us in the present, we will also experience the life changing power this vision causes in our life.

The Bible correctly calls the return of the Lord Jesus "the hope." That word does not refer to the uncertainty of our expectation, but to the stimulus it gives. Hope is life. Hope means light at the end of the tunnel. Hope makes a path along which we can go on in the most desperate circumstances. Because the greatest of all expectations is the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, this hope creates the greatest dynamism in our life. We are only truly alive if we live in the expectation of Christ's return.

That is the reason our longing for His return will push sin in our life to the background. Hope will make us take our sanctification seriously and urge us to live a life of fellowship with Him. How would we meet Jesus Christ if we have not lived with Him here and now?

B. Practice of Righteousness 3:4-12

4 Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.

5 But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin.

1. See I John 1:9.

2. Hos. 2:14,15

6 No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.
7 Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.
8 He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.
9 No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.
10 This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.
11 This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.
12 Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous.

In these verses John shows us the horrible character of sin. He does this, not in order to make us give up sin because we are afraid, but for the purpose of giving us a deeper understanding in the seriousness of Jesus' death in our behalf. "Sin is lawlessness." This means that in sinning we go against the will of God. We tend to write off certain sins merely as human weakness. John emphasizes the hopelessness of our condition, because we are lawless people. V.5 cuts a hole in the wall we built up around us. Jesus stands in the gap because He came to deliver us from our prison and to place us again in the center of God's will. It is important to note that John uses the present tense of the verb "to sin" in v.6. In the Greek grammar this means a continuous act, a living in sin. It is not a temporary failure, but a remaining in a sinful condition and enjoying it. John's words are not meant to make believers desperate because of their lack of perfection. He wants to show us how sinful sin is, so that we would run to the Lord Jesus for our protection. Although the Greek verb rendered "sins" is in the present, the verb translated "take away" is in a tense that speaks of a "once-for-all" act. It all happened in one act; it is an accomplished fact that needs not be repeated. "It is finished!"¹ If we go to Jesus for our salvation, our sins have been removed in the past. This is enough reason to say: "Hallelujah!"

A person who keeps on living in sin has never seen or known Jesus. This does not describe a child of God who has yielded to temptation and has repented with sorrow. Falling does not mean that we know Him once and then again not know Him. John speaks here about someone who lives in sin, who continues practicing it without ever turning around to experience redemption and cleansing by the blood of Jesus.

More positively: When we are in Him, we no longer live in sin. If we turn around John's negative statement, we can say that remaining in Him means to see Him and to know Him. The primary point is not living a holy life, but seeing Jesus. It is this personal vision and the intimate knowledge of Jesus that will exert its influence upon our daily life and make us free from sin.

Vv.7 and 8 with 9 and 10, form a triple picture in which the contrast between the children of God and the children of the devil is depicted, each time in a different light and with different colors. "Do not let anyone lead you astray" shows recognition of the source to which we are connected. We cannot see the intimacy of fellowship with God, but we can understand whether certain acts are born out of this fellowship or not. A person can only be righteous by virtue of the righteousness of Christ. It is a tremendous truth that the righteousness of Jesus Christ can take hold of us in such a way that it shows in our daily life.

Generally speaking, the manifestations of sin are much easier to discern than the demonstrations of righteousness. This may not be true as far as our own person is concerned, but it is for what we can observe in others. Yet, we do not always see the connection between sin and Satan. For certain people it is so obvious that it is beyond question. Who doubts, for instance, that Hitler was an instrument of the devil? But we do not always look at impure thoughts, adultery or gossip as things that are the result of Satan's direct influence upon our life. We usually see those vices merely as a sign of the weakness of our human nature.

Sin is of the devil. And Jesus Christ came to destroy the devil's work in us. Yet, sin remains a factor in the life of a child of God. Even if we belong to Jesus Christ, our old sinful nature wants to keep its finger in the pie.

1. John 19:30

Without denying the relationship between our sinful nature and the devil, we must admit that there is a difference between Satan's direct impact upon a life, which results in a life of sin, and being tempted by our own lusts and giving in to them. We do not refute the seriousness of the latter when we state that John's radical pronouncements pertain to a person who stands under direct control of the enemy and who has no desire for deliverance from sin. Jesus came for this kind of hopeless condition, for the purpose of destroying the work of the devil. If we put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as a dynamic power for our daily life, we will not be able to consistently live a life of sin. The seed of God, that is the Word of God in our heart, will not permit us to do this.

Being born of God means that we have made the transition from darkness to light. We have moved from the devil's control into the kingdom of God, from a life dominated by sin into God's justification. The words "God's seed" remind us of the first prophecy in the Bible: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel."¹ Jesus says: "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me."² It is the constantly remaining of Christ in us that will protect our life and make sin abhorrent to us. If the life of the Son of God is in us, the ties with our past will be broken once for all. As a child of God we can fall into sin but we cannot live in it.

In v.10 John reverses the statement of v.8. This has a profound meaning, because it forces us to ask ourselves the question: "Where do I stand?" Often we maintain a condition of quiet coziness, thinking that we are eternally secure, shielding ourselves from the tensions John mentions here, tensions that are typical of real life. Of course, we cannot consciously experience holiness, but it is important that our conscience remains sensitive enough so that it registers any tendency to deviate from fellowship with God. John's introduction of brotherly love provides us with a reliable tool for the evaluation of our spiritual condition. A love relationship with God cannot but evince itself in love to other people. And there is a great lack of brotherly love in this world!

John's admonition in v.11 that we should love one another seems to be a repetition of what was said in v.7. Here it is not a command but a declaration. A command must be obeyed, whether we want to or not. A declaration reveals what is hidden within. John declares that love for one another will be the fruit of the Gospel we have heard and received. It is not only an act of obedience to the will of God.

If Cain had known of this love he would never have murdered his brother. John reveals that Cain's relationship with God was wrong; he belonged to the devil. He allowed the enemy to take possession of him so that envy took over in his heart. His actions were evil and he found no satisfaction in them. But instead of turning to God, he turned away from Him.

C. Love in Deed and Truth 3:13-24

13 Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.

14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.

15 Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

17 If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?

18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

19 This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence

20 whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

21 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God

1. Gen. 3:15 NKJV

2. John 15:4

22 and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.

23 And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.

24 Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

The fruit the Gospel produces in our life is for some a refreshing experience and for others it is repugnant. I remember a time when I had an inward longing to live a holy life and yet I wanted to stay away from people who had “a smell of holiness.” There is in the hatred of the world a measure of self-condemnation. I ought not to be too amazed about that because that is the way I was myself.

Jesus said: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”¹ This radical passage is totally God’s work. Our faith does not cause our resurrection and our entrance into real life. God prepares this for us and our faith only helps us to enter through the door.

In the same way, brotherly love is not the fruit of our own efforts. We are not resurrected from the dead because we love the brethren. Love is the fruit of the resurrection God provided. For us it is proof of the new life we have received.

At the same time, we cooperate in producing this love, because we have the ability to refuse to love. Lack of love is the twin brother of egoism. It is true that we cannot break the power of egoism in ourselves, but refusal to love others will close the door to the power of God. If we have no desire whatsoever for this love, how then can the Gospel penetrate in us and how can we experience its liberating effects?

I John 3:16 is one of the golden verses in the Bible: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” In complete opposition to human egoism stands the love of God, which we know in that it gives itself completely. If this love is in us, egoism will be banned and we will become bearers of the image of God, which others will also recognize in us.

We must not interpret laying down our lives for our brothers exclusively in terms of martyrdom. That may be included in it and it is good to ask God to make us faithful if in times of persecution we are called upon to die for someone else’s sake. Satan can manipulate our tendency to apply the Word of God to circumstances in the distant future, far beyond our present reach, circumstances we may never have to face, simply so that we would not make the application to the place and time at which we are now. To lay down our lives for our brothers may simply mean to be touched with compassion when we see a fellow believer suffering and doing something to help. In most cases this will not play itself out against the background of inquisition of persecution, but in the gray everyday reality of the present.

This verse also shows that God’s love is not to be a passive entity in our lives. It is the talent we have to put to use. If we only bask in the sunshine of God’s love without sharing it with others in practical ways, we are in danger of losing it completely. The truth about God’s love is “Use it or lose it!”

There does not seem to be any difference between John’s admonition “let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” and James’ words: “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”² Our words are often in opposition to our actions. Much of what we say has little fact to bear it up. Love, whether between husband and wife, or neighborly love, does not consist in talk, but in acts. It is something to be practiced.

John’s addition “in truth” after “with actions,” contains a warning against hypocrisy. “In truth” means “in Christ.” As Jesus said: “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”³ And: “I am the way

1. John 5:24

2. James 2:14-17

and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”¹ And answering Pilate’s question: “You are a king, then!” Jesus answered, ‘You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.’ ”²

We cannot separate love from God. Our love means nothing apart from God. If love is truly demonstrated in our lives it is because we are in the truth, that is: we live with God through Jesus Christ. This means that we should not merely try to love. If we apply ourselves to a life of fellowship with God, love will follow by itself. It will take no effort at all.

I cannot imagine any greater consolation for our struggling conscience than the assurance given that God is above anything our hearts can condemn us of. Belonging to the truth does not mean sinless perfection. The truth is for people whose hearts condemn them. The very fact that we do condemn ourselves proves that we belong to the truth. We can be sure to belong to the truth if we come to the point of saying: “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing.”³ If we know this, God knows it too. And God’s voice is stronger than the voice that accuses me. I do not have to be afraid and hide anything; God knows it all. God is greater than our hearts. God’s grace is also greater than my sin. Knowing this means standing in the reality of the Gospel. This is the truth.

The fact that God is greater than my heart would have no effect if God were not in my heart. God’s greatness is so important to me in my daily experience because it is His greatness in me. My heart may accuse me, but God is infinitely greater; His holiness is greater than my evil heart.

If our hearts do not condemn us we experience the benefits of having entered into God’s rest. According to the writer of Hebrews, “anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.”⁴ We have to learn to let go and confide in Him who is greater than our heart. It is one thing to ignore the accusing voice of our conscience and harden our heart, but it is equally dangerous if we only have an ear to hear that voice. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin because without that conviction there cannot be any experience of being forgiven. The purpose of the Spirit’s conviction is always forgiveness. Satan will accuse us for the purpose of accusing and to bring us to despair. In as much as the presence of Jesus Christ in us will become a greater reality to us, the accusation will lose its grip on us and we will learn to live as being forgiven. This is a two-way street. We will have more confidence before God as our heart will condemn us less, but the more we use this confidence that is given us in Christ, the more our conscience will be cleansed from a sense of guilt.

The words “we obey His commands” sound like an Old Testament phrase, not in the sense the Old Testament speaks about the law, but in the way the Jew understood this. The relationship between obedience and answered prayer goes much deeper than we may think. The command given is the command to believe. Faith puts us in a right relationship with God in which asking and receiving becomes natural. Of course, there is a connection between a clear conscience and answered prayer. And because a clear conscience is fed by faithful fellowship with God, the answer to our prayer will depend upon our fellowship.

The command is to have faith and the demonstration of faith is in doing those things that are pleasing to God. So the line between obedience and answer to prayer runs via faith. It is faith that moves us from the level of what is earthbound and human to new life in Christ. This means that answers to prayer can never be because of something we merited.

V.23 boils down the command to these basics: faith and love. Everything God ever commanded is comprised in these two. When God gave the Ten Commandments and the Levitical Law, He only had one thing in

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3. John 4:24
 1. John 14:6
 2. John 18:37
 3. Rom.7:18,19
 4. Heb. 4:10

mind, which has been realized in Jesus Christ. Without the Person of Jesus the Law of God makes us run into a brick wall. It is an impossibility.

Faith means: “to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ.” It means faith in His authority and living on the basis of His mandate. “The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.”¹ The command is for those who know themselves to be cleansed by the blood of Christ, which makes them able to stand against the devil by the power of the Name. Because faith is something that is alive and bears fruit, love will follow naturally. It is impossible to believe in Jesus Christ without experiencing His love which will melt away all traces of hate. That which is warm will radiate warmth. That which is loved will love.

We find this concentric circle: faith bears fruit in obedience; obedience provides the experience of being loved and loving. Our remaining in Him and His remaining in us is, first of all, a taking by faith, but it is also a real experience. John tells us how we can recognize the reality of this. The Holy Spirit will demonstrate His presence in us. It is this Spirit we received by the same act of faith by which we were saved. The emphasis in v.24, “Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us” is on His living in us. That is the solid foundation, the basis of our living in Him. This is not merely an example as to how to remain in Christ, it is the magnet that pulls us irresistibly toward Him.

D. Testing the Spirits 4:1-6

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

2 This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,

3 but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

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

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

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

The life of a Christian moves between two points of peril. On the one side there is a tendency for isolation, which keeps out everything that does not exactly conform to our understanding of the Gospel. That closes the door to fellowship with other believers who may differ slightly from our point of view. On the other hand there is the danger of accepting everything that presents itself as religious. The strong emphasis in this epistle upon fellowship with one another contains a condemnation of the first tendency. There is genuine spiritual life that will take forms that are totally different from what we are familiar or comfortable with. There is also a form of orthodoxy that has excluded the presence of the Lord completely. The determining factor is the presence of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that we must joyfully accept every form of spirituality that is unfamiliar to us. We may find “false prophets” outside the circle of identified “false prophets.” There are prophets about whom God says: “The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds.”² This is a real and subtle danger.

The proof of the working of the Spirit of God is in the way it influences the human spirit. We can only confess Jesus Christ as Lord by the Holy Spirit. John speaks here about the effect we have upon the lives of others and the effect others have upon us. Is the person who speaks demonstrating the spirit he proclaims to possess? Is it the Spirit of Jesus Christ that comes to me through him? Or does he, in his orthodoxy, give evidence of a cold, loveless

1. Prov. 18:10

2. Jer. 14:14

and calculating mentality that is completely foreign to the compassion of the Lord? Although, in these verses, John argues primarily against false teaching, the truth goes deeper than the surface. “It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”¹

The Apostle Paul states: “If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.”² And: “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”³ If this is not true, how then could the aroma of Christ permeate our life? There is in us often still enough left of “the reproach of Egypt,”⁴ of the spirit of the Antichrist that ought to temper our judgment over others.

When John states: “You, dear children, are from God” he does not refer to a certain level of spirituality but to a basic principle. We not only belong to God, but we are from Him. This means that the life that is in us, the spirit in us, originates in God. This realization ought to fill us with inexpressible joy. We may know that, living in this confused and foolish world, we have no inner ties to the fears and despairs of this world. We are from God; He is our Father. This is so true and so immense that we will never be able to fully comprehend it. But we know that the difference this makes is decisive. Because we are from God, our lives move toward Him. That must be the basis of our daily fellowship with Him. Our fellowship with God is no fearful groping without any assurance that He hears our prayers. Every day we may set our feet upon the solid rock of this verse: “You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.” We are not merely “from God” because He is the Creator of all human beings. We are not “from God” because our parents were believers, but we are “from God” because Jesus Christ died for us personally and God placed us in Him, making us a new creation.

The words “you have overcome them” are not an indication of how far we have come spiritually. They mean that we have the victory over everything that refuses to bow under the authority of Jesus Christ, whether in us or outside us. We are thus victorious not because we are so strong, but because we have become part of the victory of the cross. Light is always stronger than darkness; everything that is “from God” is always stronger than sin. We may not always be consciously aware of this. Sin and darkness can terrorize us, even though we are Christians. But that does not take away anything of the truth that Christ’s life in us is stronger than anything else. As soon as our eyes are opened to this, the experience of victory will flood our soul. He who is greater than the spirit of this world is in us.

In sharp contrast to “you are from God,” stands the phrase “they are from the world.” “The world” is the system that came into being because of the disobedience of one man. It is the aversion in the heart of man against all that God wants him to be. Jesus’ words in John’s Gospel form the basis of this verse: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates me hates my Father as well. If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: ‘They hated me without reason.’”⁵

“You are from God,” “we are from God.” If we would put our relationship with other Christians as simply as John does it here, many problems and tension would be taken out of the way. The painful truth is that the situation is as simple as John puts it. Once the complexes of our human prejudices have been removed, there only remains fellowship with those who acknowledge Jesus as Lord, and there remains a abyss between us and those who choose

1. Heb. 4:12
2. Rom. 8:9
3. Rom. 8:16
4. Josh. 5:9
5. John 15:18-25

to go their own way. If we look at a group of Christians and ask the question how much Gospel is preached among them, we may also reduce the matter to this simple issue: are they from God, or do they preach themselves? It will be clear that the spirit of deception is not only found among spiritualists, humanists or Jehovah Witnesses; this spirit also moves freely among some very orthodox churches.

E. Love as Christ Loved 4:7—5:3

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

13 We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.

16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.

17 In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him.

18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

19 We love because he first loved us.

20 If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

21 And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Chapter 5:1 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.

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

3 This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.

Fellowship with God and love for one another belong together. The fact that we are “from God” not only obliges us to love but it also enables us. If we are born of God and we know God, we are enveloped in God’s love for us and it is only natural that this love will emanate from us to others. The fact that the Apostle John issues this statement proves, however, that brotherly love does not come naturally to us. We must constantly focus upon God’s love for us in order to bring ourselves to love our neighbor.

“God is love.” Together with the statement “God is light,” this verse forms the heart, not only of this epistle, but also of the whole Gospel. Just as much as we are unable to comprehend “God is light” so we are incapable of understanding what it means that God is love. Love is not merely one of God’s attributes, it is God Himself. As “God is light” has the healing effect upon us that it discovers our darkness, so has God’s love. Fellowship with a God who is love will urge us to give as He has given, without making a distinction between human beings. This loving God searches us, not because of the evil within us, but because He longs to see in us the perfection and joy of Jesus Christ. If we love our fellowmen, we demonstrate a desire to see in them the holiness of God. This is quite different from the judgmental attitude we often demonstrate toward others. God’s love is also different from the affection we may feel toward others, which is often more geared to receive than to give.

God’s love is not a vague feeling of fondness, an unreal sense of being in love, that fails when hardships hit. God’s love is a strong reality. “Love is as strong as death.”¹ It is sad when we get used to the most glorious event that

ever took place on earth, the demonstration of God's love in the giving of His Son. What God has given us is inexpressible. It is difficult for us to believe that Jesus came to earth for us and faced hatred, disobedience and death in order to save us. We ought to pray the Holy Spirit that our hearts will not become like Jacob's whose heart turned to stone when he heard that his son Joseph was still alive.¹ God gave definite proof of His love for us and this proof is our salvation. We ought to thank Him with our life because it cost Him His all.

"He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him." God not only demonstrates His love for us in our salvation and conversion but specifically in our life through Him. At this very moment, writing and reading these words, God gives us Jesus Christ, as proof of His love, as love itself, as Himself. To live through Him means receiving His life moment by moment, as an embryo receives its mother's life through an umbilical cord. It means a continuous receiving of His strength and His grace. This is even greater than the change He brought about at our conversion when we met Him and knew Him for the first time. That was a one-time event, which caused great joy. But this is the sweet reality of daily life. It is true: God is love!

We are on the wrong road if we worry about the lack of love for God in our heart. Love, this kind of love, is not something we can produce ourselves. God's love streams toward us and what overflows returns to the source. The only way to produce love for God in our heart is to acknowledge that we do not have it and that we cannot work ourselves up to it. Having done that, we may bask ourselves in the warmth of God's love. This is what it means to live in Him. We must not magnify ourselves as if our great faith or the power of our love produces results. The heroes of faith are those who are weak in themselves, who are so afraid that they are unable to stir until God works through them. We walk in the way of love if we cannot go on ourselves, and God picks us up and carries us.

God has loved us; we did not love Him first. He sought us; we did not seek Him. He sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. That is the chorus in God's love song.

Love for one another is a command. It is not a matter of preference that we can take or leave. Jesus says: "This is my command: Love each other."² And earlier in this epistle, John stated: "Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him."³

The words "ought to love" do not convey a sense of "maybe, maybe not." The Greek word *opheilo* means "to owe," or "to be under obligation." We find it in Jesus' story about the servant and his debts. "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who *owed* him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you *owe* me!' he demanded."⁴ If we lack love for one another we sin against God's commandment. The glory of this verse is that it puts God's command in a natural light. It is easy for us to respond to the laws of nature. We know we have to eat and drink in order to stay alive. Our experience of hunger and thirst make it easy to obey that law of nature. The law of brotherly love belongs to the same category. Our realization of God's love for us makes it easy to spontaneously respond with love to all who appear to have the same relationship with God as we do.

"No one has ever seen God." The invisible God manifests Himself in us and through us by means of our love for others. If we fail to show forth God's love we blur the manifestation of God's presence in this world. Not only that, but we have to give proof to unbelievers in our service to an invisible God. It will be the only manifestation of

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1. Song of Solomon 8:6
 1. See Gen. 45:26.
 2. John 15:17
 3. I John 2:7-11
 4. Matt. 18:28

the existence of God they may ever receive. Love for one another makes God's presence a reality, because our love is the fruit of His presence. This love will make "God lives in us" a glorious experience. If we fail to manifest God's love, we shut off the current and standing water becomes rank. God's love is always perfect and complete. When God's love is made complete in us, it means that it has grown to maturity and has taken complete possession of us. Growing into maturity takes care and cultivation. If we neglect God's love it will die in us. If it is cared for it will grow. Our daily fellowship with God is of vital importance.

"We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit" is the twin of an earlier statement: "We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands."¹ This throws an important light upon the fact of our fellowship with God. First of all, it tells us that fellowship with God is a conscious experience: "We know!" We must not have any doubt about this. The Holy Spirit makes this a deep certainty in our heart. As the Apostle Paul says: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."² The guarantee of our fellowship with God and the fruits that are the result of it is not something in ourselves but the presence of the Holy Spirit.

When the Father sent the Son into this world He had the salvation of the whole world in mind. God was not concentrating on a small select group of people only. It is only when we live in fellowship with God that our eyes are opened to God's world-encompassing plan of salvation. It is also only from within this fellowship with the Father through Jesus Christ that we can understand what happens in the world.

Another facet of our being in God and of His presence in us is our confession. This is undoubtedly the primary condition of fellowship. Other conditions are obedience³ and love for one another.⁴ Life with the Lord has nothing harsh, even though there are requirements to be met. That which will make even the slightest effort of ourselves falter is the enormity of God's overflowing love. All our own efforts to climb up to God will crash into the wall of this love.

John gives us three statements that reflect the perfection of God's love in us and the effect this has upon our life: "If anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him,"⁵ "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us"⁶ and "In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him."⁷ This last verse gives us the result: "confidence on the day of judgment." This is probably the greatest miracle of all.

Some people are so caught up in their sin that they have no guilt feelings at all and either feel quite confident about the day of judgment or never even think of it. God's love replaces our guilt feelings with a deep peace and confidence about the day of judgment that is quite different from that. We know that we have eternal life and will not be condemned because we have crossed over from death to life.⁸

It is good to realize that God brings people, who never knew what real love was, to a place where love is made complete in them. It is also good to know that this is a growing process. We will be able to love more tomorrow than we do today. Love is the solution to all of life's problems. If the fear of death, whether it is conscious or unconscious, keeps us in a condition of slavery, and death is the unavoidable end that dominates our whole existence, how overwhelmingly wonderful it is then when this fear is taken from us and we find ourselves placed in the center of God's eternal love! God does not stand at the end of our life with a pair of scales in His hands to weigh our good

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1. I John 2:3
 2. Rom. 8:16
 3. See I John 3:24.
 4. See I John 4:12.
 5. I John 2:5
 6. I John 4:12
 7. I John 4:17
 8. See John 5:24.

deeds against our sins. Judgment is past; blessing is ahead. When we were still outside God, God had to look at us critically and judgmentally. But as we are in Him now, He is in us and He cannot condemn Himself. "Because in this world we are like him." We share the same life; we have the same task; we have the same dependence upon the Holy Spirit, and we are given the same mandate. We are not in this world like He was, but as He is. As God's children, as the church of Jesus Christ we are indissolubly linked to Him. Before God, we are one: Jesus and us. That is our confidence. Our becoming aware of this means that God's love in us becomes mature. This will inevitably bear fruit.

Fear can occupy a dominating place in human life. John points to the reason for our fears: "Fear has to do with punishment." This means that all our fear-complexes, all the crookedness of our life, can be traced back to our broken relationship with God and to our realization that we bear responsibility for this. Even after we have become God's child, this fear can still exist. We may be afraid to meet God even after our salvation. As Adam, who tried to hide from God, we try to avoid the light of fellowship with God. Only when our eyes are open to the eternal love God has for us, the anguish is taken away. In spite of our terrible poverty and nakedness, we have no reason to be afraid of God. And if we have no more reason to be afraid of God, we have no reason to fear anything.

"We love because he first loved us." This statement suggests that, in connection with fear and love, when we become aware of God's love for us, we will respond by returning love. The fact that God loves us does not protect us from fear. But if we realize that we are the objects of God's love and we respond to this by returning love to Him, fear will disappear. If God is the essence of our life, our attitude toward life will be governed by our relationship with Him. If we think that life owes us something because we love God, we will be disappointed. But if we have an eye for the miracle of His love for us, it will release God's power in us.

Our love for God is nothing more than a natural reaction to His love. God's love for us is a miracle that will keep on surprising us. If we understand who God is and who we are, we find nothing that justifies such love. God's love is unreasonable; it is wonderfully strange. How could we pass by in indifference a God who so loved us!

The Bible leaves no room for unreal fantasies. It is easy to evoke romantic feelings and to consider those to be our love for God. Genuine love of God will put us with both feet on the ground, and it will make us love our fellowmen. God's love for us is realistic; it demonstrates itself in factual manifestations. If our love of God is not visible in the way we treat others, we fool ourselves. It is not the echo of our heart to the love of God that brought Jesus on earth. God wants us to be practical. We are facing real people in a harsh and real world. If we cannot cope with that visible world, we must not think that it is easier in the invisible realm. Love of God is not a flight from reality, it is reality itself, devoid of all appearance of fake and deception, which is the image sin makes it out to be. For those of us who do not have this insight, the easy way is to just obey the command. God tells us to love our brother; that is a order.

Love, however, cannot be forced upon us. Love lives by our choices. We must understand that, once we have made the choice to love God, we choose against ourselves if we hate our brother. As the Apostle Paul says: "If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker."¹

To believe that Jesus is the Christ means much more than merely acknowledging that He is it. It means acquisition of insight into the person of Christ, not by natural means, by reasoning or study. We can only know Jesus Christ as Savior by receiving new life from God. It is the acknowledgment of Jesus as the Christ that renews us and, at the same time, it is the new birth that makes us realize that Jesus is our Savior. As Jesus said to Peter: "This was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."²

In writing these things, John formulates our relationship with fellow believers in the simplest terms and according to the only valid principle. If we love Him who has given us new life, we must see our brothers and sisters in their relationship to the Lord, as we see ourselves in our relationship with Him. Our love for others is not based on what they are in themselves, but on the basis of the new life in Christ we have in common with them.

1. Gal. 2:18

2. Matt. 16:17

“This is how we know” in v.2 is the last of 11 verses in which these words are used.¹ These words determine the special character of this epistle. They demonstrate the evidences of life with the Lord. They speak of knowing Him, being and remaining in Him and His love for us, and of His return. The remarkable proof of our love for God and our fellowmen is in our obedience. We tend to turn things around and say that the love of our neighbor is proof of our love of God. But John says: “Do you want to know how much you love the other? Ask yourself how much you love God and obey Him.” John bases his argument on the law of life of the Holy Spirit in us. If we really have a relationship of love and obedience with God, love for others will not be an obligation forced upon us, it will be an inevitable reality. “This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands.”

Measuring our love for God’s children will require a good measure of self-examination. If we love God we will naturally want to obey Him, but this is not an unconscious process. We have to know whether we obey or not. We do well to take an inventory from time to time and see how real our obedience is. If we fail to do so, our brother will suffer from our lapses of love for God.

But our love of God consists of more than obedience alone. Instead of “This is love *for* God: to obey his commands” the Greek text reads literally: “This is the love *of* God: to obey his commands.” God loves us so much that He will see to it that we obey Him! It is not our love for God but His love for us within us that makes our heart willing and tender.

II. Consequences of Fellowship 5:4-21

A. Victory over the World 5:4-5

*4 for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.
5 Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*

God’s commands are not a burden if we overcome the world. What makes God’s commands a burden is the influence the world has upon us. It is this tension between wanting to please God and wondering what people will say of us that makes the will of God conflict with our lifestyle. Simple confidence in the Lord, having faith, will make God’s commands a burden that is light. There was nothing heavy for the Lord Jesus in obeying His Father’s will. He said: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.”² If we are born again by the Holy Spirit, we will overcome the world. This does not necessarily refer to the world in us but to our tendency to live for ourselves and to act apart from God. We must have no doubt about it that sin that keeps us in captivity becomes a weak and powerless gel when it is exposed to the light of God. The tiniest spark of the Holy Spirit in us is stronger than the power of the most awful sin.

If it is our faith that overcomes the world, what then is faith? It is not a human virtue. It is a flight to Him who has said: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”³

John does not ask: “Who is it that has faith?” He asks: “Who is it that overcomes?” As in the previous verses, John’s conclusion annuls all other options. Nothing is simpler than faith. A person who has faith is the most uncomplicated human being that exists. Simply holding on to the fact that Jesus Christ is the Son of God is what overcomes the world in us and around us. John does not worry about theological complication. As long as our understanding that Jesus is the Son of God means power and victory for us, theological implications are of no importance. Unfortunately, theology will increase its power as the power of the Holy Spirit loses its grip upon our lives.

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1. The others are 2:3,5,18; 3:10,16,19,24; 4:2,6,13.
 2. John 4:34
 3. John 16:33

There are two Old Testament stories that illustrate how we can overcome the world. When Israel entered the Promised Land God said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.”¹ The reproach of Egypt must be rolled away from us to make us victors. The corruption that is in the world must be taken off spiritually in “the circumcision of Christ” as it was physically done to the Israelites at Gilgal. If we consciously identify ourselves with the Lord Jesus in His death, the mentality of the world will lose its grip on us. Sin is a reproach, a shameful thing for a child of God, or for that matter for every human being. Faith removes the reproach. The second illustration is from Ezekiel. Ezekiel had a vision in which he saw water trickling from under the threshold of the temple entrance. This trickle became a little stream and ended up a river that he could no longer ford. The water that originated in the sanctuary ended up in the Dead Sea and healed the water. The angel that explained the vision to the prophet said: “When it empties into the Sea, the water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live.”² That which originates with God overcomes the world. It is the victory of life over death, of wholeness over corruption. Those who do not seek themselves but seek their Creator will inherit eternal life and incorruptibility. Victory is the lawful possession of those who are in Christ.

B. Assurance of Salvation 5:6-13

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

7 For there are three that testify:

8 the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.

9 We accept man’s testimony, but God’s testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son.

10 Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son.

11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

The images of water, blood and the Spirit are some of John’s favorite metaphors. In his report about the conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus, he mentions water and the Spirit in connection with the new birth. We read: “Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.’”³ And at the time of Jesus’ death he reports: “One of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.”⁴ It may be difficult to interpret the meaning of “water” in this context. Speaking about regeneration, the Apostle Paul writes to Titus: “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”⁵ This may be what John refers to here. But the most likely explanation may be that John thought of the Old Testament rituals in which that laver and the altar were prominent in bringing about atonement. The author of Hebrew also alludes to blood and water as agents of sanctification. He states: “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our

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1. Josh. 5:9
 2. See Ezek. 47:1-12.
 3. John 3:5
 4. John 19:35
 5. Titus 3:5

bodies washed with pure water.¹ There is also a connection between water and the Word of God, as is obvious from Jesus' words to His disciples: "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."²

Jesus Christ came "by water and blood." The blood was His own blood. He came not only to teach us, but also to give His life as a ransom for us. Because His perfect life was poured out in death, we receive pardon of sin and enter into fellowship with God.

"And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth." This glorious statement is most significant. There is much we can say about the Spirit's testimony. Without the working of the Holy Spirit our faith would be nothing more than a figment of our own human efforts. The Apostle Paul says: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."³ God is not only the goal of our faith, He also is its source. The first result of the Spirit's testimony is that we become sure in our heart of the facts of salvation. Secondly, the Holy Spirit will give us what we need in order to be a testimony of the saving power of the Lord Jesus Christ to the world around us. This truth will become evident "because the Spirit is the truth." God does not entrust His testimony to untrustworthy human beings as we are. Our faith will suffer a miserable shipwreck if we cast our anchor on anything within ourselves. Only the Spirit of God can reveal God's truth to us "because the Spirit is the truth."

The testimony of the Spirit, the water and the blood, mentioned in vv.7 and 8, still refers to the object of our faith: Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The Spirit, the water and the blood testify with one voice about Jesus, the Son of God. We are not brought to the recognition of who Jesus Christ is by intellectual convictions, but by this three-voiced testimony. And this is never a merely objective conclusion about the facts. This testimony causes the objective history of salvation to become our history. However important it may be what other people tell us about Jesus, it is ultimately what God says about His Son that will bring us into a living relationship with Him. It is the Holy Spirit who renews our life and who makes us into genuinely living beings. It is the water that cleanses us and releases us from bondage, and it is the blood that washes away our sins so that we can lift up our eyes to God with a clean conscience, even if we were murderers to begin with. The testimony of these three tells us clearly that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. As the Psalmist says: "Your testimonies are wonderful; Therefore my soul keeps them."⁴ "Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart." This is the interaction of faith. Our redemption and conciliation with God and our being filled with the Holy Spirit affirm to us who Jesus Christ is. And our acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord will make this truth penetrate deeper and deeper in us. If we do not believe God, we deny His testimony and refuse God's power that made His light shine in the darkness of our heart in order to recreate the chaos of our life into His new creation. If we refuse to accept God's testimony, we actually make God a liar. The expression is the same as in the first chapter: "If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives."⁵

The water, the blood and the Spirit are living proofs of the eternal life that is within us. If we know that our life has been changed because God has let the light of His love shine upon us, we do not have to ask ourselves whether we are God's child or not. We have the proof of the Holy Spirit in our heart. The eternal life God has given us is in His Son. God does not merely give us a bath to wash away our sin; He does not merely cover us with some impersonal holiness; He gives us His Son. The Apostle Paul writes: "It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption."⁶ Sometimes we may wish that God had given eternal life and then let us go. But since He linked us inseparably to the Person of Jesus

1. Heb. 10:22

2. John 15:3

3. Rom. 8:16

4. Ps. 119:129 (*New King James Version*).

5. I John 1:10

6. I Cor. 1:30

Christ our right to self-determination has ceased to exist. This life belongs to Jesus Christ and not to us. This life only belongs to us as we are in Christ and He is in us.

Actually, it is wonderful that God made it so personal for us. We need personal love in our natural life. A baby grows by drinking at his mother's breast. The cherishing and warmth that denote the presence of the mother is just as important for the infant's well-being as the milk he drinks. This is what it means: "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son."

"He who has the Son has life." The emphasis here is on possession, that is on the appropriation. Although it is true that eternal life is always God's life and not ours, it becomes ours in the Lord Jesus. We may put the possessive pronoun "my" in front of the Name of Jesus. He is "my Jesus," the One to whom all power in heaven and on earth has been given. We may consider Him to be ours because He has the right to do with us as He wishes. Without this personal involvement there is no eternal life for us.

In v.13 we find the last "I write these things." This expression in one form or another can be found 12 times in this epistle.¹ Apparently, one of the reasons for the writing of this epistle is to evoke in the reader a strong consciousness of the reality of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostle John wants us to know for sure what we believe. When we simply entrust ourselves to the Lord, faith will lay in us an unshakable foundation and we will be absolutely sure.

C. Guidance in Prayer 5:14-17

***14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.
15 And if we know that he hears us — whatever we ask — we know that we have what we asked of him.
16 If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that.
17 All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.***

The following verses are marked by this assurance. The first immovable surety is about our salvation. We know we have eternal life. The second assurance pertains to our prayers and God's answers. We may approach God with an attitude of confidence. Our natural reaction to the realization of God's presence may be hesitation, or even complete helplessness. It is only when the Holy Spirit gives us His assurance and makes us understand the position in which He placed us that we will feel free to approach God. The crucial condition for receiving answers to our prayers is that we pray "according to His will." George Mueller, who received numerous and wonderful answers to prayer, said that it often took him more time to know the will of God than, once he understood what God's will was, it did for him to pray and receive the answer.

With the example of the brother who sinned and the law that is at the basis of the problem, John gives us an answer to a series of questions that arise from the preceding verses.

1. Prayer according to God's will is, first of all, prayer for others. "If anyone sees his brother commit a sin..." Concern about the destiny of others is a clear example of the working of the Holy Spirit in our life.
2. "We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin..." There are specific spiritual laws that we can know. We do not have to ask what the will of God is about these matters. There can be no doubt about them. These laws make the will of God clear to us and they help us to know that will. They help us to pray that God will take the life of the one we pray for and align it anew to His will. Every situation in which we observe that something is not according to God's will ought to bring us to pray with confidence.

Vv.19-21 contain a clear summary of the whole epistle and they also form the climax of it. "We know that we are children of God" is not a haughty statement that looks down upon the world below. It is the glorious testimony of a person who knows that he is saved. He knows who did this for him and he knows what his position is. We are in Him who is the truth, Jesus Christ. Nobody but John succeeded in expressing the inexpressible so beautifully.

1. See 2:1,7,8,12,13,14,21,26; 5:13.

Everything that falls outside this intimate relationship with God constitutes idolatry. Let us beware of all that puts a wedge between God and us!