

# George Philip Bible Readings

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## THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

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## Introduction (1)

The New English Bible entitles this epistle a "Recall to Fundamentals" in a day when heretics were already trying to seduce the faithful away from the truth (2:18-26). John refutes the errors of the heretics by expounding the truth, affirming in plainest terms the facts of the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ (2:22-23). The epistle was probably a circular letter sent to all the churches of Asia Minor and cannot be dated more accurately than around 60-90 A.D, the later date being more probable. This makes John the apostle, author of the Gospel that bears his name and of this epistle, an old man writing out of a lifetime of experience. The date also indicates how early in the life of the apostolic church heresy had reared its ugly head and how the blight of false teaching had spread over a wide area. Keep in mind the tremendous spiritual awakening of the Acts of the Apostles, and you will see in the rise of false doctrine the work of Satan seeking to counteract the work of God. If, as we believe, there are faint stirrings of evangelical affirmation in our land today, then we must see in the plethora of heretical pronouncements and subtle doctrinal drifting a significant anti-Christ development. In such a situation we must know what we believe and stand by it. This Epistle will help us to see things clearly.

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## Introduction (2)

It is possible that John's Epistle was originally published along with his Gospel by way of a commendatory postscript and the two documents have a complementary function. The Gospel of John was written as a proclamation to the unbelieving world in order to awaken faith in Jesus as the Son of God (John 20:30-31). The Epistle was written to believers to confirm them in the assurance of their faith (5:11-13). "The epistle is a sermon with the Gospel as its text," that is, it is a comment on and an affirmation of the Gospel in a day when unbelief is stirring. We need to be reminded that unbelief rising up inside the church is no new thing, and every true pastor must of necessity be a teacher in order to protect the flock of God (2:26; 3:7; Acts 20:29-30; 2 Tim. 3:1-9; 4:1-4; Titus 1:9-11; Jude 3-4; 17-21). We must be realistic and recognise things as they really are, refusing to be beguiled by specious pleas for "charity" (though never becoming brutish and belligerent in a way that is nothing but religious persecution) because of what false teachers are and are doing. They are false prophets (4:1), speaking by inspiration of a spirit that is not of God. They are deceivers (2 John 7), leading people astray, away from God into darkness. They are anti-christs (2:18,22; 4:3), denying the divine-human Person of Jesus Christ. Note that they are many in number and that at one time they appeared to be loyal members of Christ's church. Now they have separated themselves from the main body of orthodox believers (2:19) and are active in society (4:1), spreading their lies and by their successes increasing the doubts and uncertainties of the believers. The only corrective to this situation is a positive affirmation of the substance of the faith (Luke 1:1-4; Jude 3)

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## Introduction (3)

Read chapter 1 quickly. The evil influences at work in the churches concerned both belief and behaviour. In terms of belief the heretics were the Gnostics (the "knowing ones") whose two main principles were "the impurity of matter" and "the supremacy of knowledge". Believing that everything material was evil, they could not believe in a true incarnation of the eternal Son of God, saying that Jesus was born as any other child of Mary and Joseph. They went on to claim that "the Christ" descended on Jesus at His baptism, remained upon Him during His life and departed from Him prior to His death on the Cross. They thus denied that it was Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, who died on the Cross for the sins of men. In terms of behaviour these "knowing ones" (Gnostics) held firmly to the "supremacy of the intellect and the superiority of mental enlightenment to faith and conduct." As a result they ignored the ethical demands of the Gospel, and, as 1:6-2:3 makes clear, they went as far as to deny that sin exists in our nature and behaviour (an attitude that bedevils our modern attitude to crime and punishment). If they did recognise that sin existed, they denied that it was important or that it interfered with a person's fellowship with God. Proud intellectualism married to indifference to righteousness of life produces a lovelessness that has neither respect nor care for others. "John lays his emphasis on three marks of authentic Christianity, namely belief in Jesus as the Christ come in the flesh, obedience to the commandments of God and brotherly love" (Stott). John will have nothing to do with "free

thought" and permissive morality. There is a certainty about faith and there is a moral imperative flowing from it. This is what we shall see as we study this letter.

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### 1:1-3a

John comes right to the point, vouching for the message of the Gospel from his own personal experience, in which his vital senses of hearing, sight and touch had all been involved (v. 1). The message is the "Word of life", the word of the Gospel (Acts 15:7), which is no new thing fabricated by a few religious enthusiasts calling themselves by the name of Christ. This Word of Truth (John 14:6) was from the beginning; it is an eternal word proceeding forth from the Father and being manifested historically and physically in the person of Jesus Christ. We cannot escape the obvious connection here with the Gospel according to John 1:1, 14. "The Eternal Word was with the Eternal Father. He did not come into existence at some point in time. He was from all eternity." (Ross) Then, in His incarnation, when the Word was made flesh to dwell amongst men, we have a truly human Jesus to deal with, not a mere phantom. The apostles heard and saw this Jesus as they companied with Him, being eventually fully persuaded that He was in fact the Son of God. The next two words, "looked at" (beheld in steady reflective gaze) and "handled", seem to be clear references to the resurrection appearances of Christ, when in spite of His transcendent and miraculous physical qualities He assured them that He was not a ghost (John 20:19-29; Luke 24:36-43). Now, if we can see the tremendous amount of theological affirmation that is crowded into these verses of introduction, we will begin to understand the power that attended the ministry of the early church. It was the power of God bearing testimony to the truth of God. This is the lesson the church of our day needs to learn. Affirmation of the truth must precede exhortation and appeal. Too many people are exhorted to make "decisions" before they have any idea what they are deciding about.

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### 1:1-3a

The second clear emphasis in these verses is that the true concept of the Gospel is that of an invasion or breaking in of the grace of God from outside man's mere human situation and experience. When Christ came in the flesh, and when He comes in the preaching of the Gospel, people are made aware of a visitation from on high which brings a tremendous crisis of decision to all. Jesus Christ appears among men not as a pale, anaemic figure to be pitied and patronised and who will be satisfied with an occasional nod of recognition. He comes as the Eternal God who has entered time and whose word alone is truth and life. Any movement or emphasis that seeks to distinguish between the historical Jesus and the eternal Son must be countered. Any group which seeks to deny or confuse the fact of the real physical incarnation of the Son of God, His actual death on the Cross and His physical resurrection must likewise be opposed. The only way to counter false doctrine is by the systematic and rigorous exposition of sound doctrine. The confusion which exists in our generation and which is spawning age-old heresies as if they were advanced thinking is due to the fact that the Christian Church has failed to expound the doctrines of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ as they are declared in the historical revelation which is recorded in Holy Scripture. There is a great cry from the intellectuals in our day to make God intelligible to modern people. In an effort to do so they have stripped the Christian message of most of its fundamental doctrinal content, leaving God as some vague philosophical concept so far removed from reality as to be quite irrelevant. The apostle speaks of "God manifest in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3:16), heard, seen and handled so that no reasonable doubt remains. This is declared with authority to call people to repentance and faith. This confident assurance in preaching is needed to compel the world to listen.

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### 1:3b-4

John cannot conceive of any people having this glorious message in their possession without wanting to share it with others. If, through faith in Jesus Christ, the pulse of eternity has begun to beat within our hearts, it should be impossible for us to keep silence and equally impossible to keep ourselves to ourselves. A "saint" in the Bible is not some isolated character living in solitary confinement, aloof and unapproachable. A saint will always be found with other saints. John conceived of Christ like the centre of a great wheel, drawing people of all kinds from all directions to Himself. In this process of grace, which is salvation (for there is no salvation

apart from or away from Jesus), people are inevitably drawn nearer each other. The closer we are to Jesus the closer we must be to each other as together we live in the light and blessing of His presence. This is fellowship, and if we choose to remain on the circumference of a fellowship, we are denying the grace that bought us, denying the Father His rightful enjoyment, and denying our brothers and sisters their full joy. We are like the elder brother of the prodigal who would not go into the celebration because he had an exalted sense of his own importance and worth. Fellowship begins when sinners recognise what they are and begin to forgive even as they themselves have been forgiven. John speaks from a full remembrance of Jesus' words and we recall some of them in Matt.6:9-15;18:21-35; Luke 15:11-32.

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### 1:3b-4

It is on the basis of the saving truth of God in Jesus Christ being declared that John speaks of fellowship, and this is undoubtedly one of the fruits of a Christ-centred Biblical ministry. There is a fellowship in which each belongs to the other and to the body of the fellowship in such a way that we are members one of another, complementary in our gifts and service and yet retaining the wonder of individuality. It is not a fellowship created by conformity to a rigid and outward pattern of behaviour, but one that grows in natural grace, always developing and never static. This relationship is not merely that of the reconciliation of people to each other, but of each one's reconciliation to God. The blight of sin is that it breaks people's fellowship with God and substitutes a relationship of strain and friction, which in turn vitiates all human relationships. But when we are reconciled to God through the death of His Son, life is thereafter based on the peace of God sealed by God Himself. And it is as this new "entente cordiale" is realised that we find not only peace but joy. This is not the effervescent thrill of superficial emotion. It is the deep abiding awareness that God is at peace with us, and that all things in time and eternity are geared in His sovereign will for our good and His glory (Rom. 5:1-11; Acts 13:50-52; Heb. 12:1-2; Jas. 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:3-9). Cruden's Concordance gives over 160 references to the word joy, and one of them is Nehemiah 8:10! Another reference is Psalm 16:11, and while that verse points to the perfect felicity of heaven, great joy can be ours *now* because God is with us and has raised us up *now* with Christ in a salvation that can never be undone (Eph. 2:4-8).

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### 1:3b-4

Read in from v.1, for the first four verses form the introduction to the exposition and application of the truth which occupy the rest of the epistle. It is a doctrinal and theological introduction which can be summed up as follows: "There is a Being who has existed with God the Father from all eternity: He is the Father's Son: He is also the expression of the Father's Nature and Will. He has been manifested in space and time; and of that manifestation I and others have had personal knowledge: by the united evidence of our senses we have been convinced of its reality. In revealing to us the Divine Nature He becomes to us life, eternal life. With the declaration of all this in our hands as the Gospel, we come to you in this Epistle, that you may unite with us in our great possession and that our joy in the Lord may be made complete." (Plummer) Ponder that statement carefully and it will provide you with clear thoughts as to the basic lines of approach with regard to your personal witness as a Christian. You have something to say that is staggeringly unique and which carries with it the unction and authority of God. We have something to say that people need to hear, and perhaps it is because we speak of these things so little that our joy remains an elusive thing.

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### 1:5-7

The epistle divides into three main sections each with a clear theme: God is Light (1:5 - 2:29); God is Love (3:1-4:21); God is Life (5:1-21). In the first section the fact that God is Light is applied in two ways. It will affect the life and conduct of the believer in a very positive and practical way (1:5-2:11). It will also have a negative application inasmuch as walking in the light will require the believer to refuse all association with certain things and people (2:12-29). We ended yesterday's note querying the elusiveness of our joy in Christ, and the answer may well be right here. To walk in the light is to walk out in the open with God, whereas all too often we prefer the shadows. To walk in the light is to be open-faced and with nothing to hide either from God

or our fellows, but such straightforwardness is not always an appealing thing to our carnal natures. God is Light, He is the Father of lights (Jas. 1:17), and He is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity (Habakkuk 1:13). God is light and it is His very nature to shine and to reveal Himself to all who have eyes to see. God is light in the sense also that He is the One who is possessed of an absolute moral perfection. Note that John declares God is Light before he says God is Love and these two statements must always be held together. There can be no division between God's righteousness (light.) and His love, for they are married together. In like manner, as John will yet say, no one who claims the light of God will be devoid of love. This we will see tomorrow.

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## 1:5-7

In John's day there were many who claimed proudly that they had all the answers of knowledge, but their grasp of the truth never reached their hearts to influence them as to how they lived personally and in relation to others. But John affirms here that God has made His light known not merely to satisfy and stimulate their intellectual capacities, but to purge and channel their practical lives. There were people who said that sin did not matter since it was a thing of the flesh and not the spirit, and could not therefore interfere with a person's "spiritual" relationship with God. With devastating logic, starting from the premise that God is light, John challenges such people and calls them liars. You say you know God, who is light, and yet you live a shady life. This cannot be, for God will not be a party to your sinning. This is a word to encourage us to have done with sin and to walk in the light, walking on into the light more and more, This has two results. First we will enter into fellowship with other believers. Always be suspicious of those who call themselves Christians yet keep themselves to themselves as a general principle of their lives. Have they something that dare not be discovered? But as we walk in the light with God, not only do we have fellowship with Him, but the light of His presence reveals to us more and more the flaws and blemishes of our own lives. The nearer we come to the light the better we can see the stains of sin. "They who fain would serve Thee best are conscious most of wrong within" (H.T. Wells). But this exposure is not unto condemnation, because as we become aware of the immensity of our need for pardon and cleansing, and bring these needs to God, then the blood. of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses and keeps on cleansing us from all sin. What a Gospel!

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## 1:8-9

In using the words, "If we say"(claim), John for the second time challenges the false doctrine of the heretics, in this case the doctrine of perfectionism in whatever form it manifests itself. In v.6 he challenged those who recognised the fact of sin but denied that it affected a person's spiritual relationship with God. Now he challenges those who deny the very fact of sin, those who say they "have no sin" or "are sinless". The word "sin" being in the singular indicates that it is the inherited, inbred principle of sin that is spoken of, and this is manifested in the basic self-centredness of human nature. Listen to those who talk much of "sinless perfection", "total sanctification" or "eradication of the sin nature" and you will find that the main topic of their conversation is themselves and their sanctification, but not Christ. If anyone is in fact indwelt by the truth of God, one sure fruit will be a deep awareness of the sin and utter worthlessness of himself apart from Christ. To say we have no sin is to betray an utter ignorance of what sin is and what God requires. Now, it is this defective view of sin that is one of the curses of our own generation in which people seek to explain sin and cure social behaviour solely in terms of physical, psychological and environmental factors. The attitude now pervading the whole structure of discipline and punishment is that of regarding human nature as essentially good and needing only help and encouragement to become a noble, altruistic creature who will create a happy society. We deceive ourselves.

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## 1:8-9

The Christian Gospel not only recognises sin and confirms the fact of sin, it bears in upon all in order to compel them to confess their sins, acknowledging that they are sinners both by nature and practice. This operation is not one of judgment but of grace, in order that people might be forgiven their sins and cleansed from all unrighteousness. In confessing our sins to God we must be prepared to forsake them (Prov. 28:13), then on the basis of the death of Jesus Christ, the propitiation for our sins (2:2), God removes the stain and remits the

debt. In this act, God is faithful to Himself and His covenant promise (2 Tim. 2:13; Heb. 10:23; Jer. 31:34).

But God is also just and righteous in this act of pardon. He cannot simply excuse sin and act as if nothing had happened (Ex. 34: 7) or else no values of righteousness would ever remain. If sin is to be .forgiven, it can only be on the basis of the absolute demands of holy law having been met, and this is the word of the Cross (Rom. 3:19-26). Note the phrase "cleanse (purify) from all unrighteousness". It is often a deep conviction of some specific sin or wrong that first turns our hearts to Christ to seek forgiveness. But when we come to Him confessing that sin by which we have learned our need, we are cleansed not *merely* from that one specific sin but from *all* unrighteousness and are given a totally new start with a new heart. As we go on in Christian life we learn more and more what sinners we are, and it is blessing indeed to know that when Christ came to us in His saving grace, all that sin over which we grieve, (and much more within us that has yet to be brought home to our consciousness), has been forgiven. How glad and how quick we should be to abandon every outcrop of sin as soon as it makes its appearance in our lives.

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## 1:10

Here is the most blatant claim of the heretics and, had we not come across in personal experience those who make such a claim, we would have thought it impossible that such words could cross human lips. We may claim that we have not committed certain acts or had thoughts of certain sins for some time. By that we may simply mean that our besetting sins have not troubled us as often nor as powerfully as in the past. But if we say we have not sinned on any given day we have lost sight of the fact that to be alive is to be a sinner, and in consequence all we do partakes of the defect and "falling short" from perfection of our natures. It seems in John's day that this claim came from those who felt themselves "more enlightened" than others and by this supposed superiority had passed beyond the stage where common things like sin were relevant. This is a common temptation on many levels of Christian life and service. If we begin to think that any practical, moral or spiritual precept no longer applies to us, we are giving evidence of a dangerous spiritual sickness. Note how John's language has grown stronger. In v.6, we lie; in v.8 we deceive ourselves and go astray; but in v.10, we make God out to be a liar. The whole of God's Word declares man's sin and need of repentance all the time, and to deny this word is to libel the good name of God. Spiritual growth is evidenced by a spirit of humility, dependence, and quiet obedience, not by a spirit of proud independence, indifference and separatism.

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## 2:1

There is a strain of crooked thinking in people which, by the inspiration of the Devil ,always seeks to pervert the truth of the Gospel in order to excuse low moral standards. If, as John has affirmed, we can never be free from sin in this world, is there any use striving after holiness? Why bother too much if we do sin? After all, if forgiveness is so immediately available, does it matter all that much? These are things people tend to say (cf. Rom. 6:1). But the great promises of the Gospel do not condone sin nor encourage it, but exhort us to have nothing to do with it. Sin is dynamic evil and dangerous beyond all measurement, capable of destroying our personalities as well as our relationship with God. John, now an old man, speaks with infinite tenderness to his "dear children" as he warns them most strenuously against all tampering with sin. But it is also possible to take a position of exaggerated severity towards sin which serves only to crush and demoralise the sinner. This would be heartless and a denial of the Gospel. Therefore John adds at once the great affirmation that is of such wonderful comfort and assuring hope. If we sin we have an Advocate, one who speaks for us, with the Father. Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, whose standing is never in doubt, will plead our case with the Father. Note that it is a Father's displeasure with and grief over sin that is spoken of here, not the grim legal rebuke of a Judge. Christ's death has secured our legal standing. His Advocacy guarantees our relationship with God.

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## 2:1-2

The Word of God is always seeking to inculcate a godly fear of sin in the conscious and subconscious mind of everyone. Sin is not to be trifled with because it is an offence to God and makes a disastrous disruption of a person's fellowship with God. It also works devastation and demoralisation in human personality. But our

human thinking is so self-centred that we think far more of what sin does to us than what effect it has on a holy and righteous God. Sin effects a disposition of wrath on God's side, and John is concerned to show that the removal of the guilt of sin (expiation) is not enough. There must be propitiation, that is, a righteous honouring of the law. This was accomplished in the Cross of Christ on our behalf. God's holy anger is turned away by that righteous sacrifice so that sin no longer stands as a barrier preventing our fellowship with God and bringing His wrath upon our unrighteousness. If we could learn to see sin as something which necessitated the death of the Son of God, we would begin to fear its dimension and power. Learning to hate it, we would flee from it whenever its first intimations registered in our minds and feelings. If godly fear of sin is a healthy corrective when we are dealing with a righteous Judge, how much more should we fly from sin when it concerns our relationship with a Father, whose heart is grieved by the wrongs of His little children. Do not miss the wonderful tenderness in the words of v.1. It is those who hate sin most who can deal most tenderly with sinners. This is exactly what God does in Jesus Christ.

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## 2:1-2

God's provision for the sinning Christian is summed up in Jesus Christ, the Advocate, the Righteous One, and the Propitiation. Now, the word "advocate"(AV and RSV) is the same word which is translated "comforter" in John 14:16-18 and literally means, "one called alongside to help" (paraclete). If we take the two passages together we see that we have two advocates, one in Heaven and one (The Holy Spirit) in our hearts, both exercising their influence on our behalf against the temptations and ravages of sin. "Christ as Advocate pleads the believer's cause against the accuser Satan (1 John 2:1; Rom.8:26; Rev. 12:10; Zech. 3:1). The Holy Spirit pleads the believer's cause against the world (John 16:8-11); and also Christ's cause with the believer, John 14:26; 15:26; 16:14." (Westcott) The Advocate we have is always at home with the Father, because He belongs there from all eternity and there is never the possibility of His being refused audience or permission to speak. Nor is there ever sin in Him to hinder His speaking; so very different from us. "As true man (Jesus) He can state the case for men with absolute knowledge and real sympathy. As God's anointed messenger (Christ) He is naturally fitted for the task and acceptable to Him before whom He pleads. As righteous He can enter the Presence from which all sin excludes." (Brookes) Note that it is with the Father our Advocate pleads, not the Judge. The sinner having been justified, that is, declared righteous by the Judge on the basis of Christ's atoning death (Rom, 3:24-26; 5:1-2; 8:1), he has in fact passed from death unto life and does not come into judgment (John 5:24; Rom. 8:33-34).

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## 2:1-2

Christ our Advocate does not plead our innocence but presents His own vicarious sacrifice for our sin and guilt as the ground of our acquittal. By the shedding of His precious blood, once for all on the Cross, where He bore our sins in His own body, there is "righteous peace securely made". If God's righteousness turned a blind eye upon sin and passed it over, the foundations of all experience would be shattered and no ground of solid trust would remain. All would become capricious. But, in language based on the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, John declares that full atonement has been made through the shedding of the blood of God's Lamb.

God, who is the offended party, "permits a substitution, provides a substitute, and substitutes Himself." Christ is Himself the propitiation, being the Priest, the Altar and the Sacrifice. This is indeed the love of God (4:10). Note that Christ *is* the propitiation. He Himself in His coming, His life, death and resurrection is God's work of saving love. Christ did not come to bring the Gospel. He is, in His coming; the good news of God. Note also that He *is*, not was, the propitiation. He is still the only means whereby sinners can be at peace with God, for His shed blood is the only basis on which God can be at peace with them. And this message must be affirmed not merely for us who believe, but for all the world, for there is no other way for sinners to be reconciled to God. Let there be no narrowing down of the glorious message of the evangel. Let the whole world be told that there is none other name given whereby people may be saved, and the eternal division will come into view. All that are of God will come to Jesus (John 6: 37, 44-45).

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**2:3-6**

Here begins a passage of devastating logic by which a profession of faith is put to the test. We closed the previous reading with a word about the exposure of people's real and eternal attitudes and you can imagine it being met by some with a very definite claim to have faith. Now look at the questions posed in v.4, 6 and 9 by the words, "The man who says." Let there be no doubt about this. The reality of faith can and must be tested, and the first test is on the ground of moral obedience to the commandments of God. The first verse of today's passage challenges all false emotion that passes itself off as spiritual response to the Gospel. In like manner it puts a great question mark to all superficial association with Christian people and Christian work that passes itself off as true spiritual fellowship. It is not even enough to protest and say you are happier in the company of Christians than anywhere else. How could it be otherwise, for you are with people who love you, care for you and make ceaseless allowances for all your limitations and preoccupations? If you are a true Christian you will be more concerned to do the will of God and keep His commandments than anything else in your life. There are two sides to the Gospel, the believing side and the behaving side, and unless these two are joined together in happy, consistent marriage, faith is a fraud. John is probably thinking of those people who are very slick with their tongues and can prattle on about spiritual matters with little effort and less significance, whose lives are anything but conformed to the commandments of God. Read Jesus' words in Luke 6:43-49.

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**2:3-6**

If we claim to be Christ's and yet lead lives that are not lived in the light of obedience and fellowship with Him (1:5-7) the verdict on us is *not* that we are poor quality Christians, *but* that we are not Christians at all. We may even claim special "knowledge", as many claim special, experiences and blessings and gifts, *but* if we do not go on keeping His commandments our spirituality is spurious. Now this is not setting a standard of perfection but it signifies those men and women who by the grace of God are determined to strive, at whatever cost, to conform their lives to the will of God. And this they do, *not* in order to be saved (Rom. 3:20), but because they *are* saved (Eph. 2:8-10). Those who keep God's word in watchful obedience are those in whom love to God is perfected or fulfilled. After all, the proof of love is loyalty to the one loved. A declaration of human love should lead to marriage and the sharing of a common life in harmony of objective and desire. So it is in things spiritual. This is what the loving heart of God yearns for. He wants a people who will be His people in deed as well as word. John goes on to say that it is by our abiding in Christ that we prove our part in Christ, and our abiding itself is proved by our living lives that are like His. It is a practical and personal relationship of knowing, loving and obeying. "By this shall all men know you are My disciples," said Jesus. Read John 15:1-16.

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**2:7-8**

The first word of v.7 could read, "brothers of mine," (J.B.P.) or better, "beloved," and with this word he introduces the theme of love. Just as faith is tested by obedience, so it is tested by social relationships which can be so lacking in genuine, caring love which gives people true value and dignity. The commandment to love one another is old, since it runs through the Bible from the time Cain was told he was in fact his brother's keeper. But at the same time it is a new commandment (John 13:34-35), for it is no longer satisfied by legal duty or cold gracelessness which says and does the right things but never feels them. We are to love as Christ loved, being prepared to bear and forbear and if necessary forfeit rights and even life itself for the sake of the loved one. This was preached and taught from the first time the people John is writing to heard the Gospel. This fact must challenge the term "Gospel preaching" which can so easily degenerate into a non-ethical beliefism and give people a false hope of salvation. In like manner we must remind ourselves (and others if need be) that walking in the light with God and in utter obedience and loyalty to His word does not require us to be forbidding, censorious creatures trampling roughshod over social conventions and the finer feelings of others who are in fact our equals. Take note of Jesus' methods. How wise, careful and courteous He was with all except religious hypocrites.

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**2:7-8**

Read Eph. 5:1-2; Luke 10:25-37; Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:5. The old commandment is shown in its fullness and we become ever increasingly aware of a whole world that waits to be loved. There is no end to the discovering of ways and means of expressing and exercising love. All our limited understanding of love flames into light in the person of Jesus Christ and it must be reflected in those who call themselves by the name of Jesus. In this way light will dispel darkness. "Behold how these Christians love one another" was a saying of the ancient world. The darkness of sin had hidden love from love-hungry lives and left them nothing but lust as a substitute. Then Christ came, and a new age began. Here was something staggeringly new, a God who gave Himself up to death for those who loved Him not (4:9-11). But Christ died and is no longer to be seen by people save only in the lives of His followers. If redeeming, caring, restoring love is to be seen in the world it must be seen in Jesus' people, for everywhere else is darkness. But if Christians cannot love one another enough to get on together, what hope is there of love reaching a loveless world? If God loved the likes of us, what ground have we for denying love to another sinner?

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**2:9-11**

Words are not enough, says John, even if they are words about love. Love is light and lack of love is darkness. Therefore no matter how much someone claims to have the light of God in the understanding of spiritual things, and no matter how much he or she may claim to be walking in fellowship with God in spiritual loyalty, if there is an absence of love towards a Christian brother that person is in darkness. Note how no possible twilight is recognised. The contrasts are absolute. And what is more, the presence of love or hate in our hearts affects not only our brother but ourselves. If we are living lives in which the duty of loving concern for our brother is neglected, then our own spiritual perspectives are distorted. Because we have failed to act in love towards others, our judgments and appraisals and valuations of them are biased. Note how the emphasis is always on acting in love and this is something that can be done without waiting for the appropriate feelings of love. Love is false if it is not expressed, if it is not watchful to discern need, if it fails to seek opportunity to serve, if it cares more for its own satisfaction than for the sacrificial service of others. And if this be true of love in relation to our brothers how much more true in relation to Christ Himself? Can we possibly love One whom we are so reluctant to talk to and to talk about? Spiritual life is very practical. We had better read 1 Corinthians 13, preferably in a modern translation. We are something or nothing, says Paul; we are light or darkness, says John, depending on the presence or absence of love *expressed* to other believers.

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**2:12-14**

John digresses from his radical testing of our profession of faith to speak a word of counsel and encouragement to the believing fellowship which is the church. Then in v.15-17 he goes on to counsel the believers concerning their relationship to the world system of which they are a part. In today's verses we have a lesson that must be learned particularly by ministers and all who are entrusted with the care of souls. All ministry of searching exposure and rebuke must be balanced by a ministry of positive instruction and encouragement, especially by emphasising to Christians what they have and what they are in Christ. John, possibly now a man of about ninety years of age and seventy years of Christian experience, addresses all the Christians to whom he writes as "dear children", a term of care and love. But he then goes on to speak on a basis that recognises different age groups and different levels of Christian experience, for each person must always be made aware of the necessity of shouldering responsibility for the work of God, according to capacity and capability. Those who count themselves strong (or even superior) should take the lead in spiritual warfare (especially at the prayer meeting) and in this way ease the burden of the weaker and younger believers and at the same time encourage them to venture into the battle in faith. John makes it quite clear that the heretical situation against which his letter is written is not a matter of mere human difference of opinion, but a warfare against Satanic opposition to the truth of the Gospel as it is in Jesus Christ. If this be the case, nothing but total reality and absolute earnestness is of any use. We must not *play* at being Christian soldiers.

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**2:12-14**

Different translations give these verses in a way that suggests John makes six statements, the first three beginning "I write" or "I am writing" and the second three beginning "I have written". Scholars debate as to why this pattern was adopted by John and no conclusive answer emerges. Thrice earlier he has used the words, "I am writing," (v.1,7,8) and the total effect seems to be one of serious affirmation of the importance of what is being said. This repetition is of the essence of good teaching and, in spite of our general application of "dear children" yesterday, there do seem to be three groups of believers, each addressed twice. "The little children are those new born in Christ. The young men are more developed Christians, strong and victorious in spiritual warfare; while the fathers possess the depth and stability of ripe Christian experience." (Stott) Two Greek words are used for "little children". The first (*teknia*) emphasises the child's birth, brought forth of the parent, while the second word (*paedia*) indicates the child's position as being under discipline or training. The true child belongs to the family, cannot be denied is place, and is also being nurtured and developed to take in due time an adult place within the family. All new converts must be grounded in this knowledge. They are born of God and their sins are forgiven and remain forgiven; nothing can countermand this action of God which has been done for the sake of the name of Jesus. The "name" signifies His Person and His work. Now, the new convert becomes aware that God is in fact his Father and he begins to pray; prompted by the Spirit, saying, "Our Father" (Rom. 8:15-16; Gal. 4:4-7). A child will speak to his father knowing he will understand even if the speech be very disjointed or even laughable. Your heavenly Father knows! (Matt. 6:24-34).

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**2:12-14**

The spiritually adult in the fellowship are now addressed. They have long since passed the stage of the first flush of enthusiasm and discovery in their conversion, but that does not in any sense mean they have grown less spiritual. Consider very carefully such passages as Isaiah 40:28-31. Soaring to the peaks of exultation in early Christian days is no mean thing, and to run swift-footed eager for the battles is a grace to make the heart glad. But to move steadily forward through desert and darkness with never a thought of going back is spiritual maturity. The children rejoice in their new-found knowledge and personal experience of God as their Father.

But the fathers have learned in their spiritual pilgrimage that they are dealing with "Him that is from the beginning". This is a mark of growth in grace. The emphasis is not nearly so much on our experiences of grace and of God, as on the wonder of God's purposes that span from eternity to eternity, and which have embraced us and lifted us up. Could John be thinking of his amazing visions in the Book of Revelation or was he recalling Jesus' words in John 15:16? Read also Psalm 90. The *eternal* God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms (Deut. 33:27). Are the fathers those to whom the world to come has become a present reality? And is this one reason why the spiritually mature have such a savour of grace and such an influence of stability?

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**2:12-14**

If the children rejoice in forgiveness and the fathers rejoice in fellowship, may we say the young men, in the full vigour of life and strength by the grace of God, rejoice in the strenuous demands of the Christian warfare. John is emphasising that the Christian life is not merely forgiveness and fellowship but fighting against a personalised spiritual enemy in our own lives, in the lives of those we seek to minister to, and in the general concourse of life's experience in this present, wicked world. Twice the young men are said to have overcome the evil one. Their present victory is grounded in a past victory, the victory of Christ over sin, self and Satan. Note the affirmation in v.14, "You are strong." This is the truth about us as Christians. In Christ we *are* strong, not weak; we are victors, not vanquished, because the victory of Christ is given to us to use on our own behalf and for the deliverance of others. The young men have laid hold on this victory for themselves and for service, because the word of God abides in their hearts. They have laid hold on the truth as it is in the Word concerning Christ. (Compare Paul's emphasis on "Know ye not ..." in Rom. 6:1-14). But the word of God is also a dynamic thing, working in their hearts, energising them and enabling them to gain the victory over even Satan himself. Read again Eph. 6:10-19 and consider to what extent your own Christian experience conforms to this glorious pattern.

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**2:15-17**

There has to be something radical and uncompromising about the Christian's attitude to the world, based on a recognition of what the world is. To be in love with the world is to have given your heart to a system that is not of God and which is already under the judgment of God and is in fact even now passing away, because it has no permanence whatever. To love the world does not mean you are a poor Christian, but that you are not a Christian at all. We are not to be schemed together with the world (Rom. 12: 1-2), yet at the same time we are not to detach ourselves from the world in the name of a false sanctification (John 17: 15,18). God has given us all things richly to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17). But in our eternal calling as saints of God, we must see to it that we are not ensnared by any of the good things of God's gifts in a way that seduces our hearts from the great Giver. We must not be "brought under the power"

of anything in this world (1 Cor. 6:12), because we do not belong to this world but to another. When we look back over our lives we begin to see the wonderful overruling providence of God, by which we have been given or denied things of tremendous appeal to our hearts in order that our spiritual. destiny and usefulness might be preserved. Those of you who have a Revised Church Hymnary should ponder carefully the hymn 441 by A.A. Proctor, beginning, "My God I thank Thee, who hast made the earth so bright."

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**2:15-17**

When John uses the term "the world", he generally means, "the life of human society as organised under the power of evil." (Dodd) For this reason John exhorts believers, "do not set your hearts on the godless world" (N.E.B.). God loved the world to save people from their sins, but we are apt to love the world in order to participate in its sins. It will be good today to search the Scriptures with regard to this theme of "the world" and to be guided by the three main headings given by Stott in his commentary on this epistle. The world is *under the dominion of Satan*: John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 1 John. 4:1, 3, 4; 5:19. The world and the church are two entirely different groups of people. The world is already under judgment and is passing away (John 12:31; 16:11; 1 John 2:17). This sinful world is *the object of God's love and saving activity*: John 3:16; 1 John 2:2; 4:9, 14. The Christian is *chosen out of the world and no longer belongs to it* :John 15:18-19; 17:6, 11, 14-18; 1 John 3:13; 4:5-6, 17; 5:4-5. Let there be no doubt that the curse of worldliness lies deeper than the matter of a few proscribed activities. We can all too easily become so engrossed in a manner of life which is conditioned by the attitudes of the world, that in all practical. senses Christ is relegated to the sidelines and ceases to be anything but a vague figure with whom we *hope* we are managing to maintain a reasonable degree of affability. To be thus minded is to be an enemy of God (Jas. 4:4). There is a choice to be made (Matt. 6: 24; Luke 16:13).

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**2:15-17**

The command. and the radical observation of v.15 are backed up by the strong argument in the following two verses. All that is in the world.... is of the world (16) and is described in three-fold terms, bringing out "the essential marks of the pagan way of life." (Dodd) Note how in v.14-16 John speaks of the world, the flesh and the Devil! The lust of the flesh is simply the basic, natural desire of our fallen and sinful nature. What we are by nature determines the things we seek for. This is why we need a new nature if ever we are to be pleasing to God. If the lust of the flesh indicates temptations arising from within, the lust of the eyes pinpoints the allurement and fascination of the forbidden we see around us. Little wonder Jesus spoke about plucking out the eye (Matt. 5:27-30) rather than being led by it to destruction. Of course what the eye sees triggers off a mental and then a physical desire to possess (Gen. 3:6; Joshua 7:21; 2 Sam. 11:2). No one denies the need to come to grips with life as it really is, not least to understand and so to help. But it needs little thought to recognise the diabolical inspiration of much of the advertising world as well as much of modern literature, the screen and the stage. We underestimate both the power of sin and the craft of the Devil if we take these things lightly. The pride of life is exactly what it says. It is "an arrogance or vainglory relating to one's external circumstances, whether wealth or rank or dress." (Stott) It is the ostentation of sheer materialism, not content with "keeping up with the Jones's" but determined to surpass them and to let them know they have been surpassed. Now, says John, to live for this kind of world that is in the process of passing away is the ultimate in stupidity. Read Matt. 7:21-27 and Luke 12:13-21. Then go to Matt. 6:19-21 and Heb. 12:16 and Gal. 6:14. Now choose which world you will live for!

**2:18-20**

When John uses the phrase "the last time (hour)" he is not stating in terms of the calendar that so many years remain before the coming of Christ, for he knew full well that Jesus had warned against such a mental and indeed emotional attitude (Mk. 13:32-37 and Acts 1:7). What he is saying is that the coming of Christ into the world at Bethlehem was the beginning of the end, the consummation of the ages of the world's history (Gal. 4:4; Heb. 1:1-2). "It is the last time in which all things are so completed that nothing remains except the final revelation of Christ." (Calvin) If this is the true significance of the term, then we must learn, as the apostles did, to live our lives on the brink of eternity. This is realism, not escapism. John no doubt recalled the words of Jesus concerning the time of the end in passages such as John 6:39-40, 44, 54; 11:24; 12:48; Matt. 24 and Luke 21:5ff. He was aware of the emphasis Jesus put on the fact that as the last days proceeded there would emerge many "antichrists", as was in fact happening when he wrote these words. These are but the forerunners of the final Anti-christ who will come to the forefront of world history as the hour of final consummation approaches. We know that there is a principle at work in the world that is anti-christ, just as there are many individual persons whose influence and activity are against that which is of Christ. But in the process of time all will be clearly etched out in their true lines of identity. Let both grow together until the harvest. But already, in the providence of God and by their own decisive and divisive action, some are declaring themselves to be not of Christ. Five times in v.19 John uses the word "us!", a clearly defined fellowship grounded in fundamental truth centred on Christ. Time revealed some to be "not of us" and John accepts the fact and the implication without batting an eyelid. This too is realism.

**2:18-20**

The term "antichrist" occurs only in John's Epistles (2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7) and signifies an opponent or a rival Christ. The note of enmity is prominent and John certainly seems to be referring to something more specific than just the principle of evil that runs through the whole world's experience. It seems right to identify John's antichrist with Paul's man of lawlessness (sin) in 2 Thess. 2:1-10, and to see in the false teachers of these days a partial fulfilment of this emergence of "the man of sin". John emphasises that this is in fact so, for such "antichrists" have already come, rising up not from the outside unbelieving world but from the inner fellowship of the professing Christian church. Read the dynamically intense Epistle of Jude, especially v.3-4 12-13 and 16-21, and sense the same realism in John's words here and in chapter 4:1. Can you not imagine John recalling Jesus' words, "Watch and pray lest you enter into temptation." But John does not fear, for what is counterfeit cannot remain hidden (1 Cor. 3: 13; 4:5; Luke 12: 2). God will see to it by causing evil men to declare themselves by speech and action, The Lord knows them that are His (2 Tim. 2:19). Keep in mind when you pray that some who share with us in earthly church fellowship may not share with us the heavenly inheritance because they are not of Christ. How sad are the words, "They went out from us"; sad, not because some people no longer find our company congenial, but because their going out signifies a deeper discontent and digression, even a departing from Jesus. Cf. John 6:63-71.

**2:18-20**

We take time to consider this word "anointing" because in our own day there are those who, claiming some particular experience or blessing, make themselves into an elite group, apart from and superior to the main believing fellowship. Such persons usually claim to have some greater "knowledge" of Christian things than is the possession of the general fellowship. But John says there is no such select group, for God gives His Holy Spirit to all believers. This is the unction or anointing he speaks of here and its result is that, "all of you know the truth". All the truth of God is opened up for all of us to know, and the Holy Spirit (who is a Person and therefore indivisible; we either possess Him or we don't) will do His appointed and promised work of leading us progressively into the truth (John 16:13). This unction or anointing of the Holy Spirit to which John refers is the *indwelling* Holy Spirit who is the heritage of every true believer. The Spirit, working from within (as opposed to extraneous experiences coming upon people from outside themselves) should be sufficient to enable Christians

to discern the falsity and error of the heretics' position and thus be able to keep themselves from being drawn away or even disturbed. Now, says John, see to it that you exercise your Spirit given capacity for discernment and do not take everything at its face-value. Put to the test whatever claims to be "Christian" and "spiritual" (4:1). Be guileless but never gullible.

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## 2:21-23

John affirms his belief in the reality of their faith, and his confidence in them stems from the fact that they are taught in the truth. His purpose here is not to bring them new truth, but to confirm them in the truth they already know. This highlights two practical lessons. The reason why heretical sects make so much progress amongst church people today is simply that church people are living in appalling ignorance of the facts and doctrines of the faith. The reason for this state of affairs is that pulpit ministry has almost totally abandoned systematic teaching of the Scriptures. Little wonder that lies abound, most of them professing to come from the Bible. But what particular lie is John pinpointing? It is that kind of preaching and teaching that denies that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Saviour of sinners. When "travelling salesmen" of religion come to your door test them on this level. Do they believe in the deity of Christ? Do they believe the eternal Son of God became a true man? Do they accept the fact of the atonement, that Jesus Christ died to pay the price of sin and to bring us to God? The lie that John is speaking of is that which strikes at the very heart of the Gospel message of salvation, reducing Jesus to a mere man, perhaps a wonderful man, teacher, guide and friend, but denying Him as the incarnate Son of God, the *only* and the *necessary* Saviour. This is anti-christ teaching and must be seen to be so!

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## 2:21-23

Many would protest that they would never deny that Jesus is the Christ, but when you listen to their conversation and their expression of their religion, you become aware that Jesus Christ does not come into their scheme of things. They may talk about God their Maker, about Providence, and of course they talk about "the church" but they do not speak of Jesus as Lord and Saviour, the One in whom all their trust is placed for the salvation of their souls and their acceptance with God. To such people Jesus Christ is simply a figure from history who lived among men to show how life should be lived. But this is simply a religion of salvation by good works, which makes the Saviour's death on the Cross unnecessary. Now, says John, to deny or leave out the Son as the only way by which a sinner can come to God (John 14:6; Acts 4:12) means to have no part at all with God the Father. If the bleeding, dying Son of God paying the price of our sins to bring us to God is not the heart and basis of all our faith, the position is quite clear. It is not simply that we are poor Christians, looking at things in a slightly less spiritual way than others, we are not Christians at all. There is too much talk today in ecclesiastical circles about "complementary insights". There is a body of saving truth which centres on the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and to deny it is to be anti-christ. This is the necessary intolerance of the Gospel and has to be said (Gal. 1:1-9).

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## 2:24-27

John has marked out the heretical teachers for what they are, and this is a necessary and not ungracious exposure. Now he declares two grounds by which true believers will be safeguarded from their evil teaching. These are the words "which you have heard from the beginning" and "the anointing you received from Him" (v.24, 27). In v.24 (AV) the words. "abide", "remain" and "continue" are all the same Greek word and together convey the impression of stability, permanence and continuance. Just as abiding in the Son is the secret of fruitfulness (John 15:1-10), so it is by abiding in the Son that we can continue in fellowship with the Father. John says here that the full word of the Gospel which they heard preached and by which they were brought to salvation must be allowed to abide in them (cf. Col. 3:16). That is, it must be given the chance to settle down into the depths of intellectual, emotional and spiritual apprehension. There must be a thoroughgoing determination to master what is after all not a "simple Gospel" at all. And it is here that the enemy seeks to work, causing believers to become restive under spirit-inspired instruction and to digress into byways of irrelevance (Acts 17: 21; 2 Tim. 3:1-9). But if the believing man keeps bringing himself back to the faith once

delivered, it will become the ground of living fellowship with God. It will also lead to an inner dynamic of power and purpose and understanding, which will be the continuing guard against all seducing spirits, however they may clothe themselves in what appears to be biblical and spiritual language.

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## 2:24-27

If the apostolic word of the Gospel is the first safeguard against error, the anointing Spirit of God is the second, and both these are received at conversion. The Word was received through the instrumentality of men but the Spirit was received directly from God. The Word is the abiding, objective safeguard outside our own experience, and the anointing of the Spirit is the inward, subjective experience. These two are jointly necessary for growth in grace, but we must always test our experience by the Word and not re-write the Word to conform to our experiences. It is the indwelling Spirit who is ultimately our teacher, and while this means we need never be slavishly dependent on any human teacher, it is equally clear from the fact that this is a teaching epistle that we shall never despise God's gift of human teachers. Now, as you have been taught of God's Spirit in agreement with the Word of truth, abide in Christ, by being obedient to Him. It is as we desire to do the will of God that we can be sure of the continuing guidance of the Spirit concerning both doctrine and practice (Acts 5:32; John 7:17). One clear fruit of this obeying and abiding will be a desire to come together with the saints rather than to depart into exclusive coteries who are obsessed with their imagined superiority. See Eph. 3:14-18; 4:11-16, for teaching about both the ministry and the fellowship, and John 16:12-16 for the Spirits gracious ministry of teaching *as* we are able to receive it and *as* our spiritual circumstances need it.

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## 2:28-29

These two verses sum up the first section of the epistle which emphasises that God is Light, and introduce the second half of the epistle with its emphasis that God is Love. In v.28 John sets the exhortation to abide in Christ against the hope and expectation of Christ's return in glory. This to John is a great incentive to holy living and to persistent abiding in the truth in spite of all possible attacks and seductions of the Devil and his human instruments. The doctrine of the second coming of Christ in glory was a real part of apostolic faith and preaching, and the expectation of that return was both vivid and practical, even though it was often misunderstood. The words John uses, 'appearing' and 'coming', signify the visible appearing of One now unseen and the personal presence of One now absent. The whole of Christian life is lived in the light of the consummation of history marked by Christ's second advent. The reaction of people to Christ's coming will depend on the kind of people they are and the kind of lives they have lived in relation to Christ. Some will be ashamed, shrinking away from the light of His presence in which nothing can be hidden. Some will have confidence or boldness, that "fearless trust with which the faithful soul meets God" (Plummer). Those who are ashamed are like Adam and Eve in the garden who hid when they heard the voice of God. Such are the impenitent in Rev. 6: 15-17. But there are believers who will be ashamed and suffer loss as in 1 Cor. 3:10-15. There are others who so live that the final issue is never in doubt (2 Tim. 4:6-8). It should not be difficult to recognise in which category we fit. The Holy Spirit will tell us if we want to know.

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## 2:28-29

Verse 29 means, "if you know as a fact that God is righteous, then you will perceive as a logical consequence that everyone who does righteousness is born of Him." It is righteousness rather than enlightenment or knowledge that is the mark of a true believer, and if righteous living does not corroborate our claim to have faith and spiritual life, then our claim is false. If we are in fact born of God, then as children of God we will manifest the family characteristic of moral purity and righteousness. John here describes a Christian as one who is born of God or begotten of God, that is brought into the life of the family of God by a sovereign act of God Himself. Read John's great exposition of this truth in his Gospel, (1:12-13; 3:1-16). This is what it means to be a Christian. We are partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). Other descriptions of what a Christian is are given by John in this epistle. We know God (2:3, 4, 13-14); we are in Christ (2:5-6); we are in the light (2:9-10); we are abiding in the Father and the Son (2:24, 27 -28). Today's verse (2:29) declares one manifest

consequence of this heavenly birth: we do righteousness. Other consequences are still to be expounded (3:10, 14). Elsewhere in Scripture we are told the staggering facts of being a Christian (2 Cor. 5:17; Col. 1:12-14; Rom. 5:1-11; Eph. 2:1-8). Little wonder John goes on to exclaim, "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us". Please God we shall learn to wonder and worship as we continue this very detailed and difficult study.

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### 3:1-3

These verses begin the second main section of the epistle and the over-all theme is "God is Love." The whole of this chapter deals with the evidences of sonship, which are lives of righteousness. Today's verses, which must be pondered one by one, deal with the present and future condition of the children of God, and John begins by calling us to marvel at and be astonished by the costly love that God was prepared to bestow on us in order to have us as His sons, His children, His born ones (bairns). The phrase "how great is the love" ( "what manner of love" AV) emphasises the unique and extraordinary nature of what is being considered, for it is a love not natural to this fallen world. It is almost a question, "Where did this kind of love come from?" for the world does not love like this. The world loves what it finds attractive and profitable, but this love has been bestowed (given, not merely shown) "on us the sinful sons of men" (Scot. Paraphrase). Who and what are *we* that God should settle His love on us like this? This is the marvel of the Gospel (John 3:16; Rom. 5:6-8; Rom. 8:32; 1 Pet. 5:6-8). "All I could never be; all men ignored in me: this was I worth to God." John, now an old man and having been a believer for perhaps sixty years, writes here as if he had never got over the wonder of the saving love of God in Jesus Christ. Would that we were also delivered from crass familiarity with the glorious Gospel. This verse is a breath from eternity (the Greek "what manner" has the root meaning "of what country") and a good comment on it is Proverbs 25: 25. It is no fiction to call us sons of God with all the rights and privileges of sons. There is ample textual evidence to confirm (as in the R.S.V.) the addition of "and such we are" after the words "sons of God". This is *fact*, even when we are not consciously aware of it.

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### 3:1-3

By the glorious election of grace and regeneration by the Holy Spirit, we are God's children through faith in Jesus Christ, and are partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet:1:1-4). The Holy Spirit who indwells us bears unmistakable witness to this fact (Rom. 8:16), persuading us that we are children of another world, even although it is not immediately apparent to the world of men or even to ourselves. We must never be perturbed because the world does not recognise us or finds us rather distasteful. That is how it was with Jesus (John 1:10-11). Just as His glory was veiled, save to the eye of faith, so it is with us. People find it difficult (not without cause!) to think of us as creatures of divinity with a destiny of glory, and at times they manifest great impatience with us at what they consider to be "delusions of grandeur". But in a sense we need to tell them to reserve their judgment until God has finished His great work with us and in us. Now is the time of manufacture. The demonstration of the finished articles is not yet. But it will come, and when it does, we shall be seen to bear the unmistakable family likeness of Christ. "What we are does not now appear to the world; what we shall be does not yet appear to us" (Stott). The Christian must not pretend to know everything. God discloses what we *need* to know as He purposes and for the rest we must walk by faith. But yet to us and to those around us there are intimations of immortality and glory. For this reason we can speak and testify concerning what is not yet fully evident (Heb. 11:1-3), and this serves to exasperate even further the worldly spirits of unbelieving people who are not prepared to countenance as real what they cannot touch and see. Christians are, in the best sense, members of a secret society, but we deal with increasing light and not with darkness as the secret societies of the world are apt to do.

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### 3:1-3

The emphasis on and contrasts in "what we are" and "what we will be" serve to highlight the fact of two worlds and we must live in this light. The world of present experience will give way to the world that is to come and we must guard against living for the wrong world. That would be to deny and contradict both what we are and

what we shall be as the sons of God. John is quite clear that ultimately and eternally we shall be with Christ and like Christ, although exactly what that means he cannot say. When it is disclosed (when Christ appears) and the final perfection of the work of God's grace in our redeemed personalities is demonstrated for all to see, we shall be like Him, that is like Christ, and He will have fulfilled His glorious intention of "bringing many sons to glory." (Heb. 2: 10). Everyone who has this hope of glory is pledged to a life of increasing holiness. The words "purifies" and "pure" convey "the notion of shrinking from contamination, of a delicate sensibility to pollution of any kind." (Westcott) Note that there is no suggestion in John's words of any true believer ever wanting to go back on his loyalty to Christ. We are the sons of God, we shall yet be seen to be the sons of God and we therefore increasingly live as the sons of God in the midst of a crooked and depraved generation (Phil. 2:12-16). "Then we shall be where we would be; then we shall be what we should be; things which are not now, nor could be, then shall be our own."

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### 3:1-3

John is saying quite simply that we must recognise what God has made us, and since this is what we are from now to all eternity, then we must begin right now to live, walk and talk as the children of God. Cradled within this mortal and outwardly limited personality there is the new life of God by the Holy Spirit; a life which will grow, refine and develop until all the perfect purpose of God is fulfilled. In the end, when Christ appears, the frail outward casing now hiding the presence of glory, will be shed and, as the fruit of suffering and struggle (which is all that the world sees) there will be glory. It is like the gloriously coloured butterfly emerging from the chrysalis. Who would have believed that such beauty could be encased in such humble appearance. Already the image of God, marred by the fall, has been stamped upon us again. The new man, which we assumed at our conversion, was 'created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness' (Eph. 4:24, RSV; cf. Col. 3:10). And since that day, in fulfilment of God's predestinating purpose that we should be 'conformed to the image of His Son' (Rom. 8:29), the Holy Spirit has been transfiguring us 'into His likeness from one degree of glory to another' (2 Cor. 3:18, RSV cf. 1 John 2:6). In this latter passage the transformation is said to be due to the fact that we are 'with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord'; so it is understandable that when we see Him as He is, and not our face only but His too is unveiled, we shall be finally and completely like Him, including our bodies (Phil. 3:21; cf. 1 Cor. 15:49). This is all John knows about our final, heavenly state. For the fuller revelation of what we shall be, we are content to wait." (Stott)

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### 3:4-7

John has laid the necessity of holy living before us in the light of Christ's second coming in glory, and now he affirms the same need for holiness on the ground of Christ's first coming into this world. Note how he does this. Verse 3 ends with emphasis on those who set themselves to be pure and this is contrasted with those who go on sinning (v.4). John insists that everyone (and the use of the word indicates there were some who in fact were taking this easy attitude to moral righteousness) who continues in sin is completely opposed to the whole purpose of Christ's coming (v.5). And we see this more clearly as we consider John's definition of sin. (Other definitions of sin are found in Rom. 16:23; Jas. 4:17; 1 John 5:17). Sin is not merely a transgression of the law or a falling short of the law, it is lawlessness. Sin is lawlessness that is essentially an active spirit of rebellion against the will of God. Now, no matter how we seek to excuse or justify our wrong living, calling it enlightenment or liberty, as some of John's readers did, or calling it personality traits, temperamental weakness or circumstantial pressure, as we do in our generation, we must recognise sin for what it is: lawlessness contrary to God; and we must deal with it accordingly. Here is the Gospel. The sinless Jesus Christ came into this world and died to take away sin, and therefore whoever abides in Christ does not go on sinning as if it did not matter. There is all the difference in the world between a person who sins and fails in specific things in his struggle for sanctification, and one who habitually lives in willing, indifferent bondage to sin. The person who thinks he is righteous because he possesses some spiritual enlightenment without actually doing righteousness is deceiving himself. If we claim to know Christ spiritually and yet have no mastering desire to be like Christ morally and ethically, our claim is false. Sin shall not have the ruling, decisive influence in the life of anyone who is in Christ. Your manner of life will therefore test your conversion.

**3:8-10**

Without question a right view of sin is a fundamental necessity in Christian life, and John speaks so radically that many will refuse to accept his word. He has already said that the man who continues to live as if sin in his life does not matter is not a Christian. Now he goes further, and says such a man is of the Devil. Never forget that sin is not a static, neutral or detached thing. It is a dynamic virus that works its plague in human life ( Jas. 1:15). But we must also recognise that behind the reality of sin there is a satanic dimension, a personal power of evil, and in consequence our trifling with sin, be it gross or refined, brings us into the territory of and under the influence of the Devil. From the beginning the Devil was the first to sin and \_\_\_\_\_ has never ceased to be the inspiration of sin to this present time. His whole existence is sin and his whole influence and kingdom are anti-Christ. In like manner those who ally themselves with moral wrong become part of that regime that militates against all that is of Christ. Since Christ came to destroy the works of the Devil, those who allow themselves to live in complicity with sin will find themselves fighting against Christ. Sin, being of the Devil, is totally incompatible with Christian life. But there is no need for the Christian to be so seduced either morally or intellectually, for Satan's power has in fact been overthrown in the death and resurrection of Christ. However, we will never begin to believe this in a way that will cause us to appropriate the victory of Christ until we begin to see the sinfulness of sin and its diabolical origin, nature and end.

**3:8-10**

John's words here are very radical and we must make sure we understand what he is in fact saying. The affirmation of the Gospel that Christ has destroyed the works of the Devil must be taken to mean that Satan has been deprived of his power. The Evil One has not been annihilated "but his power is broken and he is rendered inoperative in the sense that a chained dog is made harmless to all who keep outwith the radius of its chain." The enemy's power is overthrown and we are set free (cf. Heb. 2:14; 2 Tim. 1:10; Rom, 6:6), but this does not mean for one moment that we can trifle with evil. The power of sin and Satan is broken in principle in the believer, but just as in war, when the enemy has been decisively defeated, there still remain pockets of resistance to be rooted out and dealt with, so it is with sin in the believer's life. There is a constant war to wage with sin and on specific occasions the believer may well be defeated, although there is no necessity for this, but he will get up and fight again. There can be no compromise with sin, no continuing in the settled habit of sin, no acceptance of the low standard of miserable defeat, no slothful sliding into the ways of the world, the flesh and the Devil as if sin did not really matter. This is what John is asserting here when he says that the one who is born of God does not keep on sinning (v.6). And if a professing Christian seems able to go on sinning carelessly and easily then his conversion is not merely suspect, it is nonexistent. Read the second half of v.10 and see how much sin and selfishness go together. Do you pass the test? Are you a Christian, and can it be seen that you are a Christian?

**3:8-10**

In v.9 John is affirming that it is the Christian's supernatural birth that keeps him from being able to continue in sin. The new life of God has been planted in the soul of the believer and that seed of life grows in spite of spasmodic failures right on until the fruit of the harvest of righteousness and love. The seed of the Word by the Holy Spirit has brought a totally new and divine life to the believer's soul (1 Pet. 1:2 and 2 Pet: 1:4), and he simply cannot go on living the old life. The implantation of the new life safeguards the believing child of God from sin and enables him to overcome the sinful tendencies and propensities of the old nature. Granted the Christian sins, and it would be a lie to say otherwise (1 John 1:8-10), but he can never be content that it should continue to be so. Thank God that when we do sin we make ourselves miserably wretched! The Christian says with Paul: "It is not I (the real I, in whom the seed of God abides) who do the deed, but sin that dwells within me." (Rom. 7:17) Sin is still there but no longer dominant and irresistible. To be born of God is a deep and radical inward transformation and the new life exerts its authority and power from within, insisting that sin must give place to righteousness. This is part at least of many of our inner struggles. The Spirit of God within us is

asserting the rights of Christ, refusing to allow the status quo to continue, and claiming the whole life and personality for the rightful Master. Think what Spirit dwells within you and let the thrill of truth set your feet afresh on the highway of holiness.

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### 3:11-13

The righteousness of life which John speaks of as the proof of a true faith in Christ is no cold concept of duty but something that is warmed by human kindness. Love for one another now becomes the test of true faith and the terrible consequences of a failure to love are exemplified in the story of Cain and Abel. From the beginning of Scripture revelation the commandment to love is given and we are left in no doubt that we are our brother's keeper. The sequence of this whole passage shows that John is contrasting those whose behaviour marked them out as children of the Devil and those who are marked out as children of God. Now, says John, it was Abel's righteousness, his faith and his acceptance with God that evoked Cain's murderous hatred. The sight of genuine godliness and holiness has an enraging effect on all who are not of God, and therefore we are not to be surprised by the bitter, antagonistic reception we receive from the world. In an unbelieving world that lives under the dominion of Satan, people take comfort from each other in their unbelief, disobedience and rebellion against God, excusing each other on the ground of circumstances, temptation and inheritance. Then when they see before their eyes someone living by faith in Jesus Christ they have no more cloak for their unbelief and their reaction is one of resentment. Love can evoke a response of love. It can also subdue enmity and make people ashamed of their wrong (Rom. 12:20-21). But it can also bring forth deep and intense hatred. Think of how the word of the Cross can make "nice" people furious, not least because love must always slay pride; which is self.

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### 3:14-15

The world takes delight in criticising Christians when they are obviously not living up to the standards of their profession of faith. But the moment the world sees real Christian living the criticism does not stop, but may turn to hatred. The family of the Devil always hate the family of God and we must not expect it to be otherwise. Darkness and light cannot live together and death and life are incompatible. Jesus gave warning of this very thing in John 15:17-25; 16:1-4; 17:14-16. But the situation is not merely one of love and hate but of life and death. And what is more, it is not love and hate in general terms but in relation to Christian people. The proof that we are indeed of God and have passed from the state of spiritual death, which is the condition of the world, into spiritual life is simply this: we love our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our chief delight is to be with those who love the Lord Jesus Christ and His salvation and to speak of Him and His saving love. He that loves not in this way (the words "his brother" in v.14 are not in the Greek text) remains in the condition of spiritual death. Since this is so we conclude that multitudes are in fact dead unto God and to grace because the last thing in the world they want to converse about is Jesus. If "love for the brothers" here signifies a desire for spiritual fellowship in the communion of the saints, we see yet another affirmation from Scripture that there is no such thing as an isolated Christian. Those who adopt an attitude of keeping themselves to themselves are and must be spiritually suspect. If there is no love there is no life.

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### 3:14-15

If love is the mark of a true work of grace in the heart, and absence of love marks us out as children of the Devil, we had better read 1 Cor. 13 and. ponder it very deeply. Where love is absent, hate is present, says John, and although hate may start as a negative thing, that is absence of concern for the good of the other, it very soon becomes desire for the hurt of the other. And once we reach the stage of finding pleasure in the misfortunes of others, we soon begin to seek the other person's harm for this will increase our perverted pleasure. It is but a small step from this to Cain who rose up and slew (butchered) his brother. If we are mastered by this kind of hateful spirit we declare ourselves to be children of the Devil and we have no part in God at all. This does not mean there is no forgiveness for those guilty of hate and murder, but as long as that evil spirit dominates the life there can be no possibility of pardon. It is quite frightening when God discovers to us how deeply we can dislike

people for whom Christ died, and how venomously we can speak against them and rejoice in their downfall. This is the spirit of the Devil. We need to read Jesus' words which are echoed here by John (Matt. 5:20-24).

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### 3:16-18

Here we have first of all a definition of love and then an application of it in most realistic terms. The whole dynamic of verse 16 centres on the person of Christ. The phrase "laid down his life" has the suggestion in it of laying aside or divesting oneself of some thing or garment and it seems that John here may be recalling the washing of the disciples' feet as well as the death of Jesus on the Cross. In John 13:1-17 we see all the disciples holding back from the menial task, each feeling it was more appropriate that the other should do it. Then Jesus did it, for His desire was to minister and not to be ministered to. This is love. In like manner He laid down His life even to the death of the Cross. Read Phil. 2:1-8; Rom. 5:6-10; John 15: 12-13. This is the immense sacrifice of love in the light of which we live our daily lives and by which our perennial selfishness is exposed and challenged. But this is also the sacrifice of love which calls us, if need be, to make a similar sacrifice for others. It is not a matter of performing some happy act of humanity which gives us considerable pleasure in the doing of it. We must be prepared to give up everything that is pleasurable and profitable for us, to yield place and fellowship as Christ did, to become nothing and less than nothing, even a laughingstock amongst our fellows ( 1 Cor. 4:9 ) for the sake of others. And we must be willing to do this, to suffer loss of all things (Phil. 3:7-14), even though there is not the slightest degree of response or gratitude on the part of those we love. This is the love Christ shows to us, so often taken for granted.

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### 3:16-18

We must think deeply about this matter of love, for it is all too easy to theorise about love in a way that makes no demands whatever on us. Love is not primarily a matter of feeling but of action, as John makes clear in v.17-18. And the action we are called upon to take is seldom heroic but rather down-to-earth, prosaic caring for and ministering to others out of the fulness of God's provision for us. John pictures here the man who *has* this world's goods, who *beholds*, or sees clearly, his brother who *has need* and then *shuts* up his heart of compassion and does nothing to help. This is inconsistent with a profession of the name of Christ, who saw our need and gave Himself up for us. The duty of love stands over against the indulgence of selfishness. Put your love into actions, not words, says John. It is all very specific. "It is easier to be enthusiastic about Humanity with a capital 'H' than it is to love individual men and women, especially those who are uninteresting, exasperating, depraved or otherwise unattractive. Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular." (C.S. Lewis) The good Samaritan crossed the road and when he saw the need he knew himself to be under an inescapable responsibility to care.

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### 3:19-21

When it comes to love, actions speak louder than words (18) and John writes now of "the security and serenity of conscience which genuine and active love is able to produce." (Plummer) This is to be expected, not only as the seal of God's favour but on account of the inevitable release we know when we are able to forget ourselves in caring for others. It is by loving in deed and truth (18) that we know ourselves to be of the truth, and it is this knowledge of the mind that enables us to silence the doubts of the heart in times of personal trial and tribulation at the hands of the accuser. In spite of the fact that we are still very aware of much sin remaining in us, we are persuaded by the fact that we have begun to love that we are indeed the children of God. That God is greater than our hearts and knows all things is not a source of disturbance but of peace. In this John agrees with Peter (John 21:17), and declares that the knowledge God has of our deepest desires and motives is more gracious and understanding than our own hearts. This means we must always seek our peace in God and not within our own subjective and fluctuating emotions. "Tis what I know of Thee that gives me peace,"(Bonar) and it is in this peace that we begin to know the confidence of fellowship with God, and therein is the beginning of prayer.

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**3:19-23**

The readings for the next two days are by the Rev. James Philip, Edinburgh (using AV), and give a vital exposition of these verses. "The 'hereby' in v.19 (AV) seems to refer back to what has been said in the previous verses. The existence of love is the objective proof of the reality of our Christian profession, and it is this that will assure our hearts concerning our salvation. The thought is like that in Rom. 5:4 where Paul says, 'Experience (character RSV) worketh hope' - that is, the existence of true Christian character is *prima facie* evidence that our claim to salvation is not false and misplaced. The word 'assure' has the sense of reassurance, and the context is that of the doubts and condemnation of conscience which God's children sometimes suffer. The RSV makes v.20 rightly we think continue the sentence begun in v.19b, and reads 'shall reassure our hearts before Him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts ...' An extremely important issue is raised here. It is the fact that our hearts (consciences NEB) may condemn us wrongfully. It is true, of course that our consciences convict us of wrong - that is conscience's proper function as God's monitor in the soul - but there is such a thing as a morbid conscience in which Satan, the accuser of the brethren, can be at work, counterfeiting the voice of God within us, to our hurt and deception. John's word in 4:1 about trying the spirits whether they be of God has relevance here. This is in fact what we must do in order to verify whose voice it is that is speaking to us. More of this in tomorrow's note."

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**3:19-21**

"The whole question of the voice of the accuser is one to which all too little attention has been paid in Christian teaching, but it is of first importance that it should be dealt with in the lives of those who are afflicted by it. For not only does it become a hindrance to Christian usefulness, as John implies in v.21, but also the more one yields to the false accusations, the worse and more relentless they become. This is the point of a morbid conscience. The more you 'give in' to it, the more demanding it will become until there will develop a sense of 'always being in the wrong', and despair will follow. This, in fact, is one sure sign of the Devil's activity. For the Holy Spirit's conviction is always with a view to bringing cleansing and renewal to us, with consequent further usefulness in God's service, whereas Satan's intent is to drive us deeper into ourselves in morbid preoccupation until despair grips the soul. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is not a Spirit that nags us relentlessly nor does He speak in harsh, strident tones, but rather gently and quietly; not in sudden, compulsive pressures, but with steady persuasiveness. It is all a question of getting to recognise Him when He speaks. 'My sheep hear My voice,' said Christ. If then, when conscious of the inner voice of conscience in our hearts, we have the feeling of being bludgeoned by the very vehemence of the conviction in such a way that no amount of 'obedience' to it or 'confession' to God seems to bring any kind of relief, we must learn that this is not the work of a loving God but the enemy of souls, and resist him, refusing to yield to his pressures. Take a stand, distressed believer, on the victory of Christ (Rev.12: 10-11) Dispute Satan's right to interfere with your life, and bid him begone."

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**3:22-24**

One objective of the enemy in his attacks through our condemning hearts is to destroy our sense of fellowship with God and thereby keep us from praying. When our hearts are at peace with God and we are living in fellowship with Him, in truth and in love to Him and to our fellows, there will be a spontaneity in our prayers and a 'rightness' in our petitions because we shall be asking the things that are pleasing to God. John does not say that our prayers are answered as a reward for keeping God's commandments. But he does say that keeping the commandments (22) in relation to others and the commandment (23) in relation to our Lord Jesus Christ is the prerequisite of the relationship and fellowship with God by which we can come into His presence and pray. If we are not living right lives we will never pray the effectual fervent prayer of righteous men and women (Jas.5:16b). If we regard or dabble with iniquity in our hearts the Lord will not (cannot) hear (Ps.66:18). The passage here echoes such words of Jesus as are found in John 15:1-8. More and more we begin to see that if we are going to be Christians at all it will involve the whole of our lives. There can be no trifling or half measures. And if there are, there is instantly doubt cast, upon the validity of our spiritual experience. John goes on searching our hearts and teaching us for two more chapters. It should be becoming clearer to us whether or not there are grounds for considering that we are indeed Christians.

#### 4:1

We must always test experience (which is subjective and open to counterfeit) by the truth of God's Word (which is objective and constant). We must never interpret the Word by the authority of experience. All that has the appearance of being supernatural is not necessarily the work of the divine Holy Spirit. All the preaching that carries a passionate unction and has an apparent Biblical basis is not necessarily of God. There are false prophets, that is, people speaking as if by the command of God but they are people who are not of God. Their influence is destructive and anti-Christ. Put the spirits to the test. Many shallow, gullible people are far more impressed by how a man preaches than by what the man says. Few nowadays seem to have any capacity to discern what some preachers fail consistently to say in their preaching, and when you examine the doctrinal implications of many evangelistic and convention sermons, you may be astonished at how suspect the theology is. This has come about by an undue emphasis on the subjective experience of the individual and is dangerous because when you try to reason with people they say, as their final and conclusive word, "Oh, but I know, it happened to me." This is in the background of John's epistle. Simple souls were being dazed by supernatural phenomena such as "speaking in tongues" and "prophecy", and having mentioned the Holy Spirit (3:24), John immediately warns the believers to exercise their critical faculty and not be carried away and be beguiled by all that *appears* to be "inspired". The Devil's capacity for deception is almost unlimited.

#### 4:1-3

True faith, far from being blind credulity, examines its object before resting confidently in it. It is therefore essential to test all human teachers who claim to speak by inspiration, and this is within the capacity of every true believer by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. We must be serious and watchful in the light of such warnings as are given here and in Matt. 24:24; Acts 20:28-32; 2 Peter 2:1-3. There are deceiving spirits active in the church and the world, and we must be taught and prepared to discern those voices which are of God and those which are not. We must not give way to misguided charity, for while truth builds up, lies destroy. And the only way to abide in the truth is to see to it that our faith is a theological position that we have thought through, and that our thoughts are governed by the accuracy and balance of Biblical statement. Over and over again we are driven back to the Scriptures and this is our safety, for we are shown that many of the so-called "small divergences" from true doctrine are in fact almighty cleavages which separate people from God. When you begin to have reservations about Biblical teaching (and this is often accompanied by abandoning your daily reading in the Bible and prayer) and you find yourself more interested in speaking about people and their experiences, you may be giving evidence against yourself to the effect that no real spiritual grace has been wrought in your heart. We must get down to *thinking* of what we really believe.

#### 4:1-3

The vital centre of Christian faith and practice is the Person of Jesus Christ. If you are off centre about who He is and what He has done, you are at variance with God. Any spirit that denies that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16) is not of God, for such a denial strikes at the whole root of the Gospel. Christ came in human nature; He became flesh (John 1:14). This categorical statement stands over against the ideas of those in John's day and our own day who try to say that "the Christ" came upon Jesus after His birth or at His baptism, and left Him again prior to the Cross. This, of course, denies the reality of both the Incarnation and the Atonement. Whenever you try to separate the divine and the human in the person of Christ, you destroy both. Our Lord "was and continues to be God and man, in two distinct natures and one Person, for ever." (Westminster Confession) But note that John speaks of *confessing* this fact, not merely recognising it. Unclean spirits recognised Jesus for who and what He was during His earthly ministry, but they did not confess faith in Him. They had no desire to yield to Him, obey Him and fashion their lives in conformity to His will. If the substance of this reading be true, then there are many people preaching today who are confederates of Hell rather than apostles of Heaven.

**4:4**

The last phrase of v.3 which declares the active presence in this world of "antichrist" makes it quite clear that whatever blessings may come to us in Christ (and there are many) the essential mark of Christian life will be warfare. But it is never equal-sided war. Whether we speak of the ultimate evil spirit of antichrist, who is Satan, or the many subsidiary anti-christs who are the false teachers gone out into the world (v.1), the victory belongs to those who are Christ's, for the simple reason that Christ is stronger than Satan. This victory has been *demonstrated* in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and is in fact *given* to us who believe. It is a total victory (3:8) which must be believed, grasped and appropriated by faith. We may be "little children" (RSV) in the utter simplicity of our faith, but we are at the same time "more than conquerors" (Rom.8:37). And the victory is not some remote treasure that we are able to reach only in some high moments of spiritual achievement, but one that is within our grasp moment by moment by the indwelling Holy Spirit. We cannot remind ourselves too often of the words of the hymn, "Think what Spirit dwells within thee," (Lyte) for it is by this means we begin to recognise for ourselves the possibilities of the apostolic affirmation that "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Phil. 4:13) Whatever the odds against us and whatever the waves of temptation and trial, the fact remains that we are victors. It remains a matter of choice for us to make the experience true day by day in the life of faith. If God be for us, who can be against us?

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**4:5-6**

It is false charity to gloss over fundamental differences. All who speak religious language are not necessarily of God and we must learn to discern the basic inspiration behind the lives and attitudes and speech of people. In this respect v.5 is very clear indeed. A man's speech betrays the world he belongs to, and the world recognises some men as belonging to them rather than to God. Birds of a feather flock together, and if you hear people extolling with obvious fascination and adulation the kind of preaching that is contrary to the true apostolic pattern, you know they are not of God. This is Biblical intolerance and is made plain in v.6. John is not at all embarrassed to state, "We are of God," for he speaks of himself and his companions as Christ's appointed and anointed servants and not merely as individuals. Those who heard and received the apostles of the Truth were of God, and those who refused them and their ministry were not of God. Now, the whole substance of apostolic teaching is recorded and enshrined in the Scriptures for us in our generation, and therefore the Scriptures become the touchstone of truth and error. Those who receive the Word of God as it is given, bowing to its truth and yielding to its constraint, are of God. Those who do not receive the Truth are not of God. This is how we know what people really are. Jesus said His sheep would hear and recognise His voice (John 10:4-8, 16, 26-27; 18:37; cf. 8:47). The Bible makes quite clear that all who are of God will in fact come to Jesus (John 6:36-37). This is how we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error,. The distinction is inescapable.

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**4:7-8**

To guard against any wrong sentimental notions of love we must read 1 Cor. 13 before we go any further.

Such a chapter will instantly assail any intellectual or spiritual arrogance, and together with today's verses challenge any religious bigotry or persecution and every selfish neglect of our fellows, whoever they be. It is indeed a surprising thing that we sinners, who have been loved so freely by God and forgiven so much by God, find it so very hard to think kindly of and act generously towards our fellows (Matt.18:21-35). John simply states that those who are truly God's children will inevitably reflect in their lives something of His love for others. If there is in fact and practice no evidence of the Father's characteristic love there is in fact no evidence that we are of the Father's family. The evidence suggests we belong to a family that is not His. God is love, and all that He does is done in love, even when He exposes and judges sin. And His love is always self-sacrificing love, giving up what is infinitely precious for the sake of the loved one, even when there is not the slightest response. God goes on loving those who are not in fact loveable. This is endless love that dies over and over again for the good of the one loved. But this abandonment of "self" is not found in the "good pagan" who so often twists this word to make it read "love is God". When the world speaks of love it usually thinks of pleasurable satisfaction rather than painful sacrifice. But should it be so painful to love our brother? John's two verses here are searching.

**4:7-8**

This strong exhortation to Christians to love one another is fundamental, because if believers cannot love one another there is little possibility of their loving the lost sinners of the world. If we are honest we will admit that in many cases we have no "feeling" of interest at all towards people and we conclude that if we tried to "turn on" love towards them it would be a false performance. But we must not identify "loving" with "liking", for it may well have more in common with "respecting", whereby we can regard people (as we hope they will regard us) "warts and all" and still see in them what is worthy of appreciation. Love is not blind. This is clear from what the Bible teaches about God. He is light (1:5) as well as love and He is also consuming fire (Heb.12:29; Deut. 4:24). "Far from condoning sin, His love has found a way to expose it, (because He is light) and to consume it (because He is fire) without destroying the sinner, but rather saving him." (Stott) John's thoughts are totally centred on Christ and His Cross, and when he commands us to love, he commands us to be "like Christ" to our fellows. That means taking the initiative in love. It means practical action rather than honeyed words or sentimental feeling. Ask yourself the question: How would Christ act towards this brother or sister of mine? Then go and *do* likewise! In the process you might well begin to *feel* something of care for them.

**4:9-11**

John has already taught that love is part of the commandment of God (2:7-11) and an evidence of eternal life (3:11-18). In 4:7-8 he has given an exhortation to love, and now he presents love in terms of a statement of duty, based on the historical fact of the sending of Christ. Here is the proof that God is love and John claims that, if God loved us like that, we have no excuse nor escape from the duty of loving one another. The love of God was manifested, made clear as noon-day, in the sending of His Son, that is in the Incarnation. But the birth of the Son on earth is not in itself enough if God's condemnation of sin is a real thing. There must be a turning aside of God's wrath, for there can be no forgiveness for sinners by the expedient of simply ignoring sin's consequences. The sinner himself cannot provide the propitiation, for that would be an attempt to bribe God to avert His wrath because of a gift. But when the gift is from God Himself, then Christ is the perfect atoning sacrifice (propitiation) for our sins. The atonement effected by Christ is not merely the removal of sin and guilt (expiation), but also the removal of divine hostility (propitiation), so that the relationship between God and man can be healed in righteousness. The love of God in the Cross is therefore to be seen as an objective accomplishing of salvation and not merely as a sight which influences and changes man's feelings and thoughts about God, himself and his fellows. And this immense, active love of God on our behalf ever lays us under obligation to love all men.

**4:12**

God loved us and sent His Son to die on our behalf, in our place, to save and rescue us from our helpless plight and condemnation as miserable, undeserving sinners. And, as far as John is concerned, no one can have gone in faith to the Cross of Christ, if they go back to a life of selfish lovelessness. In fact, the moment we believe this dying love was for us, we find ourselves under obligation to love all people, to be their servants in love, to die for them, physically if need be, but certainly figuratively in giving up ourselves for their sake. In this way, the love of God that dwells in us is reflected so that others can see and know it. God is love. His love is manifested historically and actively in the Cross, and His love continues to be seen and known in and through those He has brought to Himself in Christ. No one has seen God; no sinful person can look upon the face of God and live, for the brightness of His glory would consume him. How then can people see and know God? One answer is in John 1:18 the Son has shown Him forth and expounded Him. Again Jesus gives an answer in John 14:8-9. But here John says that the redeeming love of God in Jesus Christ will be seen by people when it is incarnate in us and manifested in our love for one another. If Christ dwells in our hearts by faith (Eph. 3:14-19), then it is impossible for Him to 'be hidden' (Mark 7:24), and since the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5), then we should be so in-dwelt by God that people can see Him (Matt.5:16 RSV).

## George Philip Bible Reading In Book

They may only be aware at first of some vague "something" that we have and they do not have, but that can be used by the Spirit to lead them to a personal encounter with Christ. How wonderful, and what possibilities for daily witnessing.

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### 4:12

This verse does not say that if we begin to love one another then God will come and dwell in us, but rather that the fact of our love is proof that God *has* come to dwell in our hearts. But there is no doubt that if we, as a fellowship of believers, live in love with one another, then there is created a home or habitation for God, to which He can come more readily and fully (Eph. 2:19-22) to have pleasure in His people. Think how difficult, tense and unpleasurable it is to be in a human company when you are aware that individuals or cliques are at variance with each other. How much more this is true in the realm of spiritual things. When the atmosphere is one of unhypocritical love, God is eager to be present and is able to manifest Himself more and more fully both to the individual believer and also to the fellowship. In this way, nurtured by the conscious awareness of the presence of God and His love, our love grows in response and is perfected. But it says that God's love is also perfected. All the purpose of His love and the expression of His love is brought to perfection in us and among us when we love one another. It is as if God, aware of the pulse of love among His people, and that love being made known to the world of dying men, finds His own heart is both enlarged and satisfied as He says, "This is what I desired from the beginning." To be thus personally and corporately caught up into the heart and purposes of God is one of the wonders of the Gospel.

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### 4:13-16

John now goes on to expound more fully the double theme of God dwelling in us and of love being perfected. It is when we love one another that the Spirit of God within us bears witness to the reality of our conversion, and this witness is not primarily to the unbelieving world but to ourselves, confirming and strengthening our faith. This witness of the Spirit is not some new revelation or new experience coming upon us from outside ourselves, but an inner persuasion by the Holy Spirit that all we believe and stand upon is in fact of God. In 3:24 this confirmation comes through obedience, while here it is through living in love with one another. Obedience and love are, of course, both fruits of the enabling Spirit of God in our lives. Now, John speaks here of a double indwelling, saying that God makes His home in us and we make our home in God. This is not only fellowship of the deepest and fullest kind, it is also safety that is absolute. Our life is hid with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). The reference in v.14 is to the apostles' witness to the truth, and this witness is confirmed in the hearts of those who hear by the working of the Spirit, and this in turn constrains people to confess Christ. This confession is not merely the recital of sound doctrine concerning the Person of Christ, it is the moving of the heart and soul towards Christ. Then in the confessing of Christ there is again, by the Holy Spirit, a confirmation of salvation (cf. Rom. 10:8-11). The love of God seeks to lay hold on us, and every move we make in response to that love confirms in us the knowledge of God's love. To be persuaded of this is the beginning of liberty and of love to others.

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### 4:17-21

The mutual indwelling John has spoken of should be considered in the light of Jesus' words in John 15:1-17, for it is as we abide in Christ and He in us that our love will grow and advance to perfection, completeness or maturity. This perfect love, which is primarily God's love for us and then our love to Him, has its realisation on two levels. In the Day of Judgment we have boldness and in the present day we have love to our fellows. Let us consider the first. To be a sinner is to be silenced or speechless before God with nothing to say on your own behalf (Rom. 3:19; Matt. 22:12). This is a prospect so full of fear it begets terror when we are in fact persuaded that there *is* a day of judgment. What then does it mean to have boldness, to "have something to say", on that great day? What can we say? Exactly what we say now by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us, "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15-16). We have boldness because there is no need to fear (Rom. 5:1-5; 8:1). This is the confidence of faith. John has already spoken of confidence at Christ's coming (2:28) and confidence in prayer

(3:21). Now he says confidence is a sign of love made perfect because we have learned to see ourselves as Christ is in this world, namely beloved sons and daughters with the right to call God, Father. We are accepted in God's beloved Son (Eph. 1:6); why should we fear?

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#### 4:17-21

There is no fear in love but neither is there familiarity, and therefore we love God "with deepest, tenderest fear". But still we come to Him, not seeking to hide from Him nor wishing to hide anything from Him. Why should we? We know that there is no more forbearing and forgiving person than our Father in heaven. Fear has to do with punishment, and knowing this the enemy of our souls is constantly accusing us of our sins, seeking to persuade us that this time we have gone too far and God will smite us and have nothing more to do with us. But the child of God who knows the love of God need not fear, and will not fear unless he slips back from responding to God's love. And why should we stop growing up into ever fuller love for God? We did not really know what love was until God's love touched our hearts, and ever since then we love because He loved us first. But whom do we love? We love God, but can find no fully satisfactory way of expressing our love in terms and actions within our capacity. But our brothers are very near, we know their language and their needs, for they are constantly before our eyes. If we ask God to be allowed to do something for Him, He will tell us to do it to our brother. This is in fact a commandment! Do you remember the story Jesus told of the man who never noticed his brother's need, even although he passed him every day at his own door (Luke 16:19-31)? Matt. 25: 31-46 is another very searching sermon.

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#### 4:17-21

A famous writer once said he disliked Christians because they knew too much about God, and there is indeed a danger in being so constantly occupied in preaching about God that we have no time to act like God in love for others. A student once offered to help his minister and when asked to do a rather menial but necessary task his reply was, "I was thinking of something more spiritual". These are the attitudes which John calls "lies". If love casts out fear it must also cast out selfishness and hatred and pride. God is intensely interested in how we are getting on with our brothers and sisters (Matt. 5:21-24), and if what we are in behaviour towards them contradicts what we say we are towards God, then we are liars. John asks, if we fail in the visible matters of the commandment of God concerning love to people, how can we possibly claim to be competent and successful in the unseen, spiritual relationships with and service to God. If we do not love our brother, we do not love God; and if we do not love God, we do not know the salvation of God, we are still in our sins. Be quite sure of this, says John, and be sure also that loving means allowing the heart to go out to your brother as God's heart went out to you in Christ (21). A tardy, reluctant, graceless word or two of greeting, or a hesitant friendship, or work done in a way that makes your brother wish he had not asked your help is not acceptable to God or man. Our sulky demeanour when we refuse to speak to those in whose debt we are for countless acts of love and grace is a sad testimony to a heart estranged from the love of God. Love must be expressed both Godward and manward.

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#### 5:1

Something of the total and radical significance of being born again or born of God is seen if we consider the personal case of John. This epistle reveals how truly he is called the apostle of love, but he was not that by nature. In Mark 3:17; 9:39 and Luke 9:54 we are shown a man who was strong, impulsive and even harsh. He was impatient, proud, contemptuous, intolerant and possessed of a spirit of quick condemnation. But he was born again and in the manifestation of love in his life we see the transforming grace and power of Jesus Christ.

In this verse John emphasises that the new birth lies at the heart of all Christian experience. No one can begin to live a Christian life and to manifest love in his life until he has *become* a Christian. This regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, by which we are quickened into newness of life, is altogether sovereign. It is God's work from beginning to end, and our "believing" is the result and the proof that we have in fact been born of God. Faith is the gift of God, the firstfruit of newness of life, and not, as is often supposed, the cause of the new birth. Our salvation is all of God. John then goes on to say that everyone who is born of God will love God and

will love God's children. "To love the parent means to love his child," (N.E.B.) and this is true without exception. To be part of a family has obligations as well as privileges, and this is especially true in the family of the Spirit. Strained and loveless relationships among the children usually signify disaffection from the Father.

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### 5:2-3

John is still elaborating the last two verses of chapter 4 and insists on holding firmly together these three things: believing in Christ, obeying God's commands, and loving one another. All these three things have more to do with the will than the feelings; they are more a matter of moral response than spiritual or mystical ecstasy. Jesus' words in John 14:15 are very plain and practical, and John affirms that this obedience is not grievous, irksome or burdensome. Jesus declared His yoke was easy, His burden light, and the issue of a glad acceptance of them would be rest for the soul (Matt. 11:28-30). "The fact is, it is only in the *contemplation* of the yoke of Christ that it seems hard (remember the rich young ruler); *taking it*, however, leads to rest, and it is proved easy. His commandments are grievous only for those who do not want to do them. When the will to do them is there, all else will follow, and we shall prove that the will of God is good, acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:2). As the hymn puts it, 'Love will make obedience sweet.' It is a measure of how little we have understood the commandments of God that we should think of utter obedience to them in terms of irksome duty rather than delight and joy. But if we are ever to become Christlike, will we not more and more breathe the spirit of Him who said, 'I delight to do Thy will, O God'?" (Rev. J. Philip).

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### 5:4-5

John never pretends that it is easy to be a Christian in this world. The whole atmosphere of the world is anti-Christ and the enmity of the world unites with the enmity of our old, carnal natures to militate against us in our desire to keep the commandments of God. But the Christian is not one who struggles painfully towards victory, hoping some day to achieve it. The Christian is given victory and fights from that standpoint. *Whosoever* is born of God overcomes, and this emphasises the power that is at work in the child of God rather than on the personal struggles of the believer. The emphasis seems to be on what we possess in Christ: it is this that makes us overcomers, more than conquerors, in respect of every possible enemy or temptation. The victory belongs not to the military or ideological or intellectual powers of the world, but to the humble believers in Christ. Three times John uses the phrase "overcomes the world." In the first and third instances the verb signifies the continuing conflict and victory which are the experience of the believer and the church so long as they are in this world. The second use of the phrase signifies a once-for-all act of faith and exercise of faith by which we lay hold decisively on God's victory. This is something which must be affirmed and appropriated in every given circumstance of conflict. We must say to ourselves as we prepare to fight, (and to pray), "In Christ I have the victory." There is no reason why we should be defeated. No reason at all.

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### 5:6-9

This is a difficult passage introduced by the statement that affirms Jesus is the Son of God (5:5-6). The identity of the historical person Jesus of Nazareth with the Eternal Son of God is insisted upon as being fundamental to faith, and a threefold testimony is given to this fact. Concerning v.7 some scholars say that there is no textual evidence for this verse being in the Bible as it does not appear in any ancient manuscript earlier than the fourth century. The same is true of the words "in earth" in v.8. But we read our passage with these verses included, and see that its message concerns witness to Christ. Several interpretations are given of the water and blood (v.6). Some say there is reference to the two Christian sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, both of which bear witness to Christ's work of salvation and thereby confirm the faith of the believer. Some say the reference is to the water and blood from the side of Jesus, spoken of in John 19:34-35, where the blood is mentioned before the water. Others say the reference is to the baptism of Christ in water at Jordan when He numbered Himself with the transgressors and to the baptism of His passion on the Cross when His blood was shed as a sacrifice for sin. This interpretation accords with apostolic preaching which always focused attention on the life and death of Christ (Acts 10:36-43). This is the saving message of the Gospel: not the birth of Jesus only, as

heretics then and now sought to affirm, but His birth as a true man to live and die on man's behalf and by His substitutionary death on the Cross to pay the price of sin. We must bear witness to a full and biblical Gospel if we are to know the confirmatory blessing and power of the Holy Spirit.

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### 5:6-9

We must understand this passage in the context of the heresies of John's time which tried to distinguish between Jesus and the Christ. They said Jesus was a mere man, born naturally of Mary and Joseph, upon whom the Christ descended at His baptism and from whom the Christ departed prior to the Cross. John affirms the unity of the Saviour's career. He came from the Father and passed through both water and blood and *is* for ever the One Person, Jesus Christ the Son of God. This is important in our own day when people (even some ministers) are denying the real divinity and real death of Christ. "If the Son of God did not take to Himself our nature in His birth and our sins in His death, He cannot reconcile us to God." (Stott) To these facts the Holy Spirit bears witness either directly to the hearts, minds and consciences of men and women, or through the preaching of the apostles who bear witness to the "water and the blood". We have the objective, historical witness in the message of the water and the blood, and we have the subjective, experimental witness by the Spirit who "is the truth" sealing that truth to our hearts. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13) and His witness can be relied upon. The point of the *three* witnesses is that in the eyes of the law no charge could be preferred against a person in court unless it could be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. We have the unanimous testimony of three witnesses to Jesus Christ. The truth of the Gospel can bear any amount of scrutiny.

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### 5:6-9

We add this further note by the Rev. James Philip, Edinburgh. "The apostles preached that Jesus came 'by water and blood'. What we must realise is that to say this is to put a certain interpretation on the historical facts of our Lord's life and death. And it is this apostolic interpretation that makes the historical fact of Christ into a Gospel. To say, 'Jesus Christ died on the Cross,' is to make a historical statement; and taken by itself there is no Gospel in that. But to say, as the apostles went on to say, 'Christ died on that Cross for our sins,' is to place a certain interpretation on that death; and it is this that constitutes the good news of grace. It is this that should for ever explode the fallacy that is often widely held, namely, that it is the fact of the Cross, not any theory about it that is important for the Christian faith and Christian experience. But the fact of the Cross, as such, has precisely no significance at all *as Gospel*. The whole point about the Gospel is that it is an interpretation of the facts. The real issue is not whether we should have interpretation (theory) or be content with simple facts, for interpretation there must be, before there can be any Gospel; the issue is whether we adopt the apostolic interpretation of the death of Christ, or another which is neither apostolic nor biblical, The tragedy of modernism is that it has scorned the apostolic testimony to the Cross and adopted others which are untrue both to Christ's Person and to His atoning work. It is little wonder that the Spirit's witness has been so lacking in the church's testimony in the twentieth century."

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### 5:9

Here is another comment from the Rev. James Philip. "The N.E.B. rendering of this verse is graphic and helpful: We accept human testimony, but surely Divine testimony is stronger, and this threefold testimony is indeed that of God Himself, the witness He has borne to His Son.' This brings out more clearly than the A.V. the fact that it is the witness of the Spirit, water and blood that is from God, nay more, God's own witness to His Son. We should not miss the tremendous significance of this, for it means that when a man preaches a true Biblical message, God Himself speaks in it, and it becomes the word of God to all who hear it. There is a significant testimony to the truth of this in 1 Thess. 2:13, where Paul tells us that the Thessalonians received the word of God not as the word of men but 'as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.' What an encouragement this is to those who preach and those who pray for them! With what holy and eager expectation we should come week by week to hear the word of God! The truth is, however, that we

are often so dull and weak in faith that almost the last thing in the world we expect is that God should speak, and if He did none would be more surprised than we. But if this word is true, then the surprising thing would be not that He spoke but that He didn't. And when He doesn't, there is always some good reason, for He wills to speak to men, and wants to. He may be grieved away."

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## 5:10-12

To believe on the Son of God is to move towards Him and trust Him and Him alone for salvation and life. To believe is to receive Christ as our Saviour, as He is presented to us in the Gospel. When the objective facts of the Gospel are declared, the Holy Spirit bears witness to "the water and the blood" and when we believe, that same Holy Spirit brings us an inner assurance that we are in fact Christ's. Note how John brings together, "believing on the Son," "believing God," and "believing the record God has given concerning His Son." These three cannot be separated. All we know of the Son and of God's revelation of His salvation which is in His Son is in the record of Holy Scripture, which means that all our preaching and thinking about these themes must be centred on and conditioned by Scripture. Apart from this we have no sure word from God, and indeed no instrument by which faith can be born in people's hearts. Faith comes by the Word (Rom. 10:17). The tense of "has not believed" (10) signifies a past decision when confronted by a choice, and highlights unbelief as a deliberate refusal rather than an unfortunate defect. The gift of God is eternal life, which life is intrinsically bound up in Jesus Christ. If you have not Jesus, because you have refused to believe on Him in the way spoken of at the beginning of this note, you have not and cannot have eternal life. The refusal is yours, not His. (John 5:40; Matt 23:37).

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## 5:13

The words "these things" must apply to all that John has written in the epistle: the truth about the Son of God and the tests of our profession of faith. These tests have been threefold: the test of doctrine, believing that Jesus is the Christ; the moral test, keeping the commandments; and the social test, loving the brethren. The purpose of the expository Word and also the challenging Word is the same: that we might have assurance concerning our faith in Christ, our possession of eternal life and the spiritual efficacy and stability of our service, particularly in the realm of prayer. John has already declared that he wishes us to be a joyful people (1:4), a holy people (2:1), and now he would have us a sure people (5:13). The assurance we have in the present and the sure hope we have concerning the future are the certainties of eternal life upon which we base our whole pattern of daily activity. It is not presumptuous to affirm our assurance concerning eternal and spiritual things, and indeed, in our world of uncertainty this is the witness that people need. The world ignores a Church that is no longer sure of what it believes. But when people see around them others like themselves who have been taught in the Word of God and who are able to give a reason for the hope and the assurance within them, then the world will take notice. People will begin to ask (as they did in Acts 2:37; 16:30), "Sirs, what must I do to be saved; and to be assured of that salvation you speak of?"

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## 5:14-15

This epistle does not taper off into incidental greetings but rises to a crescendo of fundamental affirmation. The section from here to the end has been divided thus: intercessory prayer (13-17); three great Christian certainties (18-20); and a final warning (21). As far as John is concerned, a man who is really a Christian will pray, and there is no doubt at all that true joy, purity and assurance are known only to praying people. This does not mean spasmodic prayer in time of crisis or sickness or danger, nor is it formal prayer on set religious occasions. A man is a praying man when, as an integral part of his daily life, he speaks to God. It is not a burdensome duty that claims attention but a desire within the soul to speak to Someone he knows and trusts and is sure about. The true believer is drawn to prayer rather than driven, and he has confidence, boldness, freedom of speech to come right to the point and lay the matter before God. It is not a matter of bending God's will to ours, for that would be selfishness. It is more our being drawn into His will. Yet true prayer asks specifically, lays hold upon God for an answer and believes it will come. How do we know what to ask for in His will? We must delight

ourselves in the Lord (Ps. 37:4) and then He hears, not only listens to, our prayers, and they are answered, although the results of the answer may not become apparent for some time. Even then in a way the answer may be different from and better than we expected at the time of asking.

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## 5:14-15

This thought of confidence in God is very fundamental to prayer, for it points to the necessity of our waiting upon God for Him to indicate the pleasure and direction of His will before we begin to belabour Him for specific and immediate manifestations of an answer. Even as Christians our thoughts are very time-conditioned and we can see only a little of the past; less of the present and very little of the future. But this should not disturb us since we have confidence in God and believe not only that the issues of all situations belong to Him, but also that He is a God who is wonderfully desirous of blessing His children and of blessing the world through them. Much of our panic and consequent lack of assurance stems from this unbelief that invades even our prayer life. Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him (Ps. 37:7) being assured of this that since He *could* answer your prayers and transform your situation in a moment, the fact that He delays must signify purpose and also tender care. It is when we are prepared to wait in confidence that God can reveal His will to us, and then we begin to ask with a new assurance, for we know ourselves caught up into the dynamic of His eternal purposes. Our prayer becomes more and more, "Thy will be done, O Lord."

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## 5:16-17

We take a simple but fundamental first lesson from these difficult verses. John follows his words about prayer with this matter of praying for others, especially those who have done wrong and gone wrong. He makes no excuse for sin (v.17), for all sin is exceedingly wrong, whether it be gross or refined in the eyes of the world. But John says anyone who falls into sin is not in a hopeless state if there is someone who will pray for him. He can be restored. Take the fallen brother or sister in the privacy of your heart and wrap him or her around with the healing, saving love of God by your prayers, and in this way lift up the fallen and cause their hearts to be turned back to the Father. This kind of prayer is a great privilege, for it associates us with Him who came to seek and save the lost and to call sinners to repentance. If the possibility of being used in this way was more often in our thoughts, we would all take a firmer grasp on the assured things of our faith. Read Jas. 5:13-20 and Gal. 6:1-2 in the light of this call to intercessory prayer and realise you may be the instrument under God of bringing life and salvation and hope to another. If we do not pray we may well be leaving people to die in their sins. John says there is a sin that leads to death, a deeply mysterious phrase which we study tomorrow.

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## 5:16-17

This phrase "a sin that leads to death" is solemn but we must face it. In one sense all sin is unto death because the wages of sin is death (Rom.6:23). But John is speaking here of sin that can put a person (is he thinking of one背slidden from profession of faith or from vital service?) beyond the point of no return! It is in this light we have the counsel not to pray! Consider these references and be sobered: 1 Sam.12:23; 16:1; Zech.7:11-13. Our reaction to this thought may be to say that only God knows when this line has been crossed, and that is true. But if this causes us to view our own sins and trifling with our high and holy calling lightly, and in consequence view lightly the wrong dealings of others in respect of God, there is something far wrong. These verses should generate in us the fear of the Lord that drives us to our knees in prayer for others as well as ourselves. There is an echo here of the words of Jesus in Matt. 12:31-32 and Mark 3:28-29. It is possible to go on so long and so far resisting, refusing and rejecting the claims of Christ for service as well as salvation that the power of repentance and remedy is lost. There are many Christian people who have at some time or other manifested a very real and vital spirit but who are now "dead". Their apathy and indifference towards spiritual things is frightening, not least because it is in practice impossible to get through to them. The last thing in the world they might possibly consider is that they are not right with God. It is obvious to all but themselves.

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**5:16-17**

In considering this deeply mysterious phrase, a "sin that leads to death" we remind ourselves that no truly born-again soul can ever be eternally lost; and we rejoice in all the promises of the Bible that tell of forgiveness and restoration for the prodigals. But we dare not sit lightly to sin and its consequences, be they spiritual paralysis and death, or physical deterioration leading to premature death as is indicated in 1 Cor. 5:5 and 11:30. There are many warning passages in the Bible that are deserving of close attention so that we may be made alive to the danger of carelessness. Read Hebrews 2:1-3; 3:7-13; 4:1-3; 5:11-6:12; 10:23-35; 12:12-17. This is a theme that runs right through the whole Bible, illustrating from history the truth of Genesis 6:3 AV - "My Spirit shall not always strive with man" You see it in the book that reveals the very heart of God's love, Hosea 4:17. You have the same inevitable issue in Zech. 7:11-13 and it is confirmed in Romans 1:28, although spiritual "death" is not always accompanied by such obvious evidences of godlessness. Little wonder we read of Jesus weeping over a city that was impervious to the appeals of grace. And there is no more solemn word than His when He affirmed, "Ye will not come to Me that ye might have life" (John 5:40 AV). When you add to this John's instruction here not to pray, you realise that the plea of ignorance (1 Tim. 1:13) is no longer valid. We are dealing with very practical issues and return to them tomorrow.

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**5:16-17**

It is manifestly clear that John is speaking here of our "brothers", that is of believers who go wrong, who go off the rails and never get back on again. In them and with them something dies and they may or may not be conscious of it. You see it in Samson (Judges 16:20), who presumed upon God and followed the dictates of his heart without reference to God. You see it in Saul (1 Sam. 26:21 and 15:24-26), whose wilfulness set him at cross purposes with God. You see it in Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10), who quite deliberately set out to live a lie and pass themselves off as spiritual believers. You see it in others (1 Tim. 1:18-20), whose doctrinal position was adjusted to permit their activities. Can God stand aside and be indifferent to this? Would you want Him to be so? He judges by entering into a situation (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11), and by actions as well as words, works for the eternal not the temporal blessing of His children. God is prepared to use fire if need be (1 Cor. 3:13-15), and a man like Paul is prepared to place himself under severe restraint rather than be rejected and become "disqualified from further service." (1 Cor. 9:24-27) Our readings of the past few days have been the "strong meat" of the Scriptures and we do well to have a twofold reaction. First to pray with the Psalmist in Psalm 19:7-14. Then to pray with exceeding earnestness for those who are our friends and about whom we are spiritually concerned, for we are our brother's keeper.

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**5:18**

With exquisite balance of grace the Scripture speaks immediately after the solemn messages of warning a glorious word of assurance. Disturbed by the searching Word of God that leaves us with no secrets, and fearful of the innate treachery of our own hearts, we draw tremblingly nearer to God. We know we are Christians even after the many tests of this whole epistle. Indeed, the Word has confirmed in us that we are in truth the children of God. But what of the future? We say we have slipped before and may well slip back again. Here is the word we need. We do not want to go on sinning (3:6, 9). More than ever our desire is to be right and true and good in relation to God and to men. But the battle is fierce and the enemy subtle. Listen to this description of your life . "We know that the true child of God does not sin; he is in the charge of God's own Son and the evil one must keep his distance." (J.B.Phillips) This is not a debatable point. It is one of the three great affirmations John makes in v.18-20, and we must hold firmly to it in faith. It is by faith that we keep ourselves anchored in the love of God (Jude 20-21) and by faith that we enjoy the victory of God. But it is God who keeps us, as the whole Bible testifies (Jude 24-25; 1 Peter 1:3-9).

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**5:19**

To make the first affirmation of this verse is not pride, but simply the recognition of a fundamental fact. We are of God, and we know it, and we recognise this to be the work of God, resting in no way upon our merit. "It is a splendid but it is an awful thing to say. It is to be conscious that the hand of God has been laid upon us, to have felt the breath of the Eternal pass over our spirit to awaken and transform. It is to know that there is a power working within us each, at the root of our nature, that is infinitely wiser and stronger and better than ourselves; a Spirit planted in our hearts which comes directly from the being and will of the Living God our Father; and links us individually to Him. To know this is to hold a distinction immeasurably above all earthly glory. It is to be charged with a principle of righteousness that can dissolve every bond of iniquity, that treads down worldly fear and pleasure, and makes us, living or dying, more than conquerors." (G.G.Findlay) Such thoughts make us conscious of our high calling and dignity, and turn us afresh to God, the lifter-up of our heads (Psalm 3) and to God the all-sufficient one (Psalm 91). "We are His people, we His care, - Our souls and all our mortal frame," (Watts) and none can pluck us out of His hand. Nor can all the slanders of men and devils ever alter this for one solitary moment. We know Him, whom we have believed (2 Tim. 1:12) and, having been given no cause to doubt or desert Him, we stand where He has placed us and with quiet assurance declare that we are of God.

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**5:19**

In the second statement of the verse John affirms the position and condition of the whole world order. It lies under the control of the wicked one. If we are not of God, we are *in* the wicked one. This is the great, inescapable division and the recognition of it will give the dynamic of purpose to our whole Christian lives. But the bringing together of these two categorically opposed groups indicates the inevitable enmity between them. The one will try unremittingly to assail the other, and we must discern the total kingdom of evil that is our sworn enemy and which will never be changed. You note that John says the world "lies" (AV) in the evil one. It is not depicted as struggling to escape but as lying quietly asleep and, no doubt, prepared to laugh uproariously at anyone who mentions the Devil, let alone his power. It is from this terrible bondage that we have been delivered, and it is because we have been delivered that the Devil is such a constant, vociferous and furious enemy. It is not surprising that Christians have more battles than other people and it is wrong for us to assume too quickly that the battles are "our own fault". We wrestle not against flesh and blood, our own or other people's, but against the personal powers of evil that rule this world order (Eph. 6:10-20). We must see ourselves as living in enemy territory, and frame our life, our speech and our silence accordingly. We live side by side with the children of disobedience (Eph. 2: 2), among whom we would still be, but for the grace of God. But we are not one with them now, nor are they one with us. There is a great gulf fixed and there is no middle way. But if we believe the world to be in the predicament spoken of here, it should give our evangelism a great sense of urgency.

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**5:20**

The third great affirmation John makes declares Jesus Christ to be the foundation of the whole of faith and life. The Gospel is undeniable historical and theological fact, for the Son of God has come. It is also a matter of experience, for He has given us understanding and knowledge in relation to His Person and His work. Everything centres in Him, in who He is and what He has done. Apart from Jesus we have no full saving revelation of God, and apart from Jesus there is no answer to our sin and no work of reconciliation to bring us to God. It is Jesus first and last, and what we have been given in Him we have been given for time and for eternity, and it will never be taken from us. Through Christ we not only know God, the one true and living God, but we are in Him. Our life is hid with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). It is this bedrock assurance that enables us to stand even when the very fabric of experience in the world seems to be tearing apart. We are persuaded that nothing can separate us from Christ or from God. Read Romans 8: 28-39 and let your heart be glad, and thankful.

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**5:20**

When John says, "We know," he is saying something that exasperates the worldling because he cannot understand it. "So long as Christianity is thought of in terms of the possibility of rational proofs and philosophical probabilities, then arguments are likely to continue. But one does not waste time trying to prove what one knows, and the believer can afford to smile at the cleverest and most convincing 'proofs', given with the greatest force and persuasiveness by agnostics, humanists and others, that the Christian faith is intellectually and logically impossible of acceptance: for he *knows* - knows that Christ has come (the perfect tense denoting that the effect of His coming has remained), and that the understanding He has given of the unseen world is such as to remove the whole issue from the realm of argument or doubt. "We know!" (Rev. J. Philip) Of course, the knowledge or understanding we have is not the result of our own wisdom or intellect, it has been given to us, as John says. It is God who has opened our eyes to see, our ears to hear, and our hearts to respond. Think of the story in the Gospel with the words, "Whereas I was blind, now I see." (John 9:25). The last statement in v.20 could refer to Jesus Christ, just mentioned, and this would give a tremendous affirmation of the deity of Jesus Christ. Or it could mean that this God who is made known in Jesus is the only true God, whom to know is life eternal; see John 17, especially verse 3.

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**5:21**

What affection and yet what grave earnestness there is in this last word from John. The word 'keep' means to 'guard' and is used in relation to a flock (Luke 2:8), a trust (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:12, 14), or a prisoner (Acts 12:4). Jesus Himself is the great keeper (John 17:12) as was affirmed in 1 John 5: 18. Of course the believer himself must exercise a sleepless vigilance in the presence of the ever active enemy. The only safety is to keep so close to the side of Jesus that the evil one will not dare come near. But if we give him a moment's opportunity he will take it and will have us well on the way to idolatry of one form or another before we know where we are. Keep yourselves from idols by keeping yourselves in Christ (Jude 20-25). An idol is anything or anyone which threatens to take, in the affections of our hearts, the place which belongs exclusively to God. John may be referring to actual pagan idolatries, for Christians can at times fall into the grossest forms of evil. He may be indicating the danger of speculative philosophising which has sprung adrift from the Scriptures. He may be referring to activities which were ostensibly Christian but which were in fact, "second-rate" service being offered to God in place of true spiritual discipleship. Whatever hinders you from being all-in-all for Christ, *get rid of it*. This is the pleading of love and grace (Hosea 14:1-8). It is also serious. Jesus' words, though not to be taken in a physical sense, make plain just how serious He is. Read Matt.5:27-30.

"The dearest idol I have known,  
Whate'er that idol be,  
Help me to tear it from Thy throne,  
And worship only Thee." (Cowper)

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# George Philip Bible Reading In Book