

# **Life in the Family of God**

*Five Seminars on 1 John*

*David Gooding*

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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## The Family of God in the Thought Flow of 1 John

My thanks, first of all, to the Institute itself, and to its revered and beloved founder for this invitation to come and lecture. As you will know, ladies and gentlemen, Dr Stott himself has written one of the finest commentaries on the Epistles of John to appear this century.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, when it was decided that 1 John was the appropriate New Testament passage to accompany your other studies this week, reason might have suggested that John Stott himself should have been the expositor. Instead, with characteristic grace and self-denial, he has invited me to take his place. You, I am sure, will hardly thank him for that. Now that I see such an authority as himself sitting here in front of me, I'm not quite so sure that I thank him either, but I have undertaken it gladly as a token of my gratitude for all that I and countless others have learned from him down the years. And certainly those of you who have read Dr Stott's commentary will perceive, in the course of this week, how much my lectures are everywhere indebted to him.

Now, one or two practical matters. Somewhere near your elbow you should have a sheaf of notes, and if you have them it will comfort me much.<sup>2</sup> They should be on the studies in the First Epistle of John, and if you have them I am glad to see that you are still sitting here and haven't run away at the sight of them. Let me comfort you by the observation that these notes are by way of being an accompaniment to the talks. They contain a lot of matter that we shall not possibly cover this week, but I thought it might be helpful, in addition to the talks, to have a little pocket commentary for you to take away. They will also be useful for you, and particularly for me, in the course of my remarks, if occasionally I might refer you to them.

The task assigned to me is to examine the first epistle by John, looking especially to see what it has to say on the topic of 'the family of God'. I am told that I need not confine myself narrowly to that particular topic, but that I should perhaps put most of the emphasis of the week on the question of the family of God and life in that family. I shall not, therefore, spend time now at this juncture in talking about introductory matters. I have made some notes on that score in the sheaf of notes that I have given you. Occasionally, we shall be referring to these matters as the time goes by, but for the moment I skip normal introductory matters for time's sake. Let us come immediately, therefore, to our topic of the family of God.

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<sup>1</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (IVP, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> These notes form the Appendix to this transcript.

## The family of God and the structure of 1 John

If we chose, we could hunt through our first epistle by John and take out isolated verses here or there that bear more or less directly on the topic. I have rejected that procedure as being too narrow and too arbitrary. It is better perhaps for us to try, however briefly, to understand the flow of John's thought throughout the epistle as a whole, and then to see what he says about the family of God and how that fits into the context, or contexts, of his epistle as a whole, so that what he has to say about the family of God is coloured by what precedes and by what follows it.

### Various analyses suggested

Now, at first sight you might think it were easy to pick out, in such a small epistle as the Epistle of John, the main line of his thought and to see some unified logical progression throughout the epistle. Actually that has proved an exceedingly difficult thing to do, and all commentators shed appropriate tears in the course of their introduction over the difficulties of their task. The reason is that John has been inspired to write in what, at first sight at any rate, looks like a series of pithy, though of course profound, statements that are only loosely connected. His book resembles, frankly, the book of Proverbs. As you know, when you study Proverbs, at first sight you are bewildered by its teeming richness, and then you notice a verse here and a verse that follows, and it appears it's going to follow a particular topic when, all to your grief, it turns and goes off onto some other matter, and once more you are lost again, beginning with some new theme, as it would appear. And many scholars have found the paragraphs of John's epistles very much like that.

If that is so, we have no reason for complaint, of course. The truths that God has revealed in this fashion in the First Epistle of John are immeasurably profound. Just take the two of them that concern God's self-revelation to us: that 'God is light' and that 'God is love'. If those two statements did stand in the middle of a wilderness, then they are surely profound enough to exercise our minds for the rest of life, and doubtless for eternity as well.

Nonetheless, it would be easier to track down our subject if we could find some logical scheme in the arrangement of his material. And, understandably, many scholars have attempted to do it. Professor I. H. Marshall, in his commentary, cites seven different ways of analysing the Epistle of John.<sup>3</sup> Professor R. E. Brown, in his recent commentary, cites many more different ways of analysing the Epistle of John.<sup>4</sup> Some of them, he points out, are divisions into two parts; and some of them are divisions into three parts; and some of them are divisions into seven parts. It begins to look as if you pay your money and take your pick. Marshall finds all of these analyses inadequate for one reason and another. He says they force the evidence, and for himself he feels it is best simply to make a list of contents, and I have copied out his list for you here so that you can see his analysis of the epistle and its breakdown into paragraphs.

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<sup>3</sup> See pp. 22–27, I. Howard Marshall. *The Epistles of John*, NICNT. Eerdmans, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> See pp. 116–129, Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible, 1982.

## I. Howard Marshall's Analysis of the Content of the First Epistle of John<sup>5</sup>

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

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He says it contains, first of all, the prologue—the words about the Word of Life, and then a paragraph about walking in the light. It is followed by another about keeping his commands and then, all of a sudden, another paragraph, this one about the new status of believers and their relation to the world. That is followed by a warning against antichrists; then another paragraph dealing with the hope of God's children; which is followed yet again by a further one about the sinlessness of God's children. Then come some exhortations on brotherly love as the mark of the Christian; followed yet again by a paragraph on assurance and obedience; and then a paragraph dealing with the spirits of truth and the spirits of falsehood and how you may distinguish between them. That is followed yet again by a paragraph on God's love to us and our love to God. Then there is another paragraph, this one about assurance and Christian love; then a paragraph, quite long this time, on the true faith confirmed. And, finally, we have some remarks about Christian certainties. So, as you see, according to Professor Marshall:

it seems preferable to regard the Epistle as being composed of a series of connected paragraphs whose relation to one another is governed by association of ideas, rather than by any logical plan. This does not mean that John is illogical, but rather that his Epistle is not meant to be divided into large sections on a logical basis.<sup>6</sup>

Well, Professor Marshall's standards are, of course, exceedingly high and exact, and he will not allow anything that does not account for every jot and tittle of the text, without any repetition and without any overlap. And that, I am sure, is exceedingly proper, but for our

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<sup>5</sup> See p. 26, Marshall.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

practical purpose this week we shall perhaps look to others for a little bit more help, so that we can comprehend the thought flow of the epistle a little bit more logically.

In a very recent commentary, Dr Stephen Smalley has suggested that you can see some kind of logical coherence in the contents of the epistle, and he analyses it in this fashion.

### **Stephen Smalley's Analysis of the Content of the First Epistle of John<sup>7</sup>**

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<b>I.</b>	<b>Preface (1:1–4) The Word of Life</b>
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<b>II.</b>	<b>Live in the Light (1:5–2:29)</b>
a.	God is light (1:5–7)
b.	First condition for living in the light: Renounce sin (1:8–2:2)
c.	Second condition: Be obedient (2:3–11)
d.	Third condition: Reject worldliness (2:12–17)
e.	Fourth condition: Keep the faith (2:18–29)
<hr/>	
<b>III.</b>	<b>Live as Children of God (3:1–5:13)</b>
a.	God is Father (3:1–3)
b.	First condition for Living as God's children: Renounce sin (3:4–9)
c.	Second condition: Be obedient (3:10–24)
d.	Third condition: Reject worldliness (4:1–6)
e.	Fourth condition: Be loving (4:7–5:4)
f.	Fifth condition: Keep the faith (5:5–13)
<hr/>	
<b>IV.</b>	<b>Conclusion (5:14–21) Christian Confidence</b>

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He says it has a preface dealing with the Word of Life. And then it has two major sections: first to live in the light because God is light, and all that is implied therein. And then, under rubric three, there is the exhortation that we are to live as children of God because God is not only light, but God is also our Father. Under those two major sections of the book he lists a number of what he calls conditions. If we are going to live in the light, as God is in the light, then the first condition is that we must renounce sin. The second condition is that we be obedient. The third condition, according to him, is that we reject worldliness; and the fourth condition is that we keep the faith.

Then, under the second major rubric: 'Live as children of God, because God is our Father', Professor Smalley lists a number of conditions, and if you notice them, according to him there is a kind of repetition, not a complete symmetry, but a repetition nonetheless. The first condition for living as children of God is that we renounce sin, and the second, once more: be obedient. The third condition: reject worldliness. And then, like most people that invent analyses of the First Epistle of John, he has to spoil his symmetry a little bit by saying, 'Ah, but there is now a fourth condition: be loving.' And I suspect if Professor Smalley were here he would say, 'Ah, but, you know, under rubric two there were some verses, if we looked around in that part of the epistle, that talked about being loving, surely.'

We shall not find fault in that way; our object is to find as much practical help as we can to get the whole epistle in front of our minds with some idea as to where its practical thrust

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<sup>7</sup> See pp. xxxiii–xxxiv, Stephen Smalley. *1, 2, 3 John: Word Biblical Commentary*, Word, 1984.

lies. And what Professor Smalley is helping us to do is at least to see that John has behind him an exceedingly practical thrust when he writes to us about the Word of Life. We are to live in the light, as God is in the light. We are to live as children of God, because God is our Father. And, according to him, John is laying down certain conditions that we must fulfil if we will live in the light and then live as children of God, and the conditions repeat themselves. So here, under number three, in the second division, the conditions are: to renounce sin, to be obedient, to reject worldliness, to be loving, and then to keep the faith. And it is all rounded off by a paragraph on Christian confidence.

Now, it is interesting to see a modern commentator arranging his material this way, for Professor Smalley's insights are quite similar, in their way, to a famous old analysis of the epistle that was put about first, at least publicly, by a certain Robert Law. And I have listed for you his ideas in your notes.<sup>8</sup>

### **Robert Law's analysis of 1 John**

Robert Law held the view that John is supplying us, if not with conditions, like Professor Smalley thinks, then with tests—criteria, by which everyone who professes to be a Christian may be able to test his own profession of Christianity and, if need be, test other people's profession of Christianity as well.

The tests, so Law suggested, are three: the test by righteousness, the test by love, and the test by belief. Or, as John Stott would put it in his commentary, the first test is that of obedience (or the moral test); the second test by love (or the social test) and the third test by belief (or the doctrinal test). It was Law's thesis that in the epistle, John is applying these three tests, one after the other, three times over in three cycles, as a very practical way to hammer home the point that he is making that all true profession of Christianity ought to be able to stand up to these three tests—the test by righteousness, the test by love, and the test by doctrine.

Marshall, of course, as usual, will not allow that Law's analysis fully comprehends and truly represents the text of 1 John. He feels, in particular, that when Law comes to his third cycle he has to push the evidence a little. That need not deter us this morning from profiting by this insight into what the general message of the epistle is. I repeat that if we are members of the family of God then we must be able to pass these tests when they are applied to us by God's Holy Spirit; and we must be able to pass all these tests, so to speak, simultaneously.

First comes the test by righteousness. It is no use arguing, as some heretics did (the Gnostics, for instance, whom I have listed for you on the notes) and as some modern interpreters of Christianity still do, that sin does not really matter because God is love, and we should be loving; and that therefore if God is love and we are loving then sin does not really matter. John the apostle will apply his test of righteousness to us and say, quite bluntly, 'He who commits sin, [that is he who goes on practising sin as the norm of his life], is of the devil' (see 3:8). It is true that our salvation is not of our works, in the sense that our works cannot deserve it, but true salvation is a thing that operates in us and leads to works of righteousness, so that if the works of righteousness are not there, our profession of faith is more than doubtful.

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<sup>8</sup> See the Study Notes in the Appendix – Preliminaries, IV. Structure of the Epistle.

But then Law would say John wants us to feel the fact that righteousness by itself—righteous behaviour, doing good—is not enough. We must also be loving. To keep the commandments of God in a hard, cold, self-righteous fashion is the mark of a Pharisee, rather than a mark of the member of the family of God. Therefore, John lays it down that, ‘If you do not practise righteousness you are not of God,’ (see 3:10). But similarly he adds, ‘He who does not love his brother is not of God’ (see 4:8). We need to be able to pass the test of righteousness and the test of love.

Then there is a third test, Law says: the test of doctrine, of right belief. It is commonplace today that doctrine is supposed to have divided people and led to all sorts of squabbles and fighting in the church, so much so that people say if only we could forget the doctrine and get on with loving one another, and doing right, then all would be well in the family of God. Too long, they say, have we had too much doctrine, and warred and divided ourselves over points of doctrine. But the Apostle John will not allow us that idea at all. He says that the test of doctrine is exceedingly important; and it does matter what we believe; and it does matter that we believe the right things about Jesus Christ, God’s Son. For while, as we shall presently see, we ought to do righteousness in the family of God, yet from time to time all of us fall, and we need a Saviour to make it possible for us to enter the family of God, and to make it possible for us to be maintained in fellowship with God. And unless Jesus Christ is God’s Son incarnate, the eternal life that was with the Father and was manifested for our sake and died at Calvary for our sake, then, of course, there is no salvation. Then there is no family of God, for there would be no way for us to enter that family or to be maintained in it.

Now, Law’s analysis has proved very popular with all true expositors, at least with all practical expositors, of the First Epistle of John. It appeals to them as putting across, very directly and clearly, the exceedingly practical purpose for which John wrote, that we may be able to test ourselves and see whether our experience is genuine Christianity, or whether it comes short by any of these tests.

### The analysis used in these sessions

With a perversity that is inherent within me, I suppose, I shall be following a slightly different scheme, though you will find that I owe a tremendous deal to what Robert Law has taught generations of expositors. Here is a very simple device that I put forward for our practical purposes this week.

	I	II	III
<b>From</b>	The manifestation of the life eternal (1:1–4)	The manifestation of the Son of God and of the children of God (2:28–3:10)	The manifestation of the love of God in his Son and in his people (4:7–11)
<b>To</b>	The warning against antichrists who deny that Jesus is the Christ (2:18–27)	The warning against believing the spirit of falsehood as distinct from the spirit of truth (4:1–6)	The warning against putting idols in place of the true God (5:18–21)



I am not putting forth this as an academic analysis of John's text, but simply as a practical device that may help us come the more nearly to our topic of the family of God. And I am going to divide the text into three great, what I call, *movements* of thought. The first starts in 1:1–4 with what John has to say about the manifestation of the life eternal, that life that was 'with the Father and was manifested to us', and follows his movement of thought down towards the end of chapter 2 where he comes to a long warning against antichrists who deny that Jesus is the Christ. I shall take that as our first major movement of thought.

Then I shall begin the second movement of thought in 2:28 and following, where John recurs to this topic of manifestation, the manifestation of the Son of God, both in his first coming and then in his second coming, and then also the manifestation of the children of God. As John says, 'It does not yet appear what we shall be; we are already children of God, but when he appears,' (that is when the Lord Jesus appears) 'we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is' (see 3:2). And I shall follow John's thought from that point onward until (in 4:1–6) we come across another great paragraph of warning, this time a warning against believing the spirit of falsehood as distinct from the spirit of truth.

When we have completed that second movement, I shall ask us to consider a third great movement of thought, beginning in 4:7 and following, where John once more recurs to this topic of manifestation. This time it is the manifestation of the love of God: 'In this was manifested the love of God' (see v. 9). We see the manifestation of that love in God's Son, first of all historically, and then in us, his people, nowadays. And I shall follow that great movement of thought until we come to the end of the epistle, where we find yet another solemn warning, a warning this time against putting idols in the place of the true God.

#### *Helping to distinguish differences*

Now, I repeat, I shall not be offering this as a technical analysis of the epistle, just as a preacher's little tactical device for comprehending the thought flow. It will help us to distinguish what at first sight looks like a lot of repetition when we read this epistle. For instance, take those warnings that end our movements. At first sight all three warnings look very much alike, but they do have differences.

The first is a warning against antichrists who deny that Jesus is the Christ. In that paragraph John will tell us that we have the help of the Holy Spirit, an anointing from the Holy One to guard us against these false doctrines that are aimed at the person of the Lord Jesus.

When we come to the second warning it does, of course, contain much that is the same, but the emphasis is different. This time it is a warning about false spirits. If the first warning has reminded us that we have the Holy Spirit to guide us, in the second warning the question will be raised: but then how do I know who the Holy Spirit is, and how do I distinguish the teaching of the Holy Spirit from the teaching of false prophets? Many claim to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. How shall I recognize, among all these claims to be inspired utterances of the Holy Spirit, the voice of the spirit of truth and not be taken away by the voice of the spirit of falsehood? So if in warning one, the emphasis is upon the person of the Lord Jesus, here in warning two we are thinking specially of the Holy Spirit.

And the third warning is a warning against idolatry, of putting anything in the place of the true God, not simply now the Son of God or the spirit of God merely, but warning against substitute gods, of loving or trusting anything or anyone in place of the true God.

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

I shall not need to argue the point that the manifestations at the beginning of our movements deal with obviously different things. But just let me put before you the observation that when we look at these three great movements of thought we shall find in each a great deal of material that will talk to us about the family of God. And the next thing we shall notice is that when John talks to us about the family of God he then talks to us in close context about the world. So if we are to understand what John means by *the family of God*, we shall also need to understand what he means by this term *the world*. It is not perhaps the easiest of terms to grasp. It is certainly very easy to get a superficial view of what John means by it—as something narrowly moralistic. So we shall be spending quite a bit of time this week considering the family of God, of course, as is our brief, but also considering what John puts over against the family of God, namely the world. And we shall find that in each of the three movements of thought John puts different emphases both on the family and on the world.

#### *The emphasis in Movement One*

In the first great movement of thought he will talk to us about the family and its members: the children—the little children, the young men and the fathers. And he will picture the members of the family united in the Father's love to them and their love to the Father, and to one another. And hard on the heels of his description of the family of God will be his description of the world and its seductiveness, so much so that when John has to urge us, 'Love the members of the family,' then he has to add, 'But do not love the world.' And he thinks of the world's seductiveness, all that is in the world: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, the pride of life, and he says, 'It is not of the Father', so much so that 'if any man love the world the love of the Father is not in him' (see 2:15). You cannot simultaneously love the world and love the Father. It is obviously important then, for our understanding of the family of God and life in the family of God that we come to understand what John means by *the world*. It is clean contrary to the family of God. And here we shall be thinking about our love. (Shades of Robert Law are already creeping up upon us.)

#### *The emphasis in Movement Two*

In the next great movement of thought we shall think of the family of God as to the origin of its life and character. Every member of the family says John is, 'begotten of God', is 'of God', as to the source of his life and the source of his character. And then once more John talks to us about the world, this time not in all the colours of its seductiveness, but in the sombre blacks of its evil. The world and its origin, the origin of its character, John says, very bluntly, (but like his Lord said) is of the evil one. And according to John there are but two families in this world: the family of God, and the family of the evil one. And that is not wild talk; we shall find it is a profound statement about the human condition in this world and the problem of sin and the way of salvation.

*The emphasis in Movement Three*

Then in the third great movement of thought we shall think again of the family, this time not of its love, nor of its righteousness—its character of doing good, but this time of its faith and therefore of its victory. It is the faith that overcomes. ‘Who is he that overcomes the world save he who believes that Jesus is the Christ?’ And what we have to overcome is of course *the world*. ‘This is the victory that overcomes the world’ (see 5:4–5).

‘Love the children of God,’ says John, and that will mean loving God. But we ask, is that not very difficult in this modern world? Does not the world put every kind of obstacle in our way so that we should not keep the commandments of God?

‘Yes,’ John says, ‘that is perfectly true.’ And we think of the world and its opposition, but there is a faith that overcomes the world, and the secret of its strengths are the great and glorious facts (the doctrinal facts, you might say) about the Son of God.

### **A start on some of the major ideas**

So that will be the way I shall be coming at the epistle this week, and I hope it is already apparent that our study shall be practically orientated. Let us now begin to get down to the facts, as we have a little time left, and at least begin to look at our text of 1 John 1 and what is commonly called the *prologue*.

#### **Fellowship**

Here John first introduces us to what is the nature and basis and content of the fellowship—a great fellowship that is to form the family of God, to be its chief treasure and its very heart. John writes:

That which we have seen and heard we declare unto you also, that you also may have fellowship with us: yes, and our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ; and these things we write, that our joy may be fulfilled (vv. 3–4).

We notice therefore that this term *fellowship* means basically ‘a sharing in’, ‘a partnership in’, so that when we think of fellowship we are thinking about our sharing in something with somebody else. We have to have something in common, in other words, and what we have in common is no less than that eternal life that was with the Father. What we have in common is not some vague mood or vague feeling that steals over us in our more religious moments. What we have in common is that eternal life that was with the Father and was manifested in history in Jesus Christ our Lord—in his life and death and resurrection. There is content to our fellowship. This is what we share.

When it says that ‘that eternal life was with the Father’ it does not of course merely signify location. It does not even merely indicate that the eternal life was pre-existent, though in these days we do well to emphasize again to ourselves the pre-existence of Jesus Christ our Lord. He always was, eternally was, ‘with the Father’. But, as I say, it means more than location or his eternity. It indicates a person who was ever the full and infinite delight of the Father—that eternal life that was with the Father.

So now we have a series of wonders to contemplate. And the first wonder is surely this, that the eternal God, the Father, would be willing to share with us this eternal and uncreated life. God has shared his own very life with us, that eternal life that was ever with the Father, so that we may talk of having eternal life. But more than that, we may speak of the blessed Lord, the Son of God, 'in us', and the Father making his abode 'in us'. 'These things I write,' says John, 'that you may have fellowship with us, and surely our fellowship is with the Father and his Son. And these things we write to you, that our joy may be full' (see vv. 3–4). So read some manuscripts—'our joy': meaning the apostles' joy, because there is no joy like it, for an apostle, to see others coming to share in the glories of the gospel. In the end it will be also true that not only the apostles' joy, but our joy, will be full. May God grant by his Spirit that these things shall cease to be words, and today, as we go on our way, and in the years to come, ever more profoundly may the joy grip our hearts that we share the very life of God.

## The Principles of the Fellowship We Enjoy

Yesterday we began to think together of that great fellowship that God has made possible between himself and us through the manifestation of that eternal life that was with the Father, which has been manifested to us in the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. Now we must hurry on, even if we are to do no more than to get a bird's eye view of the epistle that has been set before us.

### **The principles on which we may have part in this fellowship (1:5-2:6)**

I want us to think, first of all, of the principles on which we enter this great fellowship that forms the family of God, and the principles upon which we are maintained in that great fellowship. And then we shall spend some moments thinking about the family of God itself, its members: little children, young men and fathers, and especially of the love that marks that family between member and member and between all the children and the Father himself. We shall also notice two dangers to this family: the danger that comes from the world, and secondly, if we have time, the danger that comes from the inside, from the church itself.

So now let us look at the principles upon which we enter and are maintained by God in this great fellowship that is the family of God. And here we are going to find something basic. I know that in many respects we may regard this Epistle of John as a series of tests by which we may test the genuineness of our profession. But as it appears to me, in these early verses, John is not so much giving us tests whereby we may test whether our profession of Christianity is genuine or not, but he is laying down those principles upon which we may enter the fellowship. And therefore he stresses to us that glorious provision that God has made, so that we may enter and enjoy this fellowship with God in utter and complete security. We may have this security, not through any pretence, but in all realism, without pretending that we are different from what we are, in honesty, in openness, walking completely in the light, without any fear that something will suddenly be discovered that will disqualify us. We may have that utter security that God loves to give every child in his family.

I fancy the psychologist will tell us that the secret of a happy child's development is that sense of security the child has in the family and in the love of its parents. It would be an extraordinary thing, wouldn't it, if *the Father, the ideal Father* from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, could not supply that same security to every child in his family?

### **The principles determined by the fact that God is light and is now ‘in the light’**

First of all we must notice that John begins these remarks by reminding us of the message that the incarnate eternal life brought us, namely, that ‘God is light, and in him is no darkness at all’ (1:5).

#### *The meaning of light*

The symbol of light is easily interpreted. Intellectually, *light* tells us that God is self-revealing energy—he is a God who reveals himself. In revealing himself he thus reveals what the ultimate reality behind our universe is, what the truth about things is.

The truth behind a daisy is God. The truth behind an elephant is God. The truth behind a molecule and an atom is God. For he made them. The truth about God, when completely told out, is found in Jesus Christ our Lord: the eternal life that was with the Father and has been manifested to us. God, being light and revealing himself, therefore shows us the source of all things and the purpose of all things, so that his light becomes light for us to enlighten our pathway: a lamp to our path, a light to our feet, showing us the way to go.

It brings us knowledge, giving us ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (see 2 Cor 4:6). But simultaneously that light that reveals also exposes. It exposes all that is not true, all that is not real, all that is mere pretence, that is false and perverse. I repeat, if light reveals, light exposes. Therefore, if light intellectually is revelation; morally it is purity—holiness. And as absolute holiness, God’s light similarly exposes us in our sinfulness, in our dirty, grubby souls.

God is light, therefore, and now in Jesus Christ our Lord he stands in the light. It does not mean that God had not revealed himself before Jesus Christ came into the world. The New Testament says the light had already shone to different extents, in different places, in different times; but now in Jesus Christ our Lord the true light shines and God is in the light. He may be known fully in Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore the question immediately arises: if God is light in this sense, how could we possibly come and have fellowship with him? How could we who are so dark and ignorant, so sinful, stained and unclean, possibly come and have fellowship with God?

### **Where we walk (1:6–2:2) and how we walk (2:3–6)**

Now I want us to notice a feature of John’s writing that we shall find exceedingly important in answering this question of how we can have fellowship with God. He tells us in 1:7 that, ‘if we walk *in* the light, as he is *in* the light, we have fellowship, one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son, cleanses us from all sin.’ The one solitary condition (and you will notice it is only one) that we are asked to fulfil is this, that we must come and walk *in* the light, as he is in the light. But when we ask ourselves what that means to ‘walk in the light’, let us notice particularly, and very accurately, that John is now talking to us about *where* we walk.

Look at verse 6, if you will: ‘If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk *in* the darkness . . .’. That is where we walk. Again, in verse 7: ‘but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light . . .’. John is thinking about *where* we walk, and what that means we shall have to think about in a moment.

Come down, if you will, to the end of his paragraph in 2:6, and there he says, 'He who says he abides in him ought himself also to walk *even as* he walked.' And now you will see a slight but exceedingly important difference. In the earlier verses it was a question of where we walked: in the darkness or in the light. When we come to the end of the paragraph it is not a question of *where* we walk, but of *how* we walk: we ought to walk 'even as he walked'. And although those two ideas may ultimately merge, the one into the other, we do well in our thinking, to start with at any rate, to try and distinguish them and see the difference in their meaning.

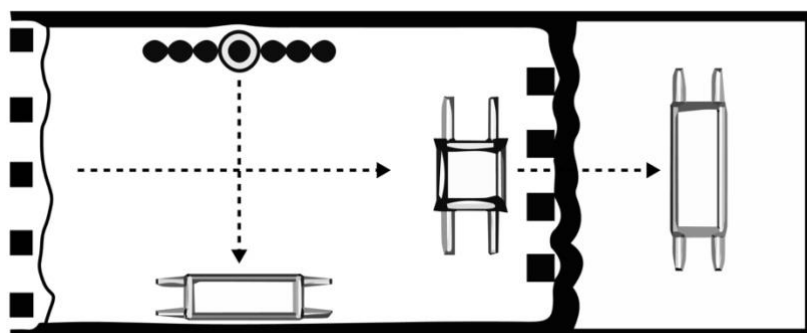
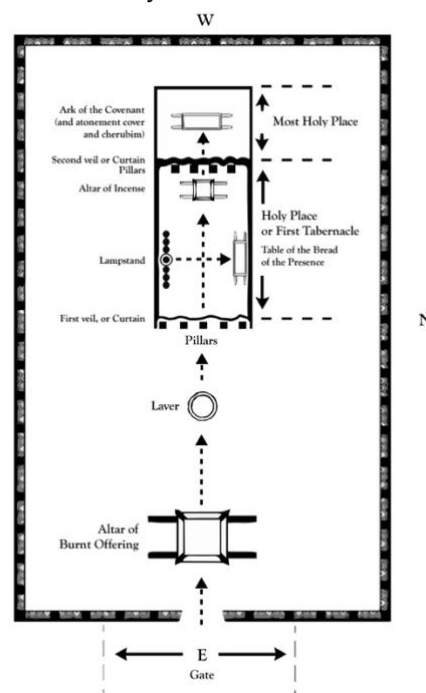
If we walk in the light we have fellowship, one with another, and therefore obviously also with God. What does it mean to 'walk in the light'? Of course to *walk* is a common Hebrew metaphor for behaviour, for the way we conduct ourselves, for the way we behave in this world.

### An Old Testament illustration of the phrase 'where we walk': the tabernacle

Let's use an Old Testament illustration that may help us to grasp the importance of this notion of where we walk, as distinct from how we walk. Then we can come and look at a New Testament example, to burn in on our understanding the importance of where we walk.

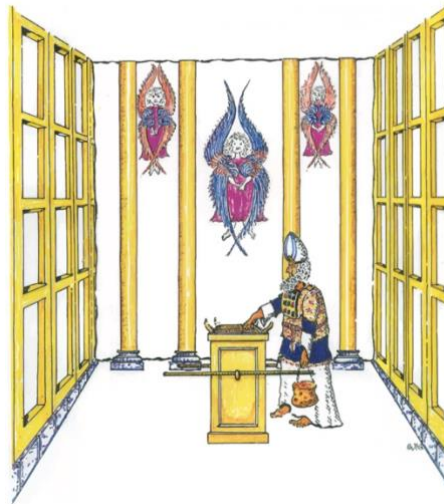
Here, we go back to the Old Testament (the old covenant) and to the arrangement that God made in those Old Testament days for his people to come and have fellowship with him. In those far off days God was pleased to presence himself in a literal and physical sanctuary, called the tabernacle. Here is a general view of it including the main building and the court around it. There is the great altar where the sacrifices were offered; there is the laver where the priests washed in water. There was the tent itself and the coverings, and underneath them the beautiful curtains that formed the dwelling place of God.

And here is the inside of the tent itself, looking down from the top.

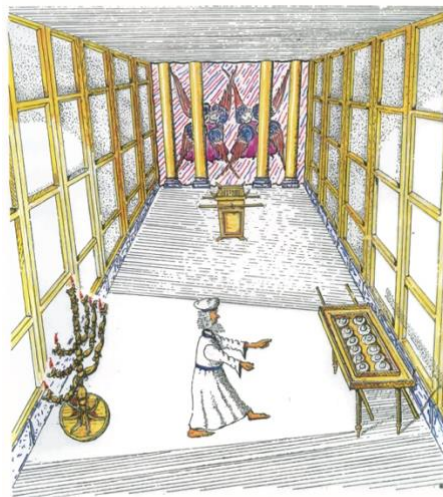


We see the first division, and there are three vessels standing. There is a table on the right. There is a lampstand on the left. And here there is a third little vessel called 'the golden altar of incense'. On the big pillars just behind the golden altar of incense, normally the veil would

hang, the counterpart of which was rent in two from the top to the bottom in the temple when our Lord was crucified. And past that veil was the Most Holy Place, with the ark of God's covenant and the propitiatory—the 'mercy seat' with its cherubim upon the ark.



Here is an image of the same for you again, and I have put the veil in place. Normally it was there to exclude everybody all the year through, except on the great Day of Atonement. But this morning we are concerned with this Holy Place where the priests came continually to do the service of God and to have fellowship with God. And I repeat, there are three vessels here. There is a table on the right; there is a lampstand on the left; and forming the apex of the triangle there is a little golden altar of incense, at which the priest would stand to intercede for the nation. And here is an image of the priest coming to that table.



Now, the *table*, in all languages, holds a very easily understood significance, and this one likewise; for on this table, twelve loaves of bread were placed in the name of Israel at the beginning of the week. They were placed there primarily for God. This was the table of the bread of presence, the table, so to speak, at which God himself fed. At the end of the week, however, the priests came and they took down the bread from off that table, put new bread



in its place, and then they took the old bread into the Holy Place and they ate it there in the presence of God.

The symbolism was as simple as it was delightful. Here was God offering men his fellowship, that man and God might eat at the same table: God for a week first, and then men subsequently. And though it was done in literal symbols: a literal table and literal bread in a literal sanctuary, behind it was the great spiritual principle that God Almighty seeks the fellowship of his people. And it may illustrate to us what we were thinking about yesterday, that our fellowship with God is not some nebulous thing; it is not some vaporous mood. In Israel, God and man had partnership in that table and in the bread that was upon that table. And so with us today, at higher levels, at the spiritual level, 'our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son' (1:3), and our partnership is in that great bread of life that feeds the heart of God and now feeds our hearts.

But we come back to the ancient symbolism. Here was a priest then who, obeying the invitation, wanted to come and have fellowship with God at that table. Now, where must he come, and where must he walk? There were the two vessels. Here is the table once more, but directly opposite the table was that seven-branched lampstand with its seven lamps of gold constantly burning in all their clarity and brilliance. And now you can begin to see, can't you, that if that ancient priest would come and have fellowship with God at that table he will have to come and walk with the full blaze of that light shining upon him? We must not think of course that that lampstand was merely there as a practical necessity to give the man light in the Holy Place. Of course it did that, but the positioning of these pieces of furniture was exceedingly carefully arranged. It was all part of the symbolism. Presently, we shall have reason to see how that altar was also very carefully placed where it was.

So here the simple symbolism was preaching its ancient lesson: if the priest would come and have fellowship with God at that table, he must be prepared to come and walk in the light. And just for the moment it is not a question so much of how well he walked. For all I know, the first day he came he might have been so overwhelmed by the sense of the holiness of the occasion that his toe caught in the hem of his robe and he went sprawling over, and he didn't manage to walk very well. Or, he approached the table nervously or something and didn't come with suitable dignity because he had a fit of nerves, and forgot what to do at the appropriate moment in the ritual and got it all muddled up (like some preachers do). How well he walked wasn't the point. The point was *where* he walked. He could not come and have fellowship unless he came and walked in the light. And for any priest to claim to have fellowship with God and to remain outside in the darkness was sheer arrant nonsense of course. And so we begin to apply that lesson to ourselves, surely.

The lesson is simple: if we would have fellowship with God we must remember that 'God is light, and in him is no darkness at all' (1:5). On what condition may I come and have fellowship with God? On what condition can I be maintained in the presence of God and in his fellowship? The Apostle John gives us only one condition. Notice it; he says, 'if we walk in the light' (v. 7). He does not even say, 'if first of all we are sinless'. Of course he doesn't, for if we had to be sinless to come and walk in that light we would never come. He doesn't even say 'if first the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin then we may come and walk in the light', though in one sense that would be true. He puts it the other way round. He says, 'if

we walk in the light we do have fellowship, both one with another and with the Father and the Son' (see vv. 3, 7).

But we say to ourselves: 'We are to come and walk in the light. If I come and walk in the light of God shall I not be exposed in all my sinfulness, my perversity, my crookedness and my twistedness?'

Yes, of course we shall be exposed. But then you say, 'That will make me feel so terrible, so bad, so unfit, that I shall want to cringe away from the light. And surely if it exposes me as sinful I shall not be able to stay in the light.'

'Oh, but yes you will,' says John. 'For if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, of course we shall be exposed, and our sins will be put in the light of Gods countenance, but the blood of Jesus Christ will deal with those sins. The blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanses us from all sin' (see v. 7).

### **What it means to walk in the light**

*It is insufficient to come to the light; one must continue in it*

We have used an Old Testament illustration; let's now use one from the New Testament. The saying of our Lord, 'I am the light of the world,' is written for us first of all in the Gospel of John and chapter 8, verse 12. The context of that remark is that John says there came to our Lord Jesus certain Jews which had believed on him; at least they said they had believed. And Jesus said to them, 'If you continue in my word then are you truly my disciples, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free' (see vv. 31–32).

Now, notice the first condition. Our Lord is announcing himself presently as the light of the world. So, our Lord is the light of the world, and we remember the condition laid down in the epistle. John does not say, 'If you come to the light you can have fellowship with God.' For, important as it is to come to the light, it is not enough to simply come to the light. John says, 'We must *walk* in the light.' Our Lord said to these men, 'If you continue [if you stay, if you abide] in my word then you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.'

*One must be prepared to be exposed as inherently sinful (1:8) and as sinful in practice (1:10)*

Immediately upon him saying that, we see the effect of coming and staying in the light, for the Jews said, 'But we were never in bondage, were we? What do you mean, we shall be made free?'

'I was talking,' said Christ, 'of bondage to sin,' at which they got very angry and told him to go and preach in the next street. They hadn't asked him to come here. Didn't he know who they were? They were children of Abraham and children of God. What was he doing suggesting that they needed to be set free from the bondage of sin? And presently they became so angry that they picked up stones to stone him, and he went away (vv. 33–59). They had *come* to the light, yes, but they were not prepared to continue in it, to *walk* in it.

That brings us to the next point. The condition that we come and walk in the light carries with it the condition that we are prepared to be exposed as sinful. Many people are not prepared to be exposed; and they remain in the dark, says John, but the person who abides in the dark and says he has fellowship with God is talking sheer nonsense—he lies, in fact. We must be prepared to be exposed and to admit all the sorry truth about ourselves, that we are

sinners by nature—that we *have sin*; and that we have done wrong in practice and constantly do wrong in practice—that we *have sinned*. Far from denying it and trying to cover it up, we must be prepared for it to be exposed. The wonderful thing is that, if we are prepared to have it exposed, then God has the answer to it, for the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanses us from sin, so that we may both enter that fellowship and remain in that fellowship and know unbroken partnership with God.

Now, it wasn't only ancient heretics that made the basic grievous mistake here and tried to say that it didn't matter if you sinned, and who kept in the dark and refused to let the light of God expose them as sinners and to expose the seriousness of their sin. Modern people too are tempted sometimes, are they not, to do the same? You will hear people say, 'Oh, but I am a good Christian,' and then with the next breath, 'and you know I've never done anything worthy of being damned. I'm not all I should be, but surely I've not done anything worthy of being damned.' But that is precisely what we all have done! And the light of God, as it shines upon us, will show us that we have indeed done things worthy of being damned. It's no good trying to cover it up or hide or remain in the dark. We must come and walk in the light and allow it to expose us.

*One must genuinely seek deliverance from sinning (2:1)*

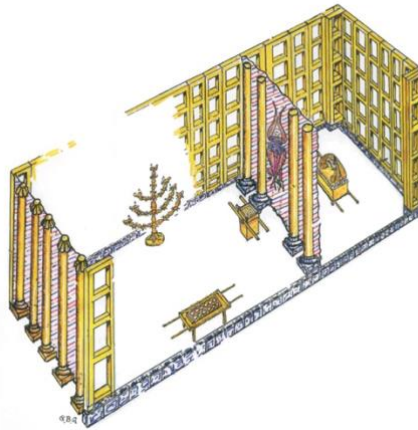
The third thing is that we must be sincerely prepared to be delivered from the habit of sinning. 'The slave does not stay in the house forever,' said our Lord, 'if you continue in my word you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free' (see John 8:35–36). We must be honestly prepared and willing to be delivered from a habit of sin, and cooperative with the Lord in being delivered. But on those conditions we may have fellowship with God. Hear the verse again: 'If we walk in the light, we *do have* fellowship one with another' and with God himself (see 1 John 1:7).

The Apostle John, however, hastens to warn us not to get his argument the wrong way round. Says he, 'These things I write unto you that you do not sin. And that if any man sin, we have an Advocate' (see 2:1). John is not encouraging us to think that sin is a light thing, of course not, but for the moment he is outlining for us the conditions on which we may come and have fellowship. Therefore, these conditions are laid down, as they are everywhere in the New Testament. God, in all his realism, knowing all our imperfections, invites us to come. He does not wait until we are perfect, nor does he demand that we shall be immediately perfect, and that if we fall we must be thrown out of his fellowship. 'For what now happens,' says John, 'if a man does fall?'

Let's recall our priest standing at the altar. Suppose he has fallen over. Excuse my naivety; but I want to bring home the lesson to you. Suppose as we are walking in the light we trip and fall. Are we thrown out forthwith? Why, of course not. We have fallen, but in the light. Prepared to acknowledge our fault and our failure, prepared to confess it, we are still accepted in the presence of God. How can we possibly be still accepted in the family of God when we've fallen over? We'll look now at that third vessel there, the altar of incense.

### **The provision which makes it possible for failing men and women to continue walking in the light and so to continue sharing in the life eternal**

It was at the altar of incense that the high priest, or some other priest, came daily to pray and intercede for his nation. And says John, using legal instead of priestly terms: 'If any man sin, we have an *Advocate* with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins' (2:1-2).



I have given you here a side view so that you may see the positioning of that golden altar relative to the throne of God—the ark of God's covenant where God was pleased to cause his presence to dwell. The veil came between them, but the altar was placed there because when the priest came to intercede for the people and burned his incense he was, in fact, addressing himself to the presence of God at that mercy seat. It was a vivid physical symbol of what we are now told is our Lord's present ministry at the right hand of God where he 'ever lives to make intercession for us', and therefore is able 'to save to the uttermost them that come unto God by him' (see Heb 7:25).

The Bible says that Jesus Christ, our advocate, is 'the righteous'. He doesn't pretend to God that our sins are not as serious as they are. He certainly makes no attempt to cover them up, allowing them to appear in the holy light of God in all their heinousness and sinfulness. Nevertheless he intercedes for us; and we are here told the basis of his intercession: 'Jesus Christ, the righteous, and he is the *propitiation* for our sins'.

One further usage from that Old Testament period may help us grasp one feature of that word 'propitiation'. The great Day of Atonement was the day in Israel's ritual when propitiation was made, and amongst the effects of that propitiation, was this: 'You shall make atonement,' says God, 'for the tabernacle itself and all its vessels that remains among the people in all their uncleanness' (see Lev 16:16).

God was observing that, throughout the course of the year, his people very often sinned and failed. Their very presence, so to speak, defiled his sanctuary. How could he therefore remain with them five minutes at a time? The answer was he could remain with them in spite of their uncleanness because of the sacrifice of atonement that made atonement even for the tabernacle of his presence. And John surely is thinking of that practical situation—as members of the family of God, doing our best by God's help not to sin, but from time to time falling and failing, and very often sinning when we are quite unconscious of sinning. Doubtless, if we could see ourselves this very moment as God sees us, we should be horrified at what we see.

How can God continue with us five minutes at a time? And the answer is because of the intercessions of him who is the propitiation for our sins, who by his great sacrifice has made it possible for God to continue with us in our uncleanness and so maintain fellowship that, by his Spirit working in our hearts, he can bring us to knowledge of our sin and confession of our sin—to pardon and forgiveness and restoration of practical communion with God.

Here then is the condition upon which we may enter this great fellowship and be maintained in this fellowship, and it spells a delightful and superb security. We do not need any pretence; we can be open and honest with God about ourselves. We need not make out that we are better than we are. If only we are prepared to come and walk in, not just *come to* but *walk in*, the light and be exposed and confess our sin and be willing to be delivered from our sin, then God has made provision for us to be maintained in that great fellowship of eternal life.

### **The importance of how we walk**

But when we have emphasized to ourselves the importance, therefore, of *where* we walk—we must walk in the light—then we must go over to the other side and emphasize to ourselves *how* we walk. We are not accepted on the grounds of how well we walk, but if we are genuine believers, if we claim to abide in him and it is a reality that we do abide in the Lord Jesus—we are walking in the light—then, John says, we have a bounden duty to ‘walk even as the Lord Jesus walked’ (see 2:6). It is not true that grace leads to carelessness. Our acceptance with God does not mean that we shall then take the view that sin does not matter. It is the very reverse. To walk in that light, to see God as God is revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord, is surely to come to love God—to know God and therefore to love God, to be entranced by the beauty of his character, the glory of his law and, above all, the grace of his Son. And therefore we long to walk as the Lord Jesus walked. It is not only that we should long to do it; we have a duty to do it, and ‘he that says he abides in the light ought himself also to walk even as he walked’ (see 2:6).

#### *A test of whether we are walking in the light*

Now we are given a test, this time it is not one which tells us on what condition we may come into the light, but a test by which to test ourselves whether we are in fact walking in the light. It is possible to be like the Pharisees of old (the bad Pharisees that is, not the good ones) and to imagine that we are walking in the light when all the while we are not. The Pharisees imagined they were indeed walking in the light and keeping God’s commands until the true light came into the world and they came in contact with him. Then, to their horrible surprise, they found out that they had not been walking in the light at all. So, here is a test whether I am indeed walking in the light or merely self-contented in a fool’s paradise and imagining I am walking in the light. The test is: does my love of God lead me to keep his commandments? Am I walking as the Lord Jesus walked?

### **Conclusion**

We shall not now complete the ambitious programme that we were laying out for ourselves this morning. But perhaps this has been an exceedingly important (although basic) part of our

lesson about the family of God. John will talk to us about our great duties. In the second movement of his thought he will speak to us about our developing character as the children of God, our stringent and rigorous duties to cooperate with the Lord in developing a God-like character, in overcoming the world, in fighting the evil one, in looking heresy in the face (and heretics if need be) and maintaining the truth of God's word. They are strong vigorous duties that will tax our strength. We should be unable for those duties if in our heart there still lingered insecurity: 'Am I or am I not a member of God's family? Could I at any moment be thrown out of God's family?' For if I do not have security in my heart, as a member of God's family—secure in his love, secure in the redemption that is in Christ—I shall not develop the strength to carry the rigorous responsibilities that I shall find portioned out to me as a growing member of the family of God; not merely as a little child, but as a young man and a father in the great family of God.

So may God bless this study to our hearts this morning.

## The Family of God in Contrast with the World

Yesterday, ladies and gentlemen, we did not get very far. That was altogether the fault of your lecturer; but nonetheless, we did spend our time dealing with some very basic concepts. First of all, in the lecture period we tried to cover those principles on which we can enter and be maintained in the great fellowship with God that is the family of God. And then in the discussion time, you may remember, we were enticed into dealing somewhat with the subject matter of today – what John means by his term *the world*, that he is so constantly contrasting with his concept of the family of God.

Now, we have managed thus to get ourselves somewhat out of phase, but that won't matter much at all. It seems to me that we can clear that up if today we content ourselves with completing what I have called Movement One, and tomorrow studying Movement Two, and then on Friday we shall look at Movement Three. Our time is not lost if today we take particular care to help one another really to understand, as far as we may, what John means by this term 'the world'. We shall meet it again very prominently, both in Movement Two and in Movement Three; and therefore it is important for our understanding of the family of God that we shall understand as clearly as we may what John means by *the world*. And if we manage to get some clearer grasp of these basic concepts in this epistle then, of course, we can fill in the detail on other occasions.

### **Love the family of God; do not love the world**

This morning, therefore, we come to our first emphasis, and that is the family of God in 2:12–14, where John talks to the members of the family, calling them little children or young men or fathers. I want us to notice, to start with, how very carefully John arranges his material in this section of his letter. Yesterday, when we were dealing with the principles upon which we may enter the great fellowship of God, we noticed how careful John was to balance his statement, placing at the beginning of the paragraph his emphasis on the importance of *where* we walk. Then at the end of the paragraph, placing like emphasis on the importance of *how* we walk. And we tried to see how important it is that we understand both of those concepts and keep them in balance. We shall find a similar balance in his writing in our section today.

The passage written to the sundry members of the family (2:12–14) has in front of it a long and strong exhortation that we are to love one another. In verses 7–11, John talks about a commandment that in one sense is not new, and yet in another sense is new, and it is clear to see that that commandment is a commandment that we must 'love one another'. Then he goes on to talk to the children, the young men and the fathers in the family, in verses 12–14. And

then, coming to verse 15, you notice he has the opposite commandment: 'Love not the world.' We are to love one another; we are not to love the world. So what he is going to say to us about the family of God lies in this context about our love, our affection, and we are to see to it that our affections are properly balanced. We are to love the family of God; we are not to love the world. Sometimes it is easy to get that order in reverse, for loving the family of God is not always so easy as you might think. In fact, if you have managed to love the Christian brothers and sisters, it is such a supernatural thing that it is clear evidence that you have been born of God. We must be realistic in our appraisal of these things. The love of the family of God is not some natural thing. It is a divinely implanted ability, and if you 'love the brethren', as John puts it, it is evidence that you have passed from death unto life (see 3:14). It is not always so easy, when you get to know them very closely, to love the Christian brothers and sisters, but we are to love them. Whereas, because we are in ourselves fallen creatures, it is sometimes very easy (if one may talk for another) to love the world, with all its superficial attractiveness. And we are to be advised that we are not to love the world. This is going to be, therefore, a matter of keeping our affections, our love, in proper balance.

And then look again how John ties this paragraph together. He says that this commandment that we love one another is a new commandment, 'which thing is true in [Christ] and in [us], because the darkness is passing away, and the true light already shines' (2:8). John uses a delightful metaphor for what the coming of Christ has meant. The older, partial ages of God's revelation are passing. For us who know the Saviour, the darkness of our unregenerate days is passing, and the more we grasp the wonder of what God has done and learn to love one another as Christ has loved us, we find the new age—the glorious eternal age—already beginning to dawn in our life. And landscape after landscape is opened up under this new light, and we begin to peer into eternity itself. We begin to see that we already have eternal life and are already beginning to exploit its ever increasing possibilities. 'The darkness is passing away.'

But if that is true, as we learn in Christ to love one another, notice what else is true. In verses 15–16, John says, 'Love not the world.' And I think to myself, 'Why should I not love the world? Has John perhaps grown old and grey-bearded and is no longer pulsating with the energies of youth, so he's grown a little bit sour? Why should I not love the world? There are so many attractive things in it. And one of the reasons he gives us is this: 'Don't love the world, because the world is passing away' (see v. 17). It is a sad world, and all the love that is spent on it will perish.

Now, there are expositors who feel that verses 12–14 which talk about the family of God are a digression in which John turns aside from what he has been talking about temporarily to talk at some length about the family of God. I find it perhaps more compelling to think that, far from being a digression from his theme, it is an integral part of what he is saying. And that surely we can see, in the first place, from this very fact. Another reason he gives us why we should not love the world is this: 'For all that is in the world is not of the *Father*', so much so that if any man loved the world, 'the love of the *Father* is not in him' (see vv. 15–16). But then look what he has said to us at the end of verse 13: 'I have written to you, little children, because you know the *Father*.' Why, of course, if we are to think of the family of God, central to that family is the Father; and central in the heart and affections of all the members of the family of



God is the love of the Father for his children, and the love of the children for their Father. What kind of a family could it possibly be in which the members had lost their love of the father? It is exceedingly relevant, therefore, and practical, when John warns us: 'Don't you love the world', because you cannot love the world and simultaneously be loving the Father. There could be no more deadly, destructive element in the family of God than this 'loving the world'.

Obviously then the verses that talked of the family (2:12–14) are very closely related to what follow. I am going to suggest this morning that they are also related to what precedes them, because as we think of the family today we shall be thinking of what it is that makes it a family and what holds it together as a family: we are to love one another. We shall then think of what would disrupt it and destroy it as a family: love not the world.

### **A commandment that is both old and new (2:7–11)**

Now then, just let us briefly look at verses 7–11. We need not spend so very long on them.

Beloved, no new commandment I write to you, but an old commandment which you had from the beginning: the old commandment is the word which you heard. (see v. 7)

We cannot necessarily tell why John was moved to make that remark. Perhaps there were some who thought that John's insistence on this love, one for the other, in the practical terms in which he insists on it, was somehow a fanatical extension of Christianity—some new, novel, innovating idea, some extreme. At any rate, John stays to emphasize that the command to love, in that sense, is no new thing. It is the command that comes from the time of our Lord from the very beginning of his earthly ministry; and he taught us that we were to love one another. Sure enough, according to John's Gospel, when he gave that commandment it was a new commandment: 'A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another . . . By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another' (see 13:34–35).

Back then it was new, but by the time John was writing to these Christians, this was old. This was original; this was basic. There was nothing novel about it. This was not some new, extreme development, but basic and authentic Christianity; it was not a new commandment. We cannot say, therefore, 'Yes, I am a Christian, but I'm not interested in these new developments, this hothouse Christianity stuff, and all of this loving one another and so forth and so on.' No, if we do not love one another then we haven't even begun Christianity.

On the other hand, he says it is a new commandment (v. 8), for now John is thinking of the coming of the new age in Jesus Christ our Lord. It is not that God had not spoken before. John doesn't imply that the light of God had never shone in this world before; of course it had. God had spoken at different times and in different manners to the fathers by the prophets; but now a new age had dawned because the very Son of God had come: 'the true light now shines' (see v. 8). That phrase does not mean that all other light before this was false, but it does mean that it was partial.

Take an example of the way the New Testament speaks of these things. Yesterday we were looking at the Tabernacle, which God commanded Israel to make. It was authentic. God commanded it. God used it to reveal various things about himself to the Israelites. He used it as the basis and means of real fellowship that he had with them, and they with him; But the

New Testament comments that nowadays we don't have a literal sanctuary like that; that belonged to our childhood days. Now we worship God in the true sanctuary; that is, the real, grown-up, adult thing, which is a spiritual sanctuary: 'the true sanctuary which the Lord pitched and not man' (see Heb 8:1–2). And in this sense we are privileged indeed to be living in *this* age. We should remember the words of the Lord Jesus to his disciples: 'Blessed are your eyes, blessed are your ears, for kings and prophets desire to see the things that you see and never saw them, and to hear the things that you hear and never heard them' (see Luke 10:23–24).

Think of what you know. Great kings and prophets looked forward to the coming of God's Son and saw it *dimly*. You are in the age that has seen him come and know him. Great kings and prophets like David approached God in that old Tabernacle, and the best they could do was to stand outside and look to a God who remained distant—hidden behind the curtain of the veil.

If you could go back all those centuries and speak to King David in the palace: 'King David, Your Majesty. That was a delightful number that you wrote the other day. You know we've got it. In fact it's most popular with us nowadays. We have it playing in our house all the time—that number you wrote about forgiveness: "Blessed is the man whose sins are forgiven, whose iniquity is covered" (see Ps 32:1). It goes to our hearts, David. Now, we were thinking, what if you got your harp and came along with us, and we went into the holiest of all in the temple and had a praise session together, and sang your psalm?'

David would have gone white round the cheeks. 'Enter the holiest of all? Of course not! You can't go into the holiest of all!'

Yes, the great King David had to stand outside. 'Blessed are your eyes,' says Christ, 'for the things that you see, and your ears for the things that you hear—things that prophets and kings never saw or heard. For you live in the age when the Son of God is come, and the true light now shines, and you are admitted into the very holiest of all, of God's family and heart.'

So we are to love one another, and in verses 7–11 John not only encourages us to love one another but points out that he who does not love is in the darkness even until now, (v. 9), that is, he is not a true Christian at all. And then he points out the fearful consequences of abiding in the dark: 'He that hates his brother is in the darkness, and walks in the darkness, and knows not where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes' (v. 11). He stumbles on, driven by his urge or hatred, not knowing where it will lead, with no true ultimate sense of purpose.

With that John now comes to address the family.

### **Relationships within the family (2:12–14)**

As I say, I am inclined to take these words very simply as John interrupts himself, if you like, to tell his fellow believers why it is that he is writing these things.

#### **Technical issues in 2:12–14**

Now, you must know that there are one or two practical and technical difficulties with these verses. First of all, there is the curious phenomenon that John appears to repeat himself. First

of all he says, 'I write unto you, children . . . fathers . . . young men,' and then he says it all over again with very little change, 'I have written unto you, children . . . fathers . . . young men.' Why did he put it twice?

Some commentators imagine that he was elderly, and he sat down at his desk and began to write: 'I write unto you, little children . . . I write unto you, fathers . . . I write unto you, young men . . .' and in came the postman or the milkman or something and he got interrupted, and when he had finished his business he came back and said, 'Where was I?' and wrote it again and didn't realize he had repeated himself. That kind of nonsense is not worthy to be mentioned in the same breath as the question of divine inspiration, is it?

Then why did he repeat himself? Well, as I say, at first sight there are one or two practical difficulties. Just let me remind you of them.

The difficulty is that, first of all and primarily, he seems to have got the various stages of growth muddled up, or at least not put them in logical order. He starts with little children, then proceeds to fathers and then to young men each time, and logic would suggest to us that he should have put it: little children, young men and fathers; or fathers, young men and little children, and had them either in ascending or descending order. And then there is the curious fact that when he talks to the little children the first time round he uses a Greek word (*teknia*), and when he talks the second time round to the little children he uses a different Greek word (*paidia*). Both of them mean 'little children'.

#### *The order of the roles in the family*

So why does he have that strange order? Well, if you care to, you can solve that problem and from the larger context make yourself out a series that is more logical, at least as far as the question of the stages of growth is concerned.

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

You do it by noticing that in verse 12 the term 'little children' (*teknia*) is a general term, not now referring to the new converts within the family of God but the term that John, as an elderly apostle, uses for all the people of God to whom he writes. He is calling them, 'my little children,' in his affectionate grandfatherly fashion. So it is used as a general term. And then notice that, lower down in the chapter, he comes back to using that term *teknia* in verse 28; and that is used as a general term. Then, on this theory, we may notice that in verse 13 we can find the three stages of growth in logical order:

I write unto you, fathers, because you know him which is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.

Then we shall have to do a little manipulating. Many manuscripts, at that point, have a past tense: 'I wrote unto you', but not all manuscripts have the past tense at that stage. Some of them still have the present tense, and if we like to follow those textual variants we can come up with a present tense: 'I *write* unto you, little children'.

And now we notice that the word is not *teknia*, as it was in the general term. The word now is *paidia*, and this time presumably (so the theory goes) it is being used of the youngest in the stages of growth, and they are in descending order: fathers, young men and little children. And then as we move on, in verse 13 and following, we have another series of stages of growth: 'I *wrote* to you, fathers, because . . . I *wrote* to you, young men, because . . .'. Only now, according to this theory, you will have to be prepared for a lot of verses to come in addressed to the young men: 'I wrote unto you, young men, because you are strong and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world' (see vv. 14–15). And that long exhortation in verses 15–17, therefore, is addressed to the young men. And then you come to verse 18, 'little children' once more, which is the Greek word *paidia* as above. You will have to suppose here that John has slightly broken his formula. Instead of saying, 'I write unto you . . .' or, 'I wrote unto you, little children, because it is the last hour,' he says, 'Little children, it is the last hour: and . . . antichrist comes' (see v. 18). And he says in verse 21, for the first time to them now, 'I wrote unto you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you do know the truth.' So that his formula is somewhat disrupted but is there. He once more is saying, 'Little children, I did not write unto you because . . . I wrote unto you because . . .'.

I simply mention that as a matter of interest, because when people come to study what John has to say about the family, one of the major difficulties that they run up against is how to understand these terms. If you like that scheme that I have laid out (not everyone does of course) you will see that this matter of the family is integrated into all that surrounds it. But you don't have to be convinced of that scheme in order to see, as I have argued earlier, that in writing these things about loving one another and not loving the world John has in mind the family of God.

### **The reasons John tells the members of God's family to love one another**

*Little children: because you have been forgiven for his name's sake*

Let's think of the first series. He says, 'I write unto you, little children'. Let's suppose that that means the people of God in general. 'I write unto you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for his name's sake' (see v. 12). In other words, he has been saying, 'Look, love one another.' And then he stops to say, 'Do you know why I'm writing that to you? Why do I write that to you and lay such important stress upon this loving of one another? I am writing this to you because your sins have been forgiven you for his name's sake.' How did you get into the fellowship? How do you manage to remain in this great fellowship? Why, he has earlier told them that if we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins (1:9). That is how we get into the fellowship; that is how we remain in the fellowship.

So I take myself. I say to myself, 'I am in this great fellowship, in this great family of God, because my sins have been forgiven, not for my own name's sake, but for the name's sake of Christ. My brother here is in the fellowship because his sins have been forgiven, for the value of the name of Christ. Now, let me see what happens. Suppose I refuse to love my brother. Suppose I refuse to forgive him when he sins against me? What am I doing? The man's sins have been forgiven him for the sake of the name of Christ. And I refuse to forgive him? Then I am denying the value of the name of Christ; it doesn't weigh enough with me in order for me to be willing to forgive my brother. I want that name to be valid for my sake so that my sins can be forgiven for his name's sake, and I be received into the family and fellowship, but I am not prepared for that name to avail for my brother to the extent that I am prepared to forgive the man's sins for Christ's name's sake. But then if I take that attitude the whole partnership becomes impossible, and I destroy the very basis upon which I myself could be received and retained in the family.

*Fathers: because you have known him who is from the beginning*

'I am writing to you, fathers' (see v. 13). 'Why do I write to you to love one another? Because you have known him that is from the beginning.' What has that got to do with it? Well, John has just used that phrase in a slightly different connection. He has told us this commandment to 'love one another', is not something new. This is not some novelty, innovation or fanaticism. This is original, authentic Christianity. It goes back to the earthly ministry of our Lord Jesus. Now he tells us something further: it comes from the eternal and unchanging character of God. It comes from 'him who is from the beginning'. Who is that? Some people think it is the Lord Jesus, looked at as the one who was from all eternity. Other people feel it is God the Father, again looked at from all eternity. It doesn't matter really which one you take it to be; the point at issue is that in that eternal life that was with the Father and was manifested to us in the earthly ministry of our Lord, we have the telling out of the heart of the eternal. This is what God is really like! Yes, it is true that in the coming of the Lord Jesus a new age has opened up. We have the full revelation of God; 'the true light' now shines. But pray consider, that doesn't mean that God has changed and in these last few centuries has grown a little bit more kindly. God always was like this. It is of his unchanging nature that he is love.

And it tells us not only that this is authentic Christianity, it tells us something glorious about the family of God. Key to the family, at the very heart of the family, is this relationship of love that comes from the unchanging character of God. 'You have known him that is from the beginning', John says. That is a wonderful comfort to our hearts, for to know God in all his eternity, in his unchanging character, is to have eternal life already. To form a relationship with one who is eternal and unchanging is to have a relationship that will never cease; it is to have a life that is eternal.

If you came to me and said, 'Do you know Winston Churchill?'

I should say, 'Which Winston Churchill are you talking about?'

And you say, 'You know, that great war leader in past English history. Do you know him?'

I would say, 'That's a very funny way of talking. Winston Churchill is dead. I did know him once, but I don't know him now. I mean, the man is dead now.'

If you go to God this very moment and say, 'God, did you know Abraham?' God won't say to you, 'Well, yes, Abraham's dead now, but I did know him.' He is more likely to say to you, 'What do you mean? I do know him. I *am* the God of Abraham. I am eternal and unchanging, and when I entered into a relationship with Abraham that was eternal life begun for Abraham, for I change not.' It's not a question with God, whether he did know Abraham. He does know Abraham. And to enter into the family of God is to come to know him that is from the very beginning the unchanging God.

And now put this alongside the next point.

*Young men: because you have overcome the evil one*

John says, 'I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one' (see v. 14). He doesn't pause to say at that very moment what exactly 'you have overcome the evil one' implies. Is he talking of their conversion, that they have overcome all the efforts of the evil one to prevent them trusting the Saviour and entering this great fellowship of God? Or, is he talking of their practical victory as Christians against the evil one? But in what sense? Well, because it is no secret John is about to tell us in chapter 3 that it is the evil one who inspires hatred. Cain, we are to learn, murdered his brother, Abel; and where did that hatred come from? Cain 'was of that evil one, and slew his brother' (see v. 12). It is the purpose of that evil one to make the family of God impossible or, where it has been set up, to disrupt it. John is saying, 'I am writing unto you, young men, telling you to love one another, because you are aware of Satan's wiles, always trying to disrupt the family of God; and you have overcome him.'

That ought to be true of us all, shouldn't it? But how often, alas, it isn't. We get so easily deceived. Some cause or other comes up, and before we know where we are, we are slaughtering our brothers and sisters, right and left, and we think we are doing God's work, while Satan laughs. He has got us helping to destroy our brothers and sisters. We need to be awake to his wiles and deceits, and to overcome him.

### **The reasons John tells the members of God's family not to love the world**

He says, 'I wrote to you'; that is, 'When you get this letter you will find I have written to you'. In other words, he is saying, 'I have written to you these things'. If John has thus far been thinking about his original exhortation: 'we are to love one another,' and is giving the believers their reasons why he writes this to them, for myself, I think that when he repeats these things now, he is giving in advance the reasons why he warns the family of God not to love the world.

*Little children: because you have known the Father*

Why shouldn't we love the world? 'Well I'm telling you in advance,' John is saying. 'First of all, don't you love the world, for, little children, I write unto you because you have known the Father.' He is asking, 'Have you known the Father, really known him, and come to love him?'

In an ordinary human family, because of all the disciplines that have to go on, I suppose, and because of the imperfections of life, it is very easy for children to lose love for their parents, is it not? For all sorts of reasons, it is easy to find the world outside far more attractive

than their parents. It is the fact that our great enemy has sown in the hearts of men and women thoughts of slander about the Father. Some men and women find God a terrible bore. Sometimes the old poison lingers on in our veins as believers, doesn't it?

I wonder what it will be like in heaven, having conversed with the Lord Jesus and with the Father. What will it be like? What will they talk about when we get to heaven? Did I hear you say, 'I hope they won't start talking about Leviticus, because I find that bit a bore'? Oh, but if God opened heaven and spoke to us this very moment, why would he not speak what he has spoken in his word? What is God like? What is his conversation like? What is the Father like? If one may confess for another, there sometimes lingers on in our veins the old poison that God is a frightful bore. John is writing this: 'Love not the world' because 'you have known the Father.' Have we really known the Father in all his love and attractiveness, glory and wonder? Then we are to be warned, don't love the world, 'for all that is in the world is not of the Father' (see v. 13, 16). You cannot love the world and the Father simultaneously.

*Fathers: because you have known him who is from the beginning*

'And you'll find I've written this to you, fathers,' he says, 'because . . .' and he simply repeats what he says before: 'you have known him that is from the beginning' (see v. 13). That is, the eternal. 'For I'm now going to tell you,' says John, 'don't you love the world.' Why not? 'Because the world is passing away.'

We have, so to speak, only so much love to spend. We shall spend it on this or that. We would be wise men and women to spend our love on that which lasts. Listen to Peter exhorting his fellow believers to love one another: 'Seeing you have purified your souls by obeying the truth,' he says, 'now love one another from a pure heart fervently' (see 1 Pet 1:22).

And I say to Peter, 'But, do you know my Christian brethren, Peter? And you tell me to love them? I find the world far more attractive, to be frank. Why should I love my brethren and not love the world?'

'Well,' says Peter, 'all flesh is as grass, and the glory thereof like the flower of the field, it perishes: but the word of God abides for ever. And this is the word of God by which means you have been begotten again' (see vv. 23–25).

Every member of the family of God is begotten of God and lasts eternally. The world passes away. The love we spend upon God and the family of God abides eternally. The love we misspend on what John calls *the world* is lost.

*Young men: because you are strong, God's word abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one*

'I have written unto you, young men, because you are strong'. And now John adds two further things: that 'the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one' (see v. 14). I want to suggest that in the phrase John is helping us understand again what he means by *the world*.

Yesterday we used the analogy of the serpent's temptation in the garden. Let's just recall the nature of the temptation that the evil one put before Eve. He didn't encourage her to go stealing Adam's store of peaches or something. He didn't tempt her to debauchery and wild profligacy, nor even to murder Adam, or anything like that. What was it then? You remember the story, how Satan concentrated her attention on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil

and invited her to consider how beautiful it was. But God had said of this particular tree: 'You shall not eat of it. For in the day you eat thereof, you will die' (see Gen 2:17).

'Nonsense,' said the serpent, 'absolute nonsense. My dear, you'll have to learn to grow up and be mature. That kind of thing is only for children. You see, God loves keeping people down. He loves tantalizing them with all sorts of beautiful things and then telling them, "You mustn't have them". That's God all over!'

Eve said, 'But you know, he's warned us that if we eat of that tree we shall die.'

'Oh, nonsense and fiddlesticks,' said Satan. 'Die? Of course you won't die. You'll rise in God's universe. You'll really begin to live. Look at that tree!'

And Eve looked at it, and she saw that it was good to look at and good for food, and desirable to make one wise.

'Go on,' said Satan, 'that's life, my dear.'

Physical satisfaction: 'good for food'; aesthetic satisfaction: 'good to look at'; intellectual satisfaction: 'desirable to make one wise' (see Gen 3:6).

'That's life!' said Satan.

And what a big lie it was, for he had ruled out the word of God and Eve's relationship with the Father through his word. So while these things were lovely, and they were lovely of course, now they were put before Eve as opposed to God, to be enjoyed apart from God, to be made an end in themselves and not a means for fellowship with God. And so, this thing that God calls *the world* did begin. You must not think of it as a whole host of nasty horrible lurid things. You should rather think of it as all the delightful things, but now seen apart from God.

Have you ever noticed a young lady who has just been engaged? Imagine your secretary, for instance. When she comes the first morning, she hands you the coffee, and somehow the handle is a little bit difficult to hold, so it manages to come round in such a way that you can see her ring finger better. Of course you notice it, and you say, 'Oh, what a splendid ring. May I have a look at it? What is it? Two amethysts, one pearl, or three diamonds? Oh, isn't that a splendid ring?' And you admire it for a moment for the ring's sake (of course so). Then you say, 'And who is the fortunate young man?'

What would you think if the girl replied, 'What do you mean?'

'Well, the young man behind the ring.'

'Young man? There isn't any young man.'

'Oh sorry, I thought it was an engagement ring, sorry. Oh, well, it is a nice ring. Yes, it's a beautiful ring.'

That changes it, doesn't it? The ring is still a beautiful thing in itself, but it has lost all its meaning. And what would you think of a society that held engagement rings up to young men and young women, denying the whole business of marriage or love, and engagement rings became a thing in themselves, for their own sake? Some such (but even bigger) tragedy has fallen on our world. The lovely things that God has made, Satan has taken them and in men's mind divorced them from the Father. They become an end in themselves. They lose their significance, to the point where if you make them an end in themselves and love the world you cannot be simultaneously loving the Father.

So did Satan come and tempt our Lord, first with physical satisfaction: 'Turn these stones into bread.' And then with other and more spiritual things, to get fame by flinging himself off



the temple; to have the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them, but all without and in disobedience to the Father (see Matt 4). And how did Christ overcome him? By the word of God. 'No, Satan!' he says. 'It stands written, "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God"' (see v. 4).

What is the engagement ring without the lover behind it? What is the whole of life's experience without the Father? And it is his word that binds us to the Father. That, ladies and gentlemen, is how I read this great passage on the family of God, in the context in which it was written.

## Family Likeness

### **The implications of a heresy (2:18-27)**

I suggest we skip the final paragraph of chapter 2, which has to do with certain heresies that were plaguing the churches of John's day, save only to notice that in that paragraph John indicates one of the grave implications of that heresy. They not only denied that Jesus is the Christ but, in so doing, denied his eternal Sonship. And John points out that if you deny that the Lord Jesus is the eternal Son of God, with that you forthwith deny the fatherhood of God, for the fatherhood of God is not something that came into existence first when God created us, but is an eternal fact about the Godhead. In denying the Father and the Son, these heretics ruined (or made impossible) that great fellowship that God wishes us to enjoy with him.

The first great movement of thought in the first epistle by John has concerned itself with the manifestation of that eternal life that was with the Father and which forms the basis and the content of the fellowship that we have with God. As we said at the beginning, when we talk of fellowship we are not talking of some vague feeling. We are talking about something very real and concrete that we share with God, because God is interested in it and, by his grace we are interested in it. And God and we form a partnership, having a share in this wonderful life that was with the Father and has been manifested to us. If you then deny that Jesus is that eternal life that was with the Father, and you demote him to a mere man, however exalted, now you have made quite impossible the fellowship of which John speaks. For in all good conscience almighty God is not (if I may so phrase it) sitting down with us and sharing a common interest in some brilliant man. The Almighty is not taking his place with us sharing an interest in an Elijah or in a Solomon or even in a Paul. He who is to be the one shared must, by definition, be capable of engaging all the interest of almighty God, as well as the interest of those of us who are called into the fellowship of God's dear Son. It is our blessed Lord—both God and man: that eternal life that was with the Father but was manifest in the flesh—that is able to form that basis of fellowship between God and man, seeing he is enough to engage the heart of almighty God completely, and more than enough to fill our hearts as well. 'This is the promise that he has promised us,' says John, 'even eternal life' (see 2:25). Take away the fact that our Lord is the eternal Son of God, and you have made our share in eternal life impossible.

## An Overview of Movement Two (2:28–4:6)

	I	II	III
<b>From</b>	The manifestation of the life eternal (1:1–4).	The manifestation of the Son of God and of the children of God (2:28–3:10).	The manifestation of the love of God in his Son and in his people (4:7–11).
<b>To</b>	The warning against antichrists who deny that Jesus is the Christ (2:18–27).	The warning against believing the spirit of falsehood as distinct from the Spirit of truth (4:1–6).	The warning against putting idols in place of the true God (5:18–21).

Let us come on now to Movement Two in chapter 3. We shall find that though it deals again with the twin topics that we are interested in, namely: the family of God and the world, it carries those twin topics still further. As we have just said, in Movement One it was the eternal life that was manifested, and we were invited to have share with God in that eternal life. Now Movement Two is going to talk about the manifestation of the Son of God and the fact that by God's grace we have actually been born as his children.

### The manifestation of the Son of God and of the children of God (2:28–3:10)

#### *We are God's own children*

Of course there is a difference between mere partnership (if I may so phrase it) and being a child. One of these days, some famous musician, a Yehudi Menuhin or some other, might conceivably (though I can't see how it would be) invite me, who knows two or three notes of music, to share with him in his tremendous love and interest in music. That would scarce make me his son, his child. And God might have invited us to have a common interest with him in Jesus Christ our Lord. But now chapter 3 is coming forth with a glorious and marvellous statement that God invites us not merely to a partnership. He has made us, he has begotten us, his actual children! We are told we already have the status of children. We are called the 'children of God' (3:1).

Then John adds that we not only have the status, but we are in fact children of God. We are literally children of God, in the sense that we have God's life within us. In 2:29 he talks about our being begotten of God. In 3:14, John reminds us of that process by which we have come into the family of God. We have passed from death into life; we have a life that we didn't have before. And then, going to what may seem an extreme, in 3:9 John informs us that the very seed of God remains in the believer. There has come a something from God to the believer, carrying the very life of God. As a father's seed conveys life to his child, so God's seed has conveyed life to us, so that we are no longer merely creatures of God, fashioned as his handy work; we have been begotten of God, with the very life of God passed on to us.

#### *We have the character of God*

Not only so, but as we come to this chapter we shall find its predominant emphasis is this, that with the coming of that life of God into our hearts there has come the character of God.

Just as human life brings with it human character, human nature, so the life of God, when it comes to the believer, brings the nature of God, the character of God. And John says in 3:9 of our chapter, 'Whosoever is begotten of God does no sin because God's seed abides in him, and he cannot sin, because he is begotten of God.'

They are extreme words, doubtless, words that have caused much argument among the expositors. I shall be interested to hear what you think they mean. I take them to mean that he who is begotten of God does not practise sin as the norm of his life. It does not mean that he is perfect, for a few verses earlier, it has said that 'everyone who has this hope in Christ purifies himself' (see 3:3). So here is John telling us that the believer needs to purify himself still; he is not yet perfect. And presumably then he is not contradicting in verse 9 what he says in verse 3. While the believer still needs to purify himself, yet he does not constantly practise sin as the norm of his life, because the seed of God abides in him and brings with it, therefore, not merely life but the divine nature.

*We are the children of God now and shall be like the Son when he comes*

Nor is that only a hope in the future. John says, 'Now we are the children of God' (see v. 2). We are already the children of God. This is not some vague hope for when we may become perfect, but already we are the children of God. And moreover, John says exultantly, while we do not know exactly what we shall be, we do know this, that when the Lord Jesus appears again we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is (see v. 2). The New Testament affirms that we shall be like him in our bodies. We shall have a body 'conformed to the body of his glory' (see Phil 3:21). We shall be like him, more importantly, in our characters—perfectly like him morally and spiritually.

So now John is taking us further, is he not? In the first movement he talked of the manifestation of that eternal life, and he was thinking of our Lord's incarnation, his death, perhaps also his resurrection and the forty days he spent among us after his resurrection. Now, while he still talks to us about his first manifestation, he carries our minds on to that glorious second coming of Christ, when he shall be manifest in all his glory; and he lifts up our heart with glorious pulsating hope that we shall most certainly be like the Lord when he appears.

### **The warning against believing the spirit of falsehood as distinct from the spirit of truth (4:1-6)**

Now, by contrast, let us notice how this second movement, throughout all its verses, talks to us also about the world, and now from a different angle from the one it used when it talked to us about the world in Movement One. In Movement One we thought about the world as Satan has organized it, in independence of God. We thought about it containing all sorts of things that, superficially, are seductively attractive: the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride in life's achievements. Now we are to think about the world in its far more sinister and sombre colours, for John is going to tell us that there is not just one family—the family of God; there are two families, and there are two fathers; and mankind is in one family or the other. There is no third ground. The believer is in the family of God and has God for

his Father. God is the source of his life, the source of his character. John is, in this movement, going to remind us that the world has the devil for its father and the source of its character.

Now, this is not wild talk, nor is it a description of lurid criminals. It is a description of every unregenerate man and woman. As Paul would say, they are 'dead in trespasses and in sins'. They walk 'according to the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience' (see Eph 2:1–2). We do not find it difficult to admit, do we, that as members of the family of God, our spiritual life, the spiritual graces we may have, the spiritual power, the spiritual development (if we have made any progress at all), we owe all together to God as our source? We now have to face what Scripture says, that the unregenerate man is not an independent individual merely. His rebellion, his hatred of God: these things do not merely come from him alone; they come from a higher source. John says, quite bluntly, 'He that does sin is of the devil' (3:8). This is the source, ultimately, of his sinning. Whereas John does not use the term 'father', our Lord uses the term 'father' in a chapter of John's Gospel that we shall look at in a moment, when he turned to people that were talking to him and said, quite explicitly, 'You are of your father, the devil' (8:44). So, there are two sources, two families; and this should help us see the solemn seriousness of the state of men and women in the world, outside of Christ.

## **Movement Two: bearing the family likeness**

Now, what I propose to do this morning as we come to the more detailed comment on this second movement is to take broadly its three sections and consider them under one heading.

Let us notice, first of all, the first major section of Movement Three. It goes from 2:28–29.

And now, my little children, abide in him . . . If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone also that does righteousness is begotten of him.

And it goes down to 3:10.

In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever does not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loves not his brother.

That section of our movement deals with the question of righteousness: right and just behaviour.

Then at the end of verse 10, and verse 11 onwards to the end of the chapter, the major topic will turn out to be the topic of love. The end of verse 10 says that he that does not love his brother is not of God, and verse 11 continues:

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

And the section goes on to talk about our duty to love.

Then in the first six verses of chapter 4 we come once more to the topic of belief, of doctrine, and John deals again with the heresies that were troubling the world and the early church and therefore urges upon us to see once more the importance of right belief about the person of the Lord Jesus.

So three areas then: the doing of righteousness (2:28–3:10); loving one another (3:10–24); and then the area of our beliefs and doctrines (4:1–6). And I am going to develop the simple thesis that in these three areas what John is now going to urge upon us is that if we are indeed children of God; and it will become clearly evident by the simple fact that, as children of God, we shall bear the family likeness. As in a human family, and life being what it is, when parents transmit their life to their children, we find that the children bear a resemblance to one parent or the other, or both. It is inevitable. There is such a very real thing as family likeness, and you say of such and such a girl: 'Isn't she like her father?' Or of such and such a lad: 'Oh, he is the dead image of his mother. Oh, I can see whose child he is. I don't need to be told!' Family likeness is a very real thing. So it is in the spiritual realm. If we are indeed children of God, and we have the seed of God abiding in us, in all these three areas that we have mentioned, we shall demonstrate quite clearly the family likeness. We shall become increasingly like God, like the Son of God, and this is indeed how it will be manifest to those around that we are genuinely children of God.

Now, in the notes I have attempted to list for you the flow of the argument, and I do not propose this morning to go through all the detailed verses, verse by verse. I have tried to do some of that work for you in the notes.<sup>9</sup>

### **The emphasis on relationships in the Gospel of John**

Let us, for a moment, sit back and look at what may be for us a helpful background against which to read this particular part of the First Epistle of John. We have already noticed, in studying the first movement, that the Gospel of John, and in particular chapter 8, proved very helpful in our understanding of what it means to walk in the light. I want to recur now for five or ten minutes to that same chapter in the Gospel of John, to notice how helpful it is also in this idea of the family likeness, that where men and women are truly children of God they will bear the family likeness. And so I refer in particular to the story with which chapter 8 begins.

In most Bibles still, mercifully, chapter 8 of John's Gospel begins with the story of the woman taken in adultery. Now, the pundits tell us that really the textual evidence for the story of the woman taken in adultery is very precarious, and perhaps that story was not originally part of the Gospel of John. In some modern versions the whole paragraph is bracketed to indicate that the translators think that perhaps that story was not original to John's writing. Well, if we just looked at textual criticism perhaps we would agree with the pundits that the textual evidence is thin. If we looked at stylistic evidence we might decide that the evidence is thin that it is part of the original Gospel. If we look at the literary evidence, I am going to suggest to you that the evidence is overwhelming that that story is part of the overall structure of that Gospel.

The story of the woman taken in adultery is but one story in a series of stories in the Gospel in which women are prominent, and all of them are stories that are either completely peculiar to John or peculiar in the amount of emphasis that is given to the story. I have listed them for you here.

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<sup>9</sup> See the Study Notes in the Appendix.

## The Women Mentioned in John's Gospel

### *Pattern as a Guide in Textual Criticism*

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#### 1. Wedding in Cana (2:1–11)

'Woman, what have I to do with you?'—a question of relationship.

#### 2. Samaritan (ch. 4)

'The one you now have is not your husband'—no true relationship.

#### 3. Adulteress (8:1–11)

Taken in the very act—unfaithful to relationship.

#### 4. Martha and Mary (chs. 11–12)

At the death of their brother: Your brother shall rise again—a restored relationship.

#### 5. Mary, Mother of Jesus (19:25–27)

At the death of her Son: 'Woman, behold your Son!' . . . disciple, 'Behold your mother!'—announcement of a new relationship.

#### 6. Mary Magdalene (20:11–18)

At the tomb: 'Go and tell my brethren, I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'—announcement of a new relationship.

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You may be able to find others, but there are these at least. There is the story in chapter 2 of Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. No one else has it but John. Similarly, only John has the story of the woman at Sychar's well in Samaria, and the long conversation that our Lord had with her in chapter 4. Only John has the story (if he has it) of the woman taken in adultery, in chapter 8. And then only John has the long story in chapters 11 and 12 of Mary and Martha at the death, and subsequently at the resurrection, of their brother, Lazarus. Of course, again John tells us of the women at the cross, like all the other Gospels do, but only John tells us this particular story: how, when our Lord saw Mary, his mother, standing by the cross, and the disciple whom he loved, he committed Mary, his mother, to the care of John. Other Gospel writers tell us of the women that came to the tomb, including Mary Magdalene, but only John tells us this delightful story: how Mary Magdalene stood at the grave weeping, and when the Lord appeared to her, at first she thought he was the gardener, but found out he was the Lord, and received from him a glorious message of consolation. Those extra details, in chapter 20, are peculiar to John.

So we have a series of stories then, told at some great length, in which women are prominent. It won't take two minutes to see that all those stories have at least one theme in common. It is the theme of *relationship*, is it not? In the first story, Mary the mother of Jesus is at a wedding. And what, pray, is a wedding if it is not the occasion when the great new relationship of husband and wife is officially formed? It was at that wedding that our Lord turned and said to Mary, his mother, very courteously but very firmly, 'Woman, what have I to do with you?' It is very much a question of relationship.

Think again for a moment of that Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar in chapter 4. She had her troubles, and one of them was this: when our Lord said, 'Go, call your husband,' she said, 'I have no husband.' 'My dear,' said our Lord, 'you've said exactly the truth. You've had five husbands. The man you now have is not your husband.' Between her and the man she was living with there was no true relationship. And the woman in chapter 8 was in sorrier plight even than the one in chapter 4. This was a woman who had been unfaithful to a relationship. If you like you can bracket those two stories together.

Look at the next two stories. The fourth story is about Mary and Martha at the death of their brother, as death came in and severed the relationship. Listen to their lament. Each of them said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' And listen to the tenderness of our Lord's phrasing it: 'Your brother shall rise again.' Then, in the fifth story, Mary the mother of Jesus is present at the death of her son, and see the lovely consolation that Christ gave on that occasion, announcing a new relationship. He said to Mary, 'Woman, behold your son.' And to John: 'Son, behold your mother.' Neither were related to each other physically, but here was our Lord announcing a new relationship, formed in the family of God.

And finally, of course, we come to Mary Magdalene in the garden. What is it but the announcement of a gloriously new relationship? 'Touch me not; don't cling to me, Mary,' he said. 'I've not ascended to the Father. But go and tell my brethren I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God' (see 20:17). And we ponder well how has it come to be that his Father has become our Father, that his God is our God? And however it has become so, what a glorious new relationship it is.

So whatever else they teach us, and they teach us a multitude of other things, these stories home in on this great question of relationship. Let's take this one here in chapter 8 that is to our purpose now.

#### *A question of parentage*

We see a woman taken in adultery, roughly handled and brought before the Saviour. We remember how he exposed the hardness of heart and the hypocrisy of her accusers. But adultery is a sorry sin, isn't it? And in the ancient world, if not in our modern one, it had the constant effect that children were born whose parentage was uncertain, who were passed off as the children of one father, when in fact they were the children of another father. Only of course, their being such a thing as family likeness, sometimes the secret would come out, and a woman's child that was supposed to be the child of her husband, bore no likeness to her husband at all, but bore an uncommon likeness to some other man down the street.

Listen to what our Lord has to say then in the rest of that chapter 8 to the people that came around him. He began to talk to them about the need to abide in his teaching, and they would find freedom—freedom from the practice of sin. They got angry and said, 'You know, we don't need your teaching; we have Abraham as our father.'

'Oh really?' said Christ. 'But do you know, if Abraham were your father you would bear the family likeness, wouldn't you, gentlemen? And you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill me, a man that has told you the truth. Abraham didn't do that kind of thing.'



Then they got nasty, and with a horrible implication they said, with great emphasis on the 'we': 'Oh, *we* weren't born of fornication.' They seem to have been referring to the popular notion of the origin of our blessed Lord. They knew he was born of Mary, and Joseph wasn't his father. They didn't believe his virgin birth. They took the other view, and now they say to him: 'No, we weren't born of fornication. We have one Father, even God.'

'My dear, good gentlemen,' he said, and once more the principal is repeated: 'if God were your Father you would bear the family likeness. You would love me.'

It was in that context that our Lord began to say what John is saying so powerfully here in 1 John 3 and in the beginning of Chapter 4: 'He who is born of God will show the character of God; and if people constantly live in unrighteousness, constantly practise sin, hate the people of God, embrace heresy, and are disloyal to the person of the Lord Jesus, they may profess what they please, but family likeness witnesses against them. He who constantly practises sin is of the devil.'

And so we have to think this morning of this serious matter: the lovely fact that every believer is born of God, he or she is a child of God. But with it comes the corollary that because this life that God gives us is real and brings with it a divine nature, genuine children of God will begin to show the family likeness. They will begin to do righteousness, even as God is righteous. They will begin to love, as the Lord Jesus loved. In their doctrines they will show the loyalty of the family to the apostles and to our blessed Lord.

Now, let us briefly pick out some of the major points in each of those three sections.

### **Family likeness will show itself in righteousness (2:28–3:10)**

Family likeness then will show itself in righteousness. Fully, one day, we shall be perfectly like the Lord Jesus, but even now, already we are the children of God. Granted that we are still imperfect and we need to purify ourselves, yet the family likeness will already be there.

So now let us notice, once more, a feature of John's writing. We noticed yesterday how carefully he keeps the balance. First it is where we walk, then how we walk; or, again, love the children of God; don't love the world. Now, look at 3:2: 'it is not yet made manifest what we shall be'. We can't see it. Oh, but look in verse 10. It is made manifest: 'In this the children of God are manifest . . . '.

Yes, there is a sense in which it is not yet made manifest what we shall be, and therefore the world does not know us. John says in verse 1 that the world does not necessarily recognize a true believer, and doesn't necessarily approve of him. And we should remember that that is not necessarily something to be unduly alarmed about, because they did not recognize the Lord Jesus: they 'knew him not' (3:1). And the lovely life of the Lord Jesus that expressed the character of God absolutely perfectly was judged by many men, and officially by the nation, as being an unworthy life. 'Too lax!' some of them said. 'Too strict!' others said. 'Blasphemous!' others said. And they so disapproved of it that in the end they crucified him. They did not know him. We mustn't, therefore, be unduly upset if the world finds true Christian character objectionable and says we are too strict, or sometimes too lax, because they did not approve of Christ, and therefore they will not approve of his people. They do not agree with God's law; they will not like those whose lives express God's law.

But when we have noticed that, we should not make that an excuse for lax living and say, 'Ah, well, I've got a terribly bad reputation in the workplace where I work, but never mind. I am a Christian; I don't care what the world thinks, because they're not my judge anyway.' We certainly should not make it an excuse for lax living, for in another sense it is manifest who are the children of God.

'Oh, you can tell,' says John. 'And you can tell equally well the children of the devil.' And John supplies us with the test:

In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever does not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loves not his brother. (v. 10)

Whereas, on the other hand, whosoever is begotten of God does not constantly practise sin, because God's seed abides in him, and he cannot go on practising sin (see v. 9). It is a question of family likeness.

And of course, with irresistible logic, John says to us, 'You know, if your hope is that one day you will be perfectly like the Lord Jesus when he comes again, then would you not want to be like him now? And if you hope to be like him when he comes again would you not want to be like him when he came the first time? If you have the hope in you that one day you will be like Christ, you will, in fact, purify yourself (see vv. 2-3).

Let's use an analogy. As you will know, the Israelites, having been redeemed from Egypt, were promised the inheritance of Canaan. Suppose, six months after Moses had left Egypt with the Israelites, you were touring Egypt yourself. Coming round a pyramid you bumped into an Israelite friend of yours, and you said, 'Hello, Eliezer. How are you? Surprised to see you here, I must say. What are you doing in Egypt? I thought you were one of that crowd that was going off to the promised land somewhere.'

'Oh,' he says, 'yes, I am.'

'You are?'

'Oh yes.'

'You mean to say you're hoping to be in Canaan one of these days?'

'Yes, yes, I am indeed,' he says.

'Well,' you say, 'that's funny, for Moses and all the others have been gone this last six months, and they're miles out into the wilderness now. They've made considerable progress towards the promised land. I mean, why aren't you with them?'

'Oh,' he says, 'I don't bother about that much.'

'But I thought you wanted to be in the promised land. How do you propose to get there?'

'Oh, I don't know. It'll happen one of these days. One of these days I shall wake up and say, "It's a little bit different somehow. I feel a bit different today. Oh, I know what it is; I'm in Canaan. Fancy that!"'

Well, of course not. If he had the hope of being in Canaan by God's grace and miracle, he would set forward to make his journey of progress towards Canaan. Why, even his progress was not merely geographical, but moral and spiritual because, as he slogged the miles of the desert and made his geographical progress, he was making progress into the experience of God.

And so it is with us too, surely. John says that if we have this hope fixed on the Lord Jesus, that one day we shall be like him, we shall make every effort now to purify ourselves and make spiritual and moral progress in the direction of growing constantly more like the Saviour. And with many another argument, John urges upon us here in chapter 3 that if we are genuine children of God, we shall show the family likeness and 'do righteousness'.

### **Family likeness will show itself in loving one another (3:10-24)**

Then as he comes to his second section of this Movement Two, John uses many other arguments to urge upon us that if we are genuine children of God we shall show the family likeness in that we shall love one another. Indeed, loving the children of God is itself an evidence: 'We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers' (see 3:14).

Now, as we said yesterday, we must be careful about this verse. John is not denying or forgetting our duty as Christians to love all mankind. As Christians we are not only to love all mankind, we are to love our veritable enemies, but here John is talking about our love of the brothers, and it seems to me important that we must not confuse things. The evidence that we have passed from death to life is not the very evidence that we vaguely love people in general; it is that we love the people of God *as* people of God.

I'm tempted to go off and talk about that much misinterpreted verse from our Lord's parable of the sheep and goats: 'Inasmuch as you did it unto one of these my brethren, even these least, you did it unto me' (Matt 25:40). Some people interpret it as though a Communist only had to love his fellow Communist, and somehow this was evidence that he was a child of God. No, surely not. In that parable, our Lord Jesus is talking of himself as King Messiah, and of those who were kind to followers of the King and visited them in prison and clothed them when they were persecuted and took their stand with the brothers of the King. And when the King came he recognized that what they had done to his brothers was in fact done to him. But a very big question is to be asked. How do you become a brother of Messiah? And are all men brothers of Messiah? No, indeed not. Hebrews 3 tells us quite plainly how we become partakers of the Messiah. It is through regeneration. It is through entering the family of God. It is by being born again that we become brothers of the Messiah and members of the family of God. 'So don't be surprised,' John says, 'if the world hates you' (see 1 John 3:13). There are two camps; there are two families. One is the family of God; and one is the world.

Now, we are not to be paranoiac and suppose that the world always hates us. John says quite accurately, 'Don't be surprised *if* the world hates you.' What is it that stirs the hatred of the world against believers? Well, John points out some examples. Cain flew into a temper at one stage and murdered his brother, Abel. Why? Not because Cain was basically irreligious; it all happened in the context of sacrifice and religion. But Abel witnessed by his quiet testimony and life and sacrifice that Cain's works were evil and inadequate, and not acceptable with God (1 John 3:12; Heb 11:4). And Cain flew into a rage and hated Abel, because Abel's works were righteous and Cain's unrighteous. Our Lord said to his brothers, 'The world doesn't hate you, but me it hates. Why does it hate me? Because I testify of it, that its deeds are evil' (see John 7:7). Jezebel hated Elijah for the same reason (see 1 Kgs 16-19). 'Don't you be surprised,' says our Lord, 'if the world hates you on that same ground' (see John 15).

For we have to reckon with this, that there are two families. God abides in the child of God, but our Lord talks of a very sinister influence that abides in the world, and 'the world lies in the evil one' (see 5:19).

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

### **Family likeness will show itself in our beliefs and doctrines (4:1-6)**

Finally, in the third of the sections of this movement, John talks to us about false religion. At the end of chapter 2, he had warned us about heretics who come out of the church and explains they never were true believers. Now they have come out in their true colours and denied the pre-existence of Christ, denied that Jesus is the Christ, denied the Sonship of Christ and destroyed, doctrinally, the very basis of salvation. As members of the family of God we are to remain loyal to the Lord Jesus, remembering that one day he shall come again, and he shall call us to account on this question of how loyal we have been to him, *doctrinally*.

But now, recurring to the theme of heresy, John talks not so much of those that come out of the church; he talks of false doctrine that has gone into the world in general; for the world is full of religion, but not all religion is good religion. 'These false prophets,' he says, 'are of the world' (see 4:1, 5). That's why the world finds them attractive. They speak the world's language; the world understands them. They seem right to the world, because they are of the world; and in these false teachers is Satan himself.

The children of God will show the family likeness: one, in their loyalty to the Lord Jesus, insisting that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh; two, in their loyalty to the apostolic witness. How will you know who is of God and who isn't? When it comes to things religious, 'he who is of God,' says John, 'hears us apostles' (see v. 6). If a man refuses to hear the apostles, contradicts the apostles, denies the apostles, then however religious he may be, his religion is not of God: it is one of the many forms of the religion of this world.

### **Conclusion**

Now, as I say, I have not attempted to cover all the detail here, but I have attempted to cover some of it in the notes. I thought this morning we would give ourselves a lighter diet and look at background things that might help to cast light upon our passage, and in particular, let me leave, with myself and with you, this exceedingly practical observation that there is such a thing as *family likeness*. And because our salvation is real, if we are children of God who carry his life, who carry his seed, then we carry his nature and character. And though not perfect yet, we already bear the family likeness and shall be found seeking to make progress and develop it until that great day when our likeness to Christ will be perfected.

## [Resources for Loving the Family of God](#)

### **Introducing Movement Three**

For our final study we turn to Movement Three, as I have called it, beginning in 1 John 4:7. We shall not need telling now that however you analyse this epistle, no one of its major divisions will prove to be a watertight compartment containing only things peculiar to itself. The very reverse is true; in all his major divisions of the epistle, John constantly repeats one or two basic, fundamentally important themes. So today we shall abstract from this final movement those two themes that have particularly occupied us throughout this week: the theme of life in the family of God, and the opposite theme of the world. We shall have to leave much detail again, though I trust I have covered it, or some of it at least, in the notes.

So then, in this Movement Three, once more John will talk to us about life in the family of God, and at great lengths urge upon us our duty to love one another. Only this time his peculiar aspect is that he tells us the resources that are available for us by which we may love one another. He says so at the very beginning: 'Beloved, let us love one another: for love comes from God' (see 4:7).

Secondly, John will talk to us about the world, only not now about its seductive attractiveness, as he did in chapter 2, nor particularly about its hatred of the family of God, as he spoke of in chapter 3. This time he talks to us about the world and the great difficulty it places in the way of actually fulfilling the commandments of God. And seeing that to love one another does mean we must keep the commandments of God, then the world is going to make it difficult sometimes for us to love one another in the family of God. But here, John talks to us, from his special angles, not only of the difficulty that the world places in our way, but of the resources and secrets at our disposal for overcoming the difficulties that the world puts in the way.

### **God's love and the standard for ours (4:7-11)**

So, first of all then, we have the basic principle of loving.

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loves is begotten of God, and knows God. (4:7)

God is no Pharaoh asking the Israelites to make bricks without straw. God certainly requires of us who are members of his family to love one another, but not without giving us the love to do it with. The love wherewith we love one another does not come from us; it is supplied

by God. 'Let us love one another: for love comes from God, and everyone who loves shows thereby that he has been begotten of God'. So it is God who provides the love, and it is God who is busy in our hearts, perfecting the expression of his own love. Look at verse 12:

No man has beheld God at any time: if we love one another, God abides in us, and *his love* is perfected in us.

That is, as we make our unsteady beginnings and efforts at loving one another, God is supplying the love that we use to love with and is perfecting, not *our* love, but *his* love. He is in the believer; all the great reservoir of his love is available to the believer; and God himself is engaged in perfecting his own love and expressing his own love through the believer. So, far from asking us to make bricks without straw, the same God who commands us to love one another is in the believer developing and expressing his own love through that believer to others.

### **The exhibition and the costs of God's love**

The standards of God's love, of course, are immeasurably high. So let us notice the first little section from verse 7, which begins, 'Let us love one another,' and runs to verse 11, which says, 'Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.' Here then is the example of God's love and the principles that are involved in God loving us.

Would you notice that verses 9 and 10 are not just repetition, but statements of different sides of the question, and in beautifully logical order? First of all, John says,

Herein was the love of God manifested . . . that God has sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. (v. 9)

And secondly:

Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (v. 10)

They are two statements about the love of God, but not needlessly repetitious. One is telling us of the manifestation, the demonstration, the outward exhibition, that God made with which to express his love. Then the second verse tells us of the costs involved in showing his love like that, and the principles upon which God's love works.

And we notice first of all then, the practical, active expression of the love, and then, what you might call the *theory* behind the love. That is a delightful order, isn't it? We see it at the human level. Here are a father and mother, and they love their child. They themselves are in difficult circumstances, but they talk it over as they plan the career of their child, and they express their love for their child in giving him the very best that their money can buy: the very best education and so forth and so on. They *demonstrate* their love to the child, and the child sees the demonstration of the love. What the child doesn't always see is what went on behind the scenes and what it cost Mum and Dad to demonstrate their love like that. But perhaps now, when he's a baldy, old thirty-five or more, sitting back in his armchair one night with a

furrowed brow, counting up the cost of loving his own children, his mind goes back, and he says to himself, 'You know, I didn't appreciate it like I should have done. I never realized what it cost old Mum and Dad to do what they did for me.' Yes, because the exhibition comes first, and then we who are on the receiving end begin to perceive the costs involved behind the scene.

### *The exhibition of God's love*

The exhibition of God's love is spoken of in verse 9: 'Herein was the love of God manifested'. He took the initiative; he didn't, so to speak, stay aloft on his throne and issue words merely but, taking the initiative, he sent his Son into our world. He made the contact; he sent his Son; his Son came where we were. This is love being *exhibited*: not content with words, but showing itself in deeds. And then, says the Bible, he sent his only Son, his only begotten Son, that we may live through him (see John 3:16). It would take a greater theologian than I to peer behind the implications of that great adjective: God's *only* Son, and what that relationship was between the Father and the Son—so wonderful, so mysterious, so unique. But see what the verse is saying. The exhibition of God's love is that God takes that only Son and gives him that we might live. He is sharing what is, if one may so describe it, the most precious thing God has—that eternal life that was with the Father. He is sharing his very life with us, sending his only Son that we may live.

I mustn't, I suppose, compare great things with small. I remember at one stage, however, being charged to drive a three or four-year-old niece of mine from her father to visit her mother who was staying with her in-laws up aloft in Britain somewhere. And the infant was given a whole large bag of sweets to convey to sundry of her cousins on the other end. But it was a long journey and, well, sweets being sweets . . . You know, there are different things in this world, aren't there? I mean, there are stocks and shares, but what use are they? But a bag of sweets to an infant of three or four, well, it proved irresistible, and while I was bent on driving, every now and then just one sweet came out. Then just another sweet came out. I'm afraid by the end of the journey there were no sweets left! Had they been stocks and shares, yes, the whole box full would have been left. And God had what to God (if we may so speak) was precious beyond all else—his only Son. And this is the demonstration of his love, the exhibition of his love, that he shared him with us. He sent him into our world, that we might live through him.

### *The costs of God's love*

Behind that exhibition, John tells us, were costs immeasurable, so that now in verse 10 he says, 'Herein *is* love'. This is not now so much the exhibition, but the principle of loving. Now he lists the difficulties that we have put in God's way, the difficulties we have put in the way of his loving.

First of all, we had not loved God (v. 10); and that is putting it mildly, because the fact is that we did the very opposite. While we were distant from God and cared not to know him, while some of us were kicking him on the shins in our rebellion, then see what he had to overcome in order to love us!

Nor was it only our surliness, but John reminds us that in order to make it *righteous* for him to have anything to do with the likes of us, let alone to love us, God had to send his Son

as a propitiation for our sins, so that God might be just and remain just, and yet be the justifier of him that believes in Jesus. I say it reverently, but God had a reputation throughout his whole universe (and any other universes there are), a reputation to maintain for righteousness and holiness. How could he truck and trade with sinners like that? And he found a way that he might love us righteously.

*Surrounded by two exhortations*

And all this time John has been making these remarks they are sandwiched between two exhortations. John is not merely telling us about the love of God; he is setting us the standard according to which we are to love one another: 'Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another' (v. 11). We ought to love one another *like that*: taking the initiative, showing and demonstrating, in spite of the costs and in spite of the antagonism of the other side.

You say, 'How should I ever love like that? Where should I get the love from?'

But John has answered our question: 'That is how God loves you.' And now he is going to tell us that that is the kind of love that God has placed within you, so that through you it might be shown to others.

### **Making real and visible the love of the unseen God (4:12-16)**

In verse 12, he begins another subsection of his letter. Notice the phrase, 'No man has beheld God at any time', followed up in verse 14 by the phrase, 'And we have beheld and bear witness that the Father has sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.'

No man has beheld God at any time, John says. In the Gospel of John, as Dr Stott points out, when John uses that phrase in his Gospel, 'No man has beheld God at any time,' he follows it by saying, 'Yes, but the only begotten Son, that is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him' (see 1:18). Now, in the epistle John begins with the very same phrase: 'No man has beheld God at any time,' but instead of adding, 'the only begotten Son has declared him,' now, if you please, John assigns that privilege to us (v. 12). No man has beheld God at any time, but God is dwelling in us and bringing to perfection and full flood his love through us. God is declaring himself in and through us.

It is not then our desperate attempts to dredge up some love from somewhere but the stupendous fact that God dwells in the believer. The God who loves this kind of love, and is wanting to express himself as he did through Christ, now expresses his love through us as his personal channels. So that if we love one another it is God that is abiding in us, and his love is being brought to its full flood in us.

But how do we know that that is true and is not a lot of imagination run riot? Well, this is how we know it is true, says John.

By this we know that we abide in him, and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have beheld and bear witness that the Father has sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.  
(vv. 13-14)

So whereas God has not been seen—'No man has beheld God at any time . . . Yet we have beheld something, and in our turn we proclaim what we have beheld,' John says.



What have you beheld, John? Actually, John has beheld a human figure, Jesus Christ, crucified on a cross. Well, thousands of people saw that and passed by wagging their heads. They never saw in it what John saw in it. Millions of people have heard of it since. They've never yet seen in it what John saw in it. As John looked at that crucified figure on a cross, suddenly there rose up in his heart a tremendous revelation of what was happening there, and he saw with awestruck wonder: 'Why, this is God sending his Son to be the Saviour!' And in the very moment he saw it, it was inevitable that his very heart was set aglow with a new light and a new significance and a new wonder.

You cannot see that without your very heart being changed and moved and lit up, as it suddenly dawns on you what the significance of this thing is. What is happening on that cross is God sending his Son to be the Saviour of the world. This is what happens to every believer. St. Paul put it in his own words when he said how he woke up to this: 'the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me' (Gal 2:20).

How do people come to see that? Why John has just told us: because God gives us his Holy Spirit, and God himself comes to dwell in our hearts by his Spirit. As the hymn puts it, 'Love only knows love.' It takes love to recognize it. And God's Holy Spirit dwelling in the heart reveals God's love to us, and the significance of the debt of Christ, so that we, in turn, start to proclaim it. That is the second, very natural, reaction. How can you keep quiet about it?

The law of God, I must confess, would never make me a missionary. Would it make you one? Well, I have too vivid an imagination. I think of myself setting forth to preach the law up your street, and I come to your door. I knock on it, and here you come: 'Good evening, what might you want?'

'I've come to tell you to keep God's law,' I would say.

Well, no, I would never do it. I should be so afraid of what you would say. For you might say: 'Oh, really? What, *you*, come to tell me to keep God's law?'

The interview wouldn't get very far. I would come to tell you what I have seen, as John the apostle will come to tell you what he has seen: 'Friend, have you woken up to the significance of what it means that Jesus Christ was nailed on a cross? The Father has sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.'

And in my heart you will perceive the reality now of what I say and what it means, because even as I say it I'm thinking how that Jesus Christ died, sent to be the propitiation for my sin. And the love of God has not only reached me, but now is coming through me, as we have seen and bear witness in our turn, along with the apostle, about the love of God in the saving work of Christ.

So whosoever, in this sense, shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, not as some mathematical or theological formula, but wakened up by God's Holy Spirit to see the significance of what he is saying: that this Jesus who died on a cross is God's Son dying there, sent to die for me. God abides in such a man, and he in God (see v. 15). So that John can add, 'we know and have believed the love which God has in us' (v. 16).

## Love that removes fear (4:17–19)

It is one thing to come to know it; (many people have not got that far yet) but oh, the glory of being able to believe the love of God! And here is where many people need, not our help, but the help of God's Holy Spirit. They know the theology of it, but life has wounded them so deeply with all kinds of scars and fears and guilt complexes that they find it difficult to actually believe the love of God.

### God's love gives us fearless confidence in view of the day of judgment

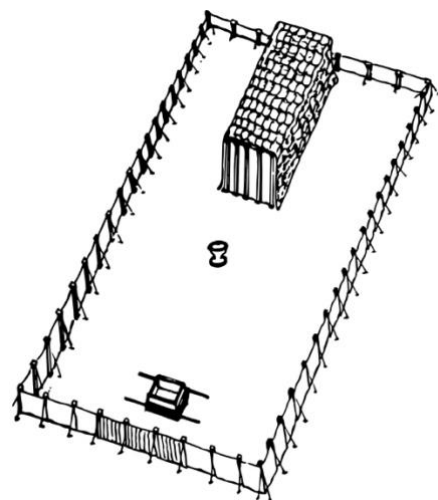
John goes on to tell us that God's love has not only been exhibited like this, and not only has he sent his Spirit that we may perceive and enjoy it and then proclaim it to others; God is busy at work perfecting his love within us, bringing it to its full tide. Of course, it will eventually mean that his love to us and in us goes back to himself, and it will become our love for God, though John is about to remind us that he loved first. 'We love,' if we love at all, 'because he first loved us' (v. 19). But now John dwells for a moment on what God is aiming at in perfecting his love in us. It is so, as he says, 'we may have boldness in the day of judgement; because as he is, so are we in this world' (v. 17). It is the desire of God that every believer shall have bold and certain assurance in view of the day of judgment, and have it while we are in this world. Do notice the explicit statement. And this assurance is to rest on this: that God's love will bring us to see that as Christ already is, not as he was merely, but as he *is* in glory, so we *are* already while we are still in this world.

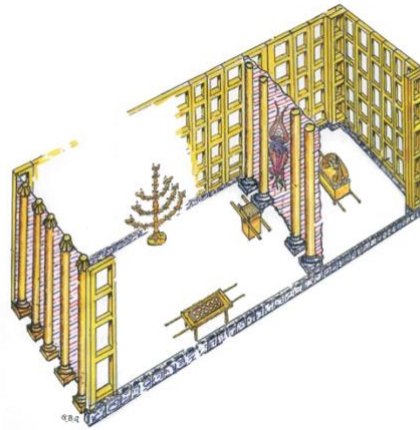
Now, what can that mean? It cannot mean that we are morally and spiritually perfect already while we are still in this world, for in chapter 3 John has told us that, no, we still need to purify ourselves. It cannot mean, therefore, that we are morally and spiritually perfect. In what sense then are we now, in this world, already as he is in the Father's glory? Well, there are many senses in which that is true. Let me briefly rehearse some of them.

#### *As he is, so are we: legally*

Look back, if you will, to verse 10. This tells us of the legal side of our standing before God. God sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Now that is a word, as we know, that is based on Old Testament thought and ritual, so that I am going to trouble you once more with a few images to take us back to where God used his infant class lessons to teach us the basic meaning of these great theological terms.

*Propitiation*, or as we sometimes have it in the Old Testament, *atonement*, is an idea especially associated with the Day of Atonement. In Israel, among the many things that happened on the Day of Atonement, the central thing was that on that day the high priest came out into the court and offered the sacrifice that was a basis for atonement, as the elders of the nation put their hands upon the head of the victim and confessed the nations sins over the head of that victim at that altar (see Lev 16).

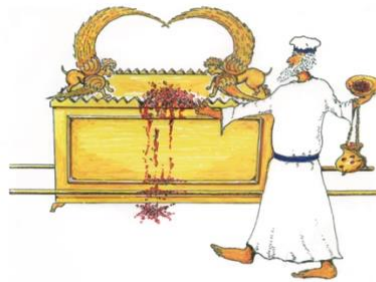




The priest then took the blood, and the priest, who had appeared in the court publicly to put away sin by the sacrifice, then retraced his steps into the presence of God, and he went through the door that normally hung there, and came of course then to the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Now, normally in the year nobody ever penetrated behind that veil, the reason being their sacrifices were not good enough; but on the Day of Atonement exception was made, and as the priest came as the people's representative, with the blood of the atonement in his hand, he passed through that veil and came into the most holy presence of God.

Looking at this sideways view, he has come in through the veil, and into the presence of God before God's ark and the mercy seat.

And there stands the priest in his white garments of the day of propitiation. He has sprinkled the blood on the mercy seat and before the mercy seat in the presence of God.



Ancient Jewish legend has it that on the great Day of Atonement, when the high priest went thus into the very presence of God, they tied a rope round his middle and let it trail all through the tabernacle, right outside to where the people were standing. Of course, it's probably a yarn and they never did do any such thing, but it shows that the ancient Jews were aware of the significance of what was happening when the priest eventually came and stood in the presence of God. The priest was coming, not for himself alone; he was coming as the representative of the people. And therefore the people saw it very clearly: the reception that God gave the priest would indicate the reception that God was giving to the people whom he represented. If God then accepted the priest on the basis of that propitiation then the people outside knew that God had accepted them, and they could rejoice that just as their priest was

accepted in the presence of God, so they who stood outside were accepted. If, on the other hand, God, having surveyed the sacrifice, declared it was insufficient and that he could not accept this priest for all his sinfulness, then the priest would have died immediately in the presence of God. And the people, so the story goes, had tied the rope round his middle so that if he died they could haul him out and then, I suppose, run away as fast as their legs would carry them! Because, again, what happened to him would happen to them, for he had gone in as their representative.

So that is the ancient story, but it imprints on our minds the wonder of this, that our blessed Lord has gone back to heaven as our representative, and as the Bible puts it: 'He now appears in the presence of God for us' (see Heb 9:24). Of course he is welcome on his own account, but that is not the point. He appears in the presence of God *for us*. And because he is our representative we are taught to argue that the reception God has given to him, God gives to us whom he represents. In that respect then, legally, as he is so are we in this world.

May I ask you, have you any doubts about Christ's acceptance in the presence of God? Be careful how you answer it, because if he is indeed your representative then the welcome God has given to him, as your representative, is an indication of God's acceptance of you. The only thing that concerns me is the question: does God know that Jesus Christ is David Gooding's representative? Has God seen it, and would he change his mind if he discovered that Jesus Christ is actually representing David Gooding? Why, of course not.

#### *As he is, so are we: spiritually*

There is another very big sense in which, 'as he is so are we in this world'. Let's look to chapter 5 and the middle of the verse that says, 'we know him that is true, and we are *in him* that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ' (v. 20). In his great priestly prayer recorded in John 17 our Lord Jesus describes what the situation is: he in us, we in him — together one in the Father (v. 21). That is not some pious hope that one day may be achieved; it is the glorious fact that we are already in Christ. And therefore, being positionally in him, if he is God's well beloved Son then we are in God's well beloved Son, and we are God's beloved children.

#### *As he is, so are we: practically*

Oh, there is even more than that, for in the strict context of 4:17, what God is saying is that not only has he loved us and accepted us, and that we are in Christ, but the very love of God is in us and God is developing it and training us to express it more and more. And he does that so that just as Christ shows out the love of God, so through us the love of God is being manifested.

On all three grounds—legally, spiritually and practically, we may have absolute confidence, 'fearless confidence,' John says, as we face the future judgment.

### **The practical requirements of love (4:20–5:21)**

This then is the love of God and how wonderful it is; and that love is now to work itself out through us, coming back to God himself, and then spreading to our Christian brothers and sisters. And John now follows with exhortations to help us see that this love of God that we are to express is no merely vaporous, impractical thing.

### **To love my brothers and sisters**

If we love God because he has first loved us, then we must love our brothers. Indeed, how would I know that the love, the feeling I have within me, is genuine love of God? 'You'll know that,' John says, 'by the fact that (if it is the real thing) it will express itself in love to your brother, for if you don't love your brother whom you have seen, how can you love God whom you have not seen?' (see 4:20). And anyway, if you love the Father, you love the Son. And everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God. If you love the Father, therefore you will love the child (see 5:1–2).

### **To love God by keeping his commandments**

And then John reminds us that loving one another is not a mere sentimental thing. How shall I know I am really loving my brother? John says we know that 'when we love God and keep his commandments' (see v. 2). I cannot say, 'Yes, there is a plain command in holy Scripture that I must obey his commandments, but now look, it would hurt the feelings of my brothers and sisters in Christ if I did it. It would offend them, so I mustn't do it then. It wouldn't be loving to do it.'

Oh, yes it would. True love of my brothers means loving God, and loving God means keeping his commandments. It is not love to my brother if, for his sake, I disobey God.

### **The world makes it difficult**

But then John comes to a very practical thing. He is aware, like any Christian is aware, that keeping the commandments of God in this fallen, sinful world can be a very difficult thing. It is not merely that the world on occasions hates the believer. That can be true, but it is the way the world is set up. It is that if we have to live in this world we are sometimes going to find it extraordinarily difficult to keep God's commandments.

I have a bank manager (you never would believe it; I sometimes wonder what I have him for, but anyway I have one), and he is a good Christian man. And I remember him coming to me once and confiding in me the enormous pressures that his principals had brought to bear upon him. They wanted him to join some secret society whose pagan idolatrous rights are as bad as any that Jezebel ever urged upon Ahab. And, of course, as a Christian man, and wanting to stand loyal to the unique deity of Christ, he didn't want to join any such pagan idolatrous society. Now, the principals of his bank weren't interested in religion; they were interested in making money. If he were a member of that society he would gain a lot of influential business friends and bring in great hordes of money to the bank. If he refused to be in the society he would lose them business. The businessmen, I repeat, weren't interested in religion; they couldn't care less, but they wanted him in that religious society. He had to stand firm, and he took the decision to risk his whole career and any possibility of advancement in order to be loyal to the Lord Jesus and keep the commands of God.

And any one of us could think of ten thousand and one illustrations of the way this world, by its attitudes, its standards, its atmospheres, its pressures, is not geared to make easy the keeping of the commandments of God, because the world isn't thinking about it anyway and is not interested in the topic. So it's going to be difficult.

## Two resources

What resource do we have with which to overcome the obstacle? We have two. In the first place, John says, 'He that is born of God overcomes the world' (see 5:4). That is, the very *nature* that God has given him has within it powers to face the world and its opposition and its difficulties, and overcome them. It is the very nature of God. Secondly, the other resource is the victory, the power that our *faith* gives to us (v. 4). But notice in what sense we are talking about our faith. We are talking about our faith in a doctrine—our faith that Jesus is the Son of God. It is that that gives us the strength to overcome the world (v. 5).

Now, at first sight that is a little surprising. We might have thought that John would have said, 'Look here, my dear fellow Christians, if you want to overcome the world, the secret is to be full of the Holy Spirit who gives you great power and energy to fight the wicked world.' We do not readily think that it is *doctrine* that gives us strength to overcome the world. But here you will perceive the secret lies very much in a belief *that*: 'Who is he that overcomes the world, but he that believes *that* Jesus is the Son of God?' (v. 5).

What has that got to do with overcoming the world anyway?

### *The practical nature of doctrine*

When we think of this matter of overcoming the world that so fills the Johannine literature, it seems to me that the easiest place to begin is with our Lord's teaching on the topic, which you will find in the final verses of John 16.

Just before he went to the cross, we are told he assembled his disciples, and he summed up for them the significance of his whole person and mission: 'I came forth from the Father, and I am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and I go to the Father' (see v. 28).

'Yes,' say the apostles, 'now we've understood. Glad you said it so clearly, Lord. You talked a little bit in proverbs earlier. How nice of you now to put it in words of one syllable. We've got it completely. You came forth from the Father, and you're going back to the Father' (see vv. 29–30).

'Do you really believe?' said our Lord. 'Do you not realize, gentlemen, that the hour is very soon coming when you shall be scattered, every man to his own things, to his own interests, to his own home, and you'll leave me alone?' (see vv. 31–32).

Why ever was that? Why, because in a few hours they were to see him spiked to a cross. They would see the one they thought was the Son of God, who had come down from heaven and was about to go back to heaven in all his glory, spiked helplessly to a cross. It would be too much for their faith. Their minds would be filled with the direst doubts: 'Well perhaps he isn't the Son of God after all. And if he isn't the Son of God . . .'

Well, they did the instinctive thing: they went off home. 'They went to their own things,' says John, to their own interests. What else would you do? If Jesus is not the Son of God it matters nothing. If Jesus is the Son of God, then whatever I may be called upon to sacrifice in order to keep his commandments doesn't really matter much at all. For if he is the Son of God, in him I have everything. That then is the issue. How many a young man in East Germany has faced the issue whether there is or is not to be promotion in his work? And it depends on whether he is vigorous in youth work for the Lord in his church, and if he is, then there never is any promotion for him. How many a fellow believer has faced the prison camp and death

for it? What fools they are, if Jesus isn't the Son of God. But if he is the Son of God then we shall be fools not to follow him and suffer what we must for him.

How do I know he is the Son of God? 'There is evidence,' John says, 'for this is he who came by water and by blood' (see 1 John 5:6). And John is referring to the first chapter of his Gospel where, when our Lord came he came first of all by water. He was baptized by John the Baptist, and John the Baptist tells us why he was baptizing: 'I have come baptizing that the Messiah may be manifest to Israel, and he who sent me to baptize told me that upon whomsoever I shall see the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And I saw and I bear record that this is the Son of God' (see 1:29-34). He came officially, and was officially introduced by John the Baptist at his baptism. He was marked out to be the one that shall baptize with the Holy Spirit and with power.

But he came also by blood, for that same John the Baptist, not after his cross but right at the very beginning of his official public ministry, proclaimed to the world at large: 'Behold, the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world!' (v. 29). He came to die, and he stands unique in all the histories of men, for he is the only one that entered our world claiming (credibly, that is) that he had come to die for our sins.

How do I know the claim is true? I know it not only because it is unique, and that he gave all kinds of evidence that he who made the claim fitted the claim, but I shall find the evidence in the actual power that it sets free in my life. This is he who, coming by water, was announced as the one that should baptize with the Holy Spirit. And thank God those who trust him find it a reality. He can impart God's Holy Spirit and give us the power to overcome the world. He who was announced as coming to die, did die. He died for us, to release us from the guilt of sin. And, as Paul would put it, we died with him (Rom 6:8) that we might find the way to a new kind of life and a new power in life, and thus prove, by experience, the doctrine we believe with our minds, that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. In that faith we shall find the power to overcome the world and obey God, and in obeying God, love him and love our fellow members in the family of God.

## Study Notes

### *Preliminaries*

## I. Authorship of the Epistle

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

## II. Historical Background of the Epistle

Scholars are much less agreed nowadays than they used to be over exactly what heresy or heresies John was combating in this epistle.<sup>10</sup> The general impression is, however, that the heretics were moving in the direction(s) of Docetism or Gnosticism, or both.

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

1. *Cerinthus*: A first-century heretic who apparently taught that Jesus was not born *of a virgin* but was the son of Joseph and Mary; that Jesus was not himself the Christ, but after the baptism of Jesus, the Christ descended on Jesus in the form of a dove; and that at the end the Christ separated from Jesus so that the Christ, being impassable anyway, did not suffer and was not involved in Jesus' death. Cerinthus also taught that not God, but some inferior power created the world.
2. *Docetism*: A heresy that denied that Jesus was a real man: he only 'seemed' (Greek: *dokeo* = 'to seem') to be a man and to suffer.
3. *Gnosticism*: A heresy, which, as its name implies, made (superior) knowledge the key to salvation. It held that spirit is divine and good; matter created and evil. Not God, but some inferior powers created the world. Since matter was evil, no true incarnation of God was possible. In ethics their view of matter as being essentially evil led either to asceticism or else to moral indifferentism. Full-blown Gnosticism and its many sects were a second-century development.

## III. Aim of the Present Studies

While we shall of necessity and, from time to time, pay attention to the historical situation to which John directed his letter, our first and foremost aim will be:

1. to trace the thought-flow through the epistle;

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<sup>10</sup> For a helpful summary of the debate see I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, Eerdmans, 1978, pp. 14–22.



2. to consider the relevance of its major themes to present, practical Christian living; and
3. in particular to examine what the epistle has to teach about the family of God, how it is constituted, how it functions and its relation to the world.

#### IV. Structure of the Epistle

1. The notorious difficulty of determining on what principles, if any, John has organized and grouped his material. Two-part, three-part and seven-part divisions have all been proposed (with detailed variations). Others hold that the epistle is one continuous chain of thought.
2. A recent analysis (R. E. Brown, *Anchor Bible* (1982), p. 124).

<b>I.</b>	The Prologue (1:1–4)	
<b>II.</b>	Part one (1:5–3:10)	The gospel that God is light, and we must walk in the light as Jesus walked.
<b>III.</b>	Part two (3:11–5:12)	The gospel that we must love one another as God has loved us in Jesus Christ.
<b>IV.</b>	Conclusion (5:13–21)	A statement of the author's purpose.

3. An older (1909), very influential and very helpful analysis (followed with adaptations by many commentators) is that by R. Law (*The Tests of Life*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1913), given here in Marshall's summary:

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

4. As a simple, practical device to help us grasp the thought-flow of the epistle we shall ourselves, somewhat arbitrarily, divide its contents into three major movements of thought:

	<b>I</b>	<b>II</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>From</b>	The manifestation of the life eternal (1:1–4).	The manifestation of the Son of God and of the children of God (2:28–3:10).	The manifestation of the love of God in his Son and in his people (4:7–11).
<b>To</b>	The warning against antichrists who deny that Jesus is the Christ (2:18–27).	The warning against believing the spirit of falsehood as distinct from the Spirit of truth (4:1–6).	The warning against putting idols in place of the true God (5:18–21).

## Movement One

### 1 John 1:1–2:28

## Contents

- A. 1:1–4 The nature, basis and content of our Christian fellowship.
- B. 1:5–2:6 The principles on which we may have part in this fellowship.
- C. 2:7–17 The family of God in contrast to the world.
- D. 2:18–28 Heresy that would destroy the basis of fellowship.

## Detailed Comment

### ***A. The Nature, Basis and Content of our Christian Fellowship (1:1–4)***

1. The content of the fellowship: the life eternal.
2. The membership of the fellowship: the apostles, the Father, the Son and those who receive the apostles' declaration.
3. The basis of the fellowship: the historical manifestation of the life eternal in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.
4. The apostles' joy in this fellowship.

### ***B. The Principles on Which We May Have Part in This Fellowship (1:5–2:6)***

1. The principles determined by the fact that God is light and is now 'in the light'.
2. The meaning of 'light' in this context.
3. N.B. the balance between:
  - a. the all-importance of *where* we walk (1:6–2:2):  
'in the light, as he is in the light', and not  
'in the darkness'.
  - b. the all-importance of *how* we walk (2:3–6):  
'ought . . . to walk *even as* he walked.'
4. The meaning of the phrase 'where we walk' illustrated by God's provision for man's fellowship with himself under the old covenant: the position and function of the table, lampstand, and altar of intercession in the Old Testament sanctuary.
5. What it means to *walk* in the light:
  - a. It is insufficient to *come* to the light; one must continue in it (cf. John 8:12, 31–32).
  - b. One must be prepared to be exposed as inherently sinful (1 John 1:8) and as sinful in practice (1 John 1:10). Contrast John 8:33–59.
  - c. One must genuinely seek deliverance from sinning (1 John 2:1; cf. John 8:31–32).
6. The provision which makes it possible for failing men and women to continue walking in the light and so to continue sharing in the life eternal:
  - a. the cleansing blood of God's Son (1 John 1:7).
  - b. God's faithfulness and justice in forgiving and cleansing.

- c. Christ's advocacy with the Father.
  - d. Christ as the propitiation (cf. Lev 16:16).
7. The all-importance of *how* we walk
- a. The purpose of 2:3–6: *not* to lay down conditions for entering and walking in the light, but to provide tests ('by this we know') by which we can be assured that we are walking in the light.
    - (1) If we are walking in the light as God is in the light, we shall have come to know God; and *knowing* God means *loving* God (2:5) and *loving* God means *doing* his commandments (2:3–5).
    - (2) Since God is light, walking in the light means nothing less than being and dwelling in God (2:6). People who so dwell in God as revealed in Christ will gladly acknowledge their bounden duty to walk as Christ walked (2:6), and will strive to fulfil it.

### ***C. The Family of God in Contrast to the World (2:7–17)***

N.B. John's careful arrangement of his material in this section:

1. 2:7–11: The old/new commandment: love one another; 'the darkness is passing away'.
2. 2:12–14: The family of God, its experiences, and the characteristics of its little children, fathers, young men.
3. 2:15–17: The prohibition: love not the world; 'the world is passing away'.

And its implications:

- a. The need to maintain the balance: love—love not.
- b. The family of God thus distinguished from the world: we must love our brothers; we must not love the world.

#### ***1. The Old/New Commandment (2:7–11)***

1. The sense in which the commandment to love is an old commandment (2:7).
2. The sense in which the commandment to love is a new commandment (2:8):
  - a. as regards Christ: the true light now shines;
  - b. as regards believers: the darkness is passing.
3. Loving/hating one's brother, a test of the claim to be in the light (2:9–10).
4. The blessed result of loving one's brother: 'no cause of stumbling' (2:10; cf. John 11:9–10).
5. The fearful consequences of hating one's brother (2:11): 'is in darkness'; 'walks in darkness'; 'does not know where he is going'; 'has been blinded'.

#### ***2. The Family of God, its Experiences and Characteristics (2:12–14)***

1. The possibility that 2:12–14 is a digression.
2. The greater probability that in his thrice-repeated 'I am writing [this] to you because . . .' (2:12–13), John is explaining on what grounds he has just urged them to love one another:
  - a. They are members of the same family, all of them little children of the same Father.
  - b. The basic, common experience that has formed them all into one family is that everyone has had his sins forgiven *for his* (Christ's) *name's sake*. If my sins have been forgiven for Christ's sake, and my brother's sins have been forgiven for Christ's sake, how can I hate my brother

- and refuse him forgiveness and love, without repudiating the merit of him through whom not only my brother but I myself have been forgiven and made a member of the family?
- c. 'Fathers' in the family of God not only have had the initial experience of forgiveness and of incorporation into the family, but they have had time to get to know 'him who is from the beginning'. They will realize therefore that the commandment to love one another is no new or novel commandment, but one that has existed from the beginning, because it stems from the unchanging character of God.
  - d. The 'young men' in the family have learned to recognize the source from which disruptions in the family come: the evil one (cf. Rom 16:17–20); and they have overcome him.
3. The possibility that John's second series 'I have written to you because . . .' (Greek idiom = by the time you get this letter you will find that I have written . . .), merely repeats and reinforces the first series.
  4. The distinct possibility, however, that it looks forward to 'Love not the world . . .' and gives the ground on which John bases his appeal:
    - a. All in the family are little children who 'know the Father' (2:13–end). The Father and knowledge of the Father are, of course, basic and constitutive for the family. John is about to warn them that 'if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him' (2:15).
    - b. 'Fathers' in the family 'know him who is from the beginning' (2:14) i.e. they know God as the permanent unchanging one. They are to be reminded that to love the world is to love something which 'is passing away', and not of the Father (2:16–17).
    - c. The 'young men' are strong through God's word and 'have overcome the evil one', who, by tempting mankind to disregard God and his word, and to try to enjoy life in independence of God (see Gen 3:1ff), has brought about the state of affairs that the Bible calls 'the world'; and he presides over and controls it as its 'prince' (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11, Eph 2:1–3) and 'god' (2 Cor 4:4).
  5. To save ourselves from interpreting the term 'the world and all that is in the world' in an unduly narrow and moralistic sense, we may digress to notice:
    - a. That the terms 'world', 'prince of this world', 'overcome the world', etc. occur frequently in the Gospel of John (see 4.c. above). See also 16:28–33; 17:6, 9, 14–15, 21.
    - b. That the Gospel echoes the terms and concepts of the book of Exodus. In Exodus, Moses is sent from God to declare God's name to Israel (Exod 3:10–16); to evoke their faith by God-given signs (4:4–9); and so to deliver them from bondage under Pharaoh, through the blood of the Passover lamb and the waters of the Red Sea. In John, Christ is sent from God into the world (John 16:28) to manifest God's name to the men given him out of the world (17:6); to evoke their faith by God-given signs (5:36; 20:30–31); and so to deliver them from bondage under the prince of this world (12:31–32; 17:15) through his blood as Passover Lamb (1:29) and through baptism in the Holy Spirit (1:33).
    - c. Pharaoh's Egypt, his treatment of Israel, and his attitude to God become, therefore, a vivid early example of what is meant by the *world*.

#### ***D. Heresy That Would Destroy the Basis of Fellowship (2:18–28).***

1. The heretics exposed (2:18–19).
  - a. Antichrist-doctrines a sign of the last hour (2:18).



## Movement Two

### 1 John 2:28–4:6

(Note: 2:28 is a pivotal verse, concluding the last theme of Movement One and introducing the first major topic of Movement Two. For another example of this stylistic trait, see 3:24–4:1).

### General Observations

1. *The family of God.* The fact that believers not only have fellowship with God but form a family of which God is the Father has already been implied by the terms used in 2:12–14. But now this great matter is developed at length and in explicit detail.

For the first time in the epistle the believer is said to have been begotten of God (2:29), whose seed remains permanently in the believer (3:9), so that he has a life which he did not have before (3:14); and with this life, a nature which is perfectly righteous (2:29; 3:7) and utterly sinless (3:9). This accounts for the fact that the child of God, even now while still not perfected and still needing to purify himself (3:2–3), cannot continue to practise sin (3:9) as the norm of life, but ‘does righteousness’ (2:29; 3:7, 10), loves his brothers in the family (3:11, 14, 18, 23), and sees through and rejects false doctrines which the world finds so convincing and attractive (4:4–6).

2. *The world.* Once more, as in 2:12–14 and 15–17, the family of God is further delineated by being contrasted with the world; only here the world is described in greater detail and set in much more somber light. In 2:15–17 the world is presented as a society attempting to satisfy its desires and urge for achievement independently of God and completely out of fellowship with the Father. Here in Movement Two the world is depicted as men and women whose sin is an expression of rebellion against God (3:4). In the same way as the source of the believer’s righteous behaviour, love and belief is not in himself but in his Father, God, so the source of the unbeliever’s sin (3:8), hatred of the children of God (3:12–13) and false beliefs (4:4–5) is not in himself but in the devil (3:8, 10), whose children unbelievers are. So throughout Movement Two there are two groups: the children of God and the children of the devil (3:10), the brethren and the world (3:13–14), Cain and Abel, the Son of God and the antichrist (3:8, 12; 4:3), the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood (4:6).

Men of the world, though children of the devil, are not necessarily irreligious (cf. Cain and his sacrifice, 3:12 and Gen 4:3–8): certain religious leaders and ideas appeal to some of them (4:5). But when the testimony of God (as with Cain, Gen 4:6–7), or of Christ (as in John 7:7), or of the children of God (as with Abel, 1 John 3:12; Heb 11:4) convicts them that their works are inadequate and evil, the world’s basic rebellion against God is apt to express itself in hatred against the family of God (3:12–13). Indeed loving the children of God as such is not a natural thing, but supernatural, an evidence of the new birth (3:14).

3. Movement Two, then, teaches us that righteous behaviour, love and belief on the one hand, and sin, hatred of God and of his people, and unbelief or heretical faith on the other, are not merely the personal, private states and activities of the isolated individual. Every individual belongs to one of two families, is informed and empowered by a source and a power beyond himself, and is

a child either of God or of the devil. This is not to deny the responsibility of the individual; but it is to put the problem of sin and the way of salvation in their full and proper context.

## Detailed Comment

### ***Contents of Movement Two (2:28–4:6)***

- A. 2:28–3:10 The manifestation of the children of God by their righteous character and conduct which distinguishes them from the children of the devil.
- B. 3:11–24 The duty of the children of God to love their brethren, which love distinguishes them from the world and marks them out as true believers.
- C. 4:1–6 The faith of the children of God which distinguishes between doctrines that come from the Spirit of truth, and doctrines and theories that emanate from the spirit of falsehood.

#### ***A. The Manifestation of the Children of God (2:28–3:10)***

1. The amazing love of God has given us both the status ('that we should be called') and the life and nature of ('and we are') children of God (3:1).
2. This is already true of us now even while we are still imperfect and need to purify ourselves (3:2–3).
3. The final perfecting of the children of God will take place at, and be produced by, the manifestation of Christ at his second coming (3:2).
4. In view of Christ's coming manifestation (2:28; 3:2), the true believer will seek to purify himself now, so as not to be ashamed before Christ when he is revealed as he really is.
5. For a child of God must and will display the same character as God his Father (2:29; 3:9), and the same attitude to sin and lawlessness as was manifested in the mission of the Son of God at his first coming (3:5, 8).
6. If the world does not recognize us as children of God that is not necessarily our fault: it did not recognize the Son of God either when he was here (3:1).
7. But that gives us no excuse for lax living: while on the one hand, it is not yet made manifest what we shall be (3:2) and so the world cannot tell that we are children of God, in another sense it is already very evident who are children of God (3:10) and who are not: even unregenerate men can see it.

#### ***B. The Duty of the Children of God (3:11–24)***

1. Note the emphasis achieved by 3:11 and 3:23.
2. If the love of God has given us the status and nature of children of God (3:1), the self-sacrificing love of Christ on our behalf has placed on us the bounden duty to love our brothers after the manner of his example (3:16).
3. 'Loving the brethren' is a product of supernatural grace, an evidence that we have been brought, not only as to our legal status, but as to our practical experience, from death to life (3:14–15).

4. We are to be warned against an outward show of religion like that of Cain and his sacrifice (3:12), and mere verbal expressions of piety (3:18), that are but a cover over an unregenerate, hate-filled, or even simply mean and selfish, heart (3:17).
5. We are admittedly still imperfect (3:3), and our hearts often condemn us. Real practical acts of brotherly love provide us ourselves with evidence, more solid than changing emotional states, that we are truly children of God. And God himself is not unrighteous to forget our 'labours of love' (Heb 6:10; 1 John 3:20).
6. A child of God, whose conscience is clear, can have boldness in prayer and expect answers. But how could we expect God to give us what we ask him for, if we deliberately refrain from giving our brother the necessities of life which we have and he lacks (3:17, 21–23)?

### ***C. The Faith of the Children of God (4:1–6)***

1. We revert to the topic of 2:18–28, only with certain differences.
  - a. There it was a question of the anointing from the Holy Spirit teaching us to recognize false doctrine regarding the person of Christ. Here it is a question of our applying doctrinal tests to religious teachers to discern which of them is under the guidance of the spirit of God and which of them is under the sway of the great deceiver, the spirit of falsehood.
  - b. In 2:18–28 the false teachers came out of the professing Christian church. Here in 4:1–6 the false prophets do not necessarily come out of the church. Islam, for instance, and forms of Hinduism, would deny that the man Jesus is the Christ, or that the Christ suffered in the flesh at Calvary.
  - c. Peculiar to our passage is its emphasis on 'the world' and 'he that is in the world' (4:1, 3–5). The prince of this world has obvious reasons for wanting to deny that God could, or would even wish to, intervene in this world to the extent of becoming incarnate. There are all too evident signs of his influence in some modern reinterpretations of the Gospels.
2. Verses 4–5 give a somber explanation of the popularity and success of heresies and false religions.



## Movement Three

*1 John 4:7–5:21*

### General Observations

John obviously does not organize his material into separate, distinct, self-contained themes. Rather it is a question of the emphasis being placed differently as the common multiple theme is restated with variations in each major section. So if in Movement One emphasis was placed on the manifestation of the life eternal which made it possible for us to have fellowship with God; and if in Movement Two emphasis was placed on the manifestations of the Son of God which have made it possible for us to become children of God and will one day make it possible for us to be manifested as fully perfected children of God; then in Movement Three emphasis is placed on the manifestation of the love of God, first of all in the Son of God and in his life and death on earth, and then in us as the children of God. For convenience sake we may divide the movement roughly into two halves:

**A. 4:7–19      God's love for us**

Setting us the example and standard in our love for one another (4:7–11); giving us the perception to perceive and the ability to believe in and to witness to, the reality of the love of the unseen God (4:12–16); and, as it comes to full growth in us, filling us with fearless confidence in face of the day of judgment (4:17–19).

**B. 4:20–5:21      Our love for God and his children**

How, to be genuine, love for God must express itself in love for our brothers and how love for our brothers will mean keeping God's commandments (4:20–5:3); how this is a real, practical possibility for us in this sinful and hostile world through our faith that Jesus is the Son of God (5:3–5); what evidence there is that he is the Son of God, and how believing it brings us power to overcome the world (5:4–8); assurance that we have eternal life (5:9–13); and confidence in prayer for others (5:14–17). Finally, in view of the reality and certainty of the salvation and life which we have in the true God, we are warned against false beliefs, trusts, loves and practices that are in fact idolatry (5:18–21).

#### ***A. God's Love to Us, Through Us and in Us (4:7–19)***

1. God's love as the example to us of how we are duty-bound to love one another (4:7–11).
  - a. Notice how 4:11 picks up and repeats 4:7 and so binds 4:7–11 together.
  - b. Notice that the call to love (4:7–8) is a call to express the life, nature and powers that we have as those who have been begotten of God and know God (i.e. if we have been, and if we do cf. 4:8).
  - c. Notice that verse 9 deals with the manifestation i.e. the outward active expression of God's love; verse 10 deals with the principles and costs involved in that expression.
  - d. Verse 9—love manifested:
    - (1) by God sending his Son into the world.

- (2) by his being prepared to give his only Son that we might live.
- e. Verse 10—the difficulties to be overcome in loving us and the cost to be paid:
  - (1) we did not love him.
  - (2) we were positively sinning against him.
  - (3) to make loving us righteously possible, his Son must die as a propitiation for our sins.
- 2. God's love makes possible our perception of, and witness to, the reality of the love of the unseen God (4:12–16).
  - a. Notice the repetition of the verb 'to behold', 'see', in verses 12 and 14.
  - b. Verse 20 is going to observe: 'how can a man love God whom he has not seen?' But there is a prior question: how can a man come to believe in the love of a God whom he cannot see and whom nobody has ever seen? One answer is that by our love for others we can make visible to them the love of the invisible God who dwells in us (4:12).
  - c. But how can we ourselves be sure that we are in him who is love, and he is in us? The answer is that:
    - (1) he has given us of his Spirit (4:13).
    - (2) as a result, not only did the apostles see Christ die, but the apostles and all believers perceive the significance of the coming of Christ into the world: the Father has sent him *as Saviour* (4:14).
    - (3) really to perceive and then confess that the Jesus who came and died is the Son of God, is to discover what God is like, to abide in God, and to have God in us (4:15).
    - (4) thus it is that the Spirit of God has made the love of God a reality which we can believe, revel in, and confidently express in word and action (4:16).
- 3. God's love gives us fearless confidence in view of the day of judgment (4:17–19).
  - a. God's love is in itself perfect, but its working in us and our perception and expression of it require time to come to completion, 'to be perfected' (4:17).
  - b. But the 'boldness in view of the day of judgment' which the love of God produces is the birthright of every true child of God.
  - c. It is based on the fact that 'as Christ is, so are we in this world' (4:17):
    - (1) *Legally*: already beyond judgment, in view of his propitiation (4:10).
    - (2) *Spiritually*: we are already in him (5:20).
    - (3) *Practically*: the love of God is already expressing itself through us towards others, as we begin to love because he first loved us (4:19).

### ***B. Our Love for God and His Children (4:20–5:21)***

- 1. Genuine love for God (4:20–5:3)—
  - a. Must express itself in love for my brother:
    - (1) Because if I do not love my brother whom I can see, I have no guarantee that the supposed love I feel for God whom I cannot see, is not merely love for some religious doctrine or psychological construction in my own mind (4:20).
    - (2) Because God has commanded me to love my brother (4:21).
    - (3) Because if I really love God, I will love every one of his children (5:1).



## About the Author

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