

1 JOHN

1:1 – 3:1

An Exposition of the First Epistle of John

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1 John by A.W. Pink (1886-1952) is the complete book in a special eBook edition. Chapel Library's printed edition is available in North America in two paperback volumes: Part One with chapters 1-20 (1:1-2:11), and Part Two with chapters 21-39 (2:12-3:1). Each chapter was written as a serial article in Pink's *Studies in the Scriptures*, the expository journal he published monthly without interruption from 1922 to 1953. These chapters appeared in 1951-1953. The author passed away in 1952 before completing his exposition of the remainder of 1 John.

Introduction

When we completed our 1,500-page exposition of John's Gospel more than twenty years ago, we were urged to take up the *First Epistle of John*, but felt quite incompetent to engage in it. The closing books of the New Testament, as their position indicates, require their expositor to possess a fuller knowledge of God's Word and a more mature spiritual experience than do the earlier ones. The style of John's Epistle is quite different from that of the other apostles, being more abstract, and for that reason more difficult of apprehension and elucidation. We still feel very unfit for the task upon which we are now entering, but if we wait until we deem ourselves spiritually qualified it will never be essayed. During the past quarter of a century we have given no little prayerful thought to its contents, and have studied carefully all the writings of others on it which the divine providence has brought our way. The benefits of, and gleanings from this we shall now share with our Christian friends.

Not only is John's Epistle much more difficult than his Gospel (which is manifestly designed for babes in Christ, though even the 'fathers' never outgrow it) and the other apostolic writings, but it does not lend itself so readily to expositions of equal length. Some of its contents afford much more scope to a sermonizer than do others; and thus, while a whole article may be profitably devoted to certain single verses, others require to be grouped together, and because of this the reader is likely to be disappointed at the varying lengths of their treatment. It is perhaps for these reasons that comparatively little has been written upon this epistle—scarcely anything during the past fifty years. So far as we know, none of the Puritans attempted a systematic exposition of the same, for N. Hardy's (1665) scarcely comes under that category. Yet this portion of God's Word is equally necessary, important, and valuable for His children as are all the others, though what they are likely to get out of it will largely depend upon their acquaintance with all preceding books and with the constancy and intimacy of their communion with the Triune God.

A brief word concerning its writer. So far as we are aware, no evangelical of any weight has ever denied that this epistle was written by the same person of blessed memory as the one to whom the fourth Gospel is unanimously attributed. There is clear and conclusive evidence, both external and internal, of this. As Barnes stated of the epistle: "It is referred to by Polycarp at the beginning of the second century, it is quoted by Papias and also by Irenaeus." It is found in the old Syriac version, which was probably made very early in the second century. Internally the evidence is strong that the same hand wrote this epistle as penned the fourth Gospel. The resemblances are many and striking, the modes of expression sufficient to identify the one employing them. The similarity of the opening verse of each is too close, yet the variations too marked, to have been

made by an imposter. The reference to the “new commandment” (never mentioned by the other apostles) in 2:8 (and see 3:11) finds its source in 13:34 of John’s Gospel. The reader may also compare 3:1 with John 1:12; 3:2 with John 17:24; 3:8 with John 8:44; 3:13 with John 15:20; 4:9 with John 3:16, etc.

To whom it was written

It is correctly designated one of the “General Epistles,” for it is not addressed to any particular individual or local assembly. Obviously it is designed for the whole family of God. Yet, as one reads it through, one gets a clear impression that John was intimately acquainted with those who first read his letter, that the majority of them were the seals of his own ministry, as his repeated “*my little children*” seems to indicate. As we shall yet have occasion to show it was Jewish Christians who were immediately concerned; 5:13 makes it evident that John wrote to believers, and by linking that verse with 2:3-5, we perceive that it was his design to aid them in the important task of self-examination, that they might be more fully assured of their interest in Christ. From 2:18-26, we learn that the original recipients of this epistle were being assailed by false teachers, and it was John’s object to counteract (not refute seriatim!) their error, and confirm the same in their most holy faith.

Though there is nothing in the epistle to tell us the date when it was written, yet we may approximate it pretty closely. That it was penned much later than Paul’s epistles appears from the fact that with John “the world” and “the whole world” (5:19) comprise all that is outside Christianity. Not so with Paul: in his time there were two distinct camps hostile to Christianity—Judaism and heathendom. But the ancient kingdom of God had now passed away. The temple of Jerusalem was destroyed. After A.D. 70 the Jews had no power to persecute Christians. It was manifestly written after his Gospel, for such statements as 2:17 and 5:6 are unintelligible unless the reader has a knowledge of his Gospel—not only in general, but in its detailed expressions. The entire absence of such terms as affliction, suffering, tribulation, intimates that this letter was composed when external opposition to Christianity had largely subsided, when outward hostility was giving place to the corruption of the truth from within. Thus it must have first seen the light very near the close of the first century.

In this epistle the enemies of the saints are neither Jews nor Gentiles as such, but “Antichrists,” counterfeit Christians. Just as Satan himself is presented to us in the Scriptures under two outstanding characters—as the lion and as the serpent, as adversary and as seducer—so are his emissaries and his children. There are two distinct classes by which the truth of God is dishonoured: by those who oppose and corrupt it in doctrine, and by those who misrepresent and malign it in practice—cf. the Sadducees (Act 23:8) and the Pharisees (Mat 23:3). Heretics, who pervert the Scriptures or openly contradict the fundamentals of the Faith, are the more easily recognized: against them the apostle warns in 2:18, 26; 3:7; 4:1-3. But numerous formalists and hypocrites shelter behind an empty profession, and are not so readily identified, for they hold the letter of the truth, acknowledging it with their lips, though they walk not in it nor are their lives transformed by it. Concerning these John has much to say. Right from the beginning he distinguishes sharply between the real Christian and the nominal one (1:6-7) and continues doing so (2:3-5, etc.).

The several aims of the apostle are easily perceived: in general it was to make a practical application of his Gospel, as appears from a comparison of 5:13, with John 20:31, and as 2:7, confirms. John sought that his beloved children should have just views of their divine Saviour, an intelligent faith in Him, and that they might adorn their profession by a holy and consistent walk—2:1. It is evident from his “I have not written unto you because ye know not the truth, but because ye know it” (2:21) that he was not addressing himself to those who were uninstructed, but rather to those who were well indoctrinated—compare also 2:20, 27. Thus his purpose was not so much to inform as to edify, not to tell them something new, but to confirm them in what they had already heard. This was the more necessary because some of their original number had apostatized (2:19) and false teachers were seeking to corrupt them. Let not their faith be shaken by the former, and let them heed his warnings and then they would not be drawn away by the wiles of the latter.

A careful reading of the epistle makes it plain that another important end which the apostle had before him was to confute those who taught that because salvation is by grace God’s people are not “under the Law” or required to keep the divine commandments. Antinomianism had raised its hideous head even in his day, and it devolved upon John to counteract the same. This it is which explains his frequent reference to “the commandments” (2:4, etc.) which, in its singular or plural form, occurs no less than thirteen times in this epistle. As students of ecclesiastical history are aware, those known as “The Libertines” had attained unto considerable prominence by the end of the first century. Their very name is sufficient to indicate their character. Peter, in his second epistle, described their forerunners as “false prophets” who, “while they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption” (2:1, 19), and Jude had spoken of them as “ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness,” in this way, “denying the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ” (verse 4). John denounces them as “Antichrists.”

There is little indication that John wrote according to a preconceived and definite plan, yet his thoughts are orderly. While the epistle is far from being a systematic doctrinal treatise, nevertheless, for its understanding, a close acquaintance with the distinctively doctrinal epistles preceding it is requisite. One expositor thereon said, “I am deeply convinced, after years of thought about it, that it can be studied aright exegetically only when it is studied theologically...no one is competent to deal in detail with this wonderful book who is not familiar with the evangelical system as a whole, and able therefore to appreciate the bearing of John’s line of thought in connection with it” (R. Candlish, 1866). That remark is, in our judg-

ment, borne out by the position his epistle occupies in the Sacred Canon. Yet another and higher qualification is needed, namely that spiritual-mindedness which is the fruit of mature Christian experience. But the most difficult part of the expositor's task here is to trace the connection of the apostle's successive lines of thought. Our main endeavour will be to bring out the general scope and tenor of his teaching as simply as we can.

“The true knowledge of Christ is the one only key by which all the treasures contained in this epistle can be opened, for it contains a spiritual treatise on communion with Christ, and with the Father in Him, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us. We can have no communion with the Three in Jehovah but as we have a distinct scriptural knowledge of the revelation given concerning Them in the sacred record. No man can call Jesus Lord, but by the Holy Spirit. This epistle...sets forth the real fellowship which the apostles and saints in that age had with the Holy Trinity, and what all the saints in all succeeding ages are to expect and enjoy, in their measure and degree, until the same is consummated with the Eternal Three in the state of everlasting glory. As this epistle begins with this most sublime subject, so it is pursued throughout the whole of it: in showing the fruits and effects which the true knowledge of and communion with the Lord produce in the minds, lives and conversations of such as know Him, and have free and frequent access to Him” (S. E. Pierce, 1817).

What has just been quoted gives much the best summary and coincides most closely with our own concept of anything we have seen on the subject. It intimates that its grand theme is fellowship with God in and through Christ. Where that is enjoyed by individual saints, it necessarily leads to fellowship one with another. As usual, the key is hung upon the door, for in 1:3 the apostle states that the design before him is “that you also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.” This fellowship is the quintessence of blessedness, but only the regenerate enter into it. It is “in the light,” with the Holy One, and therefore impossible for those who are dead in trespasses and sins (1:5, 7). Yet the Christian's infirmities, be they what they may, are not to be considered as hindrances to his communion with the Lord, since full provision has been made for him in the all-sufficient antidote of Christ's blood (1:7) and advocacy (2:1). Later, John goes on to show that this fellowship is in righteousness and in love; but we will not further anticipate.

Among the many peculiarities of style which mark John in this epistle, we may mention that, negatively, there is almost an entire absence of that logical reasoning that is so prominent in Paul's epistles—which is just what might be expected from a simple fisherman in contradistinction from a scholar. There is no “according as” or “for this cause.” “Wherefore” occurs but once (3:12), and there it is a question “why?” “Therefore” is found in 2:24; 3:1, and 4:5; yet in neither instance as a conclusion drawn from a preceding train of thought. Instead of the argumentative method, John is all for direct and positive assertions. Paul lays down a premise as a foundation on which he builds what follows; John simply affirms the truth in simple form. And so it is in connection with the ministry of the Word. Some of God's servants deal with their subjects principally in a doctrinal way, others in a solemn method of pointed averment,¹ yet both are used by the Spirit of God, and are best suited to different types of Christians. The Lord is pleased to bestow a variety of gifts on His servants for the good of His people at large.

John indeed has a style all his own, differing noticeably from all other New Testament writers. This epistle contains no salutation, yet it breathes a spirit of warmth unto those addressed. No reference is made to either of the ordinances. No prayer is recorded in it, though definite encouragement and instruction are given to praying souls. There are no predictions in it, no delineation of the future as in the epistles of all his fellow apostles. Instead of describing the conditions which should characterize “the last days,” he declares “it is the last time” (2:18). Instead of foretelling the appearing of a future Antichrist, John refers to the Antichrists who were then upon the stage (2:18, and 4:3).

Turning to the positive side, one who attentively reads through the epistle at a sitting will at once be struck by the fact that it possesses and combines certain definite qualities which at first sight seem quite opposed to each other. Its style of expression is simple and unadorned. It abounds in words of one syllable and contains few that a child would have difficulty in pronouncing. Its sense is clear and patent. Nevertheless, there is no lack of dignity in its language, and its matter is elevated and sublime. Its tone warms our hearts, yet the truth it expresses causes us to stand in awe. In its profoundest mysteries are touched upon and depths are sounded which no finite mind can fathom; still, its speech is plain, and the terms used are non-technical. “He writes at once with the most commanding authority and most loving tenderness; with the profoundest wisdom and the most touching simplicity; the most searching knowledge of the heart, its difficulties and frailties, and the most elevating and bracing courage and confidence; the gentlest affection, and the most pitiless and sternest condemnation of willful departure from the truth in practice or opinion” (Ellicott).

Much is said about love, and nowhere is a spirit of charity more admirably and forcibly inculcated. But there are also a bold outspokenness and sternness which make us shrink. The love enjoined is far from being a sickly sentiment or effeminate weakness, being a holy grace, which instead of preventing faithful rebuke and severe denunciation promotes them. In such verses as 1:5; 2:22; 3:8, 10, 15; 4:20; 5:10, we hear the voice of “the son of thunder” (Mar 3:17), vehement against every insult to the majesty of the Lord. It is ostensibly written to promote assurance in the saints (5:13), yet nowhere else in the Word are we so often called upon to close self-examination and unsparing testing of ourselves. This epistle might well be termed a touchstone by which we may discern between the genuine gold and the counterfeit. It frequently utters the lan-

¹ **averment** – assertion as a fact.

guage of confidence, yet as often uses that which is discriminating. As Spurgeon² well said, “The apostle mingles caution with caress, and qualifies the most soothing consolations with such stern warning that in well-nigh every sentence he constrains us to deep searching of heart.”

In our opening paragraph we mentioned the abstract (and absolute) character of many of John’s statements. It is most important that the reader should understand this and bear it in mind. Failure to do so will lead to a serious misapprehension of many verses. In 1:3, he says “truly our fellowship is with the Father”—not “ought to be”; he speaks characteristically, taking no notice of the things which hinder it. To the “young men” he says, “You have overcome the wicked one” (2:13), making no mention of their failures. “He that loves his brother abides in the light” (2:10)—nothing is said about the degree of love, it is simply contrasted with “hatred” (ver. 11). “For whosoever is born of God overcomes the world” (5:4)—no account is there taken of the presence of the flesh with its unbelief and self-will. John abounds in brief factual statements. “We know all things...you need not that any man teach you” (2:20, 27) is left unqualified. To John there are only two postures of heart: for or against—the points of transition from the one to the other are ignored. Contrasts are put in their sharpest form: light and darkness—no intermediate twilight; life and death—nothing which answers to mere existence.

Throughout the epistle there rings loudly the note of certainty. The two Greek words used for “know” occur no less than thirty-six times in its five chapters, examples of which are: “We know that we have passed from death unto life...hereby we know that we are of the truth” (3:14, 19). “Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us...And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us” (4:13, 16). The epistle closes with another threefold “we know” (5:18-20). Again and again the apostle describes simple but definite marks by which the child of God may be identified, and distinguish himself from self-deceivers and hypocrites. Thus, it was not addressed to those who resided in “Doubting Castle,”³ and any who dwell in its dismal dungeons should find here that which, by the divine blessing, will deliver him from there. Nor was it only a small and particularly favoured class which shared the apostle’s own assurance, or only mature Christians, as his “I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father” (2:13) shows.

That his epistle is an intensely practical one is evinced in many ways. For example, not once is the word “knowledge” found in the form of a noun, but always as a verb. The same is true of “faith”; he almost invariably uses the verbal form. With John doctrine is not mere dogma, but faith in action. Truth is not merely a theory, but an energy, which lives and moves in the new life. There is scarcely any strictly “doctrinal” teaching, and very few direct exhortations. It is mainly the vital and experimental side of things, and thus it is that the line of demarcation and separation is so sharply and often drawn between genuine and graceless professors—not to discourage believers, but to inform and safeguard them against being deceived and imposed upon. John did far more than deal with forms of error which were local and ephemeral, refuting those of his day in a manner by which he enunciated principles of universal importance and of almost illimitable application—equally suited to the exposure of error in every age.

It is remarkable how many different topics are introduced into this brief letter, so that we are almost justified in saying with J. Morgan, “The whole realm of evangelical truth is traversed by the apostle.” Blessed it is to see how the balance of truth is preserved there. No one would regard it as a theological treatise, yet most of the fundamentals of our faith are briefly set forth in it. The divine incarnation (1:1-3), the nature of God (1:5; 4:8), the atonement and advocacy of Christ (2:1-2), the person and work of the Holy Spirit (3:24), regeneration (2:29), the Trinity (5:7), etc. The epistle is far from being an appeal to emotionalism, yet it bids believers, “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us” (3:1), and while affording no encouragement to rest upon feelings (as its repeated dogmatic “we know” shows), yet it is written that “our joy may be full.” While it is not a discourse on humanitarianism, it stresses practical altruism (3:17-18). Though not a discussion of eschatology, yet the return of Christ (2:28) and, “the day of judgment” (4:17) are mentioned. Thus this epistle supplies an admirable corrective to one-sided views of the Christian life.

² **Charles H. Spurgeon** (1834-1892): Influential English Baptist. History’s most widely read preacher (apart from those found in Scripture). Today, there is available more material written by Spurgeon than by any other Christian author, living or dead. Born at Kelvedon, Essex, England.

³ **Doubting Castle** – the place in John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) where Christian and Faithful were tormented by Giant Despair after leaving the commanded narrow way for an easier way to the Celestial City.

Chapter 1

The Humanity of Christ

1 John 1:1

*“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard,
which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked
upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life”*

This epistle bears no superscription as do all others (save Hebrews), including John’s own second and third ones, and makes no reference to any particular class of persons by which we may ascertain to whom it was first addressed. We know from Galatians 2:9, that John was one of the apostles who ministered to the circumcision, and such expressions as “from the beginning” in 2:7, “you have known him” in 2:13, and “you have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists...they went out from us” (2:18-19) intimate that it was primarily Jewish Christians to whom John wrote. Yet mention of “the world” in 4:14, and the “whole world” in 2:2, and the admonition “keep yourselves from idols” in 5:21, are more than hints that it was designed for Gentile believers too. The epistle is remarkable for the absence of any local coloring or personal references. While enunciating vital truths and combating fundamental errors, the names of no places or persons are mentioned. Thus it contains nothing which is merely ephemeral or provincial, but that only which is suited to all God’s children till the end of time.

It is, then, a general epistle: not to any particular assembly, but for the whole family of God. In accordance with that fact we find no reference is here made to elders or deacons. The privileges described and the duties enjoined pertain alike to the entire Household of Faith. John deals with vital and basic principles, and does not (like the other apostles) point out how they are to be applied to the various relationships of life. Though he treats in some detail of both righteousness and love, he gives no specific instances of how they are to be exercised between husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants, subjects and kings. He even avoids the term “saints” preferring to address his readers by the more familiar “brethren” (2:7) and “my brethren” (3:13), though more frequently employing the endearing expression “little children” and “my little children” which no other apostle did (unless Galatians 4:19, be the sole exception). This has led the thoughtful to conclude that John must have been of a great age—certainly there would be no propriety in one of fewer years so addressing even the “fathers” (2:12-13).

Since the apostle was about to write on fellowship, *his design and scope* in the opening verses appear to be twofold. First, he intimates that the initial requirement for communion with God is the possession of divine life in the soul, and that this life is found in the incarnate Son, here designated “the Word of life” and “that Eternal Life.” Calvin⁴ came very near the mark when he opened his commentary on this epistle by saying, “He shows first that life has been exhibited to us in Christ; which, as it is an incomparable good, ought to rouse and inflame all our powers with a marvelous desire for it and with the love of it. It is said, indeed, in a few plain words, that life is manifested; but if we consider how miserable and horrible a condition death is, and what is the kingdom of glory and immortality, we shall perceive that there is something here more magnificent than can be expressed in any words.” It is ever the Spirit’s object to magnify that blessed One who is despised and rejected of men, and here He does so by presenting Him as the Source and Fount of life.

The second obvious aim of the apostle in his introductory sentence was to confirm the assurance of God’s children, and show what a firm foundation has been laid for their fellowship with the Father and with His Son. “These words ‘which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes,’ etc. serve to strengthen our faith in the Gospel. Nor does he, indeed, without reason, make so many asseverations; for since our salvation depends upon the Gospel, its certainty is in the highest degree necessary. And how difficult it is to believe, every one of us knows too well by his own experience. To believe is not lightly to form an opinion, or to assent only to what is said, but is a firm, undoubting conviction, so that we may dare to subscribe to the truth as fully proved. It is for this reason that the apostle here heaps together so many things in confirmation of the Gospel” (Calvin). The Gospel is no spurious invention of men, but is the annunciation of reliable witnesses who personally consorted with Christ Himself (Luk 1:1-4).

The absence of John’s name from the opening verses of this epistle is in full harmony with the fact that in his Gospel he never referred unto himself except when the occasion required him to do so, and then only by such a circumlocution as “that other disciple” (Joh 20:3-4), or “that disciple whom Jesus loved” (21:7, 20)—not, it is observed, the boastful “that dis-

⁴ **John Calvin** (1509-1564) – the father of Reformed and Presbyterian theology. During the course of his ministry in Geneva, lasting nearly twenty-five years, Calvin lectured to theological students and preached an average of five sermons a week in addition to writing a commentary on nearly every book of the Bible as well as numerous treatises on theological topics. His correspondence fills eleven volumes. Born in Noyon, Picardie, France.

ciple who loved Jesus"! As there, so here, the writer retires into the background, unwilling to speak of himself, resembling in this his namesake, who, when asked, "What sayest thou of thyself??" answered, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness" (Joh 1:22-23)—heard, but not seen. It may also be noted that John's silence about himself is in beautiful accord with his theme, for real fellowship so engages the heart with its Object as to lose sight of self. Yet, because his task required it, he gives plain indication that he stood in the nearest possible relation to the One he adored, just as in his Gospel he was wont to do so under similar circumstances.

"*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard...of the word of life.*" A superficial reading of this verse has led many to conclude that John begins his epistle in the same way as he had his Gospel—by affirming that eternality of the Son—but a more careful examination of its language should correct that impression. There are indeed several resemblances between the two verses, yet there are notable differences. Each opens at once by presenting the person of Christ: without any preliminaries, the Lord Jesus is immediately set before the reader. Both Gospel and epistle commence by referring to Him under the title of "the Logos." In each mention is made of "the beginning." The contrasts are equally marked. In John 1:1, Christ is viewed absolutely, in His Godhead; here, relatively, as incarnate: in the former, His deity is contemplated; in the latter, His humanity. There it is "in the beginning," here "from the beginning," which express entirely distinct concepts. Quite another "beginning" is treated of: in the former, before time and creation began; in the latter, the opening of this Christian era.

Two different interpretations have been given to the clause "*that which was from the beginning.*" First, that it refers to Christ's pre-incarnate and eternal existence, declaring what He was before He appeared on earth. Second, that it described what characterized Christ from the time of His incarnation, after He became "manifest" on earth. That all things were created by our Lord we firmly believe; of His eternal preexistence we have not a shadow of doubt; but we do not think that is in view here. Before anyone assumes that "in the beginning" and "from the beginning" are identical expressions, he should go to the trouble of very carefully examining every instance in the New Testament where the latter is found and ascertain how it is used. As he does so, he will discover it occurs in widely different connections and is employed in various senses. In 2 Thessalonians 2:13 (and probably there alone) it certainly has the force of eternity. In Matthew 19:8, "from the beginning" signifies the commencement of human history. But in John 8:25; 15:27; 16:4, it clearly means from the start of our Lord's public ministry.

The words "from the beginning" in our opening verse are found six times more in this epistle, and in none of them do they import eternity! "Brothers, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you have heard from the beginning" (2:7)—from the lips of Christ. "You have known him from the beginning" (2:13)—when He was first made manifest to you. The same is meant in 2:24, and 3:11. "The devil sins from the beginning" (3:8)—of human history, for "murderer" in John 8:44 is literally "manslayer." In the opening verse of John's Gospel Christ is depicted in His eternal relation to the Godhead, but here in a time state, as incarnate, as the clauses which follow make clearly evident, for their obvious design is to demonstrate the reality of His manhood. The Son's assumption of flesh and blood opened a new era, changing as it did the world's calendar from A.M. to A.D.⁵ Christ's descent to this earth inaugurated a fresh "beginning," when there was to be a "new covenant." Now began to be brought in the substance of all the Levitical shadows; now began the Messianic prophecies to receive their fulfillment.

Quotations from several orthodox expositors of the highest repute could be given to show that in what we have said above no "strange doctrine" has been advanced. Let the following one suffice. The translator and annotator upon Calvin's commentary on this epistle said in his footnote to verse one, "It is more consistent with the passage to take 'from the beginning' here as from the beginning of the Gospel, from the beginning of the ministry of our Saviour, because what had been from the beginning was what the apostles had heard and seen. That another view has been taken of those words has been owing to an over-anxiety on the part of many, especially of the fathers, to establish the deity of our Saviour; but that is what is sufficiently evident from the second verse." It is the human nature of our Lord that verse one treats of, and most assuredly that had an historical "beginning."

Most of the commentators have had considerable difficulty with the prefatory "*That which was from the beginning*" and varied have been the speculations as to why the neuter gender was used rather than "*He who was.*" Obviously, the words are to be explained by the clauses which immediately follow: yet some deem even them to be too indefinite to enable us to arrive at any certainty. On the face of it, it appears incongruous to refer to a divine person as "that which": on the other side, one can scarcely speak of seeing and handling with our hands a "Message." But no difficulty remains if we take the whole verse to be treated of our Lord's manhood. The humanity of Christ was not a person, but a thing which He condescended to assume and take into union with His person. Proof of this is found in the words of the Angel to Mary, "that holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God" (Luk 1:35)—just as a woman is given the name of her husband as soon

⁵ **A.M. to A.D.** – Before A.D. (Latin *Anno Domini*, "the year of our Lord") was generally adopted in the dating of documents, various other systems were employed at different periods and in different countries. The reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian is usually called the "Era of the Martyrs," and its abbreviation is A.M. (for Latin *anno-martyrdum*). The "Era of the Martyrs" is also called the "Diocletian Era" because it is dated from 284, the year this bitterly anti-Christian emperor began to reign. This is in recognition of the severe persecution of Christian churches under his reign.

as she is wed to him. The Word's becoming flesh and tabernacling among men marked a new beginning in the world's history.

"That which was from the beginning." Those words, when taken by themselves, are admittedly indefinite and mysterious; yet men have greatly added to their difficulty by making "from the beginning" synonymous with "in the beginning," i.e. without beginning. If "from the beginning" has the force of from eternity, then no satisfactory explanation can be given of the neuter and abstract "that which," for the allusion could not be to anything created, since matter is not from everlasting; and so far as we have observed, none who take that view have made any real attempt to grapple with the difficulty. If "from the beginning" signifies from eternity, then it must be a divine person that is in view, and in such case "He who was" would be required. On the other hand, if the reference is to the divine incarnation, and more specifically still to the human nature which the Son of God took unto Himself, all difficulty vanishes.

In our introductory remarks, reference was made to the fact that those whom John immediately addressed were being assailed by heretical teachers (2:26). Many conjectures have been made as to the precise nature of their errors, and the names of those who propagated them. Most probably they were a branch of the Gnostics, Ebion and Cerentheus being the leaders; but this cannot be determined for sure. What we may be certain about them is, (1) that those who were then seeking to seduce John's converts had themselves once been professing Christians, but later apostatized (2:19); and (2) that they denied the reality of our Lord's humanity (4:3). It is, then, with the design of counteracting that error that John here lays so much emphasis upon the evidences which the incarnate Word had presented to the very senses of His apostles. The "Christian[?] Gnostics" taught that Christ's body was but a phantasm, a mere temporary appearance assumed for the benefit of the world.

"That which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life"—the "that which was from the beginning" is repeated (identically in the Greek) in each of the three clauses, in this way explaining it! In those words, John intimates (as the following verse more explicitly states) his intention of describing an experience and knowledge of Christ with which he and his fellow apostles have been favoured. It was far more than a message about life which had been delivered by word of mouth, more than a perfect but abstract ideal of life, which he would treat of, namely that Life which had appeared in personal and human form in Jesus of Nazareth, the promised Messiah, the incarnate Son, who had exhibited a life which was eternal and indestructible, even the very life of God. John's adding of one clause to another, in progressive and climacteric order, was designed not simply to show that he was speaking about Jesus Christ and none other, but rather to declare that that which was to be announced concerning Him was an absolute certainty and exhibited truth—not only the truth about Him, but what John himself had actually heard, seen, and handled of Him.

Immediately after his opening clause, John proceeded to give proofs that Christ was really and verily man, bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh: that "in all things it behoved him to be made like unto *his* brethren" (Heb 2:17). His body was a palpable one—visible, audible, tangible. By it the Saviour made full demonstration to each sense of their bodies that His was as real as were those of His apostles. The genuineness of Christ's humanity—denied by the Gnostics and by those now calling themselves Christian Scientists—is a cardinal doctrine of the faith once delivered to the saints, and for which we are bidden to "contend earnestly." In that body which God prepared Him (Heb 10:5)—which the Holy Spirit supernaturally produced from the substance of His mother—He lived, died, rose again, ascended to heaven, where He is now beheld in its glorified state; and in which He will yet come again (Act 1:11). At the divine incarnation the Son of God became what He was not before—"being found in fashion as a man" (Phi 2:8). Our nature was taken into union with His divine person. Thus, the first verse of our epistle is parallel with John 1:14, rather than with the opening verse of his Gospel.

John commences his epistle by setting before us God manifest in flesh, because He is the grand Subject of the Gospel, the Object of our faith, the Foundation of our hope, the One who brings us to and unites us in fellowship with the Father. The Gospel is no mere abstraction, but is inseparably connected with the Lord Jesus. As Levi Palmer (1902) so beautifully expressed it, "As the ray of light depends upon the sun, and a wave of sea upon the ocean, so Gospel truth is but the acts, and words, and glory of Christ." As it is impossible to know and receive Christ apart from the Gospel, so we cannot receive the Gospel except from Him. It was John's design to make known what sure and firm ground our faith in the Gospel rests upon. He relates not that which he had received second-hand, nor even what he had beheld in a vision, but rather that of which he had first-hand and ocular acquaintance. What he was advancing was real and true, in contrast with all that is merely imaginary, speculative, or dreamed about. His four verbs in verse one not only mark a progress from the more general to the more particular, but breathe a greater intensity as he proceeds.

"That which we have heard." John was with Christ throughout the whole of His ministry, and chronicled more of what He said than did any of his fellows. This is given the first place because the utterances of Christ are of more importance than His miracles; so in his Gospel John recorded a greater number of His discourses than did the other evangelists. This indicates the reverential esteem in which he held the Lord's teaching, as well as supplies guarantee of the accuracy of his report. "Heard" includes more than the actual sound of His voice, namely all the gracious words which issued from His mouth, and also possibly having a special allusion to John 13-16. "We have heard" goes deeper than the words of Christ falling upon their ears: it signifies that their souls had felt the power of what He said—"Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way?" (Luk 24:32). If the enemies of Christ acknowledged, "Never man spake like this man," what must the

regenerated apostles have felt? The Lord Jesus wrote nothing, but He spoke much, and we have great cause for thankfulness that God moved the apostles to record so much of what He said, that we too may hear Him (via the printed page) for ourselves.

“That which we have seen.” This is by no means to be restricted to His miracles of healing and other supernatural works, but understood as including the perfections displayed by His character and conduct as He, untiringly, “went about doing good.” Seen, “with our eyes” is added for the purpose of emphasis, to show the verity and corporeality of Christ, that it is an historical entity which is here in view. Here too the reference is not limited to the mere sight of their bodily eyes, but implies also their spiritual perception of His peerless excellency. “That which we have looked upon.” This is no tautology,⁶ but expresses a closer and more deliberate inspection, for which John (as one of the three in the innermost circle) had peculiar opportunities. “Looked upon” is the same Greek word as “we beheld his glory” in John 1:14, and means to gaze at with desire and delight. “And our hands have handled” probably has both a special reference to His resurrection body and a more general one to the closeness of their contact with Him during the days of His flesh; such precluding all possibility of any optical illusion.

The physical experience of the favoured apostles, as set forth by the four verbs in verse 1, is duplicated in the spiritual history of each Christian, and in the same progressive order. At first, his knowledge of Christ is limited to what he hears of Him in the Gospel. Then, when the miracle of grace has been wrought within him, he sees Christ with the eyes of faith—loving and giving Himself for him. Later, as he grows in grace, and becomes more and more enamoured of Him, he looks upon Him more steadfastly and closely with the eyes of love and adoration; the result of all being that, in a spiritual way, he handles Christ. He has become a bright, living, experiential reality to him. The matchless charms and superlative glories of the Saviour make everything else appear mean and contemptible to him. The soul now has before it a heavenly Object, infinitely excelling all the perishing things of earth. It is an inestimable privilege if reader and writer are among those who can say “we see Jesus” (Heb 2:9). Happy day, blessed hour, when our eyes were first opened to behold Him as the Redeemer of our souls. Oh, to behold Him more distinctly and devotedly. The more we contemplate His peerless person, amazing love, and perfect work, the sooner will sin lose its hold over us, the world its charms, and death be robbed of all terror.

For the young preacher we would suggest the following outline, *“The Divine Incarnation”*:

- (1) The new era which it inaugurated, (Gal 4:4).
- (2) Proofs of the reality of His humanity, (Joh 20:30-31).
- (3) The witnesses of it, the apostles, (Luk 1:2, 4).
- (4) The title here accorded Christ: “The Word of life”, (Act 3:15).
- (5) The bearing of this verse on the theme of the epistle.

Under these heads may be arranged most of the material in this article.

Chapter 2

The Life Manifested

1 John 1:2

“For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us”

It is very evident that John’s first epistle was designed as the sequel to and companion of his gospel (compare 20:31 and 1 John 5:13), and since he opened the one by a presentation of the deity of Christ, it was most fitting that he should commence the other with a setting forth of His humanity. This he does in the first verse, where most convincing proofs are supplied by reliable witnesses. “That which” (namely our Lord’s manhood) “was from the beginning” (of this Christian era). “That which we have heard”—speaking personally and audibly to us, and in power to our hearts. “That which we have seen with our eyes” in tangible form, furnishing conclusive evidence of the reality of His manhood. “That which we have looked

⁶ **tautology** – needless repetition of an idea in different words.

upon” as none of the world did: the surpassing splendour of His countenance when He was transfigured upon the holy mount; His anguished face in Gethsemane, when His features were more marred than any man’s; the marks of the cross in His resurrection-body; His beloved form as it gradually receded from our view at the time of His ascension (Act 1:11).

“*And our hands have handled.*” John, moved by the Holy Spirit, was determined to certify unto his readers the verity and corporeality of his Master’s manhood, that there might be no doubt whatever on that score. There was no possibility of the apostles being misled by an optical illusion. Peter had felt the firm grasp of Christ’s hand when He caught hold of him and delivered him from sinking in the sea. John himself had actually reclined upon His bosom. Thomas and his fellows had been invited to handle Him after He came forth triumphantly from the tomb. It was something far more substantial than an ecstatic vision which John was here relating. “The nature which Christ took when He was born of Mary, He lifted out of the grave at His resurrection. We have, therefore, a Saviour, who not merely became a man, but wears His glorified humanity in heaven. His incarnation is thus associated with the redemption of man. He took our nature, stood in our place, and has taken possession of heaven as our Representative” (James Morgan).

“*Of the Word of life,*” or more accurately, “concerning the Word of life”; that is to say, what has been so much insisted upon in the preceding clauses is intimately related to Him—His manhood is an essential part of the Mediator’s complex person. This title “the Word of life” at once informs us that the One whom John had in view was more than a man. “Life” is one of the prominent terms of this epistle, occurring no less than fourteen times. Three different words are employed in the Greek: here it is *zoe*, the one which has the fullest signification. It is used in John 1:4—“in him was life”; all life resides in Him. But that hardly seems the thought here, for it is not the Word in His essential being, but as incarnate: “For as the Father has life in himself; so has he given the Son to have life in himself” (Joh 5:26)—to administer and impart unto others. John’s design here was not so much to declare what the Saviour is in Himself, as to show what He is to His people—the Communicator of life to them.

“*The Word of life*” in this verse we regard as being almost parallel with His own averment in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life”—the Giver of life. As “the Word” (*logos*) He is the highest expression of God’s mind, the Revealer of the Godhead unto us, as “the Word of life” He is the Bestower of life upon us, and thus is the Link connecting us with God. If it is asked, What is the precise character of the “life” which Christ gives to His people? the answer is, Every kind that can be conceived. First, natural life, for He is the Author of our beings (Col 1:16). Second, spiritual life: “The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live” (Joh 5:25), that is, those dead in trespasses and sins shall be quickened by Him. Third, resurrection life: “...the hour is coming, in which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life” (Joh 5:28-29). Fourth, the life of glory: “When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with Him in glory” (Col 3:4). Well may He be designated “The prince of life” (Act 3:15)!

We can see no reason whatever why verse 2 should be placed in parentheses, for it is obviously a continuation of the former one, though with most important additions. This is yet more evident in the Greek, for it opens with the word *kai* which is usually translated “and” and scarcely ever “for.” “And the life was manifested.” A divine person descended into the human domain. It was into a realm of darkness that the Light entered. It was unto a fallen and sinful people, a world which lay in the wicked one, that the Son of God now came. It was in the midst of a scene where death reigned that the Life was manifested. This divine title is very emphatic. He is life essentially, He is life manifestatively, He is life communicatively. Christ may well be styled “The Life” for the natural life of all creatures is in Him and from Him. He is the spiritual life of angels as well as the Church. From heaven He came to earth to exhibit a life which had no beginning, no limitation, no end, and for the express purpose of conquering death, and becoming eternal life to His people (Joh 17:2-3).

In the first two verses of his epistle John sets before us Christ in His theanthropic character, His twofold nature of deity and humanity. This was frequently the manner of New Testament writers. Mark commences his Gospel thus: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Paul began his treatise to the Romans by announcing that the gospel unto which he was separated, the contents of which he was about to expound, “Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh” (1:3). The epistle to the Hebrews opens with a setting forth of Christ as the final revelation of God in His sevenfold mediatorial⁷ glory. In the first chapter of his Gospel John had affirmed the absolute deity of his Master (verses 1-4), and then spoke of Him as incarnate, tabernacling among men (verses 10-14). The reason for this is not far to seek. “The assumption of human nature by the Son of God is the most stupendous fact in the history of providence. Angels ‘desire to look into it,’ and are amazed at it. It will be the subject of devout inquiry and adoring wonder to the whole intelligent and holy creation of God throughout eternity. In the meantime, the salvation of the sinner is suspended upon it. In the incarnation of the Word there is provided for him an all-sufficient Saviour” (James Morgan).

In the first verse the whole emphasis was thrown upon the visibility and tangibility of our Lord’s humanity. But John, ever jealous of His dignity and glory, would not have his readers form a false or inadequate concept of Christ, so in the se-

⁷ **mediatorial** – referring to a go-between; “It pleased God in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus His only begotten Son, according to the Covenant made between them both, to be the Mediator between God and Man; the Prophet, Priest and King; Head and Savior of His Church, the heir of all things, and judge of the world: Unto whom He did from all Eternity give a people to be His seed, and to be by Him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified.” (1689 London Baptist Confession 8.1, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY)

cond verse he makes clear His deity, both by the titles there accorded Him and by affirming His equality “with the Father.” In Christ all the perfections of God shine forth resplendently; through Him the whole Godhead is displayed. As another of His servants declared, the incarnate Son is “the brightness of *his* glory, and the express image of his person” (Heb 1:3). He is the Mirror in which all the divine perfections are exhibited to us. “God, that He might help our weakness, and attract our faith to Himself, hath been pleased to come, as it were, out of His unapproachable light, and manifest Himself in attributes such as wisdom, holiness, justice, grace, mercy, power, with the like. These rays of the divine perfections are let down (in Christ) that we might sanctify Him in our hearts, that our souls might be in a posture of holy humility, fear, love, joy, and obedience, suited to those excellencies in Him” (E. Polhill, 1678).

“*And the life was manifested*” in flesh, in open view of men. Since fallen creatures could not ascend to heaven in their sins, the Son descended to earth to be a Saviour for the lost. In order for the Life to be evident and apparent, the Infinite took upon Himself the limitations of the finite. In order that the Invisible might become visible, He was clothed in flesh and blood. We consider that W. Lincoln, in his brief lectures on this epistle, brought out the most helpfully the thought here, by making the term “manifested” a summary of the preceding verse. “From the beginning” conveys the idea of issuing forth: Christ coming from heaven to earth, from God to men.

The four verbs there show us Christ, as it were, approaching nearer and nearer, in ever clearer manifestation. A person at a distance may be heard. But “which we have seen with our eyes” means that person has come within the range of our vision “which we have looked upon” or attentively considered signifies he is near. “Which our hands have handled”—all distance is now obliterated. It is Christ drawing closer and closer, with ever-increasing intimacy, until He is clearly “manifested.”

But while the primary reference in “the life was manifested” is to the divine incarnation, it is by no means to be restricted to that. The Life was manifested not only in bodily form, and through His gracious ministry, but still more especially in His salvation. As previously intimated, this title speaks not so much of what Christ is in Himself essentially considered, but what He is unto His people. “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have *it* more abundantly” (Joh 10:10)—than what they originally had in Adam before the fall. Christ indeed had life in Himself (Joh 1:4) and therefore was He fully qualified to act the part of Mediator, interposing Himself between God and those who were dead in trespasses and sins, and thus become a Source of new life to them. But that necessarily involved His death in their behalf and in their stead. Therefore, right after announcing He had come “that they might have life,” He added, “I lay down my life for the sheep...I lay down my life, that I might take it again” (Joh 10:15-17).

These words in John 6 are to be regarded as a condensation of our Lord’s statement, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread he shall live forever. And the bread which I will give for the life of the world is my flesh...Unless you have eaten the flesh of the Son of man and have drunk his blood, you have no life in yourselves. He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood has everlasting life. And I will raise him up in the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood is living in me, and I in him” (Joh 6:51, 53-56). Those verses bring out more definitely the connection between the vicarious sacrifice of Christ and the communication of life. The atonement stands in causal relation to our receiving life from Christ: His crucified flesh is the fountain from which we derive spiritual life. So, verses 1 and 2 make known how perfectly qualified Christ is to bestow life and thus equip us for fellowship (verse 3).

“*And we have seen*” Him. The apostle now proceeds to amplify the foregoing statement, for in this connection “*manifested*” had the force of to be made visible. The “*we have seen*” is reiterated here because Christ’s tabernacling among men in tangible form was the most wonderful fact of all history. As S.E. Pierce expressed it. “The greatest event which ever took place in the world.” Yet, as that writer pointed out, “We are not so deeply sensible of this in our minds as we most certainly ought to be. The sufferings, agony, and bloody sweat of Christ, and His sustaining the very curse due to our transgressions, seem to fix a deeper impression of His love on our minds than His taking our nature. Yet there is more love expressed in the incarnation than we can ever possibly conceive. Out of it the whole execution of our salvation proceeded. He could love us in heaven with as great a degree of love as He will to the ages of eternity; but He could not be made sin and a curse for us in heaven...The incarnation of Christ was a most astonishing proof of His love.”

“*We have seen.*” The senses of the body have their place and value, being given to us by God for the purpose (among other things) of imparting knowledge to the mind. They are therefore a means of information and verification. The apostles had beheld Christ in a manner that the patriarchs and prophets had not done, for they had seen Him only in prophecy and promise, in types and visions. Though He had occasionally appeared unto them in human form (the “theophanies”) they had not looked upon Him as actually incarnate, clothed with flesh and blood, dwelling among and conversing with them as He did with the apostles. Thus, as Calvin pointed out, there is “an implied contrast” in this “*we have seen.*” Though the Old Testament saints were partakers of the same Life as us, and though their faith rested upon the sure promise of God, nevertheless they were shut up under a hope yet to be revealed; whereas in the case of the apostles that hope was manifested in bodily and visible form.

“*We have seen and bear witness.*” It was not a second-hand report which they proclaimed, but something they had personally heard and seen for themselves. When Judas apostatized and another was needed to fill his office, it was required that he be “of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning

from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection” (Act 1:21-22). The apostles were eye-witnesses as well as ear-witnesses, and therefore did one of them declare: “For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2Pe 1:16). It is that very fact which renders excuseless all those who refuse to receive their testimony, for “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him?” (Heb 2:3).

Christianity fears not the light, but welcomes the most searching investigation, for not only are the historical facts on which it is based attested by the most reliable witnesses and “by many infallible proofs” (Act 1:3), but it is able to supply rational conviction and solid persuasion of its verity both to the understanding and to the conscience. Many others indeed heard and saw Christ during the days of His flesh, yet they enjoyed not personally that constant closeness to Him as had the twelve. They were not specially called, but supernaturally qualified, being given the power to work “both signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the holy Spirit, according to his own will” (Heb 2:4). Thus a peculiar dignity and position was theirs, for in the foundations of the new Jerusalem are “the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (Rev 21:14). Thus, in the very nature of the case, they could have no “successors.”

“*And show* [better, “report,” as the Greek word is rendered in the next verse] *unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father.*” This is brought in to guard the glory of the One spoken of in the preceding verse, telling us that “the Word of life” came from the bosom of the Father. Though He had only recently been “manifested,” it was not then that He began to be. On the contrary, He had ever been with the Father: thus the “which was with” rather than “which is”—after the ascension. Thus this declaration is parallel with the “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” of John 1:1. “The life,” then, is a divine Person, distinguishable from the Father yet in eternal fellowship with Him. One in the undivided essence of the Godhead, but possessing distinct personality. “That eternal life which was with the Father.” His duration evidences His excellency and sufficiency. In our judgment this statement indicates that “From the beginning” in verse 1 does not have the force of from everlasting: had it done so, there would not have been any need to say that the Life was “eternal.”

“*That eternal life which was with the Father.*” “The preposition (*pros*) is very significant. It might be translated ‘toward’ or ‘to’ and suggests that the Eternal Life was face to face with the Eternal Father” (Levi Palmer). As Christ, speaking as “Wisdom” informs us, “Then [when God appointed the foundations of the earth] I was by him, *as* one brought up *with him*: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before *him*” (Pro 8:30). “Wonderful words! How can we apprehend their meaning and force? He dwelt with Him as His ‘Fellow,’ and partook in common with Him of eternal life. Christ, as the Son of God, is essentially possessed of life in its highest exercises and enjoyments. It is of Him John says in this epistle, ‘This is the true God and eternal life’ (5:20). Life is His to impart it to sinners. ‘This is the record, that God has given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son’ (5:11). It is laid up in Him, in His mediatorial person, as in a fountain, to which sinners may ever come and receive out of His fullness” (James Morgan).

“*And was manifested unto us.*” This is by no means a repetition of the first clause of the verse: that was general, this particular—as the qualifying “unto us” shows. The reference is to the peculiar privilege enjoyed by the twelve. All the Lord’s ministers, and in a lesser degree His people, are witnesses unto Him; but not all in the same way, or to answer the same end for which the apostles were appointed. Christ prayed that, from His ascension till His return, all the election of grace might believe through their word (Joh 17:20). The Church is said to be “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner *stone*” (Eph 2:20). In them was specially fulfilled His promise, “when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth” (Joh 16:13), so that they could not but give an accurate and divine account of Christ in every particular which they delivered of and concerning Him. The apostles were under the immediate control of the Spirit. After the day of Pentecost their conceptions of the truth were directly from Him. They were infallibly taught by Him. We may therefore rely on their testimony with absolute assurance of its integrity.

But something more is needed than a firm persuasion of the authenticity and trustworthiness of the apostolic report, namely a personal knowledge of and saving acquaintance with Christ for ourselves. In reading and re-reading the first three verses of this epistle, one cannot fail to be struck by the earnestness of John, how evidently he longed that Christ might be truly apprehended by his readers; and it is equally clear from much that follows that he feared, notwithstanding all his plainness and urgency, they might still remain ignorant of Him. The manifestation of Christ in the flesh is one thing, the manifestation of Him to the heart, by His Spirit and Word, is another. Have you, dear reader, an experiential acquaintance with Him? Have you proved Him to be “the Word of Life” by His effectual working in your own soul? “No man can say that Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Spirit” (1Co 12:3). Unless you are taught by Him you can neither discover your need or discern the sufficiency of Christ to meet it. But if He is your Instructor you will really feel and confess both. Pray, then, for His divine illumination and a fuller understanding of Christ.

Were we to sermonize the last clause of verse 1, together with the whole of verse 2, our title and divisions would be: The Life openly revealed. (1) The Person spoken of; (2) The titles accorded Him; (3) The manifestation made by Him; (4) His eternal pre-existence; (5) The witnesses to it; (6) The peculiar privileges granted them.

Chapter 3

Fellowship—Part One

1 John 1:3

“That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

In the opening verses we have intimated the basic and vast importance of the doctrine of the divine Incarnation. The Word's becoming flesh and His birth at Bethlehem was the most wonderful event in the world's history. Not only so, but the Son's being made like unto His brothers most deeply concerned the welfare of God's people, and is a matter of profound veneration and delight to them. The principal reason why John here began his letter by stressing so much the humanity of Christ, rather than His deity, lay in the particular design before him. That design was quite different from the one which guided him when penning his former and larger communication. The grand aim of his Gospel was to set forth the peerless glories of God's Son, but the object of his epistle is to delineate the character and distinguishing marks of God's regenerate sons. Therefore it is that he opens by showing us the Beloved of the Father descending to the place where those sons were by nature and in their fallen estate, in order that He might conduct them to His place on high. Thus the beautiful progressive order of his two productions at once appears: first, the personal incarnation of the divine Redeemer, and then His inhabitation of the redeemed, with the blessed consequences and fruits of the same.

The connection between the first two verses of the epistle and the one now to be before us is equally evident. John commences by setting before his readers the adorable person of Christ, who is the only medium of communication with the Three-in-one God, and then states,

“That which we have seen and heard we declare unto you, that you also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ” (verse 3).

The “we” is that of the apostolate, and John's was the last of their voices now heard speaking on earth. Beautifully did S.E. Pierce show how well equipped this one was to write on such a subject. “This apostle was in the New Testament Church what the prophet Daniel was in the Old. He was addressed by the angel ‘O man greatly beloved’ (Dan 10:19), and John was known by the title of ‘that disciple whom Jesus loved.’ He was a high favorite with our Lord Jesus Christ. He was admitted to lie in His bosom; and like as Christ lay in the bosom of His Father before all time, and drew out all the love of the Father's heart into His own, and shines in the full splendour of it, and reflects the glorious shine of it on His Church; so this apostle, being admitted to such familiar intercourse with our Lord, drew out the very heart of Christ into his own. And in this way he was most eminently qualified to write concerning one of the greatest of all subjects—communion with the divine Persons.”

Throughout verses 1-3 the “we” and the “our” have reference to the apostolate and John speaks in their name as well as his own. There were indeed many others of the saints who had both seen and heard the Lord in His incarnate state, yet they were not called to be public witnesses of the same as were the twelve. Nor did all of them alike see and hear as much of Christ. There were but two of them present with John when the Saviour restored the life of the daughter of Jairus. The same two were with him upon the holy mount. His brother James and Peter only were with him when they gazed upon Christ's agony and bloody sweat in Gethsemane. Those in the innermost circle of privilege were in such immediate proximity to the Lord and enjoyed such intimate contact with Him as afforded the fullest satisfaction both to their minds and senses of the reality of His person. It may be pointed out that as all of the apostles were not equally favoured with the same views of Christ during the days of His flesh, so it is now with the spiritual views which Christians have of Him. As only three of them beheld His marred visage in the garden and His radiant countenance on the mount, so a few believers are privileged to enter experimentally more deeply into both Christ's sufferings and glories than are many of their fellows.

“That which we have seen and heard we declare unto you.” John's reiteration of this intimates the deep importance we are to attach to the experience and testimony of the apostles. Their position and privileges were unique. The evidences which they had of Christ's person and incarnation were different from ours. We receive ours from them, and that in a way of believing—taking into our minds from their divinely inspired writings such a knowledge of the Lord Jesus, as by the effectual power of the Holy Spirit, brings us to commit ourselves and our interests unto Him for time and eternity. But the apos-

bles had something more than that. Not only was the deity of Christ supernaturally revealed to their hearts (Mat 16:17), but they had too the evidence of sense, an ocular and palpable demonstration of the Messiah was made to them. Christians today hear His voice in the Word, and hearing they live. With the eyes of their understanding they see Him shining in the glass of the Gospel. They handle Him mystically at His holy table. But all of this is quite different from what John is speaking of in the opening verses of his epistle. While our knowledge of Christ is effectual to our soul's benefit as was theirs, yet the different ends served by the one and the other must be distinguished. They beheld what we never shall. They were with Him during the days of His humiliation, and that is forever past. We shall yet see Him with our bodily eyes, but it will be a glorified Christ that we behold.

The practical application of the above pertains principally unto ministers of the Gospel, showing us that the first qualification for that holy calling is their own personal and saving acquaintance with Christ. The servants of the Lord Jesus are to declare unto others what they have themselves known and felt of the divine Son's grace and power. They are to communicate unto others what they have first received of the Lord (Mat 14:19). "The heart of the wise teacheth his mouth, and addeth learning to his lips" (Pro 16:23). The discerning hearer will readily perceive the difference between the preacher who merely repeats what he has read or heard from men, and the one who tells forth from a burdened or burning heart that which he has tasted and found satisfying. The ministry of the one will be sapless and spiritless; that of the other fresh and invigorating. If the heart is taught of God, then out of its fullness the mouth will speak unto edification. It is those who can truly aver⁸ "We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen" (Joh 3:11) who express themselves with that assurance which carries conviction to others. The retailer of other men's thoughts lacks not only warmth and savour, but unction and the note of authority.

"That which we have seen and heard we declare unto you, that you also may have fellowship with us." Here is a noble example of spiritual generosity (Rom 1:11-12). Instead of keeping their knowledge secret, the apostles longed to share with God's children at large (so far as that was possible) the signal advantages which they had enjoyed during the time when the Word of life had tabernacled in their midst. Having found the honey, they would not eat it alone; having tasted that the Lord was gracious, they desired that others should prove it for themselves. The beloved John and his fellows did not live to themselves, but realized that the privilege of hearing and seeing involved the duty of testifying. They deemed themselves to be not so much garners for the storing of truth, as sowers for the scattering of it. That is ever the effect of a saving apprehension of the Gospel—expanding the heart with a Christ-like benevolence. As it is the law of God's being to give, so is it of the new nature received from Him. The apostles longed that others should participate with them in an inestimable good. "For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Act 4:20) was the spirit which actuated them.

"That you also may have fellowship with us" is very blessed, and worthy of our closest attention. The apostles had been eminently privileged, not only in being the immediate attendants of the Saviour for three years, sitting at His feet and drinking direct from the Fountain of living waters, but also in sharing something of His trials and humiliation (Luk 22:28). But all of that was peculiar unto themselves, and they could not make their converts sharers of the same. Not only so; strange to say, it had not fully satisfied either the one or the other if they could. They had themselves experienced a great and profitable change after the ascension of their Master, when the sensible means of knowledge and external opportunities for contact with Him had been withdrawn. They had to say "Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we *him* no more" (2Co 5:16)—rather did they know Him after a higher manner. As Christ promised them, the Comforter "shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you" (Joh 14:26). Then they understood much in Christ's conduct and teaching which before had been dark to them, and with such spiritual apprehension they entered into a new and grander fellowship with Him.

"And truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ." Wondrous and blessed is such an unspeakable privilege. Wonderful it verily is, something entirely peculiar to Christianity, for there is nothing which in the least resembles it in any of the religions of heathendom. Their "gods" are one and all regarded as remote, hostile, unrelated to their worshippers—viewed with horror rather than with veneration and delight. Almost the sole idea in the minds of their devotees is to placate their wrath and endeavour to win their favour. The idea of their loving their subjects, and taking them into intimate union and communion, never enters their thoughts. Nor is that to be wondered at. Such an inestimable favour had never entered ours had not the Scriptures clearly revealed this astonishing truth. What an amazing thing it is that the ineffably Holy One should take into fellowship with Himself those who are by nature fallen and depraved creatures, and in practice rebels against Himself. Oh, my soul, bow in adoration before such a marvel. But most wonderful of all is it that the great God not only desires the company of such, but fits them for and will have them with Him in His immediate presence for all eternity.

Even now this glorious fact is revealed, many of God's dear children find it difficult to apprehend, and still more so to avail themselves of the privilege and actually enter into the enjoyment of the same. Probably that is one reason why John expressed himself so emphatically here, for his "truly our fellowship is with the Father," etc., seems to be inserted because there were some who doubted it—as altogether too good to be true. It was as though he said, I make this positive assertion

⁸ **aver** – to declare to be true.

for the benefit of the whole Church to the end of time, therefore let no believer in Christ entertain the thought that such an inexpressible favour was one which God designed for the apostles only; not so, rather is it the birthright of every member of His family. Let no saint be persuaded that there is a privilege so high above him as to be unattainable in this life. Every born-again soul has, through the mediation and merits of Christ, a right and title to this; and through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit possesses the necessary qualification and meetness for it. If any such enjoy it not, the fault is entirely their own. The grand design and end of God in salvation and the communication of His grace to us is that we may have fellowship with Himself.

The term “fellowship,” which occurs twice in our present verse and again in verses 6 and 7, is the second great word of the epistle. The first is “life,” which is found three times in the two preceding verses. The order of them is divinely accurate and doctrinally significant, for there can be no fellowship with God on the part of fallen creatures until His life or “nature” has been imparted to them. But before we seek to outline the blessed theme comprehended in this important term, let us suggest a further reason why the apostle was so express in saying “truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.” It is to be borne in mind that the earthly lot of Christians was very different in the early days of this era from what is now ours. At that time the saints were despised and hated; nevertheless a most honourable, desirable, and blessed spiritual portion was theirs. It was as though the apostle said, Though you are looked upon and treated as the filth of the world, be assured that is by no means all you have through believing in Christ and following us His apostles. A really astonishing and glorious heritage is yours. You have been made heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ. As sharers of the divine riches you are amply compensated for any temporal privations which your Christian profession may involve.

That grand fact needs to be kept steadily in mind by the Lord’s people in the present hour, and nothing allowed to shake their confidence in the same or deprive them of the full enjoyment of it. For some of them are assailed by those who would fain make them believe that there is no Christian fellowship for any who do not accept their peculiar views and become followers of them. There are some who proudly imagine themselves to be the only ones who gather together on spiritual ground, and if they no longer assert it openly, they still convey the impression that none outside their circle can enjoy the fullest fellowship with Christ. There is also a species of high doctrinalists who will not regard any as regenerated who are not prepared to pronounce their shibboleths. Likewise there are experientialists who attach such importance to a certain type and order of experience that all who are strangers to the same are regarded as being entirely “out of the secret” and fatally deceived if they think they have fellowship with God. These are but variations of the arrogant claims of the Papacy that there is salvation for none outside of “holy mother church.” Let your reply to one and all be, “Truly our fellowship is with the Father and his Son”—which is infinitely better than fellowship with any body of professing Christians.

Those words are addressed to all saints whatever their age or spiritual attainments, or whatever their denominational affiliation or lack of it. “Stand fast therefore in the liberty with which Christ has made us free” (Gal 5:1), and enter into and enjoy the wondrous privilege which He has purchased for you. “Fellowship” is an old Saxon word, “communion” a Latin one which signifies more than to be a recipient of His grace or even a partaker of His love, and rises higher than the concept of companionship. Literally it means sharers together, a community of interests, having things in common. In its simple form the Greek word here rendered “fellowship” is translated “partners” in Luke 5:10, and 2 Corinthians 8:23: “James and John, the sons of Zebedee, which were partners with Simon”—they were co-owners of the ship; “Titus...my partner and fellow helper.” The Father and the Son desired not to enjoy one another alone for all eternity, but graciously purposed that a company should be brought into being not only fitted to enjoy Them, but also in whom They would everlastingly delight. Therefore did the Son declare unto the Father “the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one” (Joh 17:22).

Thus, the basic idea of “fellowship” is sharing together. Yet we must be careful to interpret and understand the same in the light of the general analogy of faith.⁹ It does not mean that we have been taken into an equality with God, but that according to our finite measure we are made partakers of His life, His holiness, His ineffable blessedness; that as “the LORD’S portion *is* his people” (Deu 32:9), so “The LORD *is* my portion, saith my soul,” (Lam 3:24); that as He declares “the saints that *are* in the earth, and *to* the excellent, in whom *is* all my delight” (Psa 16:3), so each of them avers “Whom have I in heaven *but thee?* and *there is* none upon earth *that* I desire beside thee” (Psa 73:25). The Lord Himself is ours, and we are His: a joint participation—what an amazing dispensation! No wonder the apostle pressed the fact so emphatically: “truly our fellowship is with the Father and his Son”—I solemnly set my seal to it that such is the case. Not (we repeat) that this signifies an equality, but rather the dutiful but cheerful drawing near of an inferior to a superior, yet so as there is a holy intimacy and freedom in the same because we both love God and are beloved of Him.

“Fellowship” with God necessarily presupposes that we have been taken into a near and dear relation to Him so that not only do we view Him as One who befriends us, but He condescends to regard and treat us as His friends. Abraham, the father or prototype of all believers, “was called the Friend of God” (Jam 2:23)—admitted to share His company and converse with Him. But not only does “fellowship” presuppose our reconciliation with God, but also the reception of a nature and disposition which fits us to be with Him, for “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” (Amo 3:3). There cannot be friendship unless there is congeniality. Fellowship is not a one-sided thing, but mutual. It is the law of friendship to answer

⁹ **analogy of faith** – the method of biblical interpretation where clearer related Scriptures are used to interpret a particular passage (Rom 12:6).

it with friendship. None is warranted in regarding himself as the friend of God unless he has the heart and carriage of one—delighting in Him, seeking to be conformed to His image, endeavouring to promote His interests. Thus we find the Lord Jesus saying to His disciples, “Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you” (Joh 15:14)—if you make it your sincere aim to please Me in all things. A “friend” is one who conducts himself in a friendly manner unto another, avoiding whatever would injure or grieve him.

So long as we do not carnalize it, probably the figure of friendship best enables us to grasp what is meant by “fellowship.” One has a high regard for a friend, esteeming him above mere acquaintances. Thus it is between the Lord and His people. They highly esteem and value one another. What a word is that of David’s: “he delivered me, because he delighted in me” (2Sa 22:20); while the saint confesses “all my springs *are* in thee” (Psa 87:7). Real friends find genuine pleasure in each other’s company, being happiest when together: does not the spouse say, “His desire *is* toward me. Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field” (Song 7:10-11), while she exclaims, “Make haste my beloved” (Song 8:14)? Intimate converse and close communications characterize the dealings of one friend with another. Things I would not discuss with a stranger, matters about which I would be silent to a mere acquaintance, I freely open to one whose worth I have proved and in whom I delight. It is thus between God and His dear children. Did not “the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” (Exo 33:11), and did not he, in return, express himself with great freedom unto the Lord—“shew me now thy way, that I may know thee” (verse 13) more intimately?

Fellowship is reciprocal. “*When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, LORD, will I seek*” (Psa 27:8). Thus there is an interchange of confidence. “The secret of the LORD *is* with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant” (Psa 25:14), while they freely open their hearts unto Him. God sends forth gracious influences into the soul, and we (by the assistance of His Spirit) make suitable responses unto Him. They pour out their souls unto Him, and He opens His ear unto them: “In the day when I cried thou answeredst me, *and* strengthenedst me *with* strength in my soul” (Psa 138:3). He makes known to them His will, and they seek to walk according to the same. They seek His glory as their highest end, and He makes all things work together for their good. The saints generally are most taken with and speak the oftenest about their communion with God, yet it is His with us which must take place before ours can be perceived even by ourselves. It is wholly a spiritual and supernatural exercise and doubtless is often carried on when we have no consciousness of the same.

Chapter 4

Fellowship—Part Two

1 John 1:3

“That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

Here we have a communicated knowledge, an affectionate desire, an emphatic assertion, and a shared privilege. The apostles openly proclaimed what they had received immediately from Christ. They did so because they had an unselfish longing that others should also be benefited thereby. It was no figment of an enthusiastic imagination that they referred to, but a divine and spiritual verity. Fellowship with God is the highest dignity and richest blessing we can be favoured with, either here or hereafter. It is one of the great mysteries of grace. Reason cannot comprehend it, and sense has nothing to do with it. None can have the least conception of its excellence save those who are actual participants in the same. In order thereto there must be oneness of nature, an intimate knowledge, concord of heart, unity of interests and aims, and an open acknowledgment of one another. Though this fellowship is the utmost of blessedness, it is one in which all the saints partake.

Great is the honour, wondrous the privilege, of being admitted unto communion with the Lord God. Fellowship with Him is both an objective fact and a subjective realization: that is to say, it is based upon a relationship, and is enjoyed in the soul’s experience. Since all believers are regenerated and reconciled to God, they are in communion with Him—in a state of sacred friendship. That state consists of a reciprocal communication in giving and receiving after a holy manner; God’s in renewings of grace and fresh supplies of His spirit; ours in the outgoings of our hearts unto Him in the ways which He has appointed. It is consciously enjoyed by the exercise of faith and love (for they are the two hands of the soul by which we take

hold of God), and by the heart's being engaged with His ineffable perfections and gracious bestowments. Some believers enter into a much richer experience of this fellowship than do others of their fellows, and the degree in which he actually participates may vary considerably with the same believer from day to day. It is chiefly acted out by us in praise and prayer. It is maintained by avoiding those things which hinder and by using the means which further it—especially devout meditations upon God and His word.

Opinions differ as to whether the Father and the Son are to be considered here conjointly or distinctly. Grammatically, each is permissible. For ourselves, we incline to the view taken by Candlish,¹⁰ namely that the Object of the Christian's fellowship is one. Certain it is that we first have fellowship with the Son, for only through Him may sinners have access unto the Father. Christ is the only way, the new and living way, unto Him. But as that expositor pointed out, it is not thus that Christ is presented: rather is the Son here regarded as associated with the Father—"together in Their mutual relationship to one another, and Their mutual mind and heart to one another (and unto the saints), They constitute the one object of this fellowship." In 1 Corinthians 1:9 we read, "God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord," in view of which we, personally, prefer to say that our fellowship is with the Triune God in the person of the Mediator—borne out, we consider, by 1 John 1:5-6 where the Object of our fellowship is simply said to be "God," without distinction of persons. Yet since They may indeed be contemplated separately, it is quite warrantable to distinguish between the communion which we have with Each, and so shall we treat thereof.

Another consideration which supplies confirmation that, essentially regarded, our fellowship is with God in Christ is the fact that our communion is based upon union with Him. Now our union with God is not immediate or direct, but mediate, through the Lord Jesus. We are first joined to Christ, and then through Him with the Father (1Pe 3:18). The saint's oneness with Christ is a very wonderful and many-sided subject, which we can now but barely outline. First, from all eternity we had an election union with Christ, being chosen in Him. There was also a federal union, so that we were one with Him as the last Adam: it was as such that He took our place and discharged our legal obligations. There is likewise a vital union when, because of regeneration, it becomes true that "he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit" (1Co 6:17). From that issues a moral union, when by faith and love we are espoused to Him. That in turn leads to a practical union, when we take His yoke upon us and walk in subjection to Him. All of this issues in an experimental union in which we enjoy an intimate intercourse with Christ, drinking into His spirit.

Now each aspect of that multiform union has a corresponding communion. By virtue of our election union with Christ, we are "blessed...with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ" (Eph 1:3). Because of our federal union with Him we become legal partakers of His righteousness, and entitled to the full reward of His meritorious obedience. In consequence of our vital union with Him, we are made recipients of Christ's life and are indwelt by His spirit. As the result of our moral union with Him we enter into His salvation and receive out of His fullness "grace for grace." By our practical union with Him we walk together in agreement: we now "cleave unto the Lord" (Act 11:23) in a life of dependence upon and devotedness unto Him, becoming more and more conformed to His holy image. From our experimental union with Christ we enter into His peace and joy, and become fruit-bearing branches of the Vine. "There is a friend which sticketh closer than a brother" (Pro 18:24) expresses His side of this communion; "there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of His disciples whom Jesus loved" declares our side of it. This is the result of our practical union and communion: "He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me...and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him" (Joh 14:21).

The intimate union which there is between the Lord and His people is intimated in their very names: He is "the Christ"; they Christians: "For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified *are* all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren" (Heb 2:11) and to treat them accordingly. The figure that is most frequently used in the New Testament to set forth the oneness of the Redeemer and the redeemed is that of His mystical "body" of which He is the head and they the members: "For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones" (Eph 5:30). The result of that union is communion, or sharing together: "My beloved *is* mine, and I *am* his" (Song 2:16)—to mutually delight in, to further each other's interests, to be together for all eternity. It is therefore my sacred privilege not only to have personal contact and converse with Him, but the most unreserved dealings. There is no aloofness of His part, and there should be none on mine. Christ has not only given Himself for His people, but to them—to make full use of: "Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you" (1Pe 5:7). He is ours to feed upon (Joh 6:57), and as "the Lamb" (Exo 12:5): that is, Christ in His sacrificial character—exactly suited to sin-harassed souls.

Nor is that feasting a one-sided thing: Christ delights to commune with His own—"With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer" (Luk 22:15) illustrates the fact. He seeks such fellowship: "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door [for He forces Himself upon none, see Luke 24:28-29], I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Rev 3:20)—addressed, be it remembered, to a church! The intimate fellowship which there is between Christ and His Church is blessedly exhibited in the Song. He makes request, "let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet *is* thy voice, and thy countenance *is* comely" (2:14); while the spouse declares, "cause me to hear [Thy voice]: Make haste, my Beloved" (8:13-14). He exclaims, "Behold, thou *art* fair, my love" (4:1); and she rejoins, "my beloved *is* white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand" (5:10). There is sweet entertainment on both sides:

¹⁰ Robert Smith Candlish (1806-1873) – Scottish divine, born at Edinburgh, and spent his early years in Glasgow, where he graduated in 1823.

says she, “Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits” (4:16); “Eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved” (verse 1) is His answering call. They are mutually charmed with each other: does she bear testimony, “I sat down under his shadow with great delight” (2:3), “How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love, for delights” (7:6) is His gracious acknowledgment.

We will now consider that communion which we have with each of the divine persons distinctly. Clearly there can be none with any of them except through the Mediator. We can only approach the Father through the Son incarnate. Our union with the one is via our union with the other. We are the sons of the Father (1Jo 3:1) because made one with His Son, and therefore does the latter say, “Behold I and the children which God hath given me” (Heb 2:13). After His resurrection He said to His disciples, “I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God” (Joh 20:17), thereby making it clear that the relation in which He stood to God was theirs also. That relation is further made good unto them by God’s sending forth “the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father” (Gal 4:6); and thus they cherish toward Him the affections of children. From whence we may perceive the character of that fellowship which the Christian has with the Father. As a child has near access to his father, so does the believer unto God. As a child enjoys his father’s favour, so does the believer that of God. As an earthly parent delights to gladden the heart of his child by special tokens of his love, “how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask Him?” (Mat 7:11).

The nature of our fellowship with the Father is also indicated by the very meaning of that term, namely a community of interests, and that it is a reciprocal thing. Thus the Father and His children take mutual pleasure in His beloved Son. Blessedly was that depicted by the Saviour in what is known as the parable of the prodigal son. When the wanderer returns from the far country, and is welcomed home, the father says, “Bring hither the fatted calf and kill; and let us eat, and be merry” (Luk 15:23)—figure of them feasting on a once-slain Christ and rejoicing together. In like manner, as the glorifying of Christ is the chief end which the Father has before Him in all the out-workings of His eternal purpose, such is our grand aim too. Again, the Father makes us partakers of His holiness (Heb 12:10), even of His own nature (2Pe 1:4), so that what He hates they hate, and what He delights in, they do also. Again, they have fellowship with the Father in His affectionate regard for all His dear children: “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren” (1Jo 3:14). Further, a most blessed intercourse is maintained between the Father and His children through the means which He has appointed to that very end. As they endeavour to perform His will, He takes upon Him the care of all their concerns.

“And with his Son Jesus Christ.” Yes, and in that precise order. First, we have fellowship with Him as God’s Son because made His sons, as being “*his seed,*” yea, “the travail of his soul” (Isa 53:10-11). This explains why Christ is designated “The everlasting Father” (Isa 9:6). Second, we have fellowship with Him as “Jesus,” for as faith lays hold of Him we become partakers of His so-great salvation—as those who believingly touched the hem of His garment were healed of their plagues. Since the exercise of effectual faith be a spiritual act we must first be made sons, spiritual persons, “new creatures in Christ” by regeneration. Faith gives a saving union to Christ, and He is then “made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (1Co 1:30). Not only are our sins removed as far as the east is from the west, but we obtain a personal interest in all that He is and has. Third, we have fellowship with Him as “Christ,” that is, the Anointed One. As “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit” (Act 10:38), so believers “have an unction [same word] from the Holy One,” and “the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you” (1Jo 2:20, 27)—the anointing oil on the head of the High Priest (Exo 29:7) “went down to the skirts of his garments” (Psa 133:2)!

The believer’s fellowship with his Saviour opens to him a perennial fountain of blessedness. Since He be God, He is fully competent to undertake for him in every situation and supply all his need. Since He be man, He is capable of being touched with the feeling of our infirmities, and is full of tender sympathy to His sorrowing people. He was tempted in all points as we are—sin excepted—and therefore fully understands our trials. He personally experienced poverty, neglect, reproach, injustice, harsh treatment. He was misunderstood by His friends and hated by the religious leaders. He knew what it was to suffer hunger and thirst, and weariness of body as well as anguish of soul. Consequently He is “a brother born for adversity” (Pro 17:17) and is moved with compassion when He beholds the afflictions of the members of His mystical body; yea, it is written “In all their affliction he was afflicted” (Isa 63:9). So close is the bond that unites the Redeemer to the redeemed, that when Saul of Tarsus (in the days of his unregenerate madness) ill-treated His children, Christ said unto him, “why persecutest thou me?” (Act 22:7)—by assailing them, he “touched the apple of his eye” (Zec 2:8).

Thus there is everything in Christ to invite and encourage us to seek and maintain the closest and freest communion with Him. He wears our nature, and we are recipients of His. All the infinite resources of Deity are exercised on our behalf. As He endured our poverty, so we are made the partners of His riches. His righteousness is as truly ours as He made our sins His own. His reward He shares with His redeemed, so that the glory which the Father gave Him He has given to them (Joh 17:22). There is a community of affections between them—running in the same channels, fixed upon the same objects: “I love them that love me” (Pro 8:17). They have familiar intercourse together: they pour out their complaints unto Him, He communicates to them His consolations. They have mutual desires: “Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am” (Joh 17:24); “come, Lord Jesus” (Rev 22:20) is their response. They participate in like privileges and honours: He is Priest and King, and He “hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father” (Rev 1:6). They gladly endure loss for His sake, bear His reproach, and enter into “the fellowship of his sufferings” (Phi 3:10).

It may be asked, Why is no mention made in 1 John 1:3, of the believer's fellowship with the Holy Spirit? Though He be not expressly referred to, He is necessarily implied, for none can have fellowship with the Father or with the Son save by Him. "For through him [Christ] we both [believing Jews and Gentiles] have access by one Spirit unto the Father" (Eph 2:18). The Holy Spirit is the sole efficient cause of all spiritual fellowship. Necessarily so, for the Father and the Son are imperceptible to sense, the Objects on which our faith is exercised, and with whom communion is enjoyed; and it is the Spirit who makes Them real and precious unto us, drawing out our hearts unto Them. He it is who sheds abroad in our hearts the love of the Father, and who takes of the things of Christ and shows them unto us. Thus the Spirit is not specifically named here, because He is the author of our fellowship with the Triune God in Christ. He introduces us into the same, and is the only transactor of it, for it is by His enablement that we are lifted out of ourselves and our affections drawn unto things above. Yet it must not be overlooked that in 2 Corinthians 13:14, while "grace" is attributed to the Lord Jesus, and "love" unto God, "communion" is definitely ascribed to the Spirit. We are also sharers of His nature, and His mission to glorify Christ.

A word now upon the fellowship which the saints have one with another. "If we have fellowship with the Father, then we are His children, and animated by His spirit. If we have fellowship with Jesus Christ, then we are His redeemed ones, and the subjects of His grace. It follows, therefore, as a necessary consequence, that wherever there is fellowship with the Father and the Son there must also be fellowship with those who believe in Them. And this is the very light in which the subject is presented in the text, where the three forms of fellowship are treated as indissolubly connected with one another" (J. Morgan). It is to be noted that whereas "that ye may have fellowship with us" is mentioned before "our fellowship is with the Father and the Son" (because, as previously explained, it is by means of the writings of the apostles that we obtain a full saving knowledge of Them), yet in experience fellowship with believers follows that of our fellowship with the divine persons; for we are united first with the former ere we have any spiritual union with the latter. What that fellowship consists of Ephesians 4:4-6, tells us: "*There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.*"

Believers are sharers together of the riches of God's grace, joint partakers of all the benefits of Christ's mediation and merits. They possess the same nature and associations of heart. They have common beliefs, experiences and hopes. They will be together with the Lord for ever. Therefore are they enjoined: "Endeavouring to keep [not "make"] the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). But that is possible in a practical way only as they personally heed the preceding exhortation, "With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love." Not only is it their mutual interest so to do, but thereby Christ is most honoured and glorified by them (Joh 13:35). Thus it should be their earnest and constant endeavour to cultivate this fellowship. If they do not, then their claim to enjoy communion with God is but an idle boast. As this very apostle declares: "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" (4:20). Not only are the objects of fellowship inseparable, but the enjoyment of the one is commensurate with the other: in proportion as we have fellowship with the Father and His Son shall we have fellowship (in prayer, at least) with all who believe.

It is not our intention to supply a sermon outline on each verse, for we desire to stimulate unto study, and supply hints of how to go about it, rather than encourage laziness. With this article and the preceding one before him, the young preacher should have no difficulty in culling out sufficient material for at least one sermon on Fellowship—the simpler his style and the fewer his divisions, the better. Homiletically considered, the opening sentences of this article furnish an analysis of verse 3. By way of introduction the different things which prevent any fellowship between God and an unbeliever, and the divine provisions to remove those hindrances, should be shown, such as sin divorcing from holiness—overcome by atoning blood; spiritual death—by the communication of life; alienation of heart—by reconciliation at conversion; the distance between the finite and the infinite—bridged by the Mediator.

Chapter 5

Fullness of Joy—Part One

1 John 1:4

*"These things write we unto you,
that your joy may be full."*

For the benefit of young preachers (and also those of God's people who desire to form the habit of studying Scripture more closely) we may say that we began our own examination and meditation of this verse by framing the following questions, and then seeking answers thereto.

- Exactly what is referred to by the “these things”?
- Why the “we write” rather than the “I write” as in 2:1, 12, 26?
- What is the connection between the “these things” and the “fullness of joy”?
- What is the nature of the joy here spoken of?
- Is a “fullness” of it attainable in this life?
- Are we to read it as “that your joy may be full” or “our joy” as in the R.V.¹¹ and in Bagster's Interlinear¹²?

The results of our own searchings and ponderings will now be set before the reader, though we shall not adhere strictly to the order of those six queries. Personally, we have found that by means of such interrogations we are enabled to make a more definite approach to a verse, and thereby obtain something better than a general and vague idea of its contents.

“*And these things write we unto you.*” We believe there is a twofold reference. As the opening word indicates, the principal allusion is unto that which immediately precedes. Here again the link connecting one verse with another is quite evident, and the order of their contents corresponds exactly with Christian experience. First, a setting forth of God's Son as incarnate, and our saving apprehension of Him as such by His revelation to the soul as “the Word of life;” for as it is rationality and the exercise of it which fits men to be companionable with one another, so it is our being made recipients of a spiritual life which capacitates us to have intercourse with God. Second, the actual enjoyment of intimate fellowship with the Triune God in and through the Mediator, and with all His children as the consequence. Third, fullness of joy as the outcome. Thus the former stands related to the latter as does cause to effect, the tree to the fruit, the means to the end. And here too the one is commensurate with the other: as the measure of our fellowship with the Father and the Son determines the measure of our communion with fellow saints, so in proportion to the constancy and depth of this fellowship in its three forms will be the degree of our joy.

More closely still verse 4 intimates one of the essential characteristics of the communion referred to in verse 3: that it is a fellowship of joy—the sharing together of a mutual delight. Thus we see once more the deep importance of paying close attention to the immediate context, that we may be better enabled to follow the order of thought and development of the subject under discussion. It is by observing the precise relation of one verse to another that much light is cast upon the whole, and the significance and perspective of each detail is more clearly perceived. But more largely the words “And these things write we unto you” must be regarded as including all that follows, for not only do verses 5-7 show that the subject of fellowship is there still under discussion, but John's specific design in writing this epistle was to lead God's children into a deeper and fuller experiential fellowship, with the resultant happiness inseparable therefrom. The whole contents of this epistle are to be regarded as a making known of the various means which promote both our fellowship with God and the increase of our joy in Him, and a setting forth of the different things which hinder the same.

John's purpose in saying, “*My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not*” (2:1) was to warn against what would—if allowed and unrepented of—break their fellowship and quench their joy. When he exhorts them, “Love not the world, neither the things *that are* in the world” (2:15), he is telling us that any undue familiarity with those who are God's enemies, or any inordinate affection for the creature, is inimical to our communion with and delighting ourselves in Him. Likewise, his “These *things* have I written unto you concerning them that seduce you” (2:26) signifies that they must ever be on their guard against false prophets, lest their joy be blighted by erroneous teaching. Fellowship with God must not be looked for outside the way of His assignment or the order which He has appointed: therefore we must earnestly avoid all tampering with sin, deny our curiosity to hear or read the proponents of strange doctrine, and flirt not with the world. Finally, “These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life” (5:13) was but a repetition in thought though varied in language of verse 4, for there can be no fullness of joy while the soul is in a state of uncertainty of its acceptance in the Beloved.

“*And these things write we unto you.*” It will be remembered that John had employed the plural number throughout verses 1-3, for he was not only relating the special privileges which had been enjoyed by the twelve, but was speaking there as their mouthpiece. He longed that all of God's children should (so far as their case admitted) enter into the same free and familiar intercourse with God in Christ. “That ye also may have fellowship with us” (verse 3) imported that ye may enter more fully into an experiential knowledge of the truth set forth in verses 1-2, and thereby participate in the ineffable joy which comes through a believing apprehension of it; for Christian “fellowship” consists of association of heart, attachment to the same objects, having together thoughts, affections, hopes and joys in common. Thus it was at the beginning, and has (in varying degrees of intelligence) continued throughout this age. “They that gladly received his word were baptized... And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship” (Act 2:41-42). Moreover, the saints are “built upon the foundation of the apostles [cf. Rev 21:14] and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner *stone*” (Eph 2:20), which

¹¹ R.V. – Revised Version translation of the Bible, completed in Britain in 1885.

¹² Interlinear – form of printing the Bible text with the Greek and English in alternating lines.

means that the doctrine which the apostles taught, and which is embodied for us in their writings, is the basis on which the Church rests.

Observe two things in the last-quoted Scripture. First, the plural number used again. The Church is not built upon Peter, as Rome erroneously insists, but, doctrinally considered, rests upon the teaching of the whole of the apostles—who were also “prophets,” i.e. endued with the gift of divine utterance. But second, the Lord Jesus is “the chief corner stone,” for the entire validity and efficacy of the apostles’ testimony lay in the name of Him whose witnesses they were. In his second epistle Peter said, “I now write unto you...That ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord” (3:1-2). Though each of them wrote on different subjects, with a particular end and design, they were all inspired by the one Spirit. Characteristically speaking Paul was the apostle of faith, Peter of hope, John of love, James of good works, while Jude warned against apostasy or the abandonment of such. Being of one heart and soul, having the same desire and mission, it was fitting for any one to speak in the name of them all, using the term “we.” They proclaimed the same Gospel and bore witness to the excellence of the same Christ. Their aim was ever the same: to make Him known and gain unto Him a glorious name. Whenever they wrote, it was in order to build up the saints. In their doctrine they differed not one iota.

The fountain from which all spiritual joy proceeds is that blessed One who is set before us in the foregoing verses. As He expressly declared, “But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (Joh 4:14). It is in intimate contact and converse with Christ that real communion with Him consists and satisfaction is found: in seeing, hearing, handling Him—we can only “handle” one who is near and dear to us. It is by having the mind engaged with His perfections and beauty, meditating thereon and reveling therein, that the heart is drawn out to Him. Nothing so warms and nourishes a Christian’s soul as a believing and adoring contemplation of the One who loved him and gave Himself for him. We should therefore see to it that, above all else, a realization of Christ’s surpassing love is kept fresh in our hearts; for this, in turn, will move us to seek yet closer and more constant fellowship with Him. That was the source and spring of Christ’s own joy—His absorption with the Father’s love unto Him: “The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand” (Joh 3:35). Note how frequently He dwelt upon the Father’s love: John 5:20; 15:9; 17:23-24.

Fullness of joy is something which all men desire, but which very few attain unto. Nor is that difficult to explain: they seek it in the wrong place. Alas that many of God’s people are so often guilty of making the same mistake. In the pride of their hearts, they want to find something of self to rejoice in; yielding to a spirit of legality, they look for happiness in their own experiences or attainments. But that is to miss the substance and chase the shadows. As it is with our natural eyes, so with our spiritual: they are designed to look at external objects and not internal ones, “Rejoice in the Lord”, and that “always” (Phi 4:4) is the delightful task which faith is to engage in. All real happiness is bound up in Him. Every other joy but that which issues from fellowship with the Lord is but a counterfeit one. That is sensual, as the rich fool’s “soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry” (Luk 12:19); this is spiritual. The one is superficial and temporary; the other solid and lasting. The former comforts only in health and during a season of prosperity; whereas the latter sustains upon a bed of pain, cheers the soul in times of affliction, yea, enables its possessor to exult at the prospect of death.

Now this joy is not to be regarded as a luxury, but rather as a spiritual necessity. We are obligated to be glad in God. It is something more than a sacred privilege, namely a bounden duty unto which we are expressly commanded. “Let all those that put their trust in thee rejoice: let them ever shout for joy, because thou defendest them: let them also that love thy name be joyful in thee” (Psa 5:11). “Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, ye righteous: and shout for joy, all *ye that are* upright in heart” (Psa 32:11). “Rejoice in the Lord alway: *and* again I say, Rejoice” (Phi 4:4). “Rejoice evermore” (1Th 5:16). If we do not give unto Him, who is so excellent in Himself and so gracious and beneficial unto us, that esteem which rises to the degree of rejoicing in Him, then we sadly fail in rendering to Him that honour which is His due. Our thoughts and valuation of Him are utterly unworthy unless they bring us so to delight ourselves in Him as to fill us with joy. While we seek God’s favour in Christ, live in obedience to His will, and rest in His love, we are warranted to keep a holy feast continually.

It is certainly not the revealed will of Christ that His followers should walk through this world in a spirit of dejection: rather are they a reproach unto Him if they do so. One chief reason why the Lord Jesus uttered His high priestly prayer in the presence of His disciples was that they might be filled with comfort and good cheer: “These things speak I in the world [in order] that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves” (Joh 17:13). He was about to leave them and return to the Father, and He would dispel their sorrow and fill them with holy gladness by apprehensions of His joy. And of what did that consist? First, the realization that He had glorified the Father in the place where He had been so grievously slighted (verse 1). Second, that He had finished the work given Him to do (verse 4). Third, that He was about to return to that ineffable glory which He had with the Father before the world was (verse 5). Christ was rejoicing at the prospect before Him, and He would have His disciples make His joy theirs. We are to rejoice in a triumphant Saviour who completed the work of our redemption. We are to rejoice in the blessed fact that the head once crowned with thorns is crowned with glory now. The knowledge of this should banish all gloom and fill us with joy unspeakable.

But more, by giving us the wondrous privilege of hearing His prayer in John 17, Christ has made it known that His changed position has made no alteration in His attitude toward us, that His love for His people has not diminished in the

least. By His generous act on that memorable occasion Christ assured His disciples (and us) that when He entered into His well-earned reward and took His seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high, His thoughts would still be engaged with His redeemed. They were inexpressibly dear unto Him—as the Father’s gift to Him, and as the travail of His own soul. Their names were inscribed upon the palms of His hands, yea, upon His very heart. He could not forget them: rather would He occupy Himself on high by constantly pleading their cause. If our hearts are suitably affected with the amazing fact that our great High Priest “ever liveth to make intercession for us” (Heb 7:25), we cannot but be full of joy. A considerable part of our happiness is to contemplate Christ’s joy in us! He rejoiced in His people before the world was made (Pro 8:31), He rejoices now in and over them to do them good (Jer 32:41), and He will express it even more abundantly when He brings them home unto Himself.

Further. The joy of the Christian will be promoted and increased by observing the various things for which Christ here petitioned the Father in John 17, for in them we discover what are the desires of His heart unto “His own.” First, He prayed for their preservation: “Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me” (verse 11). Second, He sought their jubilation: “that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves” (verse 13). Third, for their emancipation from sin: “that thou shouldest keep them from the evil” (verse 15), so that none of them should be overwhelmed by it. Fourth, for their consecration: “sanctify them through thy truth” (verse 17), that they may grow in grace and adorn their profession. Fifth, for their unification: “that they all may be one” (verse 21), which will be fully realized when “we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). Sixth, for their association with Himself: “that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am” (verse 24). Seventh, for their eternal gratification: “that they may behold my glory” (verse 24). Since all these requests will be granted (Joh 11:42), what cause have we constantly and fervently to rejoice!

Yet further, Christ has made most gracious provision for the joy of His people in the gift of the Comforter. When His disciples were dismayed and dejected at the prospect of His departure, we find that again and again He reassured and cheered them by the promise of the Holy Spirit. “I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you” (Joh 14:18), which He did in a most blessed manner on the day of Pentecost. Then it was that their sorrow was “turned into joy.” The Comforter is here not only to convict of sin and bring souls unto repentance, but, following that operation, to fill them with gladness and to experience “joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). This He does by opening and blessing the Word, by taking of the things of Christ and showing the same unto them, by witnessing with their spirits that they are the sons of God, by producing in them the spirit of praise. The blessed Spirit uses the words of Christ, especially those of John 17, to work upon the renewed mind, giving it some blessed apprehensions of the joy of which Christ is both the object and the subject, of the joy which comes from Him and centers in Him, bringing us into communion with the same and making our souls realize the satisfying portion we have in Him.

A word now on the *nature of this joy*. That is the more necessary since not a few are apt to naturalize and carnalize the same, regarding it as a mere spirit of elation or happy feeling of exhilaration. Instead, it is a heavenly grace, a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), and therefore something spiritual, supernatural, and divine. God is alike its Author, Object and Maintainer. As the peace which He gives “*passeth all understanding*” (Phi 4:7), so the joy He communicates is said to be “*unspeakable*” (1Pe 1:8)—not only excelling sense, but beyond full comprehension. It is an elevation of soul after the Lord and of things above. It is a delighting ourselves in God, for since all happiness be the enjoyment of the chief good, then all felicity is bound up in Him. Joy is heaven begun in the saint, for his blessedness here and hereafter differs not in kind but only in degree. It is therefore a joy which is pure and unalloyed. As spiritual love is far more than a sentiment, as God’s peace is more excellent than mere placidity or tranquility of mind, so the joy which Christ imparts to the believer is vastly superior to any natural emotion. It is a state of exultation, a complacency of heart, a full satisfaction of soul as it feasts upon a perfect Object.

Spiritual joy results from the heart’s being engaged with the Lord: “my soul shall be joyful in the LORD: it shall rejoice in his salvation” (Psa 35:9). “Because thy lovingkindness *is* better than life, my lips shall praise thee. My soul shall be satisfied as *with* marrow and fatness; and my mouth shall praise *thee* with joyful lips” (Psa 63:3, 5). We rejoice that all our sins are forgiven, that we are accepted in the Beloved, that we are made the friends of God, that our names are written in the Lamb’s book of life, that we have a building of God eternal in the heavens. Such a joy is something to which the natural man is a total stranger: “Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased” (Psa 4:7)—the love of God and His goodness to us in Christ affords a pleasure and a satisfaction which no creature can. Spiritual joy is a very different thing from mere exuberance of spirits or ecstatic feelings, being entirely a holy and supernatural experience. No matter what may be his circumstances in this world, the Christian has ground and matter for rejoicing at all times, and is called upon to do so “evermore” being assured “your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you” (Joh 16:22).

In view of what has been pointed out in the last two paragraphs, the Christian reader should more readily perceive the radical difference there is between natural hilarity and spiritual joy. The former is incapable of rising above the woes of earth. It wanes in the presence of life’s hardships. Its bloom departs when the sun of prosperity is beclouded. It cannot survive the loss of health or of loved ones. Vastly different is the joy of the Lord. It is restricted neither to surroundings nor temperaments, and fluctuates not with our varying moods or circumstances. Nature may indeed assert itself, as Christ wept

by the grave of Lazarus, yet its possessor can say with Paul, “as sorrowful yet always rejoicing.” When the hurricane lashes the surface of the sea, the heart of it is undisturbed. Grace enables us to glory even in tribulations (Rom 5:3). While the bodies of the martyrs were burning at the stake, hallelujahs were on their lips. Joy is quite consistent with godly sorrow, for each fresh discovery of the worthlessness of self should lead us closer to God.

Chapter 6

Fullness of Joy—Part Two

1 John 1:4

“And these things write we unto you, that your joy [and ‘ours’] may be full.”

A common desire animated and regulated the apostles: to promote the glory of their Master and the good of His people—the two things being inseparably connected. They had themselves experienced the unspeakable blessing and blessedness of intimate fellowship with Christ, and the bliss which ever accompanies it, and therefore they longed that their fellow saints should, according to their measure, freely and fully participate in the same. They desired that their converts should be bright and buoyant Christians, whose hearts would rise above the trials and troubles of this life, rejoicing in the Lord, finding their satisfying and everlasting portion in Him. Accordingly, they one and all, in both their oral and written ministry, employed themselves in setting forth the person and perfections, the offices and work, the Lordship and example, of the Christ of God, knowing full well that it was only by means of a spiritual knowledge of His excellency, an interest in His salvation, the maintaining of a close walk and daily communion with Him, that fullness of joy would be experienced in the souls of those whose welfare they had so much at heart.

Those words *“that your joy may be full”* were not penned by an inexperienced visionary or youthful dreamer, aglow with an enthusiasm which would shortly be dampened by bitter disillusionment. Instead, they were written by a very aged person who was thoroughly acquainted with the dark side of life, with the sins and sorrows which beset a Christian, and who knew that it was through “much tribulation” that any entered into the kingdom of God (Act 14:22). But it was to no mere natural emotion he had reference—an exuberance of spirit suited only to high festivals, an enthusiasm raised to the point of excitement. Radically different is the spiritual joy which he had in view. This is a divine grace communicated to and situate in the depths of the soul, which the storms of this world cannot reach. It is something which is suited to everyday life and work, for it is a calm and serene frame of mind as well as a happy state of heart. Far more was implied than actually expressed in John’s language, for where fullness of joy exists there is a separation from the world, a close fellowship with God in Christ, a treading of wisdom’s ways, and thus the Lord is honoured and His people helped.

Fellowship with the Lord is the grand marvel of redemption, and a fullness of joy in the redeemed is its crowning blessing. In Christ there is matter for perpetual delight. “Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound [of the Gospel]: they shall walk, O LORD, in the light of thy countenance. In thy name shall they rejoice all the day: and in thy righteousness shall they be exalted” (Psa 89:15-16). Such is the believer’s right and privilege, and if it be not actually realized in his experience the fault is all his own. The ministers of the Word are “helpers of your joy” (2Co 1:24). The one who feeds thereon will exclaim, “Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart” (Jer 15:16). How the heart is gladdened by answered prayers (Psa 116:1)! We have great reason to “call the sabbath a delight” (Isa 58:13), to “rejoice and be glad in it” (Psa 118:24). Contemplations of God’s perfections: “My meditation of him shall be sweet: I will be glad in the LORD” (Psa 104:34). The one who is baptized should “go on his way rejoicing” (Act 8:39). The Lord’s Supper is a spiritual feast for the elevating of the Christian’s heart.

Piety, peace, and joy are what ought most to characterize the saints. To “worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh” (Phi 3:3) are the marks of the true circumcision. There are three things in connection with that rejoicing. First, an apprehension of our saving interest in Christ and of the glorious benefits we have by Him, for otherwise how can we glory in Him (1Co 1:30-31)? Second, corresponding affections which result therefrom: love to Him, exultation of soul, feasting upon Him, joy in Him. Third, an open expression of the same: evidencing that our satisfying portion in Him has made us lose all relish for the things of the world. What we prize most best demonstrates what we are, for where a man’s treasure is there will his heart be also (Mat 6:21). Each of us is discovered by his complacency or displacement: “They that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the

Spirit” (Rom 8:5). Thus to be comparatively miserable manifests a Christian to be in a backslidden state, and places a question mark on the genuineness of his profession. A miserable believer is no credit to Christ, and has a depressing effect upon his brethren.

The advantages and benefits of spiritual joy are real, many, and great. It diffuses sunshine over the whole life, supplying vigour for service, lightening our cares, animating for conflict, and making obedience a delight. Joy enlarges the heart and quickens us in the way of God: “the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh 8:10). It overcomes that natural deadness and dullness in holy duties which arises partly from indwelling corruptions and partly from the remissness of our wills toward heavenly things. But when there is rejoicing in Christ, irksome and difficult tasks become pleasant and easy. The joy of the Lord is His cordial to fortify us against the infelicities and calamities of this world, whether they be the common afflictions incident to men or persecutions for righteousness’ sake—making bitter things sweet to us (see Habakkuk 3:17-18). It enables us to bear opposition and reproaches with courage and constancy: “They departed...rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Act 5:41). It greatly encourages and cheers our fellows: “My soul shall make her boast in the LORD: the humble shall hear *thereof*, and be glad” (Psa 34:2).

We cannot prosper in our souls nor flourish in the house of the Lord unless we be assured of that peace which He has made by the blood of His cross and are daily delighting ourselves in Him. Yet, though the Saviour has not only made His redeemed secure for eternity, but would have them happy in time, the fact remains that many of them are frequently oppressed with dullness and despondency. God does not appear to be the light of their countenance, and their spirits seem to have caught little of heaven’s luster. If they be children of light and of the day, why is it that they are so often gloomy and cast down, and manifest so little of that brightness which should mark those who have been given “everlasting consolation and good hope through grace” (2Th 2:16)? No doubt cases differ considerably, and a variety of causes account for the failure of so many to enjoy their birthright.

Space will permit us to name only two or three of the *principal hindrances*. Prominent among them is a defective ministry. In view of our text we place this first. How few ministers could warrantably say, “These things preach we unto you that your joy may be full!” What numbers of them are almost for ever talking about the increased wickedness which is in the world, the likelihood of another war, the menace of the atom bomb, or the waning spirituality of the churches—things that tend to horrify rather than edify, to depress rather than delight their hearers. Many others confine themselves very largely to a dwelling upon the shortcomings and failures of God’s people as though it were most desirable for them to cherish doubts and fears. Others are all for the performance of duty and discharge of obligations which, if stressed disproportionately, can but promote a proud and legal spirit. There is so very little of that preaching of Christ, which draws out the renewed heart unto Him, which leads to a closer walking and more intimate communing with Him, and which not only fills the saints with joy but at the same time instills a deep abhorrence of sin and inspires a stronger desire to honour and please Him.

Second, the lack in many Christians of a definite assurance of their acceptance. How can one experience the peace of being reconciled to God, or the joy of knowing his sins are forgiven, while he be constantly debating whether or not he be His child? Not a few of His people dishonour the Father’s gift to them of His Son, in whom they have redemption and eternal life, by not estimating that gift at its true value. They do not take God at His word and believe that the death of Christ has cancelled all the guilt of His people, that He will by no means cast out any sinner who comes to Him for salvation, and that through Him they have full access and welcome to the Father’s house and heart. They have not really learnt the first lesson of the Gospel—the sufficiency of the divine love. “Not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins” (1Jo 4:9-10); and consequently they withhold from Him that full confidence which the manifestation of such love calls for, and which He delights to receive from those upon whom He has bestowed such favours.

Third, even when a Christian is well assured of his salvation he may dim and dampen the joy of it by failing to walk as a child of light (Eph 5:8). To do so he must cast off the “unfruitful works of darkness,” so far and so soon as he discovers them to be such. God hates sin, and sent His Son to save us from our sins. If then we turn again to folly, yield to the lusts of the flesh, and “allow” evil in our hearts and lives, then the Holy One will withdraw from us the light of His countenance. Yet even in this case He has made most gracious provision for our immediate and complete restoration to the knowledge of His favour and the joy of His smile: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1Jo 1:9). The moment any emotion, thought or deed is revealed to us as sin, we should penitently confess the same and then rejoice in the divine declaration that the blood of Christ has washed away all the stain of it. Thus if we live up to our holy privilege, not even our sins should cloud the sunshine of God’s love or destroy the happy consciousness that He dwells in us and we in Him.

When John penned the words, “These things write we unto you, that your joy may be full,” it is highly probable that he had in mind those statements which he had heard from his Master: “These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy may be full” (Joh 15:11), “These things speak I in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves” (Joh 17:13). It is to be carefully observed that both these utterances fell from the lips of the Saviour upon the night of His betrayal. Very remarkable and blessed is it to hear Him—with the terrible crucifixion staring Him in the face—speaking of His joy. What a proof that spiritual joy is in no wise created or regulated by circumstances or external conditions! And how those striking declarations ought to correct a one-sided view which only too many have taken

of Christ's earthly life! Here too there is a balance to be preserved. He was indeed "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," in a measure and degree which none else ever has been or can be, for His human sensibilities were more refined than ours. His were undulled by sin, and therefore He felt the effects of sin far more keenly and had a greater capacity for pain than we have.

The sorrows and sufferings of Christ were many, poignant, inconceivable. It could not be otherwise with One of infinite purity surrounded by those who were hostile to God and enduring the contradiction of sinners against Himself. And while we must always keep sight of that fact and be deeply affected with the same in our souls, it is not to exclude from our view and thoughts the other side of His experience. Because He was a man of sorrows we are not to conclude that He was a miserable and melancholy person, that during the years He trod this earth He was a stranger unto joy. Admittedly we enter here the realm of mystery, and need to tread very cautiously and reverently, with unshodden feet; yet we must not close our eyes to what is clearly revealed in the Scriptures. Not only must we bear in mind that the One who then tabernacled in this scene of wickedness was God as well as man, not only need we to distinguish sharply between what He endured officially and what He experienced personally, but we are also required to take into careful consideration what is said of Him in the Psalms as well as in the Gospels if we are to obtain the complete picture.

That the Lord Jesus possessed a real, deep, and abiding joy is clear not only from His own utterances in John 15 and 17, but is equally evident from other considerations. He could aver, "The LORD *is* the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup," and add, "Therefore my heart is glad" (Psa 16:5, 9)—Jehovah was unto Him a fount of ceaseless consolation. As the connection between 1 John 1:3-4, imports, joy is inseparable from fellowship, and since the Son enjoyed unbroken fellowship with the Father until the three hours of darkness, fullness of joy must have been experienced by Him. Again, Christ found infinite satisfaction in discharging the commission assigned Him: "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work" (Joh 4:34). God's commandments were never irksome or grievous to Him in the slightest degree, but rather were most blessed, as His "I delight to do thy will, O my God" (Psa 40:8) attests. Wisdom's ways are "ways of pleasantness" (Pro 3:17), and Christ ever walked therein. He found His joy in concurring with the Father's appointments: since God had ordered His lot, though He had not where to lay His head, He declared, "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places" (Psa 16:6). Contemplating the Father as "Lord of heaven and earth," sovereignly hiding truth from one and revealing it to another, Christ "rejoiced in spirit" and said, "even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight" (Luk 10:21).

Think not, then, of Christ during His earthly life as but "a man of sorrows"; contemplate Him too as One who was filled with joy. That the two things are in nowise incompatible is clear from the apostle's experience: "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2Co 6:10). Christ's joy consisted not only in the things which we have mentioned above, but also in the assurance of the Father's full approbation that was ever His: that He did "always those things that pleased him" (Joh 8:29). He found, too, unspeakable comfort in His consciousness of the Father's abiding presence: "he that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone" (Joh 8:29). Since holiness and happiness are inseparably conjoined, deep joy must have been the portion of the Holy One, for He ever walked in the light of God's countenance. What joy was His in the saving of sinners appears from His "layeth it [the recovered sheep] on his shoulders, rejoicing" (Luk 15:5). Finally, He endured the cross "for the joy that was set before him" (Heb 12:2)—in faith's apprehension and hope's anticipation of the reward for His perfect work, He rejoiced.

We come now to the question, *Is fullness of joy attainable by the Christian in this life?* Assuredly it must be, or John had never written our present text. Assuredly it must be, for why did the Lord Jesus say unto His disciples, "These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and *that* your joy might be full" (Joh 15:11)? Therein Christ told out the fullness of His heart, intimating His desire concerning His own. If it were not attainable, then why has the Saviour also bidden us, "Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full" (Joh 16:24)? Ah, is not the littleness and feebleness of our joy due to the paucity of our faith and the smallness of our hope? Has not the eternal Lover of our souls freely invited us, "Eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly" (Song 5:1)? If fullness of joy be not experienced by us, then certainly we are living far below our privileges. The straitness is in ourselves, and not in Him or His revealed will. The Lord knows all about our temperaments, circumstances, trials and corruptions, yet, notwithstanding, bids us "rejoice evermore" (1Th 5:16), having made full provision for us to do so.

Did not this same John say to those whom he addressed in his second epistle, "I trust to come unto you, and speak face to face, that our joy may be full" (verse 12)? Nor can we legitimately set aside the force of all these passages by saying they express the ideal rather than the actual, that they set before us the standard at which we are to aim, and not what is realized by any soul in this time state. Such an evasion is at once ruled out of court by Acts 13:52, "And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit"—and they were men subject to like temptations and passions as we are! As pardoned sinners, accepted in Christ, made sons and heirs of God, we should "rejoice in the Lord always." We must not be content with a fitful and occasional joy, but rather see to it that we keep this holy fire ever aflame upon the altar of our hearts. It is both our privilege and our right to feed and feast upon the Lamb and satisfy our soul unto a holy satiety.

Throughout our exposition of 1 John 1:4, we have followed the Authorized Version, but a word requires to be said upon the Revised rendering: "that our ["the apostles"] joy may be full." Really, it comes to the same thing, for the joy of the minister is largely bound up in the spiritual prosperity of those to whom he ministers—their happiness being mutual. Paul called the Philippians his "joy and crown" (4:1), and said of the Thessalonians, "Ye are our glory and joy" (1Th 2:20): while

John said to those addressed in his second epistle, “I rejoice greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth” (verse 4), and in his third epistle, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (verse 4). As the saints are partakers of the joy of God’s servants, so they, in turn, of theirs, for they rejoice in the same Saviour.

Chapter 7

Light and Darkness

1 John 1:5

*“This then is the message which we have heard of him,
and declare unto you, that God is light,
and in him is no darkness at all.”*

We shall now consider, first, the connection of this verse with the immediately preceding ones—its bearing on the epistle as a whole will be shown under our exposition of verse 6. Second, its message or assertion. Third, its scope—in view of the teaching of Scripture on light and darkness. Fourth, its design, or the reasons why this declaration is here made.

The connection of this verse with those immediately preceding

The A.V.¹³ is rather misleading, for the “then” suggests that the apostle is drawing an inference or pointing out a consequence from what he had stated previously. But such is not the case. The literal meaning of the Greek is “And this is the message,” and is so rendered in Bagster’s Interlinear, and the R.V. The opening “and” intimates not only a direct connection between this verse and the foregoing ones, but a continuation of the same subject. As usual, the Holy Spirit has graciously hung the key on the door for us by announcing the theme of this epistle in its opening verses, namely fellowship—with God, with the apostles, with fellow saints. Concerning that fellowship we have already seen that it has been made possible by the Son of God becoming incarnate and giving His people an experiential knowledge of Himself as the Word of life. It is regeneration which capacitates us to enter into this inestimable privilege. Not only is it a fellowship of spiritual life, but also in the truth, consisting of a saving knowledge of Christ and the Father. It is likewise a gladsome fellowship, which, if entered into intimately and constantly, produces “fullness of joy.” Now we are informed it is a holy fellowship, for it is exercised only in “the light.”

The blissful fellowship which the apostle was speaking of is radically different from anything known to natural man. The joy which it produces is greatly superior to any experienced by the senses. It is in nowise carnal, but wholly spiritual. It transcends all natural emotion. It was necessary to insist upon this so that neither congenial social intercourse nor religious excitement should be mistaken for it. There has always been a “mixed multitude” who attach themselves to the people of God, making a profession of Christ and claiming to enjoy communion with God. While this fellowship is open and free for all who are partakers of the Holy Spirit, yet no unregenerate persons can participate in this high favour. It was therefore a point of great practical importance that the apostle should make a clear statement thereon so as to guard against all erroneous conceptions of it and its joy. This he does by a most searching description of the One with whom such communion is had and by the solemn assertion that “If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie.”

Again, one can perceive almost at a glance that “And this is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you” is intimately related to the contents of the previous verses. Both in the first and the third verses John had made mention of what he and his fellow apostles had heard from that blessed One who had been made manifest unto them, and which it was their mission to “declare” unto His redeemed (verse 3). And now he gives an epitomized statement of what Christ had made known unto them: “this is the message.” The R.V. rendering is preferable: “heard from Him,” for it was not merely something about Christ which the apostles proclaimed, but rather what they had actually heard from His own lips. The “from Him” clearly has reference to the incarnate Word: because He is the principal Person spoken of in the immediate context, because He was the Sender of the apostles, and because He is the next antecedent in verse 3. The apostles and ministers of the Gospel are the messengers of the Lord Jesus, and it is their business to communicate His mind and will both to the churches and to the world. “But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught *it*, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal 1:11-12).

¹³ A.V. – the Authorized Version of King James of England, 1611. Also known as the King James Version, KJV.

The message of this verse

The Greek term translated “message” has several different shades of meaning when rendered into English. Young defines it as “promise,” for that word in 2 Peter 3:13, is derived from the same root and indicates its benign character. In Acts 22:30, it is translated “commandment,” which emphasizes its lordly nature. These agree with the first two statements made in the New Testament, concerning our Lord’s oral ministry: His hearers “wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth” (Luk 4:22); “the people were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one having authority” (Mat 7:28-29). But here in our text it is used to express the sum of the revelation communicated by Him. John here puts into a terse sentence what the apostles had gathered from Christ’s announcements. Or, if we place the emphasis on “And this is the message which we have heard from him” its force would be, “This was the dominant and central doctrine our Master proclaimed, around which all others rotated and from which all others issued.” This “message” was one of the greatest importance, both in itself and also in the consequences of it, for it respected the ineffable purity of the divine nature, and the imperishable glory of the same.

John’s style here is similar to his opening words in the Apocalypse: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants,” which He sent “unto his servant John, who bare record of the word of God.” As the Son said unto the Father, “I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me,” so they in turn communicated the same unto their converts (cf. 2Ti 2:2). Christ came here to declare and reveal the true and living God (Joh 1:18), and John here summarized His teaching: “this is the message which we have heard from him, and declare unto you: that God is light.” This was not a discovery which the apostles made for themselves, nor an inference which they drew from the divine works and ways. No, it was an authoritative communication which they had received from the Saviour, and therefore is to be accepted without question. We heartily agree with J. Morgan, who said of the substance of this message, “Its simplicity and comprehensiveness are amazing. It is so simple, a child perceives its meaning; while it is so comprehensive as to render a full exposition of it impossible.”

“God is indefinable, because to define is to limit, and to speak of limiting infinitude is an absurdity. Names are ascribed to God in Scripture, and attributes, yet they convey only some faint notions of His exalted perfections; but sufficient is revealed to preserve the mind from vain imaginations or gross conceptions of His Being. Man knows nothing of God, and can know nothing, except what He has revealed. In condescension to our capacity God has revealed Himself under names and notions which may best strike our senses—the channel of all our reasonings and the medium by which we know” (A. Serle). Three statements are made (we dare not call them definitions) concerning what God is in Himself, which, for want of better terms, may be said to tell us something of His nature or character, and they should be reverently pondered in the order in which they occur in Scripture: “God is spirit” (Joh 4:24), “God is light” (1Jo 1:5), “God is love” (1Jo 4:8).

“*God is spirit.*” The absence of the article (in the Greek) imports that God is spirit in the highest sense. The indefinite article in the English “a spirit” is objectionable, because it places Deity in a class with others. He is spirit itself, absolutely, the alone Source of spirit. The word “spirit” signifies in man’s lisping speech, “air” or “breath” or “wind,” being that subtle fluid by the respiration of which all things live. “What the air is in motion in the natural world, that the divine Spirit is in the spiritual world...The Deity is revealed under the name of Spirit in order to declare that all existences, both corporate and incorporate, derive their spiritual life and being from Him. He is Spirit in the fount—the creatures are only so as streams proceeding from Him” (A. Serle). Life is a principle or power to act or move planted in a substance or being. A living creature then is one which can act from within itself, yet is wholly dependent upon its Giver—the living God, the Author and Sustainer of all life. Negatively, “God is spirit” signifies that He is both incorporeal and invisible.

That declaration was necessary in order to correct the erroneous views entertained by those Jews and Samaritans who had, from the elaborate ritual of Judaism, formed a wrong concept of God. It was Jehovah Himself who ordained the imposing furnishings of the tabernacle and temple, with their vessels of silver and gold, their brilliantly coloured curtains, the gorgeous vestments of the high priest. But those things were never intended to intimate that the great God derived any personal satisfaction from them: rather were they appointed as types and emblems of Christ. “The most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands” (Act 7:48). Nor is He charmed by elaborate services therein. God is spirit, immaterial, and therefore not sensual or influenced by the senses. God cannot be gratified with carnal things. It is not costly architecture, beautiful music, lovely flowers, fragrant incense, which please the eyes, ears and nostrils of the creature, but that which issues from renewed hearts He requires. “God is spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth”—spiritually and sincerely.

Scope of the verse: “God is light.”

“*God is light*” tells us very much more than the former statement. God is not only the light, but light itself—absolute, essential, infinite—the Source of all light. Scripture speaks of God in a peculiar and immediate relation to light. The pillar of fire was the symbol of His presence with Israel in the wilderness. Daniel tells us “His throne was like the fiery flame” (7:9). Habakkuk declared, “His brightness was as the light” (3:4). The Psalmist avers, “Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment” (Psa 104:2), on which Spurgeon remarked, “The concept is sublime: but it makes us feel how altogether inconceivable the personal glory of the Lord must be: if light itself is but His garment and veil, what must be the blazing splendour of His own essential being?” Perhaps the nearest we can come in framing an answer to that question is to employ

the words of 1 Timothy 6:16—“dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see.” In James 1:17, He is denominated “the Father of lights.”

“*God is light*” expresses all the excellence and glory of Deity. It is to be taken in its widest sense, as including the divine essence and the three Persons therein, for though the Father be primarily in view, yet the Son and the Spirit are equally possessed of the divine nature, and therefore are equally “light.” “God is light” is a word to search and awe us, for we “were sometimes darkness” (Eph 5:8), such being our woeful condition by nature. But it is also a word to gladden and warm us, for light shines for the benefit of others, as darkness is wrapped up in itself. Thus there is the Gospel in this word, for it tells us that Deity has been pleased to reveal and make Himself known unto men. “Light maketh all things visible on which it falls and from which it is reflected, but it becomes itself visible only in a radiant point or disc, like that of the insufferable sun, from which it floods the world. So God is unknown except in the person of Christ” (G. Smeaton). That is why Christ designated Himself “the light of the world” and why prophecy pointed to Him as “the Sun of righteousness” (Mal 4:2), for where He is unknown, men “sit in darkness” and “in the region and shadow of death” (Mat 4:16).

“The supreme thing in the physical world is light. Apart from this there could hardly be a world at all, for all life and movement depend on it. It was the first of God’s creations, and it is the last thing that will fade before the approaching glory of the New Jerusalem. And yet of all things light is the most mysterious. The distance of the sun from the earth can be measured, the rate at which light travels across space can be gauged, and the rays can be passed through the prisms, divided and analysed. But the sun itself still dwells in light inaccessible. No eye can search its burning depths, and no mind can wrest from it its profound secret” (L. Palmer). “God is light”: “He is all that beauty and perfection that can be represented to us by light. He is self-acting, uncompounded spirituality, purity, wisdom, holiness and glory; and then the absoluteness and fullness of that excellency and perfection” (T. Reynolds).

Most appropriate and comprehensive is the metaphor here used. “God is light” is a summarized expression of the divine perfections. It tells us that He is the living God, for the rays of the sun exert a quickening influence, being a minister of vigour, health and growth to all creatures. It is the parent of all fruitfulness, for those regions (the poles) where the sun scarcely shines at all are barren wastes; so it is spiritually. It announces that God is a most glorious Being, for light is a thing of luster, dazzling the eyes of its beholder. It proclaims God’s excellency: “Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun” (Ecc 11:7). If it be a pleasant thing to behold the natural light, how much more so for the eyes of faith to behold the King in His beauty! It declares that He is a beneficent Being, the Fount of all blessedness. Light is the source of helpfulness and gladness to all who bask in its bright and genial rays. No beauty can appear anywhere without the light: exclude it and all charm at once disappears from every object. Nor can there be any beauty in the soul until God commands the light to shine in our hearts (2Co 4:6).

More distinctly, light is the emblem of God’s holiness. Light is simple or pure. In it is neither mixture nor pollution, nor can there be. Its very nature and property repels defilement. It traverses unstained each object and medium of uncleanness. Snow is so bright that there is no other whiteness equal to it, but man’s step mars and defiles it. Water sparkles brightly as it issues from the spring, but man’s hand soils it. But none can make light’s purity less pure! Such is God in His ineffable purity. Again, light is a symbol of God’s omnipresence, for it is diffused throughout all creation, scattering its rays everywhere. In like manner, “Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the LORD” (Jer 23:24), which made the Psalmist exclaim, “Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence” (139:7). “Light is on the hill and in the valley, on sea and on land, in the city and in the desert. With its crystal fingers it clasps the round earth, and throws its mantle of brightness over all worlds” (Palmer).

In a most striking way light also adumbrates God’s omniscience. Not only because it is the figure of knowledge and wisdom, but because of its searching power, entering into every corner and cranny of creation, revealing the hidden things of darkness. “All things that are discovered [margin] are made manifest by the light” (Eph 5:13). Light is all-revealing, equally so are the rays of divine holiness, detecting sin and unmasking the world as a monster lying in the wicked one. As light reveals, so nothing can be hidden from God. He cannot be deceived, but sees things as they actually are. Our motives and aspirations are as palpable to Him as our bodies. “O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known *me*. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted *with* all my ways. For *there* is not a word in my tongue, *but*, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether...Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to *thee*” (Psa 139:1-4, 12).

In Scripture darkness and light are used in quite a number of figurative senses: among them, as signifying ignorance and knowledge (Eph 5:8), a state of nature and a state of grace (1Pe 2:9), heaven (Col 1:12) and hell (Mat 25:30). Thus, “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” necessitates and draws the essential moral distinction between good and evil, holiness and sin, innocence and guilt. It also intimates that it is possible for creatures, yea, fallen creatures, to have fellowship with God, for light is diffusive, self-communicating, shining upon and illuminating dark bodies. Therein lies both its beneficence and its ascendancy over the darkness, as in Genesis 1:2-3. But more: this most comprehensive “message” elucidates the whole plan of redemption, wherein God acted throughout in this character, both exhibiting His opposition to the darkness and yet triumphing over it. In the person of His Son the light came to save those in darkness, yet preserving inviolable His own ineffable purity. Nor was there any surrender of the light to the darkness: no concession, no compromise. For when

made sin (2Co 5:21), “God spared not his own Son!” Likewise, we are made to hate sin and repent before forgiveness is ours. Salvation is not only a miracle of grace, but the triumph of holiness.

“*And in Him is no darkness at all.*” In the Greek there is a double negative. God is absolutely perfect: there is no blemish, no ignorance, no sin, no limitation, naught contrary to His perfection, nothing to mar or dim the splendour of His character; no possibility of any deterioration, for with the Father of lights there is “no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (Jam 1:17). God is light which is never clouded, which never wanes. Therein we behold His paramount excellence. How radically different is the true and living God from every “god” of human invention or conception! While the heathen endowed their imaginary deities with certain virtues, they also attributed some vice or other to them. In the “god” of Pantheism and other systems of philosophy, the distinction between good and evil is only seeming and relative, and not real and absolute, for “he” is identified as much with the one as the other. Here, once more, we have illustrated the uniqueness of Holy Writ, for here alone is One made known to us in whom there is “no darkness at all.”

That could not be said of the holy angels, whom He “charged with folly” (Job 4:18), because prior to their establishment in holiness they were liable to fall. Nor could it be said of Adam in his innocency, for his holiness was but a mutable one. But God is immutably holy, impeccable, for He “cannot be tempted with evil” (Jam 1:13). We cannot conceive of the least defect in God, for His holiness is His very being, and not a superadded thing like ours. “God is light”: He not only clothes Himself with the light, and dwells in the light, but He Himself is light, only light, and there is nothing in Him but light. Now to make this affirmation yet more emphatic, the negative is added to the positive: “And in Him is no darkness at all”: no kind of darkness, in any degree or manner; whatever falls under the appellation of “darkness” is excluded from His being. This has the value of intimating that we are to regard the term “light” in its widest possible latitude, and not to restrict it to holiness, for the antithesis, “darkness,” includes more than sin. No element enters into His light to obscure it; there is no limit to His knowledge, no stain on His holiness, no hindrance to His blessedness.

Design or purpose of the verse

The design of the apostle in verse 5 may be briefly summarized thus. First, to indicate the nature of that fellowship into which the saints are called: it is a holy one, “in the light.” That is its distinctive character, and is necessarily determined by the nature of God. Second, to impress upon believers the deep reverence of the divine Majesty: that as light cannot mix with darkness, so they cannot converse with God except as their hearts are in a suitable frame and their minds filled with proper apprehensions of the great, holy, and glorious Being they are approaching. Third, to intimate to all succeeding generations of Christians that the holiness of God shines in and through every doctrine, every part of the truth, every ordinance He has appointed. Fourth, to prepare his readers for what follows in his epistle.

Chapter 8

Light and Darkness

1 John 1:6

“If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth.”

In those words we have: (1) A lofty averment: claiming to have fellowship with God. (2) A flat contradiction: walk in darkness. (3) A solemn indictment: such are denounced as liars. (4) A sweeping inclusion: the “we” taking in the apostles themselves—if the cap fitted, they too must wear it.

The connection between this verse and the one immediately preceding may be readily perceived: “This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (verse 5).

John was writing on the subject of fellowship, and having described the character of the One with whom that fellowship is had, he makes application of his “message” unto two radically different classes, which together make up what is known as Christendom, or “the kingdom of heaven” in the parables of Matthew 13 and 25:1-10, which includes tares as well as wheat, bad fish as well as good, foolish virgins as well as wise ones. The first class comprises those who have a name to live, but are dead; the second, those who actually possess spiritual life. More specifically, the relation of verse 6 to verse 5 is that here we behold the Light detecting and exposing what is contrary thereto. Since in God there be no darkness at all, true piety is to

be distinguished from its counterfeit by a walking in the light. By this criterion or test must we judge all who claim to hold converse with God: their characters must harmonize with His.

In verse 6 John was not referring to the unregenerate as such, but to unrenewed professors, who boasted of their enjoying communion with the triune God. It was not the openly wicked and profane which he had in view, but those who unwarrantably bore the name of Christians, those who were in church fellowship. In his day, as now, there were in the Christian assemblies those who were born of God, and those who were not so. This is clear from those mentioned in 2:19, “They went out from us, but they were not of us”; originally members; later apostates. Jude refers to certain men who “crept in unawares,” ungodly men, who were “turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness” (verse 4) Hence there was a real and pressing need for lip profession to be tested by the character of the daily life. This is done here by immediately following up the statement in verse 5 by a solemn warning against self-deception, insisting that fellowship with God is to be gauged by conformity unto Him in holiness and righteousness.

So far as we can discern, the apostle’s design in the words before us was at least threefold. *First*, to stir up the saints themselves, and prevent their becoming careless and remiss. The apostle here warns them of how much need there was to watch their own hearts and to be circumspect and strict of their walk, avoiding everything which had a tendency unto sin, since that would interrupt their holding and maintaining communion with their heavenly Father. As the Psalmist declared, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the LORD will not hear me” (Psa 66:18): when I cherish that which is evil, the Holy will not connive at my sin. “If thou listen to the Devil, God will not listen to thee” (Spurgeon). *Second*, to convict and undeceive the deluded, that the ignorant and erring might discover their perilous state and be led to cry unto God for a real work of grace to be wrought in them. *Third*, to unmask hypocrites, and thereby prevent the children of God being imposed upon by those who had nothing in common with them; and to separate themselves from all such false pretenders.

In seeking a closer view of our present verse, we not only need to attend to the context, but also to bear carefully in mind John’s peculiar style. We made a brief reference to this in the introductory chapter, when calling attention to the abstract (and absolute) character of many of his statements. Thus in 1:3, he declared “truly our fellowship is with the Father”—not “ought to be,” taking no notice of the things which hinder and break it. So it is here: he speaks of that which characterizes a person, and not of something which is exceptional. There are none on earth who enjoy unbroken and unclouded fellowship with God. Only One could say, “I have set the LORD always before me” (Psa 16:8). In like manner, there has never been a saint who walked uninterruptedly in the light, who never deviated from the paths of righteousness. None but Christ could aver “I always do the things that are pleasing to him” (Joh 8:29). He alone ever practiced what He preached and perfectly exemplified what He taught: hence the unique emphasis of “mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” (Luk 24:19), and “all that Jesus began both to do and teach” (Act 1:1).

“*If we say that we have fellowship with him.*” Here is a lofty avowal supposed. “If we say” is a common mode of speaking in Scripture to express a definite affirmation or profession, as in “but now ye say, We see” (Joh 9:41), “What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works?” (Jam 2:14); “He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar” (1Jo 2:4), where in each instance, as here, the declaration is proved to be an idle boast. It is a bare assertion without any corresponding reality. There is a radical difference between profession and possession. To “have fellowship with God” presupposes regeneration and reconciliation unto Him. To state that we have fellowship with God is tantamount to claiming that we are His children, to be partakers of the divine nature, to be delivered from this present evil world, and that we belong to that company whose desire and determination it is to please and glorify Him. To have fellowship with God means that our affections are set upon things above, that we bask in the light of His countenance.

“*If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie.*” Obviously the first task before the expositor here is to give a correct definition or explanation of what it means to “walk in darkness,” and strange as it may sound (heretical to some ears) that is not necessarily the same thing as a scriptural one. There are many terms and expressions in God’s Word which are used by no means uniformly, and it is the interpreter’s duty to ascertain by a careful study of its setting, and then demonstrate to the reader, what is its precise meaning in any given instance. Thus, in Isaiah 50:10, the words “walketh in darkness” are found, yet their force there is quite different from that in our present text, and they respect very diverse characters. Let us, then, examine closely its language. In Scripture, a man’s “walk” refers not to any single act, or even habit, but rather to the general tenor of a person’s behaviour—the regular course followed by him. “Walking” is a voluntary act (Pro 2:13), continuous action (Isa 65:2), progressive action (2Ti 3:13). A man’s walk reveals the state of his heart, being a practical expression of what he is.

Whatever that term may signify in other passages, to “walk in darkness” certainly does not here mean to be in doubt about our spiritual state, or to be totally lacking in assurance of our acceptance with God; nor even a deep depression and despondency of soul. It is indeed desirable for the saint to know he has passed from death unto life and to have the Spirit bearing witness with his spirit that he is a child of God, as it is also both his privilege and duty to “rejoice in the Lord always;” yet though he may lack both the one and the other (and such is to be greatly deplored, and never excused), the absence thereof is no proof that he is not a Christian. No, something very much graver than that is here in view. While “the darkness” has reference to the realm inhabited by this class, nevertheless it is also their activities in that realm which the apostle had before him. In general terms to walk in darkness is to order our lives in opposition to the revealed character and will of Him who is light. It is expressive of being in a state of nature and acting accordingly.

More specifically, to walk in darkness is the condition of all the unregenerate, for they are total strangers to God and His so-great salvation. “For we were sometimes darkness” (Eph 5:8) describes our fearful state by nature. By his fall man was deprived of the favour of God, the Spirit of God, the image of God in his soul, and darkness became his element. Second, to walk in darkness is to be under the curse of God, for when Christ was made a curse for His people (Gal 3:13) there was “darkness over all the land” (Mat 27:45) for the space of three hours. Third, to walk in darkness is to be under the control of Satan, for salvation is a being turned “from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God” (Act 26:18 and cf. Col 1:13). Fourth, to walk in darkness is to be completely under the dominion of sin (Pro 4:19). To walk in darkness is to tread the broad road which leads to destruction, and the one who does so ends by being “cast into outer darkness” (Mat 22:13).

To walk in darkness is to conduct ourselves unholily, to follow steadily a course of self-pleasing, for “the unfruitful works of darkness” are the products of the flesh. It is not simply to be betrayed by the force of temptation into inconsistent actions, but the ruling principle and power of our lives is the very reverse of godliness, demonstrating such to be complete strangers to a work of divine grace. “Darkness” here has reference to the dominion and power of sin, with its awful effects upon the character and conduct of the unregenerate. Even though the grosser forms of sin appear not in the life, yet enmity against God rules the heart, regulates the thoughts and affections, and determines the motives; and though the ungodly may have little or no cognizance of the same, yet all these things are “naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Heb 4:13). As the best fruits of grace are produced by the Spirit in the heart and are known and valued only by the Lord, so it is with indwelling sin—its principal and vilest productions are not seen by our fellows.

Again, to walk in darkness is explained both by the contents of the preceding verse and the antithesis pointed in the following one. “Light” is transparent and translucent, open and clear, and it is so always and everywhere; whereas darkness is characterized by the opposite properties: it conceals, disguises, distorts. By his apostasy from God man lost that element of simplicity and openness in which he was created. Moreover, the clear and bright sunshine of the countenance of Him who is light became intolerant to the fallen creature—man fled and hid himself from God. Hence it is that insincerity and deceitfulness mark the natural man. He is not honest either with himself or in his dealings with God. He tries to make himself out to be other than he is. Men love darkness rather than light: “For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved” (Joh 3:20).

Finally, let it be pointed out that to walk in darkness includes living under fundamental error concerning spiritual and eternal things. Every doctrine of men, everything which is contrary to the glorious Gospel of the blessed God, derogatory to the honour and dignity of Christ, or which is opposed to the free grace of God in election, effectual calling, final perseverance, and the inculcation of true piety, is sinful in the sight of God and morally evil in us. He has not given His Word for us to pass judgment upon, but to receive into our minds with all submissiveness. There can be no fellowship with God but in the belief and practice of the truth. While we are walking in the reception and influence of anything contrary to divine revelation, we can have no communion with Him, for we are in the darkness of error. Every part of the truth is like its Author: light, pure, holy, perfect. His doctrine is “according to godliness” (1Ti 6:3), promoting and increasing it, supplying motives thereunto. But error is pernicious, and its words “eat as doth a canker” (2Ti 2:17).

“If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie.” Surely that is self-evident. Not only is the latter manifestly inconsistent with the former, but the two things are utterly irreconcilable. Purity and impurity are opposites. They are radically and essentially distinct. They are contrary in their nature, their properties, and their tendencies. Sin and holiness are diametrically antagonistic to each other. Truth and error can never agree: there can be no such thing as walking in the truth and at the same time living in that which is flatly contradictory thereto. “What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial?” (2Co 6:14-15). None whatever: they are avowed enemies of each other. To make the claim that I am enjoying fellowship with God and at the same time for me to be ruled by Satan, acting in self-gratification and taking pleasure in the ways of sin, is not only a patent absurdity and an empty pretence, it is also a manifest falsehood, a wicked lie.

Such glaring hypocrisy calls for strong denunciation. Very different was John from our mealy-mouthed men who gain a reputation for being “gracious” at the expense of fidelity. John did not merely say that this class of Christian professors erred or were “labouring under a delusion,” but spoke plainly and called them what they were. He was the apostle of love, and here gave proof thereof, for love is faithful. False pretences need to be dealt with sternly and their dishonesty condemned. The apostle used great plainness of speech, yet no more so than the case called for. It was not only that their lips were uttering what was untrue, but they were acting an untruth, their very lives were a falsehood, and therefore they were not to be spared. To be guilty of making such an outrageous claim is to traduce the character of God, for He holds no intercourse with the unholy; is to repudiate the truth, for such have no access to God; and is grievously to dishonour the cause of Christ.

“And this is the message which we have heard from him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth.”

By putting those verses together, not only is the proposition in the latter more self-evident, but the needs be for the former becomes plainer. At first sight it seems strange that John should announce so formally and emphatically such elementary truths. Surely, if there be anything which believers are clear upon it is the character of God, and that it precludes such an incongruity as is here refuted. Why then commence therewith right after the introductory verses? Because one of the

chief designs of this epistle is the testing of Christian profession. Because there were, and have been ever since, many in Christendom who came under the description of verse 6. And because there is still a sad tendency remaining in real Christians practically to deny this proposition—to act deceitfully, to trifle with sin, fellowship the unfruitful works of darkness, and yet suppose they are in communion with God; which is virtually saying that He is not light.

The love of approbation is the native trend of the human heart. Each person desires to be well thought of by his fellows, and the vast majority pose as being better than they are. Fear of censure and the contempt of others is another powerful motive which induces many to act the part of hypocrites, and such needs to be unsparingly mortified by the saint, for the extent to which he yields thereto makes him untruthful, and effectually hinders him from walking with the Holy One. Thus it is that so many of the unregenerate apply for Church membership: they profess the truth of the Gospel, but are strangers to its power. Many of them claim to have not only fellowship with God, but an exalted type and high degree thereof. They have much to say about the grace of God, but little or nothing of His holiness. They extol the imputed righteousness of Christ, but give no evidence of being recipients of His imparted righteousness. They prate about their peace and joy, but their daily lives are not ordered by the precepts of the Word. Their walk gives the lie to their profession.

“If we say”: John here includes himself! Were we, the apostles of Christ, to be found walking in darkness and at the same time asserting that we have fellowship with God, we should brand ourselves as liars. The “if” does not signify that such a thing was possible; rather was John pointing out what was utterly impossible. The apostles had fellowship with God and gave clear proof of the same. The blessed effects thereof were felt in their souls and appeared in their lives. It preserved them from sin, and deepened their hatred of it. It is impossible to have fellowship with God and not become increasingly conformed to Him. If it be true that “he that walketh with wise men shall be wise” (Pro 13:20), how much more so will walking with God deliver from folly! If evil communications corrupt good manners, then certainly divine communications will correct evil manners. Fellowship with God requires oneness of nature, and walking with Him produces sameness of character. Fellowship with God ever issues in spiritual fruitfulness. Thus it is the wisdom and duty of each of us to test himself by this rule, and then measure his associates thereby.

“If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth.” John here denounces such a sham, exposes its base inconsistency, and denies that such have any intercourse with Him who is light. “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” (Amo 3:3). Neither can one walk with God without being radically influenced thereby. “What God communicates to us is not a base fiction, for it is necessary that the power and effect of this fellowship should shine forth in the life: otherwise our profession of the Gospel is fallacious” (Calvin). Yet the spirit of self-deception and hypocrisy prevails to such an extent that our churches are filled with those of high pretensions whose walk is entirely inconsistent therewith—they have no true sight of themselves nor sense of their peril. Their practice demonstrates the falsity of their profession. They “do not the truth;” they act not in accord with its holy requirements—they are not vitally influenced thereby. Christianity does not consist in “saying” but in being.

Unspeakably solemn is what has been before us. We are plainly warned that “There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes, and yet is not washed from their filthiness” (Pro 30:12), and if I really value my eternal interests I shall seriously inquire, Do I belong to that company? Remember that self-love works presumption. Take nothing for granted; refuse to give yourself the benefit of any doubt. If you honestly desire to know the truth about yourself, then pray sincerely and earnestly, “Examine me, O LORD, and prove me; try my reins and my heart” (Psa 26:2). No matter how well instructed your mind, or what be your happy feelings, measure yourself by this unerring rule. Truth is not only to be believed and loved, but practised. It is at this point that graceless professors are to be distinguished from the regenerate. The one who hears Christ’s sayings but does them not is building on the sand (Mat 7:26). The one whom He owns as a spiritual kinsman is he who does the Father’s will (Mat 12:50). Those whom Christ pronounces blessed are they who “hear the word of God, and keep it” (Luk 11:28). “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves” (Jam 1:22).

Chapter 9

Walking in the Light

1 John 1:7

“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.”

Our present verse, especially its closing portion, is probably the best known and most frequently quoted in all the epistle, yet our familiarity with its language is no proof that we rightly understand its meaning, still less that it calls for no careful study and prayerful pondering. It is only when we come to inquire closely into its terms and the relation of one clause to another that we discover the verse is not quite so obvious and simple as we thought. As it be slowly and thoughtfully examined, the following questions suggest themselves and call for answer:

- Why is this statement made in the hypothetical form—“but if”?
- What is signified by “walking in the light”?
- How are we to understand the amplifying “as He is in the light”?
- Who is the “one with another” between whom there is fellowship?
- Is the “cleansing” here judicial or experimental, or does it include both justification and sanctification?
- Does the present tense “cleanseth” oblige us to regard it as a process?
- What is the exact relation of the final clause to the preceding ones—is the “cleansing” conditional upon our “walking in the light”?

It should be obvious to any careful reader that several of these questions can only be satisfactorily answered by pondering the two verses which immediately precede our text. If it be detached therefrom, we are likely to misapprehend both its force and its terms. We shall, therefore, quote the same:

“This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.”

Those three verses are, in turn, an amplification of “truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” (verse 3). There the general fact was stated; here details are entered into. First, the essential nature or character of the One with whom fellowship is enjoyed is described. Then we are shown the characters of those who are debarred from such a privilege. Here we are informed who are the ones that have fellowship with God, and how that fellowship is established and maintained.

Such is the transcendent excellency of God that none can hold converse or have fellowship with Him save those who are partakers of His nature and are being conformed unto His holy image. “If, therefore, our conversation be in darkness, if we wallow in the mire of untamed, unmortified lust, whatever our evangelical profession may be, or howsoever we may fancy ourselves entered into a fellowship with the Father by the means of the Mediator, it is but a lying imagination; for how can there be communion between two natures so different, between light and darkness, purity and impurity, heaven and hell, God and the devil? But if our conversation (manner of life) be agreeable to Gospel precepts, we have then fellowship with Him” (Charnock).¹⁴ Here then is the reason why verse 7 opens with the word “but”—because it presents a contrast with those described in the preceding one. Here, too, is the answer to our first question above: both verses are introduced by an “if” because it is the testing of profession which is in view: in the former, it is shown to be worthless, false; in the latter, genuine and valid. By it each reader should honestly measure himself.

The particular characters set over against each other in verses 6 and 7 are the same as those referred to by Christ in John 3:19-21, evil-doers who hate the light; truth-doers who welcome it—with the latter there is a concord between profession and performance, with all its blessed consequences. “In the context the apostle speaketh of communion with God. Now communion with God we cannot have till we be reconciled to Him by Christ, and none can be looked upon as reconciled to Him by Christ but those that endeavour conformity to God in purity and holiness” (Manton).¹⁵ In verse 6 the hypocrite is exposed and condemned; in verse 7 the real Christian is identified and confirmed. He furnishes evidence that he is in fellowship with God and has a saving interest in the cleansing blood of Christ, and that by the character of his walk. Thus the “if” is used in our present verse, as in the foregoing, to substantiate the truth contained in the assertion. So far from weakening the statement or rendering it doubtful, it makes it more positive and unequivocal—that is why instead of saying “ye” the apostle employed “we,” thereby including himself. “There can be no walking with God, who is light, but as we renounce and avoid every false way; and walk in truth, in the light of it, and under the sacred energy of the same” (S.E. Pierce).

Coming now to our second question, What is signified by “walking in the light?” There is less need for us to dwell at length upon this, since we entered so fully in our last upon walking in darkness. First, it necessarily presupposes regenera-

¹⁴ **Stephen Charnock** (1628-1680) – Puritan divine, English Puritan Presbyterian clergyman, born in London. He studied at Cambridge, ministered in Southwark, and then completed his studies at Oxford. In Ireland in 1656 he became chaplain to the governor. He became widely known for the skill by which he discharged his duties. He began a co-pastorship at Crosby Hall in London in 1675. He is best known for his work, *The Attributes of God*.

¹⁵ **Thomas Manton** (1620-1677) – Nonconformist Puritan preacher. Graduated from Oxford and preached until forbidden by the Act of Uniformity of 1662. From 1662 to 1670 he preached in his own house, but was finally arrested and imprisoned for six months. Subsequently became preacher for London merchants in Pinners’ Hall. James Ussher called him “one of the best preachers in England.” Appointed as one of three clerks at the Westminster Assembly. Born in Lawrence-Lydiat, county of Somerset, England.

tion, for certainly one cannot walk in the light unless he first be in the light, and this none are until they be born again. Then they are effectually called and brought “out of darkness into God’s marvelous light” (1Pe 2:9). Then they are made “light in the Lord” (Eph 5:8), and therefore is it said of them, “Ye are all the children of light and the children of the day: we are not of the night nor of darkness” (1Th 5:5). But, second, they give proof of this by acting accordingly, just as those who “are darkness” love darkness, walk in darkness, and produce “the unfruitful works of darkness” (Eph 5:11). Thus to “walk in the light” imports much more than the sphere in which the believer lives, namely the manner in which he conducts himself there. He is not only in the light positionally, but he walks in it practically. In other words, his external conduct reflects his internal condition. As his character corresponds to the nature of God, so his character is exhibited by his conduct. The tree is known by its fruits.

There is a light to which the Christian is journeying—the realm of unclouded glory (Pro 4:18; Col 1:12). There is a light by which he walks—that of God’s Word (Psa 119:105; Pro 6:23). There is also a light in which he walks—the highway of holiness (Joh 8:12). To “walk” connotes not an occasional step, but an habitual course. A person’s “walk” is a figurative expression which signifies the general tenor of his life. “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly” (Psa 1:1)—whose ways and works are not regulated by carnal policy and self’s interests. “For we walk by faith, not by sight” (2Co 5:7)—with our hearts engaged with the perfection of an invisible God and our wills subjected to His. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). Again, to “walk in the light”, is to live in separation from the world, with our affections set upon things above, laying up our treasure there. Darkness is the principle which actuates and governs the world, for it is inveterately opposed to the Father (1Jo 2:16), and he who will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God (Jam 4:4). Thus it is clear that the fellowship with God estranges its subjects from the world. The Christian belongs to another sphere and manifests it by his deportment.

We must be careful not to restrict the idea of walking in the light unto our external actions. God ever looks first upon the heart, and desires truth “in the inward parts” (Psa 51:6). He will not tolerate dishonesty and cannot be imposed upon by any species of deception. The Holy One allows neither insincerity nor concealment from those with whom He communes. Two cannot walk together except they be agreed, and there is a radical lack of agreement if we distrust God or hide anything from Him. Light is clear and transparent, and to walk in it means that we are open and candid with Him. There must be complete frankness in all of our dealings with God. If I turn a blind eye to something suspicious in myself, or shrink from meeting a brother or fellow creature because I have an uneasy feeling that he has just cause of complaint against me, then I am seeking shelter from the darkness. But if I genuinely desire that my secret sins should be discovered to me, if I daily measure myself by God’s pure truth and judge myself in the light of His holiness, if I sincerely pray “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psa 139:23-24), then do I truly love the light and hate all shams.

“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light.” The apostle explains what he intends in the first clause by drawing an illustration from the One who is Himself light and dwells in eternal purity and glory. The self-same Model is here presented to us by the apostle as his Master set before him and his fellows: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Mat 5:48). Nothing short of absolute perfection is the standard at which we ever must aim. But does not our present verse speak of something more than aim—even actual realization? Certainly. Yet it is that of likeness and not of sameness; or, rather, not of sameness in degree. As Trapp so well expressed it, “We walk in the light as God is in the light for quality, but not for equality.” We are indeed being conformed to His image, and bear His likeness, yet fall very short of His stature. As Spurgeon pointed out, “I can walk in the light of the sun, though I cannot dwell in it; and I can walk in the light as God is in the light, though I cannot attain to the same measure of excellence, purity, and truth in which the Lord Himself resides.”

“We have fellowship one with another.” It strikes the writer as passing strange that any Christian should have difficulty with those words. In view of the ones immediately preceding, surely their meaning is plain. If we be walking in the light as God is in the light, it follows as a certain fact that we have fellowship with Him and He with us. We are one with Him in nature, in love of the truth, in delighting in holiness. Those who are born of God are as truly attracted unto Him as the babe is to its mother. If we be walking with God then His secret is with us (Psa 25:14) and our secret is with Him. He opens His heart to us, and we open our hearts to Him. He sups with us, and we with Him (Rev 3:20). Yet our fellowship with God is neither perfect nor constant in this life, any more than our walk is. A godly walk both fits us for and evidences we are in communion with God. The previous verse, where the opposite is stated, removes all uncertainty: “If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness, we lie...But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another.”

“And the blood of Jesus Christ his Son [namely, the Son of Him with whom we have fellowship] cleanseth us from all sin.” Cleansing from sin is a sacrificial term, which can best be understood in the light of the Old Testament types, particularly that of Leviticus 16:30, “For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins.” That cleansing was effected by the shedding of blood. It was in nowise subjective, or something wrought within them, but, instead, a work done for them. It was not a matter of purifying their hearts, but of annulling their guilt and putting away their sins judicially from “before the Lord.” The blood of atonement not only propitiated God, it purged the people—freed them from God’s wrath, rendered them meet to worship Him. Again, in Numbers 35:31-33, we

read of Israel's land being "cleansed" by the penalty of the Law being enforced and guilt thereby expiated. The "land" signifies the people who resided there: when the claims of divine justice and holiness had been met, sin was not imputed or charged to them.

Though the blessings of justification and sanctification ever accompany each other, yet they must not be confounded, but considered distinctly. Justification has to do wholly with the legal side of our salvation. It consists of absolution from our sins, and being declared righteous by God on account of the perfect obedience of Christ being reckoned to the believer. Sanctification has to do more with the experiential and practical side, the fitting or rendering us meet for God's presence, and where that is in view the operations of the Spirit and the water of the Word are mentioned. That, too, is equally a fruit of the redemptive work of Christ, which procured for His people the gift of the Spirit. But what we have here in our text is judicial only. First, because as a fact no believer is cleansed from all sin in this life in any other way. Second, because the cleansing is by blood, and that always respects the objective side of things: see Romans 5:9; Ephesians 1:7; Revelation 1:5.

"*When he had by himself purged* [or "made a cleansing of"] *our sins*" (Heb 1:3, and cf. 9:26). It is the blood which gives us title to enter into the holiest (Heb 10:19)—"sanctified" by blood occurs only in Hebrews 10:10; 13:12, in its sacrificial sense, of setting us apart before God in all the acceptableness of Christ's perfect oblation.

If the cleansing be a judicial one, relating to our justification, why is it spoken of in the present tense?

First, to set forth the eternal efficacy of Christ's blood, which may be considered distinctly as shed, as pleaded, and as applied or sprinkled (1Pe 1:2). As Charnock so well put it, "The blood of Christ cleanseth, not hath cleansed or shall cleanse. This denotes a continued act. There is a perpetual pleading of it for us, a continual flowing of it to us. It is a fountain set open for sin (Zec 13:1). There is a perpetual stream of virtue from this blood, as there is of corruption from our nature. It was shed but once, but it is applied often, and the virtue of it is as durable as the person whose blood it is." We do not immediately enter into the whole good of Christ's redemption at the hour of conversion (Rom 8:23). As there are blessings procured for us by Christ that await us in the future, so there are others which are received by us gradually in this life. Our cleansing is one of them. Sin ever defiles, no matter who commits it. Some say, Though God sees sin in His children, He no longer sees sin on them. But He does, and deals with them accordingly. He no longer imputes it to their eternal condemnation, but He notices it to their temporal chastisement (Psa 89:30-33).

Second, our cleansing, even judicially, is, in fact, continual. This is denied by some, on the ground that it is dishonouring to the sacrifice of Christ, bringing it down to those offered under the Law, which produced only a temporary remission. But such an objection is pointless. It is true that at conversion all our previous iniquities are blotted out, but to speak of God's forgiving us our future sins before they are committed is senseless; "having forgiven you all trespasses" (Col 2:13) is quoted by these Antinomians, but that refers to all pre-conversion ones, or, as 2 Peter 1:9, styles them, "purged from his old sins." Until fresh sins are committed, further guilt accrues not, and therefore cannot be removed until it is there. We will say nothing further upon this point now, as it will come before us again (D.V.)¹⁶ when considering the ninth verse. Rather let us thank God that the cleansing blood is ever available for sinful creatures, and plead it in all our approaches unto Him. Christ's blood is called "a new way" in Hebrews 10:20, and the word signifies "newly slain"—as suited to us today as when shed on the cross.

When taking up the second half of our verse, honest Spurgeon said, "I have been driven to this text, and yet I have been afraid of it." After pointing out that it had very often been handled out of its connection, he added the following.

"I do feel that it is essential to the Christian ministry not to pick passages out of God's Word and rend them away from the context, but to take them as they stand. God's Word must be taken as God speaks it: we have no right to divide the living child of divine truth and detach the second half of our verse from the first half, or wrest it to make it mean other than it does. According to the text, special pardon of sin is the peculiar privilege of those who walk in the light as God is in the light; but it is not the privilege of anyone else. Only those who have been brought by divine grace from a state of nature into a state of grace, and walk in the light, may claim the possession of perfect cleansing through the blood of Christ."

Manton, too, wavered in determining whether our walk in the light is an evidence of a saving interest in Christ's blood or necessary thereunto, and declared, "It is best to say, It is both a sign and a condition without which we cannot have benefit by Christ's death; but the first condition is faith; next, love and holiness to continue our interest in this privilege."

In the first three verses John testified that the apostles had fellowship with the Father and His Son, and declared this in order that "*ye also may have fellowship with us.*" But who are the "ye?" The children of God, those redeemed by Christ. But how are such to be identified? In verses 6 and 7 he tells us: not every one who professes to participate in this privilege, but those whose practice accords with their profession. Thus, in the clear light of the whole context, the first design of John in here linking together walking in the light and cleansing by the blood is to assure the hearts of believers: they may know their interest in the latter by their sincere endeavours after a more constant subjection to the truth and a closer fellowship with God. As Charnock said, mutual fellowship between God and us "is a certain proof that we are interested in the expiatory virtue of the blood of Christ."

¹⁶ D.V. – Latin: *Deo Volenti*, literally "as God wills."

Second, it is intended to humble us. Our walking in separation from the world and enjoying fellowship with God is no ground for boasting, for they are impossible apart from Christ's sacrifice—we owe them to His blood, and are here reminded of our complete dependence upon it.

But, third, the second half of the verse is brought in for our instruction. "Nothing is said about Christian experience as a means of cleansing. What, says one, do not the first sentences of the verse imply that? Assuredly not. If I walk in the light as God is in the light, what then? Does my walking in the light take away my sins? Not at all. I am as much a sinner in the light as in the darkness, if it were possible for me to be in the light without first being washed in the blood. Well, but we have fellowship with God, and does not that take away sin? Beloved, do not misunderstand me. No man can have fellowship with God unless sin be taken away; but his fellowship with God does not take away his sin—not at all. The whole process of the removal of sin is here: the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin. I beg to repeat: neither our walking in the light, nor having fellowship with God, cleanses us from sin: these go with the cleansing, but they have no connection as cause and results." (Spurgeon).

Fourth, the closing words of our text are designed for the comfort of the Christian. The more he walks in the light, the more are the hidden things of darkness (the corruption of his heart) revealed and exposed. The greater the sinner he comes to perceive himself, the more highly he prizes the atoning and cleansing blood of Christ, and the more completely does he rest his soul on its sufficiency and plead its virtues before God. Likewise, the closer he be admitted into fellowship with God, the more conscious does he become of those things in his heart and life which are out of harmony therewith, and beg Him for Christ's sake to enable him to mortify and put them away. And when painfully aware that sinful conduct has broken his fellowship, he mourns over the same, acknowledges it to God, and betakes himself again to that fountain which has been opened for sin and for uncleanness, that the hindering cause may be removed and communion restored. The farther a Christian proceeds on the path of holiness, the viler he becomes in his own eyes, and the deeper his appreciation of Christ's sacrifice.

Our present verse emphasizes the enormity of sin: so exceedingly sinful is it that the blood of God's Son must be shed in order for its removal. It teaches us the defiling effects of sin: it pollutes and renders us filthy. Then let us never think lightly of it, for naught but the blood of Christ can remove its horrible stains. Here too we behold the sufficiency of Christ's atonement: it has made satisfaction unto God both for our original and personal sins. No sin a Christian ever commits is too black or crimson for it to be blotted out. The precious blood of Christ is of enduring virtue and perpetual efficacy—ever available for the befouled believer. But faith must lay hold of it, and there must be a return to walking in the light, in order to be sprinkled from an evil conscience. "Walk in the light because we are cleansed from our sin; but we are also cleansed from our sin because we walk in the light" (Levi Palmer).

Our title for a sermon on verse 7 would be: Walking in the light, washed by the blood. 1. A definite contrast (with verse 6)—pointed by the "But." 2. A spiritual performance: walking in the light. 3. A blessed privilege: mutual fellowship between God and us. 4. A gracious provision for failures: the cleansing blood.

Chapter 10

Sin Denied

1 John 1:8, 10

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us...If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

We have linked together these two verses because they are so similar in their substance—giving a separate treatment of verse 9 in the next chapter. Each of them opens with the words "If we say," which indicates that it is the testing of Christian profession that is in view. In the second half of this chapter John is very discriminating. All through its last five verses and the first two of the following one (which complete this section), we behold the apostle distinguishing sharply between the wheat and the tares, or separating the good fish from the bad ones (Mat 13:47-48)—in each instance dealing first with the latter. Those referred to in 1:6, 8, 10, are guilty of making an empty boast and are expressly charged with falsehood. Over against them are placed genuine Christians, their characteristic marks being described and their peculiar privileges and portions named: they walk in the light, confess their sins, have an Advocate with the Father. The careful reader will observe

the absence of the word “say” in 1:7, 9; 2:1, because therein he was not exposing a worthless claim, but delineating the features of those who actually enjoyed fellowship with God.

What has been pointed out above at once serves to refute superficial students of this epistle who have complained that the apostle followed not so orderly a method as Paul was wont to do. The structure of his opening chapter contains clear evidence that he wrote according to a definite plan and expressed his thoughts regularly and logically. The above paragraph also illustrates two features which are quite prominent in this epistle. First, John’s habit of drawing sharp contrasts: 1:6-7; 1:8-9—seen again in 2:3-4; 2:7-8; 3:8-9. Second, his fondness for combining triplicates of objects, as the three different classes of graceless professors described in 1:6, 8, 10. That is the first of several triads. For example, in 2:13, he divides the children of God into three grades—fathers, young men, little children. In 2:16, he makes the world to consist of “the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.” Three references are made to the “antichrist”: 2:18, 22; 4:3, and three to “overcoming”: 2:13-14; 4:4; 5:4. In 5:7, mention is made of the “Three that bear record in heaven,” and in 5:8, of the three “that bear witness in earth.”

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (verse 8).

Five things in connection with this verse claim our best attention. First, its connection. Second, its comprehensiveness. Third, its proud boast. Fourth, its divine diagnosis. Fifth, its solemn verdict.

Its connection

In view of what is affirmed in the verse immediately preceding, the avowal made at the beginning of the present one appears logically and necessarily to follow. If those who walk in the light as God is in the light have fellowship with Him and He with them, and if the blood of Jesus Christ His Son “cleanseth them from all sin,” it is to be expected that they would say “we have no sin.” Had verse 7 stood alone, that is the only conclusion that could be drawn. Let those who are so fond of repeating that “Scripture says what it means and means what it says” give due weight to this consideration—that in those two verses—the same term “sin” is used, but with two very different shades of meaning, and that unless the distinction here drawn be clearly apprehended by the Lord’s people they are in real danger of misunderstanding what is so plainly declared at the close of verse 7. By noting the connection between the two verses, we perceive how the Holy Spirit in verse 8 guards us against drawing a wrong inference from verse 7, and how that the latter statement serves to fix the precise signification of the former—that the believer is cleansed from all sin judicially, but not so inherently.

“While the apostle insisted on the necessity of an habitual holy walk, as the effect and evidence of the knowledge of God in Christ Jesus and of communion with Him, he guarded, with equal care, against the opposite error of self-righteousness and pride” (T. Scott).¹⁷ Therein we have a striking example—and one which every preacher should most diligently heed—of how careful the blessed Spirit ever is to preserve the balance of truth, and to prevent us drawing a false conclusion from one aspect of it by failing to supplement the same by bringing in its complementary aspect. To acquit the consciences of the saints of all sin and guilt on gospel grounds, and thereby raise up their minds to such conceptions of the virtue and efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ as will encourage them to hold communion with the Father in the clear and full apprehension that the blood of His Son cleanseth the believer from all sin, is one of the most blessed and important works in which His servant can engage. Yet it is also his duty to remind them that the blood of the Lamb has not cleansed their unholy natures or made them pure from sin. Instead, though their hearts are sprinkled from an evil conscience, and they have liberty to enter the holiest by the blood of Christ, nevertheless the inherency of sin is not yet taken away.

By linking together verses 7 and 8 we perceive that the apostle would have his Christian readers learn how to distinguish sharply between what they were in Christ and what they still were in and of themselves. The blood of Christ is the believer’s everlasting purity in the eyes of divine justice. By it he is completely cleansed from every spot and stain of sin. His purity in the sight of God’s Law is such as cannot be fully conceived by any of us, for not only was the whole of the Christian’s pollution removed when Christ was made sin for him, but he is made “the righteousness of God in him” (2Co 5:21), the perfect obedience of his Surety being reckoned to his account. Nevertheless, neither his guilt being charged to the Lord Jesus nor the imputation unto him of the merits of His finished work has removed the inherency of sin out of him. His old evil nature still remains within him—unchanged, filthy, vile, with “no good thing” dwelling therein. That which we inherited from our first parents, which was a part of us at our birth, still defiles every member of our complex beings, and does so unto the very last moment of our earthly history; yet that in no wise contradicts or even qualifies the blessed fact that “the blood of Jesus Christ God’s Son cleanseth us from all sin.”

As one with Adam, both federally and seminally, we have derived from him the total depravation of our whole persons. In consequence thereof we are “born like a wild ass’s colt” (Job 11:12)—stupid and intractable. By birth we are “all as an unclean thing,” and consequently “all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isa 64:6). His inbred corruptions continue to be the Christian’s plague of heart (1Ki 8:38) so long as he be left in this world. These are very humiliating facts, the consideration whereof ought at all times to humble us before the Lord. So far as our carnal nature be concerned, we are always one

¹⁷ **Thomas Scott** (1747-1821): Anglican minister, born in Lincolnshire, England. He served for some years as parish priest before conversion during correspondence and mentoring from John Newton (1725-1807). He is best known for his *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, his autobiography *The Force of Truth*, and being a founder of the *Church Missionary Society*.

and the same, though indwelling sin is more manifest at some times than others. That should teach us to look outside of ourselves for our present and eternal purity before God. There is no other way of getting above the influences and effects of our natural depravity than by having our spiritual minds engaged in real fellowship with God, and in true apprehension of what is contained in the precious and efficacious remedy which His grace has provided. Nothing will so relieve the heart when oppressed by a sense of our vileness as believing views of what we are in Christ—“complete in him” (Col 2:10), “perfected for ever” (Heb 10:14).

It might naturally be supposed that walking in the light and enjoying fellowship with the Holy One will exert a cleansing effect upon our natures. Not so; it leaves “the flesh” unchanged. Yet many cherish the idea that if only they walked more fully in the light, and had closer and more constant fellowship with God, the flesh would cease opposing the spirit. And again we say, Not so; though in such a case they would be more delivered from fulfilling its lusts (Gal 5:16). It is obvious, then, that one gracious design of the Holy Spirit in the verse before us is to comfort distressed believers, who are so apt to think that their own grievous case is such as none but themselves have any experience of. The more so if they listen to the glowing “testimonies” of certain ones, for fear is then awakened that they are strangers to the supernatural and saving operations of divine grace. When beholding the cheerful countenance and exuberant spirit of some of their fellows, they are perhaps ready to conclude that they are yet in the bond of iniquity. But appearances are proverbially deceptive. Many a smiling face conceals a heavy heart. While the heart knows its own bitterness, it is not privy to the groans of others, who, in secret, frequently have occasion to cry, “Oh, wretched man that I am.”

Its comprehensiveness

Look now at the comprehensiveness of this statement. It is not “*if ye,*” but “*if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.*” By that word John included himself and his fellow apostles—just as he had all through the foregoing verse. He did so with the design of showing that the predication here made is one which admits of no exception. No matter who be the person that affirms he has no sin, he is utterly deceived. Not even the eleven, who were favoured above all other believers; nay, not the very one who was privileged to recline on the Saviour’s bosom could truthfully aver that he was all pure within. See here the omniscience of God, with His foreview of the future, guiding His servant’s pen to use the pronoun “we” rather than “ye”! Undoubtedly the Holy Spirit was anticipating the fact that there would arise those of apparently exceptional piety and attainments who would lay claim to this very thing, and therefore He here cautions the children of God to give no heed unto their arrogant and absurd assertion, assuring us that all such are deluded souls.

Listen attentively, my sin-harassed and distressed brother, to the language which John here employs, as he (by necessary implication) declares that I myself, and my fellow apostles, have sin within us. Mark how he is pointing out that your sad case is far from being unique; as he indirectly affirms, we too are but sinners saved by grace, and still have the root and seeds of all evil within us. Yet, on the other hand, observe well that he did not say they were under sin or that sin reigned in and over them. He could not say that of any of the regenerate, though to their senses there are times when such seems to be the case. No, sin is in them, and is ever more or less active, yet it does not have complete dominion over them: such a thing would be utterly incompatible with the state into which the saints are brought by the new birth, when, being made new creatures in Christ, they are freed from their former slavery and fitted to walk in newness of life, though, alas, they often fail to live up to their privileges.

It is indeed the sincere desire and endeavour of every real child of God to walk worthily of the Lord unto all pleasing and be fruitful in every good work (Col 1:10), but to eradicate his carnal nature is altogether beyond him: “Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?” (Pro 20:9). But cannot the grace of God effect sinless perfection? “There is no channel for such a grace to run in, no promise in all the Word of God to bottom such a persuasion upon. There is a promise for the subduing of iniquity, but not for the annihilating of it; a promise that sin shall not reign in us, but none that it shall not be. Therefore, the believer would not seek for that in himself which is found only in Christ, nor for that on earth which is reserved for heaven” (E. Polhill, 1675). God leaves sin in His people to wean them from self-love and self-righteousness, and to develop in them the grace of perseverance, through oppositions and temptations from within and without. His power is rendered the more evident in preserving the plant of holiness in a heart so filled with noxious weeds. He would conform them to Christ’s sufferings: as He endured the contradiction of sinners against Himself, so they endure the contradiction of sin against themselves. The compassion of our great High Priest is demonstrated in bearing with our infirmities.

“*If we say that we have no sin.*” Such an arrogant assertion goes much farther than saying we commit no sin. It is a declaration that they are without the root from which all evil fruits proceed: that their very nature is undefiled, clean. It seems almost incredible, yet there are those who make the audacious boast of moral perfection, that their hearts are holy, and that all their desires are regular. They are so puffed up with the conceit of their own attainments as to declare themselves to be as immaculate in heart and holy in life as the Law of God requires. They aver themselves to be so “entirely sanctified” that their “old man” has been wholly purged and purified. So imbued are they by a spirit of vainglory that such people profess to be without sin internally or externally, spotless in thought, word and deed, faultless before God and man. That such a preposterous boast should be made by the heathen Gnostics is, in measure, understandable, but that it is made by any professing Christians only shows the awful deceitfulness of sin and the blinding power of pride.

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,” or “err ourselves”—not in the doctrinal but the ethical sense, for their state is far more serious than if only intellectual ignorance were involved, being like unto that of those of whom it was said “they do always err in their hearts” (Heb 3:10). They have so imposed on themselves as to be utterly led astray, regarding darkness as light. Such is the divine diagnosis here made of their condition: the omniscient Physician declares them to be most awfully deluded. Imagining themselves to be the excellent of the earth, they are in reality a stench in God’s nostrils, for nothing is so abhorrent to Him as pride. So far from being holier than the rank and file of believers, they are in total spiritual darkness, for they have never seen themselves in God’s light or had an experiential discovery made to them of the depravity of their hearts. What is here in view is not deliberate hypocrisy, but a species of self-imposition, and such a state is well-nigh hopeless, for this is the most fatal of all forms of deception.

“And the truth is not in us” is the divine verdict. It is contrary to Scripture, to universal experience, to the confession of every saint recorded in the Word, for one and all acknowledged they were the subjects of sin, inwardly defiled and all their actions affected with it. Neither Abraham, Job, Moses, David, Elijah, Daniel, nor Paul could maintain any such thing. Thus it is such self-deception as proves these braggarts to be destitute of a saving acquaintance with the Gospel. Instead of having received what they term “the second blessing,” they were never the subjects of the first. Instead of occupying the highest rank in Christ’s army, they are not members of it at all. Had the Word of God been in them as a principle of life and light, they could never have made so gross a mistake as proves them to be completely ignorant of God and His holy Law and their own hearts. If they were not so, they would be painfully conscious of the evil which is ever at work within them, and would cry, “Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults.” Herein we are shown, from another angle, what a terrible thing sin is: it not only defiles us and renders us obnoxious to God, but it fatally deceives the natural man.

Its proud boast

“If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (verse 10).

Since sin indwells us it cannot but follow that we must, more or less, have the evidence of the same in our experience. This is the ordination of Him who is too wise to err and too loving unto His own people to be unkind to them. But why? Would He not be more glorified had indwelling sin been destroyed and they lived sinless lives in this world? No, or He had so ordered it. Some of the reasons for His not doing so have been intimated above. In addition, we may perceive that, as things are, the saints obtain a much fuller realization of their total depravity and marvel the more at God’s amazing grace unto them. Thereby too they come to perceive more clearly their dire need of and to value more highly that Fountain which has been opened for sin and for uncleanness. Sometimes God permits their iniquities to prevail against them (Psa 65:3), that they may be humbled and made to loathe and wholly renounce themselves, and wonder at His infinite patience and forbearance with them.

Those known as “sinless perfectionists” are not the only ones to say they have not sinned, for this preposterous and wicked assertion is made by several other classes. It is the implicit if not the explicit avowal of those Satan-blinded people who call themselves “Christian Scientists,” for they emphatically deny that there is any such thing as sin, declaring it to be a delusion of mortal minds: and thus they are neither Christians or scientists—those who “know.” Some extreme Antinomians have taught that they are “in Christ” in such a way, so one with Him, that they not only do not but cannot sin, wresting such words as “dead indeed unto sin” (Rom 6:11), as they also do “dead to the law” (Rom 7:4). It is also the doctrine of the infatuated papists that a man may, all his lifetime, eschew every mortal sin, and do all that the Law of God requires of him; yea, that he can do more than he is obligated unto, and supererogate and merit for others who fall short of perfection.

Its divine diagnosis

“If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar,” for we flatly contradict the Word of truth. In verse 6 it is the hypocrite who is exposed as a liar; in verse 8, those who so believe their own lie as to become fatally self-deceived; in verse 10, those whose consciences are so calloused and hearts hardened by unbelief that they blasphemously assert that which makes God a liar. He has expressly stated that “there is no man that sinneth not” (1Ki 8:46), that “there is not a just man on earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not” (Ecc 7:20). It is not pre-conversion sins which are in view in our verse, but those committed after, as verse 9 clearly shows. No matter how strict he be over his outward walk, or what he appears in the eyes of his fellows, the most godly and favoured Christian cannot truthfully aver that he is without sin in thought and word and deed; nay, he has to acknowledge himself to be included in the divine declaration, “in many things we all offend” (Jam 3:2)—even when those things wear a religious garb—and therefore does he make daily use of that petition in the family prayer, “Forgive us our sins.”

Its solemn verdict

It is highly important that we should understand what sin is, in its vile nature and exceeding sinfulness. Yet sin as it really is can be seen only in the light of God’s Word and Spirit. None but the regenerate have a true concept of that “abominable thing” which God hates (Jer 44:4). Inherent sin is a self-acting principle and is always at work, whether we perceive it or not, defiling our whole being and all that we do. Some sin most in thought, others in words—the boiling over of a hot temper; others in deeds. Rightly did S.E. Pierce point out, “None of us are saved from sin so much as we conceive. We are saved

from a state of sin and sinfulness; we are also saved from a gross way of sin and sinfulness; yet we are not always saved from cursed and carnal affections, nor from dispositions and expressions of our sinfulness;” and every regenerate person is taught of God honestly to acknowledge the same. I cannot say I have not sinned while reading the Scriptures, or when upon my knees, or in the pulpit. Atonement has to be made for our “holy things” (Lev 5:15)! The closer we walk with God, the more conscious are we of our sins.

Chapter 11

Sins Confessed

1 John 1:9

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

While our present verse be complete in itself, yet it is also a part of a larger whole, and an apprehension of its coherence with what precedes helps to a better understanding of it. It cannot be too frequently insisted upon that the Bible is not a collection of separate and unrelated texts, but rather a living body of truth, one member of which is connected with and dependent upon another—as the fingers (though each one be complete in itself) upon the hand, the hand upon the arm, and it with the trunk. The principal subject of 1 John 1 is that of fellowship with God in Christ: made possible by the divine incarnation (verses 1-2), producing a fullness of joy (verse 4), had with Him who is light (verse 5). In verses 6, 8, and 10, we are shown how certain types of godless professors are cut off from this privilege. How then are we to identify those who do enjoy it? That is a most pressing question: What are the clear and infallible marks by which Christians may know themselves to be among those in fellowship with God?

- (1). Walking in the light (verse 7).
- (2). Confessing their sins (verse 9).
- (3). Obedience (2:3, 5).
- (4). Love to the brethren (3:14), etc.

It is also to be noted that verses 7-10 all treat of some aspect of sin, for that is the great obstacle and hindrance to fellowship with the Holy One.

Coming now to the more immediate context, it is obvious that verse 9 supplies the second member of the general thought begun in verse 7, giving the opposite alternative to the one specified in verse 8. First, the believer is judicially cleansed from all sin; yet, second, the root of evil still remains within him. The questions may therefore be asked: Are we still affected by it? Does it at times occasion us to fall? If so, what must we do? Since the sin which indwells the believer is an active principle, it cannot but be that he will be under the partial influence of the same, and thereby moved to act unworthily of his Christian calling. Nor is this to be wondered at, when we consider the vileness and power of the flesh, the implacable enmity of Satan against him, the world laying its snares in his path, ever setting before him a multitude of objects to turn away his heart and mind from Christ. Nor can he deliver himself—even inherent grace or “the new nature” is insufficient for such a task. None but the Lord can give the victory. Yet at times He is pleased to leave us, in some respects and in a variety of ways, unto ourselves, so that we stumble in the mire and befoul our garments. And why does He so act and withhold His supporting arm? That we may realize our weaknesses and have experiential proof that “without me ye can do nothing” (Joh 15:5).

That is a very humbling and painful lesson, yet it is one which God has ordained that all of His children shall learn. It is His will that they should have a fuller discovery of their ruined and corrupt condition by nature, and have a personal acquaintance with their weakness and impotency. It is His will that they feel, bewail, and own both the one and the other, that they may be more sensible alike of the disease and the remedy. When a real Christian sins, he smarts under it. He cannot but be affected and afflicted by it, for his peace and joy are temporarily lost, and his free access to God is broken into. That distresses his mind. Sometimes an old sin is revived, and he is greatly perturbed. Rightly so, for sin must never be regarded lightly or excused. Instead, it is to be loathed and lamented. Nevertheless, the saint must be careful that he does not confound his present case with his unchanging state. Though there be guilt on the conscience, pollution on the mind, grief in

the heart, that is a very different thing from being in a sinful state—something which none of the Lord's regenerate can ever be in again, though they may be over and over again in a sinful case and circumstance.

But God has mercifully appointed a relief, exactly suited to this part of His people's spiritual distress. Marvel with us, fellow Christian, at the grace which has provided for the restoration of ungrateful and undutiful children. In the verse now before us God has given us directions how we are to act when in and under such sinful cases.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

And, my reader, there is no relief for the burdened conscience, no restoration to real fellowship with God, until we do so. Alas, that we are so slow, so reluctant to avail ourselves of the same. But pride hinders us, and we are loath to humble ourselves before the One against whom we have transgressed. When we realize who it is we have offended and grieved, call to mind the privileges we have enjoyed and abused, think upon the profession and promises we have made, dwell upon the heinousness of the sins into which we have fallen, there is a sad tendency in us to keep silent, and then to excuse ourselves. But that is fatal both to our present peace and future spiritual prosperity. Unjudged sins produce a cold reserve in the heart toward the Holy One, and if that be persisted in divine chastisement will be our sure portion.

What has just been said receives forcible illustration in Psalm 32:3-4 where David describes the painful experiences which befell him during those months when he had refused to acknowledge his foul offences. Said he, "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer." He was like a man in a fever—tossing about upon his bed, trying first one position and then another, but finding no rest. Such perturbation and disquietude of spirit in a believer is one of the surest signs that he is out of communion with the Lord. "There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked" (Isa 57:21), and such is the case of a backslider. There is nothing more distressing for one who has walked with God than to have a spiritual relapse; and if he be overcome again and again by his chief besetting sin, then is he most wretched—far more so than had he suffered a temporal loss, were afflicted bodily, or had encountered persecution. And there is no relief for him, no ease for his conscience, no joy in the Lord, no delight in His Word, no liberty in prayer, until he unburdens his heart unto Him by free and frank confession.

God has most graciously provided for just such emergencies. He is pleased to address Himself unto His people thus: "Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the LORD; and I will not cause mine anger to fall upon you: for I *am* merciful...Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the LORD thy God, and hast scattered thy ways to the strangers...Turn, O backsliding children, saith the LORD; for I am married unto you" (Jer 3:12-14). "I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself *thus*; Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke: turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God" (Jer 31:18). "Take with you words, and turn to the LORD: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips" (Hos 14:2). Such Scriptures are exactly suited to us when we are in particular cases and distressing spiritual circumstances arising from our inherent sinfulness and actual defilements. Let no Christian allow a lying Devil to rob him of such precious and needed portions of God's word by listening to 'dispensationalists' who say they are not for him. They are as much a part of his spiritual heritage as is Psalm 23.

Many such passages as the above would be meaningless to believers today were their experiences different from what they actually are. On God's part they are blessed memorials of His grace; on our part they are solemn testifications unto sad wanderings of heart. Our cases vary much at different times. This morning I may be able to say, "Thou anointest my head with oil: my cup runneth over"; but ere night falls I may have to lament, "Iniquities prevail against me" (Psa 65:3). When such be the case, the only thing to do is to pour out our hearts before the Lord. Not to conceal it in our minds, but to cry, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions" (Psa 51:1-3). He is the only one who can pardon us, and to Him we must go. "I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin" (Psa 32:5). Then will the restored soul have reason to exclaim, "For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee" (Psa 86:5).

Confession is not optional but obligatory, a necessary thing. First, that God Himself may be honoured (Jos 7:19). Non-confession is a virtual and practical disowning of His rectoral office—"he confessed and denied not" (Joh 1:20). Second, that God may be obeyed. He has appointed that His children should daily acknowledge their sins and ask for His forgiveness (Luk 11:4). "God's justice is satisfied by Christ, but it must be glorified and owned by us" (Manton). All through Scripture pardon presupposes confession (Lev 26:40; 1Ki 8:33; Jer 3:12-13; Luk 15:18). Nowhere is there a promise of forgiveness unless acknowledgment of sin is made. God requires us to sue out our pardon: as He said to the ascended Saviour, "Ask of me, and I shall give *thee* the heathen for thine inheritance" (Psa 2:8). Third, that we may be affected and afflicted by our offences in a due manner, for genuine confession is an expression of hatred of sin and grief for it. Failure at this point is a bar to our advancement: "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper" (Pro 28:13). Fourth, in order to the maintenance of our communion with the Holy One. "Only on the footing of sin daily confessed and pardoned can there be any fellowship between us and God this side of heaven" (Spurgeon).

Confession of sin is both the consequent and the condition of fellowship with God, as also is walking in the light. Communion with God produced frank and honest dealings with Him, bringing things out into the open. Such a one not only walks in the light, but he owns whatever in him is opposed unto the light. Yet it is much more than a bare admission that he has sin (in contrast with verse 8): it is the acknowledgment of individual and specific sins which is the form that confession must ever take if it is to be real and valid. A merely general acknowledgment soon degenerates into an empty phrase. The God of truth will tolerate no pretence. The flesh would have us gloss over things and call them by a pleasanter name than “sins,” but close dealing with God purges the spirit of guile. In the light, things are seen in their true colours; contact with God convicts of what is contrary to His holiness, and that leads to a contrite confession.

As Candlish discerningly remarked, the confession here is from those who are walking in the light, and “such confession is very different from that in which the natural conscience seeks a lightening of its guilty burden, and a lessening of its guilty fears.” Rather does it proceed from an ardent longing of soul for everything to be put right between himself and his Beloved, refusing to hide anything from Him. The farther we proceed thus with God, the more intimate be our dealings with Him, the more discoveries do we make of what is displeasing to Him, and such discoveries are welcome to us. He desires truth in the inward parts, and we do so too, and therefore do we open our hearts fully to Him, and bring everything out into the light. Such confession is a spreading of our case before the Lord, concealing nothing, palliating nothing. It is the laying bare of our inner man to the loving and wise Physician, who alone knows how to deal with us. Of course, where sins are committed against our fellows they must be confessed unto them too (Mat 5:23-24; Jam 5:16).

Confession is alike a sign and adjunct of repentance, since it proceeds from both conviction and contrition. It begins by owning the fact of sin (Jos 7:20), and then the fault of it, or as David called it, “the iniquity of my sin.” He not only acknowledged his crime of adultery, but the foulness and enormity of it. So again when his heart smote him for his pride and presumption in numbering Israel, he not only admitted what he had done, but added “I have sinned greatly in that I have done...I have done very foolishly” (2Sa 24:10). The aggravations of our sins are to be declared: that they were committed against light, persuasions, warnings, conscience, the motions of the Spirit; for such things, especially after our being the recipients of countless privileges, mercies and blessings, greatly heighten the enormity of our iniquities, and are to be sorrowfully owned by us. Observe how Daniel did so when confessing the sins of his people: “Neither have we obeyed the voice of the LORD our God, to walk in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets” (9:10). The guilt of our sins too must be confessed: what we should suffer did we receive our deserts (Ezr 9:13).

Confession of sins is to be made freely, owning every known offence, making no attempt to hide anything, either from God or ourselves. We are not to generalize but to particularize, and acknowledge sins of omission, some of which—such as failure to perform duty, lack of love, absence of zeal, unthankfulness—are worse than many sins of commission. If we are definite and precise when making known our requests unto God, we should be equally so in specifying our sins. Contritely, with a due sense of the infinite evil of sin, as it is dishonouring to God’s holiness, an opposition to His sovereign majesty, a contempt of His Law, a flying in the face of His Word, and a grieving of His Spirit. If there be a real apprehension of those things, a regenerate soul cannot but be filled with godly sorrow over his transgressions, and mourn before the Lord on their account. Sincerely, laying bare our case before God just as it stands, proffering no excuses, refusing to throw the blame upon others. Though an unpleasant exercise unto flesh and blood, nevertheless it is salutary to unburden the conscience, pour out our grief into the ears of One who is “very pitiful and of tender mercy.”

Confession is to be accompanied with shamefacedness, lamenting our ingratitude unto Him who daily loads us with His benefits. The more we realize our base requital of God’s wondrous love to us, the more shall we say, with Ezra, “I am ashamed, and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God” (9:6). It is to be accompanied with hatred of sin and loathing of ourselves, such as marked those of whom the apostle could say, “Ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge” (2Co 7:11). It is to be made in faith, in the everlasting efficacy of the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ—just as when Aaron confessed the sins of Israel, he did so with “both his hands upon the head of the live goat” (Lev 16:21)—asking the Father to pardon you for Christ’s sake. It is to be done daily. Keep short accounts with God and suffer no cloud to remain between your heart and Him.

“He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Here is the grand encouragement for us to perform this painful duty: it makes way for blessing, for though confession be not the cause, yet it is the condition of divine forgiveness. That forgiveness is what the penitent soul seeks from God, and as he does so, let him bear in mind the fact that one of the titles which Deity has been pleased to take unto Himself is “the God of pardons” (Neh 9:17, margin)! Unto such we are to repair: unto Him who declares, “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jer 31:34). “Let us therefore come boldly [unhesitatingly and freely] unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16). Unto us, considered in ourselves, divine forgiveness is always an act of pure mercy or clemency, for it is something we deserve not. But more—and oh, the preciousness of it!—God’s forgiveness is also an act both of faithfulness and justice: faithfulness to His promises, His covenant engagements; justice unto Christ, in bestowing on His people what He purchased for them.

We are inclined to think the Spirit has designedly duplicated terms here for the comfort of distressed believers. “Faithful and just” are of much the same import, and while they may be distinguished (as above), yet both have a regard to the ever-

lasting covenant, the latter being brought in to supply an additional ground of confidence for us—that the fulfillment of God’s gracious promise is at the same time an act of strict righteousness on His part. As Calvin pointed out, “The penitent has here two of God’s attributes, faithfulness and justice, to encourage and support him.” Thus the contrite soul should have full and firm assurance of God’s readiness to pardon. Personally we believe that both the forgiveness and the cleansing here include alike a judicial and an experiential one, an objective and a subjective, but lack of space now prevents our enlarging upon that statement. Admittedly the point is a difficult one: not only to apprehend, but more so to express—such is always the case when the finite mind is occupied with things that are infinite.

Chapter 12

Sin Prohibited

1 John 2:1

“My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous”

At the close of our last chapter we expressed the opinion that the forgiveness and cleansing of 1:9, includes both a judicial and experiential one, an objective and subjective, but that the same is difficult for the finite mind to grasp fully, and still more so to express clearly. It should ever be borne in mind that with God there is no such thing as past, present and future, though in condescension to our infirmities He sometimes so represents things in His Word. Time limitations do not exist with the eternal “I am”: all is an ever-present now. This needs to be remembered in connection with the Atonement. In the view of God, Christ was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, and therefore the Old Testament saints, from Abel onwards, enjoyed all those benefits which His sacrifice procured as truly as do believers in this Christian era. Therefore, theologians are only creating their own difficulties when they wrangle among themselves as to whether or not the sins which believers commit after their conversion were blotted out from before God when Christ cried “It is finished.” The important point to be concerned about is when do we enter into the good of Christ’s redemption.

Certainly no one is saved by Christ’s sacrifice until he be converted, that is until he repents of his sins and trusts in the cleansing blood. Equally certain is it that we cannot repent of sins before they be committed. Those who insist that it is dishonouring to the blood of Christ to speak of repeated applications thereof to those who contritely acknowledge their sins need to be told that it is most dishonouring to the holiness and government of God to talk of His pardoning sins before they are owned before Him. Both Old and New Testament alike distinguish between the blood shed (Heb 9:22) and the blood of sprinkling (12:24), and we must do so too, especially in connection with the antitypical fulfillment of Leviticus 16:21, and Numbers 19:2-9. As shed, the blood of Christ has met all the claims of God, so that He can now righteously pardon those who plead its merits. As shed, the blood of Christ has a cleansing virtue, and as sprinkled it actually removes defilement, as the apostle declares in Hebrews 9:13-14, where he shows the antitypical fulfillment of Numbers 19:9, in that the blood of Christ purges the conscience.

The question as to when the Christian’s sins were put away from before God and he was discharged from the guilt and penalty of them admits of more than one answer. Vicariously the penalty of his sins was fully borne by Christ upon the cross, and the guilt of them was remitted when God raised his Surety from the dead. Yet personally he is not formally forgiven any sins until he savingly believes on Christ. The Lord Jesus purchased and procured a right unto God’s elect receiving forgiveness, but they do not individually enter into the enjoyment of that blessing until their faith is placed in Him. At the cross the Saviour secured certain benefits for His people, but they do not become partakers thereof before they are converted. Distinction must also be made between that general pardon which is received the moment we first lay hold of Christ and the more specific and detailed forgiveness which we stand in need of repeatedly, daily. To say that there is no need for Christians to pray for forgiveness because all their sins were atoned for at the cross betrays great confusion of thought, and flatly contradicts Scripture. As well might an Israelite have argued against the offering of the daily lamb because all of his iniquities were remitted on the annual day of atonement (Lev 16:21). The satisfaction of Christ is indeed eternally valid before God and allows of no repetition or addition; but considering forgiveness as the act of God as the moral Governor of the world, it is continuous unto the same persons.

It is the inconformity of sin to the Law of God and its loathsomeness to His holiness, and as it is attended with defilement and shame to us, that has to be confessed. Our daily sins displease the Holy One, and it is our duty to acknowledge them. It becomes us to humble ourselves before Him on their account. The righteousness of God requires that we own our guilt and seek His remission of it. The Old Testament saints asked for pardon, “O LORD, pardon mine iniquity; for it is great” (Psa 25:11), and requested Him to “look upon the face of thine anointed” (Psa 84:9). And can New Testament saints do less? No, Christ Himself taught them to pray “Forgive us our debts” (Mat 6:12), and that prayer is assuredly suited unto Christians today, for it is addressed “our Father!” In so making request, we ask Him to be gracious unto us for Christ’s sake and not to lay to our charge the sins we have committed (Act 7:60; 2Ti 4:16)—“enter not into judgment with thy servant” (Psa 143:2). Applying unto God for the forgiveness of our sins is a coming to the throne of grace “that we may obtain mercy” (Heb 4:16). “To the very end of life the best Christian must come for forgiveness, just as he did at the first—not as the claimant of a right, but as a supplicant of favour” (J. Brown).

We need to distinguish between the purchase of our pardon by Christ and its actual bestowment upon us by the Father. After David was assured “the Lord also hath put away thy sin” (2Sa 12:13), we find that he begged God’s forgiveness of the same (Psa 51:1). Let it be distinctly pointed out that in asking God for forgiveness we do not pray as though the blood of Christ had never been shed, or as though our tears and prayers made any compensation to divine justice. Nevertheless, renewed sins call for renewed repentance. While we do not need another Redeemer, we do need a fresh exercise of mercy unto us and a fresh application of the cleansing blood to our hearts. That, too, is included in the petition of Matthew 6:12: grant a gracious manifestation of Thy mercy. “Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice” (Psa 51:8). We ask for a comforting sense of His forgiveness, that we may again have “the joy of His salvation.” It is the assuring of our hearts of the divine forgiveness, the same being efficaciously made known to the mind and conscience.

As this writer understands 1 John 1:9, it is not a legal forgiveness of God considered as Judge which is in view, but the governmental pardon of God as the moral Governor of this world and the Father of His children. It necessarily follows from its language that if believers do not confess their sins, then those sins are neither forgiven nor cleansed. 1 Corinthians 11:31, appears to us a parallel passage: “If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged,” and as the preceding verse shows, those who failed to do so brought down upon themselves sickness and death. As Candlish pointed out, the forgiveness and cleansing includes more than the remission of punishment: “Our sins are so forgiven as to ensure that in the forgiveness of them we are cleansed from all unrighteousness—all unfair, deceitful and dishonest dealing about them; all such unrighteous dealing about them, either with our own conscience or with our God. The forgiveness is so free, so frank, so full, so unreserved, that it purges our bosom of all reserve, all reticence, all guile; in a word, of all unrighteousness. And it is so because it is dispensed in faithfulness and righteousness.” God deals with us neither complacently nor indulgently, but as equally true to Himself and to us.

“My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man [“any one” Greek] sin, we have an advocate with the Father” (2:1).

As we shall see, these words are intimately related to what precedes; but before dwelling upon that we will outline the contents of our verse and consider them in order. First, there is the apostle’s affectionate address unto those he was here dehorting.¹⁸ Second, the immediate design which he had before him in now addressing them: that “ye sin not.” Third, the provision made in case there should be failure. Fourth, the striking balance of truth here presented.

“My little children.” Such indeed are all God’s people, metaphorically speaking, and it is divine grace which has made them so. It is the power of the Spirit which casts down proud reasonings, self-righteous pretensions, “and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God” (2Co 10:5), and makes us “become as little children.” And such in spirit we are to continue—dependent, trustful, conscious of our weakness and helplessness: “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby” (1Pe 2:2). There was, as others before us have pointed out, a peculiar pertinency in John’s thus addressing them. “It is probable that he was the only surviving apostle when he wrote this epistle, and his old age and long-continued usefulness, faithfulness, and love for Christians must have given him a kind of parental authority over the whole Church, as far as it adhered to the pure Gospel of Christ. It was therefore peculiarly proper for him to address them as his spiritual family, whose welfare he had greatly at heart; and as most of them were young in years compared with this beloved and venerated disciple, who probably was the oldest Christian on earth at that time” (Scott).

The form of salutation “My little children” combines the two notes of tenderness and authority. As someone has reminded us, “It is a notable triumph of godliness when age is redolent with the earnestness and diligence, of youth.” Throughout the first chapter John had been presenting objective doctrinal statements, but now he was going to make practical application of the same and address himself to the conscience of his readers. “In this there is an example to all who would be teachers of others, whether pastors or parents, or any who would be to them ‘helpers in Christ.’ It shows the spirit in which they should labour, and the object at which they should aim. That spirit should be affectionately ‘speaking the truth in love,’ ever in meekness instructing those who oppose themselves” (J. Morgan). Yet care needs to be taken against suffering that tender and gentle spirit to degenerate into a servile timidity, which brings the teacher almost to apologize for presuming to

¹⁸ **dehorting** – exhorting a person not to undertake a particular course of action; advising or counseling against.

exhort others. There are not a few ministers in this effeminate age who need to heed that word: “These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise thee” (Ti 2:15).

“My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not.” The “these things” makes it plain that the first two verses of chapter 2 are intimately related to what has been stated in the first, and thus in those words the Holy Spirit, through the apostle, emphasizes the need and importance of carefully observing the context. The real force of many a verse can only be perceived as we note and ponder its connection and coherence with what precedes. In this instance the reference looks back to all John had said from the opening of his epistle. First, he had set before his readers the glorious person of the Mediator as “the Word of life” and as the Author and Giver of eternal life. If, then, such be the Lord Jesus, and such His mission, what ought we to expect will issue therefrom? Surely that “he shall save his people from their sins” (Mat 1:21). Second, he had shown that a saving knowledge of Christ produces fellowship and joy. And what but holiness must be the result thereof? Third, he had made clear his design and the tendency of his message by a presentation of the character of God and of those who enjoy communion with Him in Christ: they walk in the light, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses them from all sin. Thus, the purifying influence of such fellowship is obvious.

Finally, John had given a brief but comprehensive outline of the divine life in the soul of the believer. It is marked by the conviction of sin (1:8) and the confession of his sins (1:9). The effects of such exercises of soul must be the bringing forth of fruits meet for repentance, i.e. an increasing hatred of sin and godly sorrow for the same. In view of all this, the propriety of his applicatory injunction “sin not” is apparent. Between such things as he had mentioned and the practice or indulgence of sin there is an absolute contrariety: they are altogether incompatible with each other. Light and darkness are no more opposed than are fellowship with God and the allowance of sin. In view of all that I have said, this is the practical application you are to make. It might be summarized “therefore sin not.” By thus tracing the connection of his “these things write I unto you” and the dehortation “sin not” we perceive the fuller force of John’s “my little children,” in which, for the first time, he directly addressed his readers, namely that he was speaking of their responsibility, and therefore did he express both his warm love to them and his parental authority, and as Gill¹⁹ said, “it might serve to put them in mind of their weakness in faith, knowledge and spiritual strength, that they might not entertain too high notions of themselves, as if they were perfect, without infirmity.”

More specifically our present verse is to be connected with 1:6-10, wherein a double proposition is presented. First, that fellowship with God is conditioned upon a repudiation of, and separation from, “darkness.” Second, that fellowship is accompanied by an owning of the principle of indwelling sin and confession of its works. John had a definite design before him when he made those statements, which is plainly expressed in 2:1, and that design is likewise twofold: to exhort and comfort—to deter from moral laxity and afford relief unto those who, despite their endeavours to the contrary, often failed to realize their ideal. First, “sin not,” second, if you should, there is an Advocate to plead your cause. But how do these practical consequences follow from the preceding doctrinal propositions? Why that 1:6-7, lead to the conclusion that believers ought not to sin; yet verses 8 and 9 presuppose they will do so. Even fellowship with Him who is light does not eradicate innate darkness; nevertheless, that is not to be condoned or excused by us, but diligently and unsparingly resisted. Yet our best efforts therein are but partly successful, and this is deeply distressing to a tender conscience.

“But though all sin that was pardoned, was pardoned upon the account of the blood of Christ, which had a property to cleanse from all sin, and that confession was a means to attain this forgiveness, purchased by our Saviour’s blood, yet men might suck in this poisonous doctrine of licentiousness, believing that upon confession they should immediately have forgiveness, though they walked on in the ways of their own hearts. And, on the other side, many good men might be dejected at the consideration of the relics of sin in them, which the apostle asserts no man was free from in this life. In 2:1, therefore, he prevents these two mistakes which men infer from the former doctrine: that we may not presume by the news of grace, nor despond by a reflection of our sin. Though I have told you that forgiveness of sin is to be had upon confession, yet the intent of my writing is not to encourage a voluntary commission. If you do commit sin, you must not be so cast down as if the door of mercy were clapped against you; no, there is One above to keep it open for every one that repents and believes” (S. Charnock, 1628-1680).

“These things write I unto you, that ye sin not.” The standard of conduct which the Gospel sets before us is no less holy and perfect than that of the Law: no indulging of the flesh is permitted, no self-pleasing tolerated. When our Lord healed the impotent man His word to him was “sin no more” (Joh 5:14); and though it was not then His province to condemn to death the woman taken in adultery, so far from making light of her crime He said “go, and sin no more” (Joh 8:11). Nor was John the only one of the apostles who made this exacting demand upon the Lord’s people. “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21) said Paul; and again, “Awake to righteousness, and sin not” (1Co 15:34). Likewise Peter, in his first epistle: “But as he which called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation” (1:15). And again, “Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation” (2:11-12).

¹⁹ **John Gill** (1697-1771) – Baptist minister, theologian, and biblical scholar. Author of *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity, The Cause of God and Truth*, and his nine-volume *Expositions of the Old and New Testaments*. Born in Kettering, Northamptonshire, England.

Everywhere in Scripture the Gospel is represented to be “the doctrine which is according to godliness” (1Ti 6:3), which forbids us to regard sin as the normal element of the Christian life, or even to consider its commission as inevitable. Not only are we to reject with abhorrence the devilish idea that the grace of God and the sacrifice of Christ give license to sin, but we are not even to view them as a provision for the weakness of the flesh. “Sin not” is the peremptory and unqualified demand. It was as though the apostle had said, I would have you so narrowly watch your hearts and ways that no evil might slip into your lives, no wrong thoughts be allowed, no idle words be uttered. I would have you make this your serious and constant aim: not merely that you are to sin as little as you can, but that you are not to sin at all. Great care needs to be taken against lowering or whittling down the exalted standard of moral purity which God has set before us. “Sin not” is not to be restricted unto the commission of merely gross and flagrant offences, nor to open acts in the outward life, but to all inward sinning too.

Each statement of Holy Writ is to be given its full and fair meaning, and is never to be toned down or modified by us. “Sin not” is the standard of excellence which God has set before us, for the Holy One can claim nothing less, and our obligation fully to measure up to the same is beyond contradiction. It is the unabating requirement of the Gospel, for the object of Christ’s death was not only to make atonement for the sins committed by His people, but to supply motives to fortify and restrain their souls against continuing therein (2Co 5:14-15). To sin not is the Christian’s exalted ideal, the earnest pursuit of which is to engage all his faculties and powers. It is what every renewed heart ardently longs to attain unto. Few of our readers will be inclined to call into question the statement that nothing short of complete conformity to the image of Christ should be the daily endeavour of every saint, yet how few appear to make this their fixed resolution and purpose. Nothing short of abstaining from everything which is displeasing to Christ should be the task we set ourselves, and that without any secret reserve. Our eyes are to be fixed on our Rule and not on our infirmities. Say not beforehand a measure of failure is certain, but rather “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Phi 4:13).

The Gospel is designed to inspire love to God and holiness, and every part of it reveals the malignant nature and evil effects of sin, and bids us hate, dread, and flee from it. “Sin not.” To make anything less than that the daily business of our lives is opposed to divine grace, for it teaches its recipients to deny ungodly and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously and godly in this world (Ti 2:12). It is antagonistic to saving faith in Christ, for that receives Him as Lord as well as trusts Him as Saviour, and if we are being ruled by Satan instead of rendering obedience to Christ we are not partakers of His salvation (Heb 5:9). It is presumption and not faith which trifles with temptation. It is contradictory to repentance, which includes both a godly sorrow for sin and the sincere purpose to forsake it. That spiritual repentance which is the gift of God (Act 5:31, 2Ti 2:25) not only turns the heart from sin, but against it, and therefore serves as a check against evil inclinations. It conflicts with sincere love to God, for that seeks to glorify Him in all things, and makes duty a delight. It is contrary to the injunction which a renewed conscience imposes upon the will, for though the will may, and does, oppose the conscience and follow the impulses of the flesh, yet conscience never consents or condones, but judges and condemns.

Finally, for the Christian to allow himself in any sin is directly opposed to his redemption by the blood of Christ. What a word is that by the Spirit of God: “Ye are not your own. For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s (1Co 6:19-20). “Your time is redeemed—use it as a consecrated talent in His cause. Your minds are redeemed—employ them to learn His truth and to meditate on His ways. Thus make them armouries of holy weapons. Your eyes are redeemed—let them not look on vanity; close them on all sights and books of folly. Your feet are redeemed—let them trample on the world and climb the upward hill of Zion, and bear you onward in the march of Christian zeal. Your tongues are redeemed—let them only sound His praise and testify of His love. Your hearts are redeemed—let them love Him wholly, and have no seat for rivals. A redeemed flock should live in redemption’s pastures. The Redeemer’s freedmen should evidence that they are called to holy liberty, and that their holy liberty is holy service. The chain of sin is broken. The chain of love now holds them” (H. Law of Wells, 1862).

Chapter 13

Sins Provided For

1 John 2:1-2

“*Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness*” (1Ti 3:16). Not only so in connection with the two natures united in the person of the God-man Mediator, but also in regard to the two opposing natures which at present exist in all those on earth who are members of His mystical body. This it is which alone casts light upon the strange conflict which is being ceaselessly waged within them, and which explains many a paradox in Holy Writ. A forceful example of the latter is found in

the first chapter of our epistle. In it “The apostle seems to have said both that believers are free from sin and also that they have sin (verses 7 and 8); that they cannot sin and yet that they do sin (verses 6, 10). The explanation is that these verses contain the antithesis of Christian experience. In all realms there are apparent contradictions. Night is a contradiction of day, winter a contradiction of summer, and infancy is at the antipodes of old age” (Levi Palmer). The same antithesis of Christian experience, or contradictory elements, is brought forward into 2:1, where the apostle declares:

“My little children, these things I write unto you, that you sin not,” yet at once adds *“And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father.”*

Admire the blessed balance of truth there, and observe the order in which it is presented. There is no turning of the grace of God into lasciviousness by making light of sin, but a forbidding of us to commit any. “Sin not” needs to be turned into fervent prayer: “Hold up my goings in thy paths, that my footsteps slip not” (Psa 17:5). “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” “Cleanse thou me from secret [unsuspected] faults” (Psa 19:12). But more, “sin not” is to be made our firm and fixed resolution. So far from complacently expecting to fail, we must do as the Psalmist did: “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee” (Psa 119:11). That is the use we are to make of God’s Word: to get it deeply rooted in our affections, so that holy conduct will result from it, and that we may be able to bear testimony: “by the word of thy lips I have kept *me from* the paths of the destroyer” (Psa 17:4). It must also be our diligent endeavour: “Herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God and toward men” (Act 24:16).

“Sin not.” Allow not yourself in any; no, not in what men term “little” ones. Yield to no temptation. Keep yourself unspotted from the world. Even though divine provision is made for sin, yet God’s demand is “cease to do evil; learn to do well” (Isa 1:16-17). “This is the order and method of the doctrine of the Gospel. First, to keep us from sin, and then to relieve us against sin. But here the deceit of sin enters. It puts this new wine into old bottles, whereby the bottles are broken, and the wine perishes as to our benefit from it. It changes this order of Gospel truth. It takes up the last first, and then excludes the use of the first utterly. If any man sins there is pardon provided, is all the Gospel that sin would willingly suffer to abide in the minds of men. When we would come to God by believing, it would be pressing the former part of being free from sin; when the Gospel proposes the latter principally, or the pardon of sin for our encouragement. When we are come to God and should walk with Him, it will have only the latter proposed, that there is pardon for sin, when the Gospel principally proposes the former, or, keeping ourselves from sin. The grace of God brings salvation, having appeared to us to that end and purpose” (John Owen).²⁰

“These things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father.” Observe well how cautious and discriminating was John in the selection of his language here. First, so far from regarding the commission of sin as something which is to be expected as the common experience of all God’s children, he changes the number from “that ye sin not” to “if any man sin.” Second, even then such a fall is not contemplated as inevitable, but only as possible, and therefore, instead of saying “when,” he uses the hypothetical “if.” Third, the antithesis between the two sentences had been made even plainer and more direct had our translators rendered the opening word of the second member “But if any man sin”—as kai is translated in John 1:21; Acts 16:7; 1 John 2:27, which in each instance more suitably points a contrast. Finally, the tense of the verb which the apostle here employs is to be carefully noted: he did not say “But if any man sinneth,” but “sin.” It is not a continuous repetition which is in view, but a single and past act—as his use of the aorist connotes.

“We have an advocate with the Father.” Here too we could call attention to the nicety of the apostle’s diction, as appears in his selection of the pronoun. It would naturally be expected that after saying “But if any man sin” John had written “he has an advocate.” Or, if he employed the plural number in keeping with the first part of the verse, he had continued to use the “you.” Why then this change to “we have an advocate”? Because he would include himself! Beautiful is it there to behold the apostle’s modesty. He does not address himself to his little children as from an elevated plane, as one whose spiritual experience was far removed from and superior to theirs, but instead he places himself on the same level as them, as personally needing the mediation of Christ—so far was he from imagining himself qualified to act as a mediator for others! How much we lose, dear Christian friends, through a careless reading of God’s Word, failing to note and weigh every jot and tittle in it! John’s change from the “ye” to “we” might well be made the text for a sermon on “The Humility of the Apostles.”

By John’s inclusion of himself in the “we,” it is quite possible that he also intimated that his preceding “If any man sin” was to be understood as without any distinction. If any child of God, let him be what he will—a babe or a father in Christ, rich or poor, high or low—this Advocate belongs to him. Every believer is His client, for since He makes intercession for them “that come unto God by him” (Heb 7:25), no such comer is excluded. Note well, it is not “But if any man sin he had an advocate,” as though Christ would no longer take the case of such a one, but “we have”—“in the present tense, which notes duration, a continued act. We have an Advocate, i.e. we constantly have, we have Him as long as life endures” (Charnock). Observe too that John did not say, “but if any man repents we have an advocate,” for in no sense is either our contrition or

²⁰ **John Owen** (1616-1683) – called “The Prince of the Puritans,” a chaplain in the army of Oliver Cromwell and vice-chancellor of Oxford University. Most of his life he served as a minister in congregational churches. His written works span forty years and run to twenty-four volumes representing among the best resources for theology in the English language. Born to Puritan parents in the Oxfordshire.

confession a moving cause of Christ's mediation, rather are they the effects or fruits thereof. Nothing but the apprehension of the love of Christ and His present gracious advocacy is so well calculated to melt the backslider's heart.

In a most striking and blessed manner our present verse contains both exhortation and consolation. "But if any man sin" despite God's prohibition, while he must not be unconcerned, neither should he yield to despondency. For on the one hand it was not their affections which clove to sin, but sin which did cleave to their affections. And on the other, while God makes no allowance for sin, He has made provision for it. Therefore, "We must not sin that grace may abound, but when we have sinned, we must make use of abounding grace" (Matthew Henry).²¹ From the inspired example left us here by the apostle, it is clearly as much the preacher's duty to comfort as to admonish; it is as necessary for him to make known the divinely provided relief for sin as to warn against it. "The valiant soldier will be most furiously attacked by the enemy, and may sometimes be foiled, and despondency is as inimical to watchfulness, diligence, and holy obedience, as even carnal security itself. No man, on scriptural principles, can conclude himself to be any better than a hypocrite who habitually commits sin because God is ready to pardon the penitent; but the fallen, who desire to arise and renew the combat, have encouragement so to do" (T. Scott).

If God's children should sin, it is not "they are rejected by Christ and forfeit their salvation" but instead, "we have [not "had"] an advocate," who undertakes for them and pleads their cause before God. "It is not an Advocate for sin, though for sinners. He does not vindicate the commission of sin or plead for the performance of it: He is no patron of iniquity. Nor does He deny that His clients have sinned, or affirm that their actions are not sins: He allows in court all their sins, with all their aggravating circumstances. Nor does He go about to excuse or extenuate them. But He is an Advocate for the non-imputation of them, and for the application of pardon to them. He pleads in their favour that these sins have been laid upon Himself, and He has borne them, and His blood has been shed for the remission of them, and that He has made full satisfaction for them; and therefore in justice they ought not to be laid to their charge, but that forgiveness of them should be applied unto them, for the relief and comfort of their burdened and distressed consciences" (John Gill).

"*We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*" Most blessedly was this typed out under the Levitical economy. When Aaron entered the holy place, he bore the names of the twelve tribes upon his breast plate (Exo 28:9), to signify that he was to have such care and love for them as those who were the dearest objects of his affections. And thus it is with the High Priest of the spiritual Israel. Christ presents His people before God as those who are inestimably dear unto Him. He not only died for them, but lives for them (Rom 5:10). He died to render satisfaction to God on their behalf; He lives to keep them secure. This was one chief end of His ascension and session at God's right hand. Christ entered "into heaven itself" for what end?—"now to appear in the presence of God for us" (Heb 9:24). Though there is a great change in His condition from a state of humiliation to a state of exaltation, yet there is no change in His office or in His attitude unto His redeemed. He came here from the Father to make known His gracious purpose, and He has returned to Him to sue out the benefits which He so dearly purchased. "When His offering was accepted, He went to heaven, to the supreme Judge, to improve this acceptance of His sacrifice" (Charnock).

Christ not only died for our offences, but He rose again for our justification (Rom 4:24). His redemptive work is not only a historic fact, but a present, living, efficacious reality, for He is seen on high "a Lamb as it had been slain" (Rev 5:6). The present advocacy of Christ expresses the glorious truth that He has undertaken our cause before God, and performs for us all that such an office implies—defending us, securing our rights as His ransomed people. His being seated at "God's right hand" imports that He is possessed of power and authority. It was promised that He should be "a priest upon his throne" (Zec 6:13). He is not begging for favours or gratuitous benefits, but suing out a right: all His transactions there are in a way of satisfaction and purchase. Christ sits at God's right hand as no silent and inactive Spectator, but as an industrious and mighty Intercessor: to prevent the sins of His people making any breach, to preserve a perpetual amity between God and them. Thus we have "a Friend at court" who spreads before the Father the odours of His merits as the all-sufficient answer to every indictment which Satan prefers against us.

An advocate presupposes an adversary, and that He appears to defend our cause. This is indeed a great mystery about which we can know nothing whatever save what God has been pleased to reveal. In Revelation 12:10, the devil is termed "the accuser of our brethren...which accused them before our God day and night." From this it appears that when the saints fall into sin the adversary charges them with the same before God, demanding sentence of judgment upon them—as he did Job of that of which he was not guilty. In Zechariah 3 we see the high priest in filthy garments and Satan resisting him. But Christ calls on the Father to rebuke him, saying, "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" Orders were given for his filthy garments to be taken away, his iniquity was caused to pass from him and he was clothed with change of raiment, and a "fair mitre" set on his head! The Advocate admitted the iniquity of His client, but defied Satan on the ground that his sin was pardoned and a righteousness had been procured for him. This is recorded to assure us that no charged preferred against any whom Christ represents will succeed.

²¹ **Matthew Henry** (1662-1714) – Presbyterian preacher, author, and commentator. His *Exposition of the Old and New Testament* (1710) easily holds first place among devotional commentaries for its blending of good sense, quaintness, original and felicitous remark, and genuine insight into the meaning of the sacred writers.

“We have an advocate with the Father.” That blessed statement is as much designed for our comfort as is the fact that Christ is now acting as the Attorney of His redeemed, for it tells of His gracious relation and disposition toward them on whose supreme will their case depends. It emphasizes the grand fact that the heart of the Judge of all (Heb 12:23) is toward and not against His people. And as Goodwin pointed out, “he says not only ‘an advocate with His Father,’ though that had given much assurance; or with ‘your Father,’ though that might afford much boldness; but indefinitely ‘with the Father,’ as intending to take in both—to assure us of the prevailing efficacy of Christ’s intercession from both.” “Jesus Christ the righteous;” in Himself (Jer 23:5), in the ground of His admission into this office (Heb 1:9), and in the cause He pleads. He asks for nothing which is in the least degree opposed to the strict requirements of the Law. He requests not the Father to show mercy at the expense of justice. There is no compromise of holiness in God’s pardoning His children, for Christ made full atonement for all their sins.

The work of advocacy belongs to and is part of Christ’s priestly office, as the type (Lev 16:12-14) evinces. As Aaron’s entering into the holy of holies after the atoning sacrifice had been offered was a figure of Christ’s ascension after His passion, so the incense he bore there adumbrated the prayers of Christ on high. Christ’s intercession respects the procuring of grace and mercy for His people, and all that they need while left in this scene; but His advocacy relates only to their sins—it is that part of His intercession wherein He undertakes our defense when accused by the adversary. That advocacy is inseparably connected with His being our “propitiation,” for His oblation on earth is the foundation of His intercession in heaven. The saint also has “another Advocate” within him, for the Greek word rendered “Comforter” in John 14:16, 15:26, and 16:7, is the one translated “advocate” in 1 John 2:1. As the result of Christ’s intercession on high, the Holy Spirit within the believer convicts him of his sins, moves him to confess them before God, and thereby our broken communion is restored.

“And he is the propitiation for our sins” (verse 2). Those words are in part an explanation of the ground on which Christ’s advocacy rests, and in part an amplification of “the righteous” of the preceding verse. Christ’s advocacy is based upon the fact that He has taken away our unrighteousness. The word “propitiation” means precisely the same thing as the Old Testament term “atonement” (the same Greek word being found in the Septuagint²² version of Leviticus 23:27; Numbers 5:8, rendered by “atonement”), providing it is understood in its scriptural signification, namely as a penal and sacrificial satisfaction unto divine holiness and justice, for the expiation of sin and the averting of vengeance. That is what atonement is—“at-one-ment,” or reconciliation, is what it effected. The force of the Hebrew word appears plainly in such a passage as Numbers 16:46, namely as that which pacifies God’s wrath (compare 2Sa 24:15, 18). Thus to atone or propitiate is to placate (it is rendered “appease” in Genesis 32:20) by means of an adequate compensation—“kaphar” is translated “satisfaction” in Numbers 35:31-32.

As the word “vicarious” relates Christ’s sacrifice unto those in whose stead it was made, so the term “propitiation” relates it to God as the One to whom it was offered, as a reparation to His broken Law and the dishonor done Him by sin. The grand end of Christ’s mediation is the appeasing of God’s anger and the securing of His favour. Note carefully He “is our propitiation,” for the apostle is not referring to what Christ was in His death, but what He is in consequence thereof, to meet our present needs. He entered heaven as the propitiation of the Church and on that basis is now serving as the Medium of forgiveness and the Maintainer of communion. He is the Advocate with the Father on behalf of His sinning people, pleading His righteousness and blood for them. That plea is founded on His sacrifice, which was presented for the entire election of grace, and therefore God justly forgives them. It is because Christ is such that His erring people may have the most confident recourse to Him in every time of need.

“And not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.” Universalists and Arminians²³ have misunderstood the sound of those words through failure to ascertain their sense. They cannot mean that Christ is the propitiation for the sins of all mankind, or every Scripture which teaches the eternal punishment of the lost would be falsified; or, on the other hand, the oblation of Christ is largely a failure and He will not “see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied” with the fruits. Those propositions ought to be so self-evident as to require no argument. Justice—divine justice least of all—does not demand a double payment for the same debt, and if Christ rendered full satisfaction unto God for the sins of the entire human race, then not a single member of it can possibly perish. Our verse is not announcing a possibility, but an actuality: it is not Christ’s willingness to be a propitiation for “the whole world” if they threw down their weapons and trusted in Him, but that He is so, and therefore if the whole world here is to be understood without restriction, then the verse teaches universal salvation and Scripture contradicts itself. But it does not: as here we have a “world” saved, so in 1 Corinthians 11:32, a “world” lost!

As its opening “And” indicates, this declaration of verse 2 must not be separated from verse 1. Beyond controversy, John is there addressing Christians, and Christians only. His design was to deter them from sinning, and to point out that in case they did it was not to be supposed that they had forfeited their salvation, for divine provision was made for just such an emergency. The contrite believer (1:9) has a twofold ground of assurance set before him., First, he has an advocate with the

²² **Septuagint** – a Greek translation of the Old Testament, commonly abbreviated as LXX, which derives from its alleged “seventy” translators; made approximately 3rd century BC, it was the Bible of the early church.

²³ **Arminians** – followers of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), Dutch theologian, born in Oudewater, the Netherlands. He rejected the Reformers’ understanding of predestination, teaching instead that God’s predestination of individuals was based on His foreknowledge of their accepting or rejecting Christ by their own free will.

Father, and second, He is the propitiation for his sins. Parallel passages show that none but Christians may draw comfort therefrom, for Christ is the Advocate of none others. Those for whom He makes intercession are defined by the “us” of Romans 8:34, and the “them that come unto God by him” of Hebrews 7:25. “He disowns in His mediatory prayer the whole unbelieving world...As He prayed not for the world on earth (Joh 17:9), so much less does He in heaven” (Charnock), for He knows that no prayer of His can add one to the number of God’s elect.

But why did John say “and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world”? To stain the pride of the Jews, and to comfort the despised Gentiles. Throughout the Mosaic economy the sacrifices were available for none but Israelites and proselytes who were circumcised and permitted to enjoy some of their privileges. During the days of His public ministry Christ forbade His disciples to go into the way of the Gentiles (Mat 10:5-7), but after His resurrection He commissioned them to preach the Gospel to every creature and make disciples of all nations, for at the cross “the middle wall of partition” (Eph 2:14) was broken down; therefore did He die outside Jerusalem (Heb 13:12) to intimate that His sacrifice had been offered for the whole election of grace, and not for believing Israelites only. John was one of the three apostles “unto the circumcision” (Gal 2:9) and that his epistle was addressed principally to saved Jews is evident: they alone had the old commandment from the beginning (2:7), had known Christ “from the beginning” (2:13), and only from Jewish Christian assemblies would “antichrists” have gone out (2:18-19).

Thus “He is the propitiation for our sins” is Jewish Christians, and “also for the...whole world” signifies Gentile believers also. That interpretation is necessitated by John 11:51-52, which supplies a threefold parallel. First, “he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation”—“He is the propitiation for our sins.” Second, “and not for that nation only”—“and not for ours only.” Third, “but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad,” which explains “and also for the...whole world” in which God’s children were dispersed—cf. “both theirs and ours” (1Co 1:2): if the “whole world” signified the race, the previous clause would be meaningless, for there could be no “also”! That the word “world” is used as a general expression rather than an absolute one is clear from many passages. “All the world wondered after the beast” (Rev. 13:3), yet there were some who received not his mark nor worshipped his image (20:4)! Satan, “deceiveth the whole world” (Rev 12:9), yet not God’s elect (Mat 24:24)! “The whole world lieth in wickedness” (1Jo 5:19), not so those who are in Christ. Such expressions as “all flesh” (Act 2:17), “the Gentiles” (Act 11:18), “all men” (1Ti 2:4), “The Saviour of the world” (1Jo 4:14) are indefinite expressions which include God’s elect at large, in contradistinction from Jews only. As they were too self-centered (Act 11:1,2; Gal. 2:12), so individual Christians lay too much stress on what Christ did for me, instead of dwelling upon what He did for the whole Church!

Chapter 14

Obediential Assurance

1 John 2:3

*“And hereby we do know that we know him,
if we keep his commandments.”*

Simple as this verse appears to be, and as it really is, yet a careful and critical examination of it raises five questions, on none of which do the commentators return a uniform answer.

First, with what is its opening “And” to be linked, precisely what is the connection between verse 3 and those that follow with what has preceded?

Second, which Person in the Godhead is specifically alluded to by the pronouns “Him” and “His”—the Father or the Son?

Third, what is the meaning of the word “know” here, and what distinction are we required to make between its double usage?

Fourth, what is the precise force of the “if”—is it a calling into question, the testing of profession, or the drawing of a logical inference?

Fifth, whose precepts are referred to in the “His commandments,” and which particular ones are in view—those of the Law or those of the Gospel, or both? A hasty conclusion must not be jumped to on any of these points, but care taken to supply proof before definite answers are returned. Guesswork is impious where God’s Word is concerned.

What is the connection?

If 1:5, to the end of 2:2, is read consecutively, it should be evident that we have there a complete paragraph, in which the apostle has covered the whole subject of sin in relation to believers. A close reading of 2:3, to the end of 2:11, also makes it clear that those verses are to be regarded as another distinct and complete section, wherein the obedience of God's children is in view. But some may demur at the statement that a new division, treating of a different subject, commences at 2:3, seeing that it opens with the word "And." While such an objection is not to be ignored, it must not be allowed to shake our impression that the two separate aspects of truth are there set forth: rather must we seek the relation between them. That there is a connection and relation, and probably an intimate one, is certainly intimated by the conjunction uniting them, and it is a matter of no little importance to discover or trace out their coherence, otherwise we are liable to bring a legalistic element into our understanding of 2:3, 5. Nor is the link, or links, between the two passages at all difficult to discover.

For a general statement, perhaps Calvin's can scarcely be improved on, for he pointed out, "John here reminds us that the knowledge of God derived from the Gospel is not ineffectual, but that obedience flows from it." Stating almost the same thing in another form, we may say that gratuitous remission of sin is not a thing apart, but is ever accompanied by those sanctifying operations of the Spirit which cause the pardoned to express their gratitude by subjection unto God's revealed will. The grand truth of Christ's advocacy and propitiation will not, when savingly apprehended, induce a careless walk or encourage a spirit of lawlessness. Where Christ is truly known as Lord and Saviour, His authority is gladly owned; if He is loved, there will be no question about obedience. A spiritual apprehension of what Christ has done and is now doing for us is the most effective means and motive unto a God-honouring life: as the heart is brought under the power of the same, it is blessedly disposed unto every good word and work. After mentioning the gracious provision which God has made for the sins of His people, and the maintenance of their fellowship with Him, the apostle turned to consider the outward evidences of a spiritual knowledge of and communion with Christ.

But still more definitely: 2:3-6 is to be regarded as an amplification of 1:5-7, for the emphatic "This then is the message which we have heard of him" must be steadily borne in mind as we go through the entire epistle. There the apostle summarized what he and his fellows had heard from the lips of their Master and had seen so perfectly exemplified in His own life, namely that "God is light," and in order to enjoy communion with Him the darkness must be shunned. In 1:7, he had affirmed that "if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another," and though the light will increasingly make manifest our imperfections and defilements, yet, if we duly confess the same, the blood of Christ will cleanse us from all sin. Now, here in 2:3-6, "walk in the light" is declared to be a keeping of the divine commandments and a following of the example which Christ has left us; while the resultant fellowship is seen in the "we do know that we know him" and the "abideth in him." Finally, the opening "And" confirms our interpretation that God's people alone are referred to in the whole of 2:2.

Which Person in the Godhead is specifically alluded to by the pronouns "Him" and "His"—the Father or the Son?

Several spiritually minded and scholarly expositors regard the pronouns "Him" and "His" in our text as relating to Jesus Christ, the nearest antecedent, but most of the more recent writers insist that they relate to "the Father" with whom Christ is the Advocate. After carefully weighing their respective opinions, we fail to see any argument which necessarily excludes either the One or the Other, and therefore we much prefer to follow the older commentators who included both Persons. Our present verse is speaking of a saving knowledge, and where that is in view, while the divine Persons may be distinguished, they are not to be separated. None can approach the Father except by the Son (Joh 14:6), and none can come unto the Son unless the Father draw him (Joh 6:44). As Christ declared unto those who opposed Him, "Ye neither know me, nor my Father: if ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also" (Joh 8:19), and as He told His disciples, "he that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (Joh 14:9). The One cannot be known apart from the Other: "no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him" (Mat 11:27).

As pointed out above, there is an intimate relation between 2:3-11, and 1:5-2:2, and for exegetical reasons we consider the pronouns of 2:3, look back to the One spoken of in 1:5. There we are informed that "God is light"—here that we "know Him" as such and conduct ourselves accordingly, for it is not merely a notional but an influential knowledge which John treats of. Now "God is light" is to be understood of the Godhead, and particularly of the triune God made known through Christ, "for in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily [or personally]" (Col 2:9). It is true that God is light in Himself essentially, yet not so unto fallen men—outside of Christ God is unknown, and man is in total spiritual darkness. In like manner, "God is love." He is so essentially, yet not unto fallen men—outside of Christ "God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:29). "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (Joh 17:3): here again the Two are joined together, for the Father cannot be known apart from the Mediator.

What is the meaning of the word "know"?

"Hereby we do know that we know him." As one eminent expositor said, "It must be so as He is Father in Christ, so that hereby is implied that the knowing of God absolutely is not saving: it must be relative, in the glorious dispensation and mystery which is by Jesus Christ." But we must now inquire, What is meant here by our knowing Him, and particularly know-

ing that we know Him? We say here, for this is another term which is far from being used uniformly in the Scriptures. In some passages, as, for example, Ecclesiastes 3:14, and the words of Nicodemus to Christ, “we know that thou art a teacher come from God” (Joh 3:2), “know” has the force of “believe,” as it has also in John 17:3. In other places it signifies “approve,” as in “They have set up kings, but not by me: they have made princes, and I knew *it* not” (Hos 8:4, and cf. Mat 7:23). In yet others it goes farther, and signifies “love”: “I am the good Shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine” (Joh 10:14, and cf. 1Co 8:3). But its commonest meaning is to be sure or assured, as in “One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see” (Joh 9:25) and “we know that all things work together for good to them that love God” (Rom 8:28).

As it is with natural things so also with spiritual: there is a radical difference between a notional and experiential knowledge. I may be theoretically assured that a certain thing would be helpful or harmful to me, but I know actually and factually that fire burns, that water refreshes, that food strengthens, for I have proved it for myself. In like manner, there is a very real distinction between knowing about the Lord and in knowing the Lord Himself. As one can see the one consists merely of information concerning Him and the other is a personal and a saving acquaintance with Him. In the Scriptures we are told that at first “many of the Samaritans...believed” in Christ because of the testimony borne to Him by the woman at the well; but later, when they came into His presence and listened to His teaching, they declared, “Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world” (Joh 4:39, 42). Thus too Paul bore witness: “I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” (2Ti 1:12)—from what he had already received from Him, he could confidently trust Him for the future. Such knowledge is vastly different from mere conjecture, it is based on something more than a probability, namely a certainty.

Christ can only be savingly known as we receive the Spirit’s testimony concerning Him, surrender ourselves fully unto His control, and trust in Him with all our hearts. Then shall we obtain inward evidence of His reality and the verity of His offer. It is said of Him that He “knew no sin” (2Co 5:21): there the term connotes experience: that He had no practical acquaintance with it—having no carnal nature as we have. Thus to know Christ savingly is to have personal proof of His redemptive power: to pardon and cleanse, to subdue our passions, to speak peace to the conscience, to draw out our affections unto things above, and to have a vital realization of other divine influences of that Spirit which proceeds from Him. Finally, the word “know” also imports to acknowledge, as we are told of a certain Pharaoh “which knew not Joseph” (Exo 1:8), that is he had no regard for his memory, no sense of what Egypt owed to him, and therefore refused to be kind unto his people for his sake. In this sense, the term occurs in “And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers” (Joh 10:4-5): the sheep respond to Christ’s voice—they publicly own Him, but refuse allegiance to all impostors.

“The knowledge of Christ has become expressive of a personal and saving interest in His work and grace. There is great propriety in this use of the term. Knowledge is the result of observation and experience. It implies certainty. If we say we know a man, it supposes we have had intercourse with him, and have proved what sort he is. If we know a country we must have been there and seen it and become versant with its inhabitants, soil, and products. If we know a medicine, we must have used or analysed it, and so become acquainted with its constituents and properties. Now this is precisely the force of the term when we speak of the knowledge of Christ. Hence it is the characteristic of believers in our text: ‘we know Him.’ We know His power, for we have proved it; we know His wisdom, for we have been guided by it; we know His love, for we have enjoyed it; and we know His truth, for we have ever found Him faithful. How thankful we should be that this is the nature of true religion. It is not a speculation about which there is uncertainty. It is not a doubtful opinion. It is knowledge. It is a reality of which we may know ourselves. They who attained it may say ‘we know him’” (J. Morgan).

But is this really the case with all of God’s children, uniformly so in their consciousness? No, indeed, far from it. Some of them are often full of doubts and made to question the reality of their relationship to Christ. And there is no little occasion for them to do so. As they behold what shipwreck some have made who started out so promisingly, apparently progressing more swiftly than themselves, they ask, Shall I end thus? As they hear the pratings of graceless professors who talk so fluently of divine things, and behold their carnal and worldly lives, they wonder if their knowledge of Christ be only a theoretical and theological one. As they are frequently made painfully conscious of the risings of indwelling sin, and often have to cry “Iniquities prevail against me” (Psa 65:3), they are fearful of being deceived on this important matter. Yet none of these occasions affords a legitimate reason why any born-again soul should call into question his regeneration or saving knowledge of Christ. As Spurgeon said on this verse, “This ought not to be. It is too solemn a thing to be left to chance or conjecture. I believe there are saved ones who do not know of a surety that they are saved. They are raising the question often that never ought to be a question.

“No man ought to be content to leave that unsettled, for mark thee, if thou art not a saved man, thou art a condemned man. If thou art not forgiven, thy sins lie on thee. Thou art now in danger of hell if thou art not secure of heaven, for there is no place between these two. Thou art either a child of God, or not. Why say ye ‘I hope I am a child of God, yet I do not know; I hope, yet know not I am forgiven?’ In such suspense ye ought not to be. Thou art either one or the other—either a saint or a sinner, either saved or lost, either walking in the light or walking in the darkness.” We fully endorse those sentiments, for there is scriptural warrant for the same. John tells us that one of the very purposes for which the Spirit moved

him to pen this epistle was to give assurance to the hearts of God's people: "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe [more confidently] on the name of the Son of God" (5:13). Thus one of its chief designs is to resolve all doubts and displace them with certainty.

That declaration of 5:13, shows that it is of deep importance that the Christian should know he has eternal life. For to be in doubt thereof is to reflect upon the veracity of God, whose Word declares that he has (Joh 5:24). It is to call into question the gracious work of the Spirit within him. It is much to his own spiritual loss. It deprives him of the greatest comfort which any soul can experience in this life, for to be assured that Christ is mine and I am his is a perennial joy and unfailling consolation under the heaviest trial. As one has said, "you who are living on 'perhapses' and 'maybes' are living on dust and ashes." Such knowledge as John here treats of inspires confidence. What assurance it gives in prayer to know that I am making requests unto my Father—we can never ask believingly until such be the case. What courage it conveys for meeting temptations—shall a child of God panic and flee before the devil? It kindles the highest degree of love. To know that I know Him cannot but draw out my affections unto Him, and cause me to ask "What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits unto me?"

Now here in our text we are supplied with a sure recipe for the attainment and preservation of this sound state of the soul's health. It is the first of seven passages in this epistle wherein are made known how a scriptural assurance is secured (for the time being we will leave the reader to search for the other six), namely by a keeping of the divine commandments: "hereby we do know that we know him." Here is another instance where the same word occurs in a passage with two distinct meanings. To make them clearer we would paraphrase our text thus: In this way may God's children be sure that they have a saving faith in and acquaintance with Him—by fulfilling His precepts. It is by means of a willing, impartial and habitual compliance with God's will that we obtain evidence of the genuineness of our profession and supply proof that we really love Him. It is by a walking in subjection to Him that we may be sure we are in the narrow way that leads unto life. It is for this reason that we have entitled our chapter "Obedient Assurance," for the validity of their persuasion is attested by a practical subjection to God's authority.

What is the precise force of the "if"?

It is to be duly noted that the apostle was here emulating his Master, for He had clearly taught the same thing: "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you" (Joh 15:14). Friendship entails obligations—the pleasing of and promoting the interests of one another. As to the design of the "if" in our text, we regard it as being threefold. First, as investigative, a testing of profession or putting to the proof of those who averred a saving knowledge of God. Then, as now, there were many who claimed to know God in Christ, but their knowledge was a barren one. Second, as discriminative, supplying God's people with a criterion which if put to use would preserve them from being imposed upon by hypocrites. Third, as demonstrative, the sure evidence by which a Christian may determine his own state before God. The tree is known by its fruits, and if mine be bearing that which is spiritual and heavenly it cannot be one of nature's planting. Thus the force of the "if" is double: hereby we may be assured that we truly know God spiritually providing we keep His commandments, or/and inasmuch as we do so. There cannot be real fellowship with God without its having a vital influence on the heart and a transforming effect upon the life.

Whose precepts are referred to in the "His commandments"?

But who is there who really keeps God's commandments? All of His people, for whereas the unregenerate are designated "the children of disobedience" (Eph 2:2), the regenerate are addressed "as obedient children" (1Pe 1:14). There is a twofold keeping of God's commandments: a legal and an evangelical. The former pertains to the Covenant of Works, wherein an absolute and perfect obedience, without failure or cessation, is demanded on pain of death. The latter marks the Covenant of Grace, wherein a filial and sincere obedience, though full of defects, is accepted by God—its blemishes being blotted out by the blood of Christ and its inadequacy covered by His merits. God looks at the heart, and where it beats true unto Him with a genuine desire and determination to please Him—grieving over and confessing that which displeases Him—He accepts the will for the deed. Love fastens not its eyes upon defects. Thus we find God testifying of David, notwithstanding his sad lapses, "He kept my commandments and my statutes" (1Ki 11:34); Christ declaring of His apostles, despite their failures, "They have kept thy word" (Joh 17:6); and the Holy Spirit bearing witness to the patience of Job (Jam 5:11), though he had not a little impatience.

The keeping of God's commandments signifies and includes that we make His will the rule of our lives, using His Word as a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. That it works effectually in our souls, inclining our hearts and governing our wills. That we hold it in our memories and delight to meditate daily thereon. That we genuinely endeavour and prayerfully strive to perform God's precepts. That we obey them implicitly, simply because they are God's commandments, and not because they commend themselves to our reason, are agreeable to our inclinations, or conducive to our interests. That we obey them impartially, for if we be regulated by what God commands, then we shall be by whatsoever He enjoins—without any picking or choosing. That we do so cheerfully, regarding each commandment as an expression of the will of Him who loves us and whom we love and long to please. That we do so perseveringly, for if we really love Him we shall not stop obey-

ing Him. Such obedience is not in order to salvation, but from gratitude for having been saved; nor is it performed in our own strength, but by grace duly sought from above.

Chapter 15

Obediential Assurance

1 John 2:4-5

*“He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments,
is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth
his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected:
hereby know we that we are in him.”*

Our title suggests that there is more than one kind of assurance, and such is indeed the case; nor do we refer to the difference between a genuine and a false one, but to those that are real and true. Like so many other subjects treated of in Scripture, Christian assurance has more than one side to it, though many are unaware of the fact. Broadly speaking they may be reduced to two: an objective and a subjective. The one is a firm persuasion resting on something without us, namely the Word of God; the other upon something within us—the work of God’s Spirit. Each is obtained by faith, and both are equally sure, though the latter be not attended with the same degree of certainty. The former is foundational, the other evidential. “Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favour of God and estate of salvation, which hope of theirs shall perish? yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God; which hope shall never make them ashamed.

“This certainly is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion, grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith, founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirit that we are the children of God: which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*).²⁴ It will be seen that that statement relates not to a simple assurance, but to a complex one, which rests on several grounds. There is an assurance conveyed by the direct action of faith, when it receives and rests upon Christ as He is freely offered in the Gospel, and His promise that He will never cast out such a one is relied upon. There is also an assurance which springs from the reflex action of faith, when the believer sees himself in the mirror of God’s Word and perceives in himself “the inward evidences of those graces” which are the scriptural marks of a saving change wrought in his soul by the Holy Spirit. The latter cannot exist without the former, nor will the former be without the latter, except in those rare cases where regenerated souls are taken at once to heaven.

Whereas the unsaved are to be plainly informed that there is a sure ground in the Gospel for the chief of sinners to rest his faith and hope upon, and that there can be no spiritual experience or inward evidence to confirm his hope until he looks away unto Christ as his Saviour; on the other hand, those who profess to have done so are to be exhorted to make their calling and election sure (2Pe 1:10) unto themselves and their fellow saints, by bringing forth those fruits which manifest them to be trees of the Lord’s planting. Now in this epistle John enters into some detail in showing what those fruits consist of, the presence of which attests the saving nature of their possessor’s faith, and the absence of which demonstrates the emptiness of such a one’s profession. In other words, the fact of regeneration may be certainly inferred from the presence of those marks which according to God’s Word pertain unto those who have been born again. Conversely, of those who affirm themselves to be regenerate but tread not the highway of holiness, but instead “have corrupted themselves,” it has to be said “their spot is not the spot of His children: they are a perverse and crooked generation” (Deu 32:5).

Now it is this evidential assurance of which John treats in the passage before us. First he declares, “Hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments:” in this way do we obtain sure confirmation that our acquaintance with Christ is a saving one. Christians may be convinced that a new nature has been imparted to them if they clearly perceive

²⁴ **Westminster Confession of Faith** – one of the great confessions of the Christian faith, produced in 1645-1646 by an assembly of 121 theologians appointed by the “Puritan” Long Parliament to make proposals for reforming the Church of England.

themselves to have new thoughts, tastes, impulses, desires, and acts. “As light proves the shining of the sun, as movement proves the existence of life, so this new experience assures us that our faith is not in vain. It is not without works, and therefore it is not dead” (L. Palmer). David could say, “I understand more than the ancients, because I keep thy precepts” (Psa 119:100)—not because he lived in a later and “more enlightened” age, nor by mental industry and extensive reading, but by entire submission to the supreme authority of the divine will. “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine” (Joh 7:17)—obedience is the grand means for removing doubts. “He that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in [or “by”] God” (Joh 3:21); he who acts uprightly and conscientiously fears not for God to scrutinize him and knows that divine grace must be operating within him. So intimately connected are spiritual knowledge and obedience that it is most difficult to define that exact relation and interrelation between them. It has been remarked that the one is both the cause and the effect of the other, the root and fruit alike; but it would be more accurate to say they are completely interdependent. Thus we find David testifying, “Through thy precepts I get understanding,” and then asking, “give me understanding, that I may know thy testimonies” (Psa 119:104, 125), yet there is not the least inconsistency between the two things. Paul prayed that the saints might be filled with spiritual understanding, in order that they should walk worthily of the Lord, thereby “increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:9-10). “Let me give you an illustration of this point. When our Lord met the disciples at Emmaus and talked with them, they did not know Him while He talked with them. But when think you did they know that they knew Him? Why, not until they performed an act of obedience by offering hospitality to a stranger. Then He was known to them in the breaking of bread” (Spurgeon). The lack of practical obedience to Christ lies at the root of the majority of doubts and fears!

Well did T. Scott remark upon this verse, “What then shall we say to the unguarded language of some persons who have argued or asserted that sanctification is not the proper ground of assurance and evidence of our justification, and that it is legalistic for men to look to their works as the proof of their being true believers? We can only say that they directly contradict the apostle, and that they are most certainly mistaken.” There is a vast difference between saying that the ground of assurance for acceptance with God is my obedience to His commandments, and declaring that the genuineness of my profession is to be tested thereby. As Calvin pointed out, “But we are not hence to conclude that faith recumbs on works, for though every one receives a testimony to his faith from his works, yet it does not follow that it is founded on them, since they are added as an evidence. Then the certainty of faith depends on the grace of Christ alone; but piety and holiness of life distinguish true faith from that knowledge of God which is fictitious and dead: for the truth is that those who are in Christ, as Paul says, ‘have put off the old man’ (Col 3:9).” The soundness of our knowledge is to be gauged by the obedience which it produces.

“*He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him*” (verse 4). In those words the apostle declares that any knowledge of God which issues not in obedience to Him is worthless, and that the lawless one affirming a saving acquaintance with God is a deceiver. John’s immediate design was to expose the vain pretences of the Gnostics, who claimed to know God in a very profound and intimate way. They imagined that they understood the very essence of God’s being and the mysterious manner of His subsistence, and therefore acquired or appropriated the name of Gnostics, or “knowing ones.” But they kept not the divine commandments, affecting themselves to be occupied with higher things, which raised them above God’s precepts; and therefore they disdained His ordinances. John was also refuting the error of Antinomians, who, under the guise of magnifying divine grace, set aside the Law as the believer’s rule of conduct. Peter refers to them in his second epistle and declares that the “liberty” they preached was naught but “bondage” (verse 19); while Jude branded them as deniers of our Lord Jesus Christ (verse 4). But in its wider scope, our text is an exposure of all graceless professors.

It is an easy matter for anyone to say “I know God,” but whether or not such be the case must be put to the trial. It raises the question, What kind of knowledge is mine? Is it merely a natural and notional one, or a spiritual and influential? Do I know Him with a filial fear and holy love, or just intellectually, as the demons do (Mar 1:24)? This calls to the duty of self-examination, and shows the importance of making sure that I really have a saving interest in Christ. It requires me to ascertain if that great change has been wrought in me which regeneration ever effects. The defects and deficiencies of the Christian’s life are indeed many, nevertheless the one who has been born again evidences it by habitually walking with God. Nor will the real children of God resent the challenging of their faith or the testing of their knowledge. Rather are they deeply concerned, and willing to go to considerable pains in order to be scripturally assured that their knowledge is radically different from that of empty professors or conscienceless hypocrites, that their faith is a divinely communicated one, that their experience is sound and genuine and not delusive and counterfeit, evidenced by a conscientious compliance with God’s will.

Whether our knowledge of God be a saving one is not to be determined by the soundness of our creed nor by the depth and liveliness of our feelings, but by a radical change of heart which has produced a new disposition, which moves us to a willing, steady and diligent compliance with and conformity to God’s preceptive will. It is in this way that we may confirm the sincerity of our profession and the reality of our state. Contrariwise, anyone who avows himself to have passed from death unto life, yet makes no conscience of the divine authority, but is a self-pleaser, supplies evidence that he is a liar. Thus it is that the Lord’s people are both to identify themselves and to be known unto others. See this principle illustrated in the case of Saul of Tarsus: when in response to his inquiry, “Who art thou, Lord?” Christ was revealed to him, he at once asked, “What wilt thou have me to do?” (Act 9:5-6). As soon as he knew Christ, he desired to obey Him, and unmistakably and last-

ingly was that desire exemplified to the end of his course. Nor was his in any wise an exceptional case, rather was it in this respect “a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting” (1Ti 1:16).

Unto all who are in Christ is that promise made good, “I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts” (Heb 8:10), so that they understand, love and obey them. It is in this way that we are renewed in knowledge after the image of God (Col 3:10). That knowledge is a practical and persuasive one, which powerfully influences its subject and produces a walking in the light. When God writes His laws upon our hearts, our affections and wills answer to every tittle in them, with a genuine desire and determination to perform the same. There is a complete harmony between the renewed soul and God and a correspondency of will. That correspondency was expressed by David thus: “*When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, LORD, will I seek*” (Psa 27:8); and by Paul: “For I delight in the law of God after the inward man” (Rom 7:22). And though he was harassed with another and contrary law warring against the same and bringing him into captivity to the law of sin which was in his members, causing him to cry for deliverance, yet he not only thanked God that he would yet be fully delivered, but could say “with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.”

“*He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.*” The particular design of these verses is to take forth the precious from the vile. In them the apostle describes one of the vital differences which there is between the sheep and the goats. Of the latter it is said, “They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him” (Ti 1:16). They adopt the same language as the saints, believe the same doctrines, claim to be resting on the finished work of Christ, and are quite sure of their salvation; yet evince little or no concern for His precepts. They talk glibly, but walk carelessly. This is exceedingly solemn, for those who tread not in the way of God’s precepts are strangers to Him. A man spiritually knows no more than he practices, for spiritual knowledge is radical and influential. It exerts both a restraining and a constraining power, causing its subject to loathe and shun evil and to love and pursue that which is good. Therefore they who keep not God’s commandments have no experiential acquaintance with Him. “We cannot know Him as Lord and Father, without being dutiful children and obedient servants” (Calvin).

While John describes quite a number of distinct marks whereby God’s children may surely recognize themselves and also identify those who have a form of godliness but know nothing of its living and transforming power, it is both highly significant and deeply important to note that he has given the precedence unto obedience, for without it any other apparent features of spirituality are but spurious. Though this be by no means the only evidence of a saving knowledge of God, it is the first and foremost, and where it be absent it is useless to look for others. As Christ asked those whom He addressed, “Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luk 6:46). Habitual disregard of His commandments is utterly incompatible with the owning of Him as our Lord. A disobedient life is a blank repudiation of a Christian profession. To avow that I know God savingly while self-will orders my life is a blatant assumption, for it is thoroughly lacking in reality. If I disregard that which Christ has appointed to be observed and done by His disciples, then that is absent which marks me as one.

He “*is a liar, and the truth is not in him,*” As John proceeds to develop his subject his language becomes increasingly emphatic. In 1:7, he had affirmed that those who walk in the light have fellowship with God in Christ, but in 2:3, he used a stronger expression of those who keep His commandments—thereby they “do know that they know Him.” So, contrastedly, in 1:6, it was asserted that if we profess to have fellowship with God and yet walk in darkness “we lie, and do not the truth,” whereas here the apostle roundly and positively declares of the one who claims to know God and yet “keeps not [observe the tense!] his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.” It should be pointed out that the final clause is much more than a bare repetition in a negative form of the preceding one, being explanatory not only of his being a liar but of his being disobedient: he kept not His commandments because he lacked the “impulsive power of a new affection,” which impels to holy action. And here we would answer the final question in the opening paragraph in our last chapter: “His” refers to God in Christ, and therefore the “commandments” include those of both the Law and the Gospel—amplification and verification of this statement will be given (D.V.) under our exposition of 2:7-8.

“*He is a liar,*” for he professes that which his life refutes. He may know much about Christ and have many ideas of Him floating in his brain, but it is a glaring falsehood for one who makes no conscience of His Law to say he has a saving knowledge of Him. As Spurgeon pointed out, it is more than a verbal lie, namely a doctrinal one, for it is horrible heresy to aver a personal acquaintance with the Saviour and live a life of self-pleasing—the two things are utterly incompatible. It is a practical lie, for he completely falsifies such a profession. One who poses as a Christian when he is not “hangs out false colours on Sunday and all through the week plays the liar’s part.” It is a corrosive lie, eating into the soul of its utterer and corrupting it, for he who has no compunction in testifying falsely of his relation unto God soon becomes inured to deceiving his fellows. Some of the most shameless trickeries and robberies have been committed by those posing as ardent Christians. It is a damning lie, for the one who is guilty of this God-dishonouring falsehood is signing and sealing her own death warrant, challenging the dread sentence of eternal perdition (Rev 21:8).

“*But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him*” (verse 5). Here the apostle returns to the thought of verse 3, and describes those who know the grace of God in truth (Col 1:6 and cf. Eph 4:21), though the careful reader will observe the change from “his commandments” to “his word.” That was not simply for the avoidance of tautology, but because the latter is a more comprehensive expression, taking in the entire communica-

tion which God has made us. It is first and foremost a commanding Word, which demands the subordination of our reason and judgment to it, the submission of our affections and wills, the subjugation of our likes and dislikes. But it is also a Word of doctrine to be believed and held fast. We are required to be as jealous of God's truth as we are responsive to His will, to be as sound in our faith as holy in our conduct, to hate false teaching as we do the garment spotted by the flesh. It is also a Word of threatening, to be respected and treated with fear and trembling—as Joseph did (Gen 39:9), and not trifled with as was the case with Adam and Eve. It is a Word of promise and consolation, to be embraced or appropriated (Heb 11:13) and rejoiced in (Jer 15:16). As such that Word is to be kept as a whole, and in all its parts.

The *“love of God”* is an ambiguous phrase, for it may be understood either objectively or subjectively, as the love which God Himself bears and manifests unto His people or as that which they exercise toward Him; but whichever it is it comes to much the same thing, since theirs is but the reflex of His—the outflowing of that which He has shed abroad in their hearts. As the expression comes before us again in chapter 4, we will reserve till then (D.V.) a fuller consideration of its precise significance, as well as what is intended by its being “perfected”: suffice it now to say that by God's love being “perfected” we understand its having accomplished its design or reached its end in producing obedience. The aim of God's love in choosing His people is to make them holy (Eph 1:4). The purpose of Christ's love in redeeming His people is that they may be “zealous of good works” (Ti 2:14).

As Calvin pointed out with his usual perspicuity—greatly excelling that of most who have followed him—“this misunderstood clause intimates what a true keeping of God's Word consists of, even love to Him.” “What doth the LORD thy God require of thee...to love him...to keep the commandments of the LORD” (Deu 10:12-13); “therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom 13:10), for love is dynamical, the most effectual of all influences and motives. Love is intensely practical—seeking to promote the interests of its object—or it is an empty name. Where there be love in the heart it will soon appear in the life; of all the affections it is the hardest to conceal. Love for God and obedience to Him are inseparable. Love reaches its objective when we please God—as a grafted tree has when laden with fruit. Consequently the Word is precious unto those who love God because it is His Word, and therefore they treasure it in their affections and memories and give proof thereof in their daily walk.

In verses 3 and 5 the Christian is shown how he may test the nature of his knowledge of God and the reality of his love for Him, namely by the effects they produce. If my knowledge of Him be something more than a self-acquired and notional one, namely that which the Spirit has wrought in me, then it has subdued my pride, humbled my heart, and brought me into subjection to God's revealed will. It will produce in me that spirit which was manifested by Cornelius when he said to Peter, “Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God” (Act 10:33). Our own wisdom and whims will be so subordinated to God's authority that we shall be willing to be weighed in the balances of His Word, to bring everything to its touchstone, ready to be corrected and reprov'd by it; and that not spasmodically or only for a season, but constantly: “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed” (Joh 8:31). God's Word becomes everything to such a soul: his delight, his food, his rule, his chart. In like manner, if the love of God be in my heart it will operate powerfully, so that sin is hated and holiness panted after, and therefore my greatest burden and grief is to sin against Him, as my supreme delight is to commune with and enjoy Him: “Hereby know we that we are in him”—belong to Him.

Chapter 16

Christ Our Exemplar

1 John 2:6

*“He that saith he abideth in him ought himself
also so to walk, even as he walked.”*

That is supplementary to verses 3-5, completing what is set forth therein. The “he that saith” intimates that it is the testing of profession which is still in view—here a yet severer and more searching trial is made. First, a saving knowledge of God must be demonstrated by a keeping of His commandments. Then the scope of our subjection unto God is enlarged upon, by showing it includes the keeping of His “Word”—a being regulated by the entire written revelation He has given us, regarding every jot and tittle in it as of divine authority. Now the nature of that obedience is defined. A mere outward compliance with the divine precepts, no matter how punctilious and comprehensive it be, is not sufficient: we are required to

walk even as Christ walked—to be regulated by the same principles, actuated by the same motives, directed unto the same ends as His were. Thus this verse describes the kind of obedience which is necessary in order to our having fellowship with the Father and with His Son. Walking in the light is not enough: it must be such a walking as marked that of the Lord Jesus.

It has been remarked that to have fellowship with God, to know Him, to love Him, to be in Him, and to abide in Him are expressions which, in John's epistle, all mean substantially the same thing. No doubt this is so, nevertheless there are shades of distinction between them, and it is to our loss if we fail to perceive the same. In our judgment there is a designed gradation and intensification in the several expressions used in the passage we are now studying: just as there is in the different tests of profession there named. First, John shows how we may know that we know Him, then how we may be assured that we are in Him, and now of our abiding in Him. The first signifies a saving acquaintance with God in Christ: the second, that we are one with or united to Him: the third, that we are rooted and grounded in Him. It should be pointed out that the Old Testament saints knew God as truly and intimately as did the New Testament saints (for the latter were certainly not more favoured in this respect than were Enoch, Abram, Moses, David, etc.), and that they blessedly realized they were covered by the wings of El Shaddai, and underneath them were the everlasting arms.

To come to Christ, to be in Christ, to abide in Christ, and to walk according to Christ express four of the principal aspects and distinguishing features of the Christian life. In 1:7, the walking is with God in holy communion; here it is walking before God, and outwardly before men. In 2:4, profession is made of knowing God in Christ, which is simply an avowal of His name and salvation; but in 2:6, the claim is made of abiding in Him, which signifies a continuation of the same, for perseverance is necessary to confirm it. As our Lord declared, "He that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved" (Mat 24:13). As a number of things are included by the term "coming" to Christ, and still more by being "in Him," so several distinct concepts are imported by abiding in Him. It signifies to rest on Christ alone for the whole of our salvation, to continue in the belief, confession, and acknowledgment of the same, to remain steadfast in His doctrine or teaching, to persevere in obedience to Him. Hebrews 10:23, is an exhortation unto the same: "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering;" on the other hand, "no man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luk 9:62).

Abiding in Christ connotes a lasting experience, in contrast with those evanescent effects which a hearing of the Gospel produces in so many, which are likened to the early dew which soon evaporates (Hos 6:4). Further light is cast upon the term by our Lord in John 15:4-5, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye *are* the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing"—and note the two verses that follow. Thus to "abide" in Christ means to live wholly on Him, to be completely dependent upon Him, to cleave thoroughly unto Him, to seek refuge constantly in Him, as in a strong tower, and to be established in Him. Now the onus resting on anyone who professes to abide in Christ is a very real and pressing one, a present and lasting one, namely to walk himself even as He walked, and thereby own Him as Lord and Master, making it manifest that he is a partaker of His holiness, indwelt by the same Spirit. In no other way can he substantiate his profession, and so honour and glorify Him. Such a walk is not optional but obligatory: there is a real necessity of so doing if we are to furnish clear proof that we belong to and are followers of the Lord Jesus.

In addition to our remarks on the figurative force of "walk" in 1:6-7, we would here point out that it has respect principally to the practical side of things—believing in Christ and a hearty enjoyment of Him are to be translated into deeds. "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him" (Col 2:6)—make the reality thereof apparent unto beholders by a Gospel practice souring the sweetest sin, making Christ's yoke easy. Thereby is the trial of faith to be made: not by your degree of confidence, but by the extent of your conquest of sin, subduing your lusts, overcoming of the world. Thereby the beauty of faith is manifested—by letting its light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven. Faith cannot be seen by our fellows, but its fruits can in a godly walk. Hereby the comfort of faith accrues to ourselves. It is by Gospel conformity that a good conscience is maintained and the smile of the Lord enjoyed. "Great peace have they which love thy law" (Psa 119:165), and the effect of righteousness is "quietness and assurance for ever" (Isa 32:17). Thus a godly walk is an intensely practical thing.

The term "walk" also imports progress, for to stand still is not to walk. Walking denotes growth from faith to faith, from strength to strength, from glory to glory. There is no such thing as remaining stationary in the Christian life: if we do not go forward by the strength of grace, we shall go backward by the power of corruption. There are indeed those who maintain the routine of outward religious duties, yet who make no advance—as a spinning wheel goes round, but is in the same place still. Spiritual walking is in contrast both with lazy listlessness and useless running around in circles. It signifies an increase in the experiential knowledge of Christ, a closer conformity to His death and a better acquaintance with the power of His resurrection, a deeper insight into the mysteries of the Gospel. It is true a believer may fall, relapse, backslide, so that his feet are so benumbed he ceases to "walk," but if he really be a child of God he will profit from his falls; for when he gets to his feet again his falls make him more humble, more dependent, more watchful, more circumspect, and thereby he will run faster in the ways of God.

The term "walk" also connotes permanency, both in the ways and the doctrine of Christ, as is clear from "rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith" (Col 2:7). A single step is not a walk: the figure expresses steady motion. True,

different figures are used to set forth other aspects of the Christian life, as in the verse just quoted. The believer is to be active yet rooted, to walk and yet be stable. On the one hand “be ye steadfast, unmoveable”; on the other side “always abounding in the work of the Lord” (1Co 15:58). “Like the two feet of a pair of compasses: the one foot of the compass stands steady in the centre, and the other draws the line and goes round. So it is with the believer: his faith is like the foot of the compass that stands fast in the centre, Christ and His doctrine; but his Gospel practice is the part that is like the other foot of the compass—it never stands, but ever moves in the way of the Lord” (R. Erskine). Thus, “walking” is also opposed to leaping, for in the former one foot is stationary while the other moves, whereas in the latter both are employed together—to leap out of one doctrine into another is neither walking nor being steadfast in the faith (Eph 4:14).

“*Ought himself also to walk, even as he walked.*” This is one of several verses in this epistle which takes it for granted that its readers were already acquainted with John’s Gospel (see the fifth paragraph of the introduction of this book), for to walk as Christ walked assumes that they knew how He walked. Now everything recorded in Scripture of our blessed Lord should engage the devoutest attention of His people, yet it is to be feared that many of them give an entirely disproportionate consideration to His walk. While we should indeed be deeply impressed by what one termed “the crises of the Christ”—such as His incarnation, temptation, transfiguration, death, resurrection and ascension—yet between His virgin birth and His victorious resurrection lay His virtuous life, and that is described at much fuller length than any of those crises! It was by His holy walk that the divine Law was magnified and made honourable in the very place where it had been so despised and dishonoured. It was by His immaculate life that Christ evinced Himself to be a fit sacrifice for sin, the Lamb “without blemish and without spot.”

In the preceding verses the apostle had spoken of keeping God’s commandments and Word; here he makes reference to the only One who ever perfectly did so on this earth. Pre-eminently was the life of Christ a walk of obedience. His obedience was the absolute conformity of His entire spirit and soul unto the will of His Father, His ready and cheerful performance of every duty which God had appointed Him. This obedience He flawlessly carried out amid the sorest trials, with infinite respect unto Him whose “Servant” (Isa 42:1) He had voluntarily become. The laws which He kept were, first, those to which He was subject considered simply as man, namely the Ten Commandments; second, those to which He was subject considered as Son of David (Mat 1:1), namely the ceremonial laws of Israel (see Luk 2:21-24, Mat 8:4, and His keeping of “the feasts” for illustrations of His compliance therewith); third, those which devolved upon Him as Mediator, namely carrying out the stipulations of the everlasting covenant—such as becoming incarnate, preaching the Gospel, calling His disciples, putting away the sins of His people and bringing in an everlasting righteousness. The closer the four Gospels be read in the light of this fact, the more clearly will it be seen that obedience to His Father was Christ’s supreme mission when He came down to this earth.

Psalms 40:7-10 reveals that it was to comply with what had been written of Him in the volume of God’s Book that He became incarnate and delighted to perform God’s pleasure. “I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me” (Joh 6:38). Every act of Christ during the thirty-three years that He tabernacled among men was distinctly and designedly an act of submission to God. He was baptized in order to fulfill all righteousness (Mat 3:15). Satan’s design in the temptation was to turn aside the Saviour from the path of complete surrender to God’s will. But in vain: each assault of the enemy was repulsed by an “It is written”—I refuse to disobey My Father. The perfect Servant chose His ministerial headquarters in accordance with God’s revealed will: it was neither force of circumstances nor personal inclination which moved Christ to dwell in Capernaum, but that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah (Mat 4:13-16). Though Christ was tender, sympathetic, and full of compassion, yet the motive prompting Him to heal the sick was the doing of God’s will: His miracles of mercy were wrought that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah (Mat 8:16-17). The laying down of His life was in obedience to the Father (Joh 10:18).

As the earthly life of the Lord Jesus was a walk of obedience, so also was it one of faith. In becoming incarnate God’s Son took upon Him a dependent nature, and therefore did He live a life of trust in His heavenly Father. The varied actings of His faith, in all its diversified phases, may be seen portrayed not only in the Gospels, but also in the Messianic Psalms and the announcements of Him by the prophets. As the kinsman Redeemer of His people Christ became truly “of one” with the many sons He was to bring to glory, and in all things was “made like unto his brethren” (Heb 2:11, 17). Yet as the Firstborn, here too He has the pre-eminence and therefore is He seen not among those of Hebrews 11, but distinguished from them and placed apart in 12:2, as the grand Model for all racers, the supreme Example of their faith. It is in the earthly life of Jesus, and nowhere else, that we have the ideal Pattern. Each of those mentioned in Hebrews 11 displayed some single aspect of the life of faith; but in the Saviour they were all combined in their consummate excellence. In 12:2, the word for “Author” does not mean so much one who originates as one who “takes the lead,” while the term “Finisher” is rendered “Captain” in 2:10, and “Prince” in Acts 3:15. Thus it is as the One going in advance that our Lord is to be “looked to,” as the perfect Pattern of faith for us to follow.

The earthly life of Jesus was one of entire dependence upon the Father. Hear Him saying, “thou *art* he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope *when I was* upon my mother’s breasts. I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou *art* my God from my mother’s belly” (Psa 22:9-10). How that brings out His uniqueness! In faith, as in everything else, He has “the pre-eminence!” It was not only in manhood, or even in childhood but from very earliest infancy that He drew His support from the Triune God. The whole of His prayer-life exemplified the same fact, expressing as it did His felt need of

divine strength and succour: “I live by the Father” (Joh 6:57) was His express avowal. A life of faith is one lived in communion with God, and never did another enjoy such a deep and constant realization of the divine presence as did the man Christ Jesus: “I have set the LORD always before me” (Psa 16:8) was His confession. “He that sent me is with me” (Joh 8:29) was ever a present reality to His consciousness. From Bethlehem to Calvary He had, by faith, unbroken and unclouded fellowship with the Father.

So too the life and walk of Jesus was one of hope, which is a sure expectation of desired good—sure because promised by Him who cannot lie. Hope is that spiritual grace which enables its possessor to look away from the perishing things of time and sense, above the shows and shams of this world, unto the enduring realities of eternity, and which gives him a present enjoyment (by confident anticipation) of the same. That which enthralls and enchains the ungodly had no power over the perfect man: “I have overcome the world” (Joh 16:33), He declared, and when the devil offered Him all its kingdoms He bade him “get thee hence.” So vivid was His realization of the unseen that in the midst of earth’s engagements He spoke of Himself as “the Son of man which is in heaven” (Joh 3:13). It was “for the joy set before him” that He endured the cross (Heb 12:2): that which sustained Him was having respect unto the recompense of the reward. That reward was the bliss of knowing He had finished the work which the Father had given Him to do, of being reinstated in the glory which He had with Him before the world was (Joh 17:5), and having effected the salvation of His Church; and so as He faced the immediate prospect of death He averred, “My flesh also shall rest in hope” (Psa 16:9).

The life and walk of Jesus was one of unbounded love. This supplies another link with the context, for in 2:5, we are told, “Whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected”—has attained its proper end. Real obedience is nothing more and nothing less than the exercise of love and the directing of it unto what God has commanded—any external compliance with His precepts which proceeds not from holy affections is worthless. Now as none other kept the Word of God as Christ did, so none other manifested unto Him such pure and transcendent love. When He entered this world He did so declaring, “Lo, I come...I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart” (Psa 40:7-8)—enshrined in My affections. Because He delighted in God’s will, His obedience was not only voluntary, but cheerful and universal, extending to every requirement of the divine Law without any omission or violation. “But that the world may know that I love the Father; and as the Father gave me commandment, even so I do” (Joh 14:31), “I do always those things that please him” (Joh 8:29).

“I have manifested thy name” (Joh 17:6)—all that God is in a manifestative and communicative way. The Son came down from heaven with this express purpose, that in His incarnation, person, walk, ministry, and atoning sacrifice He should declare the Father (Joh 1:18). In and through and by the incarnate Son the invisible God has opened to us the holy of holies and made known what has been kept secret from the foundation of the world. That which was beyond the reach of the human mind was beheld in the reality of a human life when the Word became flesh (Joh 1:14). Christ has presented to our view all the divine attributes: He unfolded God’s wisdom, showed forth His power, revealed His grace, exhibited His faithfulness as the fulfiller of His prophecies and the performer of His promises. Now we cannot do so to the same extent, but we are required to be Godlike in our measure. He is light and we are to “walk as children of light” (Eph 5:8). God is holy, and so must we be in our lives (1Pe 1:15). He is love, and we are to be “imitators of God, and walk in love as Christ also did” (Eph 5:1-2).

Not only did the Lord Jesus honour God in His daily walk by perfectly performing the requirements of the first table of the Law, but equally so in regard to the second table, the demands of which are all comprehended in “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Blessedly is that expressed in those words, “who went about doing good” (Act 10:38), which like the “He hath done all things well” is one of the terse but pregnant summaries of His peerless life. It presents to us a general but vivid view of His varied and active ministry, the whole of which consisted in promoting the interests of His fellows. Benevolence characterized His entire course among men. His prayers, His teaching, His miracles, His every movement, were directed unto the well-being of others, ever and always He “Went about doing good”; unto friends and enemies, intimates and strangers alike, unto their bodies as well as their souls. Of none other could this be said absolutely; of others in their measure, and only as possessed of His spirit and as they learned of Him.

“He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.” The “even as” is not a note of equality, but of likeness: to make Christ’s life the rule of ours is a pressing Christian duty. But like that word “duty,” “ought” has an unpleasant sound to supercilious ears. Nevertheless, the fact remains that many passages set Christ before us as the Model at which it is incumbent that His people should ever aim: how else shall they distinguish themselves from carnal professors, and the unregenerate who walk “according to the course of this world” (Eph 2:2)? Repeatedly did Christ speak of His disciples following Him (Mat 16:24, Joh 10:27, etc.). Paul bids us “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ” (1Co 11:1). “Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps” (1Pe 2:21): He displayed in His walk that which He requires from His redeemed, that they “may grow up into him in all things” (Eph 4:15). Conformity unto Him is ever to be our endeavour: not only in our conduct, but also in the spirit actuating it: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phi 2:5).

To walk as Christ walked is a moral obligation resting upon the Christian, for he is not his own, but bought with a price. The sacrifice of Christ demands nothing less: the honour of His name requires it: His love should constrain us thereto. A life of self-pleasing is utterly inconsistent with our union with Him: the Head was holy and humble, shall His members be car-

nal and proud? In the routine of our daily lives, in each relation we are called to fill—social, commercial, domestic—we should make it a point of honour and esteem it a holy privilege to ask, How would Christ act in such circumstances? and seek by all that is within us to do likewise. We ought to in order that God may find in us every hour that which is a sweet savour of His Son. Only so shall we “walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing” (Col 1:10). Only so shall we “shine as lights in the world” (Phi 2:15). Only so shall we “show forth his virtues” (1Pe 2:9, margin). Only so shall we be His witnesses and representatives in this scene. Only so shall we truly glorify Him.

Chapter 17

The New–Old Commandment

1 John 2:7-8

“Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which ye have heard from the beginning. Again, a new commandment I write unto you, which thing is true in him and in you: because the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth.”

In order to an understanding of these verses it is necessary to seek answers to the following questions. What is the relation between them and the context? What is the “old commandment” which is not immediately and formally defined? What is “the beginning” here referred to? Why the seeming repetition in the last two sentences of verse 7? What is the “new commandment” and how is the first clause of verse 8 to be understood, in view of the first clause of verse 7? What is meant by “which thing is true in Him and in you”? What is the precise bearing of the “because” on what precedes, in view of the remainder of the sentence? What is referred to in “the darkness is past and the true light now shineth”? Finally, why is the whole introduced by the term “Brethren”? Obviously, the interpreter and teacher is called for here.

It is a mistake, made by several of the commentators, to suppose that 2:7, begins a new division of the epistle. It does not: verses 7 to 11 are closely related to those immediately preceding. John is continuing to press for holiness of life, but passes from the general to the particular. In verses 3 to 6 the apostle had shown that the keeping of God’s commandments and following the example left His people by Christ are proofs of the genuineness of their love unto the Father and His Son, and therefore assurances for their hearts of their being and abiding in Him. Tacitly these verses contain an exhortation unto obedience to God and imitation of the perfect walk of Christ, and thus are an amplification of the opening sentence of the chapter: “these things write I unto you, that ye sin not.” In what follows he had intimated what was the positive implication of that prohibition: that his design was to inculcate and promote practical piety in the lives of the saints. Verse 3 had laid the foundation in a general statement, by mentioning the keeping of God’s commandments at large; now, he singles out and dwells upon a more specific commandment, which was at once both old and new.

As to precisely what commandment John had reference to, there does not seem to us the slightest room for doubt. With the great majority of the commentators we consider it is the precept which enjoins the exercise of brotherly love that is here in view. Candlish and one or two others who were prone to strain after “originality” dissented: on the ground that such an interpretation is awkward and unnatural, it being contrary to the apostle’s usual simplicity to spend two verses in describing a commandment which he had not yet mentioned, and brings in only at verse 9. But in 3:23, John tells us we should “love one another, as he gave us commandment,” and in 4:21, “This commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.” While in his second epistle he declares, “not as though I wrote a new commandment unto thee, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another” (verse 5), which surely removes all uncertainty. But that which settles the matter once and for all with the writer are the words of our Lord unto His apostles, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another” (Joh 13:34).

This will be the best place (though we put it last in our list of questions) to consider why our present passage is addressed “Brethren.” That is an endearing term. They had all been born again of the same Spirit, had one and the same Fa-

ther, even the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and had been delivered by the same Redeemer, and were alike interested in one complete and everlasting salvation. They were bound up in the same bundle of life with Christ, and so were in the highest and truest sense His brethren (Heb 2:11, 17), and therefore brethren one of another—united to each other by the sacred tie of blood, even the blood of the Lamb. Since the apostle was about to address them more immediately on the subject of being “kindly affectioned one to another,” most appropriate was it that he should here address them as “Brethren”—thereby reminding them of the obligations involved by such a relationship. Only once more in this epistle does he employ this particular form of address, and that most significantly, when bidding them marvel not at the world’s hatred, when assuring them that love to the brethren is a proof of having passed from death unto life, and when pointing out that, if occasion required it, they were to seal their love by laying down their lives, for their brethren (3:13-14, 16).

It is through our failure to examine carefully and weigh thoughtfully every detail of Scripture that we miss so many of its finer shades of beauty. Not only are we at a loss to understand much of that which passes so rapidly before our eyes, and still more so to retain it in our memories, but the minute perfections of the Word are unperceived by us. As we cannot enjoy the delicious flavour of fruit if it be eaten hurriedly, neither can we value the workmanship of the Spirit if we rapidly scan the sacred page. A pertinent illustration of this is found in the appellations employed by John when addressing his readers upon different parts of his message to them, for they are used not simply for the purpose of variety, but in strict accord with his change of subject. Thus it was most fitting that he should begin this chapter “My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not,” for older Christians ought not to need such a dehortation. Equally suitable was it that now, when, for the first time, he was to write upon brotherly love, he should address them as “Brethren.”

“Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning.” Let us consider the wider bearing of this statement here, taking up its more specific reference. John was introducing no novelty or innovation of his own. He desired to make it clear that in pressing a divine commandment he was not adopting a hitherto unheard-of policy in this Christian dispensation, or following a strange procedure. He was acting in no wise inconsistently with a regime of pure grace, for grace ever works through righteousness (Rom 5:21) and never at the expense of it (Ti 2:11-12). Privileges do not release from the discharge of duty, but impose additional obligations, or at least furnish motives thereunto. It is a serious mistake to suppose that “commandments” are out of place where love dominates (Eph 5:24; 1Pe 3:6), as it is to argue that the pressing of them upon God’s people in this era is “legalistic.” Such reasonings are once and for all refuted by Christ’s words in John 15:10, “If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in his love.”

In declaring that he wrote no new commandment unto his readers, John was emulating his Master. At the beginning of His public ministry Christ had said, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill” (Mat 5:17). It was the desire both of the supreme Teacher and of His beloved disciple to allay the prejudices of hearers and readers, by preventing them from supposing they were bringing in something new. The apostle delighted to pattern himself after his Master, not only in his conduct, but also in the methods and manner of his teaching. Nor was there any need whatever for him to invent something new, for the Lord Jesus Himself had delivered all that was ever to be given as from Him: His ministers being required to teach others only those things which He had commanded them (Mat 28:20; Heb 2:3). What a lesson there is here for present day preachers, not to pander to those who, like the Athenians, “spent their time in nothing else, but to tell, or hear some new thing” (Act 17:21). Do not be ashamed to be dubbed “old-fashioned.”

J. Reynolds (in Henry’s commentary) pointed out, “The precept of love must be as old as human nature; but it might admit of divers enactments, enforcements and motives. In the state of innocence, had human nature then been propagated, men must have loved one another, as being of one blood, made to dwell on the earth as God’s offspring, and bearing His image. In the state of sin and promised recovery, they must love one another as related to God their Maker, as related to each other by blood, and as partners in the same hope. When the Hebrews were peculiarly incorporated, they must accordingly love each other as being the privileged people, whose were the covenants and the adoption, and of whose race the Messiah and Head of the Church must spring; and the law of love must be conveyed with new obligations to the new Israel of God to the Gospel-church; and so it is the old commandment or the word which the children of the Gospel-Israel had heard from the beginning.”

Though that is all doctrinally and historically true, and while the great majority of the commentators since then have, substantially, adopted this explanation of the new-old “commandment,” yet we personally consider it misses the mark exegetically, and that through failing rightly to understand what is meant in the repeated expression “from the beginning.” It should be carefully noted that the apostle did not say “an old commandment which was from the beginning,” but instead, “which ye had” and “which ye have heard from the beginning.” As we showed in our exposition of 1:1-2, this expression “the beginning” is used in the New Testament in quite a number of distinct senses, though in this epistle we regard it as having one uniform meaning, namely the beginning of this Christian era, and more particularly the commencement of our Lord’s public ministry, when He was openly revealed before the eyes of men, when it was made manifest that none other than Immanuel was tabernacling in their midst. This we are convinced is the reason why the Holy Spirit moved John to add the final clause to verse 7: to explain to us the meaning of the preceding one, and let us know he referred to the “beginning” of their saving knowledge of God, to the time of their conversion—the start of their spiritual lives.

Calvin pointed out that some explained the “old commandment” as referring back to Sinai, saying, “that Christ now proclaims no other rule of life under the Gospel than what God did formerly under the Law,” adding, “this is indeed most true, nor do I object.” Alas that so many who now call themselves or at least regard themselves as “Calvinists” do object thereto, that they emphatically deny the Moral Law is the Christian’s rule of life, and denounce subjection thereto as a species of “bondage”—a view which is not only falsified by Matthew 5:17, but the plain teaching of the epistles also (Rom 3:31; 7:22, 25; 1Co 9:21). Then, with his usual perspicuity, the justly renowned reformer and expositor gave it as his opinion that John “calls it the old commandment, not because it was taught the fathers ages before, but because it had been taught them on their very entrance into the religious life. This was one of the first elements of the Gospel that they had been thus taught from the beginning; and it served much to claim their faith that it had proceeded from Christ Himself, from whom they had received the Gospel.”

With the above view we heartily concur, though we would supplement the fact that not only had Christ proclaimed this commandment (Joh 15:17), but had Himself perfectly exemplified the same (Joh 13:14-15). Now since the apostles had themselves experienced such a blessed commendation of it in their beloved Master’s treatment of them, we may be sure that they emphasized this law of fraternal benevolence wherever they ministered unto the saints. As others have pointed out, John himself here gave an instance of the same in his own example, and placed it on record: in the intimate appellation he here employed, for his “Brethren” signified that those to whom he wrote were near and dear to him, united by that bond of Christian charity unto the practice of which he was soliciting them. Thus in declaring, “I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning,” he assured them it was no novelty he was enjoining, but something they had been familiar with from the day they became Christians. Nor had this precept originated with him, for he had received it from Christ; it was thus a disclaimer that he was broaching any strange doctrine.

But to what does he refer in his “*Again, a new commandment I write unto you*”? Not to an entirely different one, or he had said “And yet again.” The adverb “again” intimates that the same subject was being considered, but under another aspect. In the New Testament two Greek words are used for “new”: *kainos*, which refers especially to quality, and *neos* which alludes principally to time—it is the former one here. One commandment is in view throughout, but considered from different angles, namely that of brotherly love—not formally named, for all his readers would know the one he referred to. The same object may be at once both old and new: old in itself, new to us. Probably the reader heard the Gospel for years, but when the Holy Spirit applied it unto his heart in power it was thoroughly new in his experience. Some have illustrated this commandment’s being both old and new by the grand Reformation: that which was proclaimed by Luther and Calvin was “old,” for it had been taught by Christ and His apostles; again it was “new,” as purged from the adulterations of Rome. A more scriptural example is found in the Sermon on the Mount, where we hear our Lord enunciating no absolutely new law, setting up no different standard of conduct, but renewing the Decalogue, freed from the glosses and corruptions of the rabbis and Pharisees.

The apostle had, in the former verse, explained what he meant by the old commandment, declaring it to be the very same as they had been taught and had received “from the beginning”—that which respected brotherly love, as the verses which follow prove. As S.E. Pierce well expressed it, “It was the old commandment in the same sense as when we read of the old covenant and the new. There ever was but one and the same everlasting covenant: yet the different administrations thereof have been such as to give the denominations of the old and new covenant thereto.” That analogy is both pertinent and illuminating. It is on the basis of the everlasting covenant of grace made by God with Christ, that His elect were saved during the former economy (2Sa 23:5) and that they are so now (Heb 13:21), yet different privileges have been enjoyed by and different duties required from them under Judaism and Christianity. Likewise as our Lord’s commandment to His disciples to love one another required the names of old and new—from the distinct periods of His delivering it unto them—so also it is invested with higher privileges, enforced by superior motives, and contains different enactments from the former.

Some commandments are old in the sense of being antiquated, like the ceremonial laws of Judaism; others are new absolutely, as the Christian ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Some are both old and new, as those given at Sinai, renewed by Christ and His disciples. At the beginning of His ministry Christ enforced the Decalogue, the sum of which is loving God with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves. At the close He said to His disciples, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you.” The Law required that I love my neighbour, which was a natural relationship; but the Gospel requires me to love my “brethren” in Christ, which is a spiritual relationship. The Law required me to love my neighbour as myself: to be as zealous in protecting his interests and forwarding his welfare as I am my own; Christ commands us “That ye love one another, as I have loved you” (Joh 15:12)—with a fervent, sacrificial and enduring love. His words in John 13:34, “as I have loved you,” are to be interpreted in the light of their context (verses 14-15) where we behold the incarnate Son of God performing a slave’s part, washing the feet of His disciples. His was a self-renouncing, self-denying love which shrank not from the meanest office.

Several broad hints have been given above, but we must now furnish a more definite and fuller answer to the question, Why is the old commandment of verse 7 called a new one in verse 8? The terms are used relatively and not absolutely: the old commandment is now considered in a new light and is to be laid hold of with a new vigour. Love for the brethren is now urged on grounds on which it was not under the Mosaic economy. First and foremost, from the example supplied by Christ. He not only expressly ratified the original precept, but had given a pattern of charity such as had never been seen in this

world before. In Him it was supremely and sublimely personified. The Lord Jesus displayed a love which was superior to all the faults and failings of its objects, a love which never varied or cooled, which deemed no service too menial and no sacrifice too great. It was new then not in its substance, but in the form given to it by the Redeemer. Perfectly exemplified by Him, it shone with additional luster and appeared with new beauty. Thus we see how intimately this linked with verse 6: in exhorting Christians to walk as their Master walked, the apostle singled out one particular feature thereof—how He conducted Himself toward His brethren.

So far is Christianity from rendering the exercise of love and the performance of good works needless, it imposes additional obligations unto the same, and at the same time furnishes new incentives thereto. “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples,” said Christ, “if ye have love one to another” (Joh 13:35). And as the example of Christ so plainly exhibited, love is very much more than a nebulous ideal or flowery expression, being an intensely practical thing; more than a beautiful sentiment, namely a mighty force and impelling dynamic. The followers of Christ are required to love one another for His sake, as bearing His image, and as imitating the copy He set before them of compassionate, patient, disinterested affection. They are to have a genuine regard to each other’s interests and comforts, a sympathy with their sorrows and a part in their joys. They are to delight in one another’s company, to live in peace and harmony, to bear and forbear with each other’s frailties. They are to unite together in prayer and worship, to bear each other’s burdens, to spare no pains in seeking to build them up in faith and holiness. This new commandment is to be kept for ever fresh in the hearts and minds of the saints.

But there are many other respects in which the old commandment is now a new one. It is given to a new society or corporation, the Christian, “brotherhood” (1Pe 2:17). It has received a new exemplification in the Head of that corporation, being abundantly and perfectly realized in Him who “loved the church and gave himself for it.” It is addressed unto those who are new creatures in Christ Jesus, and therefore are they to love one another for His sake. Thus it is kept from a new principle or nature, received at regeneration. It has come to them with a new power: under the old covenant it was inscribed upon tables of stone, but the Spirit writes it on the hearts of those who are under the new covenant, and it was for this reason that Paul said to the saints, “But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another” (1Th 4:9). It is invested with new force, even the mediatorial authority of Christ, who, after His resurrection from the dead, was given all power in heaven and in earth, and “gave commandments unto the apostles” (Act 1:2). It is to be obeyed in a new manner, according to its multiform application in the precepts found in the Epistles, which are given for the directing of brotherly love.

Chapter 18

The Commandment Belied

1 John 2:8-9

As our title intimates, there is a close relation between the two verses we are here to consider, in fact the latter is so intimately connected with the foregoing that we will begin by setting both of them before the reader.

*“Again, a new commandment I write unto you,
which thing is true in him and in you: because
the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth.
He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his
brother, is in darkness even until now.”*

In the preceding chapter we sought to make it quite clear that the “commandment” referred to is not an entirely different one from what had previously been given, that the “new” one differs not from the old in substance, but receives this appellation from its having been renewed and beautified by Christ, and because it is now enforced by new considerations and motives. The same term is used again of the “new song” sung by the saints in heaven (Rev 5:9), and that is not a fresh one absolutely, for, as Psalm 40:3 shows, the redeemed are learning to lisp it even now.

By correctly defining “the beginning” of 2:7, as the commencement of Christian experience (in the case of the apostles, under the ministry of Christ) we learn that the precept of brotherly love is the law of the new life—the spiritual cement

which in all generations has bound together the whole company and community of the saints. The old commandment received a new embodiment and manifestation in the eternal Lover of our souls, and by His example acquired a new significance and meaning. This is the more evident if we examine and ponder the context of John 13:34. There was no commandment which required Christ to wash the feet of His disciples: it was a spontaneous act, which rose above any mere deed of obedience, prompted by and as an expression of His love to His disciples—the gushing forth of His heart in a manner and measure as amazed them (Joh 13:6, 8). In like manner, love is to be the spring and motive which moves His followers to serve one another, and to evince their union with Him.

We cannot truly love Christ without also loving His brethren. Moreover, they too are joined to one another by a new bond of union, as fellow heirs and fellow travelers unto their heavenly inheritance. Therefore did the apostle go on to say, “which thing [namely the exercise of brotherly love] is true [is realized] in him and in you.” The repetition of the preposition is very suggestive, marking as it does the minute accuracy of Scripture, and evidencing the Spirit’s jealousy of the honour of Christ. Had John said “true in him and you,” he would have affirmed something which was common to both, without any difference—true alike in Christ and His members. But the insertion of the second “in” admits of a distinction, and implies that it is true in another sense, in a modified way, in us than what is true in Him. True in Him originally, in us derivatively; in Him essentially, in us reflectively; in Him radically, in us imitatively; in Him perfectly, in us faultily. Here too He has “the pre-eminence.” “Which thing is true” imports which is actually realized, which is a historical fact, a matter of present observation.

“*Because the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth.*” Upon which S.E. Pierce said, “By which I conceive the Jewish state, and the present state of the Church is to be understood. The former dispensation is finally closed, it is past, never to return. The present Gospel state of the Church is such that the true or clear light of the Gospel and its ordinances now shineth, and will remain unshaken until our Lord’s second coming in His kingdom and glory.” The darkness is past because the Sun of righteousness has arisen, and a full and final revelation of God has been made unto men (Heb 1:1-2). The ineffable glory of God has been openly displayed in and by His incarnate Son. The mists of darkness or obscurity which hovered over things in the previous era have been dispelled, and light has been shed on all its symbols. This statement is parallel with 2 Corinthians 5:17, which expresses not the great change wrought in a soul at regeneration, but the dispensational alteration effected by the appearing of Christ, namely that change of state produced by the new covenant’s supplanting the old, the ordinances of the Mosaic economy being superseded by the Christian baptism and the Lord’s supper.

“*Because the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth.*” That these words have also an experiential force, as well as a dispensational application, is clear from the fact that they are explanatory of the preceding clause—as its opening “because” makes apparent: “which thing is true in him and in you.” The members must be conformed to their Head, believers must walk suitably to the Christian order. But that is possible only as a miracle of grace is wrought in them, and thus this sentence describes what takes place at their regeneration, when He who at the first “commanded the light to shine out of darkness” shone in our benighted hearts unto “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2Co 4:6), and He effectually called us “out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1Pe 2:9), and when He “delivered us from the power of darkness,” and “translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son” (Col 1:13), so that now we are “the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not [any longer] of the night, nor of darkness” (1Th 5:5). When the light of the glorious Gospel shone with power in our souls, the darkness of unregeneracy was past.

It appears to this writer that the Holy Spirit provided us with a broad hint here that this clause possesses a double force, by employing a word which admits of an alternative rendering, for *parago* is also translated “passeth away” in verse 17. The dark shadows of Judaism are forever past, but it is more accurate to say that the darkness of nature is passing for the Christian, since his path shines “more and more unto the perfect day.” The acute Calvin understood the words as having a relative force rather than an absolute one, for he remarked “not that every one of the faithful becomes wise the first day as much as he ought to be (for even Paul testifies that he laboured to apprehend, Phi 3:12), but that the knowledge of Christ is sufficient to dissipate darkness. Hence daily progress is necessary and the faith of every one has its dawn before it reaches the noon-day. But as God continues the inculcation of the same doctrine, in which He bids us to make advances, the knowledge of the Gospel is justly said to be the true light.”

In bringing to a conclusion our remarks upon verse 8 it should be pointed out that our English version fails to make clear the beautiful shading of the Greek. In the first clause of its second half “*alethes*” signifies true as opposed to lying and fictitious—cf. John 8:31, “My disciples indeed,” in contrast with the many nominal ones—whereas “*alethinos*” in the final clause means true and substantial, as opposed to what is vague, shadowy, symbolical. Hence it occurs again and again in connection with Christ, who is “the true light” (Joh 1:9), “the true bread” (Joh 6:32), “the true tabernacle” (Heb 8:2), “the faithful and true witness” (Rev 3:14). Archbishop Trench, that master of words, says that our translators have erred in not rendering “very” as an adjective as well as an adverb—as in the Nicene Creed²⁵ it is rendered “very God of very God.” John

²⁵ **Nicene Creed** (AD 325) – an early creed or profession of faith of the Christian church. It is called “Nicene” because it was adopted in the city of Nicaea by the first ecumenical council which met there. It has been normative for the Anglican Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Oriental Orthodox churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, and many Protestant denominations. The Nicene Council was called in the face of the Arian controversy. Arius, a Libyan presbyter in Alexandria, had declared that although the Son was divine, he was a created being and

Wyclif's²⁶ version (see the Hexapla) translated John 15:1, "I am the very Vine." Thus, as L. Palmer pointed out, "Christ is the great reality, the very light"—the substance of all the shadows and emblems of the Levitical system.

"He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now." The pondering of this verse in the light of the whole of its context is not only a help to an understanding thereof, but is also another instance of such serving to bring out several features which are not perceptible if only a detached view be taken of it. In a previous chapter we pointed out that, contrary to the opinion of superficial students of this epistle, John presents his thoughts and develops his subjects in a most orderly manner. We also called attention to his fondness for triads and gave a number of examples of the same. Now in this second section of his letter, which runs from 2:3 to 2:12, we find both of these features exemplified. In his first division there was a threefold exposing of "liars" (1:6, 8, 10), and a threefold predication made of the saints (1:7, 9; 2:1). Likewise, in this second division there is a threefold testing of professing Christians, as is clear from the repeated "he that saith" at the beginning of 2:4, 6, 9. As others before us have pointed out, this testing is made by the commandment of God, the walk of Christ, and the operation of the Spirit, for by it alone is anyone brought into the light.

Two out of three of those professions are discovered to be worthless (verses 4 and 9), and over against them is set the two-fold "we know" of verses 3 and 5. Thus the contents and structure of the whole of this passage evince painstaking deliberation. It is clear that from verse 3 onwards the apostle had before him a particular reference to the precept of brotherly love, for though the plural ("commandments") be used in verses 3 and 4, yet he employs the singular ("word") in verse 5. It reminds us of Paul's statement in Galatians 5:14, "For all the law [in regard to our fellow men—for that was the point he was enforcing] is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Equally clear is it that if the second division be interpreted in connection with the first its theme is, He who walks "in the light" must necessarily love his brother. Thus the two divisions correspond with 1:3: "that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son," denominated "light" in 1:5. Fellowship with God is dwelt upon in 1:6-7; fellowship with believers as the consequent in 2:7-11. Clearly, then, the knowledge of God spoken of in 2:3, is that of a participation of nature, which results in conformity of character.

In view of what is stated so emphatically in verse 8 we are left in no doubt of exactly what is purported by anyone saying "he is in the light," though the same may be expressed in several ways. It is making claim that he is in communion with God in Christ (1:5, 7). It is averring that he is a born-again soul, for it is only by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit that we are made "meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light" (Col 1:12). Thus it is to declare himself to be a real Christian. But if such a one hates his brother, his claim is invalid, for his profession is repudiated by his conduct. Such a one has mistaken an intellectual attainment for a spiritual experience. He may indeed be charmed by the magnanimous spirit of the Gospel, admire its sublime and transcendent ethics, or extol its logical doctrines and profound depths; nevertheless the very light which he eulogizes is still something outside himself, for he has never been experientially turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God (Act 26:18), nor has the day star arisen in his heart (2Pe 1:19).

"He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness." His language conforms to the Christian state, but his disposition agrees not therewith. In reality he belongs to that prolific generation who "profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable and disobedient" (Ti 1:16). John is referring to one who makes a public acknowledgment that he loves Him who is "the true light," but if he did, then he would also love those who are His brethren, for Christ is in them (Gal 2:20). True, there is still much of the flesh evidenced by them, nevertheless if they be "in Christ," then He is in them, and He cannot be hid (Mar 7:24), and where any of His perfection shine forth, however feebly, a regenerated heart is drawn out unto the same. It is impossible to be in communion with God and not to love His people. When any heart be Divinely illuminated with a saving knowledge of God in Christ, it is so renovated and transformed as to produce an answerable disposition unto all others who have experienced a like miracle of grace within them.

The one who claims to be a Christian but hates any bearing the image of Christ is to be charged with making a false profession. The two things are utterly inconsistent. No matter how fully assured he may be, or how loud his profession, he is yet in a state of nature—unregenerate. He is in the kingdom of Satan, and under the power of darkness: he was born therein, and has never been delivered from the same. So far from one who hates those who belong to the Lord Jesus enjoying fellowship with Him who is the light, he is still a subject of the prince of darkness, the instigator and director of all the malice and malevolence which is vented against and upon Christ's seed. But alas, how many there are in the assemblies and churches today who assume what is not true; yea, comparatively few who lay claim to being spiritually enlightened give real proof of the same. Note well that John did not allow that such a one was in the light, but merely that he "saith he is." We too should be very slow in accrediting the claims of those who do not satisfactorily attest the same.

therefore not co-essential with the Father, and "there was when he was not." This made Jesus less than the Father, which challenged the doctrine of the Trinity. The Nicene Creed explicitly affirms the co-essential divinity of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²⁶ **John Wyclif** (c.1328-1384) – English Scholastic philosopher, theologian, lay preacher, translator, reformer, and university teacher at Oxford in England, who was known as an early dissident in the Roman Catholic Church during the 14th century. He is sometimes called "The Morning Star of the Reformation," and was also an early advocate for translation of the Bible into the common language. He completed his translation directly from the Vulgate into vernacular English in the year 1382.

“He that hateth his brother is in darkness.” That all hatred is not sinful is clear from Psalm 45:7, for there it is said to the glory of the God-man, “Thou lovest righteousness, and hatest wickedness.” Really, love and hatred are but the opposite poles of the same moral principle: “Ye that love the LORD, hate evil” (Psa 97:10, and cf. 119:113)—love for the One necessarily begets hatred of the other. Hatred becomes sinful only when it is exercised against that which is entitled to be loved. Love and hatred—two of the principal influencing principles of action—are natural affections, and they are good or evil according to the objects to which they are applied and affixed. The one has its use as much as the other: aversion and shunning are as necessary as longing and pursuit. Love was made for God and all good; hatred for sin—the latter being put in man at the beginning, that he might fly from temptation and evil. As carnal men hate the truth (Psa 50:17), so the saint is to hate all error and falsehood (Psa 119:104). “The fear of the LORD is to hate evil” (Pro 8:13), and therefore it is our duty to arm ourselves and take every precaution against it. There are many who forbear sin who do not abominate it.

Those powerful natural affections which God placed in man when He made him have been misplaced by the fall, so that he now loves what he ought to hate (Joh 3:19), and hates what he should love (Rom 8:7). Hence the divine work of grace is to renovate and restore the disordered affections to their right center and fix them upon their proper objects. The one or the other will inevitably regulate and dominate the life. “The human heart is a soil that must produce a crop of some sort. It cannot lie fallow. In the absence of the fruits of the Spirit, it will produce the weeds of sin...He that is not with Christ is against Him (Mat 12:30). Where life is absent death is present. The antithesis of light is darkness, and there is no twilight in the kingdom of heaven. He that is not in the light is in the darkness; and he that loves not his brother must therefore hate him. The human heart may be like the house that was cleansed and garnished, but still left vacant. Morality may, to some extent, restrain the passions and beautify the outward character; but unless love is enthroned, hatred must inevitably establish the reign of darkness” (L. Palmer).

“He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness.” The “brother” is, of course, a real child of God, for there is not a single instance in the New Testament where a fellow man as man is designated a brother. The only brotherhood mentioned therein is the Household of Faith. The one who hates him (no matter what be his profession) is unregenerate. Therein is the awful malignity of this hatred seen, in the fact that it has a child of God for its object: hence the added words “even until now.” Such hatred attests the utter depravity of his moral judgment and demonstrates that he is led captive by the Devil at his will. As there is an innate contrariety between virtue and vice, fire and water, so there is between the seed of the serpent and the seed of Christ (Gen 3:15). Because the carnal mind is enmity against God, it is so against all those who bear His image. There is ever that in true piety which stirs up the venom of the unregenerate. So far from one who hates the followers of Christ being in the light, he is both in and of the world (Joh 15:19).

The hatred that is spoken of here is very much more than dislike of a person, for we may pity and desire to help one whom we dislike. But such is far from being the case with one who is abhorred. From the antithetical terms used by our Lord in Matthew 6:24, it is clear that to hate is to “despise.” It is to detest and hold another in utter contempt. It is not a transient motion of the affections, but a deeply rooted species of loathing. Hatred is all for injury; it is a murderous lust which desires the destruction of its object. This is clear from the cases of Cain and Abel, and of Esau and Jacob. In each of those instances hatred was called into exercise by a spirit of envy: the one being jealous because his brother’s offering was accepted by God, whereas his own was rejected; the other because his brother received from their father the blessing which he coveted. The same evil crop sprang up again in Jacob’s family, for because of his partiality unto Joseph; his brethren “hated him” (Gen 37:4), and took the first opportunity which came their way to get rid of him. This hatred issues from an active and implacable enmity, causing its possessor to bear ill-will and malice unto another, to loathe and abhor him. Obviously such a malignant spirit cannot possess a regenerated soul, least of all be exercised against a brother or sister in Christ.

This hatred is the exercise and manifestation of that enmity which God Himself has placed between the seed of the serpent and the seed of Christ. Whereas the Lord restrains its working in some more than in others, yet it is present in all of the unregenerate. Though it may not be vented equally upon every child of God, nevertheless all of them are its objects. The wicked hold in utter contempt everyone who treads the highway of holiness and shows forth the virtues of his Master. As those who truly love Christ love all who are manifestly His, and that because they are His, so the children of the devil hate all who are Christ’s, because they are His. They despise them as simpletons who are missing the best of this life. They are envious of their fortitude under stress and their peace in the midst of tribulation. The workers of iniquity are filled with a spirit of revenge against them, because their godliness condemns their ungodliness. The righteous are thorns in their sides, and they are so in proportion as they follow the example which Christ has left them, and walk in separation from the world. Those who are in the dark detest the children of light because they refuse to “run with them to the same excess of riot,” and therefore do they “speak evil” of them (1Pe 4:4).

Chapter 19

Light and Love

1 John 2:10

*“He that loveth his brother abideth in the light,
and there is none occasion of stumbling in him.”*

The apostle continues to develop his theme of the relation and interrelation of light and love. As might well be expected, he had begun with a reference to “the love of God,” for His is ever the fountain of ours, whether it be unto Himself or unto His children. As Calvin pertinently remarked, “He pursues the same metaphor. He said that love is the only true rule according to which our life is to be formed (verse 5); he said that this rule or law is presented to us in the Gospel (verse 7); he said lastly, that it is there as the meridian light which ought to be continually looked on (verse 9). Now, on the other hand, he concludes that all are blind and walk in darkness who are strangers to love. But that he mentioned before the love of God and now the love of the brethren involves no more contrariety than there is between the effect and the cause. Besides, these are so connected together that they cannot be separated”—so united that where the one is the other is found also.

More specifically: in verses 7-11 professing Christians are tested by their response to that divine precept which enjoins the exercise of brotherly love. It is made the criterion of one’s being in the light or in the darkness. John began by reminding his readers that the commandment which he was pressing upon them was no invention of his, but rather what they had first heard from the lips of Christ (Joh 13:34). That it was the old commandment which required us to love our neighbour as ourselves, but which had been renewed by the Lord Jesus, perfectly exemplified by Him in His treatment of the apostles, and then enforced by new motives and considerations. Next he had declared that the claim made by anyone to being in the light while yet he hated his brother was a false one, for such conduct demonstrated that he was still in the darkness. Finally, he urges the duty of brotherly love by a high commendation of its exercise (verse 10), and utters a most awful denunciation upon the one who violates the same (verse 11). Such appears to us to be his train of thought.

It is important to take note of the tense of the verbs in our present verse, for a more severe and searching test of Christian profession is in view than in the preceding one: there, it was a question of being in the light; here, of abiding in the light. Thus it is far more than a single act or fleeting affection which is referred to—perseverance is what crowns an action. Yet another link with the context should here be observed. At the close of verse 8 it was stated that “the true light now shineth,” where the reference was more an objective one; now the subjective application is made thereof—shineth in you, and so through you—and not simply upon us as in John 8:12. There is as much difference between external and internal light, and between intellectual and spiritual, as there would have been between the twelve spies returning with only a bare report of what they had seen in the land and their actually bringing with them clusters of the grapes of Canaan upon their shoulders—a beautiful figure of Gospel graces in the heart.

As 1:6-7, has revealed, to walk in the light indicates that one is regenerate and in fellowship with God in Christ. What, then, is the relation of love to light? It is twofold: an effect thereof, and a necessary means for preserving us in the light. “Light is essential to love, and love is inseparable from this light. Light is love’s home, and love is light’s offspring. Love is born in the light. We have only to know God to love Him, and we have only to see God’s image in our brethren to love them. As the light transforms the chrysalis into the butterfly, so light creates love, and wings it for heaven. Love grows in the light. It is a tropical plant, and thrives best in the meridian of spiritual life. Love loves in the light. When God’s glory shines in the face of a Christian brother we cannot help loving him. In this sense we can love all through Christ. Onesimus the slave became in Christ Jesus a brother beloved (Phm 1). The nearest way to our brother is through the heart of Christ. Love conquers in the light. This light subdues the flesh and eclipses the glory of the world. Love abides in the light. It is lust that seeks the darkness. Those who love darkness rather than light show that their deeds are evil” (Levi Palmer).

Brotherly love is one of the blessed fruits which issue from a soul’s enjoying communion with Him who is light. The exercise thereof is also essential to the maintenance of that communion, for where ill will is cherished against a fellow saint the Holy Spirit is grieved and communion with God is hindered. In verse 9 the existence and exercise of brotherly love is made a test of our being in the light, but in verse 10 it is both the effect and the means of continuing therein. As Candlish also pointed out, “The law of action and reaction is here very noticeable. Being in the light begets brotherly love. Brotherly love secures abiding in the light. For this brotherly love is love to the true light shining in my brother as in Christ. And

such love to the true light, wherever and in whomsoever it is seen shining, as it shines in Christ, must needs cause me to grow up more and more into the true light, to grow up into Christ.” Our affections ever follow our apprehensions, for the heart is reached via the mind, and therefore the measure of our love makes manifest the measure of our spiritual light.

It is no mere verbal claim which is here made, but something that speaks louder than words. It is far more than the use of endearing expressions by the lips being seen and felt in deeds. It is a real, active, benevolent affection, which suffers nothing in its object to quench the same. As hatred is a malignant disposition which fills with ill will against another, so love is a frame of mind that produces respect and esteem for another. As hatred is a murderous lust which seeks to injure, love is a principle which aims at the good of its object. That which is here in view is not a natural trait, but a spiritual grace, yea, the queen of the Christian graces. It is exercised in a great variety of ways: ministering to the body, comforting the mind, promoting the welfare of the soul. It is expressed in practical forms, as far as lies within the power of its possessor. Thus it supplies an external evidence of the inward reality of a real Christian profession, for such outgoings of good will fall more or less under the notice and observation of fellow saints.

“*He that loveth his brother*” for Christ’s sake, and for what he sees of Christ in him, loves him sincerely and cordially—“*abideth in the light.*” What a high commendation of brotherly love is this! He who freely expresses Christian affection unto fellow believers supplies clear evidence that he is a born-again person, in fellowship with God, for out of love to Him issues love to His children. Not only so, but he gives proof that he is walking according to the principles of the Gospel, that he is vitally influenced by the truth he professes, for holy love unto the brethren is a sure criterion of spiritual illumination. Without it he who speaks with tongues is as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. Why so? Because unless love inspires my testimony it brings no gain to those who hear it, but is lost on the air. One might be endowed with the gift of prophecy, understand all mysteries, be possessed of all knowledge, yet if he be devoid of love he is “nothing”—a spiritual cipher, contributing naught unto the edification of his brethren. Therefore his most imposing deeds will receive no reward in the day to come.

In that thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians a most sublime description is given of the nature, characteristics and workings of this holy and heavenly love. It is patient and forbearing toward its objects, refusing to take offence at a frown or word. It suffers long and is kind, being neither easily irritated nor repulsed by ingratitude. It is humble and lowly, for it neither envies the prosperity of others nor is puffed up by its own performances. It is unselfish and disinterested: “I seek not yours, but you” (2Co 12:14) is ever its aim. It “thinketh no evil,” harbouring no doubts or suspicions, but places the best construction upon the words and actions of others. It rejoices not in iniquity but rather is grieved when the sins of a brother are apparent. “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it” (Song 8:7), for that love which is the fruit of the Spirit “beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.”

Such is this spiritual love in the abstract, and such is it concretely in its manifestations. Yet it requires to be borne in mind that 1 Corinthians 13 takes no notice of the hindrances which the Christian meets with in the exercise of his love from the workings of the flesh within him or from the opposition of the devil and his agents from without. Light is pure and radiant, but when it shines through a defective medium its beams are blurred. Fire burns and is hot, but when it encounters that which is wet and damp its action is checked. What love consists of in itself is one thing, the allowances which have to be made for our natural make-up, and especially for indwelling corruptions, are quite another. On the one hand we must not deny the fact that, so great is the change which divine grace effects in its subjects, it is likened unto the wolf being fitted to dwell with the lamb, the leopard lying down with the kid, the young lion and the fatling together (Isa 11:6); and on the other hand we are not to ignore the fact that the regenerate require to be exhorted: “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice” (Eph 4:31)—set aside whatever corrodes your own mind or wounds the feelings of others.

Let not the reader forget what was pointed out in the preceding chapter on the first clause of the second half of verse 8, according as its verb admits of a twofold rendition—as the translators of the Authorized Version gave it: “because the darkness is past,” and “the world passeth away” (verse 17); the former having a dispensational reference to the relative darkness of the Mosaic economy, the symbols and ceremonies of the Levitical system having become obsolete now that they are made good in their antitypes; the latter rendering possessing a practical allusion to the experience of God’s children. Though there still be much darkness in them, and though they are more or less influenced by the darkness now surrounding them, nevertheless, as they grow in grace, and in proportion as they enter into God’s best for them, the darkness is passing and their path shines more and more unto the perfect day. Yet that perfect day is still future, and so is that complete conformity unto Christ which shall then be the condition of all the redeemed. Meanwhile the flesh opposes and none remains in the light fully and without intermission, and therefore none loves his brother perfectly. But as there ought to be an increase in knowledge and faith, so of love and all other graces.

It is just here that we see again the intimate relation between light and love. When my love to God cools and my communion with Him is broken, then affection for my brethren is proportionately affected. As Candlish pointed out, “It is in the darkness that injuries are brooded over and angry passions are nursed. If you, brother, and I are at variance, it is almost certain to be because there is some darkness about us that hinders us from seeing one another clearly. Let in the light. Let us see one another clearly. Differences between us may still remain, our views on many things may still be as wide as the poles asunder, but we see that we are men of like passions and like appetites with one another. The light shows us we are

true brethren in spite of all.” When love be in a healthy and vigorous state, we are far from taking offence at the manifestations of the flesh in a brother: rather will such move us to pray more earnestly for his refining and growth. Nothing is a more practical proof of love than to make supplication for those who slight and injure us; nothing is better evidence that we are in the light.

Our verse adds a further commendation or mentions yet an-other advantage resulting from the exercise of brotherly love: “and there is none occasion of stumbling in him.” Not only does the expressing of this spiritual grace supply an evidence of regeneration, and is a means for maintaining our communion with God, but it also preserves from scandalous conduct. He who habitually shows himself disposed to goodness and mercy, and manifests a generous and self-denying affection unto his brethren, demonstrates that he is vitally influenced by the principles of the Gospel. True love will move us to dread everything which would hinder the spirituality of others, and therefore takes care to avoid what would be a stumblingblock to them. The Greek word for “occasion of stumbling” is *skandalos*, from which is derived our English word “scandal,” which primarily means a snare laid for an enemy. It is rendered “stumblingblock” in Romans 11:9; 1 Corinthians 1:23; Revelation 2:14; and nine times is translated “offence,” as in Matthew 16:23; Romans 9:33; Galatians 5:11. The general prevailing disposition of such a one’s heart will prevent Satan successfully tempting him to the commission of any gross sin, and his deportment will be such that his fellows will not be evilly influenced by him.

There can be little doubt that when John penned the second half of verse 10 there was before his mind the closing part of Psalm 119:165, “Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them,” for his words tally exactly with the Septuagint translation of that verse, except that the apostle changes the plural “them” to him. Spiritual love is a wonderful preservative from and preventive of injuries. Those who love God’s Law not only have “great peace” in their consciences and minds (for where the affections be set upon things above, the heart is content with whatever be its portion on earth), but “nothing shall offend,” or as the margin of Psalm 119:165, reads, “they shall have no stumblingblock”—nothing in God’s providential dealings will scandalize them. Those who love God’s Law are kept from the snares and temptations which the world is so full of, and which bring about the sin and ruin of so many. In the same way, genuine love unto the brethren induces a circumspect walk, delivering from those carnal and satanic pitfalls, because the light in which such affection dwells enables them to see and shun what would be an occasion of falling unto them.

Offences or scandals are of various kinds. Very often offence is taken where none is given. An outstanding example of this is Christ Himself. He is unto the believer “a cornerstone, elect and precious,” but to the unbelieving and disobedient “a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence” (1Pe 2:8). Such He was unto the Jews, for His humble appearance was a scandal to them: though He was exactly what their own Scriptures had foretold, yet He was not according to their ideas of what the Messiah should be and do. Christ crucified is still a stumblingblock to the Jews, and to the Greeks foolishness (1Co 1:23). So too His doctrine was far from being agreeable to them: “the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying” (Mat 15:12), and murmured when He declared “I am the bread which came down from heaven” (Joh 6:41). Some of His own disciples complained “This is a hard saying,” so that He asked them “Doth this offend you?” And many of them “went back, and walked no more with him.” Much of the doctrine of Scripture is still a stumblingblock to the proud and self-willed. The simplicity and spirituality of that worship which alone is acceptable with God is despised by those who crave pomp and pagentry. Yet such offence is causeless, arising solely from human depravity.

But there is also offence given where none is taken. Thus when Peter sought to dissuade Christ from His sufferings, He said “Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me” (Mat 16:23)—not that Christ was stumbled thereby, for His heart was immune to evil counsel and to the infection of evil example. From the language of Hebrews 11:24-26, it is clear that Moses was upbraided for turning his back upon such a “golden opportunity,” and was severely censured because when he came of age, he “refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt.” The godly are unmoved by the world’s scorn, for they have respect unto a recompense greater than anything it can offer them. So too David, instead of being scandalized by the impiety of those surrounding him, and following their wicked course, exclaimed, “They have made void thy law. Therefore I love thy commandments above gold; yea, above fine gold.” (Psa 119:126-127). They who dwell in the light can see honour in disgrace, and beauty in the very things of God most despised by their fellows.

There are two principal things which the Devil employs as scandals or stumblingblocks to the saints: the persecutions and the enticements of the world—the one working on their sensibilities, the other on their lusts. By frowns and terrors of the world Satan seeks to draw us to think hardly of God and dislike the path of holiness. Therefore is it said concerning him, “whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world” (1Pe 5:9). His temptations to the godly are often conveyed by afflictions from the unregenerate, seeking by means thereof to prevail with them to relinquish their Christian duties and grow weary of the ways of God. These tend the more to succeed if he can persuade them that they are the only sufferers. But there is no excuse for God’s people being deceived by such a lie, for there is much in the Scriptures which is designed to remove from us the fear of the world, and to comfort us in trials and tribulations for Christ’s sake, and such passages would be neither pertinent nor serviceable if there were no persecutions for the godly to endure.

The allurements of the world are more dangerous than its op-positions. Though at first the Lord's people may be discouraged and dismayed when meeting with unfriendliness from the enemies of Christ, yet "God giveth more grace," and patience and fortitude from Him enable them to hold on their way. But the seductive snares of the world and its flesh-attractive baits do not drive the saints to their knees and cast them upon God as do its cruel slights and threatenings. Present and visible things have a far greater attraction than future and invisible ones unto all except the spiritual. Paul had to lament, "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2Ti 4:10), and in all generations the servants of God have had to taste the same bitter experience. It is by the baits of sense that the majority of our fellows are prejudiced against the strictness of the Gospel's requirements, and a base opinion of the same is nourished in their hearts by the knowledge that such clashes with their own lusts. Esau preferred the gratification of his fleshly affections to the blessing of the Lord. How the exercise of brotherly love preserves from such snares will be more definitely pointed out in our next.

Chapter 20

Hatred and Darkness

1 John 2:11

*"But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh
in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth,
because that darkness hath blinded his eyes."*

In 2:9-11, the apostle continues to draw the line of demarcation and to differentiate sharply between the genuine and the spurious, for his obvious design in those verses was to make further manifest the radical contrast there is between a merely formal professor and a real and practical possessor of Christ. Equally so it must have been his intention to strike conviction into the former. Open rebuke is better than secret love, and for one who made the claim—and most probably sincerely so—to be informed on apostolic authority that "He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now" ought most solemnly to affect him. To really believe and then to positively affirm that he was in the light of truth and grace, and to be walking in the same, and at the same time to make clear proof that he was wholly and altogether a stranger unto what he declared, was a most fearful and fatal delusion. That ninth verse contains the pith of the passage, the tenth presenting the opposite character, and the eleventh amplifying the original statement.

It is the testing of profession which is in view, the distinguishing of the true and living Christian from the nominal and lifeless one, the former being identified by that which makes clear the reality of what lies behind all surface appearances. When the truth is applied in power to the heart by the Holy Spirit, it produces its own effects and bears fruit after its own kind. For one to hate a member of the body of Christ, to regard him with contempt, to have as little to do with him as possible, to speak ill of him, to desire his injury, is to demonstrate that he has no love to him, and that he is yet in a state of nature. Conversely, "He that loveth his brother abideth in the light," his profession and practice accord, his claim is made good, his heart is made evident by his life, his relation to Christ is seen from his affection for His disciples. A saving knowledge of Christ is known by His Word dwelling in the heart, directing its actions, drawing out its affections both unto Him and unto those who are His. Love for the brethren is a proof of his being in the light, for the light is the cause of his love, as love is the effect and fruit of the light.

"And there is none occasion of stumbling in him." Personally, we much prefer the rendering of the annotator of Calvin, "To him there is no stumblingblock," for while the "him" probably refers primarily to the lover, yet the beloved is not to be excluded. The Greek preposition "en" clearly has the force of "to" in the last clause of Colossians 1:23—"preached to every creature;" and is so rendered again in 1 Thessalonians 4:7, "unto holiness." "No occasion of stumbling to him" widens the scope of the statement. "Stumblingblock" is, of course, used here in a moral sense. Literally the word means impediment, something against which one strikes one's feet; but when employed figuratively it imports nothing which will occasion a fall into sin, as in "But if thy right eye offend thee" (Mat 5:29, margin "do cause thee to offend"), and "that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way" (Rom 14:13). Thus, first, there is nothing in him-self which will cause him to act uncharitably; and, second, nothing in his brother from which he will take offence.

The link between the two halves of our verse is a moral and practical one: "He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and [consequently] there is none occasion of stumbling in him." To walk in the light and to exercise love unto the brethren are among the chief means of preserving the believer from those stumblingblocks which cause so many godless

professors to forsake the way of holiness; for by the one he is enabled to perceive the snares of Satan, and by the other he is moved to avoid and shun them. The extent to which the Christian is practically in the light will determine the measure in which his old nature is held in check and the new one dominates his soul and regulates his conduct. The one who abides in the light will not act injuriously toward his brethren, and while love be cultivated he will not be readily stumbled at anything in or from them; for, as previously pointed out, “Charity [love] suffereth long, and is kind...doth not behave itself unseemly...and is not easily provoked...beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things” (1Co 13:4-5, 7).

It is to be carefully noted that it is not light alone which keeps us from stumbling. The knowledge of God’s Word is indeed of great value and importance, for it provides us with a sure rule to walk by, and also makes known those great and precious promises of God which we are to appropriate and build upon. Nevertheless, as 2 Peter 2:20 shows, something more is needed, for it is possible to escape the pollutions of the world through a bare knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and then be again entangled therein, as the cases of Demas and thousands since then have sadly demonstrated. Love must be joined with the light if we are to escape those snares which occasion the fall of so many: it is because “they received not the love of the truth” (2Th 2:10) that so many are fatally deceived by Satan. As one of the old writers expressed it, “A man is better held by the heart than by the head.” That is true Godward as well as manward, for as love is the living principle from which all acceptable obedience proceeds, so also that which receives uncomplainingly God’s most trying dealings.

Tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and sword are unable to separate the saints from the love of Christ (Rom 8:35), where “love” is not only to be taken passively, for that love wherewith they are loved, but actively, for the love with which they love Him; for afflictions assail our love to Him and His to us. Where love is healthy and vigorous, trials cause us to cleave more closely to the Lord—“though he slay me, yet will I trust in him” (Job 13:15). Love will take nothing ill at His hand, causing us to submit meekly to His rod. So it is in connection with our brethren. The more we love them, the less likely are we to be offended with their infirmities. Love envies not their prosperity, and preserves from many sins, for it “worketh no ill” (Rom 13:10). Love not only prevents my treating a brother wrongly, but it delivers me from dwelling upon what is wrong in him, for “love covereth all sins” (Pro 10:12). As we shall see later (D.V.), John returns to this subject again and again, explaining and enforcing the Divine commandment which requires brotherly love.

Since “He that loveth his brother abideth in the light,” it inevitably follows that “he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness” (verse 11). There is the incontestable evidence against him, for hatred is the mark and badge of darkness. He is not a regenerate person at all: he knows nothing of practical Christianity. Let him no longer deceive himself. “The fruit of the Spirit is love” (Gal 5:22), and where the one be absent so is the other. To be destitute of the Spirit is to be dead in sin; and where that be the case such a one will conduct himself accordingly, for the walk manifests the heart. No matter what specious excellency he may appear to possess, or how loud his claim, if he hates a saint he is not a child of God, but a stranger to Him. If he loved Christ, he would love His disciples too. To really hate a brother in Christ is altogether against nature, for if I be born of God there must be something in each of His people that I shall find to love; if therefore I hate such, that is entirely inconsistent with a holy profession, and is a sure proof that I am not in a state of grace.

Hatred issues from enmity, and is in all men by nature, being one of the fearful effects of the fall. “For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another” (Ti 3:3). Note well the apostle’s use of the past tense, for he would by no means allow that such a horrible state of affairs could consist with those in whom a miracle of grace had been wrought. No, he was describing what the elect were while yet in a state of nature. That root of bitterness was in all, though it was not drawn out and made equally evident in all. It is at once drawn out when the unregenerate contact the regenerate, by the very contrariety of their natures, the latter being odious to the former, for the holiness that is in them irritates and condemns their sinfulness. Since “every one that doeth evil hateth the light” (Joh 3:20), it necessarily follows that they hate the children of light. Conversely, “he that doeth truth cometh to the light”—welcomes and loves it.

This hatred is a settled, deeply rooted and thorough ill-will unto another. It consists of envy, which cannot bear for another to exceed him, or be more highly esteemed for gifts and graces than himself. The one who hates will seek by all means to establish his own reputation and ruin that of his brother. He goes to one and another who will grant him a hearing, reporting and giving an account of every infirmity which the one who hates is the subject of. Such a malignant spirit at once identifies him as a child of the devil, fulfilling his evil desires (Joh 8:44). That hatred manifests itself by rejoicing when adversity overtakes a child of God, for instead of sympathizing with him it callously exclaims, “Serves him right.” It breaks forth in more evil speakings and actions. Alas, there are many such in the churches and assemblies: those with a considerable head knowledge of Scripture, orthodox in their beliefs, regular attenders at services, able to make long and beautiful prayers, but possessed of a spirit of malice. Theirs is merely a natural religion, for their hearts are unaffected by the truth, uninfluenced by the principles of the Gospel, and therefore their profession is a vain pretence. No amount of theological lore is of any value if it slays not enmity both against God and against His people.

It is to be duly observed that John knows no middle ground between love and hatred: as his Master declared, “He that is not with me is against me” (Mat 12:30). As there is no third alternative between right and wrong, so there is no third quality between love and hatred. We therefore emphatically reject that miserable shift of human invention that hatred means to “love less,” though some men whose writings we highly respect adopted it. Through a misapprehension of our Lord’s words

in Luke 14:26, they suppose that there was at least one passage which obliged them so to define the term. But whatever difficulty that verse might present, the force of the term in many others is unmistakable. Fancy rendering “the fear of the Lord is to love evil less,” or “they loved me less without a cause” (Joh 15:25)! There is not the slightest need to resort unto such sophistry in explaining, “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Luk 14:26).

It is indeed true that the Gospel does not set aside natural affections, rather does it elevate and direct them. It is also a fact that Christ demands the first place in our hearts and must be loved supremely. Yet there is nothing whatever in Luke 14:26 to indicate that our Lord was there drawing a comparison between a superior and an inferior love. Nor was there anything in His words that contradicted the fifth commandment. Rather was Christ there insisting that He would brook no rival, that His claims were paramount, and therefore when those of subordinates clashed with His they must yield and be denied. Under certain circumstances, so far from “loving less” those who are nearest and dearest to us in the flesh, we must act as though we did not love them at all. If loyalty unto the Saviour requires it, we should cross their wills and antagonize their wishes. Thus, if godless parents should forbid their converted child to read his Bible or engage in prayer, his duty would be to disobey them. In thus acting, it might grieve him deeply to displease those who were kind to him in every other way, yet his actions would be hateful ones.

It is not long before each Christian learns by painful experience that the calls of nature are unfavourable to the pursuits of grace, that the longing to please those who are near and dear to us by blood often leads us to the confines of sin, if not to the actual commission of it. Therefore to hate whatever opposes the rights of God or our own spiritual interests is among the clearest evidences of regeneration. A striking example of this is found in Exodus 32, where the Levites’ love and zeal for Jehovah triumphed over the ties of nature. When Moses perceived that Aaron had made the worshippers of the golden calf naked to their shame, he bade those who were on the Lord’s side to come to him, and when the Levites did so he commanded them in the name of his Master: “Put every man his sword by his side...and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion” and they did so (verses 25-28). Later the Holy Spirit declared of Levi: “Who said unto his father [i.e. by his actions] and to his mother, I have not seen him; neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor know [love] his own children” (Deu 33:9), thereby signifying God’s approbation of their fidelity to His honour.

Surely the last clause in our Lord’s declaration serves to explain the whole: “yea, and his own life also.” Life is precious, and the instinct of self-preservation is the endowment of every creature. Yet if the issue be drawn between prolonging my life at the cost of repudiating the Gospel and being burned at the stake, then loyalty to Christ makes my duty quite clear. Self-loathing is ever a mark of a real Christian character. And why does he loathe himself but because the flesh in him rises up against the Spirit? If then I am to hate or spurn the desires of my body when they are hostile to the welfare of my soul, then I must also hate the opposers of the divine life, whoever or whatever they may be; yet without cherishing the least animosity against them. As in the case of Levi, regard to God’s glory must prevent our regard to any and every creature. Thus this hatred is not absolute but relative, not in my heart, but in my actions. In a word, the Christian is required to antagonize every tie of nature when it be found to run counter to the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the most grievous trials which a believer has to endure is when one whom he had good reason to regard as a fellow saint turns against him and treats him maliciously. He expects the profane world to oppose and persecute him, but when those in the professing world do so it is much harder to bear. It is indeed a bitter cup which the child of God is called upon to drink when one wearing the name of Christ acts spitefully unto him; yet it is no unprecedented experience, and with the Word of God in his hands should come as no surprise. David made sad complaint at Ahithophel’s conduct toward him: “Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me” (Psa 41:9). In the context he had drawn up a list of his woes, recounting the unkindnesses of his enemies, but he reserved for the climax the abominable behaviour of that one whose only return for kindness was ingratitude, and who basely perverted his offices of hospitality.

A still more touching reference is made thereto in Psalm 55:12-14: “For *it was* not an enemy *that* reproached me; then I could have borne *it*: neither *was it* he that [openly] hated me *that* did magnify *himself* against me; then I would have hid myself from him: but *it was* thou, a man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance. We took sweet counsel together, walked into the house of God in company.”

For apparent friends to become the open enemies of those who truly fear God is a great grief. For those who pretend to love us to insinuate themselves into our confidence and affections on purpose to injure us is to touch us in our tenderest spot. Yet thus was our blessed Lord treated by one who had been privileged to enjoy the closest intimacy with Him. The perfidy²⁷ of Judas pierced Christ more deeply than did the unconcealed enmity of the priests and elders: His “yea” in Psalm 41:9—which He quoted as a prediction concerning Himself (Joh 13:18)—shows that He regarded the treachery of the son of perdition as the acme of His woes at the hands of men, as something almost inconceivable. The faithlessness of that favoured apostle cut Him to the very quick.

Job lamented, “All my inward friends abhorred me: and they whom I loved are turned against me” (19:19). Those who should have concerned themselves about him, visited him in his sore afflictions, and performed whatever kindly offices lay

²⁷ **perfidy** – deliberate betrayal of trust.

in their power, evidenced no more solicitude than though he were a complete stranger unto them. Nay, they not only neglected, but abhorred him and turned against him, adding to his distress by maligning him. Human nature is fearfully fickle. “All the men of thy confederacy have brought thee even to the border: the men that were at peace with thee have deceived thee...they that eat thy bread have laid a wound under thee” (Oba 7)—the Chaldeans, who were joined to the Edomites, became their enemies; so that it is no new thing for former allies to become bitter antagonists. Among the hardships endured by the apostle Paul was “in perils among false brethren” (2Co 11:26)—an experience more or less shared by most of God’s servants. Religious hatred is the most cruel and venomous of all, as Acts 7:52 and Rev. 17:6, show. With such examples recorded in Scripture let every Christian be forewarned, and put not his trust in any creature. Expect no mercy from traitors, for they will stick at nothing unless God restrains them.

“But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes.”

He who so far from loving his brother cherishes a bitter and malignant spirit against him, who instead of seeking to promote his welfare desires to injure and ruin him, proves that darkness is his element, for it rules all his actions. He walks according to the course of this world, and, though distress and misery are in his ways, so thoroughly is he deluded by Satan and blinded by sin and pride that he knows not whither he is going, being quite unaware of the fatal path he is treading. Not only is he in the darkness, but the darkness is in him: it has blinded his eyes, sin has complete dominion over him, dominating all the faculties of his soul. Enmity in the heart blinds the judgment, causing its subject to be ignorant of himself, to know not the way of peace, and also to be utterly unable to perceive that he is making direct for “the blackness of darkness for ever” (Jude 1:13).

In concluding this chapter, let it be pointed out that the history of the Jewish people supplies a graphic commentary upon our present verse. Solemnly indeed has each clause of it been exemplified in the case of that unhappy nation. Not only had they no love for Christ, who was made of the seed of David according to the flesh, but they murderously hated Him—proof that they were in spiritual darkness. And in what awful moral darkness have they walked since with respect to the Gospel, and the darkness of God’s afflictive providences! He has judicially blinded them. “Evil shall slay the wicked: and they that hate the righteous shall be desolate” (Psa 34:21) has literally been their case for the past two thousand years.

Chapter 21

Forgiven Children

1 John 2:12

“I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name’s sake.”

The title of this chapter raises the question, Are there any unforgiven children? To which we reply, certainly there are—the whole company of God’s elect remaining so while in their natural condition. “But surely such could hardly be denominated ‘children’—children of God.” Wrong, they are children of God when they enter this world, though they possess not then the divine nature, and therefore are as yet unmanifested as such, and unknown either to themselves or to others until they be born again. They are God’s children by eternal predestination (Eph 1:5). It was as such that Christ died for them (Joh 11:52). It is because they are such that, in due time, the Holy Spirit is sent into their hearts (Gal 4:6). But their sins are not forgiven them before they savingly believe in Christ, and that is not until the Holy Spirit is given them and they are quickened into newness of life, for it is impossible that anyone who is dead in trespasses and sins should really feel his dire need of a Saviour and come to Him for pardon. Thus our text speaks of the regenerated children of God whose sins are forgiven.

What a truly amazing thing it is that there should be such a thing as divine forgiveness of sins—transgressions of God’s Law, affronts to His holiness, rebellions against His exalted majesty. What a marvel that God does not deal with all mankind as He did with the angels when they fell—“delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment” (2Pe 2:4)! Next to the gift of Christ Himself and the grace we receive from His fullness (Joh 1:16), forgiveness of sin is the greatest blessing God bestows, and therefore does it head the list of benefits for which the Psalmist blessed the Lord with all his soul (103:2-3). Forgiveness may be defined as that judicial act of God whereby the penitent believer is released from the guilt of his transgressions against the Law, without receiving any satisfaction at his hands or inflicting any punishment upon him.

It is the remitting of the penalty, which he had incurred. It is a revoking of the sentence of justice, an acquittal of his person before the bar of God. It is described in Scripture by a variety of expressions, which serve to open unto us the nature of the thing itself. Several of them are brought together in Psalm 32:1-2.

Before proceeding any further to develop the principal subject of our verse, let us outline its contents. “I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name’s sake.” Five things call for consideration.

- The connection between that statement and what precedes as well as follows.
- The significance of “I write unto.”
- The appellation which is here given to those addressed—“little children.”
- The reason why the apostle sent this epistle unto them—“because your sins are forgiven.”
- The ground of this blessing—“for His name’s sake.”

First, *the relation between 2:12-14, and its context*. Hitherto we have had before us the fellowship of the Father with His children: the nature of that fellowship, the means²⁸ appointed for its maintenance, and the obligations and privileges which the same entails. Now we are introduced, as it were, to the different members of God’s family, notice being taken of their several ages or stages of growth, with their corresponding spiritual attainments. But before John begins to divide the family into its component parts he addresses himself to the whole thereof, comprehending them all under the endearing expression of “little children,” announcing their sins to be forgiven. That was in strict accord with his central design in this epistle: “These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life,” (v. 13), for a saving faith in Christ which issues in forgiveness is a sure sign that the one exercising the same is already in possession of eternal life.

“These verses (12-14) form a break or interruption in the apostle’s line of argument. There is, as it were, a pause. John calls upon those to whom he writes to consider, not only what he is writing to them, but what they themselves were to whom he is writing; what is their character and standing; what he is entitled to assume in and about them as likely to ensure a fair reception of his message. That was the common apostolic method. It is a courteous and complaisant way of insinuating advice; taking for granted the attainments to be enforced. But it is far more than that, and it is so emphatically here. It is a trumpet call summoning all the faithful to a recognition of their real and true position before God; and that with a view to their receiving aright what His servant is now writing to them” (R. Candlish).

In other words, verses 12-14 pave the way for what follows.

While stressing the necessity of a godly walk and a fruitful life, the foundation on which they rest must ever be insisted upon. “Holiness of life ought indeed to be urged, the fear of God to be carefully enjoined; men ought to be sharply goaded to repentance, newness of life, together with its fruits. But still we ought ever to take heed lest the doctrine of faith be smothered—that doctrine which teaches that Christ is the only Author of salvation and all its blessings. On the contrary, such moderation ought to be presented that faith may ever retain its primacy. This is the rule that is presented to us by John: having faithfully spoken of good works, lest he should seem to give them more importance than he ought to have done, he carefully calls us back to contemplate the grace of Christ” (Calvin).²⁹ In other words, duly to observe the order and balance of truth. Doubtless there is, too, a designed link with verse 10: real faith, saving faith, “worketh by love” (Gal 5:6), and where it exists and is exercised, we may be assured that this results from God’s having pardoned our sins.

“*I write unto you.*” Three things were intimated by that language. First, a holy privilege. It was the conferring of a great favour upon them. If the reader were to receive a letter from the official secretary of the king of England, he would feel himself highly honoured: how much more so to be addressed by one of the ambassadors of the King of kings! Second, a call to duty. As 2:1, shows, “I write unto you” is a hortatory expression. I John am telling you what to do, and what not to do: sin not (verse 1), keep God’s commandments (verses 3-5), follow the example Christ has left us (verse 6), love the brethren (verses 7-11), love not the world (verse 15). Give heed then to my injunctions for they are invested with divine authority. Third, a permanent record: writing conveys the idea of fixedness. The message delivered by the apostle was no mere transient one, allowing a subsequent revision, either of subtraction or addition. It was the imperial and imperishable Word of God for all generations, and a solemn curse is pronounced upon anyone who adds to or takes from the same (Rev 22:18-19). Thereby God’s children are graciously provided for against all the attacks of Satan and his agents, who are ever to be met with “It is written”!

“*Little children.*” The word used here is quite another from the one found in the next verse, and from “newborn babes” in 1 Peter 2:2. In the Greek there are two different words which are both translated “little children” in our English version without distinguishing between them. The one in our text is *teknion*, which occurs seven times in this epistle, and in each

²⁸ **means** – the instruments through which God works to communicate to the hearts of men.

²⁹ **John Calvin** (1509-1564): the father of Reformed and Presbyterian theology. During the course of his ministry in Geneva, lasting nearly twenty-five years, Calvin lectured to theological students and preached an average of five sermons a week in addition to writing a commentary on nearly every book of the Bible as well as numerous treatises on theological topics. His correspondence fills eleven volumes. Born in Noyon, Picardie, France.

instance is applied to the whole company addressed: 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21. The one in verse 13 is *paidion*, which occurs again only in 2:18, and is restricted to spiritual infants. The former is a term of affection, and is given to the entire believing family; whereas the latter is a discriminating word, which signifies those who are very young, and in verse 13 is limited unto a particular class in God's family—the spiritual babes, in contradistinction from the “young men” and the “fathers.” *Teknion*, then, is used of believers of all ages and degrees of growth. This is clear from its first occurrence, for in both halves of 2:1, the whole household of faith is obviously in view: “*My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any one sin, we have an advocate with the Father.*”

The blessing which is predicated in our text of those written unto is not one that is peculiar to any special grade of Christians—as are the attainments of the several classes referred to separately in verse 13, but is true of all alike, for the forgiveness of sins pertains to every one of them. There is a community of life, and pardon is the portion of all saints. By the new life received at regeneration, they are related to God as Father and to each other as brethren; by forgiveness a title is conveyed which makes them heirs of heaven. In verse 12 the apostle postulates that which pertains to every believing child of God; but in verse 13 he describes that which characterizes their respective grades according to their measures of growth. In styling all “little children,” John expressed both his authority and his affection: it stamped his address with weight and dignity, and at the same time revealed the warmth of his heart unto them. From the remainder of the sentence he would have them know that it was out of love to Christ and to them that he penned this letter: not to distress, but to promote their spiritual happiness and mutual affection one to another.

“I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you.”

“As this epistle is what we style a catholic epistle, so the address is suited to this, and a universal blessing which belongs unto and is actually bestowed on all the members of the true Church of Christ is expressed. This is the reason he assigns for writing to them, and why he so lovingly addressed them. He had before declared that the blood of Christ, the Son of God, cleanseth them now, in the present tense, from all sin. He then proceeded to declare if any of them should sin, they had in Christ an all-prevailing Advocate. He was with the Father. He was their righteousness and their atonement. Then he showed what the true and spiritual knowledge of this, and communion with Christ in the blessings and benefits of the same, would consequently and evidentially produce. And now he addressed them because they were the pardoned ones of God. Thus here is consolation, abounding consolation, increasing consolation for them. They were brought to the knowledge of the Father and the Son; they were admitted into fellowship with Them; they were in Christ, pure and righteous. He was their High Priest before the Majesty in the heavens. Their sins were completely taken away, and they were in their individual persons pardoned” (S.E. Pierce).

“For thou, LORD, art good, and ready to forgive, and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee” (Psa 86:5). What a word is that in Nehemiah 9:17, “Thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness”! It was on the basis of that blessed fact that Daniel prayed, “To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses, though we have rebelled against him” (Dan 9:9). In Psalm 32:1, forgiveness of sins is likened, first, to a removal of them: “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven” is literally “whose transgression is lifted up”—taken off him because laid on Christ. Second, to a covering of them—by the blood of Christ. Sin is nauseous and abhorrent to the eye of the Holy One. Third, to a non-imputation of them: they are not reckoned to his account, because charged to his Surety. In Isaiah 43:25, to a blotting out of sins; in Luke 7:41-42, and Matthew 6:12, to the cancellation of debts; in Hebrews 8:12, to God's no more remembering them—thinking no further about them, His justice having been satisfied; and in Isaiah 1:18, to a washing of them “as white as snow.”

It is therefore very clear that one grand design of a Gospel ministry is the assuring and comforting of the saints, for unbelief is ever at work within them, and Satan constantly engaged in efforts to destroy or at least disturb their peace. No small part of the work assigned to the Lord's servants is so to set the person and work of the Saviour before His redeemed that, by occupying their hearts with the same, they will be lifted out of themselves and delivered from their fears. The forgiveness of sins of those who believe is one of the first blessings announced by the Gospel: in fact there is no true proclamation of God's good news where that is not plainly set forth. When the Lord Jesus gave the great commission to His apostles, He declared, “that repentance and remission [forgiveness] of sins should be preached in his name among all nations” (Luk 24:47), and accordingly we find that when Peter was sent to Cornelius and his friends he asserted of Christ, “To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins” (Act 10:43). Paul, too, bore witness at Antioch, “Through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things” (Act 13:38-39).

The object of divine pardon is a penitent believer, and the fruit thereof is a longing and determination to please the Bestower of it. “And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven...Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace” (Luk 7:48, 50). Faith is as necessary in an instrumental way as Christ's satisfaction in a meritorious way: “that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me” (Act 26:18). Christ purchased remission of sins, faith puts us in possession of it. It is fitting that those who are indebted to Christ for this benefit should give up themselves to Him, both in a way of dependence and of submission, putting their case into His hands as the Advocate with the Father, and devoting themselves in subjection to Him, for He is “the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him” (Heb 5:9). Evangelical repentance issues from the renewed heart's sorrow and horror of sin—which cost the Saviour so dearly.

Saving faith is that which clings to Christ as our only refuge and hope. Gratitude flows forth in affection to Him: “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven [in their own apprehension], the same loveth little” (Luk 7:47).

This divine pardon of sins is free, no charge being exacted of its subject: “the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” (Eph 1:7). Our redemption and recovery cost us nothing, and since it be by grace, then without our deserving. “Ye have sold yourselves for nought; and ye shall be redeemed without money” (Isa 52:3). It is bestowed without respect to anything in us or from us: “and when they had nothing [wherewith] to pay, he frankly forgave them both” (Luk 7:42). Thus it is wholly gratuitous.³⁰ “I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions, for mine own sake” (Isa 43:25)—whatever God does in our salvation it is to glorify His mercy, and out of compassion for our misery. “For thy name’s sake, O LORD, pardon mine iniquity; for it is great” (Psa 25:11): the penitent believer has no other plea but the honour of God’s name engaged by gracious covenant. Well may we exclaim, “Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage?” (Mic 7:18).

Divine forgiveness is full: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isa 55:7). And since He does so “according to the riches of his grace,” we may be sure it is neither niggard³¹ nor grudging. Possibly the reader has acknowledged a fault unto a fellow Christian, and he has said, “I forgive you,” but in such a tone of voice and expression of countenance that you felt you had been just as well without such a pardon. But when God forgives, there is—as Luke 15:20 reveals—just as much joy in His heart as there is in the recipient’s. God does things not by halves, but perfectly: “Who forgiveth all thine iniquities” (Psa 103:3), canceling the whole, so that not one is left on record in His book. A partial forgiveness would not shed sufficient glory on the blood of the Lamb. As John Gill³² said of His atoning sacrifice, “It reaches to all sins: original and actual, secret and open, past, present, and to come.”

Divine forgiveness is final. When God pardons it is not merely for a season, but forever. His sentence is irrevocable, releasing the believer from the whole guilt of his transgressions, so that the triumphant challenge goes forth, “Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth?” (Rom 8:33-34). His sentence is never repealed; the saint is fully discharged from all punishment, for the Law can demand no penalty from him. “Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic 7:19), and the ocean, my reader, never casts up anything which has sunk into its depths. When God pardons sin it is never charged again to the culprit: “their sins and iniquities will I remember no more” (Heb 10:17). Divine forgiveness is permanent and continuous because of the everlasting value and validity of Christ’s atonement. It is the standing office of Christ to act as the great High Priest of His people, and His blood has not only cleansed, but “cleanseth from all sin.”

The great assize is indeed at the last day, but God is exercising His judicial office even now. “Verily he is a God that judgeth in the earth” (Psa 58:11) weighing every action, passing verdict on each person, forgiving or not forgiving. The final judgment is but a public proclamation and execution of the same. As Manton³³ so aptly pointed out, there is a threefold distinction between God’s forgiving us now and then. First, during this life the sentence of the Law may be revoked, but then it is definitive and preemptory. One who is now condemned by the Law may be absolved. Every son of Adam is “condemned already” (Joh 3:18), and he binds that condemnation upon himself if he dies in his unbelief and impenitence, in contempt of the gracious offer of the Gospel. That his state is now capable of alteration is clear from John 5:24, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is [judicially] passed from death unto life.” But at the last great day the sentence is inexorable and irrevocable, and as the tree fell so will it for ever lie.

Second, the divine sentence is now given in private; then it shall be proclaimed publicly. At conversion the verdict is passed in the awakened conscience according to the Word of God, the Holy Spirit sealing upon the renewed and believing heart some sure promise of God. But when the dread tribunal is set up the sentence will be pronounced by the Judge’s own mouth before an assembled universe, saying either “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Mat 5:34) or “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mat 5:41). As the believer now has the Spirit’s witness within him, then it will be ratified in open court, the Judge of all the earth publicly exonerating him. Third, then there will be an actual execution of the sentence. Now we have our everlasting portion either by promise or threat; but then both the promise and the threat will be fully made good.

³⁰ **gratuitous** – free; without cost or condition.

³¹ **niggard** – stingy or ungenerous.

³² **John Gill** (1697-1771) – Baptist minister, theologian, and biblical scholar. Author of *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* and his nine-volume *Expositions of the Old and New Testaments*. Born in Kettering, Northamptonshire, England.

³³ **Thomas Manton** (1620-1677) – nonconformist Puritan preacher. Graduated from Oxford and preached until forbidden by the Act of Uniformity of 1662. Preached in his own house, was imprisoned, then preached in London. James Ussher called him “one of the best preachers in England.” Appointed as one of three clerks at the Westminster Assembly. Born in Lawrence-Lydiat, county of Somerset, England.

Chapter 22

The Family Graded

1 John 2:13-14

“I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father. I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one.”

All of God’s regenerated people are not of the same spiritual stature. Though all of them are quickened into newness of life, made partakers of the divine nature, and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, yet they vary from one another in several respects. Talents are not bestowed upon them uniformly, there are distinct stages in their growth in grace, and their actual attainments differ considerably. In the passage at which we have now arrived, the apostle divides believers into three classes: fathers, young men, and babes. But before he describes their respective characteristics he first addresses himself to the entire family under the endearing appellation of “little children,” and predicates a basic blessing which pertains unto them all alike: “your sins are forgiven you for his name’s sake.” In our last, we dwelt upon the subject of forgiveness, but had to conclude before reaching the final clause of verse 12, which announces the ground on which God pardons the penitent believer. We shall therefore turn to it now, and consider first the force of “his”; second, explain the “for his name’s sake”; and third, show how He is conjoined with the Father Himself.

Whom are we to understand by “for his name’s sake”—God or Christ? For the praise of the glory of the grace of the former, or because of the redemption that is found in the latter? A careful reading of the whole context supplies a clear answer. In verse 1 it is Christ who is the Advocate with the Father. In verse 2 He is mentioned as our Propitiation. In verse 6 He is presented as our Exemplar. In verses 4, 7, and 8 He is viewed as our Legislator. The new commandment of verses 7 and 8 is definitely from Christ, and so too believers receive the forgiveness of sins for His sake. “Nevertheless he saved them for his name’s sake” (Psa 106:8). “O LORD, though our iniquities testify against us, do thou it for thy name’s sake” (Jer 14:7): it is never for the sake of any good thing found in us or done by us. “His name” is here to be taken for His person, for that was what gave infinite value to His work. Our sins are forgiven because they were atoned for by Christ, pardon being purchased and procured by the shedding of His blood (Heb 1:3). Our sins were imputed to Christ, laid upon Him. He bore them in His own body on the tree: there He was paid their wages: the debt was discharged, and therefore they are eternally banished from the eyes of the Law.

But though the believer’s sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, yet not to the exclusion of the Father. No indeed, for though Christ be mentioned in many such passages without the Father, it is never but as conjoined with Him. Our salvation is a covenant one in which the eternal Three are equally engaged and concerned. Pardon comes from God the Father, but it flows down to us through Christ the blessed Mediator,³⁴ being the effect and fruit of His mediation. When it is said that “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins,” the reference is unto the Father, who is faithful to His covenant engagements and just to the claims of Christ’s sacrifice. So too our glorified Saviour is an Advocate with the Father. And thus here: while the forgiveness of our sins is due immediately to the offering of Christ, being sure proof of the everlasting efficacy thereof, it is equally an evidence of God’s grace and the exercise of His righteousness. “Then he is gracious unto him, and saith, Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom” (Job 33:24); “God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Eph 4:32). Every spiritual blessing we receive comes to us from the Father’s bounty, but through

³⁴ **Mediator** – a go-between; “It pleased God in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus his only begotten Son, according to the Covenant made between them both, to be the Mediator between God and Man; the Prophet, Priest and King; Head and Savior of His Church, the heir of all things, and judge of the world: Unto whom He did from all eternity give a people to be His seed, and to be by Him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified. (*Second London Baptist Confession*, 8.1)

the channel of Christ's glorious and prevalent mediation. The salvation of the triune God shines forth in the person of Christ.

Divine forgiveness can be known only by faith resting on the bare word of God. Reason cannot reach unto it, and often the dictates of conscience are dead against it. Yet a knowledge thereof does not always come to the saint the hour he believes in Christ, though the fact itself does.

*“The moment a sinner believes,
And trusts in his crucified God,
His pardon at once he receives,
Redemption in full through Christ's blood.”*

Yet it is the bounden duty of every Christian to labour after a clear realization of the same: “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith [i.e. with a firm trust in Christ and entire dependence upon Him], having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience” (Heb 10:22). Here are some of the marks of a forgiven soul:

- A spirit without guile (Psa 32:2), honest with self and in our dealings with God: hence, “Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity” (Eph 6:24).
- Mourning for sin and displeasing of God, “there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared” (Psa 130:4).
- Deliverance from the dominion of sin (Mic 7:8).
- The forgiveness of others (Mat 6:14).

We turn now to verses 13 and 14. In this world nothing is brought to maturity immediately: instead, everything develops by orderly progress and gradual growth—“first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear” (Mar 4:28). The child of God is no exception, for at regeneration he is not fully developed spiritually, as the first Adam was naturally; but, in conformity to his Head, he is born like the last Adam—a babe, who “increased in wisdom and stature” (Luk 2:52) until He attained to manhood. All the parts and faculties of the new man indeed come into being at the new birth, but time is needed for their increase and manifestation. The apostle here makes mention of little children, young men, and fathers, and in so doing he grades them not according to their natural ages, nor by the length of time they had been believers, but according to the progress they had made in the Christian life. John himself was well qualified to deal therewith, for in his own case he knew what it once was to be a babe in Christ. Later, he had also known what it was, under the grace and teaching of the Spirit, to advance to the stage of being a young man in Christ. Ultimately, through the good hand of God, he had arrived at being a “father.”

While it be true that the apostle does not here grade the children of God by their natural ages, but rather according to their spiritual attainments, nevertheless he describes the latter in terms which are characteristic of the former, for the different excellences ascribed to each group accord with those which are found in nature. Affection marks the regenerate infant, as it does the physical one; vigorous exploits distinguish the young men, and wisdom the fathers. Little children love to be carried in their parents' bosoms, to be dandled on their knees, to be taken by the arms as they are taught to walk; and here the spiritual babes are said to know the Father. We are told that “the glory of young men is their strength” (Pro 20:29), and the same thing is predicated of the second class in 1 John 2:14; while “with the ancient is wisdom; and in length of days understanding” (Job 12:12)—exemplified in the case of the “fathers.” Thus the several qualities assigned to the three groups harmonize with the natural properties, which pertain to those of corresponding ages.

There are real and marked differences among the people of God: not all of them are of one uniform stature, strength, or growth in godliness. Some are sheep, others are lambs, and are to be dealt with accordingly (Joh 21:15-16). Some are strong; others are weak (Rom 15:1). Some are “babes,” others of “full age” (Heb 5:13-14). All are fertile, yet not all in the same measure: “and brought forth, some thirty, some sixty, and some an hundred” (Mar 4:8); similarly we read in John 15 of “fruit” (verse 2), “more fruit” (verse 2), and “much fruit” (verse 5). Yet though there be different degrees of grace, knowledge and attainments among the sons and daughters of the Lord, they are all alike dear unto Him. Then let us not despise the least degree of grace in others. There was a time when the father in Christ was but a babe, and the time may come when the babe shall grow into a father. If by grace we have been enabled to go “from strength to strength” (Psa 84:7) and “from glory to glory” (2Co 3:18) let us bless God, for we have nothing to boast of. “Who maketh thee to differ from another [not only from the unregenerate, but also from thy feebler and more ignorant fellow Christians]? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?” (1Co 4:7).

Though the distinctions made by the apostle in our text respect not their natural ages, but rather their different measures of grace, still it is to be observed that God has always had His people of all sorts and sizes. Of “little children” we may cite Samuel, who was called at a very early age (1Sa 2:18); Timothy, whom Paul reminded “from a child thou hast known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2Ti 3:15). Little children also raised their hosannahs to the Son of David (Mat 21:15-16), and He did not despise them, but defended them. Among young men, we think of Joseph, David (1Sa 17:33, 37), and Josiah, who “while he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his father” (2Ch 34:3). Among the “fathers” we read of “Mnason of Cyprus, an old disciple” (Act 21:16), and of “Paul the aged” (Phi 9). And thus it is still: some are plucked as brands from the burning while of

tender years, others in the vigour of youth, and others when nearing the close of life. Here too God displays the sovereignty of His grace.

It requires to be pointed out that all babes in Christ do not grow up into spiritual young men, nor do all Christian young men attain the status of fathers. In some instances they are taken home soon after their conversion, but in the majority of cases their development is checked through failing to make a proper use of the means of grace, and hindered by a number of other things. There are many who make a promising start, but later their zeal abates, they backslide, and become a grief to their brethren. To the Corinthians Paul had to say, "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ" (1Co 3:1); while to the Hebrews he complained, "For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat" (5:12). On the other hand, there are those who progress steadily and make such proficiency in the school of Christ that, long before their heads are hoary, they can say with David, "I understand more than the ancients, because I keep thy precepts" (Psa 119:100).

That the believer ought to make constant advance in the Christian life is obvious, for we are expressly exhorted to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2Pe 3:18). To the Ephesians Paul wrote, "That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine...but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ" (4:14-15); and to the Corinthians, "Brethren, be not children in understanding; howbeit in malice be ye children; but in understanding be men" (1Co 14:20). Nevertheless, the fact remains that it is with individual Christians as it was (and still is) with corporate companies of the saints. To those at Rome Paul could say, "your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world" (1:8), but of the Galatians he had to say, "Ye did run well; who did hinder you?" (5:7). To the Thessalonians he declared, "your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth" (2Th 1:3); whereas of the Ephesians it is recorded, "thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works" (Rev 2:4-5).

In many instances growth in grace is far from corresponding with the increase of age. There are many professing Christians, and not a few real ones too, who are old in years and of long standing in the Church, yet are they but little children in knowledge and experience: they neither attain unto an apprehension of the deeper things of God, nor are they competent to counsel those who are much younger than themselves. How often we behold a verification of those words of Job 32:9: "Great men are not always wise: neither do the aged understand judgment." How few really spiritual Christians there are, qualified to restore a brother who has been overtaken in a fault (Gal 6:1). Mortified young believers are far more spiritual than older ones who indulge their fleshly appetites and inordinately seek the things of this world. The youthful Elihu used milder language and better arguments when reasoning with the afflicted patriarch than did the three friends who were greatly his seniors. Gracious abilities come not from age, but from the Spirit. Those whose thoughts are formed and whose ways are regulated by the Word of truth are wiser than they who confer much with flesh and blood.

While the differences between the three classes in the school of Christ are more or less clearly marked (probably much more so in the apostle's day than in ours), yet we need to be upon our guard against so partitioning off believers in our mind that we attribute all the knowledge to the fathers, or all the strength to the young men. That would be contrary to Scripture and experience alike: as the fathers have strength, so the young men possess knowledge, though not to the same extent. So too if the young men in Christ overcome the wicked one, so do the babes in their measure and degree—and the fathers also. It is also to be borne in mind that Christian experience is not always uniform or unvarying even in the same individual. The mature saint may in some respects be as weak as the most recent convert, and in certain regards be tempted as fiercely as the young men. In general, we may say that God so orders His providences with the different members of His family that each of them is given opportunity to exercise and make manifest these Christian characteristics in due course, so that in their season those graces shine forth with greater clearness.

It will be noted that the apostle addresses the several classes according to the order of their dignity and responsibility; whereas in Ephesians 5 and 6 it is the order of grace, for in each instance of the reciprocal relations it is the inferior party who is first exhorted, the wives before the husbands, children before their fathers, and servants before their masters. To notice first the weaker vessel, or the one occupying the lower place, is according to that wondrous grace which led the Lord of glory to take upon Him the form of a servant. Nothing in the Scriptures is without significance and importance, for they are the Word of Him who is a God of order. A further example of what we are here calling attention to is found in the contrast presented between the parable of the labourers (Mat 20) and that of the talents (Mat 25:14-30). In the former, where the Lord was acting in sovereign grace (verse 15), He began by rewarding the one who had done the least, who had wrought only one hour; but in the latter, where responsibility was in view, the one who had received the five talents was dealt with before those who had received only two and one.

In accord with the different grades of intelligence and attainments among His people, the Lord graciously calls a variety of servants, whom He equips to minister unto them. The ministers of Christ are not all of the same spiritual stature, nor are they alike qualified to be of most help to the several classes in Christ's school. Thus we are told that "He gave some apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11-12). The first two of those offices have become obsolete, but the last three mentioned still obtain, and they correspond closely with the three groups mentioned in our text: the evange-

list being best suited to the babes in Christ, the pastor to the young men, and the teacher to the fathers, who are capable of receiving profounder instruction than either of the others. Our Lord Himself, the perfect Servant, was divinely fitted for and actually discharged all three functions, for not only did He go about evangelizing, but He went forth to “teach and preach in their cities” (Mat 11:1, and cf. 4:23); as did also the most gifted one of His ambassadors—thus the two things are quite distinct.

There are many who mistakenly suppose that all God-sent preachers are the same. In one sense they are, all being commissioned by Him and clothed with His authority; but they are not alike furnished to meet the peculiar needs of the several classes of the saints. There are ministerial “young men” and “fathers,” as well as among the rank and file of believers. Since there are always far more spiritual babes than fathers in the churches, the Lord appoints a greater number of His servants to minister “the milk of the word” unto those, and endows fewer of them with the ability to give forth “strong meat.” As Paul informed the Corinthians, “But we will not boast of things without our measure, but according to the measure of the rule which God hath distributed to us, a measure to reach even unto you” (2Co 10:13). His traducers were accusing him of egotism and blaming him for ranking himself with such wise and eminent men as they deemed themselves to be. He refuted their charge, insisting that he had not gone beyond either the capacity or the territory which God had assigned him. The “rule” is the determiner of both the gifts and the sphere of each servant of God, and the “which God hath distributed” shows that He bestows them in varying measures.

Still more to the point was his statement in the first Corinthian epistle, “For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers” (4:15). Upon which S.E. Pierce said: “None ever respected such as the Lord sent more than did Paul; yet he did not think alike of all them as it respected their station, qualities, and usefulness to the souls of men. Some of them were instructors in Christ, and they could go no further: the Lord Himself had neither fitted nor designed them for anything beyond this. It was a great honour conferred upon them to be such; yet they should be content and not exalt themselves above their brethren by thinking they were the only ministers who are useful in the Church of Christ. Most assuredly fathers in Christ are superior to them, and their usefulness must be of more service and importance. As amongst such are real saints the Lord will have the threefold division kept up, of fathers, young men, and babes in Christ, so He will have ministers suited to each of these. And whilst they shall all be useful in their respective situations, yet they cannot be so in the same way. The ministerial fathers will ever be distinguished from others. Their use will be of another kind from that of the brother who is to encourage the young men in Christ, and quite distinct again from those who feed the babes.” As there are always many fewer fathers among the saints, so far fewer men capable of ministering to them.

The links between what is said in verse 12 to be the common portion of all the believing children of God and what is predicated of them in verses 13 and 14, where they are divided into three classes, are more or less apparent. First, “I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning”; however lengthy or full be their acquaintance with Christ, their experiential knowledge of Him began by proving the sufficiency of His atoning blood to cleanse them from all the guilt of sin. Second, “I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one:” such victory was not possible unless there was the assurance of sins forgiven, for, as Revelation 12:11, declares: “they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb”: that is by faith in that blood. Third, “I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father:” but such a privilege and blessing cannot be apart from the Saviour, for, as He said, “no one cometh unto the Father, but by me” (Joh 14:6). It is blessed to see that the sins of the weakest babe are as truly forgiven him as are those of the maturest father. It is also to be noted that the forgiveness of sins is accompanied not only by the knowledge of the Father, but by conflict with the wicked one too.

Chapter 23

The Family Delineated

1 John 2:13-14

“I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father. I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because

*ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you,
and ye have overcome the wicked one."*

In the verses before us the saints are viewed according to their several levels in the school of Christ, and the excellences ascribed to them correspond with and are proper to their stages of growth. In addressing the "fathers," they are viewed not according to their age, but to their spiritual development. That which is here predicated of them is "ye have known him that is from the beginning." We think "that is" should be deleted, for this supplement inserted by the translators is quite unnecessary, the reference being to the One spoken of in the opening verse of our epistle. They had known Him from the beginning of their spiritual history, from the day when Christ had first been graciously revealed in them (Gal 1:16). Doubtless some of them had personally seen and heard Christ in His incarnate state at the commencement of the Christian era. That which distinguished them from the young men and babes was that they had acquired a deeper, fuller, and richer acquaintance with Him. In their earlier days they were occupied with His work, what He had done and obtained for them. Later, they were more taken with their exploits and achievements, what His grace and strength had enabled them to accomplish. But now it was Himself that engaged their hearts and minds: the wonders and perfections of His blessed person which enthralled them.

"I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phi 3:8) is the language and longing of a "father." That which characterizes such is a clearer insight into the marvels and mysteries of His ineffable³⁵ person, of His manifold glories, of His distinctive offices. They know Him as the God-man Mediator. They apprehend something of His covenant engagements, and of His prophetic, priestly and kingly functions. They discern Him to be the Centre of all the divine counsels (Eph 3:11), the image of the invisible God, the Firstborn of every creature (Col 1:15). They know Him as "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1Co 1:24), and as the One in whom all the promises of God are yea and amen (2Co 1:20). They know Him as the Head of the Body the Church (Col 1:18), yea, as "the head over all things to the church" (Eph 1:22), angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto Him (1Pe 3:22). They not only know Him as a personal and all-sufficient Saviour, but they have gone on to apprehend what He did for God and what He finds in His Son, as the One who magnified His law and made it honourable, glorifying Him in this very scene where He has been so grievously dishonoured: the One of whom the Father says, "Mine elect, in *whom* my soul delighteth" (Isa 42:1).

"*I write unto you, fathers*": the reference is to all that he says in this epistle. Though they had known Christ from the beginning and had so grown in grace and in the knowledge of Him, yet what he wrote was as much needed by them as by their younger and more immature brethren. No child of God ever gets beyond the need of instruction, exhortation and comfort in this life. The very fact that the fathers are so well acquainted with Christ should make them the more amenable and receptive to the apostle's message. They had proved what a good master the Lord Jesus is to serve: how patiently He had borne with their dullness, how graciously He had pardoned their sins, how faithfully He had supplied their every need; and therefore they ought the more readily to attend unto the words of His servants. The proved goodness of Christ should engage them to lively gratitude, fervent love, and devoted obedience. They should be examples unto and the guides of their juniors. They must not abate in their zeal or entertain the idea that it was permissible to be less diligent and earnest than formerly, still less be puffed up with their attainments, but rather pray and strive to continue "increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col 1:10).

"*I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one.*" This second class comprised those who had emerged from their spiritual infancy, though they had not arrived at that maturity of growth the fathers had attained unto. What is here predicated of them has sorely puzzled not a few, yet if it be regarded in the light of the general analogy of faith, and more particularly with respect to John's style of making abstract and absolute statements, it should present no serious obstacle. Whatever difficulty is here presented, let us be careful to avoid increasing the same by reading into it what is not there. The apostle did not say the young men had overcome the flesh. It is a most significant fact, and one which needs to be kept in mind that while this epistle speaks of overcoming "the wicked one," and of overcoming "the world" (5:4), it makes no mention of believers overcoming their evil nature. They are indeed bidden to mortify their corruptions (Col 3:5), and in varying measures all the regenerate do so, for the grace of God effectually teaches its recipients to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world (Ti 2:12); but nowhere does Scripture affirm that any saint "overcame the flesh."

Thus, "ye have overcome the wicked one" is not to be understood absolutely and unqualifiedly, but relatively and within certain limits. These "young men" had successfully encountered the first temptations and trials, which attended enlistment under the banner of Christ and their consequent separation from the world, so that Satan had been unable either to drag them down into his evil ways or to shut them up in the dungeon of despair. As they had continued following on to know the Lord, they had received many setbacks and been sorely wounded in their conflict with the powers of evil, yet Satan had been foiled in his efforts to induce them to give up the fight. That leads us to point out that the Lord's people are far more aware of their defeats than they are of their frequent overcomings. Nor is the reason of that hard to discover. As we are naturally

³⁵ **ineffable** – indescribable; incapable of being expressed.

far more conscious of a painful illness than of our good health, so the Christian's falls are more evident to him than are his victories—the more so since the latter be gained while his eyes are fixed on Christ rather than on himself.

Satan never succeeds in prevailing finally or totally over any child of God. He is bent on the destruction of all the saints, but in no case can he accomplish his full desire—the intercession of Christ prevents him from so doing. In every instance those words of His hold good, “I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not.” Nevertheless, that does not release us from the necessity of taking unto us the whole armour of God, or from the duty of unremitting watchfulness. Our very striving against the devil is one degree of conquest. God does indeed postpone the full and ultimate victory, yet if we continue to resist the devil we are not overcome by him. When he gains a temporary advantage over us, causing us to disgrace our profession and dishonour the name of Christ, he strives his utmost to drive us to abject despair, or to persuade us that we have committed the unpardonable sin; but if a sense of our failure drives us to our knees in humble and sincere confession to God, then we defeat his hellish designs. Poor Peter failed sadly in the high priest's palace, and experienced an awful fall; nevertheless, when he went out and wept bitterly he overcame the wicked one.

This overcoming of the wicked one by the saints—for the experience is by no means restricted unto the “young men” class—is in fulfillment of the terms of Genesis 3:15, for it is to be carefully observed that that remarkable prophecy is concerned not only with the serpent and the Saviour, but also with their respective seeds. The members of Christ have fellowship, in their measure, with the Head, both in His sufferings and in His victories. As it was not the serpent alone (though chiefly, and as the instigator of others) who bruised Christ's heel, for both Jews and Gentiles were gathered together against Him (Act 4:27), so it is not Christ alone (though He pre-eminently and His seed subordinately) who obtains conquest over the devil. Thus the triumph of the Captain of our salvation over the archenemy of God and His people is twofold: personal and immediate, mediate and instrumental—in and by His soldiers, for He loves to have them share with Him in all things. Believers overcome the wicked one not only representatively in their Head, but personally through His strength, and therefore the glory is still His. In this respect also they are “predestinated to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29).

Far too little thought has been devoted to the terms of Genesis 3:15, in their application unto the children of God. While the Redeemer Himself be its prime subject, His redeemed are by no means to be excluded. They certainly have part in the conflict and are bruised in the heel by the serpent, and to them also extends the promise of bruising his head. This is confirmed by the fact that the “enmity” exists not only between Satan and Christ, but also between their respective seeds. This is according to the promise of “if we suffer, we shall also reign with him” (2Ti 2:12). Their victory is set forth in the New Testament in very language drawn from Genesis 3:15. When the seventy, as representatives of all Christ's ministers, said, “Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name,” He replied, “I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven. Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you” (Luk 10:17-19). To the saints Paul wrote, “The God of peace shall bruise Satan [more completely] under your feet shortly” (Rom 16:20): it is indeed God who treads him down, but it is under their feet he is trodden.

“*I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father.*” This accords with and is the fulfillment of the covenant promise: “all shall know me, from the least to the greatest” (Heb 8:11). It is at this point that experiential Christianity begins: an apprehension of the Father's love in Christ, the realization that He so loved them as to give His only begotten Son for them. It is their privilege, wisdom, and comfort to know God as “Father.” It was His grace that chose them in Christ, His Spirit who was sent to seek them, His power that begat them. In natural life the very first thing which babes and little children discover is an acknowledgment—in their infantile way—of their parents, owning them by their names (“papa and mama”) in distinguishing them from others. And thus it is spiritually: the spirit of adoption is given them “whereby they cry, Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15). The distinguishing act of babes in Christ is to own God as their Father, expressing in their way their attachment to Him, their delight in Him, their dependence upon Him, lisping out His name in their praises and petitions before the throne of grace. None can approach Him with any confidence or freedom until they know God in this relation—their Father, because the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In verse 14 the apostle changes from his threefold “I write” of verse 13 and twice uses “I have written.” Why such repetition? For the purpose of emphasis: to make clear his warm affection for them, his deep concern for their spiritual welfare, and to emphasize the privilege and honour conferred upon them. At least six different explanations have been given of the change of tense, only two of which strike us as being feasible. The first is that John here contemplated his epistle from two different mental standpoints. Originally, his mind dwelt upon what he was engaged in penning (1:4); later, he contemplated his completed production (5:13). It was as though he said, I am telling you this and that; afterwards, remember what I told you. Second, that John was pondering a changed situation. He was then in the body, though very aged, and could not be here much longer. Soon his what “I wrote” would become what “I have written.” Considered thus, there is a pathos in it which is quite affecting: I write to you as a dying man; treasure what I wrote as my last charge to you.

“*I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him from the beginning*” (verse 14). They knew Him so as to approve of Him, trust in Him, and make Him their All in all. Theirs was not a bare theoretical and historical knowledge, but a spiritual and saving one, an experiential and heart-affecting knowledge, which receives the truth not only in the light of it but in the love of it (2Th 2:10). Their knowledge is more deeply rooted (Col 1:23) than is that of the babes or young men. It is more influential (Phi 1:9): their love is more stable (Eph 3:18): they are more settled in the truth against error (Eph 4:14). They are more prudent, having learned to moderate their affections and activities within the bounds of sobriety (Ti 2:2).

Nevertheless, despite their maturity of knowledge and experience, they require to be written unto, needing the same counsels, admonitions and encouragements as did their juniors. As one quaintly said, “The oldest Christian needs to go to heaven with the Bible in his hand.” They are not yet out of the reach of temptations, and need to beware lest a sense of security begets carelessness. Their responsibility is greater too: to see that the purity of the Gospel is preserved and discipline in the churches maintained.

“*I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one*” (verse 14). In making that statement the apostle was certainly far from seeking to flatter them, for he did not say “ye have made yourselves strong.” No, he was simply making a sober statement of fact. In so doing he first gave honour unto the Holy Spirit, for their state and achievements were the results of His operations in them. Second, he was giving expression unto his own personal joy: it was a matter of delight to him that they had, by the grace of God, emerged from a state of infantile weakness, and had reached this state of health and vigour. Third, it was said by way of encouragement to them. If on the other hand it be our duty to rebuke and reprove what is evil in fellow Christians, it equally becomes us to recognize and own whatever good is in them. A word of cheer and stimulus is often a real help. If there be a time to “break down,” there is also a time to “build up” (Ecc 3:3). Paul did not hesitate to tell the Thessalonians “your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth” (2Th 1:3).

But what are we to understand by “ye are strong”? Relatively. Through using the means of grace, by increased spiritual knowledge, by appropriating the strength which is in Christ Jesus (2Ti 2:1), through exercising the graces of the new man, by improving (profiting from) the varied experiences through which they had passed, and by the assisting operations of the Spirit, they had developed from babes into a higher spiritual stature and were better able to use their spiritual muscles. It is written, “They that wait upon the LORD [which refers not so much to an act, but is descriptive of an attitude taken by all the regenerate who are in a healthy condition] shall renew *their* strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; they shall walk, and not faint” (Isa 40:31). It is indeed true that the believer’s strength, like his righteousness, is in the Lord, yet as there is an imparted righteousness (1Jo 2:29), so also a communicated strength. David acknowledged, Thou “strengthenedst me *with* strength in my soul” (Psa 138:3), so that he was no longer feeble in himself. There is such a thing as outgrowing spiritual babyhood and weakness, though not continued dependence upon the Lord. There is such an experience as going on “from strength to strength” (Psa 84:7) and being able to do all things through Christ strengthening us (Phi 4:13). But as increasing holiness is accompanied by increased realization of our filthiness, so increased strength makes us more conscious of our weakness.

“*And the word of God abideth in you.*” Though we would not exclude a reference here to the personal Word Himself (Joh 1:1; Rev 19:13), yet we consider that it was the written Word, which John had primarily in view. It was by Christ living in them, putting forth His life and light in their souls, that they were strengthened. Nevertheless, it is by means of the written Word, by faith and meditation thereon as it abides in our renewed minds and hearts, that Christ lives and dwells in us. Hence that designation of the Scriptures when Paul exhorted the Colossians, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom” (Col 3:16). The two cannot be separated: it is by the written Word that Christ indwells the believer, as it is Christ who teaches how to use the Word. Thus this second clause is first of all explanatory of the preceding one, making known to us the principal means and source of the strength of these young men; as it also serves to define the nature of their strength, as inherent, something within themselves. It is by means of the pure milk of the Word that the babe in Christ grows (1Pe 2:2). It is by that Word—through faith’s exercise, and meditating thereon, and the Spirit’s blessing—that the believer is quickened (Psa 119:25, 28, etc.). And it is by that Word abiding in him that he becomes strong, that the faculties or graces of the new man are developed and energized.

“*And the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one.*” Thus the second clause is linked with both the former and the final ones, casting light upon each. It was by means of the Word of God dwelling in them that they were strengthened, and equally so was it the means of their overcoming the wicked one. The question “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?” receives answer “by taking heed thereto according to thy word” (Psa 119:9). So, too, David declared, “By the words of thy lips I have kept me from the paths of the destroyer” (Psa 17:4)—so blessedly exemplified by his greater Son in His conflict with the devil (Mat 4). The Word of God is expressly designated “the sword of the Spirit,” for it is the one offensive weapon given us to be used against the enemy (Eph 6:16-17).

“*And the word of God abideth in you*” may also be regarded as being itself the grand proof that they had “overcome the wicked one,” for he had not been able to take away the good Seed sown in their hearts—as in the case of the wayside hearer (Mar 4:15; Joh 5:38), nor had he succeeded in inducing them to sell the truth. In view of what follows in 1 John 2:18-26, we consider that the principal meaning of “ye have overcome the wicked one” in verse 14 is that they had withstood his attempts to poison their minds with fatal error.

Chapter 24

The World Prohibited

1 John 2:15

“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”

The connection between our present verse and the foregoing ones may not be apparent at once, but a little reflection will make it evident that it is linked more or less closely to all that precedes. As we have previously pointed out, the contents of verses 12-14 were designed to pave the way for what follows. John would duly impress his readers with what the riches of grace had made them in themselves, and this in order to prepare them to respond cheerfully to the prohibition of verse 15. In view of what they now were in relation unto God in Christ, they should the more readily and heartily detest that which is directly opposed to Him. As we have repeatedly observed in those sections of the epistle already traversed, John is fond of presenting the truth under the form of sharply defined antitheses. It is so again here. Having described the several members of God’s family, he sets over against them the world. They are solemnly reminded that they have to live their lives in an evil and hostile environment, and therefore are they warned against its menace, and instructed how to carry themselves toward it.

At the beginning of our chapter the apostle had announced, “My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not”; and to enforce that injunction he had stated the broad and basic principles by which the characters of believers are to be formed and their conduct regulated. They must fix their eyes upon the One who is their Advocate with the Father, keep God’s commandments, and walk even as Christ walked (verses 1-6). Then he had descended from the general to the particular: calling upon them to exercise love unto their brethren (verses 7-11). Next, he had expressed some strong assurances (verses 12-14)—addressed to the different grades of Christians to whom he was writing—which were designed as motives and incentives unto a compliance with the exhortations to which he now returns. Following the command to love the brethren is the dehortation³⁶ “Love not the world.” It gives additional point and weight unto these precepts if we bear in mind that they are not only rules for the direction of conduct, but also tests by which we are required to examine and measure ourselves, for proof that we personally possess a saving knowledge of the truth.

As the apostle proceeded to develop his subject and pursue the several designs which he had before him when writing this epistle, the different tests which are presented become increasingly searching, and the line of demarcation between a valid and an invalid Christian profession is drawn more sharply. On the other hand, the characteristics and walk of the regenerate are so delineated and their portion and privileges so described, that their comfort and assurance should be proportionately deepened. Thus it is both a needful and a salutary thing for every one of us carefully and honestly to try himself by each of these admonitions and precepts. As J. Morgan pointed out, “Without conformity to them we are not entitled to conclude that ‘we know’ Christ or that we are ‘in Him’ by faith. As, therefore, we would have our evidences clear of a saving interest in Him, and would enjoy the assurance of a living faith, we must cultivate a close conformity to the manner of life enjoined by the apostle.” It is with such considerations before us that we should prayerfully ponder the interdiction of our present text, and, instead of viewing it abstractedly, suffer ourselves to be searched by it.

There is also an undoubted link between verses 15-17 and that which was before us in verses 9-11. There John had contrasted those who walk in darkness and those who abide in the light, and, as Haupt strikingly pointed out, “Here again (verse 15) is the ‘darkness,’ though in its concrete form, where its kingdom is to be found.” It is not sufficiently recognized that the world is the domain where darkness works and holds sway. Nor is it sufficiently realized that, morally, darkness is not an objective thing only, but a subjective one too, an operative force within man; yet Scripture speaks expressly of “the power of darkness” (Luk 22:53, Col 1:13) and “the rulers of the darkness of this world” (Eph 6:12). Darkness is as truly the animating principle in the unregenerate as light is in the saints. All that is outside of God in Christ is under the dominion of sin and Satan, which is but another way of saying that it is the realm of darkness. That is the fundamental reason why the world is not to be loved by us: it is the very antipodes from Him who is light, as is made very plain in the verses which follow, where its hideous features are depicted.

³⁶ **dehortation**— the act of exhorting (a person) against a particular purpose or course of action; advising or counseling against.

“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” This verse contains one of the innumerable proofs of the divine authorship of the Bible, for its teaching concerning the world is at direct variance with the beliefs and sentiments of humanity. If on the one hand that which is of great price in the sight of God (1Pe 3:4) is despised by the world, on the other hand that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God (Luk 16:15). Now if there be anything which is highly esteemed by man it is the world. He thinks highly of it, and speaks loudly in its praise, for he regards it as his world. Since it be that which his labours have produced, man views the world with pride and satisfaction, boasts of its progress, and is assured that it will yet develop into a real Utopia. Certain it is then that none of mankind ever invented such a statement as “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God” (Jam 4:4). Equally evident is it that our text never originated with the human mind.

The Bible uniformly condemns the world. Again and again Christ and His apostles indicted and warned the saints against it. When the Son of God became incarnate and tabernacled among men, “the world knew him not” (Joh 1:10); yea, He declared, “Me it hateth” (Joh 7:7). He insisted that the whole world was of less value than a man’s soul (Mat 16:26). He intimated that its cares and the deceitfulness of riches were the thorns which choked the Word and made its hearer unfruitful (Mat 13:22). He solemnly said, “Woe unto the world because of offences” (Mat 18:7). He announced that Satan was its prince (Joh 14:30). In reference to the Holy Spirit He stated, “whom the world cannot receive” (Joh 14:17). He averred,³⁷ “I pray not for the world” (Joh 17:9). He “gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world” (Gal 1:4), and therefore are His people forbidden to be conformed to it (Rom 12:2). The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God (1Co 3:19). “Ungodliness and worldly lusts” are linked together (Ti 2:12). 2 Peter 2:20 mentions “the pollutions of the world,” while 1 John 5:19 informs us that “the whole world lieth in wickedness.” Such declarations as these are radically opposed to all the beliefs and philosophies of men.

The above passages greatly need pressing today upon all professing Christians: “all,” we say, genuine saints not excepted. A careful pondering of the same makes it very manifest that this dehortation “love not the world” is no incidental or secondary one, but rather one which is fundamental unto vital godliness. It is therefore a matter of great practical importance that we obtain a right understanding and definition of the world, the “things that are in it,” and especially of what is meant by loving the same; otherwise, how can we rightly keep this precept? There are some conscientious souls who are very apt to distress themselves needlessly through incorrectly interpreting the same, supposing that to have their thoughts engaged with secular things while performing their daily duties is a species of worldliness, and a contravention of this injunction. But that is not so: God requires every able-bodied person to be engaged in some useful occupation: “work with your own hands” (1Th 4:11), and “if any would not work, neither should he eat” (2Th 3:10).

Honest industry is incumbent upon all, and if our calling be a lawful one, then we should apply our minds to the same: “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might” (Ecc 9:10). “Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks, and look well to thy herds” (Pro 27:23). If there be an eye single to God’s glory and a conscientious performance of duty, He is as truly honoured and pleased by the farmer as by the preacher, the labourer as his employer. Indolence or inattention to practical matters is very far from being an evidence of spirituality: “Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit, serving the Lord” therein (Rom 12:11) is one of the marks of a true disciple. It is not sinful to trade, to be industrious in the same, and to acquire money; yet constant watchfulness is necessary lest we be captivated and ensnared: “if riches increase, set not your heart upon them” (Psa 62:10). Many a prosperous merchant has been a man of deep piety, and his wealth a power for good. Nor is it wrong for a Christian man to lay up in store for his family, agreeably to the bounty of the Lord toward him (2Co 12:14; 1Ti 5:8).

No. Scripture does not require the saints to renounce the duties of relative life, or to become careless in the discharge of them. The proper evidence of being a Christian is not merely to talk about divine things, but (by grace) to walk according to the rules of God’s Word in whatever position Providence has placed him: whether as a master or servant, husband or wife, parent or child, bearing rule or yielding obedience as unto the Lord. Diligence and fidelity in the management of temporal affairs are to be maintained, yet without a sinful conformity to the world. It is indeed necessary that the believer should ever bear in mind that “the LORD hath set apart him that is godly for himself” (Psa 4:3), and that as a stranger and pilgrim in this scene he must abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul (1Pe 2:11). Yet that is far from signifying that he is to make himself conspicuous as an oddity. There is a happy medium between a sinful compliance with the world, being a slave to its opinions and an imitator of its fashions, and a scrupulous singularity which repudiates the spirit and liberty of the Gospel, and which is in reality nothing but a spirit of self-righteousness.

“Love not the world.” In this and all similar passages the “world” is both a society and a system. The members of it are described as “men of the world, which have their portion in this life” (Psa 17:14). Their chief good consists of the things of time and sense: their consuming desire is to crowd as much as possible of earthly joy into the present. Of each of its prosperous citizens it is said, “Lo, this is the man that made not God his strength; but trusted in the abundance of his riches” (Psa 52:7). As a system, it is under the dominion of Satan: he is its “prince,” regulating its policy and politics; its “god” (2Co 4:4), directing its religions. It is therefore the embodiment of his spirit, bearing his image and wearing his livery. Thus it is

³⁷ **averred** – asserted as a fact; declared to be true.

said of the unregenerate that they walk “according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (Eph 2:2). As Christ declared to some of its most respected devotees, “Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will [desire and are determined to] do” (Joh 8:44); they listen willingly to his solicitations and readily credit his lies.

Considered morally, rather than materially, the *world* is synonymous with the kingdom of Satan (Mat 12:26) or the unregenerate part of mankind, together with the things on which they set their hearts: all that is outside “the kingdom of God”—where His authority is owned. “It is the reign or kingdom of ‘the carnal mind’ which is ‘enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.’ Wherever that mind prevails, there is the world” (A. Candlish). It is fallen human nature acting out itself under the influence of the devil, fashioning the framework of society after its own tendencies. Its very spirit is hostile to godliness, for it is dominated by carnal ambition, pride, avarice, self-pleasing, and sensuous desires and interests. Its opinions are false, its aims selfish, its pleasures sinful, its influence thoroughly demoralizing. The maxims which govern it, the springs which operate it, the ends which it seeks, are earthly, sensual, devilish. Its politics are corrupt, its honours empty baubles, its smiles fickle. Even to its own votaries it is a thing of bitter disappointments, for it is full of illusions and fierce rivalries.

Now since the world is the sphere of rebellion against God, His people are commanded not to love it. They are not to esteem it as their portion or treasure. They are forbidden to set their affections upon it. Love is the supreme affection in whatever heart it dwells. It is jealous and will brook no rival. Its very nature is to make everything else subordinate to the object on which it is set, whether that object be God, a human creature, riches or pleasure. To love the world is to give it the first place in our hearts, to idolize it, to make everything else subordinate to the acquisition and enjoyment of it, to despise whatever comes into competition with it. Where the world be loved, it possesses and governs the soul, overcoming the scruples of conscience and the principles of integrity, for its influence is subtle and insidious, powerful and perilous. It dominates many who do not suspect it. To love the world is to make its vanities the chief objects of our pursuit, to share its friendships, to court its smiles, to conform to its ways, and to find our happiness in what it yields. Since the world is openly antagonistic to God, for any of His people to love it is to exercise a spirit of hostility to Him—it is to act a traitor’s part, to hold converse with the enemy’s camp.

Even the habitable earth in which we reside must not be cherished by the Christian as though it were his eternal dwelling place: for “this *is* not *your* rest, because it is polluted” (Mic 2:10). As Henry remarked, “It was never intended to be so: it was designed for our passage, but not for our portion; our inn, but not our home...let us therefore sit loose to it, live above it, and think of leaving it.” All the time we spend here is but a night in comparison with eternity. Even the patriarchs were not satisfied with Canaan, though, it flowed with milk and honey; instead, they “confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth,” and desired a better country, that is a heavenly, “wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He hath prepared for them a city” (Heb 11:13, 16). A loathness to leave this earth indicates that our affections cleave too much unto it. To be content with such a sinful scene as this is sure proof that any individual is in a sad state of heart. It is because of their proneness to cleave to it that God so often embitters this world unto them.

“*Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.*” In the second clause the apostle descends from the general to the particular. One may renounce the world as a whole, and yet the heart still clings to some of its parts. Even an unregenerate religionist may separate himself from the grosser aspects of the world, refusing to have fellowship with the giddy and frivolous, scorn its carnal attractions, and yet remain a thorough worldling at heart. He may have no sympathy with its tone and spirit, and yet certain objects in it possess great attraction for and have power over him. It is all the same in essence whether I love the world collectively or any of the single things which comprise it. It is not sufficient that I eschew the ways of the world, I must also detach my affections from everything which seeks to claim them. I must not delight in anything which would cause me to lessen my esteem of Christ and heavenly things. I am not to value any object if it hinders the performance of my duties Godward, dulls my relish for His Word, or chills the spirit of praise and prayer. I am to prefer nothing to spiritual things. I may use many of the things that are in the world, but I must not abuse them, trust in them, or place my happiness in them.

Manton most helpfully pointed out:

“God doth not require that we should love nothing, think of nothing, but Himself: the state of this life will not permit that. But God must have all the heart so far (1) that nothing be loved against God—a prohibited object is forbidden: sin must not be loved. (2) Nothing above God with a superior love: ‘he that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me’ (Mat 10:37). (3) Not equal with God, for then our love is but a partial and half love, divided between God and the creature. God above all, and our neighbour as ourselves. God can endure no rival. Love to man is but the second commandment, and must give way to the first. (4) Nothing apart from God, but as subservient to Him: God in the creature, Christ in His members: myself, wife, children, natural comforts in God and from God.”

The Christian’s love is to be reserved for God, and not thrown away upon anything which is averse to Him, and therefore whatever present and sensible things exert a malignant influence upon the mind, as opposed to the influence and effect which spiritual and future things should have upon us, are to be shunned.

As “love not the world” is not an order forbidding the believer to have any intercourse with the society of the world or to engage in commerce therein, so love not the things that are in the world is not a prohibition against his making a moderate use of the comforts and conveniences of this life, agreeable to the station to which the Lord has appointed him here. Christians are not required to cut themselves off from all contact with their fellow men and retire into a monastery or convent; nor are they directed to abstain from pleasant food or the wearing of clothes which become their station; still less is it wrong for them to admire the wonders and beauties of God’s handiwork in the material creation. While he is bidden to be temperate in all things, yet it is no virtue for a saint to adopt the austerities of the Spartans or to practice the bodily mortifications of the Brahmins. There is a “strictness” which arises from ignorance rather than knowledge, and a self-denial which is the fruit of fanaticism rather than spirituality. To be wholly concerned about externals is to gratify the spirit of self-righteousness, for it is possible to starve the body while feeding pride.

“If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” It comes to the same thing whether the love of the Father refers to His being shed abroad in the heart, or ours to Him, for the one cannot be without the other. If my prevailing desires be for the things which are in the world, if I conform to its carnal manners, comply with its sinful demands, and would do anything rather than antagonize it, then obviously I am an unregenerate person. If my affections be set upon the world which hounded His Son to death, and which hates His people in proportion as they see His image in them, how can the love of the Father dwell in me? It is impossible: the world, which lieth in the wicked, and the Father are irreconcilable, for they are diametrically opposed. Since they be thoroughly incompatible, love for the world and love to God cannot dwell together in the same heart. That was plainly taught by Christ: “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other” (Mat 6:24). Both cannot rule the soul, for their governments and commands are contrary: their spirit and their course are diverse. Each person has to choose which of the two claimants for his heart shall be served and loved. Each Christian is required resolutely to resist the world in every respect in which it draws him away from God, and refuse to comply with it at the cost of disobeying Him.

Here are some tests by which the reader should examine himself to determine whether he loves the world or the Father. Which do you seek with the more fervour: the wealth and honours of the world, or the riches of grace and the approbation³⁸ of God? Which have the greater attraction: the pleasures of the world, which are but for a season, or those pleasures at God’s right hand, which are for evermore? Wherein lies your confidence: in the money you have “laid up for a rainy day,” or in the living and faithful God, who has promised to supply all the need of His people? Which occasions the deeper sorrow: a temporal loss, or the severance of fellowship with God? Which are you spending more money upon: personal comforts and luxuries, or the circulation of God’s Word and the spread of His Gospel? What most dominates your mind: thoughts and schemes after worldly advancements, or resolutions and efforts to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord? Do your “good intentions” materialize, or are they empty dreams?

Chapter 25

The World Described

1 John 2:16

*“For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh,
and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life,
is not of the Father, but is of the world.”*

The divine precepts ought to be as highly esteemed by us as God’s promises; and if they be not, something is seriously wrong with our hearts. They are as much an integral part of God’s Word, are accorded a place of quite as much prominence, are revealed by the same Spirit, and rest upon the same foundation. They proceed from the self-same love, and are designed equally for our good. When God gave His commandments unto Israel, it was that, by their obedience, “it might be well with them, and with their children” (Deu 5:29). The preceptive part of the Gospel is designed to be our director in the path of filial obedience, the rule of our duty, and the standard at which our love is ever to aim. If it be true that God is glorified by our faith as we trust Him to fulfill His pledges, it is none the less a fact that He is honoured by our submission as we cheerfully keep His statutes. And if it be true that our hearts are strengthened and our lives enriched by laying hold of and feeding

³⁸ **approbation** – warm approval; liking; praise.

upon God's promises, it is equally the case that we are greatly the gainers by cherishing and heeding His precepts. "His statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good" (Deu 10:13). Walking according to God's Law is the only way to true happiness (Psa 119:1).

What has just been pointed out receives illustration in connection with our observing the precept of 1 John 2:15. It is both our wisdom and our welfare to comply with the prohibition, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world," for, as a whole and in all its parts, it is the deadly enemy of God's children. One of the distinctive properties of the Bible is that all its precepts are directed unto our affections. They are not intended to fashion the mere external, but are meant to mould the inner man. Satan is well aware of that, and therefore he is ever seeking to turn our affections away from God and wed them to the world. The very fact that we are enjoined, "Love not the world" intimates that its supreme assaults are upon the heart. It is only by heeding this commandment that we shall be delivered from the world's fatal snares. It is therefore a matter of the deepest practical moment that we walk in separation from this deadly menace to spirituality, for in proportion as we fail to do so will there be a forfeiting of God's smile and the loss of peace of conscience. Any measure of love of the world will stunt our growth, deprive us of joy in the Holy Spirit, undermine our assurance, and bring down upon us the chastening rod of God.

That is God's design in regeneration: "I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes" (Eze 36:27). But though the Christian has renounced the world, with its God-defying and self-pleasing ways, yet for the enjoyment of communion with God in Christ, and to avoid the grieving of His Spirit, he needs to be continually on his guard that the world does not again possess his heart, for not only is it all around him, but its dominating principle (the "flesh") is still within him—a deputy to do its evil work. By nature we were wedded to the world, thoroughly entangled in its vanities, and naught but love to God and heavenly things delivers the heart from its thralldom. It is indeed a most humbling thing that believers should be told to "love not the world," yet they require that injunction, and ought to turn the same into earnest prayer, daily seeking grace that they may be divinely enabled to decline its temptations and to mortify their desires after its carnal attractions, remembering that by the cross of Christ the world is (legally) crucified unto them and they unto the world (Gal 6:14). If we diligently endeavour to cultivate a spirit of contentment with the temporal portion, which God has given us, however small a one it be, then we shall be delivered from lusting after the husks which the swine feed on.

It is altogether unreasonable for any man to look for satisfaction in anything which this world has to offer him, for how can material and transient things meet the needs of a soul that has been made for eternity? No real, still less any lasting, good is to be found in this world. Abundant proof of that is supplied by the book of Ecclesiastes. There we have placed upon imperishable record the experiences of one who was permitted to gratify every lust of the flesh. The resources at his command were practically limitless. He was a king, and not a poor one, but possessed of abundant means, so that he was able to procure everything that money could purchase. He surrounded himself with every conceivable luxury, form of pleasure, and object of beauty. His palace was filled unstintingly with everything the senses could crave. And what was the outcome? Was he able to say, "All is very good, I can now rest in the enjoyment of what I have acquired?" Very far from it. After he had taken his fill of all its pleasures, drunk deeply from all this world's streams, he declared that, "all is vanity and vexation of spirit." And, my reader, if Solomon could find no satisfaction in all his worldly possessions and pursuits, none who comes after him will ever do so.

Since God's commandments are designed for our good, a careless neglect of them cannot but be harmful. In proportion, as we imbibe the spirit of the world, our breathings after God are stifled and the soul becomes dull in holy duties. As one cannot handle pitch without soiling oneself, neither can a believer take a deep interest in the politics of the world without suffering loss spiritually. Conversely, the more we delight ourselves in the Lord, the less relish shall we have for the things on which the unregenerate set their hearts. The two things work in inverse ratio: love to God weans the soul from love to the world. Now the outstanding evidence of love is obedience: a fixed resolve to please Christ in all things. As He declared, "If a man love me, he will keep my words" (Joh 14:23). Then how fervently should we pray for more love to Him (Eph 3:17-18; Phi 1:9). How we should meditate daily upon His manifold perfections and feast on His excellency. How diligently we should cultivate a closer and more constant communion with Him. How we should keep short accounts with God, and make a practice of promptly confessing every known sin. How we should discipline ourselves and love the creature in subordination to Him.

"For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world" (verse 16). As the opening "For" indicates, that is said by way of explanation and amplification of the previous verse, which is an instance of the gracious condescension of our God. We ought ever to give a ready and cheerful obedience to the divine precepts on the bare authority of their Author, without His advancing any reasons for them, and whether or not we can perceive the wisdom and benevolence of the same. Sufficient for us to act on the merely revealed will of the Most High. It is not for us to ask the why or the wherefore, but to comply with His demands without demur or delay. But sometimes it pleases the Lord to elucidate, as He expounded His parables unto the apostles. Such is the case here: in support of the prohibition of His "love not the world," He adds that all that pertains to it is evil, corrupt, and therefore to set our affections upon it is quite incompatible with devotion to God; equally so does love for such a world make clear demonstration that the love of the Father is not in such a person.

Here are the contents and sum of the world: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. It is clear that the apostle is not referring to the natural world, which is full of the glorious handiwork of its Creator; but to the corrupt world of sense and sin, all in it which is esteemed by its carnal citizens, which shapes their thoughts, moves their affections, directs and consumes their energies. Those evil propensities and principles are said to be “in the world,” yet it is evident that they are principally in the subject rather than in the object. They are said to be “in the world” because the world gets into the heart, incorporates itself in the affections, and occupies its throne. As faith and God’s promises should be “mixed” (Heb 4:2), so temptations twine themselves around men’s lusts. Thus we do not have to go very far in order to frame a Scriptural definition of what constitutes the corrupt “world”: it is not something outside us, but within ourselves. It is not that which our natural hand can touch or our natural eyes see, but that which fallen man carries in his own bosom. The world is simply the aggregate of all the hearts of unregenerate men that now dwell upon the earth. The external world only carries into practice the principles acting in its subjects, putting into operation the sin, which is ever working in them.

The things that are both in and of the world are divided into three classes, according to the three dominant inclinations of depraved human nature. “The lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” are the three harpies of man’s polluted soul to which the things of the world minister. Those are the prolific wombs from which issue all our sinful acts: the roots which convey life and sap unto that which appears openly above the ground; the branches on which grow all the evil fruits which abound in human life. Those are the “strongholds” of Satan, which command all about them. They are the mighty conquerors of all mankind. It was so at the beginning, for it was through those avenues that the serpent attacked and overcame Eve. The inspired account is very brief, but its language corresponds exactly to what is here before us. First, we are told that, “the woman saw that the tree was good for food”: there was “the lust of the flesh” at work. Second, “and that it was pleasant to the eyes”: there was “the lust of the eyes” operating. Third, “and a tree to be desired to make one wise”; there was “the pride of life” active, and yielding to the same, she disobeyed her Maker and took of the fruit.

Let us now take a separate look at each of these evil propensities: “evil” we say, for sin has so vitiated the whole of man’s being that though the objects that God has provided for his needs be wholesome, yet the affection with which men crave them is impure.

When the term “*flesh*” is employed in the Scriptures with a moral force, it is commonly used in the larger sense, as taking the whole of that corrupt nature which we inherited from Adam and bring with us into this world. So in its wider signification “the lusts of the flesh” is an expression which usually takes in all the works of our corrupt nature, whether in the understanding, by vain imaginations and evil thoughts; in the affections, by inordinate longing or unlawful inclinations; or in the will, by perversity and stubbornness. But here, since they are distinguished from the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, the “lusts of the flesh” are to be taken more strictly and narrowly for the sensual appetite: the immoderate craving for soft and sumptuous living, the intemperate use of pleasures, meats and drinks, all such things as gratify the body. While it be true that in the catalogue given in Galatians 5:19-21, the horrible products of the flesh are headed by different forms of immorality, yet they are by no means confined thereto.

“*The lusts of the flesh,*” then, include the giving way to any form of intemperance, as well as uncleanness: the craving for and responding to any of the things which excite the irregularities and inordinate hankerings of the animal appetites, as in the case of Esau, who made a god of his belly. They comprehend every form of pampering the body, whether it be a feeding of it more than is required for its natural sustenance, or spending more time in sleep than is necessary. When God created man, He endowed him with an appetite for food, for marriage, for the beauties of Eden; but sin perverts those appetites and carries them to excess, so that their gratification becomes, only too often, gluttony, uncleanness, covetousness. Everything that pleases either the body or the mind, and gives us pleasure distinct from God Himself, may be included therein. Though men differ considerably in their constitutions, interests, pursuits, habits, and objects of desire, yet from first to last it all comes to the same thing; it is not of the Spirit or of grace; whatever be craved, whether something gross or refined, it is for the pleasing of carnal self. We have had but two common fathers, Adam and Noah, and both fell by indulging their fleshly appetites: Adam by eating, Noah by drinking.

“*And the lust of the eyes*”; that is the second main avenue by which the world gains entrance into the heart. We contract far more sin through our visive³⁹ organs than any of us are aware of, for they are the inlets to the mind, setting objects before the fancy which leave an impression and taint which are very difficult to get rid of. It is not so much the object beheld as the pleasure felt in seeing it, and the longing to possess the same. This then is the spring of wantonness, covetousness, and avarice. But as from the lust of the flesh proceed not only the gluttony, drunkenness, and immorality which the baser and more brutish part of mankind is taken up with, but also the inordinate love of pleasure, vain company, and carnal delights with which the more refined are so often bewitched, so the lust of the eyes is not to be restricted to an evil gazing upon unlawful objects, but from it spring all forms of earthly-mindedness, and immoderate yearnings for the acquisition of a thousand things, such as costly apparel, jewels, elaborate home furnishings, sight-seeing, etc. In the mental realm, it creates a curiosity to pry into the unseen and tamper with things which pertain to the darkness rather than to the light.

Scripture abounds in solemn examples of those who fell into grievous and fatal sins through indulging the lusts of the eyes: Lot’s wife (Gen 19:26), Shechem (Gen 34:2), Potiphar’s wife (Gen 39:7), Achan (Jos 7:21), Samson (Jdg 16:1), David

³⁹ **visive** – visual; pertaining to vision.

(2Sa 11:2). Like children, we can scarcely see a pleasant object without wanting to possess it: Ahab, not content with his palace gardens, fell sick for Naboth's vineyard (1Ki 21:4). What need is there, then, for us to pray, "Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in thy way" (Psa 119:37). That is a request for restraining grace, that we may be enabled to look away from whatever entices us to evil. It is by our optics being fastened upon the world's attractions that the heart is infected with the love of them, and thereby alienated from divine things. But prayer is not sufficient: there must also be a walking circumspectly and cautiously. If we pray "lead us not into temptation," we are also required to watch that we do not enter into it (Mat 26:41). The more we are engaged with the beauties of the Lord of glory, the more will our hearts be delivered from the glittering toys of the world, and the less envy shall we have when beholding "the prosperity of the wicked" (Psa 73:3).

"And the pride of life," which is the last of the evil triad. The word for "life" here is not *zoe*, which expresses essential being, but *bios*, which has to do more with the eternal life of man as pertaining to the natural world. The pride of life consists of vying with and outvying one another; in every possible way. It gives rise to a conceit of ourselves and a contempt of our neighbours, producing a spirit of self-superiority and arrogance. It grasps after power, seeks the chief places in the world, coveting positions of elevation, authority and influence, so that one may have dominion over his fellows. It may assume the extreme form of the tyrannical dictator, but it is just as truly active in the woman who aspires to be the mistress of a few servants. It thirsts after admiration, adulation, and applause. It strives after the honours and dignities of the world, craves a position in society which will convey prestige and repute. It therefore seeks a variety of situations and circumstances, which have in them an appearance of happiness and satisfaction in self-advancement. It loves pomp and parade, is fond of flattering titles and a glittering show. It covets a name or renown, eagerly pursues popularity, so that one may be distinguished above others.

This "pride of life" expresses itself in many ways. It evidences itself in an ostentatious display, like the strutting of a peacock, so that there may be an outshining of our neighbours. It induces many to attempt the keeping up of an appearance which they can ill afford. It leads to much hypocrisy, a pretending to be and have what is possessed not: seen in facial make-up, the wearing of imitation jewelry, etc. It causes people to become the slaves of fashion and to be in bondage to the foolish conventions of the world, as, for example, extravagant and expensive funerals far beyond their means. Nor is this affectation of repute, lust for power and love of ostentation by any means confined unto those who have the largest incomes and most opportunity for gratifying themselves. It works just as powerfully in the poor and humble as it does in the rich and exalted. The peasant may be loud in his condemnation of the greed of the capitalist and denounce his prodigalities, but place him in the same position of affluence and influence, and often he proves to be worse than those whom he formerly censured: it is only the force of his present circumstances which prevents him from making the show he would like to.

The "pride of life" includes much more than either the lust of the flesh or the lust of the eyes. They are restricted either by their end—the satisfying of our carnal desires, particularly those of the body—or by their instruments—the gratifying of the senses. But pride is not thus restricted. Man is ever prone to be puffed up by conceit of his own excellence: his strength, beauty, wisdom, talents, graces, and achievements. It is, then, accurately designed, for it spreads through all the enjoyments and comforts of life: the entire span of our mortal existence, from the cradle to the grave, being its sphere. As Manton remarked, "He ascribes a universal and unlimited influence, and calls it 'the pride of life' because it taints every action, it serves itself of every enjoyment, it mingles with other lusts. Other vices destroy only their contraries: covetousness destroys liberality, drunkenness sobriety; but pride destroys them all. There is nothing so low but it yields fuel to pride: the hair, which is but an excrement, is often hung as a bush and ensign of vanity. And there is nothing so high and sacred but pride can abase it; like mistletoe, it grows on any tree, but most upon the best."

It will therefore be evident that these springs of evil are set forth in a climactic order: sensuality, covetousness, pride. Little as the majority may suppose, the last one is more heinous than the others. Sensuality is the corruption of the lower part of man's being, an unlawful gratifying of his bodily appetites; but pride is the corruption of the higher part of his nature—the lifting up of his understanding and spirit. By sensuality man sinks to the level of the beasts, but by pride he rears up against God, and enters into fellowship with the devil, for "being lifted up with pride" was his condemnation (1Ti 3:6; and cf. Isa 14:12-14). It was bad enough for the conceited king of Babylon to exclaim, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built?" (Dan 4:30), but it was far worse when the haughty monarch of Egypt asked, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go?" (Exo 5:2). Thus does this abominable pride inflate puny creatures of the dust and cause them to exalt themselves against the Most High.

Chapter 26

The World Doomed

1 John 2:17

“And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”

“Love not the world” (2:15): either its policies or its pleasures, its maxims or its methods, its trends or its ends. Refuse all intimacy with its subjects. That prohibition is enforced, first, by the solemn consideration, “If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” The great Searcher of hearts cannot be deceived: if I am living for the enjoyment of the world and seeking to win its favour, then I am waging warfare against heaven, bidding open defiance to the Lord of hosts (Jam 4:4). Anyone who makes the world his portion or supreme good is dead in sin. It is impossible to keep God’s commandments and to be on good terms with His open enemies.

“For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (2:16). This is the second reason why we are not to love the world: because the principles, which operate therein, and the food which it provides for them to feed upon, are essentially evil. We are forbidden to set our affection upon things, which gratify the carnal nature, which pander to a disordered imagination, and which minister unto pride. The world supplies an elaborate menu for its subjects. There are stalls and shows in Vanity Fair⁴⁰ designed by its prince to appeal unto all tastes and temperaments.

It should be pointed out that those three propensities of fallen human nature have had a corporate embodiment in that monstrous system which God has suffered for so long to devour both the souls and bodies of millions of mankind. We refer to “the mother of harlots,” which for the last thousand years has had the effrontery to term herself “The Holy Catholic Church” and “The Bride of Christ.” If there has been any religious organization outstandingly characterized by these three evils, it is undoubtedly the Papacy. What but “the lust of the flesh,” in its grossest form, has marked her gluttonous prelates, the “indulgences” which they sell to their poor dupes, and the moral filth which has obtained in her convents and monasteries—as converted nuns and monks have frequently testified? What are her imposing cathedrals, her elaborate ritual, her gorgeous vestments and her spectacular processions but so many alluring appeals to the “lust of the eyes”? And what are the flattering titles assumed by her dignitaries, the Pope’s usurpation of the alone prerogatives of Christ, and his claim to rule over kings, but clear evidences of “the pride of life”? And the worldlier other allegedly “Christian” denominations become, and the closer they draw to Rome, the more conspicuous are the same elements and features in them.

In glorious contrast with what has been before us above, let the child of God ponder and feast upon the blessed ways of Immanuel, and bow in admiration and adoration before Him who differed as much from them as does the light from darkness. When about to descend to this earth, He “made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant” (Phi 2:7). He was born not in a palace, but in a cattle shed. During the years that He remained in this scene, He disdained its pomp, and sought not His happiness in it. Yet the unworldliness of Christ was not that of the hermit, but of One whose ministry was upon the stage of public action, among all classes of people. When He selected the twelve apostles, who were to be His most intimate companions, and later His ambassadors, He chose not the mighty, the noble, or the wise of this world, but humble fishermen and a despised tax-gatherer. So far was He from seeking the limelight that, after He had healed the sick, again and again He bade one and another, “See thou tell no man” (Mat 8:4; 9:30; 12:16). When His brethren after the flesh said, “If thou do these things, show thyself to the world,” He refused their request, and later went up to the feast at Jerusalem “not openly, but as it were in secret” (Joh 7:4, 10)—unannounced, unobtrusively.

After the Lord Jesus Christ had performed many mighty works, and the same had been noised abroad, Simon and his fellows said unto Him, “All men seek for thee,” but He replied, “Let us go into the next towns” (Mar 1:37-38): rather than receive the plaudits of the crowd, He moved on. Instead of courting popularity, He ever shunned it. Said He, “I receive not honour from men” (Joh 5:41). In Mark 7:17, we are told, “And when he was entered into the house from the people” (and cf. 3:19; 9:28, 33)—He went about doing His Father’s business quietly and unostentatiously. Upon His transfiguration, He charged those who beheld it, “Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead” (Mat 17:9).

⁴⁰ **Vanity Fair** – the town in Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) that was given over to worldly lusts, governed by the devil, and presented Christian with many difficult temptations and trials.

When it became necessary to make a public presentation of His royal claims, He entered Jerusalem not in a chariot, but seated upon an ass—the King of meekness. He averred, “the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me” (Joh 14:30). There was no lust of the flesh, no lust of the eyes, no pride of life working within the Lord Jesus; and therefore naught to which the corrupt things of the world could appeal. Not only so, but positively there was everything in Him to repel them, for He was “the Holy One,” against whom all the shafts of the devil were aimed in vain.

Having explained at some length what is signified by the three evils announced in verse 16, let us return to the apostle’s principal designs in our passage, which were to warn the Lord’s people, and to expose graceless professors, for in neither the Old Testament nor the New does God own anyone as a lover of Him save he who keeps His commandments and walks in separation from the world. The Church and the world are sharply distinguished entities, their members two opposing companies. Therefore does God say to the former, “Walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind” (Eph 4:17): instead, they are required to keep themselves “unspotted from the world” (Jam 1:27), “hating even the garment spotted by the flesh” (Jude 23), witnessing against the world (Heb 11:7). The world makes its appeals to all of the bodily senses, but its main object is to capture the heart, for until that citadel be won all its arts and devices have failed; but the moment the heart is taken, man becomes the world’s captive, even though (to borrow the language of another) “he be bound in the silken fetters of love.” Hence the supreme importance of our complying with the precept, “Keep thy heart with all diligence” (Pro 4:23), for it is the throne where either Christ or Satan rules.

Solomon tells us that “a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Ecc 4:12), nevertheless the grace of God can and does effectually deliver from the love of pleasure, riches, honours, as appears with more or less clearness among the regenerate. A striking case in point is that of Moses, for we read of his “choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin [the lust of the flesh] for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt [the lust of the eyes]...By faith he forsook Egypt,” abandoning his position there as “the son of Pharaoh’s daughter,” thereby disdaining the pride of life (Heb 11:24-27). Note well, my reader, the repeated “by faith” in those verses, for only so far as that grace be healthy and active will the saint be impervious to both the delights and the terrors of the world: “this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith” (1Jo 5:4). Faith occupies the soul with invisible and eternal realities, and as we are engaged with them the things of time and sense lose their hold upon the heart. A sight of “the King in His beauty” and a sense of His dying love are the surest means of breaking their power.

*“I thirst, but not as once I did,
The vain delights of earth to share:
Thy wounds, Emmanuel, all forbid
That I should seek my pleasures there.”*

As the Christian desires to ascertain whether or not he is growing in grace, let him frequently measure himself by this standard: Am I becoming less worldly? He may be innocent of all forms of intemperance and of a spirit of covetousness, he may not envy the prosperity of the wicked or join with them in their vanities, but is he indifferent to their opinion, caring not whether they smile or frown upon him? Is the reader afraid of being called “peculiar” because he ignores its fashions and defies its conventions? Nothing is more pitiful than to see a citizen of heaven in bondage to the whims of Satan’s children: certain it is that if his daily life does not offend them, he is not being faithful to his Master. We shall become less worldly only as our love for God in Christ increases and becomes more vigorous, and therefore, as it is more important to act grace than to be assured that we have it, we should set ourselves with all our might to strengthen our love to the Lord, and then shall we know that we love Him. The example which Christ has left us should make it easier to deny ungodly and worldly lusts. How fully did He manifest His contempt of the world and all the glory thereof! Let us not affect a greater eminence in it than He had. If He was “a Man of sorrows” in this scene, does it become any follower of His to be addicted to its pleasures? If they called Him “Beelzebub” should we compromise in order to escape “bearing His reproach”?

“Is not of the Father, but is of the world.” This is the third dissuasive against setting our affections thereon. Observe, first, that the apostle did not say “is not of God,” but “is not of the Father,” just as in the foregoing verse he had said, “If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” As the devil is opposed to Christ, the flesh hostile to the Spirit, so the world is antagonistic to the Father and hates His children (3:13). “All that is in the world...is not of the Father.” The things of the world are termed “the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” because they are the objects of them: just as the “doctrine of Christ” (2Jo 9) is called “the faith” (Gal 1:23; Jude 3), because it is the object of faith. Those three principles are the springs of action in its citizens; all that takes place in this mundane sphere (as considered apart from the Church and the operations of the Spirit) issues from them: every motive-power at work within the ungodly may be traced thereto. In its turn, the world caters fully for and to them. For the first there are carnal delights to entice the soul from the strictness and severity of the Christian profession. For the second there are all kinds of material profits and illicit gains to allure. For the third there are preferments and applause, which the natural man is so fond of. Those sensible objects to which the old nature is so inclined are ever present, seeking to divert the heart from God and heavenly-mindedness.

“All that is in the world...is not of the Father.” They are not of His creation, for at the beginning He pronounced all things, including our first parents, “very good.” No, as Christ declared of the field wherein tares were sown after He had

sown it with wheat, “an enemy hath done this.” The idolatrous desire after its objects attached not nor pertained to them originally, but resulted from the fall. Nor are they of His infusion: “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: but every man is tempted, when he is drawn away [from the path of rectitude] of his own lusts” (Jam 1:13-14). All such evil lusting is the outcome of indwelling sin. Nor are they of His preceptive will. He has not provided them for any such purposes, nor prescribed them to be so misused. And certainly such perversity of them is not of His approbation. No, rather are they “of the world” as it “lieth in the wicked one” (5:19), which does not, in either its prince or its subjects, respect God’s laws, acknowledge His claims, or seek to glorify Him. Such unlawful cravings are the effects of man’s apostasy⁴¹ and subjection to Satan, who now makes whatsoever is in the world to be his baits to seduce men into further sin. Thus, loyalty to God and regard for the welfare of our souls require that such a world be renounced by us, and every inordinate longing after it mortified.

“*And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof*” (verse 17). Here is still another reason why God’s people are not to love the world, an argument drawn from the vain and vanishing state of mundane things and man’s enjoyment of them. Those words may be understood two ways: relatively and absolutely, in regard both to ourselves and itself. In themselves, and in the pleasure which the ungodly derive from them, the things of the world are only transitory and can afford no lasting satisfaction. “The fashion of this world passeth away” (1Co 7:31). There is a “fashion” or outward form, which in its incidentals alters in each age and generation, after which its deluded votaries order their lives, being carried along hither and thither by the ebb and flow of its tides. Its customs and habits, its styles and modes, its pleasures and amusements, are ever varying. Yet it is by this very means that the multitudes are more and more deceived. The objects they sought so eagerly yesterday fulfilled not their expectations, so with equal earnestness they pursue the same or other objects today, assured that the attaining of them will rejoice them; only to find them broken cisterns which hold no water.

“*And the world passeth away.*” It is but an amusing pageant: its alluring shows and sights are like a revolving stage, with its scenes changing rapidly, one set of actors soon following another. How frequently do houses and estates change hands. How many a monarchy has been overturned in this century, how many a kingdom had its boundaries altered, how many of its proud cities reduced to rubble. How frequently do riches take to themselves wings and fly away. “Change and decay in all around I see.” Its beauty is only transient, vanishing almost as soon as it appears. Its “fashion” is but an appearance, for there is nothing substantial in it. Its pleasures soon pall: the laughter of fools is compared to “the crackling of thorns under a pot” (Ecc 7:6)—a momentary blaze which disappears in smoke. Its honours are evanescent and disappointing. Its smiles are artificial and fickle. “And the lust thereof” Calvin pointed out that “lust” is here used metonymically, as signifying the objects coveted, or the things which captivate the desires of men; the things they deem most precious are but a shadowy phantom, which fails them in the hour of need. The carnal joys of the wicked are like the present sufferings of the saints—relatively “but for a moment,” but instead of working for them “a far more exceeding eternal weight of glory” they issue in everlasting shame and woe.

“The world passeth away” also has reference to its citizens, for “all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass” (1Pe 1:24). All mankind is in a perishing condition, hastening to the grave. The tombstones in our cemeteries bear solemn witness to the brevity of life: far more die in infancy and childhood than in old age. No class is exempt, the wealthy equally with the poor being often cut off in the prime of life. “For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass...so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways” (Jam 1:11). The uncertainty and transiency of mortal life is something which worldlings desire to forget, and therefore do they “put far away the evil day” (Amo 6:3), death being feared by them because it will summon them into the presence of their righteous Judge. The shortness and instability of life are set forth in the Scriptures by many comparisons: the wind (Job 7:7), a leaf before the wind (Job 13:25), a shadow (Job 14:2), the flower of the field (Isa 40:6), “vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away” (Jam 4:14), so unsubstantial and unreal, so impermanent and soon over, is human life, and all the prosperity, magnificence and enjoyment that may have attended it.

“*But he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.*” It is not, as might be expected from verse 15, “he that loveth God,” but the fruit and proof thereof which is here named, for obedience to God is love in action. Nor is it simply “he that knoweth and [theoretically] approveth the divine will,” but rather the one who actually performs it. This is the grand design and end of God’s work of grace in the soul: to make its subject the doer of His Word. The saint is here viewed not as an object of God’s everlasting love, nor as one for whom Christ purchased redemption, but rather as one who has been transformed by the renewing of his mind and made an obedient child. This is very searching. As Peter declared, “God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him,” (Act 10:35-36). And as his Master taught, “For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother” (Mat 12:50); “blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it” (Luk 11:28); “they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life” (Joh 5:29). “Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life” (Rev 22:14). Such passages as those are almost universally ignored by Antinomians, who are forever crying up grace at the expense of holiness.

“*He that doeth the will of God*”: not grudgingly but heartily; not bits of it, but the whole. Such is the character and conduct of Wisdom’s children—the very opposite of the worldling’s. They willingly submit to God’s authority, seek to please

⁴¹ **apostasy** – the state of abandoning the faith one had believed in.

Him in their daily lives, walk in the Law of the Lord. Not flawlessly so, but evangelically, sincerely, so that of his deviations therefrom the believer can honestly say, "That which I do I allow not" (Rom 7:15), condemning himself for, mourning over and penitently confessing the same. There is no such thing as sinless perfection in this life, either in being entirely rid of love for the things of the world or in doing the will of God. But "he that doeth the will of God" is characteristic of a Christian. And such a one "abideth for ever," which imports far more than personal continuance (for such will be the case with all the unregenerate), namely in the favour of God and shall be eternally blessed. He shall abide for ever in the possession of that substantial good which he has been enabled to make choice of. Such a one is the heir of eternal life, a member of that kingdom which cannot be shaken. Durable riches are his, a crown of glory awaits him, fullness of joy and pleasures for evermore at God's right hand.

Chapter 27

The Last Time

1 John 2:18

"Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time."

Why is this verse prefaced with the particular address, "little children"? What is meant by "the last time"? What is signified by "antichrist"? Who are referred to by the "many antichrists"? In what way did the presence of many antichrists make it evident that the last time had even then begun? Why is this statement brought in at this point? What is the precise importance and value of it unto us today? In seeking to answer these questions and expound our present verse we are mindful of the fact that we shall clash with the teaching many of our readers have sat under, and therefore they will not readily accept a part of what we are about to advance. Moreover, it will differ from the prophetic outlook, which we held personally in the early days of our Christian life. But we must write according to the measure of light God has vouchsafed for us, and request our friends to heed prayerfully the injunction, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good" (1Th 5:21).

Why does our present verse open with the words "little children"? The term ought to have been translated "babes" in order to distinguish it from that which is used in 2:1, 12, etc. There the one employed is a term of endearment, being a general one in its scope, applied to the whole family of God. But the one found in our text is a descriptive and distinguishing one, being used only of the lowest grade of God's children, namely spiritual infants. It will be remembered that in 2:12, John had employed the comprehensive term "*teknion*" when expressing his tender regard for all the saints. Then in verse 13 he had graded them into three distinct classes: "fathers," "young men," and "babes," designating the last "*paidion*," which term occurs again in this epistle only in the verse now before us. In verse 14 the "fathers" and in verses 15-17 the "young men" were each addressed a second time. Now in verses 18-27 the "babes" are again written to. Thus we perceive once more what care the apostle devoted to the structure of his epistle, and how particular he was to follow a strict and logical order. In 2:28, the general designation "*teknion*" is again found, to denote a resumption of address to the whole company. Hence it is apparent that, through failure to observe the plan followed in the context, the Revised Version erred in beginning a new paragraph with verse 18.

Not only did the due balancing of this section (the speaking twice to each of the three classes) require that verse 18 should be directed to the "babes," but in view of its contents there was a peculiar propriety in addressing it to the third and youngest group. It was really a word of warning to them. As the young men are most in danger of being allured and spoilt by "the world," so the babes are the ones most liable to be beguiled and poisoned by the "antichrists." It was therefore peculiarly pertinent to put the young converts on their guard, for being more inexperienced and less established in the Faith, they were apt to give ear unto those who were desirous of corrupting them. Though not so pointed, it was indirectly the equivalent of Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians, "That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive" (4:14). It is sad to see how little taken to heart are those words of Christ, "Take heed what ye hear" (Mar 4:24). Many professing Christians are as careless in this matter as ignorant children playing with sharp and dangerous weapons.

"*Little children, it is the last time.*" The order of words in the Greek expresses it still more emphatically: "Little children [the] last time it is." The word here translated "time," *hora*, signifies an indefinite period, be it long or short. It is rendered

“season,” “day,” “hour,” “instant.” The Revised Version gives “it is the last hour.” Personally, we prefer “the last time.” By affirming that it is the last time we consider the apostle was announcing that the Jewish economy had passed away—the temple lay in ruins, its priesthood no longer functioned, Jerusalem was trodden down by the Gentiles. Still more definitely, he was averring that this Christian economy is the final one. Calvin (in his *Institutes*) pointed out, “And for this reason the dispensation under which we live is designated in the Scriptures as ‘the last time,’ ‘these last times’ (1Pe 1:20), ‘the last days’ (Act 2:17), that no one might deceive himself with a vain expectation of any new doctrine or revelation.” This Christian dispensation is the one during which the history of this world will be brought to a close: whether or not it will include within its scope and be terminated by what is known as “the millennium” we are not prepared either to affirm or deny; but this we must believe, that no separate and distinct age will follow the present one.

The coming of God’s Son to this earth in human nature introduced the concluding season for this world, in which all its affairs will be wound up. But as Barnes pertinently remarked, “The apostle does not, however, say that the end of the world would soon occur, nor does he intimate how long this dispensation would be. That period might continue through many ages or centuries, and still be the last dispensation.” The concluding era of God’s gracious government over men had arrived. “The world’s history is divided into two sections. The first is the preparatory, and the second is the final. The incarnation of Christ is the goal of the first, and the starting point of the second. John the Baptist, who closed the first period, might have written, ‘It is the first hour.’ And yet the life of John the Baptist was synchronous with the life of John the Apostle, who said, ‘It is the last hour.’ But between those two Johns there stood the milestone that divided the world’s history. To pass that way-mark was to pass from the preparatory to the final, from the old to the new, from law to grace, from prophecy to fulfillment. Before Christ one day had been as a thousand years, but now a thousand years were as one day” (Levi Palmer). So mighty and revolutionizing the change effected by the advent of God’s Son, that henceforth time is measured more by events than by duration. The birth, death, and resurrection of Christ, and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, were events which represented more than all the previous “hours” or seasons of human history.

The proofs for the Scripturalness of the above assertions are many and decisive. It was “when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman” (Gal 4:4), as it is in this “dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one [“family,” 3:15] all things in Christ, both which are in heaven [the holy angels], and which are on earth [redeemed sinners]; even in him” (Eph 1:10). “Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come” (1Co 10:11): not the end of the material world, but (as the Greek means) of the ages. All previous ones were but introductory: they furnished the types, this one has the substance. The last of those periods which God has assigned to the duration of this earth is the present order of things: no new administration of it will follow this era. “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son” (Heb 1:1-2). Finality has been reached: God has nothing further to communicate unto mankind. Christ is His ultimate revelation (compare “last of all he sent unto them his Son,” Mat 21:37): in Him there is the finishing of the unfolding of God’s mind, the conclusion of the making known of His will. There will be nothing higher, nothing further; what God has spoken through Christ will continue unaltered to the end of time.

Another apostle declares that Christ was “foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you” (1Pe 1:20). The Messianic age was at once the consummation of all that preceded it and itself the ultimate divine economy. So also Jude reminded the saints that they had been forewarned how that there should be “mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts” (verse 18), and that this prediction was being fulfilled before their very eyes. Some have wrongly concluded from 1 Peter 1:5, that “the last time” is yet future. There Christians are informed that they are “kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time.” While the “salvation” there mentioned is still future, for it has reference to the completion of their redemption (their resurrection and glorification) when the Lord Jesus shall “appear the second time without sin unto salvation” (Heb 9:28), when the open vision of Him will perfectly conform us unto His holy image (1Jo 3:2); yet that blessed hope will be realized and that glorious event will take place “in the last time” and not in some subsequent age lying beyond the close of this present one.

“John announced ‘that it was the last time’ or the last dispensation, which God intended to introduce on earth, under which He would establish the kingdom of His Son...and this kingdom should continue till all enemies were put under His feet” (T. Scott).⁴²

As indicated above, this Christian dispensation is designated “the last time” for two reasons: first, in relation to former times, which were introductory, paving the way for it; second, in relation unto the remainder of human history, for at the end of it the curtain will fall. There is nothing in the expression itself to determine the length thereof, nothing to intimate that it might not last longer than any previous one or be even more protracted than all others put together. Certainly Christ gave no intimation that His absence would be a brief one. Instead, He foretold that “while the Bridegroom tarried” all would

⁴² **Thomas Scott** (1747-1821) – Anglican minister, born in Lincolnshire, England. He served for some years as parish priest before conversion during correspondence and mentoring from John Newton (1725-1807). He is best known for his *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, his autobiography *The Force of Truth*, and being a founder of the *Church Missionary Society*.

slumber and sleep. He spoke of His departure as “travelling into a far country,” and said that “after a long time” He would return and reckon with His servants (Mat 25:14, 19).

“Since then nineteen centuries have dragged their weary round, but compared to what happened in John’s day, they would not make one hour. And time’s hour glass may yet contain other centuries, or millenniums, or even half an eternity, but compared to what took place in the first century of the Christian era, they can only be as moments or minutes. It is the last hour (or time), although its moments may be centuries, and its minutes millenniums” (Levi Palmer).

We shall give here only the briefest of answers to the third question, reserving our fuller remarks thereon for verse 22 (D.V.).⁴³ Suffice it now to say that an “antichrist” is an antagonist of Christ and a corrupter of His doctrine. From those words “ye have heard that antichrist shall come,” it is clear that the saints of those days, even the youngest of them, were taught to expect that, so far from Christianity making a speedy and complete conquest of the world, there would be fierce opposition against it; that the servants and followers of Christ would be no more acceptable to the unregenerate than was their Master. Yet it must not be supposed that they were entertained with a cheap sensationalism under the guise of “expounding prophecy,” but rather were they informed that it was God’s will that the enmity which He put between the serpent’s seed and Christ’s seed would continue until the end. Therefore they must be prepared to encounter false prophets, and persecution if they withstood them. Implicitly, this “ye have heard that antichrist shall come” was a solemn and urgent exhortation unto believers to contend earnestly for the Faith, and to instruct new converts in the duty of watchfulness against deceivers.

Nor is there any need for us to say much upon the “many antichrists” of the apostle’s day, the chief reference being to the Gnostics⁴⁴ and to such men as Hymenaeus and Philetus (2Ti 2:17-18). In view of the faithful instruction and warnings, which Christians were then receiving from the ministers of God, there was no excuse for any of them being taken unawares and imposed upon. But alas, how sadly were such warnings, generally disregarded is only too evident from history. The Christ-hated doctrine of Balaam and the Nicolaitanes (Rev 2:14-15), and the suffering of one who called herself a prophetess to seduce His servants (2:20) were the precursors of many others in the next three hundred years, and by the close of the sixth century almost the whole of Christendom was as completely deceived as though God had given no warning against the anti-christ, and for almost a thousand years there followed what are known as the “dark ages.” Concerning antichrist, Calvin remarked, “They who suppose that he would be only one man are indeed greatly mistaken,” and then pointed out that such influential heretics as Cerinthus, Marcion, Ebion, etc., “were members of that kingdom which the devil afterward raised up [in the papacy] in opposition to Christ.”

The question, In what way did the presence of many antichrists make it evident that “the last time” had even then begun? also admits of a short and simple answer. As increasing infirmities and failing faculties are sure signs that old age is upon us, so the presence of antichrists was proof that the true Christ had come, and since He had ushered in the final era for this earth, naught remained but the judgment of God—His long-sufferance alone postponing the same. The outstanding characteristic of all former ages was the rejection of the truth, not only in man’s refusal to be subject to God’s Law but particularly that revelation which He had made through the prophets concerning His Son; whereas the most prominent feature of this dispensation is the reception of error, especially seen in the corrupting of the Gospel. As the presence of counterfeit money argues the existence of the genuine, so those who set up themselves against the person and kingdom of Christ are tacit but real witnesses unto the same. The fact, that those false prophets received such a welcome and favourable hearing in John’s day was proof that, to use the language of 1 Peter 4:7, “the end of all things is at hand.”

As to why John brought in 2:18 at this point in his epistle, several reasons may be suggested. First of all, it gave point to his preceding statement. In verse 17 he had said, “the world passeth away,” and now he declares, “it is the last time”—its harvest was ready for the sickle. Thus, second, it was a note of imminency and urgency. In the whole context John had made it clear that the world in which believers are left as witnesses for Christ is a very evil one, and here they are informed that it has entered upon the final stage of its history. It must be “the last time,” for the lowest depths of human depravity have been exhibited in the world’s treatment of God’s Son: the climax of its sinfulness appeared in His precious blood being despised and trampled upon by man’s unbelief. Moreover, the presence of the “many antichrists” was a fearful omen that the final catastrophe was impending, for their evil activities made unmistakably plain the determined and continued antagonism of the world unto Christianity. How evident it is that our present verse, so far from beginning a new paragraph, is a continuation of what went before. In verse 16 we behold how the “darkness,” mentioned in verses 9 and 11, had corrupted the world; here we see the darkness opposing the truth.

Third, verse 18 was brought in for the special benefit of babes in Christ, who are less suspicious of false prophets, and not yet able to say of Satan “we are not ignorant of his devices” (2Co 2:11). Therefore they needed to beware of teachers of error lest they make shipwreck of the Faith, for the words of such “will eat as doth a canker” (2Ti 2:17). The very name “antichrists” should awaken the deepest horror and concern, for it imports that they are opposed to Christ and all who adhere to Him, ready to rob them of every blessing enjoyed in Him. The fact that there were many of them intimated that on every

⁴³ D.V. – *Latin* Deo Volenti; “as God wills.”

⁴⁴ Gnostics – (from Greek *gnosis*, meaning “knowledge”) a group of 2nd and 3rd century heresies that taught escape from the material world through gaining secret knowledge.

side were deadly enemies unto faith and holiness. Of this they "had heard." No truth, which was profitable had been kept from them; everything the apostles had heard from the lips of Christ they faithfully committed to their converts. It therefore behoved them to make a proper use of such instruction, especially since so much contrary to sound doctrine was prevailing. Finally, since this era is the completion of all previous ones, great are the privileges and obligations of the saints.

The practical importance and value of verse 18 for us today lies, principally, in our noting and taking to heart its moral connection with verses 15-17, where a number of reasons are advanced why we must not love the world, while here we are warned against antichrists. There is a far more intimate relation between the state of our hearts and the receptivity or repulsion of our minds to error than is commonly supposed. Yet that relation is not far to seek nor difficult to understand. The doctrine of Scripture "is according to godliness" (1Ti 6:3), and therefore just so far as the heart be in a sound and healthy state will the holy and searching truth of God be acceptable to it. As John points out a little later concerning the false prophets, "They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them" (4:5). Such charlatans quote (and misquote) sufficient of the Bible to deceive the unwary, but they are careful to omit everything unpalatable to the unregenerate, which rebukes carnality or calls to a closer walking with God. They deliberately tone down the truth and prophesy "smooth things." And "the world heareth them," because their rotten hearts fully accord with such preaching.

As we pointed out in a previous article, the world is the sphere where the darkness reigns, and therefore the more a believer comes under its influence the less spiritual perception will he have and the less ability to "try things that differ" (Phi 1:10). It is in God's light that we see light (Psa 36:9), and morally speaking we are far from Him when our affections be set upon things on earth. It is only so long as the sheep follow Christ (walk according to His example, in obedience to His commandments) that "a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him" (Joh 10:4-5). In proportion as the soul finds its satisfaction in Christ will the world repel it; but when the heart grows cold unto Him, the things of the world appeal to it. The first century supplies numerous examples of that sad fact, and not a few wonder how it was possible for so many of the early churches to be corrupted (Rev 2:14-15, 20); the explanation is found in "thou hast left thy first love" (2:4). When a soul or church does that, the door is open for the entry of every possible abomination.

We have an illustration in the case of Isaac of a believer being deceived when his heart is not right with God. How came it that he was tricked by so clumsy a device as Jacob's? He knew that the voice was Jacob's; were then his neck and hands a surer test? Surely not! Then how are we to account for his being imposed upon in a way that no man of the world, with common sense, would be? The answer is, because he was out of communion with the Lord, and when that be the case with any saint he is likely to be deceived by the grossest of shams. It is quite clear from the preceding record that the eye of faith in Isaac was as dim as his natural ones, otherwise he would have discerned the sinfulness and madness of trying to fight against the Most High. He was displeased at God's appointment regarding his two sons, that the elder should serve the younger (Gen 25:23). He deliberately sought to turn the purpose of God into another channel, and in his intention gave to Esau the blessing, which God had said should be Jacob's. It was the flesh and not the Spirit which was dominating him, and that dulled even his natural judgment.

First, Isaac had done wrong in making Esau his favourite, and that because of the venison he provided for him (25:28). Second, he condoned Esau's act in marrying a Hittite (26:34), for as 27:1 indicates, he continued to show partiality unto him. Third, in his old age and as death drew near, he yielded to the lusts of the flesh, determining to gratify his carnal appetite by eating of his savoury meat. No wonder his judgment was blinded. But later, when he was made conscious of his failure to recognize Jacob and of his attempt to set aside God's choice, he "trembled very exceedingly" (27:33). Then it was that his slumbering faith awoke, and the scales fell from his eyes. Now he bowed to the divine will, and in spite of natural prejudice said of the one who had tricked him, "yea, and he shall be blessed."

Now as the allowing of carnality dulls the judgment of a believer, so does the entry into his heart of a spirit of worldliness; consequently he is likely not only to be imposed upon by natural things, but to mistake error for truth. "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine" (Joh 7:17). In order to spiritual perception there must be a steadfast refusal to follow the ways of the world. Error always flourishes most in the soil of worldliness, and it is there that the antichrists meet with success.

Chapter 28

Apostates

1 John 2:19

“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.”

The first of those “perilous times” announced to take place in “the last days”—i.e. the Christian dispensation—had begun. Those “having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof...ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” had appeared in John’s day; men of whom it had to be said: “Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith” (2Ti 3:5-8). The Spirit’s prediction in 1 Timothy 4:1 was likewise receiving a fulfillment: “in the latter times [i.e. the present era] some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils.” Impostors and heretics were rising apace: antichrist had already begun to show himself in the false teachers and seducers, who were his forerunners. It was therefore necessary for the apostle to make reference to a very great evil that had broken out among some of the congregations of the saints, for these apostates had formerly been numbered among and had enjoyed fellowship with them. As Jude also declared, “For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness” (verse 4), by coming out in their true colours as the opposers of His Christ.

“They.” The opening word of our present verse at once makes it apparent that it is closely related to the preceding one, for the “they” has its antecedent in the “many antichrists” of verse 18. There John reminded the newly converted that they had heard antichrist should come, and that many of his tribe were even then in existence, whereby they might know that the last period of the world’s history had already dawned. It must be “the last time,” for God has nothing further to reveal, and therefore it is naught but His longsuffering that prolongs this final hour. Since it be the concluding season for mankind, no higher privileges will ever be vouchsafed to those on earth, and no other means of grace appointed by God than those that are now in existence. Hence the urgent force of that exhortation, “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?” (Heb 2:3).

It was most needful that the saints should take notice of what the apostle had alluded to. *First*, to prevent them from being carried away with the error of the wicked, and thereby fall from their own steadfastness. The only safeguard against that was to continue cleaving unto the Lord, and maintain fellowship with Him by walking in separation from the world. It is when the heart departs from its anchorage that it is liable to be “tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine” (Eph 4:14). When the soul is not at rest, the mind cannot be; instead, it is ever seeking some fresh object to afford it satisfaction. It is the unstable who are always on the wing after some new opinion. King Saul forsook the Lord before he turned to the witch of Endor (1Sa 28:7), as those mentioned in 1 Timothy 4:1 departed from the faith ere they gave heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils. A tender conscience is slow and cautious in receiving the truth, and for that reason holds tenaciously to the same when assured it has it. A tender conscience examines carefully and weighs prayerfully whatever is presented to the mind. Not so a conscience which is seared by the world and put to sleep: with such there is no waiting on God for light, but an independence of mind that leans unto its own understanding (Pro 3:6), and a consequent running after novelties and an espousing of error.

“They went out from us.” Those antichrists were not men who had from the beginning been open antagonists to the truth, but, instead, professing Christians. They were not those who took their rise from among the rejecters of the Gospel, but rather were such as had avowed their belief in and acceptance of the same. Formerly they had walked with the Lord’s people, and then had deserted them. The Greek is even more emphatic, “From among us they went out”; originally they were members of Christian assemblies. The word rendered “us” (*hemon*) occurs again in 1 John 1:3; 3:16, 20 (rendered “our”), 21; 4:6; 5:14-15. The statement that they went out signifies more than a local and corporeal departure, namely one in affection and doctrine. It was far more than their forsaking of any particular church for a season, and then walking irregularly; they became leaders of heretical sects contrary to the glory of Christ and the doctrine of His apostles, denying that

the Son of God had come in the flesh. They were therefore apostates from the faith, repudiators of the Gospel, though most of them still claimed to be “Christians,” yea, peculiarly enlightened and eminent ones.

Our present verse makes still more evident the propriety of the whole passage being addressed more specifically to the spiritual babes, for though all of God’s children need to take the same to heart, the younger ones especially so, since they were the ones most liable to be stumbled by the defection of these apostates. It is always a very disturbing and distressing thing for any of God’s people to see some of those whom they regarded as their fellow Christians apostatizing, the more so when such were members of their own local assemblies. Particularly is that the case with the recently converted. In the glow of his first love and newly found joy, his zeal longs to see his unsaved loved ones brought into the fold. But to behold some of those with whom he was in communion forsaking the church is a severe shock to him, and should some of the preachers he had sat under prove to be traitors and set themselves up in opposition to the truth, that is indeed a shattering blow. Inexperienced as he is, yet unacquainted with the fickleness of human nature and the prevalence of hypocrisy, he little expects to find those whom he considered to be quite orthodox⁴⁵ suddenly becoming thoroughly heterodox.

By thus going out, those men renounced all subjection to the headship of Christ over His churches. Thereby they proclaimed themselves as hypocrites, devoid of any love to Him and His Word. It was a terrible thing to do: they were guilty of the fatal sin of apostasy. They started up new sects, drew away many disciples after them, and corrupted the worship of God. In so doing they disrupted the unity of the faith, producing disorder in Christendom. Now, says the apostle (for such was the scope and design of his words here), be not shaken by this sad sight, for, *first*, you were forewarned that “antichrist should come,” and therefore instead of being perplexed and staggered by what you are now witnessing it should strengthen your faith. *Second*, as I have told you, the appearing of these many antichrists furnishes proof that “the last time” has come. *Third*, it was a word of warning for them to take heed unto themselves, to keep their hearts with all diligence, and to close their ears unto the horrible doctrines which were being propagated by these false prophets. *Finally*, there was, as he went on to state, a needs be why God permitted this tragic occurrence: that the line should be drawn between the genuine and the spurious, the latter being exposed for what they really were.

“*They went out from us.*” There have always been such. Even Moses had to say, “Certain men, the children of Belial, are gone out from among you, and have withdrawn the inhabitants of their city, saying, Let us go and serve other gods” (Deu 13:13). There were false prophets in Israel as well as true ones, as Jehoshaphat discovered (1Ki 22:6-7). Through Jeremiah the Lord said, “Hearken not unto the words of the prophets...for they...prophesy a lie in my name” (27:14-15). Ezekiel was told to “prophesy against the prophets of Israel” and to pronounce a “woe” upon them (13:2-3). Zephaniah declared, “her prophets are light and treacherous” (3:4). At the beginning of His ministry the Lord Jesus gave warning, “Beware of false prophets” (Mat 7:15). The church at Jerusalem found it necessary to send word to the Gentiles, “Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain men which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment” (Act 15:24). The carnality and unbelief of men’s hearts always assure a welcome unto those who speak smooth things in order to win disciples. In his second epistle, Peter announced, “there shall be false prophets among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies,” adding “and many shall follow their pernicious ways: by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of” (2:1-2).

“*But they were not of us.*” John is very definite in repudiating these apostates, careful to point out that they were never anything more than nominal Christians. They had professed faith in the Gospel, had been baptized, received into fellowship with the Lord’s people, and been admitted to His table; some of them had, perhaps, been church officers. John first informs us whence these antichrists sprang, and then he disowns them, denying that they were living branches of the Vine. They originated in Christian assemblies, but forsook the same. It was that which made them the more dangerous, for they knew the better how to sow their pernicious errors, and deceive the unwary. They were falsehearted professors who had cast off the sacred privileges of communion with the regenerate, and acknowledged no obligations to them. They pretended to have greater light, calling themselves Gnostics, or “knowing ones.” But the apostle here gives the lie to their proud boast, and then states a reason for and an explanation of their conduct: “they were not of us”—they were never of one heart and soul with God’s people, for such love the truth above everything on earth, and abhor whatever detracts from it.

“*They were not of us.*” It was very necessary to make this clear, for apparently the Church had produced these vipers and nurtured them in her bosom. John therefore denies that they ever belonged to Christ—“as chaff, though mixed with wheat on the same floor, cannot yet be deemed wheat” (Calvin). They had not obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine, which had been delivered unto them; so far from being all that they seemed, they were but wolves in sheep’s clothing. So it has been ever since. Almost all the heresies that have plagued the churches throughout the centuries originated from persons who were once in good standing in the assemblies. When some old error is revived, it is generally by those who were disaffected⁴⁶ to the saints and apostatized from the truth. Though for a season associated with believers, yet they were never united to them in spirit. As it was in the days of our Lord, “many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him” (Joh 6:66)—they were but nominal “disciples,” for verse 64 tells us they were of those “that believe not.” Paul warned the

⁴⁵ **orthodox** – that which pertains to the body of doctrines that are essential to the Christian faith; this implies consistency in belief and worship with the revelation of Holy Scripture.

⁴⁶ **disaffected** – alienated; resentful and rebellious.

Ephesian saints, “Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Act 20:30); and also lamented, “Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world” (2Ti 4:10).

Strange as it may appear to those who closely examine our present text, it is one of the verses appealed to by those who deny the eternal security of the regenerate. Arminians⁴⁷ quote it in proof of their contention that it is not only possible for those who have been saved by divine grace to fall away and be lost, but that many such have actually done so. But certainly there is nothing here to support their erroneous theory, but that which directly refutes it. Instead of furnishing an example of real Christians falling from grace, it is evident that the characters, which are here in view, never had any grace. Though their names had been registered upon an earthly church roll, they were never written in the Lamb’s Book of Life (Rev 13:8; 17:8; 20:12). They may have had much head knowledge and zeal, but they were destitute of true piety. First, the apostle expressly declared “they were not of us,” and then he added “for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us.” Instead of belonging to the company of God’s elect, they were reprobates.⁴⁸ This is the case with all who repudiate the truth and become teachers of error—they were never genuinely converted! It is a fundamental article of the faith that no regenerate soul is ever suffered finally to apostatize: the honour of God is concerned in the preservation of such, the efficacy of Christ’s redemption secures it, the sufficiency of the Spirit’s indwelling and operations effects it.

A sound expositor always feels himself to be on the safest ground when he is able to interpret Scripture by Scripture: that is, when he can locate another passage that is more or less parallel with the one before him, that uses different language but treats of the same subject. If he knows his Bible, he will naturally turn to Jude, for the distinctive theme of that epistle is “apostasy,” the second half of it describing in detail the character of the false prophets in this “last time.” Now our present text and the nineteenth verse of Jude are a case in point, for the one throws light upon the other, the latter affirming, “These be they who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit.” The first clause corresponds with John’s “they went out from us.” It was not a brief lapse or temporary break in fellowship from the Church that is here in view, but an entire and total forsaking of the same, an unwillingness to be amenable any longer to its doctrine and discipline, and that because of worldly ends and the affectation of vainglory. The second half of the verse amplifies John’s “but they were not of us”: they were *sensual* (the Greek word being rendered “natural” in 1 Corinthians 2:14), unregenerate, “having not the Spirit”—and therefore without any inward restraint upon their carnality, pride, and avarice—unsaved, abandoned by God.

“*For if they had been of us, they would have continued with us.*” There was not need for the supplementary “no doubt” of the translators, in fact it tends to weaken the apostle’s positive announcement. In those words he was supplying proof of his assertion in the foregoing clause. The force of his argument may be stated thus: the regenerate are endowed with a spirit of perseverance and run the race that is set before them, therefore those who quit the race and become apostates could never have been renewed in their hearts. It is the solemn engagement of God’s everlasting covenant that He would put His fear into the hearts of His people, promising “they shall not depart from me” (Jer 32:40)—from faith to infidelity, from Christ to Belial. Thus it is that steadfastness, loyalty, and endurance are among the surest marks of the new birth. Said our Lord, “If ye continue in my word, then are ye [not “shall become such” because of so doing] my disciples indeed” (Joh 8:31, and cf. 1Co 15:2; Heb 3:6, 14). Those who have been divinely quickened will most assuredly remain true to the faith and persevere in holiness to the end of their earthly course. Such may indeed experience many a “fall” (but they “shall not be utterly cast down,” Psa 37:24).

The new birth is a being made partaker of the divine nature (2Pe 1:4), and while that is far from signifying that they are deified, it does mean “such moral qualities as may be imparted to the creature” (Manton). That which is received at regeneration is sometimes called “the life of God” (Eph 4:18), because it is a vital principle of action; sometimes the “image of God” (Col 3:10), because they bear a likeness to Him. One of the “moral qualities” which is imparted to the Christian is that of stability. We read in the Psalms that “the goodness of God endureth continually” (52:1), that “the glory of the LORD shall endure forever” (104:31), that “his righteousness endureth forever” (111:3), and that “his mercy endureth for ever” (136:1). As Christ declared, “they shall never perish” (Joh 10:28). Such a thing is impossible, for they were “born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever” (1Pe 1:23). Thus it is that constancy characterizes them: “and now *abideth* faith, hope, charity” (1Co 13:13). Those graces may indeed wax and wane, but be quenched they shall not. God’s children are deeply rooted trees, and not chaff, which the wind blows away.

“*They would have continued with us.*” Those words were written for the encouragement of believers who feel their own weakness and have no confidence in the flesh; and not to provide a pillow for the presumptuous, nor for slothful fatalists. While they show that no Christian will fall from grace and be lost, yet they do not ignore his responsibility. They include within their scope not only the faithfulness of God in renewing their inner man day by day, but also the discharge of their duty in the use of means. The same power that made them Christians keeps them, yet “*through* faith” (1Pe 1:5)—through the exercise and cultivation of faith, and of all other graces, and not independently thereof. Remember that it is only by cleaving firmly to the words of God’s lips that we can keep ourselves from the paths of the destroyer (Psa 17:4); then heed

⁴⁷ **Arminians/Jacobus Arminius** (1560-1609) – Dutch theologian, born in Oudewater, The Netherlands. He rejected the Reformers’ understanding of predestination, teaching instead that God’s predestination of individuals was based on His foreknowledge of their accepting or rejecting Christ by their own free will.

⁴⁸ **reprobates** – unbelievers left in their sins and abandoned by God to judgment (Romans 1-2).

the injunction, “Prove all things” (1Th 5:21), and give not place to “itching ears.” It is not sufficient for us to shun the hearing or reading of false teaching; we also need to be constantly on our guard against inward defection, mortifying our lusts (Col 3:5), and taking heed to the first decay of our love. It is much cause for thankfulness when we can truly say, “I have stuck unto thy testimonies” (Psa 119:31).

“But they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.” In this clause John states the reason why God had suffered the presence of antichrists, therefore it would probably be more perspicuous⁴⁹ to supply “But [this occurred] that they might be made manifest,” for the “they went out” was already definitely stated. Such characters are raised up by God to disturb the peace of the churches in order that the true may be distinguished from the false. Error serves as a flail to separate the wheat from the chaff. “For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you” (1Co 11:19). Let some plausible and popular preacher come forward with an old error decked out in new clothes, and empty professors will at once flock to his standard; but not so those who are established in the truth. Thus, by means of false prophets, God purges His garner,⁵⁰ and makes it appear who are the ones who hold the truth in sincerity. The genuine gold endures every test to which it is subjected. Those who turn away from orthodoxy to heterodoxy must not be regarded as real Christians. Had these men been truly one with God’s people in a personal experience of His saving grace, nothing could have induced them to apostatize.

As God Himself raised up these antichrists for His own wise reasons, so He also caused them to forsake the assemblies of the saints—to make it evident that they were but formal members, and of a totally different family from His own children. Previously they had every appearance of being the genuine article, but by their defection and opposition to Christ they were now revealed as counterfeits. He who searches the heart and tries the reins was determined to give definite proof that they were unregenerate men. Let them boast as loudly as they pleased of being among the Lord’s beloved ones, their conduct gave the lie to such a claim; they never had any root in Christ, but were merely external and temporary followers. Those whom God gives up unto strong delusion to believe a lie (2Th 2:11) are such as never truly received His truth in the love of it, for none of His people are ever suffered to deny the faith after their conversion. Since they never “knew the grace of God in truth” (Col 1:6), He left them to the pride and corruptions of their hearts and the wiles of Satan, to be deceived into the espousing and propagating of fatal heresies. And though they drew many professing Christians after them, their divisions served a useful and necessary purpose, inasmuch as they made manifest those who were the friends and those who were the enemies of Christ.

Chapter 29

Our Anointing

1 John 2:20

*“But ye have an unction from the Holy One,
and ye know all things”*

From what was before us in the last article, it is clear that the preaching of the apostles themselves did not result in the conversion of all who were convinced of its verity. From a very early date God made it appear that the gospel net enclosed bad fishes as well as good ones (Mat 13:47-48), that not all who took upon them the name of Christ were His disciples indeed. What Paul predicted in Acts 20:30-31 was soon fulfilled: nominal Christians apostatized from the faith, disturbed the peace and harmony of the churches—prejudicing many against God’s faithful servants, alluring such to follow them and organize themselves into heretical sects and schisms. Yet both 1 John 2:19, and Jude 1:19 furnish conclusive proof that such men were devoid of true piety. It is therefore a mark of God’s goodness and mercy unto His people when His providence so orders it, that those who are not one with them at heart, but who in fact hate all that is holy, should withdraw from them. It is a blessing to the churches when those who are determined to walk after their own lusts forsake their fellowship, for while they remain they are but Achans who draw down the judgment of God upon the whole congregation (Jos 7:20 ff.).

⁴⁹ **perspicuous** – clear in statement or expression; lucid; easily understood.

⁵⁰ **garner** – granary; a building where grain is stored.

Some of the very worst sins men are guilty of may be committed under the purest preaching of the gospel and the most spiritual administration of its ordinances. The antichrists referred to by John are a definite case in point. None can be supposed to have clearer light externally into the doctrine and practice, worship and discipline, of genuine Christianity than those apostates enjoyed; yet none ever sinned more willingly and perversely. We too have beheld those who departed from the truth: men like blazing comets for a season, professing to have superior light and sanctity, who are greatly admired and secure a large following, yet who are of their father, the devil (Joh 8:44). Yet such occurrences should not shake the saints. When Paul made mention of two heretics of his day, “who concerning the truth have erred...and overthrow the faith of some,” he at once added, “nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure” (2Ti 2:18-19)—the combined effort of Satan and all his agents cannot shake it. “The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations” (Psa 33:11). His Church is built upon the Rock of ages and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it!

Paul then went on to say, “The Lord knoweth them that are his,” which means not only that He recognizes them amid the mass of professors (which we are not always able to do), but that He loves them and makes all things work together for their good. Then the apostle added, “Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.” The fact that God overrules the perfidy of apostates to His own glory and the good of His people, by making manifest hypocrites on the one hand and those who are approved of Him on the other, does not excuse the former—nor must we palliate their awful guilt, but shun them as a plague. And while those who by grace remain steadfast to Christ and His gospel are not to be stumbled by the infidelity of graceless professors, yet they are to take the same to heart and turn it into earnest prayer, crying, “O let me not wander from thy commandments” (Psa 119:10). Say not in a spirit of fatalism, “If I have been born again I shall never perish,” for God gives warning: “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1Co 10:12). God has not promised to preserve the reckless. To affirm that He will preserve us whether or not we use the means of grace is not the language of faith, but of presumption and impiety. True faith produces a spirit of humility and self-distrust. True faith causes us to work out our own salvation “with fear and trembling” (Phi 2:12).

“*But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things*” (verse 20). This is in sharp and blessed contrast with what has been before us in the preceding verses, and shows the gracious provision that the Lord has made for “His own” to preserve them from embracing fatal error. The antichrists had formerly been admitted to communion with the saints, but their subsequent apostasy proved that (like Judas) they had been hypocrites from the beginning. They were of the world and not of God, for His truth dwelt not in their “inward parts” (Psa 51:6). Had they been born of Him, they would have remained faithful to Christ and His Gospel. God permitted them to forsake the assemblies of His saints, to make it evident that they had never received the anointing, which is from above. By their defection they only made more apparent the real people of God, who will not sell the truth at any price. Many appear to take the yoke of Christ upon them, but afterwards fall away and return to their wallowing in the mire; but those who are effectually called persevere unto the end—for the Spirit has been given to be with them “for ever” (Joh 14:16), and the prevalent intercession of Christ ensures their preservation (Heb 7:25). Thus the distinction between the two classes is made to be seen more clearly.

The relation of our present verse to the one immediately preceding, which mentions the going out of certain ones from the churches, was well expressed by J. Morgan:

“They had been exposed to the temptation of false teachers, and they did not endure the test. They were drawn away by the speculative errors presented to them, and so evidenced that they were not ‘rooted and grounded’ in the truth. On the contrary those whom the apostle commends in our text had remained firm in the midst of all attempts to seduce them from the faith.”

Thus the blessedness of our present verse is greatly enhanced by the sharp antithesis presented in the foregoing: the former supplying a dark background to bring out into clearer relief the excellence of this gift of the Saviour’s—the antichrists, the anointing. Those words clearly intimate that John entertained no fear that any of the saints would apostatize and bring reproach upon the cause of Christ. They had received such an unction from above as enabled them to understand and lay hold of those things which belonged to their everlasting peace, and which insured their perseverance in the faith.

Brief though our present verse be, it possesses a fullness that no expositor or commentator can exhaust. It treats of that which in our day receives but scant attention. It speaks of one of the outstanding benefits and blessings that God bestows on His people.

“*But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things.*” What is meant by the “unction” (or “anointing,” for that is the meaning of *chrisma*, and it is so translated in verse 27) that believers are here said to have? Who is meant by “the Holy One” from whom it comes? What is signified by “and ye know all things”? In what sense or senses do they “know” them? Important questions are these, yet none of them is difficult to answer. We shall, however, consider the second one first and ponder the Anointer, then the anointing, and last the anointed.

The Anointer

Who is the Anointer or “Holy One?” It is surprising that one of Albert Barnes’s⁵¹ acumen should say it is the Holy Spirit, for there is not the least room for doubt that it is the Lord Jesus Christ who is here in view. As the Son of God, He is essentially holy, as appears by comparing Isaiah 6:1 with John 12:41. In His humanity, impeccably⁵² holy (Luk 1:35). In His life upon earth, ineffably⁵³ holy (Heb 7:26). In His official character He was prefigured by Israel’s high priest, who wore upon his forehead a plate of pure gold on which was inscribed “Holiness to the Lord” (Exo 28:36). In Old Testament prophecy He was designated the “Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel” (Isa 41:14, cf. 54:5). In the days of His flesh the demons owned Him as “the Holy One of God” (Luk 4:34). After His ascension the apostles referred to Him as “the Holy One” (Act 3:14). Thus it is abundantly clear from the Scriptures that “the Holy One” is one of the Redeemer’s divine titles; for as none but God is essentially holy, and Christ is the Holy One, then He must be God!

Further, that the Lord Jesus is the person from whom God’s people receive an unction, appears from the fact that not only is He the “Holy One,” but He is also “the Christ” or the Anointed One. He was not only chosen and ordained to the mediatorial office, but furnished for the same by anointing. During the Old Testament economy, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed unto and confirmed in their office by anointing (Lev 8:12; 2Sa 5:3; 1Ki 19:16), pointing forward to Him who should be, in His own person, Prophet, Priest, and Potentate alike. The anointing of the Redeemer was announced in Messianic prophecy: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach glad tidings unto the meek” (Isa 61:1). That was fulfilled at His entrance upon His public ministry, when “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil” (Act 10:38)—the historical reference being to what is recorded in Matthew 3:16, when the Spirit of God descended like a dove and lighted upon Him. It was the furnishing of the God-man Mediator with all the necessary gifts for the discharge of His office (Isa 11:1-2). Immediately after, He was said to be “full of the Holy Ghost” (Luk 4:1).

The Lord Jesus is denominated the *Messiah* (the Hebrew term) and the *Christ* (the Greek) from this unction of the Spirit, for each of those two titles signifies “The Anointed One.” At the triumphant completion of His work, when He ascended into heaven, the Saviour was again anointed by God—anointed with the oil of gladness above His fellows (Heb 1:9)—when He received the Spirit to pour out upon His disciples; there termed “the oil of gladness” to celebrate His victory and exaltation, and to denote His deliverance from any further trouble and distress. As Peter declared of Christ on the day of Pentecost, “Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this” (Act 2:33). “I beheld...a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth” (Rev 5:6). In each of those passages the ascended Christ is seen dispensing this gift, conferring the Spirit on His people. In His mediatorial work, Christ fully met all the claims of God upon His people, and in proof thereof He has been given the Spirit to communicate to them. This is clear from Galatians 3:13-14: Christ’s gift of the Spirit is the result of His removing God’s curse from us, and thereby putting away our sins. His forerunner declared, “He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost” (Mar 1:8).

Christ had referred to the Comforter thus: “whom I will send unto you from the Father” (Joh 15:26). And again, “If I depart, I will send him unto you” (Joh 16:7). Such passages as those contain the balancing truth to Isaiah 11:1-3 and 61:1-2, where the Mediator is viewed as subordinate to the Spirit; but in Revelation 3:1, He has the Spirit, in John 15:26, He promises to send the Spirit, and in Acts 2:33, He actually bestows Him—so there we see the Spirit subordinate to the Son. Put the two together, and we learn that there is a conjoined mission in which the Son and the Spirit act in unison for the salvation of God’s elect: the Son *effecting* their redemption, the Spirit *applying* it. Moreover, while the Spirit is from Christ, likewise His great mission is to direct souls to Christ. “As the Spirit never acts but in and through Christ with respect to His people, so Christ is never received but by and with the influences of the Spirit. They are as united in Their operations as in Their essence” (Ambrose Serle). That Christ received the Spirit to bestow upon His redeemed was blessedly prefigured in the anointing of the high priest, of which we read, “The precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron’s beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments” (Psa 133:2)—reaching to the lowest of his members!

The Anointing

“*But ye have an unction from the Holy One.*” Believers have nothing but what they have in and from Christ: it is “of His fullness” that all of them receive “and grace for grace” (Joh 1:16). The Spirit is given to Christ *immediately*, [and] to us *derivatively*, for in all things He has the pre-eminence. “For God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto Him” (Joh 3:34), whereas in our case, “unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (Eph 4:7). The Spirit dwells in Christ by *radiation*, in us by *operation*. Therefore, as communicating to us by the Saviour, He is denominated the

⁵¹ **Albert Barnes** (1798-1870) – American theologian; born in Rome, New York; graduated from Hamilton College and Princeton Theological Seminary. He was the pastor successively of the Presbyterian Church in Morristown, New Jersey and of the First Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia. He was an eloquent preacher, but his reputation rests chiefly on his expository works, which are said to have had a larger circulation both in Europe and America than any others of their class. Of the well-known *Notes on the New Testament*, it is said that more than a million volumes had been issued by 1870.

⁵² **impeccably** – incapable of sin.

⁵³ **ineffably** – so extreme in degree as not to be able to be expressed.

“Spirit of Christ” (Rom 8:9) and “the Spirit of his Son” (Gal 4:6). This is one of the vital points on which “the Greek Catholic Church” errs, for she insists that the Spirit proceeds from the Father only. That is a most serious error, for there is no higher exhibition of the Godhead of the Saviour than the fact that He is represented in the Scriptures to be the Possessor and the Sender of the Spirit to His redeemed; nothing more clearly demonstrates the full equality of the Son with the Father. It is a decisive proof of His deity; for no mere servant of God, however exalted his station, could possibly confer such a gift as the Spirit Himself.

There was a peculiar propriety in saying that the believer’s unction is “from the Holy One,” for the purpose of the same is to make him holy. As Haupt rightly pointed out, “The fundamental idea of anointing in the Old Testament is the setting apart of an object from a common use to the service of God—from the world to holy fellowship. It must be remembered that things as well as persons—the vessels of the tabernacle, etc. (Lev 8:10-11)—were anointed in order for a separation from a profane to a sacred use. The stone which Jacob anointed was set apart as the place where God had manifested Himself (Gen 28:18).” Thus, here, the anointing is both the communication of a spiritual gift and an operation, which separates the individual from the world and all that is opposed to God, consecrating him to Him. It was so with the Lord Jesus Himself, for the coming of the Spirit upon Him was both the endowing of Him for His mediatorial work (Isa 61:1) and the divine setting apart of Him unto His mission (Mat 3:16-17). Thus it is with His members. The unction He received He imparts to them. He is the Anointer, they are the anointed ones, and as such the Christs of the Christ, He being designated “the Christ” (Mat 16:16), “the Christ of God” (Luk 9:20), “the Lord Christ” (Col 3:24) by way of eminence.

The Holy Spirit is the vital bond of union with Christ. The One cannot be without the Other. If we have Christ as our Saviour, we have the Spirit for our Indweller. When Christ takes possession of anyone, He puts the Spirit within him; if he lacks the latter, he has no saving interest in the former. That is unmistakably clear from, “Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his” (Rom 8:9). He who claims to belong to the Lord Jesus and gives no evidence of being indwelt by the Spirit of Christ lacks the only irrefragable⁵⁴ proof that establishes the validity of his claim, and thus his profession is falsified. We cannot be Christ’s “fellows” (Heb 1:9) unless we are His brethren or companions, and that cannot be without partaking of His anointing. This it is that distinguishes “the wise virgins” from the foolish ones, the actual possessors from graceless professors,⁵⁵ the former having “oil in their vessels” (Mat 25:4). In due course, all of God’s elect receive this unction: “Now he which establisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God” (2Co 1:21)—a decisive proof that Christ, our Anointer, is divine. At regeneration we are made members of Christ’s mystical body, partakers in our measure of those gifts and graces that our Head received without measure.

The Anointed

Both Christ and His Church come under this office-act of God the Spirit, for as the Redeemer could not have been the Messiah without His unction, neither could the Church have been His spouse without the same. As it was from the Spirit’s unction that the Lord Jesus received His name “the Christ,” so it is from their being anointed ones that believers receive their name “Christians” (1Pe 4:16), signifying that they are anointed with the Spirit. This it is which is the distinguishing mark of every truly born-again soul: he is made the temple of the Holy Spirit. Yet we say again, it is not the Spirit who anoints us; rather is He the unction wherewith we are anointed by Christ. Even where the Saviour Himself was concerned, the Spirit was not the Anointer, but His anointing, for He was anointed by the Father (Act 4:27). Our anointing is by a holy Saviour (Rom 8:2) to fit us for holy converse and walking with Him. It is received out of His fullness (Col 2:9-10). We can have no gift or grace but in and by and from the Lamb of God. The love of the Father centers in Christ Jesus our Lord, and flows through Him to us (Rom 8:39). The apostle, then, would keep our eyes fixed on Christ, the Holy One; then let us praise Him for this “unction,” which is the fruit of His death for us.

The anointing of believers sanctifies and consecrates them as kings and priests unto God (Rev 1:6) as those persons were typically during the Old Testament era. “Whereas, therefore, those titles denote the dignity of believers in their especial relation unto God, by this unction they are peculiarly dedicated and consecrated unto Him” (John Owen⁵⁶). The Spirit then takes up His abode within their hearts with all His graces, operations, gifts, and enablings. He does so on a twofold basis. First, on the ground of redemption: in the types, the oil (emblem of the Spirit) was always placed upon the blood (Lev 14:14, 17)—it is on the ground of *atonement accomplished* that the Spirit comes to believers, which at once sets aside human merits. Yet, second, there must be a moral fitness as well. The Spirit of God will not dwell within unbelieving rebels: “After [or “when”] that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise” (Eph 1:13). When we repudiate all idols, surrender to Christ as Lord, and trust in the efficacy of His sacrifice, the heart is prepared for the Spirit to enter and take pos-

⁵⁴ **irrefragable** – that which cannot be overthrown; incontestable; undeniable.

⁵⁵ **graceless professors** – those who make a profession of faith but who are not truly “saved,” i.e., who have not received a new heart in regeneration.

⁵⁶ **John Owen** (1616-1683) – called “The Prince of the Puritans.” He was a chaplain in the army of Oliver Cromwell and vice-chancellor of Oxford University, but most of his life he served as a minister in congregational churches. His written works span forty years and run to twenty-four volumes representing among the best resources for theology in the English language. Born to Puritan parents in the Oxfordshire village of Stadhampton.

session for Christ's use. When we give up ourselves to Christ, He owns the dedication by making our bodies the temples of the Holy Spirit, there to maintain His interests against all the oppositions of the devil.

"But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things." The first benefit that believers have by this anointing is an *illumination of their minds*. Not that the Spirit imparts any superior mental endowment, or that anything over and above what is contained in Holy Writ is revealed to them; rather does He enable them to perceive what the natural man cannot discern (1Co 2:14), by His effectual application of the truth to their hearts. In order to see, two things are necessary: the organ of vision within, and light from without—the Spirit imparts the former, the Scripture furnishes the latter. Their knowledge is such as to deliver from fatal delusions and preserve them from apostasy. As Levi Palmer aptly declared, "The departure of the antichrists [verse 19] shows the supreme importance of our abiding discipleship. But in order thus to abide, it is necessary to have what may be called a divine tuition, whereby we may be able to detect error. Neither heart nor intellect will do—nothing can be sufficient less than the 'seven eyes, which are the Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth' (Rev 5:6; R.V. margin). It is this power of spiritual discernment that all believers receive in the gift of the Spirit."

Chapter 30

Christian Knowledge

1 John 2:21

*"I have not written unto you because ye know not the truth,
but because ye know it, and that no lie is of the truth."*

"But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things" (verse 20). It is important to perceive the intimate connection between those two things: the believer's anointing and his knowledge are related as are cause and effect. Not only are the regenerate separated from the world by this unction, but they are also distinguished from the unregenerate in point of essential knowledge. The gift of the Spirit consecrates their souls and bodies as His temples to dwell in, and His gracious operation within imparts to them the true knowledge of divine things. As we saw in our last, when we dwelt almost entirely upon the first part of the verse, the Spirit, which Christ received without measure, He communicates to His redeemed in a degree suited to finite creatures. In consequence thereof they are sharers, in their measure, of His knowledge, so that they can say, "we have the mind of Christ" (1Co 2:16). Himself the Wisdom of God, His saved ones are the children of wisdom (Mat 11:19), the children of light. Thus, from another angle, verse 20 is a reiteration of "which thing [namely the exercise of brotherly love] is true [is realized] in him and in you" (verse 8): in Him originally, in us derivatively; in Him essentially, in us reflectively; in Him perfectly, in us faultily.

"But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things." The last clause, equally with the first, calls for the expositor, that its meaning may be made clear. It is another example where we must distinguish between the sound and the sense of Scripture. To take the "ye know all things" at its face value, without restriction, would be to affirm that the regenerate are omniscient—a manifest absurdity. Let this be duly noted by those who are so fond of saying, "Scripture always means what it says, and requires no explaining by man." There is not a little in the Bible that requires a divinely qualified teacher to interpret, for it is God's general way to make use of such in "opening" His Word to the rank and file of His people. "Ye know all things" signifies that those who have received the Spirit are given a saving apprehension of the fundamental parts of the Gospel, so that they are brought out of darkness into God's marvelous light, and thereby fitted to commune with and obey Him. Believers can say that God "hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true" (1Jo 5:20), and knowing Him, they know all things that are necessary to their everlasting well-being. "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (Joh 17:3).

We can have no saving and sound knowledge of divine things without this anointing, for the natural man is incapable of discerning spiritual things. All the teaching of men, even of the Lord's most faithful and eminent servants, is inefficacious without it. God cannot be apprehended merely by the intellectual faculty, for He is spirit (Joh 4:24), and therefore can be known only by those who are made spiritual. A living knowledge of God consists of a personal discovery of Him to the heart, such as conveys a true, supernatural, affecting realization of His surpassing excellence. When He makes such a discovery of Himself to the soul, its favoured recipient exclaims, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee" (Job 42:5), as a glorious reality.

Note well, John did not say, “we know all things,” but “ye”: it was not a privilege peculiar to the apostles. Nor is this an experience reserved for the “fathers” in Christ only: rather is it shared by all the renewed. Said the Saviour to His Father, “Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes” (Mat 11:25). Contextually the “and ye know all things” means that by the gracious teaching of the Spirit believers are granted an experiential and effectual knowledge of divine things so that no propagator of error can fatally deceive them. He alone can impart that wisdom which secures against delusions. The Spirit of Truth communicates such a personal and practical acquaintance with the things of God as preserves from total apostasy. Still more narrowly, they are admitted into a saving acquaintance with the person and work of Christ, which the antichrists denied. Not that any are vouchsafed a perfect knowledge, for in this life we only “see through a glass, darkly” (1Co 13:12); nor all Christians to the same degree and extent. But each one has so opened to him the mysteries of grace that he is secured against all the ruinous cheats of the enemy—it is to be noted that in 2 Corinthians 1:21, “establisheth” and anointing are linked together.

If, however, the “and ye know all things” be interpreted in the light of the general analogy of faith, it has a much wider meaning: “The whole truth concerning Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Father, in all its bearings on the divine character and counsels, as well as on human experience and hope” (Calvin). Let us amplify the second part of the Reformer’s definition.

Assurance

It is with the desire to help some of our weaker and fearing brethren that we now enter into detail. Such are inclined seriously to doubt that they have “an anointing from the Holy One”; for so far from being assured that they savingly “know all things,” they are painfully conscious of their ignorance.

1. Then, first, those who have received this anointing are firmly persuaded that the Bible is the Word of God, so that they doubt not its inspiration, nor question its authority. A work of grace is attended with a spiritual conviction of the judgment of the reality and certainty of divine things. Its subjects are assured of the truth of the Gospel, so that they no longer halt between two opinions of its origin. God’s way of salvation ceases to be a doubtful thing to them. These are matters which are settled in their minds beyond any dispute, so that they value them above all else. They know the Bible to be God’s Word, for it has judged and searched them, exposing the secrets of their hearts (Heb 4:12-13). They have the weight and power of it on their souls.

2. Second, they have a *humbling and experiential knowledge of sin*, not merely from an awakened conscience, but more immediately from the anointing they have received. The former occupies the mind more with sin’s consequences, the latter with its nature. The Holy Spirit is the great Convicter of sin (Joh 16:8). It is an essential part of His office work to remove the scales from the eyes of those in whom He operates, so that they behold Him in the light of God’s holiness. As He does so, the soul perceives the awful sinfulness of sin: its excuselessness, its filthiness, its vileness; that it is “that abominable thing” which the Lord hates (Jer 44:4). The soul now realizes what all sin really is, namely a revolt against God, an opposition to Him, the outbreaking of the heart’s inveterate enmity against Him. The Holy Spirit brings to light the hidden things of darkness and makes the convicted soul recognize that the whole of his life has been one of self-seeking and self-pleasing, of continuous insubjection to God. That brings him to condemn himself as a guilty criminal, as a vile leper,⁵⁷ and to take his place before God in the dust.

3. Third, they know *what real repentance is*, not only theoretically, but practically. As the sinner learns what he is in himself—in a state of depravity, darkness, and death, utterly unfit for the presence of God—he is overwhelmed with horror and anguish. God now reproves him, setting his sins in order before his eyes (Psa 50:16-21), so that he exclaims, “my sin is ever before me” (Psa 51:3). “The arrows of the Almighty” stick in his heart so that he cannot get rid of them (Job 6:4). He is made to feel what an evil and bitter thing it is to treat his Maker with contempt. He realizes that he has acted toward God with the basest ingratitude, abusing His goodness, perverting His mercies, despising His authority. His comeliness is turned into corruption (Dan 10:8), and he cries, “Woe is me! for I am undone” (Isa 6:5). He is filled with the most poignant sorrow for having offended so infinitely gracious a Being as the Majesty of heaven. He confesses, “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight” (Psa 51:4).

4. Fourth, they know *Christ as the sinner’s Saviour*. They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. None but those with an urgent sense of need really turn unto the great Physician. It is only those who are conscious of being heavily laden who come unto Christ for relief and rest (Mat 11:28). Yet so legalistic and self-righteous is the human heart that, generally, a convicted sinner sets about his reformation and gives himself earnestly to religious performances, hoping to find peace for his conscience therein. But proving all self-efforts to be utterly vain, he is driven to despair. Then it is that his heart is prepared to welcome the good news of the Gospel. Then it is that this anointing gives him to see that Christ is in every way suited to his wretchedness, that His finished work is perfect, that His blood and righteousness require nothing whatever to be added unto them, that His so-great salvation is free, without money and without price (Isa 55:1). The blessed Spirit now works faith in such a soul, causing him to place his entire confidence in the Lord Jesus for the whole of his salvation. *Now* it is that he personally knows Christ to be an all-sufficient Saviour.

⁵⁷ See Pink’s tract *Vile*, available from Chapel Library.

Verse 21

*“I have not written unto you because ye know not the truth,
but because ye know it, and that no lie is of the truth” (vs. 21).*

Once more the apostle inserts an explanatory word (compare 1:4; 2:1, 12-14), stating why he has penned this section of his epistle. The frequency with which he did so strikingly evinced his modesty. Can the reader imagine “the Pope” of Rome, when sending a message to his “cardinals and priests,” condescending to give any reason for his conduct? No indeed, he is far too self-important and arrogant to do so. Not so this honoured ambassador of Christ, who almost apologizes for writing what he has. He pauses to assure them that it is not because he deems them to be uninstructed, nor because he fears they are unsound, or even wavering, in the faith. Those are points on which the saints are very tender, resenting any suspicion upon their orthodoxy. Thus, this explanatory word of John’s was not only a mark of his humility, but a delicate consideration of their feelings as well. He would at once relieve their minds by letting them know that he entertained no doubts about their spiritual intelligence, but assured them that, since they had received an unction from the Holy One, he was fully persuaded that they were savingly acquainted with the Gospel in all its parts.

Yet as we first ponder this verse as a whole, there seems to be somewhat of a lack of coherence between it and the remainder of the passage of which it forms a part. After consulting many expositors, we consider that John Gill best perceived its force. He suggested that the apostle was here obviating an objection, which he saw might be made against what he had last said. Since he acknowledged that they “knew all things,” why was it necessary for him to write as he was here doing? To this question John replies that he writes to them not as *ill-informed* but as *instructed* ones. They “knew the truth”: the Father as “the God of truth” (Jer 10:10), Christ as the embodiment of the truth (Joh 14:6), the Spirit as “the Spirit of truth” (Joh 15:26), the Scriptures as “the word of truth” (Eph 1:13), by which the truth is to be defended and confirmed. If they had not “known the truth,” it had been to no purpose for him to write them about the antichrists. Moreover, though they were already taught of God, it was very proper for him to declare afresh those things which were most surely believed by them (Luk 1:1), that they might be still further established in the faith and fortified against false doctrine.

The connection between our present verse and the preceding one appears too in that there the “ye know all things” (as the result of the Spirit’s anointing) is here defined more definitely as a knowledge of “the truth,” and therefore qualified to detect error. As Calvin expressed it, “they would be able readily to distinguish between light and darkness because they had the Spirit for their guide.” From the above paragraph it will be seen that we do not restrict “the truth” in our text to either the personal Word or the written Word. We are always wary of limiting any biblical expression. Christ Himself is “the truth,” because the whole truth of God is summed up and embodied in Him. Equally, as Christ said to the Father, “Thy word is truth” (Joh 17:17). Even where the truth is already known, there needs to be “precept upon precept, line upon line” (Isa 28:10). As Jude said, “I will therefore put you in remembrance, though ye once knew this” (verse 5); and Paul, “To write the same things to you, to me is not grievous, but for you it is safe” (Phi 3:1). Not only are the eyes of our understanding opened gradually, but memory is weak, affections sluggish, and much opposition is made by the flesh. Truth requires to be driven home, blow upon blow, if it is to be fixed “as a nail in a sure place” (Isa 22:23). Christ often repeated the same thing.

The nature of the believer’s knowledge

Having shown above something of the scope and contents of the believer’s knowledge, let us now consider the kind or nature of it. There is a real and radical difference between the knowledge that a Christian has of the things of God and that which non-Christians may obtain of them, as there is between the substance and the shadow cast by it. The latter is but “the form of knowledge” (Rom 2:20), a merely *traditional*, intellectual, and historical knowledge, such as children have when they are taught to read and memorize the Scriptures without believing or understanding them. Later, it becomes an *opinionative* knowledge, so that they form their own ideas about certain doctrines or aspects of the truth, and are able to discuss and dispute about them; yet it cannot be said of them that “wisdom entereth into” their hearts (Pro 2:10). They do not act out what they talk about. Yet there is a *further degree* of this speculative and theoretical knowledge, which may in some measure exercise their conscience and work upon their natural affections so as to offer opposition to temptations from without. They may be influenced thereby to lead moral and decent lives, so as to escape “the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the [not “their”] Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2Pe 2:20), yet their knowledge falls far short of conforming them to the image of God’s Son (Rom 8:29).

1. The difference between gracious and graceless professors as to their knowledge lies not so much in the *matter* as in the *manner* of it. Some of the latter may greatly outstrip the former in the extent of their theological lore, and yet know nothing yet as they ought to know, nothing in a right manner, nothing spiritually; whereas the excellence of a believer’s knowledge lies not in the largeness of his apprehension of divine things, but that he sees them in the light and knows them in the power of the Spirit, so as to produce communion and walking with God. “The kingdom of God is not in word, but in power” (1Co 4:20), which means that the rule or dominion which God has over the hearts of His children is not a theory but a reality; it consists not in bare notions, nor in confident assertions, but in God’s working effectually in the soul. “For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance” (1Th 1:5), inclining the heart to heavenly things. When the effects and fruits of the Gospel are accomplished in the inner man, an indelible

and affecting impression is made upon the soul, such as the apostle had reference to when he said, “even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you” (1Co 1:6).

2. Christian knowledge is an *experiential* one. The different aspects of truth are no longer abstract propositions to him, but are by the effectual operation of the Spirit wrought into the very warp and woof of his soul. Hitherto he had at best only a nominal information of them, but now he has an inward and intuitive realization of the same. To the Jews Christ said, “I am not come of myself, but he that sent me is true, whom you know not” (Joh 7:28). Despite all their boasted belief in the one only, true and living God (Rom 2:17-18), they were at heart complete strangers to Him—well informed theologically, they had no spiritual union with Him. Nor had the writer or the Christian reader, until they could say, “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2Co 4:6). It is only by an inward revelation that He is savingly known: “and called me by his grace, to reveal his Son in me” (Gal 1:15-16).

3. Christian knowledge is a *soul-humbling* and self-abasing one. That knowledge of divine things, which is received in a natural way from men or from the reading of books, “puffeth up” (1Co 8:1), producing self-esteem and presumption. But that spiritual knowledge which comes from God reveals to a person his empty conceits, his ignorance, his worthlessness. The teaching of the Spirit convinces the soul what a miserable failure he is, how very far short he falls of measuring up to the standard of conduct set before him, what horrible corruptions indwell him, and that makes him little in his own eyes. Among those born of women was not greater than John the Baptist—wondrous were the privileges granted him, abundant the light he was favoured with—yet he felt that “I am not worthy to unloose” Christ’s shoe’s latchet (Luk 3:16). None granted such an insight into heavenly things as Paul, yet he regarded himself as being not “the greatest Bible teacher of the age,” but as “less than the least of all saints” (Eph 3:8).

4. Christian knowledge is a *certifying* one. Its glorious object is no longer known speculatively and inferentially, but truly and immediately—not by a process of reasoning, but directly. He who is spirit and invisible is made visible and palpable to the soul: Moses endured “as seeing him who is invisible” (Heb 11:27)—God was real to his faith though imperceptible to his senses. Believers know “the grace of God in truth” (Col 1:6) by a sensible experience. As it is one thing for a friend to call upon us and inform us that the wind is biting cold, and quite another for us to walk with him or her to the bus and have the frost nip our nose and ears; so it is a very different thing to hear the preacher saying God’s grace is sufficient for His children, and for them to prove the sustaining power of the same under the most trying and painful afflictions. So, too, to read that God is a prayer-hearing God, and for me to obtain definite and wonderful answers to my petitions. Again, as I ponder Romans 7, I know it is a true and accurate description of the saint’s inward conflict, for it is verified in myself.

5. Christian knowledge is an *operative* one, for it is not a species of information that adds to our mental store, but an inspiration that stirs the soul unto action. However scriptural be the notions possessed by the natural man, they exert no sanctifying influence upon him, and yield no godliness of character and conduct. His light is like that of the moon: it quickens not, nor produces fruit; however orthodox, it leaves the heart cold and barren. Whereas, the light which the blessed Spirit communicates is like that of the sun: it not only illumines the understanding, but it searches the conscience, moves the will, and sets the heart on fire for God. His teaching is dynamical, having a vitalizing effect upon the whole of the inner man, stirring its subject unto holy endeavours. Spiritual knowledge is intensely practical, altering the disposition, producing obedience, conforming unto Christ.

There are multitudes in Christendom today of whom it must be said that they are “ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2Ti 3:7). They are not only regular attenders upon preaching, but many of them are even engaged in running around to one special “meeting” or “communion” to another, read much religious literature, and have their heads stored with a mass of undigested theological details, yet arrive not at an experiential, practical, humbling, operative, and transforming acquaintance with the things of God. And why is this? Because they have never received an anointing from the Holy One; that is what makes all the difference! But that anointing gives the regenerate a supernatural and sanctifying realization of the truth. Not that they know as fully as they ought, or so as to preclude their duty of a diligent application on their part to make further progress therein. While they only “know in part” (1Co 13:9), and a very small part, yet they know it in a spiritual and saving way.

Chapter 31

Lies and Liars

1 John 2:21-22

Once more there is a very close connection between our present verses and the two immediately preceding them—a point which the expositor requires to keep ever before him. There the line of demarcation is drawn between apostates (verse 19) and the anointed ones. Those who have an unction from the Holy One “know all things.” The scope and nature of their knowledge we have already explained: briefly, it consists of a saving and influential understanding of the truth. It was because he was assured that those to whom he wrote were experientially acquainted with Christianity, that John was persuaded they would heed the solemn warnings he was about to pen.

“I have not written unto you because you know not the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth” (vs. 21).

As Thomas Scott well expressed it,

“When we are thus established in the great truths of the Gospel, we shall know that no lie is of the truth, and shall therefore disregard the eloquence, learning, ingenuity, and confidence of those who contradict the Bible; and be satisfied with opposing the express testimony of the truth itself to their well-varnished and ably defended falsehoods.”

1. It is by the knowledge of the truth that the Lord’s people *are able to discern whatever be contrary thereto*. As an old adage declares, “The line that shows itself to be straight, shows also what line is crooked.” “No lie is of the truth”; [a lie] [n]either springs from [the truth] or is according to [the truth], but the very reverse. Error often has a very plausible appearance, and by it multitudes are deceived. Not only is it propagated, frequently, by men of scholarship and seeming spirituality, but their lies are presented in most subtle and attractive forms, appearing to promote the glory of God and the good of souls—were it otherwise, the unwary would not be beguiled. Many a heresy seems to remove difficulties that perplex the thoughtful people of God, to solve doctrinal problems that are a real puzzle to them, to be favourable unto practical piety, and to give peace and happiness to those who accept the same. Nevertheless, if they are not foursquare with the truth, but really conflict with the same, they are falsehoods, and therefore worthless, pernicious, dangerous. No matter how fair the fruits they bear, how apparently excellent their “results,” they are to be rejected and shunned.

That declaration “no lie is of the truth” seems rather like a truism—something so self-evident as to need no stating. In reality it expresses a principle of deep moment. First, as S.E. Pierce pointed out, “here we have expressed the transcendent excellency of the everlasting Gospel: there is no darkness in it, there is no lie in it, there is no error [that] can arise out of it.” Divine revelation is inerrant and flawless: “Thy Law [not only “contains” but] *is* the truth” (Psa 119:142). “Every word of God is pure” (Pro 30:5). There are indeed in it “some things hard to be understood,” and not a little that is quite beyond our comprehension. It would be very strange were it otherwise, for the finite cannot comprehend the infinite. No amount of searching or inquiry by the keenest intellect can find out God to perfection, nor can it account for many of His ways or explain why He fore-ordained one unto salvation and not another, how the Eternal Three subsist in one essence, how the humanity of Christ never had a separate existence, but was from the first moment of its conception united to His divine person. These and other mysteries are to be reverently received, and humbly submitted to, for they are true—the mouth of the Lord has spoken them.

2. Second, this divine declaration “no lie is of the truth” ought to warn all those who profess to be called of God to preach, of their *solemn duty to be diligent in preaching* the preaching that the Lord bids them (Jon 3:2). “Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish aught from it” (Deu 4:2). Otherwise, they are in grave danger of falling under that terrible indictment, “The prophets prophesy lies in my name: I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spake unto them: they speak unto you...the deceit of their heart” (Jer 14:14). “Christ is essential truth. His Gospel is so, in and throughout every part thereof. Therefore no one thing, sentence, or call it doctrine if you will, which differs one hair’s breadth from that which the Lord hath delivered to His church...can be other than a lie” (Pierce).

3. Third, “no lie is of the truth” was *a word of warning* against and an exposure of the method employed by those who seek to seduce the saints. It tells us that sophistries⁵⁸ and frauds are not necessary in order to support or propagate it. There is no deceit in the Gospel, and there should be none in the handling of it. It requires no fleshly help, and cannot be ad-

⁵⁸ **sophistry** – argumentation that is intentionally deceptive.

vanced by cunning and trickery. Alas, how few there are who really believe that unless the truth itself, under the blessing of God, convicts and converts men, nothing else will. Because they lack faith in the power of truth itself, preachers resort to all sorts of carnal devices to render their message more palatable to the unregenerate, and those devices are nothing more than lying deceits, dishonest arts. The lure and love of popularity is too strong to resist for those who seek the praise of men rather than the approbation of God. Such preachers think less of the Author of the Word than they do of rendering it acceptable to the carnal mind. Recourse is had to abstruse philosophies, displays of oratory, histrionics, or musical attractions and worldly allurements, rather than the plain and faithful preaching of the truth itself.

“For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but...as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ” (2Co 2:17), declared the beloved Paul. A most solemn proof is that of how early the Gospel was corrupted, and a portent of how extensively this evil was to spread among the professed servants of God and expounders of the truth. The word “corrupted” signified adulterated: the mixing of it with a foreign element. Few indeed preserve the purity of the truth, and fewer still preserve its holy balance or proclaim it in its fullness and entirety. Too many have sought to conciliate opposers by blunting the sharp edges of the Spirit’s sword. They deliberately explain away the most distasteful aspects of divine revelation. Others resort to dishonest exegesis or attempt to “harmonize” the teaching of Holy Writ with the hypotheses of “science falsely so called” (1Ti 6:20). But the faithful minister is “sincere”—open, above board, without guile. Sent of God, he speaks in His name and conducts himself as in the divine presence, and refuses to stoop to any form of a lie in order to commend the truth.

Said the apostle again, We “have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2Co 4:2). The apostle disdained his own wisdom, discarded all artifices to win the esteem of his hearers, refused an appeal to the traditions of men, declined to mingle anything human with his divine message. He abjured and abhorred all dishonest tricks. His sole aim was to show himself approved unto God, and therefore he declared the whole of His counsel, keeping back nothing that was profitable. Even the winning of souls was made entirely subordinate to preaching the truth in its purity. He therefore used great plainness of speech, and sought to humble and not to flatter, directing his message to the conscience rather than to the intellect or the emotions.

“The veracity of God, and not the reasonableness of any doctrine, is the ground of our faith. It is the work of the Gospel to cast down reasonings against the knowledge of God, and bring into captivity every thought unto the obedience of Christ” (Reformed Presbyterian Testimony).

4. Fourth, taking the verse as a whole, its last clause points an *important practical lesson*. The apostle addressed himself unto the saints with the confidence that they would readily accept what he was writing to them, that they would—like himself—detest and refuse error. That confidence shows that men’s reception or rejection of the truth turns mainly upon the state of their hearts. Sufficient evidence must indeed be advanced to carry conviction, but if the heart be right, then the mind readily perceives the force of the evidence; whereas if the heart be wrong—prejudiced—no amount of evidence will satisfy it. “Convince a man against his will, and he is of the same opinion still,” says the old proverb. It is the perversity of the will, which so often blinds the judgment; let that be properly disposed, and the understanding will function properly. If any doctrine of Scripture be hated, no demonstration of its verity by a hundred proof texts will be of any avail—unless God removes the enmity. On the other hand, if the Word be received “with all readiness of mind,” and the Scriptures searched daily whether these things be true (Act 17:11), assurance of them will soon be ours.

This deeply important practical lesson was inculcated by Christ when He declared, “The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness” (Mat 6:22-23). The eye has no light of its own, but is merely the receptacle thereof, and the actions of the body are directed by the illumination it admits. The “eye” is here a figure of the understanding, and by its light conduct is regulated: “as he thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Pro 23:7). A “single” eye has but one object—God, the pleasing and glorifying of Him. At regeneration the heart is renewed and its vision rectified, the eye of faith is divinely opened, the understanding is spiritually illumined, and God becomes its all-absorbing object. In consequence, light is seen in God’s light (Psa 36:9), and all the faculties of the soul come under its benign⁵⁹ influence. A spirit of discrimination follows, so that the child of God discerns between the voice of Christ and that of a false shepherd (Joh 10:4-5), and by his spiritual judgment he distinguishes between truth and error, loving and heeding the one, eschewing and refusing the other.

But since the children of God be spiritually illumined and able to discern between the truth and error, why are there such differences of belief among them? In fact, there is far more agreement than disagreement—but why not entire unanimity? Because God is sovereign and bestows varying measures of light. But why should anyone who has the Holy Spirit for his teacher cling to or imbibe any error? Because of indwelling sin; the counteracting of the intellectual effects of the fall, like the nullifying of its moral effects, is not perfected in this life. Yet that is to our shame, and in no wise excuses us. There is nothing but light and truth in God’s most holy Word, and everything in it is expressed accurately. But alas, we do not receive our views wholly therefrom, nor are our minds so brought under the power and spiritual influence of the same as for its contents to be fixed in our understanding exactly as they are in the Scriptures. “No lie is of the truth”: error

⁵⁹ **benign** – gracious; kind.

springs not therefrom, but from the darkness and sinfulness of our minds. Human depravity, acted upon by Satan, disposes men to put a false gloss⁶⁰ on one passage, to wrest another, and to receive false doctrine.

If we would avoid a lie, we must neither give heed to the reasonings of men upon the Word, nor put our own interpretation upon it. Instead, we are to “hold fast the form of sound words” (2Ti 1:13), expressing truth in our minds and with our lips precisely as it is formulated in Scripture. Our first concern should ever be a seeking to know the mind of the Spirit therein; and our second, to receive it meekly without any cavil or attempt to evade its meaning. It is men’s wrangling over the Word and altering the mode of God’s expression that leads so many into error, and renders them still more susceptible to Satan’s lies. The most effectual way to be preserved from false doctrine and practice is to accept God’s Word at its face value, to believe all that the Lord has spoken. “It should ever be our study and prayer, the utmost aim and bent of our minds, to have the truths of God received into our minds and stated in our understandings exactly as they are in the Word; for there they are expressed as they are in God” (S.E. Pierce). Alas, men prefer their own reasonings and statements thereon, and then turn to the Word to support them.

“Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son” (verse 22).

The Greek Interlinear and the Revised Version render it “Who is the liar,” not because any specific one is in view, but because the reference is to those who are guilty of the greatest falsehood of all. Who is the liar of all liars? John does not wait for a reply, but at once furnishes the answer: he that repudiates the Messiah, the Anointed of God—he is outstandingly the cheat of men, the false prophet, the imposter. Here then is the link between the two verses: when the apostle said, “no lie is of the truth,” he had particularly in view the antichrists or seducers of souls who were propagating that which was flatly contrary to the Gospel, and as far removed from it as darkness is from light. As Haupt pointed out, “No lie is of the truth’ seems so clear and self-evident as to require no explanation; but however plain theoretically, it very little governs the conduct of many professing Christians,” and therefore John is still more specific and amplifies his abstract aphorism⁶¹ with a concrete example.

“Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ?” Once again we find “the apostle of love” refuses to mince words. He calls things by their right names. Love for Christ and fidelity unto the saints required that he declare plainly what their enemies really were. “Such was his zeal for the truth, he makes no scruple of calling such by this term who would dare pronounce an untruth, let their profession and quality be what they might. We have had instances of this before: If any would venture to say they had fellowship with God, whilst they walked in darkness, he is bold to pronounce this to be a lie (1:6). If any professed they had no inward sinfulness, he declares this to be self-deceit; and it is also willful lying, and truth was not in such (1:8). If any professed himself to be in Christ, and lived carelessly, paying no regard to the Lord’s commandments, he pronounces such an one a liar (2:4). So here, having appealed to those unto whom he wrote concerning the truth of sound doctrine, and that no lie is of the truth, he goes on to express more fully what he had in his eye and would bring forward” (Pierce).

Note well the particular test here applied, the standard by which preachers are to be measured: namely, the person of Christ—the liar is the one who denies Him. Christ is Himself the Truth, and therefore anyone who disowns Him is a false prophet. If we form false conceptions of Him, we cannot rightly apprehend any part of the truth.

“The denial of Christ is the greatest of all sins. To deny Him is not merely to turn away from a truth, but is the forsaking of the truth. And to change the centre is to alter the whole circumference. If, then, Christ is not the centre of our life, no part of our life can be right. To break with Christ, therefore, is to part with truth, and of all lies, that which denies that Jesus is the Christ is the greatest” (L. Palmer).

*“What think ye of Christ is the test,
To try both your state and your scheme;
You cannot be right in the rest
Unless you think rightly of Him.”*

The denial that Jesus is the Christ was the fearful and fatal sin of the Jewish nation. They rejected the claims of Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah promised in the Old Testament Scriptures: “He came unto his own, and his own received him not” (Joh 1:11). In so doing, they sinned against the clearest light and fullest evidence. All the predicted marks were found in Him, but they were blinded by prejudice—from false teaching, their own conceits, and worldliness. He was the true light, but they, through their blindness, perceived it not: “For this people’s heart is waxed gross...their eyes they have closed” (Mat 13:15).

But to deny that Jesus is the Christ has yet both a deeper meaning and wider scope. It is necessary for us carefully to consider exactly what is connoted by “the Christ.” It means “The Anointed,” and as Candlish pointed out, “This appellation marks not only a certain relation to the Jewish Scriptures, but also, and still more, a relation to God, whose Christ He was.” This raises the question, For what was He anointed?

⁶⁰ **gloss** – deceptive interpretation.

⁶¹ **aphorism** – a brief and concise statement of truth or opinion.

During the Old Testament economy, prophets, priests, and kings were set apart to their several offices by being anointed with oil. Therein they foreshadowed the Redeemer, who was the “Christ,” or Anointed One, from the moment of His birth (Luk 2:11) until His death (Rom 8:34). In this official character the Lord Jesus proclaimed Himself at the very beginning of His public ministry: “The Spirit of the Lord *is* upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised...And he began to say unto them, This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears” (Luk 4:18, 21). The blessed Spirit had anointed Him to be the Prophet, Priest, and King of His people, and it is to designate Him as bearing these offices that He is called “Christ.” He was owned as such by His disciples (Joh 1:41; 4:29) and by God (Act 2:36). Thus, to receive or reject Jesus as the Christ has respect to all His offices, and consequently to all the blessing that we may obtain or forfeit by accepting or refusing Him.

Chapter 32

Antichrists

1 John 2:22-23

What an immense amount of unedifying and worthless rubbish has been written on “the antichrist”! Yet that is hardly a thing to be wondered at, since it supplies an object that makes a strong appeal to lovers of the bizarre and sensational. Moreover, it is a subject that offers an opportunity for every conceited tyro⁶² to pose as a “deep student of prophecy.” Almost endless have been the conjectures as to the identity of “the antichrist”: whether an evil system or a separate individual; and if the latter, whether he has yet appeared on the stage of human action, or whether his advent is yet future. The Reformers and almost all of the Puritans held that “the man of sin” (which they regard as another title of this infamous character) signified the Papacy. Later, some who claimed to be more enlightened were quite sure that Napoleon Bonaparte was this son of perdition. Influenced by his early teachers and associations, this writer once deemed himself qualified to write a book of three hundred pages thereon (long since out of print), but trusts he has grown wiser with the passing of the years.⁶³

During the last three decades many others have speculated upon the personality of “the antichrist.” Not a few who were regarded as eminent “Bible teachers” insisted that the Kaiser of Germany filled this iniquitous role, but when the closing years of his career falsified their theorizings, Mussolini (as “the restorer of the old Roman empire”) became their choice; then as he began to wane in power and be eclipsed by another, Hitler was preferred. Now [that] those men of evil renown have been called to meet their God, Stalin has occupied the prophetic limelight. And so, we suppose, it will continue to the end, for human nature changes not, either in its arrogance, blindness, gullibility, or refusal to acknowledge its ignorance. “Vain man would be wise, though man be born like a wild ass’s colt” (Job 11:12). There ever have been, and doubtless will continue to be unto the close of this world’s history, men who posed as being wise above that which is written, and a flock of admirers will credit their pretensions and receive as oracles their wild and profitless theorizings.

Disregarding all speculations and controversies upon prophecies, which may or may not bear upon the subject (for example, those in Daniel and The Revelation, to which so many appeal), let us concentrate upon the term itself. The actual word “antichrist” occurs only in John’s epistles. In other connections the prefix “anti” is used in various senses: e.g. over against, contrary to, a substitute for. Thus, abstractedly considered, “antichrist” might refer either to one who pretended to be the Messiah or to one who openly opposed Him: a pseudo Christ or a rival. It is by carefully observing how the term is used by the apostle and what he predicated thereof that we must determine its sense. It is true that our Lord announced, “Many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many,” which He explained as “there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders” (Mat 24:5, 24)—but that is nothing to the point of our present inquiry: we consider that history shows those predictions were fulfilled in the first century AD.

First, John had said, “ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists...They went out from us, but they were not of us” (2:18-19). There we see that the early Christians had been forewarned that the Gospel of Christ would be opposed, that there were many such opposers by the close of the first century, and that such were apostates. “And hence we learn that antichrist is not a single person, but many: antichrist in the first clause is explained by antichrists in the latter” (J. Gill). Second, 2:22 identifies those antichrists by describing them as liars against the truth and repudiators of the Christ of God. Third, John affirmed, “And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist” (4:3). As “the spirit of the world” (1Co 2:12) has reference to that principle of carnal

⁶² **tyro** – beginner in learning something; novice.

⁶³ Pink initially held to the doctrines of dispensationalism during his early years of writing.

reason and gratification, which regulates its subjects, so “the spirit of antichrist” signifies that evil influence which produces hostility to Christ. Finally, he informs us, “For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist” (2Jo 7). “From this it is clear that John understood by the word all those who denied that Jesus is the Messiah” (Barnes).

“Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ?” (verse 22).

To deny—either implicitly or explicitly—that Jesus is the Christ is to say that He is not the Messiah, the One announced and promised by the prophets of old. Second, it is to repudiate Him as the one appointed and endued by God to be the sole but sufficient Saviour of sinners. Third, it is the rejection of His person and official work, and that is a sin of the highest magnitude: “whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God” (2Jo 1:9). As Gill remarked, “The one who denied that Jesus is the Christ is not the only liar in the world, but he is the greatest of liars; this is a consummate lie, being opposed to a glaring truth.” It is the gainsaying of a fact clear and indisputable. It is opposed to the witness of the angels at His incarnation, and to that of His forerunner. It is opposed to the teaching of Him who is the truth itself, for He clearly manifested Himself to be the Messiah. It flies in the face of His miraculous credentials, which authenticated His claim. It is contrary to the declaration of His apostles, who were eye-witnesses of His miracles, and to the sure Word of God Himself.

The denial that Jesus is the Christ is a sin committed in many different ways and in varying degrees of culpability. Unitarians, who directly and explicitly repudiate His Godhead, are not the only liars and antichrists. There are many opposers in Christendom who indirectly and implicitly deny the Christ of God by devising a false Christ from their perverted imaginations. Thus, Pelagians,⁶⁴ and in a lesser degree Arminians, are guilty of this horrible crime, for they transfer to the creature almost all the honour that rightly belongs to the Redeemer alone. And as Calvin pertinently remarked, “So the Papists at this day, setting up free will in opposition to the grace of the Holy Spirit, ascribing a part of their righteousness and salvation to the merits of works, feigning for themselves innumerable advocates, by whom they render God propitious⁶⁵ to them, have a sort of fictitious Christ I know not what; but the living and genuine image of God that shines forth in Christ they deform by their wicked inventions—they lessen His power, subvert and pervert His office. Christ is denied whenever those things that belong to Him are taken away from Him.”

*“Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ?
He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son.”*

Those terrible names of opprobrium⁶⁶ cannot but fill the renewed heart with holy horror. Yet no terms of infamy and condemnation can be too strong to designate the opposers and blasphemers of the Christ of God. To deny that Jesus is the Christ is to repudiate His virgin birth, His vicarious character, His redemptive work—for those things were predicated of the Messiah. In the preceding chapter we explained that “the Christ” means “the Anointed One” and expresses His threefold office. Thus any man who denies that Jesus is the great Prophet of the Church, the infallible Teacher, the essential Word of God, is an antichrist—an arch-heretic. Anyone who denies that Jesus is the great High Priest, the sole Mediator between God and men, by whose one perfect offering He has perfected forever the sanctified, is an antichrist—His open antagonist. Anyone who denies that Jesus is the King of the Church, the only one who has the right to command and be obeyed, is an antichrist—His avowed enemy.

Yet this is not all that is included: “*he is antichrist that denieth the Father and the Son.*” The Messiahship of Christ is not an isolated fact; lying behind it is the all-important truth of the Holy Trinity. The denial of Christ is, at the same time, a repudiation of the mysterious and ineffable union [that] is between the members of the Godhead. There is a most intimate and unique relation subsisting between the Father and the Son, one that is entirely beyond finite comprehension, expressed in such terms as “the man...my fellow, saith the Lord of hosts” (Zec 13:7), so that “all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father” (Joh 5:23), for, as He expressly declared, “I and Father are one” (Joh 10:30)—co-essential, co-eternal, co-glorious; “His own Son” (Rom 8:32) in a way that the regenerate are not: really, though incomprehensibly,

“His own Son.” Now unless Christ be owned in this highest relation, He is virtually denied in all. Scripture presents the Father and the Son in eternity past, as engaged in mutual council (Zec 6:13). “A great covenant is negotiated. The Father and the Son, with the Spirit, are, if one may dare say so, in solemn conference together. From the bosom of the Father, in which He is dwelling evermore, the Son receives a commission to come forth.

“He is appointed Heir of all things. Creation is assigned to Him as His proper work. All providence is to be His care; and, above all, the providence of this spot of earth. Here on this earth, from among a fallen race, He is to purchase for Himself, and for His Father, at a great price, a seed given Him by the Father, and to share with Him the blessedness of His being the Son. So it is announced between the Father and the Son from everlasting; the Holy Spirit being a party to the arrangement, as He is to have a large share in carrying it out. And so, accordingly, in the fullness of time, the Son ap-

⁶⁴ **Pelagians** – those who (perhaps unknowingly) follow the teachings of the heretic Pelagius (c. 354-c. 420), a British monk who argued that people could reform themselves by free will and that they can take the first steps toward salvation without the assistance of God’s grace. His views were condemned as heresy by the Council of Ephesus (431).

⁶⁵ **propitious** – favorably inclined.

⁶⁶ **opprobrium** – that which brings shame or disgrace.

pears among men. He appears as the Son: on the Father's behalf, entrusted with His Father's commission, to be about His Father's business. He is the Son not merely in respect of His being the Holy Jesus, receiving proofs and pledges of God's fatherly presence and approval, as any holy being might. He is the Son also, and chiefly, in respect of the work or office with a view to which He is the Christ. He is the Son consenting to be the Father's Servant, and as such anointed for the accomplishment of the Father's purpose. Only, therefore, in so far as you acknowledge Jesus as the Christ, do you really receive Him as the Son.

“And denial, whether practical or doctrinal, of the proposition that Jesus is the Christ, is tantamount to a disowning of His personality as the Son. It is only when you recognize Him as anointed to do His Father's will in the sacrifice of Himself, that you really own Him as the Son. Such, then, is the importance and significance of the proposition that Jesus is the Christ, considered in itself; and such it's bearing on the owning of His person as the Saviour and as the Son. It is a proposition that so vitally affects the essential character of Him to whom it relates, that the denial of it is virtually a denial of Himself...For, in a word, the completeness of this illustrious personage depends on a full and adequate recognition of His double relation: to us as sinners, as our Jesus, and to God the Father as His Son. Set aside His being Christ—the anointed Sacrificer and anointed Sacrifice, the anointed Priest and anointed Victim, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world...and we have neither any Jesus fit to be our Saviour, nor any Son of God worth the owning...Hence he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ is not only a liar, he is antichrist. And being antichrist—setting himself against the Christ—he, as antichrist, denies the Father and the Son” (R. Candlish).

Let none aspire to more “liberality and charity” than the one who was favoured to lean on the Master's bosom; those who are opposed to the person, doctrine, gospel, and kingdom of Christ are liars and antichrists. Those who array themselves against Him and hold doctrines that are hostile to His Godhead, His official character, His redemptive work, are His adversaries. Yet there is no truth so sacred and well attested, but there have ever been those who controverted it. Some have denied the Saviour's deity, some have explained away the reality and uniqueness of His humanity, and so the reality of His sufferings; while others set themselves against His headship and kingly authority—yet professing themselves to be and retaining the name of Christians, imposing their falsehoods on their deluded followers. In their bitter antagonism to the Lord Jesus, we may discover something more than an ebullition⁶⁷ of human depravity, namely the agency of Satan. It is the enmity of that old serpent the devil against the woman's Seed. It demonstrates his age-long hatred of Christ and His gospel.

“*He is antichrist that denieth the Father and the Son.*” How little is this realized today! Scriptural views of the Father cannot be ours if we err concerning the Son. “No man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him” (Mat 11:27). The Father cannot be known apart from the Son, for He is the One who has “declared him” (Joh 1:18), or made Him known. There is such an ineffable union between Them that He could aver, “he that hath seen me hath seen the Father...I am in the Father, and the Father in me” (Joh 14:9, 11). Where Christ be denied, the whole revelation of God in and through Him (Heb 1:1-2; 2Co 5:19) is set aside.

“As God has given Himself to us to be enjoyed only in Christ, He is elsewhere sought for in vain; or (if anyone prefers what is clearer) as in Christ dwells all the fullness of the Deity, there is no God apart from Him. It hence follows that Turks, Jews, and such as are like them, have a mere idol and not the true God. For by whatever titles they may honour the God that they worship, still, as they reject Him without whom they cannot come to God, and in whom God has really manifested Himself to us, they have but some creature or fiction of their own” (Calvin).

“*Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father*” (verse 23). How wide and sweeping is this solemn statement! No matter what his profession and pretensions, if he in any way denies the Son, he cuts himself off from the Father. The Father can only be known (Joh 17:3), approached (Joh 14:6), worshipped (1Pe 2:5), and glorified (Col 3:17) in and through His incarnate Son. Despite their boasted orthodoxy, Jesus Christ said to the Jews, “Ye neither know me, nor my Father; if ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also” (Joh 8:19). To be without the One is to be without the Other. That is abundantly demonstrated in heathendom: their religions are godless because they are Christless! In like manner, all who acknowledge “the Supreme Being,” “the Architect of the universe,” or even “the Almighty,” and at the same time refuse the Mediator, believe in one who has no existence. Moreover, if wrong views be entertained of the Son, erroneous conceptions of the Father are necessarily entertained. If Christ be the Son only by adoption, God is not His Father. If He be Son merely by office, equally so is the Father. If He be Son only by incarnation or resurrection, the Father is denied.

“Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father” as his “Father.” This at once gives the lie to one of the most popular and widely accepted errors of the last century, namely “the universal fatherhood of God.” In the spiritual and highest sense God is the Father of none save of Christ and His redeemed: “For ye [namely the saints] are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26). Where there be no faith in Christ Jesus, there is no spiritual sonship; and where that be absent, God cannot rightfully be regarded as our Father. Christ made that very plain when He exposed the empty boast of the unbelieving Jews, who claimed, “we have one Father, God,” and to whom He replied, “If God were your Father, ye would love me” (Joh 8:41-42). How can one who despises and rejects the Son have God for his Father—have a filial relation to

⁶⁷ **ebullition** – sudden outburst.

Him—when there is no bond of union between them? The Father thinks far too highly of His Son to love any who hate Him. He will not set a premium upon those who so grievously insult Him by disdain His Beloved, for “him hath God the Father sealed” (Joh 6:27).

“But he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also” (verse 23). We have placed that sentence in italics, for so it is found in the Authorized Version. As most of our readers are aware, that is to indicate that such words are not found in the Greek, but have been supplied by the translators. This instance serves to manifest the scrupulous fairness of those who produced that edition of the Bible: because it was found in some of the ancient manuscripts, they gave it a place; as it was omitted by others, they marked it as doubtful. The Revised Version includes it in the text without any question, and, we believe, warrantably so. The editorial note in Calvin’s commentary says, “The words are found in most of the manuscripts, and in most of the versions, and in many of the Fathers. Besides, they wholly comport with the usual style of the apostle, whose common practice it was to state things positively and negatively, and vice versa. See 5:12.” A. Barnes tells us that this passage “is found in the Vulgate, the Syriac, the Ethiopian, the Armenian, and Arabic versions; and in the critical editions of Griesbach, Tittman, and Hahn. It is probable, therefore, that it should be regarded as a genuine portion of the sacred text.”

Gill pointed out that the second half of verse 23 “confirms and illustrates what is before said; for as he who denies the sonship of Christ cannot hold the paternity of God, so he who owns the sonship of Christ, the second person, maintains the paternity of the first—for those two are correlates and mutually put or take away each other. No mention is made of the Spirit, because, as yet, no controversy had arisen concerning Him.” To which we would add, in Scripture, repetition is always for the purpose of emphasis, and often the same thing is stated both negatively and positively (as in 1:6-7) in order to impress us more deeply with that which is of first importance—as many of our Lord’s weightiest utterances were prefaced with a double “verily.” The fundamental truth of our present verse cannot be too clearly and emphatically stated or too frequently inculcated: that only by faith’s acceptance of Christ can we obtain any saving knowledge of God; and that all who believingly receive the Lord Jesus have in fact become the sons and daughters of the Almighty, and are made heirs of eternal life.

“But he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also.” “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God” (1Pe 3:18). By Christ all that believe are united to the Father, so that He could say, “I ascend unto my Father, and your Father” (Joh 20:17). As there is a most intimate relation between the Father and the Son, so there is in the doctrine and knowledge of Them. And as we cannot have the One without the Other, so on Christ’s becoming our Saviour we are received into the Father’s favour. The Father gives Himself to us in His Son, and by receiving the Latter we receive the Former. “He hath the Father” for his everlasting portion: to commune with, to enjoy, to supply all his need. Thus, not only is the honour of Christ involved in our apprehensions of Him, but our blessings and privileges are bound up therein.

Chapter 33

The Application

1 John 2:24

“Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father.”

In our present verse John proceeded to make what the Puritans were wont to designate the “improvement” of the subject under discussion, by which they did not mean “to better,” but rather to employ to advantage. In present-day language, the apostle made a practical application of what he had written in verses 18-23. There he had treated of antichrists, and had explained how it was that believers had been preserved from those deceivers: they had received an unction from the Holy One, by which they had obtained the true knowledge of divine and spiritual things. Consequently, he addressed them not as those who were ignorant, but as those who were personally acquainted with the truth. Then, for their fuller information and guidance, he had plainly defined what an antichrist was. Now he made an appeal unto his readers that was based upon the foregoing. In so doing he turned from the false to the true. In the Greek the transition is more marked,⁶⁸ for the pronoun “you” is placed at the beginning of the sentence, for the purpose of emphasis:

⁶⁸ **marked** – clear; significant.

“Ye therefore what ye have heard from the beginning, in you let it abide: if in you should abide what from the beginning ye heard, also ye in the Son and in the Father shall abide.”

Our present text, then, is an exhortation unto the Lord’s people to persevere in the faith, to part not with the truth, to heed not those who sought to entice them away from it. Thus we see once more that it was John’s aim not only to inform and establish his readers, but also to move them unto the performance of duty. That was the design of all the Epistle writers: urging the saints not to be content with a bare theoretical knowledge of the Gospel, but to seek to get their hearts fired therewith, so that faith and love should be active and the works of holiness produced. They constantly intermingled doctrinal instruction with moral injunctions, so that the saints should be neither barren nor unfruitful in their knowledge of the Lord Jesus. So again in what immediately follows, for John at once passes from exhortation to remind them of the great promise, and then strikes afresh a note of warning. Therein we may perceive the spiritual wisdom of the apostles in holding so carefully the balance of truth, and the admirable example which they have left preachers and writers to follow: to weave together that which illumines the mind *and* that which calls for the action of the will.

“Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning.” As intimated above in the literal translation of our verse, the words “abide,” “remain,” and “continue” are the same in the original, and, had a uniform rendition been given, the repetition had shown more clearly the deep importance that John attached to this precept—a case where exactness was unwarrantably sacrificed to variety. The expression “let that abide in you” is designedly antithetical to “the truth is not in us” or “in you” (1:8; 2:4), which means far more than that they were ignorant or unacquainted with it, namely that the truth was *not present* as a vital principle in the soul, as an animating force in their lives. It is not sufficient to hear sound preaching and become mentally acquainted with God’s Word: the same must find a permanent lodgment in the heart if we are really to be benefited by it. Human nature being what it is—weak and unstable—there is a real danger of relinquishing the truth under pressure of persecution for the Gospel’s sake, or through being absorbed with the “cares and riches and pleasures of *this* life” (Luk 8:14), and thus being only a thorny-ground hearer; yea, such is certain to be the outcome unless we be divinely preserved—by God’s stirring us up to guard against the same, and by a diligent performance of our duty.

“Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let *them* slip,” or as the margin renders it, “run out as leaky vessels” (Heb 2:1). If they do so, the fault is entirely their own, through failing to give the more earnest heed to them. It is by being believed that the Gospel becomes efficacious, and “it cannot be believed unless it is understood; it cannot be understood, unless it be attended to. Truth must be kept before the mind in order to its producing an appropriate effect; and how can it be kept before the mind, but by our giving heed to it?” (J. Brown). There needs to be a serious and diligent fixing of the thoughts upon that which we hear, a bowing and bending of the will to yield unto it, a placing of the affections upon it, a bringing of the entire man into conformity with it. Knowledge of the Word must be accompanied by faith therein, obedience thereto, and all other due respects which in any way concern it. Otherwise, it will soon pass out of the mind, like water out of a leaky utensil. “Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain” (1Co 15:1-2).

“Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning,” namely that Gospel which you have embraced and confessed, that Gospel wherein the person and offices, the atoning sacrifice, and justifying righteousness of the God-man Mediator is proclaimed, and wherein the example that He has left His disciples to follow is made known. The Gospel and its ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper contain a full revelation of the same. As Paul declared to the Galatians, “before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently [plainly] set forth crucified among you” (3:1). He is the glorious Object exhibited therein. The Gospel is the chariot in which He rides in His majesty. It is the glass in which He shines forth, by means of which He is seen by the eye of faith, through which His glory is reflected, and by which the adoring beholder is “changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2Co 3:18). The excellency, dignity and pre-eminence of His person are there set forth. His fathomless love and abounding grace are there published. His perfect and vicarious obedience, His everlasting righteousness, His cleansing blood, the abiding efficacy of His sacrifice, are expressly declared. His finished work, His blessed victory over the powers of darkness, His triumph over death and the grave, are plainly announced. The Gospel makes known the unsearchable riches of Christ, the glorious inheritance that He purchased for His people, His coming again to take them to be forever with Himself.

“Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning.” Here we see how the apostle magnified the great ordinance of preaching, by indicating the way in which the good news had been communicated unto them. “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom 10:17). Christ Himself was anointed to preach the Gospel (Isa 61:1), and commenced His ministry by so doing (Luk 4:21-22). Concerning Him, the Father said, “Hear ye him” (Mat 17:5). When He had completed His ministry, He committed the same work unto His ambassadors, saying, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mar 16:15), and ever since it has pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe (1Co 1:21). Now it is a very great favour to hear the Gospel proclaimed, to sit under the ministry of one who exalts the Son of God as the sole and all-sufficient Saviour of sinners. “Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound: they shall walk, O LORD, in the light of thy countenance” (Psa 89:15); whereas those who know it not sit in

darkness and in the region of the shadow of death (Mat 4:16). Still better is it to know it in the heart and understand the reality of it. But best of all: for us to abide in the acknowledgment of the truth and for it to abide in us as a regulating principle.

Every privilege carries with it a corresponding obligation, and therefore those who treat the Gospel lightly incur deeper guilt. "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required" (Luk 12:48). Solemn indeed is the case of those who hear sermon after sermon that faithfully and searchingly warns them of the wrath to come and bids them flee from the same, yet regard them as no more to be remembered than ordinary discourses. Parlous⁶⁹ the condition of all who listen to the preaching of God's Word merely as a tale that is told, to be no more affected and influenced by it, to go on in their giddy way, as though they had never heard it; to lay aside all thoughts of it as that which little concerns them; to stifle convictions, withstand reproofs, neglect exhortations, refuse the duties enjoined, reject the offers made, and continue in the very sins they hear reprov'd. Such close their ears to the truth, shut Christ out of their hearts, are possessed of Satan, and heap to themselves wrath against the day of wrath. "See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven" (Heb 12:25).

Then "*let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning.*" Of Lydia we are told, "whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul" (Act 16:14). She not only listened to but gave heed unto the same, with readiness and resolution. In due proportion to our valuation of the truth will be our earnestness and efforts to make it our own. "If thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God" (Pro 2:3-5). Silver and gold lie not on the surface of the ground to be picked up by any lazy person, but can be reached and secured only by hard work and persevering toil. Likewise, in order to learn God's will as He has revealed it, the Scriptures must be searched (Joh 5:39), searched daily (Act 17:11), one part carefully compared with another (1Co 2:13). And in order for that Word to quicken, govern, and make us fruitful, it has to be prayed over, meditated upon day and night (Psa 1:2-3), made the food of the soul (Jer 15:16), and put into practice (Jam 1:22), and thereby are we "thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2Ti 3:17).

This exhortation, "Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning," is no casual or trivial one, but one that in varied language occurs and recurs throughout the Scriptures. "Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life" (Deu 4:9, and cf. verse 23; 8:11). "Let thine heart retain my words...Get wisdom, get understanding: forget it not; neither decline from the words of my mouth." "Take fast hold of instruction: let her not go: keep her; for she is thy life" (Pro 4:4, 5, 13): that "Take fast hold of" implies that there must be deep interest, determination of purpose, perseverance of effort. "My son, attend to my words; incline thine ear unto my sayings. Let them not depart from thine eyes; keep them in the midst of thine heart" (Pro 4:20-21), yes, "in the midst of thine heart" and not merely on the threshold of it; there only will it be operative, for "out of the heart are the issues of life."

"Let these sayings sink down into your ears" (Luk 9:44), by storing them in your memory and ruminating on the same, which is what the mother of our Lord did: "Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" (Luk 2:19). That was in sharp and blessed contrast with the rocky-ground hearers, who though they "receive the word with joy" yet "have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away" (Luk 8:13). It is not enough to believe or receive the truth: it must have a permanent place in the soul. As Paul informed the Colossians, Christ would yet present them unblamable and unreprouvable to the Father: "If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel" (1:23). In order thereto we need to make the Gospel our constant study, to become thoroughly acquainted with the Scriptures, and cordially assent to them, to receive the truth in the love of it, to feed daily thereon, so that our judgments are formed by its teaching, our hearts cast into the mould of it, our consciences directed by it. Thereby shall we be enriched with true spiritual wisdom and knowledge, and be enabled to walk acceptably before God and adorn the doctrine we profess.

"*Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning.*" The "therefore" has in view what the apostle treated of in verses 18-23, and points a solemn warning, as well as presses an urgent duty. Alas, the majority of professing Christians have nothing more than a few notions floating about in their heads, and consequently they are easily swayed by any plausible deceiver, carried hither and thither by every wind that blows, tossed about like a ship with no ballast in its hold. It is not by deliberate *intention* that so many depart from the faith and give heed to seducing spirits, but through *inattention* to what they heard at the beginning, because of their indolence and failure to make the truth their own. The seed that remains on the surface of the ground is quickly devoured by the fowls of the air; only as it becomes "the engrafted word" is it able to save our souls (Jam 1:21). And in order thereto we must be able to say with David, "Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee" (Psa 119:11). Only as God's Word is stored and treasured in the heart will the heart be preserved from apostasy.

"*Let that therefore abide in you*" as a peculiar treasure, as a welcome guest, as your guide by day and companion by night. Imbibe it as the dry ground does the refreshing showers. Yield your entire being to its sway, so that it nourishes your

⁶⁹ parlous – dangerous; perilous; risky.

soul, enlightens your understanding, purifies your affections, regulates your will. Let it so abide in you that it is reduced to practice. Let it abide in you by the exercise of faith, by constant contemplation, by affectionate esteem. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom” (Col 3:16). The word “dwell” there means “to keep house,” to have authority over its arrangements, as having the right to control. We are to be governed by it, to receive our instructions and directions from it. The word “richly” signifies “largely,” as a whole, in its utmost compass; in contrast with sparsely or fragmentally. Make it your food and drink, your sustenance and strength, your comfort and joy: only by so doing will it have its proper influence over you. Then will the Word abide in you not merely as a fact in the brain, but as that which is actually realized in your experience.

“*Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning.*” The second clause conveys a double idea. First, it is an exhortation having the same force as that of Revelation 3:11, “Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown,” or shame you by despoiling you of your spiritual glory. You need to be constantly awake and on the alert, for the devil will seek to rob your soul of that which is more precious than gold or rubies. If, in view of the fact that “evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived,” Timothy needed the injunction, “But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of” (2Ti 3:14), much more so do the writer and the reader. Having bought the truth, sell it not. Our adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion, walks about, seeking whom he may devour (1Pe 5:8); but every believer ought to be able to say, “by the word of thy lips I have kept *me from* the paths of the destroyer” (Psa 17:4). But in order thereto he must store up that Word in his mind, in his affections, in his conscience, so that it is ever ready to hand when needed—as in the case of our Lord when tempted of Satan.

Second, this exhortation imports,⁷⁰ Forsake not for any novelties those things you heard at the beginning and which were blessed to your conversion. Be not like the Athenians, who “spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing” (Act 17:21); but rather “ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls” (Jer 6:16). Of old God complained that false prophets caused His people “to stumble in their ways from the ancient paths, to walk in paths, in a way not cast up” by His appointment (Jer 18:15). So too He foretold that a day would come in this Christian era “when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears” (2Ti 4:3). It was because of this evil tendency that we find the apostles went about “confirming the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith” (Act 14:22). “Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning” means, Give it not up for any new doctrine propagated by antichrists, but cherish the truth and incorporate it into your life. Spiritual progress, or growth in grace, does not mean that you will ever outgrow the Gospel, yet how many come to despise foundational truth and prefer human speculations on prophecy!

“*If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father.*” There is much difference of opinion among the commentators as to whether the “if” should be regarded as a conditional or a declaratory one; personally, we consider it is both. That it is conditional is clear from the verb employed in the last clause: it is not “if that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also do continue in the Son,” but “ye also shall” do so—providing you meet the required stipulation the latter will follow. In other words, the truth remaining and operating in the soul as a vital principle, exerting a practical power in the life, is the means of maintaining communion with the Son and the Father. As there can be no knowledge of Christ except *through or by means of* the Gospel, so there can be no fellowship with Him but by believingly and adoringly cleaving to the Gospel. As Christ will not walk with those who pursue a course of self-will, neither will He have any concord with one who gives ear to His enemies and treads the path of error. Only by faith in and obedience to the Word is preserved our experiential union with the Lord.

On the other hand, in view of the context, it is equally plain that the “if” of our present verse is evidential or demonstrative. Speaking of some who had apostatized from the faith John declared, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us” (verse 19): it was the turning of their backs upon the truth which made it manifest that they never had any vital union with Christ. So too taught the Lord Himself: unto those who professed to believe in Him, He said: “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed” (Joh 8:31); that is, your perseverance in the faith will demonstrate you to be such in truth—not that they became His disciples by so doing, but that they supplied evidence that they were such as He owned. And again, He averred: “If a man love me, he will keep my words” (Joh 14:23), for true love ever endeavours to please its object. If there be no keeping of His words, no cleaving fast to His Gospel, no walking according to His precepts, no living upon His promises, then the claim to love Him is a false one. Thus steadfastness in the faith and obedience are the marks of our saving oneness with the Son.

“*Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning.*” That clearly presupposes that they had previously received the truth in the love of it, but that they are exhorted to fix and fasten the same “as a nail in a sure place”—by mixing faith therewith, setting their affections upon it and delighting therein. That which you received at the time of your conversion concerning the person, work, and salvation of Christ, must be the touchstone by which all that you hear and read is to be tested. Great will be the benefits from so doing: thereby you will be fortified against false teachers. As one pithily put it, “Revise the old Gospel and you devise another.” We must reserve for the opening paragraphs of the next chapter a further remark on the last half of our verse.

⁷⁰ imports – to mean; to signify.

Chapter 34

The Promise

1 John 2:25

“And this is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life.”

“Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning” (verse 24) means, in the light of the context, Suffer no enemy of Christ to rob you of the Gospel which was blessed to your conversion; but rather see to it that it becomes more deeply rooted in your hearts. It is of the utmost importance that the perfect revelation of God that has been made in and by Christ should have a permanent dwelling in your souls. Make it your deep concern that it abides in your minds and regulates your thoughts; in your consciences, to convict of sin and restrain it, and by stirring you up to the practice of holiness; in your affections, melting you with sorrow for sin, promoting a higher esteem of Christ and spiritual things; in your wills, bringing them into compliance with those things which are pleasing to God. Let it abide just as you first received it, living thereon. You need not any new revelation from God, but rather a better understanding and closer conformity to what He has vouchsafed to you. “If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son and in the Father.” Here John names one of the benefits derived from obedience to the foregoing precept, namely *maintenance of fellowship with God*.

Many are the blessings, great the advantages that issue from a steadfast adherence to the hope of the Gospel and the ordering of our lives thereby. *First*, it secures us against being deceived by the plausible lies of false teachers. He who feeds upon and delights in wholesome and sweet fruits will refuse that which is bitter and poisonous. He who drinks from the River of life, “clear as crystal,” will disdain foul and brackish water. *Second*, it provides sure evidence of our saving oneness with Christ, and preserves and promotes our communion with Him. The privilege mentioned in the second half of the verse follows, obviously and necessarily, from the performance of the duty enjoined in the first half. The one cannot be without the other: where the Gospel is believingly received and affectionately cherished in the heart, there is fellowship with Christ; but where the former occurs not, the latter is unknown. The Lord Himself joined both together when He said, “If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you” (Joh 15:7). It is by means of the Word that we receive Christ into our understandings, and by exercising faith thereon that He dwells in our hearts, and thereby we continue in fellowship with Him. The Son is the Medium and Mediator by whom we are one with the Father.

Other passages make known further results of the Word abiding in the soul. For instance, “The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide” (Psa 37:31). As Spurgeon expressed it, “The best thing in the best place, producing the best results.” Where holiness is loved and obedience is predominant we are delivered from the slippery paths of sin and error. “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee” (Psa 119:11), for taking heed thereto the heart is cleansed (verse 9). “My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandment: for length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee” (Pro 3:1-2). Herein lies our interest, not less than our obligation. Long life is the highest earthly good, especially so when peace be added. “My son, let them not depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion: so shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck” (Pro 3:21-22). If the divine precepts be kept as thy much-loved treasure, as thy daily companion and guide, thou shalt find them to quicken thy soul and adorn thy profession. “If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you” (Joh 15:7), for then our desires are regulated spiritually, and we ask not amiss. If the Word dwell in us richly, “all wisdom” is ours (Col 3:16); strength too, and we “overcome the wicked one” (1Jo 2:14).

“And this is the promise that He hath promised us, even eternal life” (verse 25).

The commentators differ as to whether this statement is to be understood as receiving its fulfillment in the present or in the future: whether it has reference to that which is made good in the believer’s experience in this life, or to the celestial bliss in the life to come. That this verse is closely linked to the one immediately preceding is intimated by its opening word. There, two distinct things are in view: an exhortation, and an incentive to heed the same. Personally, it seems to us that the double idea is continued: the precept being enforced, and the injunction amplified. It is by the truth remaining and operat-

ing in us that we have communion with God in Christ, and thereby the promise is realized now, for “this is life eternal, that they might know thee [i.e. the triune Jehovah], the only true God, and Jesus Christ [the alone Mediator], whom thou hast sent” (Joh 17:3). As to the future, heaven is reached only by those who hold fast the hope of the Gospel and abide in Christ.

“The sum of what is said is, that we cannot live otherwise than by nourishing to the end the seed of life sown in the heart. John insists much on this point, that not only the beginning of a blessed life is to be found in the knowledge of Christ, but also its perfection” (John Calvin).

It will be evident to the careful student that our perception of the precise connection between and the relation of verses 24 and 25 will largely turn upon what we understand to be signified by and included in “eternal life.” As we shall show below, that expression has a twofold force and application: a present and a future one; and in both senses the promise of it supplies a strong encouragement for believers to heed the injunction to let the truth abide and work within them. For it is by adhering to the Gospel that fellowship with Christ is maintained, and in that fellowship “eternal life” is experienced in the soul. Equally so, it is by faith’s keeping constantly in view the joy set before us in the promise, that we are encouraged and strengthened to persevere in the faith.

“As surely as you continue in the faith of the Gospel, you may be fully persuaded that this eternal life is actually bestowed on you, belongs to you, and shall be enjoyed by you, in uninterrupted communion with the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in the house eternal in the heavens, forever and ever” (S.E. Pierce).

We shall now consider: the Promiser—“He”; the blessing announced—“eternal life”; the form of the announcement—by “promise”; and the implications thereof.

The Promiser: the Father

“*And this is the promise that he hath promised us.*” Without a doubt, the pronoun refers to the Father. *First*, because that is the nearest antecedent, the One mentioned at the close of verse 24. *Second*, because of the “order and economy of the sacred Trinity in their operations and actings in the economy of grace. The Father plans all. He proposes all. He provides all. He promises all. He gives all. The Son works from the Father. He performs all. He acts all. He obtains all. The Holy Spirit, in the order and dispensation of grace, witnesseth to all, and sets His seal to all the Father hath revealed and declared concerning His love in Christ Jesus to the elect; as also concerning the person and mediatorial work of our Lord Jesus Christ. So that it can be only that which belongs to the Father which is here asserted. It is a peculiar glory which is the very perfection of the sacred writers to keep up in all their discourses the trinity and proper distinction of the co-equal Persons in the Godhead; and also the order in which they act distinct one from the other; as also the distinct way and manner in which they operate in us, upon us, and within us” (S.E. Pierce). Let the reader note how this order is observed in Matthew 28:19; Ephesians 1:3-4; 1 Peter 1:2-3. *Third*, because of the clear testimony of 1 John 5:11, “God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.”

The blessing announced: “eternal life”

The blessing announced is “eternal life,” which in the following Scriptures is spoken of as the present possession of all who savingly trust in Christ. “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life,” “Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life,” “I give unto them eternal life” (Joh 3:36; 5:24; 10:28). “God hath given to us eternal life” (1Jo 5:11). On the other hand, eternal life is viewed as a future prospect in “he shall receive...in the world to come eternal life” (Mar 10:30), “Ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life” (Rom 6:22), “he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting” (Gal 6:8), “in the hope of eternal life” (Ti 1:2). Those two sets of passages need “rightly dividing” and adjusting thus. The Christian now has eternal life in divine promise, and therefore it is certain. He has a title and right to it, because the same has been purchased for him by Christ. He already has it in Christ (Col 3:3). He has it by faith, which is the substance of things hoped for. He has it in hope (Ti 3:7), which is a confident expectation of a future good, and therefore he rejoices therein. He has the earnest in the gift of the Holy Spirit (2Co 5:5). He has the seed (1Jo 3:9) or beginning of it in the spiritual nature that he received at the new birth. But he has it not yet in full possession and fruition.⁷¹

The form of the announcement: by “promise”

We come now to consider the form in which the blessing is announced, namely by the Father’s *promise*. That is more than a purpose, a doctrinal declaration or prophetic prediction. His eternal purpose was something hid in Himself. A doctrinal declaration is a matter making known to us the divine purpose or will. A prophecy is the foretelling of things yet to be, and may concern that which is evil as much as that which is good. But a promise concerns only that which is good. Moreover, the accomplishment of a prophecy is dependent upon God’s power and veracity, but the making good of His promise is secured by His faithfulness and righteousness also. The divine promises are so many assurances unto us of God’s solemn engagements, by which He has graciously bound Himself to do some good unto or bestow some blessing upon His people. They are so many certifications of His good pleasure concerning them. They declare that He will lavish upon them the rich-

⁷¹ **fruition** – a coming to fulfillment; realization.

es of His grace, out of His own mere bounty, according to His royal benignity. They are the revealed testifications of His heart who loved them from all eternity and foreappointed all things for them and respecting them. That they might have a true, clear, and spiritual knowledge of His good will and favour to them, God has been pleased to set the same before them in hundreds of promises scattered throughout His Word.

The divine promises, then, are so many declarations to remove some ill or to impart some good unto the objects upon whom God set His heart from all eternity. As such they are a most blessed manifestation of His love unto His saints. Speaking after the manner of men, there are three steps in connection with the operations of God's love. The first, His inward purpose to exercise it; the last, the actual execution of His purpose; but in between there is the gracious making known of that purpose to the beneficiaries of it—so that they may be assured of and enjoy the same by faith's anticipation before the realization thereof. While love is concealed we cannot be comforted therewith. Now God, who is "love," not only loves His own, and will in due time fully display His love unto them, but in the interim He will have them informed of His benevolent designs, that even now they may rest in His love and stretch themselves comfortably upon His sure promises. Thereby each of them has reason to exclaim adoringly, "How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them!" (Psa 139:17), for his promises make evident to us that assertion, "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil" (Jer 29:11).

The triune God is not only the Author and Giver of the promises, but is the sum and substance of them too. All the Persons of the Godhead form the subject of these blessed assurances. God the Father is not only the Promiser, but the matter of the promises, for He declares unto His saints, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Thus He gives Himself unto them, so that they may have a propriety in Him and all His perfections. God the Son, in His person, His fullness, His suitability and sufficiency, is the promise of His redeemed, being expressly termed "the mercy promised to our fathers" (Luk 1:72)—given not only *for* but *to* them. God the Spirit, in His sevenfold gifts and graces, is equally the promise of the Church: one of His titles is "that holy Spirit of promise" (Eph 1:13). Thus the triune Jehovah makes Himself over unto His elect. No wonder that an apostle says, "whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises" (2Pe 1:4). Rightly did Spurgeon remark: "Greatness and preciousness seldom go together, but in this instance they are united in an exceeding degree: they come from a great God, they come to great sinners, they deal with great matters, and they work for us great results." Everything in the way of blessing, temporal, spiritual, and eternal, comes to the believer by way of promise.

What is "eternal life"?

"*And this is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life.*" Observe the perfect harmony there is between this statement and "there [namely Zion] the LORD commanded the blessing, *even life for evermore*" (Psa 133:3)—how greatly they do err who assert that Israel's portion was a temporal one only! This is the grand promise, the all-inclusive one, that embraces and comprehends all others. This is the sum of all felicity: of all blessings, *life* is the most desired (Job 2:4), and therefore it is made the emblem of spiritual and eternal bliss. Many things are promised the children of God, but this chiefly, outstandingly; yea, all other things are but steps and means thereto. As eternal death contains the essence of all evils, so eternal life contains the essence of all good. As the good Shepherd assured His sheep, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (Joh 10:10). "Life" there is to be regarded in its widest possible latitude, as including the whole of God's so-great salvation. It is a being enstated in His favour for evermore. It consists of a satisfying knowledge of the triune God (Joh 17:3). It is the inward enjoyment of Him, and the conforming of the soul to the image of His Son.

"*And this is the promise that he hath promised us.*" Why that duplicating of language? For a double reason: first, because the promise was made originally unto Christ as the covenant head of His people, and then to the believer in the Gospel; second, because "eternal life" has both a present and a future aspect. The former is in view in 2 Timothy 1:9, "Who hath saved us [in His eternal decree], and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began"—given to us in Him by solemn compact as our Surety. So again in Titus 1:2: "In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began." There was not only a purpose of grace in the heart of God from all eternity, but a real donation of eternal life unto us. "But hath in due times manifested his word through preaching" (Ti 1:3): that which was secretly and eternally agreed upon between God and Christ is now made known in the Gospel.

The Gospel message is, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have *everlasting life*" (Joh 3:14-15). There too "everlasting life" is an expression which is to be regarded as comprehending everything that Christ purchased for His people. Briefly summarized, eternal life is union with God Himself, in, through, and by Christ. "It is the most perfect fruition of God Himself, and that for evermore" (Witsius). It begins with the divine operation of grace in our hearts, "to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2Co 4:6). It continues in our beholding by faith the glory of the Lord as it shines in the Word, by which we are experientially and progressively "changed into the same image from glory to glory" (2Co 3:18). It is consummated at Christ's return, when He will "change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body" (Phi 3:21); when in spirit and soul and body "we shall be like Him" (1Jo 3:2). It eventuates in dwelling with Him forever in heaven.

The essential elements of eternal life

But let us consider more definitely its essential elements. First, it is a life-in-law. When Adam transgressed he incurred a double death—a legal and an experiential one; being cast out of God’s favour and losing the impress of His moral image in his soul. Correspondingly, God’s elect are given both a legal and a spiritual life. It was to the former that Christ referred when He defined eternal life as “and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life” (Joh 5:24). That is entirely a judicial thing. In His atoning work Christ did two things: He bore the sins of His people and suffered the penalty of the Law; He wrought out for them a perfect righteousness by obeying the precept of the Law. Having met all its requirements, Christ merited its reward, which is “life” (Rom 7:10; 10:5), namely, a standing accepted before God in His cloudless favour; and that life is eternal because it is the award of the “everlasting righteousness” that He brought in (Dan 9:24). When the first Adam sinned, he forfeited God’s favour and came under the curse of the Law; because the last Adam obeyed, He earned for His people the approbation of God and the blessing of the Law. Thus they are not only delivered from condemnation or legal death, but they have legal life, which is justification (Rom 6:10-11).

It is most important to see that the believer has life in Christ before he has life from Him. In Christ he has met every requirement of the Law, and not only is there now no condemnation to him, but he has received “the gift of righteousness,” and must “reign in life by one, Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:17). In consequence of this, *second*, “eternal life” is a life of grace in the soul, for at the new birth the life of God is imparted and we are made vitally one with Christ. It is then that we pass “from death unto life” (1Jo 3:14) experientially, being divinely quickened. The faculties of the soul are restored to their proper exercise: the eyes of the understanding are opened to see the glory of God, the ears unstopped to hear His voice, the affections raised unto things above, the tongue loosed in praise and petition. And they are infallibly assured that “He who has begun a good work in you will perform [or “finish”] it” (Phi 1:6). This too is an intrinsic part of the fruit of the Saviour’s travail (Ti 3:5-7).

Third, eternal life is consummated in everlasting celestial bliss, for God “hath begotten us again unto a lively [living] hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for us” (1Pe 1:3-4). The spiritual life begun here is fully realized there. Now it is but the bud, then the lovely flower. “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now we know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1Co 13:12). Even now we are made partakers of the divine nature (2Pe 1:4), but then shall we be perfectly conformed to the image of His Son (Rom 8:29), and eternally share with Him that “fullness of joy,” and those pleasures that are at God’s right hand. Thus “eternal life” includes a life-in-law, a life in the soul, and a life in heaven; or justification, regeneration, and glorification.

The implications of the promises

A few words on the implications of the particular form in which eternal life is presented. *First*, since it be by divine “promise,” then it is a free gift. A promise supposes that the party making it is under no obligation to grant, and that the one to whom it is made can urge no claim. It is entirely gratuitous (see Galatians 3:18, 21). That eternal life is a “gift” is asserted in John 10:28, Romans 6:23. *Second*, it implies acceptance on our part, and that as a “gift.” Yet the very act of receiving it involves certain exercises of soul. There must be repentance, or a being sensible of our guilt and the desire for its removal; [and] the exercise of faith, or the extending of an empty hand to receive alms. Those exercises will necessarily be followed by obedience and a holy life. Where there be repentance, there is hatred of sin. Where there be faith, there is gratitude to the bounteous Giver and the longing to please Him. *Third*, everlasting bliss is also certain, for it is promised by Him who cannot lie. The unchanging faithfulness of God is the guarantee of endless felicity.

Chapter 35

Seducers

1 John 2:26

“These things have I written unto you concerning them that seduce you.”

Why this is important

It is likely that quite a number of our readers will consider that there is little or no occasion for us to devote a chapter to our present subject, or, at any rate, that they feel in no need of anything thereon. If so, they are lamentably ignorant of their own hearts. Anyone who imagines himself to be so well taught and established in the truth as to be immune from being imposed upon by error is in a dangerous state of mind, for he is possessed by a spirit of pride and self-sufficiency, and therefore very liable to fall a victim to the wiles of the devil. It is written, "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Pro 16:18). There is nothing that God hates more than pride; and where it be allowed, He humbles. Pride is "the condemnation of the devil" (1Ti 3:6), being that which brought about his ruin. It was the insensate pride of our first parents—the desire to be as God—that plunged the whole race to destruction. Pride or self-confidence was the cause of Peter's sad fall. Those who think highly of themselves affront God, and will be brought low. "Be not high minded, but fear" (Rom 11:20), dear reader. "When Majesty humbled Himself, shall the worm swell with pride?" (Bernard).

The Christian is exhorted to "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good" (1Th 5:21)—to examine carefully and critically everything which he hears or reads, testing it by the Word of God. There is pressing need for him to do so, for there is much error, cleverly disguised, abroad today. As another has pointed out, "We may know a straight line, and be assured that there is in it no curve, or twist, or angle; and yet much that appears straight will be found to be irregular, bent, and twisted, when tested by a measuring rod. In like manner we may know the truth, and yet much that appears to be true will be found false when tested by the truth Himself. The only perfect line of rectitude is Christ. All who are opposed to Him, in thought, word, or deed, are liars; even as all watches are false that contradict the sun." The Christ of many a pulpit is radically different from the Christ of God, yet because the preacher invests the figment of his own imagination with the name of "Christ," many unlearned and unstable souls are deceived into supposing that it is the Christ of Scripture that is being set before them. It was so in John's day, and that is why he devoted this section of his epistle to an exposure of the same, and warning the saints against them.

The apostle was very jealous of the spiritual welfare of Christ's sheep, and anxious to secure them from the fierce wolves. In his other epistles he revealed the loving spirit that animated him when he declared, "I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth" (2Jo 1:4), and "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3Jo 1:4). How greatly distressed, then, must he have been to discover that some had forsaken the same and espoused error (1Jo 2:19)! He therefore wrote to instruct and warn those who might be wavering. He knew that in the most enlightened there is much ignorance. In the most determined there is yet irresolution. In the most spiritual there is still corruption. Especially in the case of the newly converted was there a need for precept upon precept, line upon line. His long experience had shown him how many defects and dangers encompassed the most favoured and advanced believers, and how requisite it was ever to address unto them the word of exhortation. In the case before us it appears that he was very hopeful of success in thus addressing them. In verse 21, he intimates that he set the truth before them encouraged by the belief that there would be found in them a readiness of mind to receive it; while in verse 27 he expresses the confidence that the anointing they had received would ensure their abiding in Christ.

Definition

A "seducer" is one who, by means of his blandishments or sophistries, seeks to allure another from the path of rectitude. The ungodly are allured by their own lusts. "The righteous *is* more excellent than his neighbour: but the way of the wicked seduceth them" (Pro 12:26). Even in this life the righteous are "more excellent" than others, in their character, their spiritual possessions, and their privileges. But the worker of iniquity is deceived by the way of the world, which tempts and cheats him by its promises of temporal gains, honours, and pleasures, and blinds his mind to his eternal undoing. "He feedeth on ashes: a deceived heart hath turned him aside [from the paths of wisdom and holiness], that he cannot deliver his soul" (Isa 44:20). On the other hand, professing Christians are seduced by false teachers, who seek to corrupt their minds and turn them away from the truth. They tacitly repudiate the total depravity of man, concealing the fact that he is dead in trespasses and sins, completely incapacitated to perform a single spiritual act; and flatter him by assuring him of his "free will," and that he has power to decide his own eternal destiny. They pervert God's way of salvation, omitting that which is abasing to pride, and substituting that which is pleasing to the flesh. They preach "another gospel" than that of Christ. By "cunning craftiness...they lie in wait to deceive," and "allure through the lusts of the flesh" (Eph 4:14; 2Pe 2:18).

Of old God declared, "Mine hand shall be upon the prophets that see vanity, and that divine lies...Because, even because they have seduced my people, saying, Peace; and there was no peace; and one built up a wall, and, lo, others daubed it with untempered mortar" (Eze 13:9-10).

"The peculiar guilt of these prophets consisted in seducing the worshippers of God into idolatry and iniquity, and encouraging them to harden themselves in impenitence; by assuring them of peace and prosperity at the very time when divine judgments were about to be poured on them...Thus they acted as if a man were to build a wall with loose stones or bricks of earth without cement; and others should seek to give an appearance of stability by daubing it over with mortar made of bad materials and not properly mixed; and should then expect that such a wall would protect them" (T. Scott).

And those men were not heathen soothsayers, but Israelites who claimed to be the mouthpieces of Jehovah. So it is in Christendom: many have entered the sacred ministry as a means to worldly advancement and applause. They pretend to speak in the name of Christ, but they are strangers to Him. They love money rather than souls, and prefer the praise of men to the approbation of God.

“All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived” (2Ti 3:12-13). The seducers and the persecutors of God’s people are two very different types. The former seek to turn them away from the truth, whereas the latter oppose them because of their fidelity unto the truth. The former conceal their real character, but the latter come out in their true colours. The one feign themselves to be friends and helpers, the other make no attempt to disguise the fact that they are enemies and antagonists. The former are harder to detect, and we are very apt to be less on our guard against them. Constant vigilance is required lest we be deceived by their “good words and fair speeches” (Rom 16:18). Let us not overlook, but rather be awed by, the striking accuracy of this prophecy. It is not that persecutors would become fiercer and fiercer as the Christian era proceeded, but that evil men and seducers should wax worse and worse. And so it has been historically. Nothing comparable, either in scale or ferocity, has equaled the persecutions of the saints by Nero and others of the Roman emperors who followed him. On the other hand, efforts to corrupt the truth and beguile Christians by those claiming to be the servants of Christ have increased in number, daring, and subtlety.

The arch-seducer is Satan, who beguiled Eve through his wiles. He pretended to have her best interests at heart and to sympathize because of the restriction placed upon her liberty. He made her imagine that she was mistaken in supposing that she would be injured by eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, that such a thing was quite incompatible with God’s goodness and His interest in her well-being. He assured her that, on the contrary, she would be the gainer by partaking of its fruit. The gilded bait was swallowed, and fatal was the result. That was the beginning of his trade in seducing souls, and he has plied it energetically ever since. The devil is the instigator of innumerable devices to cheat the unwary and ruin their souls. He often appears as an angel of light, and his ministers are disguised as those of righteousness (2Co 11:14-15). Such abounded at the commencement of this Christian era. The Lord revealed their method and aim in the parable where He spoke of the evil leaven being surreptitiously introduced into the meal (Mat 13:33). The epistles contain many warnings against them. Paul declared, “For such *are* false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ” (2Co 11:13). It is so today.

The ways of seduction

The wicked one has many of his seducing emissaries in Christendom, who pose as men of superior enlightenment, with great spiritual zeal and love for souls, yet are engaged in stealthily propagating error and undermining the fundamentals of the faith. And, as we have seen, it was divinely foretold that these evil men and seducers should wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. The word “evil men” signifies wicked, being the same one as used in “the wicked one” (1Jo 2:14). They have vile designs, though they appear under “a form of godliness” (2Ti 3:5). They are dissemblers, assuming a character which does not belong to them. They are tricksters, beguiling many by their arts to receive as good and true that which is pernicious and false. They are themselves deluded by the father of lies. They jettison the Law of God under the pretence of magnifying His grace. They set aside the duty of the sinner to repent and believe, by over-stressing his moral impotence. The most searching and humbling sections of Scripture are shelved by an erroneous system of what is termed “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2Ti 2:15). Eternal punishment is represented as being incompatible with the goodness and mercy of God.

In other instances, these seducers of souls and corrupters of the truth introduce, gradually, practices not sanctioned by Scripture, until there is a fully developed system of superstitious observances. Such wax worse and worse both in principle and practice. They grow increasingly ambitious and audacious. An awful example of this is seen in the ever-advancing blattery and blasphemy of Romanism. In 1854 the dogma of “The Immaculate Conception” was invented and announced; Pope Pius proclaiming that the Virgin Mary was absolutely pure and sinless from the womb, and declaring the same to be “the established doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church”—thereby ascribing to her body what pertained alone to the Lord Jesus Christ. In 1870 the Vatican Council declared that the Pope was infallible in the execution of all that pertained to his pontifical functions, thus investing him with a divine attribute. In 1951, amid unprecedented pomp and pageantry, the Pope published the dogma of Mary’s Assumption, wherein it was averred that she had been taken “body and soul into the glory of heaven,” placing her on a par with the Saviour. The same increasing wickedness is seen in thousands of non-papish churches, whose pulpits are now occupied by men voicing the skepticism (the denial of miracles) of infidels and agnostics.

Background: Review of verses 18-25

“*These things I have written unto you concerning them that seduce you,*” or, as the American Revised Version (often more literal and accurate in translating the Greek verb) has it, “*These things have I written unto you concerning them that*

would lead thee astray.” The “these things” refers to what is contained in verses 18-25, and probably many would be helped if we briefly reviewed their contents. First, it is to be noted that John was here addressing the youngest in the family, the “little children,” or “babes” as the word properly signifies. It is the newly converted who, in their ignorance and simplicity, most need to be warned against false teachers. They are informed that this Christian dispensation is “the last time” or concluding era of the world’s history, so that no further revelation from God is to be expected, and therefore any who claim to be favoured with such are impostors. The character and will of God have been fully and finally made known in and by His incarnate Son (Heb 1:1-2). The presence of “many antichrists” furnished evidence that “the last time” had even then begun, for their activities demonstrated that the true Christ had come, and since He had ushered in the final age, and they were opposing Him, naught remained but the judgment of God.

Then the apostle intimated that there was no occasion for those young Christians to be stumbled because some of their fellows had given ear to the antichrists and had apostatized from the faith, for he assured them that those renegades were never anything more than nominal disciples. Though they had made a profession, had much head knowledge of the truth, and appeared to be full of zeal for the Gospel, nevertheless they were graceless souls, strangers to the saving operations of the Holy Spirit. They “were not of us”; though members of the churches, they never had vital union with Christ and His people. Their going out made it “manifest that they were not all of us” (verse 19). While it cannot but be a distressing and disturbing experience unto God’s people to behold some of those deserting the assemblies and proving to be traitors with whom they had enjoyed outward fellowship, yet it should not shatter their own faith, for God often suffers the chaff to be thus sifted and separated from the wheat. The Scripture gives plain warning that there are thorny-ground hearers as well as fruitful ones, that the Gospel net encloses bad fishes besides good ones, that many shall follow the pernicious ways of false prophets.

Next, in verse 20, he assured the babes, “But ye have an unction from the Holy One,” which distinguished them radically from the apostates. That “unction” is God’s gracious provision for His own people, to preserve them from embracing fatal error. That unction or “anointing” is the coming of the Spirit from Christ upon those for whom He shed His blood; it is both the communication of a spiritual gift and a divine operation that separates the recipient from the world and all that is opposed to God, consecrating him to Him. The first benefit that believers have by this anointing is an illumination of the mind: “Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things.” The knowledge imparted to the Christian by the gift of the Spirit and His effectual application of the truth unto the heart is radically different from the wisdom of the natural man, or any mental apprehension of spiritual things that he may obtain. It is a supernatural, spiritual, and saving acquaintance with divine things. It is an experiential and certifying knowledge, by which the soul is infallibly assured of the verity of God’s Word. It is a humbling and conforming knowledge, casting the heart into the mold of divine doctrine (Rom 6:17). It is therefore a *preservative* knowledge, which prevents its possessor being fatally deceived by error. It is an *operative* knowledge which stirs the soul unto holy action.

It was because these babes in Christ were savingly acquainted with the truth that John thus addressed them, and because they knew “that no lie is of the truth” (verse 21). When the eyes of the understanding be opened by God, there is the capacity to distinguish between light and darkness. Because the sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd, they refuse to follow the call of a stranger. Nevertheless, it was needful for the apostle to put them on their guard against false prophets, that they might be still further established in the faith and fortified against specious⁷² error. Error often has a very plausible appearance, and many are deceived thereby; since they have no inward and saving experience of the truth, they are unable to discern that which is opposed to it. But those who know and are established in the Gospel are assured that no lie can be found in or deduced from it; as well expect foul water from a clean fountain as heresy in the pure Word of God. Whatever be contrary to the Gospel of Christ cannot be sound and wholesome.

From that general principle John proceeded to point out that anyone who denied that Jesus is the Christ was a liar and an antichrist, and no matter what be his pretensions “the same hath not the Father” (verses 22-23)—a repudiator of the truth, an antagonist of God’s Son, a seducer of souls, and therefore a deadly enemy of the saints. By such fearful names of opprobrium⁷³ does God stigmatize the corrupters of His Gospel and warn His people against them. In view of such a menace John made a practical application of the foregoing, exhorting the saints to persevere in the faith and heed not those who sought to entice away from it (verse 24). It is only by means of the truth abiding in our hearts and operating in our lives that we are rendered immune to the devil’s lies and kept from apostasy. A cherishing of that which was blessed to our conversion, and the conforming of our characters and conduct thereto, maintains the soul in communion with the Lord, and that will make us turn a deaf ear unto those siren voices that seek to draw us from Him and bring about our eternal ruin.

Finally, to encourage these young converts to hold fast the truth and shun lying novelties, the apostle reminded them, “And this is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life” (verse 25). “Eternal life” is both a present possession and a future prospect. It is received by faith’s laying hold of the Gospel offer, and it is realized in the soul just so far as fellowship with Christ is practically maintained by subjection to His will. But the full possession and fruition of “eternal life”

⁷² **specious** – having the ring of truth, but actually false; deceptive.

⁷³ **opprobrium** - reproach mingled with contempt or disdain.

(the sum of the believer's blessedness and the climax of his bliss) awaits the world to come, and it is by hope's anticipation thereof—through faith's keeping steadfastly in view the joy set before him—that the believer is strengthened to run the race set before him and kept from straying. Now there is nothing more pleasing to God than our making a good use of His promises. First, by collecting them, storing them in our minds, meditating much upon them, and making them our spiritual food. Second, by faith's laying hold of the same and pleading them before the throne of grace: "do as thou hast said" (2Sa 7:25; and cf. Psa 119:49; Act 27:25). Third, by cleansing ourselves from everything contrary to holiness (2Co 7:1).

Conclusion

"These things have I written unto you concerning them that seduce you." From which we may see, *first*, that all teachers of error are beguilers of souls—what terrible appellations: liars, antichrists, seducers! How they should be feared and shunned! *Second*, how needful it is that we be well informed and instructed from the Scriptures that we may be enabled to detect and reject everything that is contrary thereto. The welfare of our souls and the glory of God demand that we thoroughly familiarize ourselves with the Word of truth. *Third*, "it is the duty of a good and diligent pastor not only to gather a flock, but also to drive away wolves; for what will it avail to proclaim the pure Gospel, if he connive at the impostures of Satan?" (Calvin). Error must be exposed and refuted if the minister is to "take the stumblingblock out of the way of my people" (Isa 57:14). Finally, we see how that, humanly speaking, we are beholden to the seducers of the first century for not a little in the Epistles, their attacks giving occasion to warn against them. Thus God can bring light out of darkness, and by error make way for a more complete discovery of the truth.

Chapter 36

Our Anointing

1 John 2:27

"But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him."

In this verse and the next one the apostle continues and virtually completes what he had said upon the saints' abiding in Christ. Though our text be by no means free of difficulty, yet by carefully noting its coherence with the context, its meaning is more or less obvious. In view of the defection of so many (verse 19) and the continued activities of antichrists to draw away others, John had addressed their responsibility and bade them persevere in the faith, and heed not those who sought to entice them away from it. It was their duty to store the truth in their minds and treasure it in their hearts, to yield their entire beings to its sway and reduce its substance to practice. Abandon it not for any specious novelty (verse 24). In verse 25 an incentive was supplied to encourage and stimulate them in the performance of that duty. In verse 26 a solemn warning is added for the purpose of showing the necessity for their compliance therewith.

The apostle's design, then, in the verse now before us, is threefold: explanatory, consolatory, cautionary. *First*, he states the reason why believers had stood firm under the testing which had shaken and overthrown so many of their fellows. It was not because of any superior native sagacity,⁷⁴ but was to be attributed solely unto the gracious and effectual provision that God has made for the preservation of His children from the deceits of Satan. In verse 20, John had stated *implicitly* how it was that the saints had been delivered from serious error; now he affirms *explicitly* that they would continue to be kept from receiving lying vanities. Here, as everywhere else in the writings of the apostles, the grand end in view was to remove all ground for boasting from the saints and to move them to ascribe all the glory unto their Redeemer. Our security for abiding in God—in the Father and the Son—is here attributed to that which is imparted to us at regeneration: there is now that within us which preserves from the evil without us; we have been given a sure antidote against the poison of the serpent. At the new birth we received that which ensures our abiding in Christ.

Second, whereas that clear statement redounded to the honour of Christ, for it was from Him that the preservative benefit was received, it could not fail to comfort and assure the hearts of those to whom it was addressed. It must not be over-

⁷⁴ **sagacity** – sound in judgment; discernment.

looked that, at that time, those believers were in special need of solace. They had been witnessing a most mysterious and distressing spectacle. They had seen a large number of their professing brethren forsaking the churches to which they belonged, and not a few of the ministers themselves apostatizing. That was enough thoroughly to discourage mature Christians, and much more so the babes of the family. How strengthening then to their faith to be divinely assured that the anointing which they had received from Christ was no temporary thing or evanescent experience, which would soon wear off, but a durable and effective one that would stand them in good stead unto the close of their earthly pilgrimage. How comforting to be authoritatively informed that the same divine illumination that taught them at the beginning and that had imparted to them the saving knowledge of Christ, would remain to instruct them so that they would be kept steadfast in the faith and would most certainly abide in Christ.

Third, the above declaration was also intended to animate them unto increased watchfulness and diligence. While our last-made remarks stand in need of no qualification, they do need amplification lest they be perverted to a wrong use. Such an assurance must not be abused to rashness and self-confidence. However sound and extensive their spiritual knowledge, they had real need of more. There is no remaining stationary in the Christian life; unless we progress, we retrogress. Unless we make good use of what God has given us, we are in real danger of losing what we seem to have (Luk 8:18). In order to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we are required to make daily use of the means that God has provided. This anointing is not given to slothfulness and laziness. It is a vile perversion of this heavenly privilege to make God the patron of negligence and the indulger of the ease of the flesh. This divine gift increases our obligations: “for unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required” (Luk 12:48). Nor must it be abused unto pride and self-sufficiency, so that we look contemptuously upon the more ignorant, for we have nothing good but what we have received (1Co 4:7).

The nature of the “anointing”

But we must now inquire into the precise nature of this inestimable gift. Some have thought that by this “anointing” the truth itself is intended, that the doctrine of the Gospel which they had received would preserve them from the seducers warned against. But such a view accords not with either the text or the context, for the truth of the Gospel was the very thing which the antichrists were attacking, and it was a true and experiential knowledge thereof which constituted the saint’s safeguard. This “anointing” is here said to *abide* in those who were the favoured recipients of the same, whereas strictly speaking we are said to abide in the truth. Again, this anointing is said to *teach* us all things, whereas the truth is that which we are taught: thus we must distinguish between that which instructs and that wherein we are instructed. Finally, it must be borne in mind that everywhere else in Scripture, the Holy Spirit is said to be the teacher of the saints, the One who establishes them in the truth, and there is nothing whatever in our text or the context which requires us to adopt any other signification.

The Greek word for “anointing” in our text is identical with the one rendered “unction” in verse 20, and has reference to one and the same thing. In our exposition of that verse we showed, first, that under the Old Testament economy prophets, priests and kings were appointed unto and confirmed in their office by being anointed with the holy oil, and that they typified the anointing of Christ Himself with the Holy Spirit (Isa 61:1; Act 10:38). It was from that endowment He was denominated “the Christ,” which means “the Anointed One.” At His incarnation His humanity received a fullness of the Spirit’s grace, being born “that holy thing” (Luk 1:35); at His baptism and entrance upon His public ministry He received a fullness of the Spirit’s gifts (Isa 11:2; Mat 3:17); while at His ascension He was anointed with the oil of gladness (Psa 45:7; Act 2:33). “And of His fullness have we all received, and grace for grace” (Joh 1:16)—the grace in us answering (according to our proportion) to the grace that is in Him—foreshadowed of old in the anointing of Israel’s high priest, concerning which we read, “It is like the precious ointment upon the head...that went down to the skirts of his garments” (Psa 133:2), reaching to the lowest of his members. In like manner, the believer’s anointing is an emanation from Christ.

Christ is our Anointer, and the anointing that believers receive from Him is the Holy Spirit, and thus are the members conformed to their glorious Head, yet with this difference: He was anointed with the Spirit without measure (Joh 3:34), we “according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (Eph 4:7). This “anointing,” then, is nothing less than the gift of the Holy Spirit and supply of grace which is received from the Anointed One, who is “full of grace and truth” (Joh 1:14). It is an invaluable blessing which cannot be too highly esteemed. It is a divine gift “without repentance” (Rom 11:29), never to be recalled or rescinded. It is incorruptible, and cannot be destroyed, being that good part which shall continue with them and which none can take away. This is the “oil in their vessels” (that is, in their hearts) that distinguishes the wise virgins from the foolish ones (Mat 25:4). Both had the “lamp” in their hands; that which differentiates the gracious soul from the graceless professor is something within, namely the indwelling Spirit. By this divine unction the regenerate receive light into the sacred mysteries of the Gospel, so that they have a saving and satisfying acquaintance with and experience thereof, which effectually preserves them from being imposed upon by counterfeits.

The figure of “anointing” is a very comprehensive one, which more plainly appears when we compare all the passages where the holy oil was used under the Old Testament economy. It was employed with the design of dedicating a thing or a person unto God (Gen 22:18). It was provided for the purpose of illumination, to furnish light (Exo 25:6). It was designed to lubricate and refresh, “oil to make his face to shine” (Psa 104:15). Since it was compounded of sweet spices (Exo 30:24-25),

it produced a fragrance in those using the same. In the blessing pronounced on Asher it was said, “Let him dip his foot in oil. Thy shoes *shall be* iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be” (Deu 33:24-25), which, in figurative language, signified the Spirit supplying power for the walk. Now in all these respects the antitypical substance is communicated by Christ through the unction of the Spirit. Thereby believers are set apart and consecrated to God, illuminated and instructed, quickened and comforted, made a sweet savour unto God and unto one another. There are two beautiful allusions unto the last in the Song of Solomon. First, the spouse says of her Beloved, “Thy love *is* better than wine. Because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name *is as* ointment poured forth” (1:2-3); while He in turn declares, “How fair is thy love, my sister, *my* spouse! how much better is thy love than wine! and the smell of thine ointments than all spices” (4:10), where He admires the graces that the Spirit has wrought in her.

Observations about this anointing

“But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him.”

Now it is the second aspect of the above that is principally in view in our text. No less than seven things are here predicated of this anointing. *First*, it was from Christ that it proceeded. Those unto whom John was writing had remained steadfast in the truth, unshaken by heresy, and he would have them know the reason for this or from whence their constancy originated: they were indebted to the Holy One for His unction. Thus were fulfilled the several promises that He made to His disciples ere He departed from this world. “But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father...for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you” (Joh 15:26; 16:7). It was the bestowment of the risen Saviour, for when He ascended on high He “gave gifts unto men” (Eph 4:8)—an earnest of which was imparted when He “breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost” (Joh 20:22).

Second, this endowment was a subjective one: it “abideth *in* you.” It is a gracious experience in the inner man, which is entirely beyond the cognizance of the unregenerate. As the Lord Jesus had announced, “the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you” (Joh 14:17). This is made good when it can be said, “For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance” (1Th 1:5). The external Word is now applied internally. The mind is divinely illumined, so as to receive a clear, convincing, contenting knowledge of the truth. At the same time the affections are purified and the heart turned unto God, so that it is fitted for spiritual and heavenly things; this is that “washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Ti 3:5). Then it is that the Word is received “in much affliction [as we are convicted of our sins], with joy of the Holy Spirit” (1Th 1:6), as He makes known to us our divine pardon. In the latter respect this anointing is “the oil of gladness” (Psa 45:7), for the Spirit is a Comforter as well as a Sanctifier. Combine divine illumination, purification, and consolation, and what a sure means are they for establishing in the truth!

Third, this anointing is a permanent blessing: it “*abideth in* you,” “that he [the Comforter] may abide with you for ever” (Joh 14:16). It is very much more than a fitful emotion or brief rapture of spirit which soon gives place to depression; namely, stable, and enduring. Therein it is to be distinguished from our varying frames and feelings. It is indeed exercised and manifested in different ways and directions: sometimes producing groans that cannot be uttered, sometimes bestowing sweet foretastes of celestial bliss. But beneath all surface perception it is exerting a steadying influence, keeping God and eternity before the soul, so that in the hour of temptation or tribulation it turns to Him for succour.

Fourth, this unction is, in itself, sufficient: so truly so that it is affirmed of its beneficiaries, “ye need not that any man teach you”—either to convey authority to the truth, to impart a saving knowledge of it to the soul, or to induce the regenerate to adhere firmly unto it in love and obedience. The Gospel carries its own witness, and when, through the Spirit’s anointing, it is applied to the heart in saving power, it is received “not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe” (1Th 2:13).

Fifth, it instructs its recipients: “the same anointing *teacheth* you of all things.” This is fulfillment of God’s new-covenant promise: “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD” (Jer 31:33-34). In the accomplishment of that promise the Lord works so effectually upon and within His elect that, to use the language of another apostle, they are made “partakers of the divine nature” (2Pe 1:4). There is a peculiar power accompanying the teaching of the Lord by His Spirit: “Behold, God exalteth by his power: who teacheth like him?” (Job 36:22). So our Lord interpreted His promise, “All thy children *shall be* taught of the LORD” (Isa 54:13), as “every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me” (Joh 6:45). There is such an efficacy attending the divine teaching that whosoever is favoured therewith is positively assured that the same is of and from God Himself, for he now has the certifying evidence of its verity within his own soul.

The anointing of believers with the Spirit is for the purpose of giving them an experiential acquaintance and saving knowledge of the Gospel, enlightening their understandings and causing their hearts to receive the same with delight, casting their inner man into the holy image of the same (Rom 6:17). Thereby they are given the spirit of wisdom and revelation

in the knowledge of God in Christ, the eyes of their understanding being enlightened, that they may know what is the hope of His calling, and what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints (Eph 1:17-18). Such impressions of the holiness, righteousness, goodness, and grace of God are indelibly left in their souls that Satan can no longer deceive them with lying substitutes. As another apostle said, “*Ye are* manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart” (2Co 3:3). They have received the Spirit which is of God, that they may know the things which are freely given to them by God (1Co 2:12), that they may be assured of their reality, convinced of their value, appropriate, enjoy, and embody them in their lives. They now have a spirit of discernment, but flee from hirelings (Joh 10:5).

Sixth, it is genuine and wholesome: “and is truth, and *is no lie*”—no darkness mars the light. Thus it is simple or pure blessing, no heresy being mixed with it. Therefore it is reliable and trustworthy. The Spirit is like a seal, by which the truth is testified and certified to the soul. “For while faith ought to look to God, He alone can be a witness to Himself, so as to convince our hearts that what our ears receive has come from Him” (Calvin). The added words “and is no lie” signify that God has so endowed the regenerate with sound judgment and discernment that they will not be deceived by falsehoods, or even left in a state of uncertainty and vacillation about them. There is no danger, no possibility, of anyone being misled by what this holy unction teaches; no erring while we walk according to this direction. Therefore we are to measure everything by what the Spirit teaches in the Word. Thus not only is it thorough and complete—for “By this teaching of God Himself, they were instructed in all things essential to salvation, and could not be deceived” (Thos. Scott)—it also conveys a conviction which cannot be called into question or shaken by man or devil.

“There is truth and no lie in what the Spirit shows you of the love of God in Christ, and sheds abroad in your heart of that love. Be sure of that, and be not afraid to act upon the assurance of it. There is truth and no lie in what the Spirit opens up to you of the freeness and fullness of the Father’s overtures of mercy in the Son. Be sure of that, and be not afraid to act upon the assurance of it. There is truth and no lie in what the Spirit would have you grasp of the peace that passeth understanding, the hope that maketh not ashamed, the joy unspeakable that is full of glory. Be sure of that, and be not afraid to act upon the assurance of it. There is truth and no lie in that which ye have heard from the beginning, so abiding in you that you abide in the Son and in the Father. That really is the anointing that is truth and no lie. Be sure of that, and be not afraid to act out and out upon the assurance of it” (Robert Candlish).

Instead of now taking up the seventh thing that is here predicated of our anointing (namely that it ensures our abiding in Christ), we defer it to our next chapter, and instead proffer some further remarks upon the oft-misunderstood clause “and ye need not that any man teach you.” That language calls for the expositor, to explain the force of its terms, for some ignorant souls who fail to understand the sense have been misled by its sound. Certain fanatics suppose it means that the Christian is independent of all preachers, and therefore have contended for the exclusion of oral ministry from the churches. Now it is obvious that John wrote not to promote a spirit of presumption and unwillingness to be taught by others—his own example contradicted any such idea, for he was then engaged in instructing these very persons. Nor was there any inconsistency between his statement and his practice. He taught the disciples and they were grateful and much edified. Yet supposing him to be withdrawn from them and his pen silenced, it did not follow that they must remain ignorant. The Spirit would teach them, by him and without him as He pleased. The child of God, with the Bible in his hand and the Holy Spirit in his heart, is capable of all spiritual knowledge. Whereas divine teaching does not supersede ministerial instruction, it does surpass the same.

Chapter 37

Abiding in Christ

1 John 2:28

“And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming.”

“Abiding in Christ” means remaining steadfast

The apostle was engaged in warning professing Christians against false teachers who desired to corrupt them, yea, who had already prevailed with many of their company (verses 18-19). He had shown them up in their true colours, denouncing them as antichrists and liars (verse 22). He had exhorted the saints to hold fast the beginning of their confidence steadfast to the end (verse 24). He had reminded them of the grand promise given for their encouragement (verse 25). Then he assured the regenerate that the anointing which they had received from Christ was no mere temporary benefit, but one which would remain in them as an incorruptible principle of life and light, supplying them with such spiritual discernment as no human teaching could impart. That “anointing” consisted, as we have seen, of the gift of the Holy Spirit and His saving grace. It is the Spirit as an illuminator and instructor that is here singled out for particular mention. He teaches nothing but infallible truth, without the slightest mixture of error. He teaches “of all things,” that is, all things essential unto our ingrafting into and continuation in Christ—the essential and fundamental things of the Gospel, whatever be requisite for our obedience to Christ and communion with Him. *That* all believers are taught, however ignorant they be in matters of lesser importance.

Paraphrasing the excellent Owen, we would say that, *first*, all divine truth that is necessary to be known and believed that we may live unto God, abide in Christ, and be preserved from seducers, is revealed in the Scriptures (Act 20:32). *Second*, but of ourselves we cannot understand the Scriptures unto the ends just specified (1Co 2:14); if we could there would be no need that we should be taught them by the Spirit (1Co 2:12). *Third*, by the anointing of the Spirit believers are taught all those things, so that they are enabled to discern, understand, and acknowledge them (1Jo 2:27). The Spirit is given to Christ’s redeemed for this very purpose: that He may graciously and savingly instruct them in the truth of the Gospel by the supernatural enlightening of their minds, causing the soul to cling firmly unto it with love and delight, transforming them in the whole inner man into the image of the same. Thereby it answers to the anointing of the Lord Jesus with the same Spirit, which made Him “of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD” (Isa 11:3). “The secret of the LORD *is* with them that fear him; and he will show them his covenant” (Psa 25:14). God will not conceal from them the knowledge of His will so far as their salvation is concerned in it, but will teach them the way wherein they should walk if they are to be acceptable to Him.

The general end or design of God in the gift and teaching of the Spirit is to provide for believers remaining steadfast in Christ, and thus verse 27 closes with the emphatic statement, “and even as it [the anointing] hath taught you, ye shall abide in Him.” Whatever be required in order to maintain communion with Christ all believers are taught. The especial end in view that is here singled out is preservation and deliverance from all antichrists and seducers, with the lies and false doctrines which they propagate against Christ and His Gospel. The only means whereby we may be kept from such pernicious opinions and ways is by an assured knowledge and inward acquaintance with what is revealed in Holy Writ. Truth is the only antidote against error, and none but the Holy Spirit can lead anyone into the life-giving meaning of the truth and quicken him into real fellowship with the Lord thereby. Those who lack this spiritual, sure, and establishing knowledge, possessing but a bare conjectural and theoretical acquaintance with it, are Christians only in name, receiving the Gospel from men in the letter rather than in the substance of it; and, not being rooted and grounded in the faith, are subject to any wind of false doctrine.

Nothing else ensures stability and fidelity. Man’s knowledge, skill, or disputing ability is insufficient to preserve from being inveigled with fair pretences or enticed with the cunning sleights of Satan, where he lies in wait to deceive. Yea, as Owen pointed out, “Temptations may come as a storm or tempest, which quickly drives men from their greatest fleshly confidences. Hence oftentimes those who are forwardest to say, Though all men should forsake the truth yet would not they do so, are the forwardest upon trial so to do.”

But this sacred anointing fails none who receive it, and because of it they never fail. *First*, because His teaching is not merely an external and doctrinal instruction, but an internal and effectual operation. Whereas He makes use indeed of the written Word and teaches nothing but what is revealed therein, He bestows an understanding that we may know Him that is true, and open our eyes so that we may see clearly the wondrous things that are in God’s Law. The degree of this knowledge varies considerably, both in the clearness with which divine things are perceived and in the scope or extent of the same, the Spirit acting according to the sovereignty of His will (1Co 12:11); but none who receives His anointing comes short of whatever be necessary to ensure his abiding in Christ.

Second, the Spirit so teaches as to give a love unto and delight in the things that are taught. This is the next principal cause of action and practice, being that which binds together the different means and instruments of our security, rendering them firm and stable. Even though the mind be informed and perceives a duty, if the will and the affections be not wrought upon and won over unto a hearty approbation of the same, we shall never conform ourselves unto them in the diligent performance of that duty. That which is done merely from convictions of conscience, without any gladness of heart, will neither be acceptable unto God nor shall we be constant therein. No matter how well instructed we be by God’s ministers, or what light we personally acquire by study, unless there be genuine love of the truth and the personal practice thereof, it will prove insufficient unto our preservation and the saving profession of it. This is the outstanding characteristic feature of this divine unction: it communicates a delight in the truth wherein it instructs and promotes a glad obedience to what it requires. When the blessed Spirit by His teaching breathes into the soul a holy and spiritual complacency in the

things that are taught, then we taste how gracious the Lord is in them; His Word is rendered sweeter to us than the honeycomb, and we run in the way of His commandments.

This anointing imparts a secret and infallible assurance unto that which is communicated, for “it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth...He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself” (1Jo 5:6, 10). Then, in such a connection, the “and ye need not that any man teach you” should be quite plain to all. They were not ignoramuses, who were unacquainted with the truth. They were not dependent upon Gnostics or any other “great” and wise men to indoctrinate them. No so-called “infallible church” or “pope” was required to authenticate God’s Word and persuade of its verity. As divinely enlightened, they already knew the things John was setting before them. Similarly, Paul wrote, “But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another” (1Th 4:9). So here, yet as the well-balanced Calvin remarked, “There is another use to be made of this doctrine: that when men really understand what is needful for them, we are yet to warn and rouse them, that they may be more confirmed.” As every believer has faith, yet there is need for a further increase of it, so there is ever room for an enlarging and deepening of spiritual knowledge.

“*And ye need not that any man teach you*” is also mentioned to counteract and put down that carnal tendency of idolizing the human instrument. There is a very great danger of this. Young believers especially are apt to think too highly of those who are made a blessing to their souls. Where the affections be fixed upon the messenger rather than upon the message itself, there the teacher comes between the heart and Christ. Nor must we esteem the most gifted as though his interpretation be an oracle of God, but rather test what he says by the Word. It is so easy to fix the eye on the servant who is seen, instead of on his unseen Master. How many go to church hoping to receive something from the preacher, instead of looking to the Lord for a blessing! Though teachers be needed, they must not be relied upon. “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man?...So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase” (1Co 3:5, 7). What a corrective for preacher-worship is that! Even an apostle could not open their minds to apprehend a single truth unless the Spirit was pleased to bless his efforts.

Another effect of “abiding”: stability from error

“*Even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him.*” That is the seventh thing⁷⁵ predicated of our divine anointing: it produces a permanent stabilizing effect, preserving from dangerous error. It so instructs and establishes in the faith, imparts such a spirit of discernment of truth from falsehood, that it is now impossible for Satan to deceive them with his lies (Mat 24:24). It not only illumines the mind, but sanctifies the heart and turns the will godward. Such impressions are made upon the soul of the holiness, sovereignty, and goodness of God, that they are instinctively repelled by any teaching that repudiates the same. They have a spiritual palate that is acute in distinguishing between what is wholesome and that which is poisonous. They have such a love of the truth that nothing can induce them to sell it. God has given them the spirit “of a sound mind” (2Ti 1:7), which enables them to perceive the sophistries of would-be seducers. It conveys to them a wisdom that makes wise the simple (Psa 19:7), which none of the schools of this world can impart. And therefore many an unlettered peasant is often far sounder in the faith than preachers with their classical and theological degrees. Nor is their knowledge confined to merely a few simple truths: they have a deeper acquaintance with the entire doctrine of Christ, being taught in their own experience, and in such a way that none can shake them.

“*Ye shall abide in him.*” The careful reader will observe that the margin gives as an alternative rendering, “*or it*”—that is, the truth. The Greek allows either. To abide in Christ and to abide in the truth are here equivalent. In the whole of this passage, the contrast is between those who turn from Christ to antichrists, and those who remain loyal to Him and steadfast in the faith. The apostle is comforting the distressed believers by assuring them of his confidence in them: that having received from Christ an anointing that had taught them of all things necessary to their salvation and preservation they would endure to the end. He is saying what another apostle declared of the Hebrew saints, “But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul” (Heb 10:39). “To ‘abide in Christ’ is to continue in the true faith and confession of Him, and of all which concerns Him—His truth, His ordinances, His worship. To abide in Christ is to persevere in the truth of His everlasting Gospel” (S.E. Pierce). To abide in Christ is to have Him for our supreme Object, to centre our affections upon Him, to make Him our center and circumference—our all in all.

What does it mean “to abide” in Christ?

*“And now, little children, abide in him; that,
when He shall appear, we may have confidence,
and not be ashamed before him at his coming.” (verse 28)*

Having completed his distinct instructions and exhortations to the fathers, young men and babes (verses 13-17), John returns to and again addresses the whole family collectively under the same name of endearment (*teknion*) as in verse 12. With paternal affection the apostle now exhorts them to abide in Christ. That term “little children” was the one His beloved Master had employed that never-to-be-forgotten night when He so graciously instructed the eleven in the upper room on

⁷⁵ **seventh thing** – for the first six things, see the last part of the prior chapter.

the eve of His crucifixion: “Little children, yet a little while I am with you” (Joh 13:33). Doubtless that tender word made a particularly deep impression upon the one who was wont to recline on His bosom, and was tenderly cherished in his memory—so much so that he in turn made use of it when addressing his dear converts. As his mind reverted to the great “paschal discourse,” he would recall how that the Saviour had used the word “abide” no less than eight times in John 15:4-11, for “continue ye in my love” (verse 9) and “that my joy might remain in you” (verse 11) are the same in the original as the “abide in me” of verse 4. Now this exhortation “abide in him” is so blessed, so important, and so comprehensive, as to call for a fuller opening by the expositor.

To abide, in the language of Scripture, means more than merely to remain in one place. It has a moral force, and signifies to adhere unto. Thus it implies a previous union or connection with a person or thing. To be in Christ, and to abide in Him, are distinct thoughts. In order to abide in Christ, one must first be in Him. The former respects a union that is effected by the gracious power of God, and cannot be dissolved or suspended. Accordingly, believers are never enjoined to “be in Christ,” for that could not be the subject of exhortation, since it already exists as an accomplished fact by new creation. But to “abide in Christ” is the subject of injunction, because the exercise of the believer’s responsibility is involved therein. Union with Christ has made possible a life of communion with Him, and that life may be suitably addressed, and is required to respond to His call.

Unlike the *being* in Christ, the *abiding* is capable of interruption. When assured that “we are in him that is true” (1Jo 5:20), the reference is to a union that cannot be disannulled, to a standing that cannot be shaken. But when we hear the Lord saying “abide in me” (or an apostle repeating His word), it implies that we are exposed to failure at this point, or have already failed therein. It is therefore a word which calls us to vigilance.

In calling upon believers to abide in Christ, John was bidding them to adhere steadfastly to His Gospel, to live in constant dependence upon Him in faith and hope, to render loving obedience to His commandments, to enter into fellowship with Him. Thereby they would have the assurance of being approved disciples, and in the day to come would not be ashamed before Him, as will all hypocrites and apostates. Some may consider it needless, if not meaningless, to press the duty of perseverance when the exercise of it is certain. Having stated so emphatically, “Ye shall abide in him,” why, in the very next breath, enjoin them to do that very thing?—Because privileges do not cancel obligations, but rather increase them. While our abiding in Christ is ensured by the grace of the Spirit, that releases us not from the discharge of our accountability. The Spirit is not given to exempt us from the performance of duty, but to enable us to discharge it. It is just *because* He indwells us that we ought to be the more diligent and faithful. Talents are given us to use, and not to bury in the ground. It is the Spirit’s presence and power that makes failure on our part inexcusable.

The Lord Jesus informed Peter, “I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not,” nevertheless, shortly after, He bade him “Pray that ye enter not into temptation” (Luk 22:32, 40). He who regards those things as being “inconsistent,” knows nothing yet as he ought to know. In 1 Corinthians 10:13, another apostle definitely assured the saints, “God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.” Then might they not remain passive and be carried down the stream of temptation? No indeed: very different is the use that he makes of that encouraging assurance, namely “Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry” (verse 14). He drew an argument from that very promise for the performance of duty. Promises are given for the purpose of quickening industry, and animating us in the use of means. God does not preserve His people by physical force, and compel them to retain their standing in Christ—as He establishes the earth and the heavens by the forth putting of His might. Instead, He is pleased to use rational means which are suited to moral agents. The inward workings of His grace do not set aside or render nugatory⁷⁶ external warnings, expositions, and admonitions.

In Philippians 2:12-13, Paul employed the same spiritual logic that he had used when addressing the Corinthians: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of *his* good pleasure.” There he argues that we ought to be active and diligent because God is working in us! Both the willing and the doing are freely ascribed unto God, and yet for that very reason we are to do. He will assist in the performing of it. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for God leaves you not alone. Though the task be far beyond your puny strength, He gives assurance, “My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in your weakness” (2Co 12:9). Grace is a dynamic, an operating principle, and, where it dwells, radically affects our thoughts, influences our desires, produces good works. Divine grace cannot tabernacle in a human heart without breaking forth to act in the life. It is evidenced by its fruits. Just because you have received a divine anointing that assures your spiritual preservation from all seducers of souls, *see to it* that you abide in Christ—remain loyal to Him at all costs.

We must now consider the reason or the motive by which the exhortation is enforced: “*And now, little children, abide in him; that, when He shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming.*” Christ is now hid from the eyes of the world, for He has gone into heaven itself “to appear in the presence of God” (Heb 9:24) as the great High Priest of those for whom He died. But the Scriptures plainly and repeatedly testify that Christ will appear again—personally, publicly (Act 1:11), when He shall sit upon the throne of His glory (Mat 25:31), when “every eye shall see him” (Rev 1:7).

⁷⁶ **nugatory** – invalid; inoperative.

In view of this blessed and solemn fact the questions may well be asked, "But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth?" (Mal 3:2). God's Word makes answer. On the one hand, it assures the saints, "he that dwelleth [abideth] in love dwelleth in God, and God in him: Herein is our love made perfect [i.e. reaches its designed end], that we may have boldness [confidence] in the day of judgment" (1Jo 4:16-17). On the other hand, "the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment," but will be "like the chaff which the wind driveth away" (Psa 1:5, 4).

In the great day to come, the searchlight of divine holiness will be turned upon two radically different classes of persons, clearly revealing them for what they are, and each will, righteously, be dealt with accordingly. Those that have done good will come forth unto the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil unto the resurrection of damnation (Joh 5:29); or, to cite an Old Testament passage whose language approximates more closely unto that of our present text, Daniel 12:2, speaking of the same event, declares that "many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." The two classes will be separated one from another, "as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats" (Mat 25:32). On the one hand, Christ will take vengeance on them that know not God and obey not the Gospel; on the other, He will be glorified in His saints (2Th 1:8, 10). That same clear-cut and searching distinction is preserved in our text: those who abide in Christ will have confidence before Him at His appearing, but those who were disloyal and followed the antichrists will "be ashamed before him at his coming." As the Saviour announced, "Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of His Father with the holy angels" (Mar 8:38).

Chapter 38

Righteousness

1 John 2:29

*"If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one
that doeth righteousness is born of him."*

Summary: "Abide in him"

"And now, little children" (verse 28): in view of all that I have said from verse 12 onwards and especially from verse 18, let me summarize in this one word, "Abide in him." Give continued evidence of your loyalty to Christ. Make Him the grand object of your hearts, the center of your affections, the One with whom you converse daily. Follow the example He has left you. Seek all your joy in Him. Endeavour to become better established in His doctrine. Strive to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Him. It is of the utmost importance that you do so; nothing will so effectually preserve you from error as to keep your hearts and minds fixed on the Lord Jesus. As Calvin remarked, "Faith is not a naked and frigid apprehension of Christ, but a lively and real sense of His power, which produces confidence." The Greek word for "confidence" here literally means liberty of utterance, free-spokenness, as may be seen from its force in Acts 4:13, 29, 31 and 2 Corinthians 3:12. They who abide in Christ, who commune regularly with Him, have freedom of approach and liberty of speech at the throne of grace, for assurance of heart is ever the effect of true piety. "Hence it is that the godly calmly wait for Christ, nor do they dread His coming" (Calvin).

All who trust in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, who genuinely endeavour to live unto Christ, die in Him (Heb 11:13; 1Th 4:14). They shall be raised by Him and be made "like Him" (1Jo 3:2), conformed to the image of God's Son, glorified (Rom 8:29-30). They will meet Him with confidence and joy, for He is the One they most of all desire to behold. But different far will be the attitude and demeanour of those spoken of in verse 19, and all like unto them. Those who originally made profession of faith in Christ, but who turned away from Him unto His enemies, abandoning Him in order to follow the course of this world, will in the day of His appearing shrink from Him with terror and horror. They will be "ashamed before him at his coming" (2:28), ashamed of their infidelity, of their mad policy, of their wretched choice of forsaking the living Fountain for cisterns that hold no water (Jer 2:13). Literally, "ashamed *from* him," their guilty consciences causing them to shrink from His holy presence. They will be put to the utmost confusion and dishonour. The word occurs again in Luke 16:3 and Philipians 1:20. But, blessed be God, it is written, "Whosoever believeth on him shall *not* be ashamed" (Rom 9:33).

Verse 28

“And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming” (verse 28). That admits of two distinct interpretations, though the one by no means necessarily excludes the other. *First*, the “we” may legitimately be regarded as John speaking of himself and his fellow ministers as believers, taking his place alongside those for whom he wrote, intimating thereby that he was himself following the same course, and prescribed for himself what he did for them—as he included himself personally in the “we” of 1:6, 8-9, etc. *Second*, the “we” of 2:28 may also be fairly considered as referring to himself and others as the servants of God—as in 1:1-4, he alludes to himself and his fellow apostles officially. In support of this is the significant change of person from the second to the first. In verses 20-27 he had uniformly used the “ye,” as a teacher instructing his disciples. He might well have kept to that form of address—he does return to it in the very next verse: “If ye know that he is righteous.” In what immediately follows, John had the ultimate in view: the great day of reckoning when as a minister of Christ he would be called upon to render an account of his stewardship, particularly concerning those who, under God, he had begotten through the Gospel (1Co 4:15).

Looked at from the latter standpoint, verse 28 is to be regarded both as the climax of the entire passage and as an affecting appeal to the divine love in the saints. Quite a number of weighty reasons and strong inducements had been set before the Lord’s people to turn a deaf ear unto all false teachers, and remain steadfast in their allegiance to Christ. And now they are informed that it is not only to their advantage and security so to do, but in the day to come he will be the gainer thereby: “And now, little children, abide in him; that [in order that] when he shall appear we [your spiritual fathers] may have confidence and not be ashamed [of you] before him at his coming.” That interpretation gives added force and pertinency to the tender form of address, “little children.” If you give ear to the antichrists and become followers of them, it will be a serious reflection upon us who were responsible for your indoctrination and establishment in the faith; your infidelity would impugn our fidelity. Thus our text is to be considered as a parallel appeal to the one found in John’s Second Epistle, and which throws light thereon: “Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward” (2Jo 1:8).

There is not a little in the New Testament that reveals the special relation that pastors sustain to their children in the faith, and also which clearly intimates that the present conduct of Christians has a close bearing on the minister’s approbation and reward by Christ when He shall make good that word, “My reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be” (Rev 22:12). “For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2Co 11:2). He had been an instrument in the Spirit’s hand of moving them to give up themselves to the Lord, and take Him as their Husband and Head, and was much concerned that their affections should not be diverted from Christ, or they receive “another gospel” (verse 4). Sustaining such an intimate relation to his converts, Paul was deeply interested in their spiritual welfare, and longed to present them unto Christ at His judgment-seat as those who had conducted themselves consistently with their dedication to Him, so that it would then appear that his labours on their behalf had not been in vain. As he said elsewhere, “Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man with wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus” (Col 1:28).

The under-shepherds of Christ will be called upon to render an account unto the chief Shepherd of their ministerial stewardship in the day of reckoning, and therefore are the members of their flocks exhorted, “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief” (Heb 13:17). Ministers are expressly appointed of God for the guarding of their members from error, and to warn against those sins that endanger the soul. They will have to render an account of how they discharged their duty, used their talents, redeemed their time; whether those committed to their care were built up in the faith, or whether souls were lost through their neglect—the lives of their members will be witnesses for or against them. It is in view of that solemn reckoning in the future that each minister is exhorted, “I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word, be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2Ti 4:1-2)—for in that day his service will either be approved or disapproved by his Master.

Thus, “And now, little children, abide in him; [so] that when he shall appear we may have confidence [His approval], and not be ashamed before him at his coming.” Do you be careful how you walk, so that in the day of accounts we may not be put to the blush because you have profited so little from the grace and truth we have ministered unto you. If you give heed to the antichrists, that will be a serious reflection upon us; that we rejoiced over your apparent conversion, baptized you, received you into church fellowship, only for you to fall away and apostatize from the faith. In such a case it would show that our labours were fruitless and our expectations would be disappointed. It would then seem to prove that we had failed to set before you the only preservative from all false doctrine. See here, my readers, the solemn effect of careless walking: it brings reproach on your pastor that he should have such “seals” to his ministry. The apostle longed that both he and they together might “receive a full reward” (2Jo 1:8), which would be the case only if they remained steadfast in the faith and in their obedience to Christ. As Paul also reminded the saints, “For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For ye are our glory and joy” (1Th 2:19-20, cf. Heb 13:17).

Verse 29

“If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him” (verse 29). There is considerable difference of opinion as to how this verse fits into the framework of the epistle. Scarcely any of the commentators make any serious attempt to show its coherence with that which precedes, regarding it more or less as a detached statement. Candlish considered “The apostle passes to a new thought or theme.” Personally, we believe there is a very close connection between the words now before us and those that we have just finished expounding; yet our recognition of the same will depend largely upon a correct apprehension of the terms used. The opening “if” is not one of doubt, but rather of certainty; it is not the raising of a question, but an appeal to an established fact—having the force of “since,” forasmuch as you are assured that He is righteous. The pronoun has its antecedent in the One the apostle was speaking about in the foregoing verses, namely, Jesus Christ. There He is seen as the One who shall separate the precious from the vile, and as the rewarder of His servants: in a word, as “the righteous judge” (2Ti 4:8), who shall deal faithfully and impartially with every one.

Whereas it is evident and certain that Christ is righteous, it clearly follows that, *“every one that doeth righteousness is born of him.”* He that “doeth righteousness” is a variant of he that “abideth in him”—his abiding in Christ is manifested by submitting to Him, by actually doing His revealed will. Thus verse 29 is a further word of discrimination, the drawing of the line again between gracious and graceless professors. It announces one of the tests by which we may identify the regenerate and distinguish them from the unregenerate, namely, by their conduct, for it is by the fruits which it bears that the tree is known. In sharp contrast with “the children of disobedience” (Eph 2:2), the renewed child of God walks in obedience to Him, treads “the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Psa 23:3), heeding His precepts and keeping His statutes. Verse 29 is very much more than an aphorism or mere abstract doctrinal statement: it is a clearly implied exhortation, bidding us examine the claims of those who profess to be Christians and desire fellowship with us as such. But [in] this criterion of being a doer of righteousness, we are to distinguish between the genuine and the spurious, and thus be delivered from being imposed upon by hypocrites. It scarcely needs pointing out that honesty requires that we first faithfully test ourselves by this rule before we apply it to others.

There has always been a considerable number in Christendom who “hold the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom 1:18): those who are well versed in theology, but devoid of any sanctifying effects therefrom; whose heads are filled with orthodox views, but whose hearts and lives are unaffected thereby. And John was very anxious to preserve the saints from wasting their affections upon those who were not entitled to the same. He would have them equipped to distinguish clearly between those who were for Christ and those who (despite their pretensions to the contrary) were against Him. He would have them know that there is a radical difference between the righteous and the unrighteous, so that they should walk in separation from the latter. All through his epistle he is most insistent on segregating the one from the other (1:6-7; 2:3-5, 9-11; 3:10, etc.). Here again in our text the apostle draws the picture of a real child of God; that there may be no mistaking him, he adds to the statement that he who has received the Spirit and abides in Christ is also a doer of righteousness. It therefore follows that those who are thoroughly worldly and carnal in their walk are not born of Christ. The unrighteous must not be regarded as righteous!

“He is righteous.” We are more apt to think of Christ as gracious and compassionate, merciful and tender, than righteous; but there is much said in Scripture about His righteousness. As God, He is essentially righteous. As man, He is also perfectly righteous, fulfilling the Law in thought, word, and deed. As Mediator, He was righteous in faithfully discharging His commission and finishing the work given Him to do. He is the Author of that everlasting righteousness which is revealed in the Gospel and received by faith. In Isaiah 11:5, it was announced, “Righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins.” In Old Testament times God spoke of Him as “My righteous servant” (Isa 53:11), as “a righteous Branch” (Jer 23:5), as “the Sun of righteousness” (Mal 4:2). By the spirit of prophecy Christ declared, “I have preached righteousness in the great congregation” (Psa 40:9). How righteously He dealt with the rich young ruler, exposing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, reprov’d His own disciples, accepted the awful cup in Gethsemane! Verily, He was the Lamb without blemish and without spot. When the Father crowned Him with glory and honour He bore testimony to Christ, “Thou lovest righteousness, and hatest wickedness” (Psa 45:7). He is the antitypical “King of righteousness” (Heb 7:2). He is expressly declared to be “Jesus Christ the righteous” (1Jo 2:1). And by amazing grace believers own Him as “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS” (Jer 23:6), for He has wrought out for them and covered them with the “robe of righteousness” (Isa 61:10).

“If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him.” It has been objected by those who ought to know better that the “he” cannot here refer to Christ, because nowhere else in Scripture is regeneration ascribed to the Son. Even were that the case, the objection would have no real validity—as well deny that it was “through the eternal Spirit” that Christ offered Himself without spot to God, because nowhere else are we told so except in Hebrews 9:14. But our text is by no means the sole passage where, by clear implication at least, Christ is represented as the Author of the new birth. He is denominated “the everlasting Father” (Isa 9:6), and says “Behold, I and the children whom the LORD hath given me” (Isa 8:18, and cf. Heb 2:13). God expressly declared of the Saviour, “He shall see his seed,” yea, that “He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied” (Isa 53:10-11)—what are that “seed” and “travail of his soul” but those who are “born of him”? As the Son Himself declared, “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it

abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (Joh 12:24). It is by Christ that we are given the power of privilege "to become the sons of God" (Joh 1:12)

The saving operations of God are ascribed to each of the Persons in the Trinity. In one passage we are said to be justified "by the Spirit of our God" (1Co 6:11), though elsewhere that is predicated of the Father (Rom 5:1) and of Christ (Act 13:39). So too the new birth is attributed equally to the Spirit (Joh 3:6), to the Father (Jam 1:18), and to Christ Jesus (Eph 2:10), the new spiritual nature being derived from Him as His "seed" (Psa 22:30). Nor is it at all strange that John should here attribute our new birth immediately⁷⁷ to Christ. His chief design in the whole of the context is to exalt Him in the esteem of His redeemed, to evince how deeply indebted they are to Him, and to emphasize the intimate and spiritual oneness which there is between Him and them. Christ is our Advocate with the Father (verse 1). He is the Propitiation for our sins (verse 2). He is our Exemplar (verse 6). He is our Anointer (verse 27). He is the Rewarder of our works (verse 28). And [here] He is the Author of our regeneration. The last mentioned supplies yet a further link with the context, furnishing as it does an additional reason or argument in support of the injunction to constancy. To "abide in him" is enforced first by the consideration of the great day of accounts, and second by the consideration of the dignity of those called upon to be faithful to Him: they are His dear children.

"If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him." The twofold "ye know" is closely related to the repeated "teacheth you of all things" and "hath taught you" of verse 27. The anointing Spirit communicates a spiritual judgment and discernment, enabling its possessor to perceive that which is hidden from those who are wise and prudent in their own esteem. It imparts a true knowledge of Christ and the ability to identify their brethren and sisters in Him. Until we have a true concept of Christ's character, we cannot form a just opinion of those who are His. But further, the anointing Spirit ensures an abiding in Christ, and it is the doing of righteousness that is the visible proof and practical fruit of such abiding—for doing righteousness is a complying with His revealed will. It was so with the Son Himself: "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love" (Joh 15:10). It was by walking in full subjection to the Father that Christ demonstrated His Sonship. In the case of the Christian, this knowledge is first *objective*—apprehended from the Scriptures; then *subjective*—realized in experience; then *influential*—expressing itself in the doing of righteousness; and therefore *evidential*—supplying proof of the new birth.

In our text then, the apostle enunciates the simple but obvious principle: that like produces like, that it is an unvarying law of creation that everything should bring forth "after his kind" (Gen 1:11). That there must be and is a reproduction of the parent in the child, was taught plainly by our Lord: concerning Himself, "the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do; for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise" (Joh 5:19). To the Jews He said, "If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham." And again, "If God were your Father, ye would love me"—nature and conduct *must* correspond. It did so in their case: "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do" (Joh 8:39, 42, 44). Since Christ be righteous, those born of Him are righteous; the members are conformed to their Head in nature, character, and conduct. But the emphasis is here placed first on what they do, rather than on what they are, the one serving to make manifest the other.

Instead of arguing from cause to effect, as in "every good tree bringeth forth good fruit" (Mat 7:17), the apostle reasons from actions back to principles. Where there are righteous works, there must be a righteous principle producing them. Since none of the fallen sons of men be righteous by nature, then the presence of righteous works evinces that the producer has been made a partaker of "the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness" (Eph 4:24). On the one hand, regeneration is the foundation of all righteousness in the soul, being that which inducts us into the kingdom of God (Joh 3:3), when divine power gives us "all things that pertain to life and godliness" (2Pe 1:3). On the other hand, a righteous walk is one of the visible marks of a new birth, for we are "created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Eph 2:10). The emphasis is placed here on the latter because it is the testing of profession that is in view, the drawing of the line between the real and the false. He "doeth righteousness" not in order to be saved, but in demonstration of the fact that Christ has saved him. Only those who bear Christ's image and walk before Him in the ways of righteousness are born of Him. Those who give no evidence of so doing are either deliberate hypocrites or utterly deluded souls.

⁷⁷ **immediately** – directly, without the help of someone or something.

Chapter 39

Amazing Grace

1 John 3:1

“Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.”

Having stated that “If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him” (2:29)—which means, in a word, that the performing of good works is one of the sure evidences of the new birth—the apostle’s mind was carried back to the *originating cause*, namely, the eternal love of the Father. The contemplation thereof moved him to break forth into adoring and joyous celebration of the same. But human language is entirely inadequate to express and describe the divine acts that produce our salvation, and great care needs to be taken lest we either carnalize⁷⁸ or unduly restrict the terms that are employed in connection therewith. We agree with Calvin that “when he says love has bestowed, he means that it is from mere bounty and benevolence that God makes us His children...Love, then, is declared here to be gratuitous. There is, indeed, an impropriety in the language, but the apostle preferred speaking thus rather than not to express that the more abundantly God’s goodness has been manifested toward us, the greater are our obligations to Him.” Thus by “love” here we understand the divine benignity or His amazing grace.

The chapter division at this point is apt to mislead, detaching in our minds that which is here said from what immediately precedes: 3:1 is closely connected with 2:29. The thought of sonship is carried forward, with the design of emphasizing the blessedness of such a high dignity and honour bestowed. That is first denoted by the call to “behold” it, and then by considering the “manner” of the same. So far from regarding 3:1 as the commencement of a new subject, the perspicuous Calvin considered that it furnished the second (implied) argument in proving that faith is necessarily connected with a holy and pure life. “The first argument is that we are spiritually begotten after the likeness of Christ; it hence follows that no one is born of Him except he who lives righteously. The second argument is from the dignity and excellence of our calling, for it was no common honour he says that the heavenly Father bestowed upon us when He adopted us as His children. This being so great a favour, the desire for purity ought to be kindled in us, so as to be conformed to His image. Nor, indeed, can it be otherwise, but that he who acknowledges himself to be one of God’s children purifies himself. And to make this exhortation more forceful, he amplifies the favour of God.”

The apostle was overwhelmed with astonishment as he contemplated the amazing grace that conferred such honour and felicity upon worms of the earth, as to call them into the relation of sons. Whether he viewed the ineffable greatness and elevation of the Father, the insignificance and degradation of the subjects, the uniqueness and inestimable value of the blessing bestowed, or the manner and marvel of its communication, he was “lost to wonder, love, and praise.” That the Father should ever deign⁷⁹ to notice us at all is an act of infinite condescension on His part: that He should so highly distinguish us as to set His heart upon us, choose in Christ, redeem and regenerate lifelong rebels against Him, completely passes knowledge, and so far exceeds human comprehension as to defy expression by tongue or pen. Such a prodigy is without parallel, not only on earth but in heaven also; as T. Scott rightly said, it is “incapable of being illustrated by any comparison”—any attempt to do so beclouds its uniqueness and is only a darkening of counsel by mere words. Rather let us earnestly seek grace to evince our gratitude thereat, and endeavour to walk worthy of such a calling by a humble and obedient walk.

Our text opens with a call to attention, for while the word “*behold*” here is a word of adoring wonderment, an exclamation of astonishment at such a display of grace, yet it is much more than a bare interjection. It is a verb summoning to action. Manton, with his customary thoroughness, showed that there is a threefold “behold” in Scripture, and that each of them is applicable in this place. *First*, the behold of demonstration, to denote the reality of the object, as in “Behold your king” (Joh 19:14)—there He is before your very eyes, said Pilate unto the Jews. When prefixed to a doctrinal statement, it avers the certainty of it, as in “Lo [behold] this, we have searched it, so it *is*; hear it, and know thou *it* for thy good” (Job 5:27). *Second*, there is the behold of admiration, which is designed to awaken our drowsy minds when something extraordinary is presented to our attention, challenging our most serious thoughts, as in “Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like

⁷⁸ **carnalize** – to limit to man’s experience; to derive from human reasoning.

⁷⁹ **deign** – stoop down to us; lower oneself.

unto my sorrow” (Lam 1:12). *Third*, the behold of gratulation,⁸⁰ rejoicing and delighting ourselves in the privilege, as in “Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep” (Psa 121:4)—take comfort therefrom.

Now each of those senses is to be included here, “*Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us.*” Behold it with faith and confidence. Though so astonishing and mysterious, entertain not the least doubt about it, for it is certified by a “Thus saith the Lord.” Behold it with adoring gratitude. It is of vast importance and inestimable value, so give the same your most careful and prayerful attention. Ponder it deeply, meditate much thereon, that the Father Himself has laid hold of depraved and hell-deserving sinners and made them the brethren of His dear Son. This too is “the Lord’s doing: it is marvelous in our eyes” (Mat 21:42). Behold it with exultation and jubilation, that so blessed a privilege and high a dignity is yours as to be made the children of God, the high favourites of heaven, more closely related to God than the holy angels. How that should bow us in wonderment and worship before the throne of grace! What comfort and consolation should it afford us amid the trials and tribulations of this life! How it should quicken our thankfulness and draw out our affections godward—the chief motives and springs of Gospel obedience. How it should make us contented with our present portion; if you be a child of God, it matters little what your earthly possessions amount to.

This word “behold” is used all through Scripture on particular and special occasions. When the Lord God made mention of the incarnation and mission of the Messiah, He said, “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call his name Immanuel”; and again, “Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him...Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong *hand*, and his arm shall rule for him” (Isa 7:14; 40:10). When the Father would have us fix our hearts and minds on the person of His co-equal Son, He says, “Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth” (Isa 42:1). When His forerunner introduced Him to the Jews he cried, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (Joh 1:29). During His earthly ministry, Christ prefaced many of His weightiest utterances with a “behold!” (Mat 12:42; 23:38; 25:6, etc.). After His ascension the Lord Jesus declared, “Behold, I come quickly” (Rev 22:7, 12). So that this word “behold” is used in the sacred page by the Father, by the Son, by the Holy Spirit, by the prophets, and by the apostles as introductory to the most blessed and momentous subjects revealed and recorded therein. John would have his little children contemplate this glorious truth of the Father’s love with reverence and awe, for he would stir up their pure minds to holy wonderment and admiration. He would have them engage their best thoughts thereon to the ravishing of their souls.

“*Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us.*” The “behold” is intensified by the words immediately following. It is not simply take notice of and adore the love of the Father, but particularly the *sort of love* that is here in view, the wonderful expression thereof. The question has been raised as to whether the reference be to the *kind* or *degree* of His love. Personally, we consider that both ideas are included: its uniqueness and its greatness. According to its usage in the New Testament this expression is a contrastive one. When Gabriel addressed the virgin Mary as “thou that art highly favoured...blessed art thou among women,” she “cast in her mind *what manner of salutation this should be*” (Luk 1:28-29)—she was mystified by such an unprecedented experience. When the Saviour calmed the raging tempest with a word of command, His disciples marveled, saying, “What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him!” (Mat 8:27); they have witnessed the supernatural. “What manner of persons you ought to be in all holy conversation and godliness” (2Pe 3:11), which means (in contrast with the wicked) what paragons of virtue you should be—signifying not only the kind but also the degree of piety which God requires from us.

In view of the above examples (to which Luke 7:39 and Mark 13:1 may be added), “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us” imports: Consider and adore the nature and extent, the marvel and magnitude, the uniqueness and superlative excellence of that love. It is in marked contrast, both in character and in greatness, with all other. It is incomparable, transcendent, infinite. Its cause is inexplicable; its effects are most glorious. Perhaps this is one reason why the divine benignity is here termed His *love*, rather than His *grace*. Love is especially sensitive: “God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Thomas Goodwin⁸¹ pointed out, “Of all things in God or man, love desires to have itself considered and taken notice of, as much as wisdom, and power, or any other thing; therefore he calls on them to behold *God’s* love. Above all, love desires notice taken by the parties beloved, to whom it is in special directed unto more than any other, for the emphasis lies in the speciality of it; therefore he would not have them run out in general thoughts admiring God’s love to mankind and giving His Son, but as having bestowed Him upon us,” His dear children.

Our present verse is one of many which illustrates the importance of observing the connection between a statement and the setting in which it occurs—failure to take into account the context conveys a wrong idea of its scope, that which is *qualified* being taken in an *unlimited* sense. Such is the case here; a wrong use has been made of it. It is appealed to by those who believe in what is termed “the universal Fatherhood of God”—i.e., that all men are spiritually God’s children.

⁸⁰ **gratulation** – expression of joy or gratification at the sight of something.

⁸¹ **Thomas Goodwin** (1600-1680) – born in Norfolk and educated at Cambridge, Goodwin became vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge. He became a Congregationalist in London in 1634. In 1639 persecution drove him to Holland, where he pastored a church at Arnheim. He returned to London as a member of the Westminster Assembly and leader of the Dissenting Brethren in it. In 1650 he was appointed president of Magdalen College, Oxford. He was a prominent member of the Savoy Assembly in 1658.

Apart from any other consideration, the principles of honest exegesis exclude such an interpretation of this sentence. The question, “Who are the ‘us’ upon whom the Father has bestowed His love?” requires answer. Obviously it is those whom the apostle is addressing. And who are they? 2:29 tells us plainly: they are those that give unmistakable evidence of being born of Christ by being doers of righteousness, and the only ones of whom that is the case are those who have received from Him the Holy Spirit (verse 27). Thus the “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us” has no reference whatever to the unregenerate, nor is any individual warranted in regarding God as his heavenly Father unless he be walking in newness of life and bears His moral image.

“Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us.” John would have us look not only to the fountain-head or spring of our blessings, attentively [to] consider the matchless mercy shown us, but he would engage our hearts with that which has been communicated to us personally. John is not here calling upon the saints to believe the love wherewith God has loved them, nor is he bidding them receive the knowledge of it into their minds that they might rejoice over the same in their hearts. Rather is he exhorting them to contemplate that love in its grand original, in its freeness and sovereignty, in its nature and manner, in its gifts and blessedness; that it was actually bestowed upon them—that the Father had not only conceived love toward them, and willed it unto them, but that He had really and truly imparted it to them. That statement is almost parallel with “the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us” (Rom 5:5). That is what the “behold” directs our attention unto: to ponder and adore that love not abstractly but concretely; that is, not simply as it exists within the bosom of Deity, but in its outward manifestation, its actual bestowment upon us.

Love

We are invited to look upon and admire the Father’s love in its infinite condescension, in its gratuitous character, in its blessed application. It is indeed a great wonder that He preserves in being such worthless wretches, supplying our temporal needs, and having any love for us. It is yet more wonderful that His love should be actually engaged toward us. But it is surely most wonderful of all that His love should be communicated to us—given freely, disinterestedly,⁸² abundantly. No other cause can be assigned why He should have set His heart upon them, other than His own determination: “Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace” (Eph 1:5-6). The good pleasure of the divine will is the originating cause; the manifestation of divine grace the end and issue of all. *That* love is not one merely of pity and compassion, but of delight and complacency: as it is written, “The LORD thy God in the midst of thee *is* mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing” (Zep 3:17). To take that into our minds and have it realized in our hearts, to live in the apprehension thereof, is to have real communion with the Father in all the blessedness of His love.

Consider the inestimable privilege which is here specified: “*that we should be called the sons of God.*” The word “called” does not here refer to God’s making us His children by an effectual or inward call from death unto life, but rather the acknowledging of us to be His children. It is not the act of regeneration that is in view, but the fact of our sonship that is affirmed. “In Isaac shall thy seed be called” (Gen 21:12) means, The children of Isaac shall be regarded and recognized as thy seed. Yea, of Christ Himself after the flesh, it was said to Mary, “that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God” (Luk 1:35), which obviously signifies *shall be acknowledged as such*, and not made so. Thus it is here: the Father owning the ones born of Christ, [as] mentioned in the previous verse. When the Father calls us His sons, it is not that He bestows the title upon us, but *avers* that relationship; as in Romans 9:26, where the apostle quotes from Hosea, “And it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people; there shall they be called the children of the living God,” that is, God recognizes none as His children but those born of His Spirit and conformed to the image of His Son. And again, “If thou...call the Sabbath a delight” (Isa 58:13), [i.e.,] regard and treat it as such.

This is what we are called upon to behold: the fathomless love of the Father in owning us not merely as His subjects or servants, but as His sons. It is a particular and peculiar relationship that pertains to the regenerate, for it is not a blessing that is common to all men. It originates in the Father’s love. It is based upon our union with Christ, our being born of Him. To be a child of God is to be an heir of glory (Rom 8:17), and to be regarded as such by the Father is a confirmation of it. It is a very high honour indeed to sustain this relationship, far, far greater than any which this world can bestow. David asked, “Seemeth it to you a light thing to be a king’s son in law?” (1Sa 18:23); then what is it to be acknowledged as a son of the King of kings! “Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee” (Isa 43:4) is His own blessed testimony. What weight should that have with us! What assurance it should convey to our minds! What wonderment it should evoke! Does it not move each of us to admit with the returning prodigal, I am not worthy “to be called thy son” (Luk 15:19)? How it should influence our daily lives: “Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also loved us” (Eph 5:1-2).

⁸² **disinterestedly** – without expectation for personal gain.

The qualities of the Father's love

We must not conclude this chapter without pointing out the principal qualities of the Father's love. It was *spontaneous*. Nothing outside God Himself moved Him to it. There was nothing in us to attract it, but everything to the contrary (Eze 16:5-6). It was *eternal* (Jer 31:3), for God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, and entered into an everlasting covenant of grace with Him on our behalf. It was *sovereign, selective, and discriminating*, for He loves not all; it is peculiar to the elect—"Remember me, O LORD, with the favour that thou bearest unto *thy people*" (Psa 106:4). It is *sacrificial*, for God "spared not his own Son" but delivered Him up to the cross in order that sinners might be saved (Rom 8:32). Christ shed not His blood in order to induce God to love His people; it was because God loved them that He provided such a costly offering for them. It is *infinite*. There is a depth to it that none can fathom, a height that none can reach, a length and breadth that cannot be measured. It is *invincible*. "Put not your trust in princes" said the Psalmist, for they will fail you; but God's love is reliable and cannot be thwarted. It is *immutable*, knowing no change (Mal 3:6), being without variableness or shadow of turning. Truly His love is *unique*.

How the Father's love is exercised

Equally blessed is it to observe how His love is exercised. Behold His *foreordaining* love: "In love having predestinated us unto the adoption of children" (Eph 1:4-5). Deuteronomy 7:7-8 shows that election is the fruit of God's love; likewise does 2 Thessalonians 2:13 teach us. Behold God's *redeeming* love: "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1Jo 4:9-10). Behold His *regenerating* love: "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ" (Eph 2:4-5). Behold His *drawing* love: "I have loved thee with an everlasting love, therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee" (Jer 31:3), sweetly wooing us unto Himself. Behold His *communicating* love: "The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Rom 5:5). Behold His *comforting* love: "even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation" (2Th 2:16). Behold His *preserving* love: "nothing does or can separate us from it" (Rom 8:38-39). Thus its manner is as matchless as its nature.

A brief word now on the present modification of our enjoyment of God's love. "*Therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.*" Though so greatly honoured by the Father, that will not bring you into favour with those who are strangers to Him. No matter how lavish He be in the display of His love toward us, the unregenerate will not value us on that account. The natural man is devoid of spiritual discernment, and perceives not that the saints are the excellent of the earth (Psa 16:3), the blessed ones—rather does he regard them as fools and fanatics who are turning their backs on the happiness of life.

But so far from stumbling the Christian, or even discouraging him, it is just what he should expect. Nor will this disesteem be only from the openly godless: it is from professors that the most cruel treatment will come. It was the religious element that persecuted Christ! They perceived not His glory, though it shone constantly before them in His character and conduct, His ministry and miracles; but they were blind, seeing in Him *no* beauty. Sufficient for the disciple to be as his Master: to be unknown, despised, opposed, is part of our conformity to Him (Rom 8:29).

The excellency of our sonship is not to be measured by the world's judgment, for its opinion is worthless. Sufficient for the believer to be assured that his Father loves him, that he has His approbation. Suffer not the slights of godless professors to dim your joy in Him.



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