

THE HOLY WAY

“A highway shall be there and it shall be called The Holy Way” Isaiah 35:8

ETERNAL LIFE

A Commentary on the First Epistle of John

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Foreword

The First Epistle of John is a profound and powerful unfolding of the life of a Christian individual and of the Church as a whole. It is, at once, poetic and unequivocal. At first reading, the epistle may appear to be all sweetness and light, because it talks extensively about light and life and loving one another. But John always contrasts this bright side with very sharp warnings and judgment. A person who disobeys God is of the evil one. A person who fails to love his brethren is a liar and an antichrist.

Clearly, the epistle is intended to bring its readers to Christian maturity—in terms of individual sanctification, perfecting of the Church in love, and becoming a witness that can overcome the world.

Each commentary I have read on 1 John understands the epistle quite differently. It almost seems that we each read into it much of our own preconceptions. If we want to continue in sin, we have to find a way around such statements as: “He who is born of God does not sin,” and “when we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” If we do not like to think about evil spirits, we have to find a way of disposing of 1 John 4:1-6. If we think that love just means “accepting people as they are,” we will have a different interpretation of the love passages from those who believe Christian love aims to produce radical transformation.

Several factors make a definitive interpretation of 1 John difficult. Part of this difficulty is that

certain themes (e.g. light, love, submission, and obedience) recur several times almost in the same words. John does not necessarily make it clear how the new context affects the meaning. Closer examination of the context, however, reveals that, when they recur, these passages refer to a different level of Christian growth and experience. Love, for example, is presented in Chapter 3 as a fulfilment of God's law and in the context of Christian community. In chapter 4, it appears as part of the discussion of Christian witness and overcoming the world.

Another difficulty is that John does not clearly define the terms he uses most prominently—love, law, commandments, righteousness, light, darkness, eternal life. The meanings have to be inferred from their use in this epistle, in the Gospel of John, or from our knowledge of the use of these words in other scriptures and in the context of First Century thought.

One help in understanding the structure of the epistle is the transitional verses that are placed between sections. For example, 2:3-6 serve to move us beyond the initial victory over sins and to bring us into the realm of abiding in God, obeying His law, avoiding pitfalls, and growing to maturity. The last two verses of chapter 2 make a transition from the concepts of obedience and abiding to the deeper meaning of being born of God and being His children, which forms the subject matter of chapter 3. The reference to the Holy Spirit's assurance in 3:24 leads into the discerning of spirits in 4:1-6 and the further teaching on overcoming the world in 4:7-5:15.

I believe that the structure that I have chosen to interpret the epistle takes account of the development of the argument and the beautiful and forceful way in which this is developed.

Some commentators think that the purpose of the epistle was merely to refute heresies prevalent at the end of the first century. I rather think that John wanted to leave his flock with a clear and comprehensive statement of the orthodox faith and life to keep them firm in their faith and living. In so doing, he also clearly defines many pitfalls or deviations that need to be avoided. Of course, a clear presentation of the orthodox faith is really the best way to protect people from pitfalls and heresy.

I am aware that much modern scholarship questions the authorship of the epistle, and also whether the Gospel of John and this epistle are by the same author. The more I study and meditate on the two documents, however, the harder I find it to accept these theories. The epistle has the kind of similarities with the Gospel of John that indicate the same authorship. The epistle brings together many of the concepts contained in the narrative of the Gospel, often using the same terminology, and brings these into a cohesive whole. I am convinced that John wrote this epistle towards the end of his life after a lifetime of reflection on things he had seen and heard. The epistle reflects the life of a man who knew Jesus intimately and is now passing on the fruit of a lifetime of meditation and living out of the totality of the Christ experience. The cry of his pastoral heart is expressed very beautifully in the introduction to the epistle:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2 the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— 3 that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 And we are writing this that our joy may be complete.

From Darkness into the Light

1 John 1:1—2:2

Introduction (1.1:-1.4)

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2 the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— 3 that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 And we are writing this that our joy may be complete.

John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, stayed close to his Master's side through a long and productive life and ministry. He nurtured untold numbers of disciples, making them full disciples of Jesus. He wrote a profound and insightful account of his Master's life and teaching. As bishop in Asia minor, at the end of his life, he wrote an epistle of five brief chapters laying out for his flock and for us a treatise on Christian perfection to establish us and secure us in the fullness of the eternal life which he had learned upon his Master's breast and had lived out for well over a half century.

John begins in verse 1 by stating his authority for what he is about to expound. He does this by proclaiming that he is an eyewitness to all Jesus was and taught. He had both seen and touched the Word of life. When he speaks in verse 2 about revelation of the word of life, it is clear that{it} refers to much more than a spoken word. The word of life is the whole Christ manifestation, the self-revelation of the Word Who is life and the light of men. This revelation was made, not only in words, but in deed and in relationship. In the latter part of verse 2, John states that, through Jesus, the Father has made manifest the profound reality of eternal life. In verse 3, he states that he is going to testify to what he has seen and heard, that, through this proclamation, his readers can share in the impact of that revelation and have fellowship with the Father, with Jesus Christ, and with each other.

Victory over Sins (1:5—2:2)

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. 6 If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; 7 but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. 2:1 My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2 and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

In this passage, using the image of light, John shows how the believer is to attain freedom from sinful acts. Light has several meanings: referring to God, light describes His absolute righteousness, His self-revealing openness, and His glory. For us, light means an appropriation of the light of God through our association with Him. John goes so far as to say that we cannot claim to have fellowship with God, if any darkness remains in our lives (1:6). God's light shines into our

lives, first to reveal sin, and then to remove it, because darkness cannot exist in the presence of light. God's light in our lives also brings us into fellowship with each other, because we begin to see them and love them as God does (1:7). Throughout this letter, John will continue to return, with increasing emphasis, to the subject of our relationship with each other. This is presented, not only as a manifestation of the light in our lives, but also as a very accurate test of the reality of our relationship with the Lord.

Our continuing in the light has two powerful results: It gives us fellowship with each other, and it enables us to be cleansed from all sin by the blood of Jesus.

Sin has two meanings: the Old Testament definition is doing things that are against the rules. In this sense, God's Law was given to make us aware of sin. Without the Law, there is, as Paul sometimes pointed out, no consciousness of sin. Much of the Law consists in prohibitions. Righteousness, by this definition, consists in trying to avoid doing forbidden acts. The other definition is falling short of the purposes and the glory of God. This corresponds to the law of God written in our hearts and is a fulfilment of the new covenant relationship prophesied by Jeremiah. Doing righteousness, under this definition, is a necessary result of a loving relationship with God.

1 John 1:7—2:2 deals mainly with the first definition of sin. Sin is, by this definition, doing naughty things (evil deeds) for which we deserve punishment; but coming into the light brings closure on this kind of sin. If we walk in the light as Christ is in the light the sin question gets settled. Christ, by His sacrifice, assumes upon Himself the penalty for sin, brings forgiveness for our wrong-doing, and cleanses us from our sinfulness (1:9). This has already been provided in Christ's sacrifice; our part in the transaction is to appropriate this victory by confession of sin and receiving forgiveness.

Sin in our life cannot be dealt with by denial, but only by confession. If we deny that we have sinned, we deny the necessity of Christ's sacrifice, His forgiveness, and His cleansing from sin. By denial of sin, we deceive ourselves and we call His sacrifice an unnecessary and lying act (1:10). Conversely, when we face the sin question honestly and confess our sin, He not only forgives the sins, but cleanses us from all unrighteousness (1:9). We then stand before Him in perfect purity and sinlessness. The slate is wiped clean. The logical corollary to this is that, if we have been cleansed from sin, we may no longer refer to ourselves as sinners. That would be throwing away God's saving act with ingratitude. How can we still claim to be sinners, when He has removed the sin?

Verse 2:1 deals with the possibility that temptations may sometime get too great or deceptions of the enemy become so subtle or enticing that we fall back into sin. In this case, we do not need to look at ourselves as failures or sinners again. We just have one more sin to confess and a relationship to re-establish. When we confess this sin, we find that Christ does not clobber us or write us off. He acts in our defence as Advocate. He even takes the consequence on Himself (He Himself is the propitiation for our sins) (2:2).

If, however, we go off and try to hide ourselves as Adam and Eve did, then we break our relationship with Him and we are in real trouble. If we stick around and apologize, we receive His forgiveness and restoration. He transforms the situation into a learning experience and an opportunity for Him to show His forgiving love for us.

When we have been forgiven and cleansed, we have a lifetime in which to live out that victory He has provided us. The rest of the epistle deals with how we maintain the victory.

From this point on, John is not concerned with sin as misdeeds, but with the second or new covenant definition of sin as falling short of the purposes and the glory of God. He will give frequent warnings and refer to pitfalls along the way, but he will be concerned mostly with our growth towards perfection.

Abiding in Christ

1 John 2:3—29

Walking in Obedience (2:3—6)

3 And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments. 4 He who says "I know him" but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; 5 but whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: 6 he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

Saint John introduces this chapter with the assertion that anyone who abides in Christ walks as Christ did. That puts us on the road to perfection.

John proposes a test of our relationship with the Lord. If we know Him, we will keep His commandments (2:3). This reminds us of Jesus' words quoted in the Gospel of John: "*If you love me, keep my commandments.*" This is not talking about the Old Testament law (the Torah). It refers rather to instructions that Jesus gives to His disciples. If we really know Jesus as the Lord of our lives, we will want to learn the way of obedience to Him. This becomes clearer in verse 5 where John shifts the terminology to "*keep His word.*" This means that we will do what He says. The present tense in Greek refers to a continuing action. We can translate this as "the one who consistently obeys" His word. The wonderful verdict is that, in that person who consistently does what God says, the love of God has been made perfect (2:5). Love for God is our motivation for obedience, but the result of the obedience is the perfecting of God's love in us. As we obey Him, we manifest His love perfectly.

John's conclusion is that, if anyone claims to be remaining in Jesus, that person must walk as Jesus walked (2:6). We know that Jesus was totally obedient to His heavenly Father. He could truthfully say: "*I only say and do what My heavenly Father gives Me.*" Jesus was also a perfect manifestation of God's love. He teaches His disciples this kind of love as they are obedient to Him.

Obedience demands a close enough relationship with Him that we can always know what He is saying to us. This is no doubt what Jesus referred to when He said: "*My sheep hear My voice and they follow Me.*" Walking in this kind of relationship requires that we believe that such a relationship is a possibility and that we make an act of the will to pursue it. Our faith must be based on the word of God, not past experience.

The Commandment of Love (2:7—11)

7 Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment which you had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard. 8 Yet I am writing you a new commandment, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. 9 He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still. 10 He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it there is no cause for stumbling. 11 But he who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

Obedience to Jesus is obedience to His commandment to love our brethren. “Our brethren” throughout this epistle refers to all members of the body of believers—those who are walking in the light of Christ.

John speaks of this as both an old and a new commandment (2:7, 8). It is old because it was given by Jesus Himself and has been a prominent part of the Gospel message from the first. Even when Jesus spoke it, it was not really new because it had already been mentioned in the Old Testament.

John explains that this commandment is new because, in Jesus, it has become a real possibility since the darkness is passing away, and the light of Christ is taking over (2:8). As believers, we are living in a totally different climate and culture in which the experiencing of Christ’s love is an option. This light is manifested initially and predominantly in the Christian community. This means that loving participation in that community is absolutely essential to spiritual growth and stability.

Love has two foci: love of the brethren (i.e., love within the Christian community), and love for enemies or neighbours (those outside the Christian community). In 1 John 2:7-11, the focus is on the community as the locus for individuals to grow and mature in the light of Christ.

John acknowledges two possibilities: love and hate. Failure to love as Christ loves is defined as hate. Showing God’s love for one another is defined as walking in the light. Failure to love is walking in the darkness. Those who fail to love each other are blind and do not know where they are going. They are blind to the purposes of God, blinded by their disobedience and disregard for the voice of God. Those who love their brothers are continually in the light and are in no danger of stumbling. This means that they are able to continue in the sanctified life for which God intended them from the beginning and this will fulfil all of God’s purposes for their lives.

The love referred to in these verses is the same kind of love that operated in the life of Jesus. God sent His Son to manifest His love in the world. The love of Jesus always had a redemptive purpose. He healed the sick, restored dead sons alive to their mothers, set people free from demonic bondages, proclaimed by word and deed God’s rule and order in the world. He transformed His disciples into the most powerful redemptive force that had ever hit the world. After He ascended, He equipped His disciples with the strength, comfort, and redemptive power of the Holy Spirit to enable them to continue His purposes in the world.

Our love for one another must also be a redemptive love. We will do the same kind of actions that Jesus did with the same purpose of helping one another develop into the people God wants His disciples to be. The ultimate goal is the reversal of all the detrimental effects of the fall and the perfecting of the Church as the Body of Christ.

Jesus wants to manifest this kind of love in the lives of His disciples in every age, but especially now to prepare all of creation for His second coming in glorious majesty. As we learn to be totally attentive to His voice, as He shares His secrets and His purposes with us, and as we become totally obedient to His directions, we will see redemptive love made perfect in us.

Stages of Christian Growth (2:12—14)

12 I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his sake. 13 I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. 14 I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

John distinguishes three levels or degrees of maturity in the Christian life: children, fathers, and young men.

Children

Your sins are forgiven for His sake.
You know the Father.

Fathers

You know Him who is from the beginning.
You know Him who is from the beginning.

Young Men

You have overcome the evil one.
You are strong, the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

Interestingly, John does not follow chronological age in his arrangement of these ideas. He is dealing rather with levels of development of Christian life and ministry. It may well be that all of these characterizations apply at different times or in different ways to all Christians in their spiritual growth to maturity. They may apply also to our relationship to each other and to our functions in the Body of Christ.

Children, in this sense, have received God's forgiveness. They have come to an experience of Chapter 1 of this epistle. Through their relationship with Jesus, they have come to know the Father, because Jesus has revealed Him. They have experienced the first stage in their Christian development.

Fathers have come to a deeper knowledge of God in His eternal nature and purposes. They know the heart of God. They have come to a certain maturity in their relationship with God and are living in obedience to Him.

Young men are spiritual warriors, able to defeat the power of the enemies of God. They are prepared to overcome the world. They have learned the secrets of effective service to God, ministry to His people, and outreach to others.

These stages of Christian growth really form an outline in miniature of the entire epistle. Children represent the fulfillment of chapter 1:1-2:29. Fathers represent the fulfillment of chapter 3. Young men are living out chapters 4 and 5.

All of these are functions of the Body of Christ and, in some measure, of each of us individually.

The Pull of the World (2:15—17)

15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. 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. 17 And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides for ever.

John devotes the rest of this chapter to warnings of ways that spiritual growth can be hindered. 2:15-17 looks at the love of worldly things and their attraction. John clearly states that love of the world and love of God are incompatible (impossible). He identifies “the world” as:

a) Lust of the flesh. Wanting to gratify the desires of the natural life—food, comfortable houses, people, sex, pleasant experiences, entertainment, money, and the like. These things, of course, are not necessarily bad in themselves; they only become detrimental when we get attached to them and they become the focus of our lives or we misuse them for our own purposes.

b) Lust of the eyes. Looking covetously or enviously at people, things, position, reputation. The trouble with this is that these attractions distract us from our devotion to God. They compete with Him for our affections, our energy, and our time.

c) Pride of life. Undue attachment to this life, to a particular life-style, pride in our circumstances, position, wealth, or achievements. This makes us pursue our own desires and objectives and greatly hinders our hearing His voice and obeying Him.

All these objectives are temporary; even in this life they may fade (2:17). The Lord blows on them and they disappear. In eternity they have no meaning at all. Such attachments greatly hinder spiritual growth. As we grow in love for the Lord and in obedience to Him, these characteristics of the world lose their grip on our minds and hearts. Our walk with the Lord becomes so much more attractive and consuming that we lose interest in other pursuits. The wonderful promise is that, if we walk in obedience, we will last forever and will know the fullness of the glory of eternal life (2:18).

Warning Against Drifting Away (2:18—25)

18 Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know that it is the last hour. 19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they all are not of us. 20 But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all know. 21 I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and know that no lie is of the truth. 22 Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. 23 No one who denies the Son has the Father. He who confesses the Son has the Father also. 24 Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. 25 And this is what he has promised us, eternal life.

Not all who have begun to walk in the light will continue steadfast on their pilgrimage. They may let go of the revelation they have received, separate themselves from the fellowship of God’s people, and even end up denying Christ. John’s harsh judgment on those who fall away is that they are antichrists.

John always presents two clear alternatives: loving God or falling away; loving or hating our brethren, confessing Jesus as the Christ or denying both Christ and His Father; choosing death or life. John makes it clear that the more wrong choices we make, the more difficult restoration becomes. It may, in some cases, become impossible. Only as we allow His revelation to abide in us can we abide in Him; only then can we have a relationship with God the Father. This is the way of eternal life.

The two categories are sharply contrasted:

The Fellowship of Believers

Walk in the light (2:10).
Remain in fellowship (2:10).
Love one another (2:10).
Children of God (3:1).
Know and abide in the truth (2:21).
Anointed by the Holy One (2:20).
Confess that Jesus is the Christ (2:23).
Have the Father also (2:23b).

Those who go out

Walk in darkness (2:9).
Separate themselves (2:19).
Hate their brethren (2:11).
Children of the devil/antichrists (2:22).
Lie, do not know the truth (2:22).
Antichrist (2:22).
Deny that Jesus is the Christ (2:23).
Deny the Father (2:23).

Adam and Eve did a disobedient and sinful act. They broke the rules. But then they took the next and more perilous step. They broke their relationship with God. They lost the glory of God which had clothed them. They were ashamed to come before God as they had always done, and they wanted to hide. This is why the first kind of sin (doing evil acts) is more easily reparable than the second (falling away from fellowship). If we do a sinful act, we can easily be forgiven and restored. But if, after the sinful act, we separate ourselves from God and from the fellowship of believers, we get established in our sin and become antichrists.

Antichrists are, first of all, those who have broken fellowship with the body of believers. This refers back to verses 7-11 in which John says that a necessary sign of walking in the light is love for our brethren. When they broke fellowship with the brethren, it must be concluded that they were not really walking in the light with us (2:18). In 2:11, John had referred to people who broke fellowship as those who hate their brothers.

Antichrists deny that Jesus is the Christ. They deny the incarnation in some way: they deny either the humanity of Jesus, as did the Gnostics among many others throughout history, or they deny that He is truly the Son of God. By denying Christ, they automatically deny the Father also, because Jesus is the One who reveals the Father (2:22).

The presence of antichrists is an eschatological sign. Many promises in scripture indicate that, in the period leading up to Jesus' parousia (second coming), the antichrist and his friends—false teachers, false prophets, false miracle workers, and general workers of iniquity will abound.

Eternal life is not just infinitely long life, but a quality of life that we can only receive as a gift from God as we believe in Jesus and walk with Him in continual obedience.

The Anointing Gives Stability (2:26—29)

26 I write this to you about those who would deceive you; 27 but the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that any one should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him. 28 And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. 29 If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that every one who does right is born of him.

John entertains the likelihood that these antichrists might try to deceive faithful Christians who are learning to abide in Christ. The safeguard is the anointing of the Spirit of truth. If we pray continually in the Holy Spirit and let Him direct us, the anointing will protect us from being led astray (2:27).

The anointing of the Spirit is presented here primarily as our teacher who teaches us about everything and is absolutely trustworthy. When John says that “you have no need that any one should teach you, he means that we do not need to listen to human wisdom (which is, after all, fruit of the wrong tree). He is not talking about the revelation that God gives us through the fellowship of believers, as He speaks through members of the fellowship with gifts of the Spirit—prophetic words, visions, words of knowledge and wisdom, discerning of spirits, and inspired teaching. Nor is He talking about the practical teaching that we receive from God as we obey His instructions and see the manifestation of His power and love through our ministry. However we receive revelation, we need to discern clearly whether we are hearing the Holy Spirit or some other spirit. Jesus assures us that His sheep hear His voice.

Verses 28 and 29 form a wonderful conclusion to this section on abiding in Christ. Those who remain steadfast in their obedience and love for God and the fellowship will have confidence on the day of Christ’s appearing. When Adam and Eve fell into disobedience, they lost the glory of God which had clothed them. They were ashamed before God and sought to hide. As we remain in Christ, and continue to mature in Him, this process is reversed; the shame is gone, the glory again clothes us, and confidence is restored.

These two verses also form a bridge to the new topic covered in chapter 3 concerning the profound meaning of our new birth as children of God.

Summary

John has explained that abiding in Christ is marked by spiritual growth in obedience to God’s commandments as He continues to instruct us day by day. This necessarily involves the fulfilment of Jesus’ commandment to love each other. After giving warnings about being led astray by worldly enticements, falling away from fellowship, being led astray by false teachers or prophets, John then gives us the marvellous promise of confidence before God at the last day.

A Radical Transformation

1 John Chapter 3

Introduction (3: 1-3)

1 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. 3 And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

In Chapter 2, we were still striving to order our lives according to God's specifications and avoid all the pitfalls along the way. Chapter 3 is going to give us a picture of God's powerful provision to bring us through victorious. John is going to present the radical transformation that God makes in human nature to reverse the effects of the fall and to establish us in an unassailable position as children of God.

The foundation for this victory is presented in verse 1. We have received God's great gift of love: that we should be called children of God. On this gift, our whole victory and our whole confidence is to be built. Our status as children of God brings us into an intimate relationship with Him and imparts His nature to us,

Surprisingly in the second half of the same verse, John raises the question of the world's non-recognition of our position. Why does he do this so suddenly? The reason he gives is that they did not know or understand Jesus, and, therefore, cannot know or understand us. It could otherwise be stated that we simply do not fit into their categories; their concept of reality has no place for us. We are in a different frame of reference, a different culture. John presents this difference at the very beginning of his argument because he wants to emphasize the radical nature of the difference that he is about to explain.

He then begins immediately in verse 2 to explain that great difference. We have experienced a spiritual birth. As Jesus told Nicodemus, we have to be born again of water and the Spirit in order to enter the kingdom of God. This new birth makes us children of God, a different species from fallen man. Although we start out to be God's children from the time of that rebirth, growth to maturity is expected. We cannot at the outset know all that is involved in that growth. That knowledge will unfold one bit at a time throughout all of our lives. God rarely gives us total blueprints of future developments according to which we can build by our own wisdom and ability. We are rather being led on a guided tour by His voice, explaining one thing at a time.

Verse 2, in the RSV and many other translations, is translated: "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." This would mean that we will only become like Him at the time of His second coming. This contradicts other statements in 1 John. This verse could also be translated as:

Beloved, now we are children of God, and what we shall be has not yet become evident. We know that, when it does become evident, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

If the Greek is translated to mean "it has not yet become evident" and also a parallel construction which means "when it does become evident," then this verse is speaking of the beginning of the process of our sanctification and its development as we continue to see Christ and His purposes. The subjunctive denotes the beginning of a process at a particular time but developing from that point. The revelation of Who Christ is transforms us, for we become more like Him. When we see Christ as He is, we know with certainty Who He is, discover what His purposes are, and rearrange our personalities and priorities to be in line with His.

Our total sanctification involves both a crisis experience at the time of our rebirth and a process that continues forever. Children of God share God's nature just as fully as a human baby shares its father's nature, but, just as the human child must grow to maturity, so the child of God will be matured and move towards perfection as he or she continues to live with Jesus. John says that we become like Him as we see Him as He is (3:2c). We "*purify ourselves as He is pure* (verse 3)." Of course, we know that we are made pure through Christ's sacrifice, and it is He Who makes us pure. Our part in the process is to keep our eyes on Him and be His disciples. We purify ourselves, not by trying to be good, but by seeing Jesus as He is.

Being like Him is our hope. Hope, in the Christian sense, means confidence in a faithful God, not just wishful thinking. We can surely trust in this process because God has given us His promise, and we know that His promises are secure. The hope will be realized in response to our faith, just as all aspects of our Christian development are received by faith.

Sin Contrasted with Righteousness

4 Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. 5 You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6 No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as he is righteous. 8 He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. 9 No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God. 10 By this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother.

This passage uses sin in its second definition as missing the purposes of God. John is not primarily referring to doing evil deeds or breaking rules. We learned to deal with that in Chapter 1. When sin is here defined as lawlessness, and righteousness as obeying the law, he is not referring to the Old Testament law of rules and prohibitions, or even rules deduced from the New Testament, but rather the law of the Spirit, the new law written in the heart and made possible of fulfillment by a love relationship with God.

Jesus' function is to take away sin. When John says, in verse 5, that "*in Him is no sin*," he means two things:

- a) Jesus has no sin of His own.
- b) Those who are walking with Him are free from sin.

Internalizing these concepts is an inevitable result of seeing Jesus as He is. This is reinforced by the statement that no one who abides in Him continues to sin, and that if one continues in sin, he must not really have seen Jesus or known Him (3:9). Seeing Jesus is not limited to visions or imagination, but has the deeper spiritual meaning of knowing Him personally and grasping the enormity of His power, His love, His purity, His wisdom, and His authority. Knowing Him is a spiritual reality implying an intimate relationship with Him and recognizing Him as our Lord. This is the relationship that Jesus referred to as being in His disciples and they in Him.

Verse 7 introduces the concept of doing righteousness. This cannot be achieved by our own knowledge, decision, or effort. It has to be His righteousness, not ours. If we use our own concepts of right and wrong, we are, of course, using fruit from the wrong tree. Righteousness needs to be defined as an attribute of God's character. This means righteousness is what God wants not what we want. Our part is to walk in the Spirit, obedient to His voice moment by moment. Through obedience to Him, we become righteous as He is righteous.

John states the alternative very clearly: he who commits sin is of the devil; but Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (3:8). We either have Jesus' nature or the devil's nature. If we have the devil's nature, we continue in sin. If we are born of God, we have His nature and we do His righteousness. This enables John to come to the astonishing conclusion that, "No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature (righteousness) abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God" (3:9). When we became children of God, our old sinful nature was laid down and we received the divine nature. If we can appropriate by our faith the tremendous implications of this fact, we can live as Jesus did.

In these verses, John has given us a conclusive way to demonstrate to whom we belong, God or the devil (3:10). This is good news for us, if we believe that we are indeed God's children, scary if we do not. It becomes very necessary to have our faith in God's word, not on past experience. We need to be close enough to Him so that we can hear His voice at all times, know the secrets of His heart, and act in loving obedience.

The two basic tests of which side we are on are acting in obedience or doing righteousness and loving our brethren.

Love Transformed (3:11-18)

11 For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, 12 and not be like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. 13 Do not wonder, brethren, that the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. 15 Any one who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. 16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17 But if any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth.

These verses pick up what was said in 2:7-11, but with a new emphasis. Love here is presented as the predominant and distinguishing characteristic of the Christian life and the fulfillment of the command of total obedience. Love must be expressed in the Christian community. The individual can only be matured through fellowship with the other members of the community.

Immediately in verse 12, however, before any further discussion of this message, John brings up Cain as an extreme case of hating one's brother. Why does this come in so suddenly and why does John choose this particular example? Cain's deeds were evil. Cain looked on the righteousness and godliness of Abel. Abel's righteousness provoked Cain to jealousy and convicted him of his sinful state. He did not want him around. John used this example to open the discussion of the radical nature of our walk as children of God. The Christian walk in God's righteousness is radically opposed to the ways of fallen man.

Let us remember that John is defining evil as falling short of total obedience and hate as falling short of Jesus' perfect manifestation of God's love. There is a total difference between those who are obedient and those who are not. Therefore, if we are really living as children of God, we can expect to be hated by those who are not (3:13). Being children of God is dangerous. It brings us into spiritual warfare. We have a great need for God's protection. The only safe place for us is where the Lord wants us to be and doing what He tells us.

When we become children of God, we pass from death to life. Only the eternal life that God gives at our conversion is real life. The old existence is actually death, spiritual death. The love of the brethren is the dividing line between children of God and others. Those who do not have this kind of love are dead. Love of the brethren is an essential corollary of being born of God and thus being children of God.

Hating our brethren is delineated as falling short of showing God's love for them; this is called murder. If we hate our brethren, we are murderers (Jesus said as much in His sermon on the mount). Not only do we murder them, but we actually kill ourselves also, because we lose eternal life.

How can we be sure that we have His kind of love? The test is that we be ready to lay down our lives as Jesus did. This may, of course, involve physical death, but it more surely means devoting our lives to others.

The focus of our lives and fellowship with others is towards the redemption of our fellows.

Love is not just words, but a course of action designed to meet other people's needs. Here again Jesus becomes our model. He met people's greatest needs by such activities as:

- Healing the sick.
- Setting people free from demonic powers.
- Calming life-threatening storms.
- Proclaiming God's kingdom (rule).
- Providing food in miraculous ways.
- Teaching by word and example.

These are some practical ways of showing our love for others. The Lord can show us others as we keep obeying His instructions. It is important to note that none of these can be done by human effort. They demand God's supernatural intervention and empowerment.

Confidence in God (3:19-24)

19 By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him 20 whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21 Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God; 22 and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. 23 And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24 All who keep his commandments abide in him, and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us.

Our life as children of God gives absolute security and confidence.

In the natural, prior to the awareness of ourselves as children of God, we often experience moments when "our hearts condemn us" (3:19). We wonder if we are on the right track or have done the right thing in a given situation. We are uncertain about our walk with the Lord and His favour towards us. But "God is greater than our heart" (3:20) His promises and directions are more trustworthy than our feelings. He understands perfectly where we are and where we are headed. He knows that we are "of the truth" because we have been born of Him; we are His children; He has given us His life, His obedience, His truth, and His love.

The words “by this” in verse 19 refer to all the implications of the love God has given us in calling us His children, that is, all that has been said in the earlier parts of this chapter.

- God’s nature abiding in us (verse 1).
- The hope of perfection (verses 2 and 3).
- Seeing Him as He is (verse 2).
- Freedom from sin (verses 6 and 9).
- His love and sacrifice for us (verses 8 and 16).
- Our love for each other (verses 11 and 14).

Because of this reassurance, our hearts no longer condemn us (3:21). We have confidence before God. This is the opposite of Adam’s and Eve’s reactions of shame and fear after eating the wrong fruit. Jesus, through giving us the new life as children of God, has reversed the effects of the fall.

This confidence before God enables us to pray and act authoritatively. We can receive whatever we ask (3:22).

In creation, mankind was given authority over all the works of God’s hands. This authority was conditioned on mankind’s obedience. As long as Adam and Eve were walking and talking with God and obeying Him, the glory of God and the power of the Holy Spirit were in place. God’s authority could be exercised. Disobedience caused the authority to be lost. Confidence, love, the divine nature, the power of the Holy Spirit were all lost or diminished.

Christ’s redemption is a process which restores all of the above.

As we live into the fullness of God’s gift of eternal life, seeing Jesus as He is, knowing the full significance and authority of His name, our obedience is perfected, our confidence established, the authority re-established in its fullness.

This enables us to pray effectively. Since we are obedient to God’s voice, we know what He wants; we can pray in accordance with His will. We will be able to exercise all the authority of the Name of Jesus because He is living in us and we in Him.

The key to all this is to trust in the authority of that Name, to love one another, and to obey His commandments.

If we have confidence in our continuation in sin, we probably will persist in it. If we have hope in God’s transformation and our position as sons of God, we can attain to the sanctification and authority that He promises.

Hope is confidence in a trustworthy God and His promises.

Verse 24 serves as a brief transition from our confidence in our relationship as children of God to the walk in the Spirit and spiritual warfare and ministry presented in chapter 4:1-5:15.

Confronting the World

1 John 4:1-5:21

The Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of Error (4:1-6)

1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, 3 and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already. 4 Little children, you are of God, and have overcome them; for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. 5 They are of the world, therefore what they say is of the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

In chapter 4, we begin to move into the realm of ministry and confrontation with the world.

John begins this section by asking us to identify our opposition. Since the world is in the control of the antichrist, who Jesus said is the “ruler of this world,” Christians are necessarily involved in warfare. In 2:18, 19, we were told that many have gone out from the fellowship of believers and gone into apostasy becoming antichrists. Many of these have become false prophets and are determined, if possible, to lead astray the true believers. We have many of these today, both inside and outside the churches. In addition, there are many kinds of demonic forces and people who operate under their influence. There are also territorial spirits, evil spirits over nations, and false religions.

John has already exhorted us frequently about our need to walk in the anointing of the Holy Spirit. But now he gives us several criteria to discern spirits, so that we can recognize and defeat the evil spirits.

1. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are necessary for recognizing spirits. We need to be filled with the Spirit and attentive to His voice at all times. The false can best be identified if we know the true. The Holy Spirit will bear witness in our spirit concerning the kinds of spirits operating in people, places, and situations and give us wisdom and authority to combat and cast out evil spirits.

2. An objective test of a spirit is whether or not it bears witness to the incarnation of Jesus (4:2). Antichrist spirits bear witness to and exalt the person they inhabit or control, advocate immoral acts and false teaching, or works of human design. Right spirits exalt Jesus in word and deed. They speak as oracles of God, saying what Jesus wants said, doing the miraculous works of Jesus.

However good ideas, plans, speeches, and acts may seem, if they do not bear witness to Jesus, they are not of God, but of the antichrist. All teaching, secular or religious, all social work, political agenda and legal matters need to be subjected to this test as do public education and entertainment. All “good works” that are conceived and executed according to man’s ideas and capabilities are fruit of the wrong tree (the tree of the knowledge of good and evil), and are, therefore, in antichrist’s domain. They represent a worldly point of view and are accepted by worldly people. They must be combated by Christians. John does not acknowledge any middle ground. There is only the Spirit of God and the spirit of antichrist (4:3).

3. A final test of spirits is whether they will listen to us or not (4:6). If we are truly born of God, our speech and our actions will be in obedience to God's will and purposes. Those who know God will recognize our spirits as being in line with the truth and will listen to us and accept us (4:6).

The world needs to be torn from the hands of antichrist and brought into the kingdom of God. We can confidently face all these evil spirits in the authority of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is infinitely more powerful than the other spirits. We can overcome all the work of antichrist, because "greater is the one who is in us [the Holy Spirit] than the one who is in the world [antichrist]" (4:4).

As we obey God, our lives become a living manifestation of the incarnation of Christ. The Holy Spirit bears witness in us and through us to the presence of Jesus in our lives.

The Testimony of Love (4:7-16)

7 Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. 9 In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. 15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 16 So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

These verses, at first glance, appear to be a repetition of verses in the preceding chapter. But in the context, they take on a new meaning. They refer to a greatly expanded sphere for our love.

The new life that we live in Christ Jesus becomes a witness in the world to the love of God (4:14). It can be clearly seen who is born of God and knows God and who is not (4:9). Our love for each other in the fellowship of believers can be seen by others. As someone commented about the early Christians, "Wow, see how those Christians love one another." The love that we show towards one another is the same kind of love that God has shown towards us in calling us His children. This love is the love which prompted God to send His only Son into the world to give us a radically new kind of life (4:10). He loved us so much that He was willing to lay down His life for us. Similarly, others cannot only see the manifestation of God's love in our relationships to each other, but also in our willingness to lay down our lives for others (4:11). This laying down of our lives may involve physical death on behalf of someone's salvation, but usually (what is actually more difficult) living our lives in such a way that we can bring His redemption to the world.

In Old Testament times, it was often thought adequate to love one's friends and neighbours, but hate one's enemies. Jesus corrected this impression by expanding the definition of neighbour to include anyone who would give help to someone in trouble. He also said it was too easy to love people who are nice to us. His type of sacrificial, redemptive love includes enemies also.

No one has seen God the Father at any time. Jesus had stressed this fact with His first disciples, but He assured them that, if they had seen Him, they had seen the Father also (4:12). Jesus, come in the flesh, is the revelation of God the Father. If we love one another with His love,

we, too, will be a manifestation of the Father because the Father will be in us. If we are fully obedient to Him, walking in His righteousness, as was recommended in chapter 3, His love is perfected in us. This means that we can become a perfect revelation of God's love and glory (4:12).

God has given us His Holy Spirit to bear continual witness of the presence of God in our lives. As we continue to pray in the Spirit and walk in the Spirit, we have the assurance that we are abiding in Jesus. We can rest in this assurance (4:13).

Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we "see" Jesus with our spirits. We then testify to what we have seen and known in the Spirit. Our lives become a living testimony of Jesus' presence in the world and proclaim Him as the Saviour of the world (4:14). Our lives as well as our words will bear witness to the incarnation of Jesus, because His life and His love will be manifested through us. When we speak, it will be under the anointing of the Spirit. When we act, it will be in obedience to the guidance of the Spirit and will manifest His power.

In John 14:12, Jesus is quoted as saying to His disciples: "*Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these because I go to the Father.*" These miraculous works of love—deliverance, healing, stilling storms, providing fish to eat—all testify to who Jesus is. As He told some Jews who were harassing Him, the works He was doing testified that the Father was in Him doing His works through Him. As we do the "greater works", we testify to the resurrection of Christ. The works demonstrate that He is alive, that He is abiding in us, and manifesting His love through us. A witness in words only, without the demonstration of the loving power of Jesus, will give people a right to call us hypocrites. Our actions will contradict our words. (Who wants to believe in an Almighty God who cannot do anything?) As we are obedient to God, the resurrection power of Jesus, through the operation of His Holy Spirit will do the "greater works" He has promised.

Confidence in God (4-17-5:3)

17 In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love. 19 We love, because he first loved us. 20 If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also. 5:1 Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God, and every one who loves the parent loves the child. 2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.

In 4:12, it was stated that, "*if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.*" In the present passage, John gives us the powerful corollary that "*In this love is perfected with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment.*" The ultimate benefit of our love for God and for each other is this complete confidence in facing all of life and death. As we are obedient to fulfil the commandment of love of our brethren, God perfects His love in us. This perfect love of God working in us removes all fear.

If we have no fear of punishment or judgment, we will have no fear of death, or of anything else. We can pray and act with confidence, and see the mighty works of God. This sets us free to love ourselves and others more fully.

Our love is a response to His love for us (4:19). His love in us enables us to love our brethren. Conversely, our love for the brethren whom we can see is a requisite for loving God whom we cannot see (4:19). God commands us to love all who believe that Jesus is His Son, because they are His children. If all Christians fervently believed this, it would do wonders for ecumenical relationships. Our churches could be united and become God's Church. Total revival could happen, winning cities and nations for God, preparing for the full manifestation of His rule on earth.

Christian love is equivalent to obeying God (5:3). If we always do what He tells us to do, we will act in accordance with His love, because He is, by nature, love. He will always instruct us to do loving, redemptive acts, even if they sometimes appear harsh. Remember, Christ's love is life-changing, not just "accepting."

The absence of fear and complete confidence in our relationship with God is essential to our life and ministry because our ability to pray effectively is based on our hearts' not condemning us.

Overcoming the World (5:4-13)

4 For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. 5 Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? 6 This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. 7 And the Spirit is the witness, because the Spirit is the truth. 8 There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree. 9 If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has borne witness to his Son. 10 He who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. He who does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne to his Son. 11 And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life. 13 I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

Whatever is born of God, (5:4) could also be translated "Anything that originates with God." This would broaden the statement to include not only Christians who are children of God, but also all the redemptive works of God.

"The world" refers to everything that is not of God. It is fruit of the tree of good and evil, with which Satan successfully tempted Eve and Adam. Included in world are sinful people and the chaos to which creation has been subjected as a result of mankind's disobedience. The good news is that faithful servants of God can overcome the world. This includes our personal sanctification (overcoming the world in us). But, further, it includes reversing all the results of Adam's sin: restoring man's authority over creation, bringing all things into God's order, perfecting the Church, bringing us into unity in preparation for His coming. Jesus' miracles of healing and deliverance and His command over the forces of nature demonstrate what He means by world redemption. They also show us how this process is to be carried out. He trained His first little group of disciples to do this kind of ministry and He wants to train us also. As we continue this life and ministry, we give testimony to the resurrection of Jesus and His continuing process of redemption.

The conditions for our being able to overcome the world are as follows:

- Being born again (living as children of God (chapter 3)).
- Our faith (believing that Jesus is the Son of God (5:5)).
- Believing God's testimony about His Son (the three witnesses (5:6-8)).

"Our faith" (5:4, 5) means a complete confidence in all that Jesus has said and done and a trust that He will always be faithful to His promises. Believing that Jesus is the Son of God means that we see Him as He is; we know His purposes for the redemption of the world and our part in this process; we believe and demonstrate that He can still do the things He did along the dusty lanes of Galilee or in the tumultuous city streets of Jerusalem. We know that He loves us unconditionally and wants us to be all He has planned for us.

In order to equip us for overcoming the world, God the Father has given us three witnesses as His testimony concerning His Son—the water, the blood, and the Spirit (5:6-8).

"This is he who came by water and blood" (5:6). Why did John say that He came by water and blood?

Jesus came to the river Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptizer. The waters of baptism were for those who had been living in sins and had been separated from God and the people of God. Jesus, of course, needed repentance the least of anyone who ever lived. He came voluntarily and submitted to the waters of baptism on our behalf to signify that He was identifying Himself with sinful, separated humanity. He was signifying that He was going to take on Himself the sins of all the people and would become the Saviour of the world. Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of His public ministry just as His sacrifice would form the culmination of it.

Jesus came to Mount Calvary, to the shedding of His blood to seal the new covenant and to make His salvation available to all mankind. The shedding of His blood sealed, in a most dramatic and powerful way, the promise made by His baptism. This blood of the New Covenant started our ministry, made us overcomers, and guaranteed the full redemption of the world.

"The Spirit is the witness (5:7)." The Spirit bears witness to Jesus in the hearts of believers, making us aware continually of Jesus' presence. Jesus had told His disciples when He promised the coming of the Holy Spirit, that the Holy Spirit would bear witness to Him teaching them all they needed to know. The Spirit in us is also a witness to Jesus before the world. The Spirit equips us as witnesses and sends out to all the world. Our lives bear witness to His sanctifying grace; our ministry bears witness to His resurrection power.

We know truth through the Holy Spirit, because He is the truth, could also be translated reality. The Holy Spirit puts us in touch with reality. Unfortunately, in modern English, the word reality has lost its meaning because we have been taught that reality is relative or just personal opinion. Anybody can create his own version of reality. This kind of nonsense has been able to capture modern thought because people who do not walk in the Spirit cannot hear what God says, and therefore do not have the mind of Christ. They are not in touch with reality. Reality can only be understood by being in Christ. We will be in touch with reality in proportion as we truly listen to the voice of the Spirit. In doing so, we need to apply the principles of discerning spirits which we discussed in connection with 1 John 4:1-6.

"There are three witnesses: the Spirit, the water, and the blood (5:8)." In verse 9, John explains that this is God's own testimony to the Son. John the Baptizer prophesied over Jesus, when He came for baptism, that Jesus would save mankind from sin, and that He would baptize in the Holy Spirit. Certainly three of the most critical and significant events in the life of Jesus were His baptism, His sacrificial death, and His sending of the Holy Spirit

The three witnesses of God by which God testified concerning His Son bring us into the realm of the three sacraments—Baptism, Holy Communion, and Confirmation. It is through these that the witness of Jesus gets incorporated into our lives. The Baptism of Jesus marked His equipping for the fulfilment of His purpose. Our Baptism brings us into union with His life and ministry. The blood of Jesus guarantees the fulfilment of His redemptive purpose in the world. When we receive His body and blood in the Holy Communion, not only are we cleansed from sin and made one with Him, but we are also strengthened and equipped for our life and ministry. We receive His life and He lives in us and we in Him. Jesus also received the Holy Spirit at His Baptism. Jesus' entire ministry was carried on in the power of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit for us is associated with our Confirmation which equips us for our ministry. These three witnesses, which John says are really one, are internalized for us by the Sacraments and the life of the Christian community. We appropriate the benefit of them by our faith.

“He who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in himself (5:10).” The testimony in our lives is the reality of the eternal life that God has given us. *“This life is in his Son” (5:11)* can mean either that Jesus has eternal life in Himself or that we have eternal life when we are in Him. Both meanings are probably intended. We have the same life in us that is in Christ Jesus. This means, of course, that we can live as He does and do the things that He does. We will have the mind of Christ. This gives us confidence for our life and ministry. It equips us to love as He loved. It also equips us to do our part in bring about the redemption of the world.

The process for overcoming the world is: Believe fully in Who Jesus is and the implications of that faith; obey whatever the Word (Jesus) says; be perfected in love and thus freed from fear; have confidence in God's answers to our prayers; pray according to His will; see His victory.

As we obey God, our lives become a living manifestation of the incarnation of Christ. The Holy Spirit bears witness in us and through us to the presence of Jesus in our lives.

Confidence in Asking (5:14-17)

14 And this is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him. 16 If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that. 17 All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not.

A marvellous corollary of our victory over the world is that our prayers and intercessions will surely be answered. If we ask anything according to His will it will happen. This, of course, demands that we listen and obey so that we always know what His will is and do it. This is the key to our part in overcoming the world.

Obviously, the restriction on our getting what we ask for is that we must ask according to God's will, not our own desires. As an example of this principle, John explains in 5:15—17 that we can pray for the repentance of some who fall into sin but not for others. John does not clearly define who is going to fit into each category. 1 John 2:1, 2 stated that anyone who confesses his sin will definitely be forgiven. But there are also indications that some cannot come to repentance. If, instead of confessing their sins, people run off and try to hide, sin becomes multiplied and sometimes a permanent way of life. In that passage, John referred to such people as antichrists.

We can get some insights on this matter from other New Testament writings. This same principal occurs in Hebrews 6:4-6:

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt.

Paul advises the Corinthians about a man who is committing sin with his father's wife, saying:
. . . with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. 1 Corinthians 5:4b-5

In our passage in 1 John, no criterion is given for the distinction between mortal sins and those which are not mortal. We may conjecture that this is because John has been emphasizing the necessity of seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our prayers. We need to be obedient to Him in each specific case. Sometimes it is appropriate to ask for a person to come to repentance and come back to a walk with the Lord. In other situations, it may be well to allow the person to experience the effects of the sin and God's judgment on it, in the hope that the person will be shocked into consciousness and repent. Some may even be unable or unwilling to come to repentance. Clearly, it is inappropriate for us to judge these situations or to say the same prayer for everyone. Only God knows whether a person is ready to repent or if he needs some more corrective judgment to bring him to awareness of sin. In Romans 8, Paul states that we do not know how to pray and that we have to pray according to the Holy Spirit's instruction. God's promise is that our prayers will be answered if we pray according to His will.

Summary (5:18-21)

18 We know that any one born of God does not sin, but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. 19 We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one. 20 And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. 21 Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

In closing, John reemphasizes very briefly some of the salient points of the epistle.

He reiterates the crucial statement from 3:9 that anyone who is born of God does not sin. The prototypical One who is born of God (i.e., Jesus) protects the believer and shields him from the power of the evil one (5:18).

Again John emphasizes the antithesis between those who are born of God and are under His control and protection and those who are of the world which is in the control of the evil one. We are a different race and culture from the culture of the world.

John powerfully affirms that his readers are in the Lord. We know who we are in the Lord. We know the protection and authority of the Lord. We know in a profound way that the Son of God has come in the flesh, because He dwells in us and gives us His life. He has totally identified with us and revealed Himself to us and in us so that we have understanding and insight into the full meaning of His Incarnation, we see Him as He is, we enter into a close relationship with Him, we know personally Him Who is the truth (reality). Being in Him is the closest possible relationship with God the Father and with Jesus Christ. This intimate relationship with the true God gives us a firm grasp on His truth (reality). Knowing the true God and walking in His truth is the true meaning of eternal life (5:20c). This eternal life is the key to all the themes of this epistle—forgiveness, cleansing from sin, sanctification, effective ministry, overcoming the world, bearing witness to Jesus.

Epilogue

As we face the critical days ahead and the consummation of all things, it is imperative that we have an experiential understanding of God's intention for our lives and for the body of Christ. External circumstances have changed radically since John's day; but God's intentions for His people and for the world remain and are moving rapidly towards fulfilment.

John wrote this epistle towards the end of the first century and the end of his ministry on earth. He wrote these words to his flock of believers that they might remain steadfast and know the fullness of eternal life in Christ. His intent was that his readers would have fellowship with each other in the body of Christ and with the Father and the Son. He was not concerned primarily to have people understand about the Christian life, but that they should live it to the utmost. He wanted them to be able to hear God's voice and His continuing revelation and to be prepared to live accordingly.

In the midst of the confusion and hopelessness of the world in which we live, John holds up for us hope—hope for our entire sanctification, hope for a Church united in the love of Jesus, hope for a lively fellowship with the Holy Trinity and with each other, hope for the restoration of our authority to do the greater works Jesus promised, hope for the redemption of the world, the hope of eternal life.

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