**The word of life** Text: 1John 1:1-4

*(Scripture quotes from the New King James Version unless otherwise indicated)*

What is the meaning or purpose of life, of your life and my life? In the words of Question 1 of the Shorter Catechism: ‘What is the chief end of man?’ The answer, as learnt by our children, is: ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever’. One of the verses upon which this answer is based is 1John 1:4: ‘That your/our joy may be full/complete’. One thing we note about the Westminster Confession of Faith, of which the Shorter Catechism is a part, is that it is concise and succinct; no words are wasted. Countless books have been written about the meaning of life, but the Catechism gives the answer in thirteen words.

John is similarly concise and economical in his use of Greek words. It is said that John uses the simplest Greek in the NT, but simple words are often the most profound; John uses words like ‘life’, ‘love’ and ‘light’. Over one hundred ‘Westminster divines’ took three years to prepare the Confession. We do not know how long it took John to write this letter but it appears to be the work of this one man.

This letter does not begin with the greeting we are familiar with from the letters written by the apostles Peter and Paul: ‘Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ’ or, ‘Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ’. In fact, there is no greeting at all; nor is there an ending that indicates who is the writer, where it was written from, or when it was written. If we include the two letters called 2John and 3John we note the greeting, ‘The elder’. The writer addresses his readers as ‘little children’, indicating an older man (2:1, 2:28). John outlived the other apostles, as far as we know. The writer speaks of having seen, heard and touched Jesus, so must be one of his disciples. The letter opens with words that remind us of the prologue to John’s gospel: ‘That which was from the beginning’. All this points to the apostle John as the writer. John spent his later years in Ephesus and exiled on the island of Patmos, from where he wrote the book of Revelation (Rev 1:9). Finally, church fathers, especially Irenaeus, refer to the apostle John as the writer of these letters called 1, 2, and 3John, and the book of Revelation. Since John was elderly, it was probably between 85 and 95AD when he wrote these letters.

Heresies were coming in the church that had been around for over fifty years. From its beginning Paul encountered Judaizers who wanted to enforce Mosaic Law, including circumcision. Later on, Peter writes of false teachers promising ‘liberty’, as in freedom from moral restraints (2Peter 2:19). As we enter the second century we find a heresy called Gnosticism; John seems to have encountered the early stages of this heresy. The name ‘Gnosticism’ comes from the Greek word ‘*gnosis*’ meaning ‘to know’. This heresy taught a ‘higher knowledge’ as the way of salvation, rather than faith in Christ. It taught dualism, the division between God who is spirit and is good, and matter which is evil. It taught that the physical body is evil, but the spirit or soul is good. This being the case, some Gnostics became ascetics, treating the body harshly (cf. Col 2:21-23), while others became licentious and indulged the flesh because it had no place in salvation. John counters these attitudes, warning against the lust of the flesh, and reminding us that sin, as defined by the law, is serious (1John 2:16, 3:4).

This sort of dualism is evident in other religions, like Hinduism and Buddhism, in which the aim is to escape the cycle of rebirths and enter moksha or nirvana without the evil body. Secular humanism has its own form of dualism with followers blaming not their bodies as such but their brains or their DNA for their evil deeds. ‘It wasn’t really me, it was my brain’ they say, meaning it was my body not my soul that sinned. Dualism is found in churches still today.

Gnosticism not only affected the way people behaved, it also affected what they believed about Jesus. Cerinthus (c. 50-100AD) picked up on this and concluded that God could not have come into this physical world, and Jesus could not have been born of a virgin; he said Jesus was the child of Mary and Joseph. He said that the Spirit of Christ came upon Jesus at his baptism and left before he died. Another heresy called ‘Docetism’, from the Greek ‘*dokeo*’ meaning ‘to seem’, taught that the body of Jesus was not real but phantom-like.

John rejects any teaching that denies the reality of Jesus’ body (1John 4:2). He begins his letter emphasising this reality, having himself seen Jesus in the flesh, heard him speak, and touched him. Of course, John is not saying Jesus was just a man like him; he saw and heard a unique man who spoke like no other, and in the resurrection of Jesus he saw and believed that Jesus is indeed the Son of God (John 20:8). As we meditate upon the opening words of John’s first letter we will do so under three subheadings: ‘whose who?’, ‘witness of the apostles’ and ‘written for a purpose’.

**1. Whose who?**

John began the gospel that bears his name saying, ‘In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God’ (John 1:1-2). He begins his first letter in a similar way: ‘That which was from the beginning’. In the gospel we understand the beginning to be the beginning of time, even before the creation of the world. It would be unusual if John meant something different by the word ‘beginning’ here in his letter. Some say he means the beginning of the gospel, which is true if we see the gospel as beginning before the incarnation. The incarnation, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are of course, central to the gospel. The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ; there is no gospel without Jesus. John is making this clear, and making clear the nature of the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The word ‘which’, a neuter singular relative pronoun, is somewhat off-putting. But John goes on to identify ‘which’ as ‘the word of life’ or the life-giving word (1:1, 2). ‘Word’ translates *‘logos’* as in John’s gospel, where we also read, ‘in him was life’ (John 1:4). John goes on, ‘which was with the Father and was manifested to us’ (1:2). Again in the gospel we read, ‘The word was with God and the word was God’ (John 1:1). Jesus was with God the Father in the beginning; he is co-eternal and equal with the Father.

John writes, ‘which we have heard’ and ‘was manifested to us’ (1:2); he writes in the plural. Is this simply a ‘royal plural’, a ‘we’ meaning ‘me’? This may be the case, but he is writing as one of the twelve who lived with Jesus for three years; so we might call it an ‘apostolic we’. These chosen men, minus Judas and plus Paul, became the apostles, who after Pentecost proclaimed the gospel in all the world. They are no longer alive, but John wrote a gospel, and also wrote letters bearing apostolic authority. The apostles expected their readers, including us today, to respect this authority, an authority based not only on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit but in them being witnesses of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. John is writing to ‘you’ as in one who has fellowship with God, Father and Son, because of his or ‘our’ testimony, and as one who knows the joy of such fellowship (1:3,4).

**2. Witness of the apostles**

It is good to bear in mind what heretics like the Gnostics were saying as we read what John writes here in these verses, as well as in the rest of the letter. It is also good to keep in mind what heretics are saying today. There are people in the church who say it does not matter whether Jesus actually existed; you can be a Christian without believing Jesus is historical, so they say. John would be horrified at such a suggestion, and you also I trust! If this was the case, John’s emphasis on an eyewitness account of the person he lived with, a man called Jesus, is a waste of time. Some Christians, and even non-Christians, value the teaching of Jesus but care nothing about the historical facts of the incarnation. Sure, we read of supernatural facts, but that does not negate their historicity. The teaching of Jesus means nothing apart from knowing Christ the person, and there is no salvation apart from the death and resurrection of this historical person.

John declares that Jesus is a real person, a living, breathing, speaking, and eating person whom he and eleven other disciples lived with. From our perspective as people who have never seen Jesus, he might seem unreal. Who is this man who turned water into wine, and walked on the sea, and stopped the wind? People at the time, including the disciples, were just as incredulous, so we are not alone. But they could not doubt that Jesus existed as a real person. This is what John declares to us today.

He writes, ‘We have seen and bear witnesses/testify (1:2). His language is like that of a courtroom. John is in the witness box being grilled as to what he saw and heard regarding the person identified as Jesus of Nazareth. He testifies with no hesitation, and no equivocation. There is no, ‘I think so’, and no ‘maybe’ in John’s testimony. It may have been a long time ago, but he can remember as if it was yesterday- or even today! We have five senses, hearing being one of these. Jesus was not like dumb idols that so many worship even today. Jesus spoke in words that John heard and understood (1:1).

Seeing is perhaps our most powerful sense; with his own eyes John saw Jesus (1:1). The ‘see’ here is more than the simple act of seeing; it points to thought being given to the object seen and the mind being active as the eyes focus on the object. This is further indicated by the next word translated, ‘looked upon’ (1:1). This points to something remarkable, even supernatural, something that makes a lasting impression upon us. Time and again John was amazed at what he saw Jesus do. Who could ever forget seeing Jesus stop the wind with a word (Mat 8:27, 14:33)? John was most amazed when he saw the tomb of Jesus empty, apart from the intact grave clothes: ‘he saw and believed’ (John 20:8).

Not just heard and not just saw, as powerful as these senses are, but also touched or handled is what John says from the witness box. (1:1). It was almost certainly John who lay his head on Jesus’ lap at the Last Supper; this was after Jesus had washed his feet with water (John 13:23, 15). Jesus was flesh and blood just like any other person, but yet different in that he was the word became flesh, dwelling among us, ‘and we behold his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Jesus was different in that he imparted life; he was life and he imparted life, eternal life. John had heard Jesus pray, ‘This is eternal life that they may know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent’ (John 17:3). No other man ever spoke to God like this. John saw a person of flesh and blood, but also a person manifesting God to us and to the world.

**3. Written for a purpose**

John was writing in the context of false teachers coming into the church- or ‘antichrists’ as he calls them (2:18,19), but his primary focus is upon believers in the church, ‘little children’ as he calls us. He outlines tests which we can apply to ourselves, and tests by which we can judge teachers in the church. The church refers to the fellowship of believers or ‘*koinonia’*. This Greek word can also be translated ‘communion’ or ‘participation’. This fellowship is based on the gospel as taught by the apostles. Paul wrote of ‘members of the household of God, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone’ (Eph 2:19, 20). John is saying the same thing. We cannot have fellowship with God outside that which the apostles had. ‘Divine fellowship demands apostolic fellowship’.

The church, not as an organisation but as a fellowship, is where we find fellowship with the apostles and share in the fellowship they have with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ (1:3). Those who deny Jesus as the Son of God, as the word who became flesh, do not have fellowship with the Father. Those who cast aside the gospel taught by the apostles do not have fellowship with the Father. Furthermore, those who refuse fellowship with other believers have no fellowship with the Father (3:14). In addition to having fellowship with the Father and with his Son, John writes that his ‘little children’ might have joy to the full. The best reading is ‘that our joy may be full’ (1:4, 2John 12). ‘There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents’ said Jesus (Luke 15:7). The saved soul rejoices because of the forgiveness of sin and the new life they receive from Jesus Christ. Any preacher of the gospel, like John, rejoices when they see a soul saved from sin and death. They rejoice to see new life that grows and bears fruit to the glory of God. Do you have such joy? Is your joy growing as you come to know more of your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ?

**God is light** Text: 1John 1:5-10

‘Who is God’ or ‘What is God like’ are questions we all ask. Everyone knows there is a God because of his eternal power and divine nature revealed in the creation (Rom 1:20). Many refuse to accept this revelation, choosing to walk in the dark, as it were; the theory of evolution does not offer any light. ‘What is God like’ or ‘What is God’? In the Bible we read that ‘God is love’ (1John 4:8) and many take hold of this ‘definition’ of God. Unfortunately many Hindus and confused Christians twist this to say ‘Love is god’. The Bible also says ‘God is spirit’ (John 4:24). You might turn to the Shorter Catechism to answer this question and say, ‘God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in being wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.’ This is a succinct answer informing us of the essential attributes of God, but with a simple metaphor John gives an excellent summary of the divine nature: ‘God is light’ (1:6).

On the first day of creation God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light. Light is essential to life. Plants need light to grow and we need plants for food. We need light to live- we cannot walk in the dark without stumbling. Light is purifying. A bottle of contaminated water placed in the sun will become pure. Light is revealing. Vertical blinds and heavy curtains fail to keep light out of our bedroom. Above all, the light of the sun is blinding; we cannot look at the sun with the naked eye. John’s metaphor for God is very illuminating.

John heard Jesus say, ‘I am the light of the world’. He experienced something of the physical reality of this truth on the holy mountain where Jesus was transfigured. He saw the Shekinah glory that filled the temple of old now embodied in Jesus. In preaching, ‘God is light and in him is no darkness at all’ he was making known the gospel to both Jew and Gentile. He tells us that this is the message he and the other apostles heard from Jesus. They not only saw the face of Jesus shine like the sun, and his clothes became white as light (Mat 17:2), but heard Jesus say, ‘I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life’ (John 8:12).

John continues the theme of fellowship, fellowship with God and fellowship with one another, as he poses a number of test questions in the following verses; three in fact, as our subheadings will indicate (subheadings taken from Stott). For two of these he gives us the right answer, answers that truly give us the light of life; he speaks about confessing sin and being cleansed in the blood of Christ. John writes to a community ‘beset by darkness of a doctrinal, ethical and relationship nature’. We have spoken about the Gnostic heresy of John’s day; a heresy that continues today under different names. Heresy is false teaching, and any false teaching leads to sin, to moral and relationship problems.

**1. Denial that sin breaks fellowship with God**

It was in the context of a woman caught in adultery that Jesus said he was the light of the world, and again in the context of a man born blind (John 8:12, 9:5). Recall what Jesus said to those accusing the woman? ‘He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first’, and to the woman, ‘Go and sin no more’ (John 8:7, 11). As a metaphor, light refers to purity, and darkness to evil. Some people refer to themselves as ‘enlightened’ meaning they have greater knowledge or special knowledge, but without love and humility such knowledge is a curse. It does not lead us out of spiritual and moral darkness. Knowledge must be the truth. Light and dark, truth and error, good and evil are all absolutes with no half measures. God cannot lie or do evil. God is absolutely faithful and absolutely just (1:9). When we start with God we start with these absolutes. When we start with man however, we start with shades of grey.

Moral and ethical matters are not to be judged by what we say, but by what we do. This is how we are judged by God. We might say we have fellowship with the Lord but how do we know this is true? (1:6). Fellowship is how John speaks of salvation. Salvation means being brought into a relationship with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ (1:3). Our relationship with God was broken by sin (Isa 59:2, Ps 66:18). It is restored in Jesus Christ. Fellowship with God is possible because of the blood of Jesus Christ his Son (1:7). But John speaks of two relationships, that with God and that with brothers and sisters in Christ (1:7, 2:9-11).

Most sin is against other people. All sin is against God. We might say we have fellowship with God but in truth we are walking in darkness. Hating a brother would be a case in point (2:11). It is the case highlighted in the positive aspect of this teaching: if we walk in the light we have fellowship with one another (1:7). Failure to love one another is a serious matter for John, as it was for Jesus. Jesus gave two commands, two positive commands: love the Lord your God, and love your neighbour. He did not say we could choose which command we want to follow. He did not say we could choose which people we want to love. Jesus said if we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us. We confess to forgiving others every time we say the Lord’s Prayer. I pray this is not a case of you or me saying we have fellowship with God when we are walking in darkness! If we understand the magnitude of our own sin, and how much the Lord has forgiven us, we will be more forgiving of our brother and the speck in his eye (Mat 7:4).

We are sinners and we commit sin, contrary to the belief of the heretics condemned by John in this letter (1:8, 10). The Gnostics thought the human spirit ‘could not be contaminated by deeds of the body’. Walking in the light we will not be walking in sin or habitually sinning, but we can still sin. When we do we must confess our sin, and know that the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin (1:7). Notice the full title of Jesus which indicates both his humanity and his divinity; Jesus had to be sinless in order to bear our sins in his body on the tree. This one sacrifice of the Lamb of God is powerful to cleanse or erase all our sin for all time (Heb 9:14, 28). The blood of Jesus Christ preserves our fellowship with each other on earth, and with our Father in heaven.

**2. Denial of sin in our nature**

The promise of verse 9 is most comforting. It expresses the truth of the gospel. While there are some who think they never do any wrong or never sin, there are also sin-sensitive souls who confess their sin but are never sure that God has forgiven them. We will come to what John has to say to such people shortly. Firstly, he has something to say to those who say they have no sin (1:8). Who are these people? Such people were around in John’s day and they are around today; Gnosticism is not dead! Some claim that they are inherently good, either from birth, or because they attained a state of sinless perfection through some mystical fellowship with Christ; they consider themselves beyond sin. John assures those who maintain they have no sin that they are deceiving themselves, and not being honest before other people or God. People deceive themselves when they make psychological or social excuses (‘everyone is doing it’), or try to water-down sin with euphemistic terms like ‘mistake’, ‘slip-up’, ‘white-lie’ and the classic, ‘I am only human’.

When the apostle Paul set forth the gospel in his letter to the Romans he spoke about sin and concluded that, ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (Rom 3:23). John is doing the same. The gospel begins with God but soon comes to man and his sin. Those who only preach ‘God is love’, skipping over sin, and landing on salvation, are not preaching the gospel set forth in the Bible. Too many Christians have heard that God loves them and wants them to follow him. They think they are doing God a ‘good turn’ when they call themselves Christians and start doing good works. Preaching salvation without calling for repentance of sin is false teaching, is it not? What do such people think they are saved from- from death? Death is the wages of sin. Sin must be atoned for, or propitiated, before we are given life in Jesus Christ (2:2).

Then truth is, we are all sinners, and the wise action to take is to confess your sin because God says he will forgive you. We should confess to those against whom we have sinned, but above all confess to God because all sin is against God (Ps 51:1-4). We cannot hide our sin from God. When we confess our sin God is faithful and just to forgive us. He is faithful to the promise made in the new covenant (Isa 1:18, Jer 31:31-34). God promised to blot out our sins and remember them no more (Isa 43:25). God is holy and cannot look on sin. He is faithful to his promises. He is also just. The penalty for sin, your sin, must be paid if God is to be just. ‘He is just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus’ (Rom 3:26). His justice is seen in the cross of his beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. ‘The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin’ (1:9) - not just some sin but all sin, and not just partial cleansing but complete cleansing. Do not doubt the power of the blood of Jesus.

**3. Denial of sin in our conduct**

This is the most blatant and serious of the three denials because ‘we make Him [God] a liar’ (1:10). Denying that sin breaks fellowship with God makes us a liar. If we deny original sin and say we have no sin we are deceiving ourselves, and again lying to ourselves, as well as cutting ourselves off from forgiveness freely offered in the gospel. Why is this third denial so serious? It is saying, ‘I have never sinned’. It is one thing to deny original sin but another to say I have never sinned. Remember the challenge Jesus made when dealing with the woman caught in adultery? The person John is describing would have stepped forward to cast the first stone! Not even the self-righteousness Pharisee claimed to be without sin. The only man who never sinned in Jesus himself, so what does this claim amount to? Is it not tantamount to claiming divine status?

John condemns the person making such a claim because they are in effect saying that God is a liar. Of course the atheist does not mind calling God a liar but not many atheists say they have never sinned -they just dismiss sin. John is speaking about heretics who are in the church but have no place in the true church. To deny sin is to say the cross of Christ is unnecessary, when in fact God, in love and justice, sent Jesus to propitiate our sins. Well might his wrath rest on such liars! We recently heard a bishop telling heretics to leave the church because they have no place in it. They are heretics because they refuse to call sin ‘sin’.

Let me close with a story about Charles Spurgeon. Apparently a man came to Spurgeon claiming to be without sin. He invited the man to dinner. After trying to assure Spurgeon he was without sin, Spurgeon got up from his chair and threw a glass of water in the visitor’s face. Immediately and understandably this ‘perfect’ man shows his imperfections, causing quite a scene, allowing his anger and language to cross the line of courtesy. Spurgeon replied, ‘Ah, you see, the old man within is not as dead as you claim. He had simply fainted and I have revived him with but a glass of water.’

**Provision for sin** Text: 1John 2:1-2

Some years ago I got a letter in the mail- one of those double window letters! When I opened it sure enough it was a ‘penalty notice’. It said I had driven through a red light and had to pay a fine. I protested, ‘I have never driven through a red light’. But the photo taken by the red-light camera showed my car next to a red light. I had broken the law and had to pay the penalty.

When God, through Moses, made a covenant with his chosen people he gave them laws to obey; in fact there were laws, or creation ordinances, before this time, laws about marriage and about the Sabbath. When God set down his holy law he also set down penalties for breaking his law. He declared, ‘The soul who sins shall die’ (Ezek 18:20), and ‘the wages of sin is death’ (Rom 3:23). He also provided a way for sins to be forgiven. He told Moses to build a box called the Ark of the Covenant. Sinners would be forgiven if they sacrificed an animal and sprinkled its blood on the cover of this Ark; this cover was called the ‘mercy-seat’ or ‘*hilasterion*’ in Greek (Heb 9:5).

When Adam and Eve sinned and were thrown out of the Garden of Eden the need of atonement for sin arose. God is holy and hates sin; he cannot look upon sin. God is just and cannot overlook sin. Blood sprinkled on the cover of the Ark covered the sin of the repentant sinner- for a time or until they sinned again. Animal sacrifices were made daily in the temple. Sprinkling of blood on the mercy-seat was done once a year, on the Day of Atonement. This ceremony was a picture of substitution, the blood of the animal victim being accepted by God in the place of the sinner.

Blood sacrifices are no longer part of our worship. Why? Because Jesus fulfilled this requirement when he died on the cross. The Jews want to rebuild the temple and start blood sacrifices again. Other religions have blood sacrifices. But Jesus is the great High Priest who offered up himself: ‘With his own blood he entered the Most Holy Place once for all having obtained eternal redemption’ (Heb 9:12). We must not try ‘sanitize’ the truth of the cross. ‘Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness’ (Heb 9:22). Jesus was not simply a good man or a prophet being unjustly executed; other ‘good men’ have not risen from the dead! Jesus was a sinless man; which means he is the Son of God. And it was God’s will and purpose that he die for the sins of the world (Acts 2:23, John 1:29, 3:16, 1John 2:2).

John takes us to the heart of the gospel in these few verses. He has already made it very clear that sin is a reality for every one of us. He has already spoken of the blood of Jesus, the Son of God, cleansing us from all sin (1:7). He now teaches us more of the gospel through terms like ‘Paraclete or Advocate’ and ‘propitiation’. So we have these subheadings: ‘Perfection- No’, ‘Paraclete’, and ‘propitiation’.

**1. Perfection-No!**

These verses continue with the concern about sin, about acknowledging and confessing sin, rather than denial and claiming to be perfect. John is writing to the church, as shown by the opening words of this chapter: ‘My little children’ (Greek ‘*teknia*’). Who was in a position to address the church in this way? Jesus addressed his disciples as children, even little children (John 13:33, 21:5). The apostle Paul calls believers, ‘my beloved children’ (1Cor 4:14). With John, these words not only point to his status as an apostle but also to his advanced age. He is like a grandfather calling us his little children. It is a term of endearment and love.

John is writing to believers urging them not to sin. False teachers were telling them that sin was not really a big deal, that sin belonged to the body and did not contaminate the mind: ‘God hates sin but loves the sinner’. They were saying ‘everyone sins’, that sin is being human. Some were saying they no longer sinned. John, of course, urges us not to sin, but goes on, ‘And if anyone sins’. He is not talking about wilful, habitual sin, about walking in darkness. He is saying that while ever we are in this body, and in this world where Satan roams, we will be tempted and may succumb to temptation. ‘The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak’ said Jesus (Mat 26:41).

To the believer, knowing the depths of Christ’s love and wanting to please our Saviour and Lord, committing sin is distressing. We sense that our Lord and Master is disappointed and hurt by our sin. We want to be in a proper relationship with him, a relationship of love, but sin has soured this relationship. As a believer we do not make excuses for our sin, nor do we become downcast or disheartened. We do not turn to self-flagellation, although it is important to exercise control over our bodies. What we do is turn to the Lord against whom we have sinned, confess our sins and remember his words, ‘If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ (1John 1:9). The blood of Jesus Christ is the only thing that will cleanse us of our sin. Only in this way can our relationship with the Father, and hence with one another, be restored.

**2. Paraclete**

‘If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous’ (2:1). ‘Advocate’ translates the Greek ‘*paracletos*’. In John’s gospel the same word refers to the Holy Spirit; it literally means, ‘one who stands bedside’. The Holy Spirit is called the helper, the comforter, or the counsellor. The NIV interprets the word to say, ‘we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence’ (2:1 NIV). Advocate is a legal term; in America lawyers are called advocates. When you go before a judge you take an advocate, hoping he will plead in such a way that the judge will set you free. Another driver who got booked for going through a red light took the matter to court. With the help of a lawyer pleading on his behalf he was let off without a fine.

Sin is lawlessness (3:4). We are all guilty of breaking God’s law, guilty of ‘missing the mark’, the meaning of the Greek word. When we break God’s law we are brought before the judge; God is the judge. John is not here writing about justification, the time when, as unbelievers and enemies of God, we were brought before God to answer for all our sins; ‘those who God loved he predestined, he called, and he justified (Rom 8:30). He gave us faith to believe and cleansed us in the precious blood of Christ (1Peter 1:19, Rev 1:5). Being justified we became children of God; we were adopted into his family.

John is writing to children of God. Children still sin and still need forgiveness in the same precious blood of Christ. But we now come before God as our ‘Father’. We are children not strangers. God of course, is still holy and just, and breaking one of his commands is still sin, and sin must be atoned for. We are brought to court but have an Advocate or Intercessor to plead our case (Heb 7:25). He does not plead our innocence, or extenuating circumstances, but acknowledges our guilt and pleads his own vicarious work.

We have in Jesus one who is righteous (2:1, 1Peter 3:18). If fact, he is the only one who is righteous. When you come into a human court your lawyer does not plead on the basis of his merits. Nor does he represent you for free! Jesus is the only advocate permitted to appear in God’s court and he does so *pro bono*. In our next subheading we will looking to the temple rather than the court and see that only one man was permitted to enter the temple, and that once a year, and that not without blood. A proud king called Uzziah presumed to go into the temple, and was struck with leprosy (2Chron 26:16f). If you try to represent yourself in God’s court, as some proud people try to do, you will be thrown out on your head.

John makes the point that Jesus Christ is righteous; he is the only one qualified to represent us when we sin and need forgiveness. ‘The Father’, who is ‘Our Father in heaven’, is ‘faithful and just’ or loving and just (1:9, 2:1). He wants to restore the relationship he has with us, the relationship broken by our sin. His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, is crucial to this restoration. He also loves us; he loves us so much that he ‘laid down his life for us’ (3:16). Love and justice are paramount to both Father and Son; in no sense is the Father forcing the hand of his Son, or the Son reluctant to do what is required by the Father. Father and Son are on the same page, and we need to be on that page; we must not be concocting new ways of dealing with sin! Sin is so serious that nothing but the precious blood of Jesus can wash us clean. Only Jesus is able ‘to present you faultless before the presence of His glory’ (Jude 24).

**3. Propitiation**

With the word ‘propitiation’ we move from courtroom to temple. We have already pictured the temple with the Ark of the Covenant and the curtain of separation, and the high priest entering just once a year with the blood of the sacrifice; the place was called the Most Holy Place. The word ‘propitiation’ belongs to this scene. It speaks about the wrath or righteous anger of God against sin being appeased by the precious blood of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Some reject this word because they think of propitiation in terms of pagan religions where a capricious, unpredictable god has to be appeased with bribes or gifts. The word ‘propitiation’ was dropped from the RSV Bible in 1952 in favour of the word ‘expiation’. A scholar called C. H. Dodd was influential in this move. He and others did not like the idea of a wrathful God being appeased. To them it smacked of being primitive. It is good that the word ‘propitiation’ has returned in the now-popular ESV Bible.

When we read this word ‘propitiation’ in the Bible, as we do, note that God’s anger is righteous anger against sin, not arbitrary or capricious, and that God himself provides the means of turning away His wrath, namely the blood of his own Son. God, in the blood of Jesus, propitiates himself: ‘He Himself is the propitiation for our sins’ (2:2). God ‘sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins’; he did this out of love for us (4:10). John uses this word in these two places in his letter: 2:2 and again in 4:10. He is the only NT writer to use the word in this form, ‘*hilasmos’*. Paul uses the same word in a different form in Romans 3:25. They found the word ‘*hilasterion*’ in the LXX where it refers to the ‘mercy-seat’ of the Ark.

We noted that the word ‘propitiation’ continues in the NKJV Bible and has returned to the ESV Bible. But this does not mean that the teaching of divine wrath against sin has returned to the church. Too many Christians take sin too lightly. Too many presume upon the grace of God in forgiveness; they confess on Sunday and return to a life of sin on Monday- unless they are already sinning on Sunday and have no time to confess. The apostle Paul in Romans 6, like John, appeals to the truth that being saved means being in a new relationship with Jesus, a relationship based on love and commitment, a relationship established in the precious blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

In closing verse 2, with this teaching about Christ being the propitiation for our sins, John writes, ‘and not for ours only but also for the whole world’ (2:2). Some preachers of Reformed doctrine tie themselves in knots trying to explain this phrase. John of course, is not teaching universalism, the idea that every individual will be saved in the end. Some think that John’s ‘our’ refers to Jews and his ‘also for the whole world’ refers to Gentiles; such a distinction means going back and saying ‘little children’ and all the ‘wes’ refers only to Jewish converts. Others offer to help John by saying he should have written ‘the elect’ instead of ‘the whole world’. John writes ‘the whole world’ not meaning the sins of every individual will be propitiated or forgiven by Jesus but that this is the only way for our sin to be forgiven. Jesus’ death is sufficient for all but only efficient or effective for some. Jesus’ ‘sufficient death provides the basis throughout all human history for God the Father to extend... his divine longsuffering’.

**Knowing God** Text: 1John 2:3-11

A couple of generations ago most people in our society went to church. If you drive around you will see at least one church building in the smallest of villages. The church was the focus of community life. My, how our society has changed! But were all those who went to church true Christians, people who believed in Jesus Christ? It is no longer popular to go to church and we might think that only true Christians will be found in church today. But this is not necessarily the case. True Christians will, of course, go to church, but this does not mean everyone in church is a true Christian. How do we know who is a true Christian and who is not? The early church was confronted with this problem when false teachers emerged within the church. The apostle John wrote to the church giving guidelines or tests that could be applied to teachers and members of the church.

True Christianity is a religion of the heart, so ultimately only the Lord knows those who are his. Many believed in Jesus when they saw the signs or miracles he did, ‘but Jesus did not commit himself to them because he knew what was in man’ (John 2:23-25). If only we knew what was in man the way Jesus does! If only we knew our own hearts as Jesus does! Jesus was not deceived by tears, or by toiling in Christian service. He was not deceived by emotions, by loud singing and arm waving. Words in the famous hymn of Augustus Toplady, ‘Rock of Ages’, come to mind: ‘Not the labour of my hands can fulfil they laws demands, could my zeal no respite know, could my tears for ever flow, all for sin would not atone, thou must save and thou alone’. Yes, it is by grace alone, through faith alone, that we are saved. This is the heart of the gospel recovered by Luther and the Reformers. Of course, there is nothing wrong with tears or loud singing but without obedience to God these things are futile (Mat 7:21-23, 1Cor 13).

The tests outlined by John here in this chapter can, and must be, applied to ourselves, as well as members of the church who profess faith in Christ. How do you know that you are a true Christian, a born-again believer assured of a place in heaven? As believers who hold to the doctrines of grace we have the assurance of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, our good works making no contribution whatsoever to our salvation. But as believers we will live in a way that pleases the Lord who saved us. ‘By their fruits you will know them’ said Jesus (Mat 7:16).

John is asking the question, ‘How can we know that we know the Lord’ (2:3). By way of answering this question he asks us four test questions: Firstly, ‘Are we obeying Christ’s commands?’, secondly, ‘Are we living like Jesus?’ and thirdly, ‘Are we loving our brother?’ The fourth question is about knowing the truth; this is addressed later in the chapter (2:21). John puts these questions to the one ‘who says’ they know the Lord, and abide in him, and abide in the light (2:4, 6, 9).

**1. Are we obeying Christ’s commands?**

Jesus told a parable about two sons whose father asked them to work in his vineyard. One son said he would go but did not, and the other said he would not go but did (Mat 21:28-32). The point of the parable is that actions speak louder than words; actions as in obedience to the will of the father. You cannot claim to be obeying your father if you refuse to do as he says, or if you go off and do your own thing, no matter how worthy and self-sacrificing that thing might be. If you love Christ you will obey his commands. Jesus said this (John 15:23), and John says the same thing, with the focus in verses 3 and 4 on knowing Christ rather than loving him.

John puts this matter both positively and negatively, just to make it clear that obedience is not optional. Many Christians think that obedience to God’s commands is not important. Their focus is on a mystical experience or vision from the Lord, on speaking in tongues, or on praise that stirs the emotions; they neglect this matter of obedience to Christ’s commands. Some might claim ignorance of Christ’s commands - ‘is that written in the Bible’ they say! But most claim to be living a more spiritual life, a life directed by the Holy Spirit rather than the word of God. This is exactly what the so-called Gnostics were teaching in the days of the apostle John.

The apostle’s answer is clear and unequivocal: “He who says, ‘I know Him’, and does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (2:4). ‘O, but what are these commandments’ some will ask. Let us start with the Ten Commandments that God wrote on tablets of stone. Jesus, whom they claim to know, never threw out these commandments: ‘I did not come to destroy [the Law] but to fulfil it’ he said (Mat 5:17). ‘But Jesus gave us new commandments’ they will say, ‘commandments about love’. Yes, he did, but he was summarising the Ten Commandments (Mat 22:37-40).

If we say we love Jesus we will obey his commands (John 15:23). If we say we know Jesus or love Jesus and pay no regard to his commands, we stand guilty as liars, and the truth is not in us (2:4). Are you serious about obeying the commands of Christ? If you are not and yet claim to be a believer you are a liar. You are lying to yourself, lying to other people and lying to the Lord whom you claim to love! You would not be the first liar in the church, of course. Paul, like John, writes of those who claim to know God but by their actions deny him; ‘they are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good’ (Titus 1:16 NIV).

‘But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him’ (2:4). ‘Perfected’ can be translated ‘made complete’. Does the ‘love of God’ in this verse refer to God’s love for us or our love for God? The RSV translated ‘love for God’ and Stott agreed, but the NIV translates ‘God’s love’. ‘Love of God’ points to God’s love, which is the basis of our love for God (4:10). The point is that disobedience raises a barrier between us and God. We will not truly know him or his love, and his love will not be made complete in us while ever we refuse to obey his commands. And by inference, we cannot be sure that ‘we are in Him’ (2:5).

**2. Are we living like Jesus?**

As children grow up they aspire to be like someone they know. Our two-year-old grandson loves garbage trucks; he would like to be a garbage truck driver! I think his parents will be pointing him to other ‘heroes’; best of all to Jesus. Many point their children towards sporting heroes, but children often find ‘heroes’ in their own pier group, or in social media searches. At some stage of life most children finds ‘heroes’ in their parents or grandparents. This is natural and good, provided the life of their mum and dad is worth emulating. A huge problem in our society is that there are so few men or women whose life is worth emulating. Children get let down again and again by their heroes or stars. Please tell your children that Jesus will never let them down.

Back to John and his challenge to ‘little children’ in the church (2:1). When John speaks to ‘children’ he is speaking to people of all ages. Can anyone say they are too old for church! If young people are saying this they are obviously not listening to what they are being taught from the Bible. When we have Sunday School and Bible classes for people from seven to seventy and beyond, where is the age gap?

John writes to you whatever your age, saying, ‘Whoever claims to live in Him [Jesus] must walk as Jesus did’ (2:6 NIV). The life of Jesus is the more extensively and deeply documented than any public figure in history. We do not have much about his youth, of course, and what we have comes from just three years of his public life- but this was the extent of his life on earth. John himself admits that much more could have been written about Jesus but that what is written is sufficient for you to believe, and have life in his name (John 20:30,31). What has been written is sufficient for us to know the sort of life we must live if we want to please our Father in heaven. Jesus was committed above all things to doing the will of his Father.

The footsteps of Jesus are huge footsteps to follow, but John calls us to ‘walk just as he walked’ (2:6). You must move on from walking baby steps- assuming you are not still crawling! You must get serious about walking as Jesus walked. Have you ever seen a crawling baby say they do not want to walk? Have you ever seen a toddler say he does not want to run? Yet some Christians are happy to stay crawling. Others are up and running, but not on the path Jesus has set before us. If you think you are abiding in Christ while walking the path of your own choosing, you, dear friend, are deceiving yourself.

**3. Are you loving your brother?**

John introduces his third test of knowing or loving Jesus with some background to the commandment Jesus gave his disciples at the Last Supper. He refers to his readers as ‘beloved’, beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord (2:7). Jesus called his disciples ‘little children’ as he gave them a new commandment (John 13:33, 34). Reflecting on what Jesus said and did in the upper room, John says that this commandment is not new but old. It is a command they had heard ‘from the beginning’, the beginning of their new life in Christ (2:7, 3:11). The command to love your neighbour as yourself was there under the old covenant (Lev 19:18), but it was wonderfully brought to light in the life of Jesus Christ our Lord. Only in Jesus can we truly love our neighbour. Moreover, to claim we know Christ while hating our brother or sister is to deceive ourselves.

Jesus Christ is the light of the world. In this light we know what true love is, and we are called to live in love. Love is a matter of the heart and the will. If in our hearts we know the love of Jesus, this love will be reflected in our life. If we know how much God loved us in sending his only begotten Son to die in our place (Rom 5:8), we will love our brothers and sisters in Christ. Love is the mark of a person who knows Christ. Love is the mark of Christian fellowship. ‘By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’ (John 13:35). Is this the mark of the church to which you belong? Are you striving to make or maintain love as the mark of your life, and the life of your church?

Love is inherent in the light which Jesus is shining into your heart and your life. Peter writes to those born again of the Spirit of God saying, ‘love one another fervently with a pure heart’ (1Peter 1:22). If you are not walking in love your heart is not pure, and you are not walking in the light. If you say you are in the light while hating a brother or sister you are still in the dark (2:9). Hatred blinds us to the love of God in Jesus Christ. If you get caught up in hatred towards a fellow believer, including and especially your spouse, you will soon be out of here. If you are consumed by bitterness and hatred, if you cannot forgive a fellow believer as Jesus commands, you will not be able to pray. And if you cannot pray, you cannot praise the Lord or bear to listen to his word. As I said, you will be out of here!

John says that, ‘He who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness’ (2:11). You will not be able to join in the prayer and worship that we enjoy, and that you once enjoyed. You will be sitting at home grumbling and stumbling. You might be walking in even greater darkness as you join the world in feeding the lusts of the flesh, binge eating, binge shopping, binge drinking or gambling or whatever. Yes, hating your brother or sister is a serious matter in the eyes of the Lord.

What is most serious to the Lord is the shame that a loveless church brings to his holy name. This is the title my Bible gives to the church at Ephesus (Rev 2:1-7). The church is Christ’s church; hatred and division in the church brings shame to his holy name. ‘If love is lost in the church, the lost stay lost’. Let us love one another as the Lord commanded us, and not give in to bitterness and hatred. Let us not return to the darkness from which Christ in his great love delivered us.

**Knowing you are saved** Text: 1John 2:12-14

The apostle John does not hold back when it comes to condemning false teachers in the church. It seems he or his ‘little children’ were encountering men who claimed to be perfect, men saying ‘we have not sinned’ (1:10). He called such people liars. If these people were Gnostics, they were focussing on ‘special knowledge’ and disregarding sins of the flesh or the body. In this context he sets out four tests which can be applied to such people, or to anyone who claims to know the Lord. Again, he describes as liars any who say, ‘I know Him’, while disregarding the holy commandments (2:4). If anyone hates a fellow believer they also fail the test of being saved, of abiding in Christ and walking in the light.

You might have felt somewhat intimidated hearing these tests and applying them to your own life- although you are back here again this week! You might have been discouraged as you examined your own life. You might have started doubting you own salvation. Some years ago I was told that no one preaches on the topic of doubt in the life of a believer. Is this because no one has doubts about their faith, or is it they think it is wrong to have doubts? We all have doubts at times; we all question our faith in Jesus Christ. But we must not live in a state of doubt. Doubt is destructive: ‘Let him ask in faith with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind’ (James 1:6).

John wants us to be joyful believers not doubters (1:4). If you are a doubter, then listen to what the apostle John teaches us today. If you have no doubts, go back and listen to what John has written thus far in this chapter, and then listen to what he has to say here in verses 12-14. John Stott writes of these verses, ‘His [John’s] purpose in writing is as much to confirm the right assurance of the genuine Christian, as to rob the counterfeit of his false assurance’.

Verses 12-14 stand out in our Bible because they are in poetry rather than prose. We find a series of six sentences, each beginning with ‘I write’ or ‘I have written’; we do not know why he changes tense in this way, but it makes little apparent difference. We have a staccato effect, and the repetition adds emphasis to the assurances he gives. Who are the three groups of people John refers to, each being addressed twice? The first is ‘little children’, the second ‘fathers’, and the third ‘young men’; note that ‘little children’ is a different Greek word the second time. Are these different groups in the church based on physical age, or groups based on spiritual maturity? Many opt for the second explanation. But John has just spoken of the whole church as ‘little children’ (2:1), so only the second two groups are thought to refer to different stages of spiritual maturity. However, attempts to align the assurances given with each grouping make for strained exegesis. You will note that both assurances given to fathers are the same; ‘You have known Him who is from the beginning’ (2:13, 14). Are fathers no longer concerned with sins forgiven? Who is the ‘Him’ referred to in this assurance anyway - another point on which scholars differ!

Leon Morris says it is best to regard the divisions as a stylish device adding emphasis because, ‘all the qualities John mentions ought to be found in all believers’. He quotes the liberal scholar, C.H. Dodd who wrote, ‘All Christians are (by grace, not nature) children of innocence and dependence on the heavenly Father, young men in strength and fathers in experience’. For this reason we will deal with the assurances given, rather than do what most preachers do and deal with each group separately. The assurances given by John are: sins forgiven, saving knowledge of Christ, secure in knowing the Father, strong in the Lord and through his word, and victory over Satan.

**1. Sins forgiven**

Our two-year-old grandsons have learnt to say, ‘I need it’ all the time. After some years their words might change but the intent of the heart may remain the same- ‘I need it’. What is your greatest need? Have you heard the saying, ‘Man’s greatest need is to know what is his greatest need!’ Our greatest need is salvation, salvation from death. We must know that death comes to us because of sin. We must know that sin cuts us off from knowing God. Our greatest need is forgiveness of sin, and that is exactly what we hear preached in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In opening the Scriptures to his disciples, Jesus himself spoke of his own death and resurrection saying that, ‘repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name’ (Luke 24:47). Whenever and wherever the apostles preached, they preached repentance and forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38, 3:19, 10:43, and 13:38).

If our sins are forgiven, as they are when we confess our sins and believe in Jesus Christ (1:7, 9), we are saved from death, having received new life in Christ. We have crossed from death to life (John 5:24). We are declared not guilty and justified in the eyes of God. Justification or salvation is a judicial act of God. It is not a process. It is not something you earn through good works. If you think your good works are contributing towards your salvation you will have lots of doubts. You will die not knowing if you are going to heaven or hell. John tells us our sins are forgiven, fully and finally forgiven, ‘for His name’s sake’ or in the name of Jesus Christ (2:12).

Jesus is the ‘propitiation for our sins’; he took the punishment that was ours, the wrath of God upon our sin (2:2). Jesus is our ‘Advocate with the Father’ (2:1). He pleads on our behalf on the basis of his own sacrifice, his own blood, and his plea is accepted by the Father. This is what we mean when we say, ‘for his name’s sake’ or ‘in his name’ (2:12, John 20:31). ‘There is no other name under heaven given among men, by which we must be saved’ (Acts 4:12). Only the blood of Jesus Christ can cleanse you from your sin, and only by believing in him can you avail of this cleansing. Moreover, it is the Lord himself who quickens your dead heart, giving you faith to believe (Eph 2:5).

Forgiveness of sin in the name of Jesus Christ is a fundamental truth of the gospel. This truth is most appropriate to ‘little children’ or new believers but is certainly not to be forgotten as we mature in the faith. Stott’s comment that the ‘first flush of ecstasy in receiving forgiveness and fellowship with the Father was an experience long ago’ for the ‘fathers’ is concerning. Such ecstasy or joy should be with us no matter how mature we are in the faith (cf.1:4, John 15:11). In any case, we have concluded that the term ‘little children’ includes all believers (cf.2:1).

**2. Saving knowledge of Christ**

What does it mean to know Christ? What is a saving knowledge of Christ? John writes to ‘fathers’ saying, ‘You have known Him who is from the beginning’ (2:13, 14). Knowing Christ means knowing he died on the cross bearing your sins, as well as knowing he lives in your heart through the Spirit given to all believers (Rom 8:16). John writes, ‘You have known Him’ in the perfect tense, meaning a completed action which continues into the present. You have known the eternal Son of God, the Son who was with God in the beginning (1:1). Some commentators say that John is referring to the Father who is from the beginning but the context points to the Son, to Jesus Christ our Lord.

John is most insistent that Jesus, as the Son of God, is co-eternal, as well as co-equal, with the Father. ‘He was in the beginning with God’ and ‘the word was God’ (John 1:1, 2). Believing otherwise is believing a lie (2:23). Whoever claims to be in fellowship with God but denies the divinity or the humanity of Jesus is a liar (2:22). John preached this truth about Jesus because it is what he saw and heard in Jesus. The Jews would not accept the divinity of Jesus, but Jesus said, ‘All should honour the Son just as they honour the Father’ (John 5:23) and, ‘I and my Father are one’ (John 10:30).

**3. Secure in knowing the Father**

Those who say that ‘Him who is from the beginning’ is God the Father rather than the Son must see the assurance, ‘because you have known the Father’ as essentially the same assurance (2:13a, c), even though one is spoken to ‘fathers’ and the other to ‘children’- this is of no consequence if we understand that John is referring to all believers. I am calling this assurance the security of knowing God the Father.

No matter how old or how mature you are as a believer you are always a child of God. You have been adopted into the family of God, standing beside his only begotten Son, Jesus. This is a familial rather than forensic or judicial picture. In our sin we were enemies of God, but also orphans -apart from having the devil as our father (John 8:44). In Christ we were brought near to God (Eph 2:13). God became our Father. In the Spirit of adoption we cry out, ‘Abba, Father’ (Rom 8:15). Jesus tells us to pray to ‘our Father in heaven’ (Mat 6:9). Children pray this prayer, as do young men and fathers. Every believer will know God as their Father.

Knowing we are adopted into the family of God is wonderfully reassuring for us as believers. Many orphans, abandoned, or neglected children, are placed into foster care. Most of them receive lots of love and good things but they can be removed from their foster home at any time. They never feel secure because they have no security as children in a foster home. If they are legally adopted however, they have absolute security in their adopted home. They know that no one can come and take them away. Do you have the assurance of an adopted child when it comes to being a child of God? Have you ‘known the Father’ in this way? John says you can and indeed you must if you call yourself a believer. You must know Jesus Christ as you Saviour and Lord. You must know God as your Father in heaven. It is all by grace through faith. All the assurance we need we have in knowing the almighty, everlasting God as our Saviour and our Father.

**4. Strong in the Lord**

The children are given assurance based on the forgiveness of sin and knowing the Father. The fathers are given assurance based on knowing Jesus Christ. The young men are given more words of assurance than either the children or the fathers, possibly because they are the last to be assured; and there may be some anticipation for what follows. This assurance is seen by some as being appropriate to the flush of youthful vigour in new believers. This youthful vigour, however, may come at any physical age, depending on when you believe. Moreover, it is vigour we seek to maintain; there is no retirement age for believers!

Young men are strong, not because of youth, physical prowess, or anything in themselves. They are strong because, ‘The word of God abides in you’ (2:14). Our NKJV indicates ‘word’ to be the written word of God rather than the living Word. Even so, the written word does not abide in the heart without the living Word first abiding in the heart. God’s written word will not abide in our heart if we do not believe in Jesus (John 5:38). When we love Jesus, we will love the Bible. When we have Jesus abiding in our heart and know the word of God, we are strong, and indeed, invincible. We can stand against the wiles of the devil (Eph 6:11); we can resist the devil and he will flee from us (James 4:7). It is not physical strength, not academic strength, not worldly wisdom, but spiritual strength and knowledge of God we must have to engage Satan (2Cor 10:3-5). We will all be attacked by Satan from the day we are born again until the day we die.

**5. Victory over Satan**

Young men are twice told by way of assurance, ‘You have overcome the wicked one’ (2:13, 14). Unlike many Christians, John was not oblivious to the existence and activity of the devil. Jesus was tempted by the devil or Satan in the wilderness. Jesus told his disciples to pray, ‘Deliver us from the evil one’ (Mat 6:13). Jesus’ death and resurrection marked his victory over sin and death, and over Satan. Jesus the Messiah crushed Satan under his feet, and will soon crush him under your feet (Gen 3:15, Rom 16:20).

In the victory of Jesus, we have victory over sin, over death, over the evil one, and over the world. Jesus said, ‘Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33). John writes in the perfect tense telling us we have overcome the wicked one. The war is real, but the victory is certain. We are engaged in a spiritual battle but are assured of the outcome if we abide in the living Word and treasure the written word of God in our hearts each and every day.

**Love God not the world** Text: 1John 2:15-17

A bumper sticker I once saw epitomises the spirit of the world in which we live: it read, ‘Lust not love’. Not many are so frank about their way of life; they prefer to say ‘passion’ rather than ‘lust’. People are passionate about their football, their food, their job, or passionate about the environment. These are the gods of our age, and people are passionate about their gods. Some worship these gods with their whole being. Just as love is central to our worship of God, lust is central to their worship of things created by God. The love we see in Jesus freely gives, while the lust seen in the world satisfies self.

The apostle John expands on the bumper sticker as he contrasts love and lust, or more specifically, love for God and lust for the things of the world- he expands three words into three verses! John brings us to a fundamental truth, not of the gospel itself but of living as a child of God in this world. ‘If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, old things have passed away; behold all things have become new’ (2Cor 5:17). As a born-again believer you are a new person, but you are still living in this old world, this world of sin and death, this world ruled by Satan. When Jesus prays for you he does not pray that you be taken out of this world but that the Lord will keep you from the evil one because you are not of this world (John 17:15,16). He has put you in this world for a purpose, namely to love him and glorify his name, not to love the world and glorify your name. We are in the world but not of the world. As the old hymn says, ‘This world is not my home, I’m just a pass’in through’.

John is writing to a church into which false teachers were coming, teachers saying they were not sinners, and that keeping the commands was not important. They were dualists, people separating mind and body. They could indulge the flesh without affecting their minds because it was ‘special knowledge’ that was important to salvation; they could have a pure mind while giving their body over to moral impurity. Peter similarly warns of false teachers ‘having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin’ (2Peter 2:14). Corrupted doctrine leads to corrupted behaviour. It happened in Jeremiah’s day, it happened in Jesus’ day, and it still happens today.

John gave the church four tests which they could use with false teachers. They could be used for self-examination also: do you keep Christ’s commands, do you live a Christ-like life, do you love your brother, and do you believe Jesus is both human and divine? Lest he discourage his ‘little children’, John paused to give assurances of forgiveness of sin, of abiding in Christ, and of having overcome the evil one. Yes, the evil one or Satan is ‘roaming around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour’ (1Peter 5:8). The ‘father of lies’ is out to trip us up with all manner of trials and temptations: remember Job; remember Jesus. The world, the flesh, and the devil, all mentioned in verse 14-17, are opposed to our walking in the light with Jesus our Saviour and Lord.

The Greek word ‘*kosmos*’ is translated ‘world’, but it can mean different things depending on the context. Here in these verses ‘the world’ refers to the cultures and systems men have devised, the world of people loving ‘the things of the world’. It is the ‘Babylon’ of the book of Revelation. The world is ruled by Satan. The world rejected Jesus and it continues to reject him. Do not be surprised that the world hates you (John 15:18). The world prefers darkness to light ‘because their deeds are evil’ (John 3:19). The things of this world appeal to the sinful nature, so we must be watching and praying because the flesh is weak.

John uses the word ‘world’ six times in these three verses, so it is difficult to miss his point: ‘do not love the world’ (2:15). You might ask how it is that, ‘God so loved the world…’ in John 3:16, but now tells us not to love the world. When God loves the world it is love for sinful human beings not the physical world that he made, or the cultures and systems devised by men. He was not condoning the sin of sinners or associating with them in sin. We are in the world to share the truth of the gospel, not to share with people in their sin.

In his love for the world God sent his Son to die for the sins of the world (2:2), so we could be saved from sin. When we believe in Jesus we will turn away from the things of the world and live in a way that pleases God. We cannot love God and love the world at the same time. This is the first reason John gives for not loving the world. The second is that the world is passing away.

**1. Which will it be- God or the world?**

In his sermon on the mount, Jesus said that just as we cannot serve two masters, so we cannot serve God and mammon (Mat 6:24)? He could have said, just as a husband cannot love two women, or a wife two men, at the same time. Love, true love, is jealous and exclusive. A husband who is not jealous for his wife is not loving her as he should. God is a jealous God. He will not have us loving another god. This is the basis of the first commandment: ‘You shall have no other gods before me’ (Exod 20:5).

John commands us, ‘Do not love the world or the things in the world’ (2:15). If you start loving the world and getting caught up in its focus on mammon or money, its focus on possessions, position and power, you have ceased loving God as you must. The church at Ephesus had lost its first love; it had fallen and needed to repent (Rev 2:4, 5). What was this first love? Was it love for Christ or love for one another? It doesn’t really matter because if we lose our love for Christ we will lose our love for one another, and if we lose our love for one another we have lost our love for Christ. The church at Ephesus was still working hard for the Lord and doing lots of good, but in losing its first love it would soon face divine judgment- ‘unless you repent’ (Rev 2:5). God will not tolerate his people giving their love to another. Sure, God made this physical world but we are not to love what God has made; we are to love God himself (Rom 1:25). Many of the things we love in this world actually come out of factories in China! They are man-made things, electronic gadgets, cars, boats and houses, or maybe an icon of some sort sitting on the shelf.

The world, and the things in this world, became alternate gods when Adam and Eve sinned. Eve lusted after the fruit of the tree that God told Adam not to eat. The devil tempted her and she gave way to this lust of the flesh and lust of her eyes, and indeed the pride of life, there in that very first sin. She ‘saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise’ (Gen 3:6). John makes these same points when he lists ‘all that is in the world’ (2:16).

Love for the world shows up in ‘the lust of the flesh’, or as the NIV translates, ‘the cravings of sinful man’ (2:16). The word ‘lust’ is stronger than ‘cravings’ or ‘desires’, and it pairs with the next ‘lust’ ‘the lust of the eyes’. The new creation that we become when we believe refers to the heart or renewed mind; we are not given a new body or new flesh until the resurrection. The flesh is still weak, and through this weak flesh we are tempted. Jesus was tempted when he was hungry. Not many of us go hungry but poor people may be tempted to steal because of hunger (Prov 30:9). When we are weary we are open to temptation. When we are sick we are open to temptation. We may not call it lust, but the desire for good health can eclipse our love for God. Certainly the desire for physical beauty that drives us to the gym or the beauty parlour can arise from the lust of the flesh.

The lust that drives men to massage parlours or to commit adultery is the lust of the flesh. Psychologists who follow Freud’s theories would be horrified at the Bible’s use of the word ‘lust’. They tell us that sex outside marriage is a natural way of satisfying the sex drive. For those still controlled by their sinful nature this may be true, but not for men and women who have been delivered from sin, and in Christ have been given victory over the lusts of the flesh. ‘Make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil its lusts’ writes Paul (Rom 13:14).

The second ‘lust’ is ‘the lust of the eyes’ (2:16). I was going to reference King David under the lust of the flesh but his adultery began with the lust of the eyes. From the roof of his palace, David ‘saw a woman bathing, and the woman was beautiful to behold’ (2Sam 11:2). Men young and old, men from all walks of life, lust more than David when their eyes start viewing pornography. Not all go out and commit adultery like David, but this lust of the eyes leads to the destruction of their souls. Such lust ‘is not of the Father but of the world’ (2:16). We must take care in what our eyes take in, remembering the words of Jesus: ‘If your eye causes you to sin pluck it out’ (Mat 5:29).

Lust of the eyes extends to many other things. Coveting anything that belongs to another is sin. Achan was judged for coveting gold and Babylonian garments (Josh 7:21). Lusting after any material thing is sin. It is not wrong to have possessions but it is wrong to love or treasure such things. Jesus tells us to lay up our treasure in heaven not on earth because, ‘where your treasure is there your heart will be also’ (Mat 6:21). Moreover, treasures on earth can easily be destroyed in a fire or a flood, or in a car crash, or they can be stolen. Do keep a watch over your eyes and don’t allow them to lust after the things of this world.

The third and final ‘lust’ is called ‘the pride of life’ (2:16). This is most insidious because it is not about the five senses or the flesh, but about the heart. Pride leads to boasting, boasting in what we have or who we are. Some boast in their riches, others in their family heritage, their education or their job. Remember the politician who protested to the waiter, ‘Don’t you know who I am!’ It is said of some that, ‘He is a self-made man and he worships his creator’. The parable of the rich fool epitomises such a man (Luke 12:16-21).

‘We must reject all boasting, lest the bricks of our vanity crumble down upon us. We cannot let a hint of the pride of life creep into the church’. Children of God try to make their Father proud of them; they do not proudly take glory to themselves. God resists the proud but give grace to the humble’ (James 4:6). You cannot lift yourself up by your boot laces; only God can lift you up. In Jesus Christ he has lifted us up and made us sit with Him in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6).

**2. World is passing away**

What happened to the rich fool and his overflowing barns? Did he enjoy a life of eating, drinking and being merry? (Luke 12:19). God called him a fool because he was dead the next day. The Pharaohs tried to take all their riches with them when they died but these riches are still in the pyramids- unless already looted! ‘How foolish’ you say. But many are yet to hear and heed the words of Jesus, ‘What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul’ (Mat 16:26). You cannot take your riches with you when you die (Ps 49:17). The missionary martyr, Jim Elliot, got it right when he said, ‘He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose’. Missionary friends of mine often said, ‘Only one life and it is soon past, only what’s done for Christ will last’.

Jesus said, ‘Heaven and earth are passing away’ (Mat 24:35). Peter reminds us of this truth (2Peter 3:10). In a context similar to that of John, Paul writes, ‘the present form of this world is passing away’ (1Cor 7:31). John reminds us that the world which sinful men and women are lusting after is passing away (2:17). Soon it will be no more. What then of your riches, your possessions, and your pleasures? Let the ungodly pursue what is ephemeral; you must pursue what is eternal. Do not envy the wicked; tell them what you have learned today. It is not the rich and famous who will abide forever but you who do the will of God (2:17), you who are abiding in Christ, the eternal Son of God.

**Antichrists** Text: 1John 2:18-27

In the church to which the apostle John was writing this letter, false teachers were undermining the gospel that was taught by John and the other apostles. They were undermining what we might call ‘orthodox theology’. Peter wrote with the same concern for the church, namely false teachers. The NT church was not even fifty years old when Peter wrote, and only a couple of decades older when John wrote. False teachers entered the church early on, and have continued to plague the church down through the ages.

Martin Luther faced a situation in which virtually the whole church had succumbed to false teaching. In our generation the situation is almost as bad, with liberal theology undermining orthodox theology or the true gospel in many churches. We have also seen people leave the church, to set up their own churches based upon false teaching, groups like the Jehovah Witnesses and the Mormons.

John initially told his readers he was writing to them that their joy may be full (1:4). Now he tells them he is also writing out of concern that false teachers might be deceiving them and leading them astray (2:26). He was not concerned that they did not know the truth but that they might depart from this truth (2:21). John gave the church tests by which false teachers in the church could be identified. If such teachers were identified they were to be removed, according to procedures set in place by Jesus (Mat 18:15-20) and the apostles (1Cor 6:9)- Jesus was referring to any sin when he spoke of bringing the matter before the church, and Paul was speaking of refusing fellowship with an immoral brother, but the principle is the same. John, like Paul, speaks of refusing fellowship with false teachers (2John v10, Rom 16:17, 2Thess 3:6,14). We should not welcome door-knocking deceivers but should denounce them as antichrists.

John gave the church two tests earlier in this chapter. Those who refuse to obey Christ’s commands are liars and not true Christians. Those who do not love a brother or sister in Christ are similarly lying if they say they love God (2:11, 4:20). In this passage John says that anyone who denies that Jesus is the Christ is also a liar, and in fact an antichrist. ‘Antichrists’ is our sermon title, and our first subheading. Other subheadings will be, ‘anointing’ and, ‘abiding’.

**1. Antichrists**

When the OT prophets spoke of the day of the Lord being near, they were speaking of the day when the Lord would come to judge the world in righteousness (Joel 1:15, 2:31, Obadiah v15). The coming of Jesus into this world marked the beginning of the end; his return will be the day of the Lord, the final judgment. The NT refers to the period between the resurrection and the return of Jesus as the last days. When John writes, ‘little children, it is the last hour’ he is referring to the return of Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven (Mat 24:30). At this time Jesus will judge the wicked and save the righteous as he establishes his kingdom in it fullness.

It was almost two thousand years ago when John wrote, ‘it is the last hour’. Does that surprise you? Does this worry you? Do you find it hard to believe that we are still in the last hour? The prophet Joel wrote about eight hundred years before his words, ‘in the last days’ were, according to the apostle Peter, fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2:17). John was writing to a church into which antichrists had come, telling them that by this ‘we know it is the last hour’ (2:18). It seems that teaching about the antichrist was part of apostolic teaching because these people had heard about antichrist coming (2:18). Only John writes of antichrist, although Paul writes about the ‘man of lawlessness’, who seems to be the same individual (2Thess 2:3, 8), and John later writes of the beast coming out of the sea in Revelation 13.

Although not Satan himself, this man of lawlessness is a powerful, lying and blaspheming beast, who exalts himself against God just like Satan. He will appear towards the end of the last days. But ‘even now’, as in two thousand years ago, John says that antichrists have come. Antichrists are ‘anti’, as in against, Christ; they oppose Christ and everything about Christ. They may also be men who claim to be the Christ. They oppose truth, they oppose love, and they oppose life. Looking around, you can see such antichrist attitudes and actions in the world today. Who is teaching these things? Yes, we have antichrists in the world today. Note however, that John says ‘they went out from us’. He uses this term to refer to false teachers coming from within the church.

The Reformers saw the pope in Rome, who calls himself the vicar of Christ, as an antichrist (Westminster Confession of Faith chapter XXV). The pope vigorously opposed the truth that men like Luther sought to teach in the church. We have mentioned huge religious organisations that call themselves Christian while denying the doctrine of the Trinity. John would call their leaders antichrists.

Before we look further at this theological test of orthodoxy, notice what John teaches about the church in verse 19, albeit indirectly. These antichrists ‘went out from us’, from the church. They were once part of the visible church, the church that exists in this world, but not members of the invisible church, the assembly of true Christians. If they had been believers they wouldn’t have left but ‘would have continued with us’ (2:19). Their going astray shows they were never really true believers; they were only nominal ‘hanger-oners’ as we say. They were not believers who lost their faith; they were never true believers.

This, dear friends, is still the picture of the church. Some people can profess faith in Jesus and be actively involved in the church for a long time, but it is how they end that is critical. It is hard to know why they joined the church, or why they stayed in for so long, but their end reveals that they were not believers. Lots of runners join the City to Surf race in our city, but few finish. Those who fail to finish often have no intention of finishing; they join the race because of friends, or because of a free T-shirt or cap.

John has already told about men who refuse to obey the commandments (2:4). If they were Gnostics, they claimed to have a special, higher knowledge by which they lived, knowledge that released them from the moral teaching of the Bible. Some call this a moral test. Another test given by John is a doctrinal test or a test of beliefs. The doctrine in question is that of the Holy Trinity, and particularly the person of Christ. The apostle Peter refers to Jesus as the rejected stone and the stone of stumbling. The Jews stumbled over Jesus, refusing to accept his divinity. People in the church stumble over Jesus; some refuse to accept his divinity, others his humanity; the latter was the false teaching that John had to counter.

John began his letter with a clear declaration of the humanity of Jesus: he saw, he heard and he touched Jesus. With worldly, rather than biblical thinking, the Gnostics denied the incarnation and the death of Jesus. In chapter 4, John again refers to this heresy: ‘every spirit that does not confess that Jesus has come in the flesh is not of God. This is the spirit of the antichrist’ (4:3). To deny either the divinity or the humanity of Jesus is to deny Jesus as Messiah or Christ (2:22). Messiah means ‘anointed one’, anointed of God.

Similarly, to deny Jesus as the Son is also serious heresy because such denials mean one does not have the Father or the Son (2:23). If someone claims to worship God while rejecting the full humanity or divinity of Jesus they are deceiving themselves, and lying to those who listen to them. And they are deceiving themselves if they think they are saved because if Jesus is not fully man he cannot represent us on the cross, and if he is not fully God he carried his own sin to cross, not ours. Did not God himself say to Jesus ‘You are my beloved Son’ (Luke 3:22).

You may know people who have been deceived by antichrists, and they may be trying to deceive you. If anyone does not accept that Jesus is fully human and fully divine they do not know Jesus and hence do not know the Father. You must cling to the truth of the Trinity as set forth in the Scriptures, and in the Shorter Catechism where we learn: ‘There are three persons in the Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory’.

**2. Anointing**

While condemning false teachers, John assures his ‘little children’ that they are secure because they have an anointing from the Holy One (2:20). This security comes from knowing the truth. If they hold to this truth they will not be deceived by false teachers or antichrists. The anointing is the anointing of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. The Spirit is called ‘the Spirit of truth’, who ‘will guide you into all truth’ (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit is given to all who believe, when they believe (Rom 8:16). This anointing is related to the term Messiah or Christ which means ‘anointed one’. Christ or ‘*Christos*’ in Greek means ‘anointed one’, while the word anointed is ‘*chrisma’.* ‘Christians abide in the Anointed One by means of their anointing’.

The Spirit leads us into truth, while Satan and his agents try to lead us into lies. Jesus calls himself the truth, ‘the way, the truth, and the life’, but the ruler of this world and the father of lies does not like truth. Antichrists do not like the truth. They do their best to confuse and confound the clear teaching of the Bible. Some do this with scholarly precision, others with less-subtle ridicule and bully tactics.

The Holy Spirit does not reveal new truth but leads us into the truth already revealed (John 14:26, 16:13). The Spirit is sent by Jesus; in fact, John speaks of the Father and the Son living within us (John 14:23). This is our anointing. Antichrists know nothing of this anointing. They speak of the Spirit revealing new things to them, even things contrary to the revealed word of God.

Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, an incident that in itself shows his humanity, but he rejected these temptations saying, ‘It is written’. If people tell you the Spirit has told them something new and interesting, be sure to tell them what is written in the Bible about no new revelations.

**3. Abide**

The Spirit reminds us of what Jesus said, and of all that is written in the Scriptures. Jesus is the truth. God’s word is the truth. John goes on to speak of abiding in Christ, or more precisely, of letting the anointing of the Spirit abide in us, and of letting what we have heard abide in us (2:24,27). He makes a somewhat surprising statement in telling us that we do not need anyone to teach us (2:27). We must read this in the context, which is that John is actually teaching them in this letter.

Teachers are important but we dare not follow any teacher blindly. Some Christians follow a preacher all over the country, taking in every word that he preaches. This can be dangerous. This is a feature of the antichrists who claim to be chosen leaders, even a spokesman for the Almighty. Remember that your teachers rely on the same source of truth as you do- if they are teachers of the truth. They also share the same anointing of the Spirit as you do. The true church does not have a man claiming to speak *ex cathedra.* The true church will never elevate the words of a man above the word of God.

Along with abiding in your anointing, John refers to abiding in the gospel or in ‘that which you have heard from the beginning’ (2:24). Every believer has heard the apostolic gospel and believed this truth. This gospel has not changed, and never will change. Truth does not change. We must hold to the truth as it has been passed down to us in the Scriptures and by faithful preachers of God’s word. First generation Christians usually cling to the truth of the gospel as they heard it. They throw out their old gods and old ways to embrace the new way of life in Jesus Christ.

New believers take hold of the promise of eternal life in Jesus Christ as set forth in the gospel, and cling to it (2:25). It is later generations that start twisting the words of the Bible to make them fit with their own thinking or ways, the ways of the world (cf.2:15-17). False teachers or antichrists know nothing about eternal life. Ask anyone about eternal life, even a church goer, and if their faces glaze over you know they are not born again. Observe the way in which a person faces death and you will know if they truly believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. Do you know, and understand, the promise of eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord?

**When Christ appears** Text: 1John 2:28-3:3

When our daughter visited Spain she went prepared. She learned some Spanish, she went to Spanish restaurants, and she read up on the history and culture of this country. She wanted to fit in by knowing the place, and its people. When we went to live in India, we spent time learning the language and attending orientation courses. A friend had actually visited the place where were going to live; he had one, and only one photo to show us! If you are going to heaven, I trust you are preparing yourself for life in heaven. We do not have even one photo of the place, but we do have one person who has been there and who tells us about heaven.

Heaven is a wonderful place, a place more beautiful than any place on this earth. The presence of one particular person, our Lord Jesus Christ, makes it more beautiful that we can imagine. Jesus says to you who believe in him, ‘I go and prepare a place for you… that where I am, there you may be also’ (John 14:3). If you know Jesus today, you will be looking forward to seeing him in heaven. Praying, ‘Your kingdom come’ means something to those who know Christ.

The apostle John preached the same gospel as the apostle Paul, but he used different expressions- which helps in our understanding of the gospel. John writes of ‘abiding in Christ’ or ‘remaining in Christ’, where Paul simply writes of being ‘in Christ’. In the upper room Jesus told his disciples, ‘Abide in me and I in you’ (John 15:4), likening this abiding to being a branch on a vine. John must have listened carefully because he uses the same terminology here in the verses before us -Paul was not there of course. John has already spoken of the Spirit and the word ‘you heard’ abiding in us. With this enabling, we will ‘abide in Him’ [Jesus], and ‘walk just as he walked’ (2:28, 6).

Some regard these verses as opening up a new section of this letter, ‘a second application of the tests’, while others see them as a parenthesis. I regard them as a pause in which John encourages his ‘little children’, before returning to explain further the tests they can apply to those trying to deceive them. The picture of false teachers in the church remains in the background.

John begins, ‘And now, little children’; Boice prefers to translate, ‘Since this is so’ because John is continuing with this word ‘abide’. But he moves to another truth of the gospel, namely the appearing of Jesus. He pauses to glance into the future because this is an essential element of the gospel he preached. Jesus spoke about his return and so did the apostles. Sadly, this truth is not given prominence by many preachers today. Many preach with both eyes focussed on this world when we should have one eye on this world and one on the world to come, or an eye on the past and an eye on the future.

These verses reveal wonderful truths about the future. May we find blessing in them as we look firstly at, ‘Confidence at his coming’, secondly at, ‘Called children of God’ and thirdly, at ‘Changed into his likeness’.

**1. Confidence at his coming**

As believers we should be confident in our standing in the sight of God because we stand in Christ, the Son of God. We should be confident or bold to come before the throne of God in prayer (Heb 4:16). Confidence is not arrogance, nor is it boasting. Confidence is the quiet assurance we have when we abide in Christ. Our confidence is in Christ not ourselves. John writes of having confidence on the Day of Judgment (4:17). Jesus will come on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Mat 24:30). No one will be questioning the power or glory of Jesus on that day. Many will shrink with shame and fear when they stand before Christ in all his glory (2:28). But you who know and love Jesus as your Saviour and Lord will boldly stand in his presence, even as you are filled with awe and wonder.

Why is John telling his ‘little children’ about the coming of Jesus when he is writing to warn them about false teachers, and of tests they can apply to these deceivers? These tests focus on right living, as well as right doctrine, on orthopraxy, as well as orthodoxy. If anyone says they believe in Jesus let them show it in their life. When Jesus comes again, everything we have thought, said, and done, will be revealed. We will all have to give an account to him (2Cor 5:10, Heb 4:13). John, like the other apostles, wants us to live with this truth ever in our hearts and minds.

Moreover, John says to practice righteousness because Jesus is righteous (2:29). When we are born again of the Spirit of God, another term and truth that John learned from Jesus (John 3:7), the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us. This ‘positional’ righteousness is necessary if we are to enter into God’s holy presence. But it is also necessary that we demonstrate or ‘practice’ righteousness. Sanctification, or growing in righteousness, is just as important as justification. Practicing righteousness does not save us but when we are saved we will practice righteousness (2:29). In fact, we cannot practice righteousness until we are born again or saved by grace through faith (Heb 11:6). We practice righteousness by walking the way Jesus walked (2:6). In this way we know that we abide in him. In the same way we know those who do not belong to Christ. ‘By their fruits you shall know them’ said Jesus, when similarly warning his disciples of false prophets (Mat 7:16, 20).

**2. Called children of God**

The apostle Paul often broke into words of wonder and praise as he wrote his letters (eg. Rom 11:33-36). The apostle John does something similar here at the start of chapter 3- chapter divisions were not part of John’s original letter. ‘Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called the children of God!’ (3:1). I recall these words from a ‘Scripture in song’ chorus I learned many years ago. That the almighty and holy God of the universe should love me a sinner, is an astounding truth of the gospel, a truth that we shout from the rooftop. The word translated ‘manner’ means ‘of another country’, or from another planet. It is a love that is unheard of in our world. No man-made religion preaches the love of God like the Bible. Paul writes of God’s great love saying, ‘While we were still sinners, Christ died for us’ (Rom 5:8). John goes on to speak of knowing love because Christ laid down his life for us (3:16).

God ‘lavished on us’ his love in calling us his children (3:1 NIV). Here is the king of righteousness calling me, the king of sinners, his child- this is what Paul says (1Tim 1:15). Here is the Lord calling a rebel like me, his child. Writing of God’s love for Jerusalem, the prophet Ezekiel tells of how God ‘passed by you and saw you struggling in your own blood’ and said, ‘Live!’ He later saw this ‘reject’ grown into a beautiful woman and entered into a covenant of love, calling her mine (Ezekiel 16:6-10). John does not speak of the church as the bride of Christ but of the individual believers as children of God (3:1).

In India almost all adoptions are of girls because girls are not valued in that society. We had a new-born baby girl brought to our doorstep after she was found on a refuse heap. I know people who adopted a child rejected by its parents because of a disability. In his great love God adopted you who are rejected by this world. He has picked you up from the refuse heap of this world and made you his child, a child of the King. The baby girl brought to our door now lives in another country. She has never returned to the country of her birth because she is content and confident in the love of those who adopted her. ‘Our sonship is a gift, one that cannot be earned, achieved or rescinded’.

As children of God we no longer belong to this world. This world is no longer our home; heaven is our home. Our inheritance is no longer in this world; the Lord is our inheritance. Is this how you view your life? Is this how you are living, and how you will keep on living until Jesus returns? Do you understand that as a child of God ‘the world does not know you’, that this world will hate you and reject you (3:1)? It did not know Jesus; it hated Jesus and it will hate you (John 15:19). But remember this, that as a child of God you belong to the almighty creator and judge of all people, the sovereign Lord of the universe. This is the confidence you can have today, and especially on the day of Christ’s appearing.

**3. Changed into his likeness**

Reflecting on the coming appearing of Jesus, John assures those of us who are born again into the family of God that we will see Jesus, and that we will be changed into his likeness (3:2, Rom 8:18,29, Col 3:4). This is our sure and certain hope, a hope grounded in the promise of Jesus. People like to speculate beyond what is written here, and in other parts of the Bible, with regard to heaven. But here we see the apostle John admitting to things not yet revealed; ‘and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be’ (3:2). Nothing more has been revealed to us by God, although we do hear a lot of what men have dreamed or seen in ‘near-death experiences’.

We must keep our focus on the Lord Jesus, and on his appearing, without getting caught up in speculation and ‘prophecies’ about his return. Jesus did not know the day or the hour of his return. John did not know about how we will be changed, apart from what he tells us here. What he tells us is encouraging, which is why he tells us. What he tells us accords with what the apostle Paul tells us; some things he was not permitted to tell us (2Cor 12:4).

What we know, according to John, is that when Jesus is revealed ‘we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is’ (3:2). What is John telling us here? Firstly, he tells us that we will see the risen Jesus in his heavenly glory. John, like Peter, was an eyewitness to the majesty and glory of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. They were overcome by this revelation of Jesus’ glory. When Jesus returns in glory we also will be overcome with awe and wonder. But we will be changed in an instant (1Cor 15:52, Col 3:4). We will be like him, like Christ (3:2). We will put on a spiritual or heavenly body. We will put on immortality. We have eternal life in Jesus now; this life will be revealed in all its fullness when Jesus appears in glory. There will be no more death.

We must be changed in order to see Jesus as he is. On the mountain Jesus was changed but not the disciples. Moses and Elijah talked with Jesus but not the disciples (Mat 17:3). In heaven we will be changed so that ‘we shall be like Him’ (3:2). More than this we are not told; we would not understand anyway because we struggle to understand what we are told here. John is not telling us these wonderful truths to tickle our itching ears, as it were. He is telling us to encourage us in living ‘heavenly’ lives even as we live in this world.

Paul desired to depart and be with Christ, which is far better, but he knew that the Lord had work for him to do in this world (Phil 1:23, 24). As you and I await the appearing of Jesus we also have been given work to do. John’s focus is upon an inner work; work in our hearts must precede any outer works. He writes that, ‘everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure’ (3:3- ‘Him’ and ‘He’ refer to Christ). Without holiness no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14). We must strive for holiness in our lives as we live in this fallen world. We must not give into temptation or take on worldly ways.

Purity in verse 3 refers to moral purity. Paul puts it bluntly when he says that no sexually immoral person, including adulterers and homosexuals, will inherit the kingdom of God (1Cor 6:9, 10). Yes, he also includes idolaters, thieves, drunkards, greedy people, and extortioners in this ban. If we know the Lord and have this hope of seeing Christ and not be ashamed in his presence, we will purify ourselves from all ungodly thoughts, words and works. As God is holy, we also must be holy (1Peter 1:16). As Christ is righteous, we also must practice righteousness (2:29). May your home country be heaven and may your entry into heaven not come as a shock but as a smooth transition into glory.

**Sin** Text: 1John 3:4-10

‘If we would be loyal to his first coming and be ready for his second coming we must purify ourselves as he is pure. By so doing we shall give evidence of our birth of God’- so writes John Stott by way of linking verses 4-10 with the preceding verses. You may recall that those verses focussed on the future appearing of Christ as this truth affects how we live in this world. John spoke of having confidence at his coming or appearance (2:28). Such confidence comes not only from knowing we are saved by grace alone through faith alone, but from practicing righteousness, from purifying ourselves just as he, Jesus, is righteous and pure (3:3).

In the verses before us, the focus turns to the past appearing of Jesus, the time when he was ‘manifested to take away our sins’ (3:5, 8). The passage is packed with theological truths. John’s letter is very compact- maybe he was short of paper! At the same time he repeats things a lot, or puts matters both negatively and positively, just to make sure we have not missed what he says. What he writes is just as important for us today as it was for the first century church. You will notice that John has a lot to say about sin in this passage- hence our title. He contrasts sin and righteousness; he contrasts Christ, whom he now calls the Son of God, with the devil (3:8). He also continues speaking about the new birth, about being born of God (3:9).

Before we start to unpack these verses, and hopefully discover the truths they contain, we will try to discern some structure in the passage. We have seen the words ‘little children’ often mark a new section but this does not seem to be the case here. What we have is two verses, 4 and 8, that speak about committing sin. In the first he says, ‘sin is lawlessness’ and in the second, ‘he who sins is of the devil’. Our two main subheading are: firstly, ‘sinning is not compatible with being a child of God’ and secondly, ‘sinning is compatible with being a child of Satan’.

**1. Sinning not compatible with being a child of God**

I checked that the word ‘sin’ is still in the dictionary. It was, but my dictionary is rather old. We do not hear the word ‘sin’ on the streets, in the press, or even in preaching these days. I read of one church where the preacher, after a long time, mentioned sin in his sermon and half his congregation left. What we hear are euphemisms for sin; people ‘mess up’, ‘make a mistake’, ‘had a lapse of judgment’, or ‘were not really themselves’. Even if people admit to sin they think it is no big deal because, ‘everyone is doing it’, or because, ‘it is God’s job to forgive’.

Everything is relative to people of the world but this is not the case for the people of God. God is absolute and his commands are absolute; they are black and white, not grey. My dictionary defines sin as, ‘transgressing against divine law or morality, especially one consciously committed’. Not bad! Our Shorter Catechism defines sin as, ‘Any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God (SC Q 14). This definition includes sins of omission. There is also what we call original sin.

John defines sin as lawlessness (3:4). God gave Moses laws for his people to obey, including the Ten Commandments. But sin was around before Moses, and sin extends beyond the people of God to all people and every individual. Whenever you judge someone, and do the same things, you sin (Rom 2:3). John’s focus is upon the law of God. Moreover, lawlessness is not just breaking the law; it is a state of mind, a mind in rebellion again God. Have you noticed that as soon as you make a rule people are determined to break it. With some people it is better to tell them not to do what you want them to do. This is rebellion. This is lawlessness. This the nature of the sinful human heart. ‘O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me?’ exclaimed Paul the apostle (Rom 7:24).

The false teachers trying to deceive John’s ‘little children’ made no such confession. Like so many today, including many in the church, breaking God’s commands is no big deal. Some Gnostics regarded themselves as beyond sin; they thought special knowledge made them perfect. Others thought sin no longer mattered because the body no longer mattered. The first group were blind to sin, and the second indifferent to the seriousness of sin. Liberal theologians teach much the same things, as do many populist preachers of our day. Again, just listen to how often they mention sin in their preaching.

If sin is no big deal then why did Jesus have to die on the cross? Some are not sure that he did have to die! Some see the cross more as a political statement than a salvation imperative. What does the apostle John say? ‘You know that He was manifested to take away our sins’ (3:5). Since we are all born in sin, and we all commit sin, this is great news. Is it news that you have heard and that you know? When John says, ‘You know’ he means, ‘you have heard, understand and believe’.

In order for Jesus to take away our sin he had to be without sin (3:5). If Jesus was a sinner like us he would have died for his own sin; death comes to us because of our sin. On the cross, the sinless Son of God took our sin upon himself, suffered the penalty, namely death, so that we might be set free from this penalty. ‘God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him’ (2Cor 5:21). Because of Christ’s imputed righteousness we can enter into the presence of the holy God. In Christ we become the children of God; we are born again of the Spirit of God.

John goes beyond this act of justification and new birth, to the process of sanctification, of abiding in Christ and of practicing righteousness. ‘Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known him’ (3:6). And in the next verse, ‘He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous’ (3:7, cf.2:29). False teachers were trying to deceive believers regarding this truth. They mocked at sin and at ‘practicing righteousness’. ‘The cross is so crude’ they might have said, ‘we have moved beyond the idea of sacrifice for sin’; ‘we have special knowledge; we are super-Christians’.

But for John there was no dispensing with the cross of Jesus Christ. There was no moving away from abiding in Christ and of living a righteous life. God’s law has not changed and human nature has not changed. Sin is still sin, as defined by lawlessness. When we are born again we are given the Spirit of God. With the indwelling Spirit of Christ and the word of God, we can walk in the Spirit and not in sin; we can and we must. If we continue to sin it shows we are not born again and do not know Christ. To continue in sin, or to walk in sin, is not compatible with being a child of God. This is what ‘does not sin’ in verse 6 and 9 means. John cannot be saying in one breath, ‘If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves’ and in the next saying, ‘we do not sin’ or ‘we cannot sin’ and meaning it is no longer possible for a believer to sin (1:8, 3:6,9).

**2. Sinning is compatible with being a child of Satan**

‘He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning’ (3:8). The ESV translates, ‘Whoever makes a practice of sinning’ but the NIV gives the most literal translation, ‘He who does what is sin’. ‘Why drag the devil into this matter of sin’, you might ask; ‘It is bad enough talking to people about sin let alone talking about the devil’. But the devil appeared in the Garden of Eden to tempt Eve. The devil delights in sin and in tempting men, women and children to sin. Eve could have said no to the devil but her children, us, cannot say no, not without God’s help.

God’s help is based upon his Son defeating the devil, as he did in the cross and the resurrection, as foretold in Genesis 3:15. Jesus had no original sin by virtue of his virgin birth, and he committed no sin. He resisted the devil and did not sin. In his resurrection he defeated death, destroying him who has the power of death, that is the devil (3:8, Heb 2:14). John uses the word ‘loosed’ rather than ‘destroy’ here at the end of verse 8. ‘Loosed’ has the sense of freeing us from the clutches of the devil. John’s concern is for the children of God.

Sin originated with Satan. Satan rebelled against his creator in the beginning, obviously before the creation of Adam and Eve. John calls him ‘*diabolis’* meaning ‘slanderer’ or ‘accuser of the brethren’ (Rev 12:10). He is the father of lies, a liar and murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). Jesus told Jews who refused to believe him that they were children of the devil. Anyone who refuses to take sin seriously cannot be a child of God, but they can be a child of the devil. John deals in black and white, truth and lies, sin and righteousness, the Son of God and Satan- just like Jesus spoke of sheep and goats. You, dear friend, are either a child of God or a child of Satan. There is no third option. ‘He who does sin’, as in habitually sin, ‘is of the devil’ (3:8).

Jesus told Nicodemus, ‘You must be born again’ (John 3:7). He, like all of us, was born of a woman or born of the flesh. As such he was born in sin and a child of Satan (Ps 51:5). To be born again means to be born of the Spirit (John 3:8), or born of God (3:9). When the Spirit quickens our dead hearts, leading us to confess our sin and believe in Jesus, we become a new creation in Christ Jesus. Do you know what I am talking about? Do you know what it means to be born again? If John had asked the false teachers they wouldn’t have known what he was talking about. Some in the church today wouldn’t know what you were talking about if you asked them if they were born again. But you don’t have to ask them. According to John, you can see it from the life they lead: ‘Whoever has been born of God does not sin’ (3:9).

Being born in the flesh we inherit traits from our parents. Our life begins when a sperm unites with an ovum and we become a human being. John uses the same language in saying, ‘His seed remains in him’ (3:9- seed is ‘*sperm*’ in Greek). Here the word ‘seed’ means ‘the principal of life imparted by the Spirit of God’. It refers to the new nature implanted in us when we receive the Holy Spirit (2Peter 1:4). The new nature overrules the old nature that ruled in our old life of sin: ‘The old has gone, the new has come!’ (2Cor 5:17 NIV). This being the case, we ‘cannot sin’ or ‘cannot go on sinning’; the present infinitive of the verb signifies ‘he is not able to sin habitually’ (Stott).

Our new nature is sensitive to sin and hates sin. A man recently visited me and as he entered my house he used a couple of swear words. I must have shown some disgust because he stopped, even before I told him I was a preacher of the gospel! I am sure that as child of God you react in the same way when confronted with foul and blasphemous language. As a child of God we will habitually speak the truth, habitually love one another, habitually do good when we can, and habitually praise and worship God. Satan does not cease tempting us but it takes him a while to find a door of vulnerability if, in the power of the Spirit, we keep locking the door to the devil.

Our closing verse, verse 10, could well be included in the next section of this letter because it returns to one of the tests to be used on false teachers, namely, ‘does not love his brother’ (cf.2:10). John will go on to further explain this test. But this verse is also a summary of what John has just been teaching about being a child of God or a child of the devil. We could have taken from 2:28 to 3:10 as one section, calling it ‘John’s further explanation of the test of righteousness or obedience’ (cf. 2:4).

In closing, note again the word ‘whoever’. John insists that what he says about sin applies to everyone without exception. No matter how we try to deny sin, or how we try to dress it up, it remains as sin, and the penalty for sin remains. The only way to escape the penalty of sin is to confess it to God, who is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1:9). We must then keep filling our cleansed heart with truth from the word of God, and at the same time allow the Holy Spirit to keep filling our heart with love.

**Love seen in Jesus** Text: 1John 3:11-18

The letter of John is often seen as a letter about love, about God’s love for the world and for us. It is here that we find the words, ‘God is love’, and that God so loved us that he ‘sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins’ (4:8, 10). Do you know these verses? How many verses from this letter do you know off by heart? Do you know 1:9, 3:1, or 5:15? What about 3:16? You know John 3:16 but what about 1John 3:16?

The false teachers, like the Gnostics, or antichrists as John calls them, claimed to be children of God, just like the Pharisees that Jesus confronted. But, as Jesus told his disciples, ‘by their fruits you will know them’ (Mat 7:20). The Pharisees were legalists whereas the Gnostics were more antinomian. Neither held to the truth regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, and could be readily identified by their lack of love. If you do not understand the cross of Jesus you will not understand the love of Jesus or the love of God. Only in the death of Jesus do we see self-sacrificing love, and that towards one’s enemies. Sinful human beings are prone to hatred rather than love. Why? Because they are children of the devil. ‘What is hate’ is our first subheading, our second, ‘What is love?’ and our third, ‘We must love like Jesus’.

**1. What is hate?**

In the previous verses John told us that sin is lawlessness. He said that, ‘He who sins is of the devil’ (3:8). He concluded that children of the devil could be separated from children of God on the basis of practicing righteousness, specifically in loving a brother (3:10). John does not use the word ‘discrimination’ but this is what he is teaching. Laws against discrimination are increasing in our society, as are laws about hate-speech. Such laws become necessary when the laws of God are no obeyed. Followers of God do not show partiality and do not discriminate, except when it comes to the truth. Anyone who rejects the truth of the gospel, and the truth of the Trinity, is not welcomed into the fellowship of God’s people. We might add that a true child of God will treasure fellowship within the family of believers. True Christians do not seek fellowship with unbelievers while ignoring the fellowship of believers. You will know them by their fruits!

The gospel teaches us about sin and salvation. Sin is lawlessness; sin is breaking God’s holy law. God’s law is set out in the Ten Commandments, summarised by Jesus into two commandments: love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all you mind and with all your strength, and, love you neighbour as yourself. Love for one another is a command ‘that you heard from the beginning’ (3:11). ‘Love one another’ was taught by Jesus, and was taught at Pentecost. We don’t hear Peter preaching love for one another but we see it being practiced after Pentecost: ‘All who believed were together, and had all things in common’ (Acts 2:44).

The early church practiced love by sharing with anyone in need. Upon hearing the gospel and believing in Jesus, they spontaneously shared their possessions. Widows and orphans were provided for, along with others who had fallen on hard times. Many were attracted to this fellowship when they saw and experienced practical love (cf. John 13:35). Do you think our church attracts people in this way? Are you eager to see that it does?

What is the opposite of love? Hate! Hate is at the heart of all Satan’s work because hate fills his heart. When tempted by Satan, Eve sinned. Her heart, and that of her husband, lost the ability to love and gained the ability to hate. This corrupted, sinful nature was inherited by their children, as demonstrated when Cain murdered his brother Abel (3:12). Why did he kill his brother? Was it because Abel had done something wicked and deserved to die? No. He killed his brother because his brother was practicing righteousness (3:12). While Peter refers to various OT characters or events in his letters, John refers to just one, Cain.

Cain murdered Abel because his own works were evil (3:12). We read in Genesis 4 how they both brought a sacrifice to the Lord but only Abel’s sacrifice was accepted by the Lord. It seems Cain offering was not accompanied by faith; it was a work of evil (Heb 11:4, Jude v11). We should not be offering to God the ‘leftovers’ of our income, or our life. Nor should we be giving others what costs us nothing, according to the definition of love being taught here by John. Cain murdered his brother because he was doing what was righteous (3:12).

Jesus said that ‘If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first’ (John 15:18 NIV). Jesus was without sin and the world hated him. So, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, do not marvel if the world hates you (3:13). We see the hatred of the world, bitter hatred, being unleashed upon anyone in our society who declares what the Bible teaches about homosexuality. John says, ‘do not marvel’, do not be surprised. Many capitulate to the world, or at least compromise.

All this shows that we are living in the last days. We are seeing the increase of lies and of wickedness. I mentioned already laws about hate-speech. These laws have no concern for the truth. Even if something is true you can be prosecuted if someone takes offence. Man’s laws are not necessarily be based on truth, but God’s laws are. Man’s laws are relative, but God’s laws are absolute. Man’s laws keep changing, but God’s laws never change. John speaks of righteousness and sin, of hatred and love, not of little sins and big sins or of hatred that is serious or not serious. Indeed, God knows our hearts and he condemns our sinful thoughts.

‘Cain’, says John, ‘was of the wicked one’ or the devil (3:12). ‘The devil was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in truth’ (John 8:44), so his children will be murderers also. Hatred leads to murder. But not all children of the devil are murderers, you protest! Yet John, like Jesus, indicates that words and even looks can kill. ‘Whoever hates his brother is a murderer’ (3:15). Anyone who lives with anger and hatred in their heart cannot be abiding in Christ, and cannot have the gift of God, eternal life.

**2. What is love?**

How do you define love? The dictionary refers to ‘fondness or warm affection’. In books and movies, love is defined in terms of sexual passion. The Bible gives us a definition of love that is not found in the dictionary or in the media. In contrast to selfish love, the Bible tells us of self-sacrificing love, the love seen in Jesus Christ laying down his life for us. Can you comprehend this type of love? This is the love that John says we should be practicing if we are children of God. God is love and we must ‘love one another’ (3:11, 23, 4:7, 11, 12).

While hatred belongs to the devil, love belongs to Jesus. In Jesus we have the very definition of love. In Jesus we have the perfect example of love. ‘Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends’ (John 15:13). We see love in Jesus laying down his life for us (3:16), but, more than this, he did so while we were yet sinners (Rom 5:8). As sinners we rebelled against Christ, but he stilled loved us, so much so that he sacrificed himself for us. In love self-preservation gives way to self-sacrifice.

**3. We must love like Jesus**

Jesus laid down his life to save us from death. In his blood we have propitiation for our sins (4:10, Rom 3:25). John also teaches us that this act of self-sacrifice is an example for us to follow, although only the blood of Jesus can cleanse us of sin. Being a child of God means making Jesus our model when it comes to living in this world. Jesus is our example when it comes to serving others (Mark 10:45, John 13:15), when it comes to suffering in silence (1Peter 2:21), and when it comes to love, self-sacrificial love (3:16, John 15:34). We are to practice such love not as a way to earn rewards but as a way to honour Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord.

Sacrificing one’s life for a brother or sister is, of course, the ultimate act of love (3:16). We can demonstrate love for the brethren in many smaller, preliminary ways. We will never show this ultimate love if we cannot love in smaller ways. These smaller ways will involve sacrifice, sacrifice of things, sacrifice of time and of talents, rather than of life itself. I use the word ‘sacrifice’ because we are looking at the example of Jesus, but our giving of money, time and talents is, in fact, giving of what God has already given us: ‘Every good and perfect gift is from above’ (James 1:17).

Sabbath law in the old covenant included the seventh day, the seventh year, and the ‘seven times seventh year’, the Jubilee. Each of these was commanded with the poor in mind. Servants were to be given rest, slaves set free, and land returned to those who had lost it because of hard times. Moses told the people to ‘open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy in your land (Deut 15:11). To close your heart and your hand towards the needs of others, needs that you clearly see, is not what children of God do (3:17). To do so shows that the love of God does not abide in your heart. It puts you in the same category as the priest and the Levite who saw the half- dead man and passed by on the other side of the road. It puts you into same category as the Pharisees, and indeed of the false teachers John was condemning.

We noted how the early church practiced brotherly love, or love that was in fact ‘*agape*’ love, love that they saw in Jesus laying down his life for us. No one considered his possessions his own. Any needy person within the church was helped according to their need, ‘And great grace was upon them all’ (Acts 4:32, 33). James rebukes those who fail to love in practical ways. Paul tells us, ‘As we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith’ (Gal 6:10). You must be ready to help family members in need (1Tim 5:8), but if help from the church is required, share the need with the deacons (Acts 6); do not let pride get in the way of sharing. And when you do share a need, the deacons will give help as appropriate, and as the church is able; they will do so in the name of the fellowship and in the name of the Lord.

We do not give as the world gives. We do not give expecting to be paid back, nor do we give for our own glory. This is because we do not love as the world loves. We do ‘not love in word or tongue, but in deed and in truth’ (3:17). Jesus said, ‘Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing (Mat 6:3). One of our sister churches in India had a board listing all the people who gave, and how much they gave to their building project. I said to the pastor that I hoped he would be taking this board down soon. God loves a cheerful giver, a generous giver, and a silent giver.

Let us show love in practical ways within this fellowship, remembering the love that Jesus showed towards us in laying down his life for us. Are you ready to give in a sacrificial way? Are you ready to lay down your life for the brethren?

**Assurance** Text: 1John 3:19-24

God knows all things; he is omniscient. The psalmist says he knows our sitting down and our rising up (Ps 139:2). God watches over our going out and our coming in (Ps 121). Do you find comfort in this truth? Or would you like to be free of God’s prying eyes? God not only sees our coming and going, he also sees into our hearts. He knows every word we speak and every thought we have (Ps 139:2, 4). For a child of God this truth should be comforting and re-assuring. John writes of God knowing all things and being greater than our hearts (3:20). So much for thinking that you were in control of your life! God is in the control room of your life, knowing you better than you know yourself. ‘Such knowledge is too wonderful for me’, you might say (Ps 139:6).

Other religions devise ways for you to get in touch with your inner self, things like yoga, controlled breathing, meditation, drugs and the like. We want to know who we really are. If we don’t know God all we can do is look inward, believing the answer is hidden in our soul. But knowing God, as we do through Jesus Christ, we look outward and upward to the One who made us and knows us better than we know ourselves. ‘When my heart is overwhelmed; Lead me to the rock that is higher than I’ said the psalmist (Ps 61:2). Let us look to this Rock and find assurance of where we are going. It was in knowing this that Jesus proceeded to wash the feet of his disciples (John 13:3). Knowing that God knows all about us, and that our future is in his hands, frees us from pride and jealousy and allows us to love one another as Jesus loved us.

In verse 16 of this chapter John defined love as Jesus laying down his life for us. He then said we ought to lay down our lives for brothers and sisters in Christ. He spoke of ‘works of love’, not just words of love, and of these being evidence of our abiding in God. John is always concerned about the truth, in contrast to false teachers and indeed of the people of the world today. This word ‘truth’ is the link between verse 18 and 19, and with the passage we are looking at today. This passage is about being assured we are ‘of the truth’. The truth, of course, is Jesus Christ. Let us now look at the passage under the subheadings: ‘assurance’, ‘access to God, ‘answered prayer’, and ‘abide in him’.

**1. Assurance**

In this letter John gives the church criteria by which they can test their teachers because false teachers were arising in the church. These teachers were departing from orthodox doctrine, from the gospel that they were taught in the beginning. They were unsettling members of the church such that some were questioning and even doubting their faith. John’s test, based as it was on loving one another in practical ways, might also have led to doubts in those with an overly sensitive conscience. When it comes to living the Christian life, some believers are always condemning themselves for perceived failures. John does not want faithful believers to be crippled by doubts. He is concerned for those whose heart condemns them, for all of us whenever our hearts condemn us (3:20).

How can we know that we are Christians? At boy who came to beach mission said he was a Christian because his mum had a card signed by the bishop. Maybe it was a baptismal certificate. Being born into a Christian home or having a certificate from Sunday school is no guarantee of being a true Christian. ‘You must be born again’ said Jesus. Being born again does not change your outward appearance; wearing special clothes or growing long hair does not make you a Christian; although when a Hindu I knew believed in Jesus she became a much happier and cleaner person. New birth affects our heart, something others cannot see and we ourselves may not be sure about. One day we might feel we are a good Christian and the next not so sure. The ‘accuser of the brethren’, and his agents, are ever ready to condemn us (Rev 12:10).

In the Reformed faith we hold to the doctrine of assurance. In churches which teach salvation by works, or by faith plus works, the doctrine of assurance is ridiculed. Many go the grave having no assurance of where they will spend eternity. But John teaches that we can ‘know we are of the truth’, and that ‘He abides in us’ and we in Him (3:19, 24). But the question remains, ‘How can we know this truth?’ It is possible to be presumptuous in this matter and actually deceive ourselves.

When John writes, ‘and by this we know’, he is referring back to what he said about love ‘in deed and in truth’ (3:18). If we are closing our heart, and our hands, to a brother or sister in need, how can we claim to be a believer? (3:17). Such action, or lack thereof, reveals an insensitive heart, a hard heart, a heart not touched by the love of Christ. But John is not talking about dead hearts; he is talking about hearts that are alive in Christ. Such hearts will at times be self-condemning. We will regret not showing more love, not doing more to help someone in need. We all know these self- condemning thoughts. My thoughts keep going to a fine Christian woman who was always in church and always helping others but got depressed because of her failures. Maybe you know someone like this, or maybe you are like this. If so, please listen to what the apostle is saying.

‘If our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts, and knows all things’ (3:19). Calvin and other Reformers took this to mean that God is the great judge and will judge even more severely than our own hearts. God, of course, knows our hearts, our very thoughts, and will judge us accordingly, but in the context of assurance John is teaching that God may not condemn us when we condemn ourselves, or when others condemn us (Rom 8:34). He is telling us to look to God who is greater than our own heart. Looking to God means looking to his word, looking to what is objective rather than subjective. God’s word contains promises as well as commandments. God’s word speaks of forgiveness when we repent (1:9).

We know the commandments and seek to obey them. But when we fail we must repent and accept God’s forgiveness. As a believer you are an adopted child of God, not a stranger, or even a foster child. You may not have a piece of paper saying you are a Christian but you have the mark of God on your heart, the mark of love, love for God and love for one another (Jer 31:33-34, John 13:35).

**2. Access to God**

John began this letter saying, ‘Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ’ (1:3). He wants us to have joy in our relationship with God, and in our relationships with one another within the family of believers. Doubts have a negative effect on these relationships and on our joy. We lose confidence in approaching God. We are to approach God with humility but not with doubting (James 1:6). If we sin we repent and accept God’s forgiveness- at the same time setting things right as we are able. God wants us to approach his throne with confidence and assurance, looking for grace and mercy (Heb 4:15).

The Lord wants our relationship with him to be ongoing, to become closer and stronger each day. He wants us to know his love more deeply and live the life of love that we see in Jesus Christ our Lord. Our relationship to God is based on listening to him as he speaks to us in his word. It is based on our communicating with God in prayer. The more we know God’s word, and the more we pray to him, the more confidence we will have in our standing within the family of God- not forgetting, as John reminds us, to practice love for one another.

**3. Answered prayer**

‘And whatever we ask we receive from Him’ (3:22). What an amazing promise! These words remind us of what Jesus himself promised (John 15:23, 24). In fact, much of what John teaches in this letter reflects what Jesus taught him in the Upper Room (John 13-16). What Jesus promised was with the proviso that, ‘you ask the Father in my name’ (John 16:23). John also sets out conditions for answered prayer here in this letter.

Firstly, we must keep the commandments, and indeed, do what is pleasing in his sight (3:22). Are these not the same thing? Yes and no. God is pleased when we keep his commandments but most pleased when we do so with joy and when we actually delight in our relationship to God. A sister in Christ once reminded me that tithing and giving were different; tithing is the command while giving is going beyond the command.

What commandments is John talking about here in verse 22? He elaborates in the next verse with a second condition, namely we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ (3:23). Jesus said we must ask the Father in his name (John 13:13, 16:23). We cannot approach God without Jesus, the only mediator between God and man (1Tim 2:5). The Bible says nothing about Mary being a mediator with the Father or with Jesus. To the extent that Jesus is the second person in the Trinity, and that he speaks of answering our prayer (John 14:13, 14), it is not wrong to pray to Jesus, but he does specify asking the Father in his name (John 16:23). John implies asking God here in these verses.

The third condition relates to the commandment to love one another (3:23). We know this is one of the commandments we must obey, but John is highlighting it because the Gnostics, and others, failed to obey this command. He sets it up as a ‘test’ command because it is easily seen, or not seen, in the life of the church. People can say they love God and even be diligent in attending church meetings, but do they love others in the fellowship? This is a necessary condition of being in fellowship with God, yet a condition too many forget or fail to obey. John said of the false teachers, who may have been leaders in the church: ‘They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us’ (2:19).

Others conditions for answered prayer are found elsewhere in the Bible. If you regard sin in your heart your prayers will not be heard (Ps 66:18). If husbands are not honouring their wife their prayers will be hindered (1Peter 3:7). John later says that God hears us if we ask according to his will (5:14). In knowing his Son Jesus, and in practicing obedience to his commandments, we are in a position to know God’s will and can therefore pray with the confidence that our prayers will be heard and answered (Rom 12:2, James 5:15). If you ask for something contrary to God’s will, as set forth in his word, do not expect an answer, unless God is sending leanness to your soul (Ps 106:15).

**4. Abide in Him**

When we spoke of assurance you may have been saying, ‘What about the Holy Spirit?’ You may have been thinking of Romans 8 where we read, ‘The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God’ (Rom 8:16). Well, we have come to the Spirit as John comes to the Spirit here in this closing verse. John returns to the theme of abiding in Christ, a theme he heard from Jesus (John 15).

If we love Christ and abide in him we will keep his commands, and we abide in him and he in us (3:24). John now introduces the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit saying, ‘by the Spirit whom He has given us’ (3:24). When the Spirit quickened our dead hearts, making us alive in Christ, he came to stay. The Spirit gives us life and keeps us living as children of God; he is the life-giving Spirit.

Jesus said that if anyone loves him and obeys his teaching, ‘We will come and make our home with him’ (John 14:23). John is saying the same thing. Father, Son and Holy Spirit come to abide in our hearts when we believe in Jesus and keep his commands. What an amazing truth! It is not easy to comprehend but this is what John teaches, and what Jesus taught. So do not listen to those who say you can be a Christian and not have the Holy Spirit. ‘This we know’ says John, as he concludes this teaching on assurance. Is this the truth you know?

**Test the spirits** Text: 1John 4:1-6

When Paul and Silas walked down the street in Philippi they were followed by a slave girl crying out, ‘These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation’ (Acts 16:7). We might think the apostle Paul would have be pleased to have this girl telling people to listen to him, but he wasn’t. He turned to the girl commanding, in the name of Jesus Christ, the ‘spirit of divination’ to come out of her. Evil spirits are real, and evil spirits know there is a God. Even the demons believe there is a God (James 2:19). This slave girl, or the spirit in her, spoke of the Most High God but not of Jesus Christ. This girl was able to tell fortunes and maybe perform counterfeit miracles by the power of the evil spirit. Unbelievers are prone to superstition, to believing any and every spirit that blows their way- the Greek ‘*pneuma*’ means ‘wind’ or ‘spirit’!

Another incident in the ministry of the apostles involved the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Peter and John went down to Samaria where mixed-race Jews had heard the gospel, believed and been baptized (Acts 8). Simon, who had been a sorcerer, believed and was baptized. He was amazed when Peter laid hands on believers and they received the Holy Spirit. However, Simon had not really left his old ways. His focus was on spiritual power and the supernatural, not on salvation. The church fathers called the Simon the first Gnostic. There are people in the church today whose focus is on the spectacular gifts of the Spirit, rather than on sin and salvation. Sometimes they are not discerning of the spirits. They do not test the spirits, as commanded by John. Our first point is this ‘command to test the spirits’, our second, the ‘content of the teaching’, and third, the ‘character of those who listen’.

**1. Command to test the spirits**

John was writing to the church towards the end of the first century. Some, possibly many, had left this church because ‘they were not of us’ (2:19); they had departed from apostolic teaching or orthodox doctrine. It is thought that Gnostic teaching was entering the church, teaching that focussed on special, superior knowledge (in Greek ‘*gnosis*’ means ‘to know’). This ‘higher’ teaching disregarded the body or the flesh and emphasized the mind or learning. This teaching led to either immorality or asceticism. It lead to a disregard for the commandment (2:4) and a disregard for love within the fellowship of believers (2:9).

At the heart of this heresy was false teaching regarding the person of Jesus Christ, in particular his incarnation. If matter, including the flesh, is evil, how could God take on a human body? Some, like Cerinthus, taught that the Spirit of God came upon Jesus at his baptism and left before his death on the cross, because God cannot die! The whole idea of sacrifice for sin was unnecessary, and unworthy of modern man; they thought it archaic and barbaric. We hear the same philosophy expressed today- there is nothing new under the sun! But this philosophy is just as deadly today as it was in John’s day.

John commands his ‘beloved’ in the church to ‘test the spirits’ (4:1). There are two types of spirit; those that convey error and those that convey truth (4:6). The error that they convey centres around Christ- it is an error in their Christology. Christology, or more broadly the Trinity, was a battle ground in the early church, a battle ground that continues today. Many have gone out of the church to follow groups like the Jehovah Witnesses and the Mormons. We must test these groups on the basis of their Christology. This is the tool John gives us.

Even within the church, we find confusion regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. The rise of Pentecostalism has seen emphasis being given to the Spirit, often at the cost of emphasis upon the word of God. People like worship to be an emotional and ecstatic experience. Reading the Bible is not seen as worship. John makes it clear that Spirit and word must go together. The Spirit does not bring new revelation but reminds us of words of Scripture, and confronts us with them. The Spirit is not only present in the exercise of so-called spectacular gifts; he is also present in the reading of the Bible. I remember Christians desperately trying to speak in tongues because this would authenticate the presence of the Spirit. Christians started saying, ‘The Spirit told me to do this or that’; sometimes the ‘this or that’ was contrary to the written commands of God.

In these verses John tells the early church to ‘test the spirits whether they are of God’. If the spirit tells you to do something contrary to the word of God it cannot be the Spirit of God. If it is not the Spirit of God it must be the spirit of the Antichrist; it must be a word from the devil (4:3). The person proudly telling you they have a revelation from the Spirit will be shocked to hear you tell them it is a word from the Antichrist or the devil, but this must be the case if it is contrary to what is written in the Bible.

**2. Content of the teaching**

Although the word ‘Trinity’ is not found in the Bible, the truth about the Godhead is clearly taught. In the account of creation God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image’- note the plural pronouns (Gen 1:26). Joshua met the Commander of the Lord’s army, and worshipped him (Josh 5:13-15). Jesus spoke of God as his Father saying, ‘I and my Father are one’ (John 10:30). He spoke of himself and his Father coming to live in the believer, after promising the Spirit of truth to dwell in them (John 14:17, 23). In Matthew 28:19 Jesus commands baptism in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. John actually uses the term ‘Spirit of God’ or ‘Spirit of truth’ rather than the Holy Spirit (despite 5:7).

The previous chapter ended with a reference to the Spirit whom God has given us (3:24). This was in the context of being assured that ‘He’ or God abides in us. Here in chapter 4 John warns us that spirits other than the Holy Spirit are active in this fallen world. Such spirits speak through false teachers, or false prophets as John calls them here, probably because these men were claiming to speak by the Spirit of God. People who claim to speak ‘in the Spirit’ can be very persuasive.

Years ago I was in a prayer meeting where people were waiting for ‘the spirit’ to speak. A fellow jumped up claiming to have received a message; the message was, ‘Be still and know that I am God’. Thankfully the message was in accord with the word of God. But what if ‘the spirit’s message’ was for someone to divorce their husband or wife? Clearly the message received was not from the Spirit of God.

Some men teach truth and others teach error (4:1,6). The apostles Paul and Peter similarly warn of false teachers coming up in the church (1Tim 4:1, 2Peter 2:1). How are we to tell who is a deceiver? John assures us that we can know. We first test their Christology, their doctrine of Christ. He refers to the spirit by which they speak because this is either the Spirit of truth or the spirit of error. Teachers of truth will ‘confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh’ (4:2), or that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh. Jesus is the name Joseph obediently gave to Mary’s Son- the name means ‘one who saves’. Apart from Herod’s enquiry about where the Christ was to be born, the first person to call Jesus ‘Christ’ was Peter when he confessed, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’ (Mat 16:16).

‘Christ’ is Greek for ‘Messiah’ which means, ‘Anointed of God’. The prophets spoke of God sending Messiah. It is interesting that Peter combines the terms ‘Christ’ and ‘Son of God’. John does the same: he calls anyone who denies that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, a liar and antichrist (2:22, 23). So when we use the name Jesus Christ we are confessing both his humanity and his divinity. We must test a teacher as to their confession of Jesus Christ our Lord.

The false prophets referred to by John did not acknowledge the humanity of Jesus, the fact that he had come ‘in the flesh’ (4:2,3). In their ‘higher learning’ they did not acknowledge their sin (1:10); if they had no sin they had no need of a saviour. Their Jesus was a spiritual, phantom-like being. Hence John’s emphasis on having seen and heard and touched Jesus (1:1). Like the later followers of Docetism, they taught that the suffering of Jesus was only apparent because Jesus only appeared to have a body. John, like the apostle Paul (Col 2:9), condemns any teaching that denies the full humanity of Jesus Christ, as well as his full divinity. By saying that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, John indicates the pre-existence of Christ. He was born of the Virgin Mary after the Holy Spirit overshadowed her (Luke 1:35), but Christ was with the Father before this; he was with the Father in the beginning (John 1:1).

In his opening words John makes it clear that all have sinned (cf. Rom 2:23). Moreover, the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23). Sin must be dealt with if we are to be saved from death. Can we deal with our own sin? No. All sin is against God, and God alone can forgive us. God does this through the sacrifice of his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Representing us as human beings, Jesus died on the cross, and being God as well as man he rose from the dead because death could not hold him (Acts 2:24). This is our salvation. The incarnation, the truth of God the Son coming in the flesh, is fundamental to the cross and our salvation.

**3. Character of hearers**

‘My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me’ (John 10:27). Are you listening to the voice of truth or the voice of error? John is actually talking to the church- ‘little children’ is plural (4:4). The church must be discerning, and if false teachers do not leave they must be turned out. And do not go searching for preachers on the internet; they may be eloquent and persuasive but are they preaching the truth? Besides, what fellowship do you get on the internet?

If you abide in Jesus, and Jesus abides in you, you have ‘overcome them’, overcome the false teachers. ‘He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world’ (4:4). You do not have to fear eloquent intellectuals or fear any man when you abide in Christ. The ruler of this world is a deceiver with no truth in him. But when Jesus comes, all lies and deception will be revealed and will be condemned. Take comfort from this truth when you think you are losing the battle against evil and lies.

After addressing, ‘You who are of God’, John turns to, ‘They who are of the world’ (4:5). It is amazing to see people being duped into following cult leaders. In a recent case here in Australia I heard of a university professor being among the members of a cult. When people have no anchor for their souls, they get blown around by any wind, and taken in by whatever worldly philosophy comes their way. So many people are adrift on the ocean of error that is the world today. Rising sea levels are nothing compared to the rising tide of ignorance and unbelief. The world listens to anyone who preaches lies but turns away for anyone teaching the truth. So dear friend, do not be concerned about the crowds following false teachers, especially those in the church. Remember what Jesus said about the broad way and the narrow way in Matthew 7:13.

Finally, John refers to himself and his fellow apostles saying, ‘We are of God’ (4:6). Jesus prayerfully chose twelve men to be his disciples. Upon eleven of them he sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Like prophets of old, they spoke words given them by God (2Peter 1:21), words that the early church recognised as authoritative, and words we still recognise as authoritative. If we truly know God we will listen to the words found in the Old and New Testaments. If anyone refuses to accept these words we know they are not people of God (4:6). This is the test we must apply to teachers in the church today.

We must discern between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error (4:6). We must take note of a person’s teaching with regard to the Trinity and the two natures of Jesus Christ our Lord. We take note of who is listening to these teachers and make sure that we are listening to men who preach from the Bible. To be discerning and test the spirits we must know the Bible ourselves and must be walking in the Spirit of truth.

**Love** Text: 1John 4:7-12

A famous basketball player was openly critical of the way minorities were being treated in China. He was admired for taking a stand on behalf of men and women suffering persecution in China. The communist government heard of his criticism and cancelled the upcoming tour of his team. This tour was set to bring in millions of dollars, so this player promptly retracted his criticism.

A lot is said and done by way of good works, as long as no personal cost is involved. A lot of love is shown, as long as it is appreciated or recognized in some tangible way. The world sees and knows little of self-sacrificing love, the sort of love referred to in the Bible by the Greek word ‘*agape*’. In fact, this word is rarely found outside the Bible, while other Greek words for love, ‘*philia*’ and ‘*eros*’ are rarely, if ever, found in the Bible. But when we hear the word ‘love’ outside the church it is either brotherly love (*philia*) or most commonly passionate or sexual love (*eros*). So in listening to the Bible we must not think it is talking about the love we hear of in movies and read of in novels.

John is often called the ‘apostle of love’ because of what he writes in this letter. He uses the word ‘love’ more than any other Biblical writer, including Paul in 1Corinthains 13! We come to some of the best known verses in the Bible, but verses that can be taken out of context and misunderstood. Many twist these words around and say ‘love is God’, and not just Hindus and other religions. ‘God is love’ is often understood merely as ‘God is loving’ but it refers to the very essence or nature of God; it is not just an attribute of God but a definition of who or what God is. I sometimes wonder why the writers of our Confession did not include this in the answer to question 4 of the Shorter Catechism, ‘What is God?’

Many think that an act of love, as they define love, is somehow god-like. But what is love? We know love, *agape* love, only by looking at Jesus, who laid down his life for us (3:16). John further explains this love, taking us into the depths of divine love. He continues writing against the background of false teachers and how the church can test its teachers regarding their orthodoxy. These tests centre around doctrine, their doctrine of Christ, around the commandments, and around brotherly love: some refer to these as doctrinal, moral and social tests.

Here in these verses he takes up the test of brotherly love for the third time (cf. 2:9-11, 3:10-18). He declares brotherly love to be more than just evidence of walking in the light (2:9), or of having eternal life (3:14). Brotherly love stems from the very nature of the God we confess. In exhorting us to ‘love one another’ (4:7, 11, 12) he writes, ‘Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God’ because ‘God is love’ (4:7, 8). Love, of course, does not bring us to God or make us god-like because unless we know Jesus and his love we do not know or practice love. God, not humanity, is the source of true, unselfish love. John’s concern however, is for people in the church and for those who confess Christ, to be loving their brothers and sisters in Christ in tangible ways (3:16-18). One’s confession should be questioned if love is not demonstrated within the fellowship: ‘He who does not love does not know God!’ (4:8).

John is here referring to God the Father; in the following verses he refers to God the Son, and God the Spirit. The Trinity is united in love: ‘the same substance’ referred to in Shorter Catechism Q6 includes the substance of love. God is love and our relationship to him is based on love. We keep his commands because of love (John 14:23). Because of love his commands are not burdensome (5:3). If our relationship to God is based on love, so must be our relationship to one another. ‘Beloved, if God so loved us we ought also to love one another’ (4:11). John briefly but profoundly explains the love of God in three ways: God’s nature, God’s historic love in Jesus, God’s love perfected in us.

**1. God’s nature**

Jesus tells us that God is Spirit (John 4:24). He is real but unseen (4:12). The apostle John tells us that God is light (1John 1:5). Light, both physical and spiritual, is of the essential nature of God (Rev 21:23). He now tells us that God is love (4:8, 16). Neither darkness nor hatred belong to the essence of God; so neither can reside in the heart of a born-again believer who is in relationship with God.

‘Like father like son’ we say when we see a son reflecting not just the physical features of his father but his mannerisms and behaviour: ‘he is just like his father’ we say. When people comment that you are just like your father, could they be referring to your father in heaven? These days we attribute everything to the DNA we inherit, but most of our behaviour is learnt, learnt from our parents; we are not slaves to our DNA. We are of course, slaves to Satan by virtue of our humanity, unless and until we are born again of the Spirit of God, and become children of God (3:1, 4:4).

‘Because God is the source and origin of love, all true love derives from him’. So everyone who loves with God’s love is born of God and knows God (4:1). As God’s only begotten Son, and the second person of the Trinity, Jesus of course, knows such love. He showed that love in everything he did and said while walking in our world. He spoke about such love, telling us to love one another, and even to love our enemies (Mat 5:44). Jesus condensed the commandments into two love commandments, love God and love your neighbour (Mat 23:36-40). He did not see anyone practicing such love but knew that with hearts changed by the power of the Holy Spirit his disciples, and all who believed in him, would be able to practice such love. Not that it would be automatic; it would require serious, ongoing commitment and prayer on the part of a believer to live a life of love. Knowing that God is love is the starting point of such commitment.

**2. God’s historic love in Jesus**

God is love. His love is revealed to us in his sending Jesus into this sinful world, a world that knows nothing of true love. His chosen people, Israel, knew something of God’s love. He chose them or set his love upon them (Deut 7:7). In covenant love, he protected them and provided for them, giving them a land flowing with milk and honey. But a ‘fuller’ revelation of God’s love awaited his sending of his Son into this world. He sent Jesus into this world because of his love for us (4:3, John 3:16). God gave his only begotten Son.

Gifts cost something- or they used to! We search the stores for the best gift we can find for one we love. To buy this gift we might have to save up or work overtime, or spend time making a special gift. I hope you don’t give a loved one something that cost you nothing! God’s gift to us cost him everything. It was not just one son of many but his one and only Son. It was in fact, the second person of the Trinity. It was God himself who came into this world to dwell among us. What condescension! What humiliation! Truly, this was the light shining in a dark place. Truly, this was life being lived in the midst of death. God sent his Son to deliver us from death. He sent him ‘that we might live through Him’ (4:9).

Having been sent into this world, how was Jesus going to give us life? How was he going to deliver us from death? We see God’s love going even deeper as we look at the cross. God sent his one and only Son to die for us, to be the propitiation or atoning sacrifice for our sins (4:10). It was a blood sacrifice (5:6). A sacrifice which cost us nothing but cost God everything. He gave his only begotten Son to die for our sins, yes our sins. It was sin that brought death to us. We were born dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). It is the death of the unique Son of God that brings us life, life everlasting.

We can do nothing to save ourselves. How foolish to think that we, of our own free will, can love God, that we can initiate a reconciliation with the God against whom we have sinned. ‘In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us’ (4:10). God initiated and completed the reconciliation. He did it in Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5).

We see even deeper into God’s love when we understand just how serious was our separation, how deep was the chasm between us. God cannot look upon sin (Hab 1:13). There was nothing in us that made God love us- apart from sin and misery! Yes, God loved the world when there was nothing lovely or deserving about the world of sinful men and women. ‘O, wretched, man that I am, who will deliver me’- ‘Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift’ (Rom 7:24, 2Cor 9:15). The world knows nothing of such love but I pray you know something of it, and that you want to know more of it, that you want to comprehend more of this love that ‘surpasses knowledge’ (Eph 3:18-19).

The more you comprehend God’s amazing *agape* love, the more you will want to reflect such love in your life. John Stott writes, ‘No one who has been to the cross and seen God’s immeasurable and unmerited love displayed there can go back to a life of selfishness’. ‘Beloved’, says the apostle of love, ‘Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another’ (4:11). John arrives back at the commandment to love one another, the test of genuine faith (3:23, 4:7). It is a commandment, a commandment we obey more out of appreciation than out of duty.

**3. God’s love perfected in us**

We come to John’s third and final point as he argues that we must love one another. He told us that God is love. He told us that God gave his only begotten Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Now he tells us that, ‘His [God’s] love has been perfected in us’ (4:12). Before this he sets the scene by reminding us that no one has seen God at any time. God is Spirit and a spirit, by definition, is invisible. We read of theophanies in the OT; we even read that Moses and others ‘saw the God of Israel’ (Exod 24:10). But John does not consider such visions as seeing God himself, because this is not possible for a human being. God can of course, make himself visible, which he did in sending his Son in the likeness of men (John 1:18, Phil 2:7). John had seen the Son of God. He saw God’s love displayed in the life of Jesus, and supremely in his death. But after rising from the dead Jesus returned to heaven. Jesus said, ‘By this will all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another’ (John 13:35).

John is saying much the same thing when he writes, ‘If we have love for one another, God abides in us and his love has been perfected in us’ (4:12), or ‘his love is made complete in us’ (4:12 NIV). What does John mean by ‘in us’? ‘God is at work in us by his Spirit to bring that love to completion’. It is ‘in us’ as God abides in us, and as we abide in God. As difficult as it is to believe, and astonishing, we are now God’s instruments in showing his love to the world. Stott writes, ‘Today God’s love is seen in our love’. Love cannot be demonstrated of course, when we live to our self or live the life of a recluse. Divine love is seen in relationships, and in the fellowship of believers.

The apostle Paul told husbands to ‘love your wives just as Christ loved the church’ (Eph 5:25). He could have told all of us to love one another ‘as Christ loved the church’ because love for one another in the fellowship is no less a demonstration of divine love. Paul used the word ‘*agape*’ for the husband’s love for his wife. Love for one another must be seen in a Christian marriage, in a Christian family, and above all in a Christian church. God ordained marriage, God ordained families, and God ordained the church. The church is vital in the witness of God’s love to the world.

Have you ever thought of the church is such terms? Or do you come to church only to get something out of it for yourself? Some churches are full of egos, with everyone wanting to do their own thing. Some actually say they are not getting anything out of church and leave. They have a very different view of the church to the apostle John, and indeed to Jesus himself. In fact, loving one another, which means brothers and sisters in Christ, is a test of one’s being in Christ and of having eternal life.

**God in us and us in God** Text: 1John 4:13-16

‘In the beginning God’ are the first words we read when we open the Bible. We read how God created the heavens and the earth. We read about God’s work of creation, but still we ask who or what is God? God is a Spirit. The third person of the Trinity is God the Spirit. We read about the work of the Spirit here in 1John 4. God came into this fallen world in his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. In Jesus we see the revelation of divine love; we see that God is love.

The truth that ‘God is love’ is the basis of our relationship with God: ‘We love because he first loved us’ (4:19). A born-again Christian is in a relationship with God, and with Jesus Christ, and has fellowship with other people who are similarly ‘in Christ’, as Paul would say (1:3). Paul speaks of being ‘in Christ’, while John speaks of ‘abiding in Christ’ and of Christ abiding in us. In fact he writes, ‘God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God in him’ (4:16). Father, Son and Holy Spirit all abide in the believer, and we as believers abide in Him. Being a true Christian is not just a matter of belief; it is a matter of abiding in God or living in God. We are not followers of a religion; we are followers of a person called Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And more than followers, we are those who abide in Him, and He in us. The most intimate relationship you can ever have is with God himself.

Before going on, let me quote what C. H. Dodd writes about these verses; ‘This closely knit statement therefore places the reality of the Christian experience of God beyond question, guarding against the dangers of subjectivism on the one hand, and of mere traditionalism on the other; placing equal and co-ordinate stress on love to God, which is the heart of religion, and love to man, which is the foundation of morality, without allowing religion to sink to a level of mere moralism, or morality to be dissolved in mysticism. This passage is the high-water mark of the thought of the epistle’. This scholar also reminds us that the theme of this section is ‘the grounds of assurance’.

John is writing to a church being infiltrated by false teachers. He gives the church three tests which can be applied to these men, a doctrinal test, a moral test, and a social test, as Stott calls them. They can be tested regarding their belief in the humanity and divinity of Jesus, in regard to their obedience to the commands, and in regard to their love for one another. These tests can also be taken as grounds for assurance. To keep the commandments and to love one another, and indeed to believe in Jesus Christ, are all works of the Spirit. ‘It is the divine indwelling which alone makes possible both belief and love’ writes Stott, and further ‘Believing and loving are evidence that God’s Spirit is at work in us’.

‘We know that He abides in us by the Spirit whom he has given us’ (3:24). John is prepared to repeat what he says to make sure we get the point; so here in 4:13 he repeats this truth about the Spirit being given to us. Even so, the context keeps changing. John concluded his words about ‘God is love’ telling us that ‘if we love one another, God abides is us and his love has been perfected in us’ (4:12). He goes on in the verses we are now looking at to address the first of these assurances, namely that ‘God abides in us’. The passage begins with the familiar words, ‘By this we know’ (4:13). Our three headings will be, ‘Coming of the Spirit, ‘Confessing Christ’ and, ‘Continue in love’.

**1. Coming of the Spirit**

The apostle John heard Jesus promise that the Father would send the Holy Spirit in his name. He is called the ‘Paraclete’, one who comes along side, or one who helps. Jesus said, ‘He will teach you all things and bring to remembrance all that I have said to you’ (John 14:26). But first of all, the Spirit will convict of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8). He will make alive hearts that are dead in sin. If you have been born again of the Spirit of God, the Spirit abides in you. Do not quench the Spirit. Let the fruits of the Spirit be seen in your life; the first of these is love (Gal 5:22).

The Spirit is given by God, and is a seal and guarantee of our standing in Christ (Eph 1:13, 14). If you believe in Jesus it is because the Spirit has quickened your dead heart. So if your heart is alive, and not dead towards Jesus and the cross, you know you have the Spirit and that you belong to Christ. ‘We know’ says John ‘that we abide in Him, and he in us, because he has given us of His Spirit’ (4:13). God does not give us his Spirit one day and take it away the next. We are not a child of God one day and child of the devil the next. Remember this word ‘abide’ or ‘remain’. Remember what Jesus said about abiding in the vine, about abiding in him and bearing much fruit (John 15:5).

**2. Confessing Christ**

‘And we have seen and testify’ continues John (4:14). Our new life begins when the Spirit convicts us of sin and leads us to confess Christ. The Spirit’s work must be accompanied by knowledge, knowledge of who Jesus is and what he did to save us from sin and death. It is always the word and the Spirit together. John is very clear about no one having ever seen God, but also clear about seeing the Son of God, Jesus Christ (4:12, 1:1).

Is John only referring to the apostles when he says, ‘we have seen him’ (4:14). It is, of course, the apostolic witness that we must believe regarding Jesus, his life, his death and his resurrection. Yet there is a sense in which, by the power of the Spirit, all who believe see Jesus. We are given eyes of faith, eyes to see the historical facts impact our life and destiny. When we believe and confess the facts and the truth about Jesus as revealed in the Bible, God abides in us and we in God (4:15). Let no one think that being a Christian is a matter of inheritance, of traditions, or of performing rituals. It is a matter of personal confession and belief, brought about by the indwelling Spirit of God.

What is it that we have seen and to which we testify? Firstly, that God the Father sent God the Son into this world. God the Son is none other than the person Jesus Christ, whom John saw and heard and touched (1:1, 4; 14, 15). As proto-Gnostics, the false teachers could not honestly make such a confession. They did not believe that Jesus was the incarnate Son of God, God in the flesh (4:3).

We often refer to Jesus as Saviour but the Scriptures do not use this term very often. In John’s gospel it was a believing Samaritan who first called Jesus ‘the Christ, and Saviour of the world’ (John 4:42). John uses the same words here in 4:14. John previously spoke of Jesus making propitiation for our sins, and ‘also for the whole world’ (2:2); by ‘world’ he means sinful society, people ruled by Satan. Back there we rejected any suggestion of universal salvation, and we do so again here. Jesus is the Saviour of the world in that, for anyone in the world to be saved from sin and death they must confess their sin and believe in Jesus Christ as he is presented in the Bible. Jesus is the only Saviour, the only Mediator between God and man (1Tim 2:5).

For Jesus to be your Saviour you must confess your sin and believe that Jesus is the Son of God whom God sent into this world. When you do this, God abides in you and you abide in God. As amazing as this is, it is what John tells us (4:15). This is the same as saying that our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1:3). If we have such fellowship we will also have fellowship with one another; we will love one another by virtue of being in Christ or abiding in Him.

**3. Continue in love**

John continues, and concludes with another, ‘And we have known’ or ‘have come to know’ (4:16). We know and believe that God loves us because God is love. This is where we started, and it is where we finish- not just today but in the journey of life itself. This is a fundamental, unchangeable truth about God that John repeats (4:8, 16). It was love that led God to sending his one and only Son into this world. It was love that took Jesus to the cross, love for sinners like you and me. ‘This is how we know love, because He laid down his life for us’ (3:16). This is ‘*agape*’ love, unselfish, self-sacrificing love. We did nothing to attract God’s love. We could do nothing to please God.

God set his love upon us while we were still sinners (Rom 5:8). God sent his Spirit to quicken our dead hearts, after providentially bringing us to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. God’s providence may be your coming to church today, or growing up in a home where you hear the Bible read. His providence may be a fellow student or a fellow worker telling you about Jesus, or even a tract in the letter box. His providence might include someone praying for the Spirit to touch your heart. All acts of providence demonstrate God’s love for you. How are you going to respond to his love?

When you do believe, you will know how much God loves you. You will know that you abide in God and God in you. On bended knee, the apostle Paul declares by way of a doxology, ‘That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height- to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God’ (Eph 3:17-19).

John concludes, ‘He who abides in love abides in God’ (4:16), by which he means that if we know God’s love and his abiding presence in our life, we will reflect his love towards those around us. We will be telling others that God is love. People today need to hear this message more than ever before. We will be telling and showing the world ‘*agape*’ or Christ-like love. Not everyone will appreciate such love but some will- the elect will.

We will help people in practical, tangible ways but remember, if you truly love someone you will want them to know that God is love and that ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life’ (John 3:16). Love does not withhold the truth, and this is the truth that has been revealed to us in the word of God, and in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. God abides in us, and we in him, to the glory of God.

**Love made complete** Text: 1John 4:17-21

‘What is the greatest commandment in the law?’ a smart Pharisee asked Jesus. Without hesitation, Jesus answered him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God’ (Mat 22:36-40). The Pharisee probably thought, ‘That is easy. I love God. That is why I keep the law, why I go to the temple, why I fast and tithe. Everyone can see that I love God’. But Jesus added, ‘with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your soul’. He told this man he must love God with all his being and all he had, not just in the performance of religious rituals. The Pharisee might have thought he could tell people he loved God because, after all, no one sees God so how would they know? It was of course the Son of God he was talking to, but he did not believe this.

Jesus went on, ‘And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself’. Like the lawyer, he might have asked Jesus, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ ‘Oh, you mean I even have to love Samaritans?’ ‘That is taking love a bit too far’ he might have thought, ‘My duty is to keep the commandments, not to be loving people’. But Jesus said this was a commandment; indeed the two greatest commandments were these commandments to love, to love God and love your neighbour. So what is love? Sadly, this Pharisee failed to see the love of God standing before him. He failed to see that God is love, and that he showed his love in sending his only begotten Son to die for him. ‘This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us’ (3:16 NIV).

The apostle John heard what Jesus said to the Pharisee. He also saw Jesus die on the cross. John saw and believed, and he wrote a gospel as well as these letters, ‘that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name’ (John 20:31). The life that we have in his name is a life of abiding in God and he in us, a life of joy to the full, a life of love, of God’s love being perfected or made complete in us.

Many are still asking, ‘What is the greatest commandment’, and ‘Who is my neighbour’. Christian’s tend to make their own decisions on such matters rather than listen to what Jesus says. They take their concept of love from the world rather than from the Bible. The world limits love to giving bread to the poor; it is good to help the poor but I said ‘limit’ love to this. Jesus tells us that God is love and we are to love other people as he loved us. Jesus did not come into this world to simply to feed the poor.

Back in verse 12 of this chapter John wrote, ‘If we love one another, God abides in us and his love has been perfected in us’. John goes on to explain ‘abiding in God, and he in us’ in verses 13-16. In verses 17-21 he explains the perfection of God’s love in us: ‘Love has been perfected among us in this’ where ‘perfected’ can be translated ‘made complete’ or ‘fulfilled’ (4:17- the KJV translation ‘Herein is our love made perfect’ is not correct). John points out that there is no fear in love, and no hate in love.

**1. No fear in love**

When God’s love is seen in our love for one another then it is made complete. As Stott writes, ‘God’s love is seen in our love’. Without reading the Bible and without eyes of faith, people cannot see God’s love. This they must do in order to be saved, but their initial view of God’s love may well be what they see in you. When we helped a poor woman get her dying baby to hospital she saw the love of God in us. We prayed to Jesus to save this baby, and he did. She turned from her Hindu gods to believe in Jesus. Too often we fail, but we keep alert to opportunities of showing God’s love through good deeds.

Apart from our actions, we show God’s love in our reactions, in the way we respond to criticism and to trials. Although not directly addressing God’s love, James writes of being patient in times of trial, ‘that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing’ (James 1:4). This is the same ‘perfection’ that John writes of. We all face difficulties in life- there is no trial that is not common to man (1Cor 10:13); what matters to God is how we respond. Do we respond as one who is in fellowship with the all-powerful God who is love, or as one who trusts in himself or herself?

The greatest fear most people have is that of death and judgment. When we do something wrong we fear punishment. Death is the ultimate judgment for sin; all sin is against God. However hard people try to hide their fear of death and judgment, it is there in every heart, except the heart that knows and loves God. The Bible tells us that after death comes the judgment- and no one can tell us anything different! (Heb 9:27). John knows there will be day when this world comes to an end, a day when Jesus returns in judgment. But he tells us that we can have confidence at his coming (2:28), and that ‘perfected love’ has boldness or confidence in the Day of Judgment (4:17). Every person who has ever lived will have to give account to Jesus the Judge, but John assures us that those in whom God’s love is made complete have nothing to fear on this day. Are you such a person?

‘Because as He is, so are we in this world’ (4:17). What does John mean? ‘In this world we are like Jesus’ is the NIV translation. But how are we like Jesus? Jesus faced every trial and temptation that we might face in this world (Heb 4:16), but is this what John means? An uncle recently gave me a set of commentaries/sermons by H.A. Ironside (d.1951). Ironside struggled with these words, as I did, until looking at them in the context, the context of judgment. He writes, ‘Is He ever coming into judgment? Oh, no. Has He ever been there? Yes. When? When he died on Calvary for my sin. That was judgment day. Christ settled everything for me that day, and now God has raised Him from the dead and taken Him to his own right hand… As he is in relation to judgment so are we in this world’. This is truly amazing! Love, God’s love has been perfected in us here in this world.

‘There is no fear in love because perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment/punishment’ (4:18). These beautiful words are well known, but they are more than just beautiful words. This is a wonderful truth but we do need to keep it in context. It does not refer to fear of heights or of dark places, apart from the dark place of death! The context is that of relationships and of punishment, in particular eternal punishment. Speaking of relationships, one man writes, ‘To know we are safe and secure is an absolute treasure. We enjoy that kind of peace only in the most blessed of human relationships. If we have that with parents, a spouse, siblings, or friends, then we should be most thankful. In a fallen world there is fear interlaced with almost every relationship’. I think of a woman who once worshipped with us; when I suggested she get married to the man she had been living with for twenty years she spoke of fear that he might leave her- which he could do without breaking any vow or law while they were not legally married! In fact, they were breaking the law of God in not being married, but she, like many, did not understand this.

‘There is no fear in love’. This is *agape* love. This is Christ-like love. This is love that comes from God because God is love. This is love that you know when you confess your sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the love you appreciate, knowing that Jesus has taken the punishment hanging over your head because of your sin. So while the unbeliever lives in fear of death and punishment, you who believe no longer fear. We no longer fear the unknown because there is no unknown when we know God and his love. Being in fellowship with God through Jesus Christ we can pray to him with the assurance that he hears us and is able to help us- note the word ‘confidence’ appearing again in this reference to prayer (3:22, 5:14).

Our witness to the world will be the patience and confidence we demonstrate in times of difficulty. We will be showing the love of God perfected in us, to people around us. Are you being such a witness, a witness in your actions of love, and in your reactions of ‘love made perfect in us’? Before moving to our next point, note that John is not writing about ‘reverence for God’ that Scripture means by the term ‘the fear of God’; even Jesus offered up prayers and petitions and ‘was heard because of his godly fear’ (Heb 5:7). John is writing about fear of punishment or judgment.

**2. No hate in love**

Love is completely incompatible with hate. Love is more powerful that fear or hate. God’s love is supremely powerful. In telling us that we are more than conquerors through Jesus who loved us, the apostle Paul goes on to speak of powerful things like death, like angels, or any other power in the universe, being unable to ‘separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom 8:39). We must never forget that it is God’s love for us that came first, and that powerfully keeps us every day of our lives, and not our love for God. John again tells us, ‘We love because he first loved us’ (4:19 cf. 4:10 NIV). Moreover, God’s love does not change; God’s steadfast love never fails. We do not live like the lady fearing that her husband might leave her at any time!

If we truly know God’s love for us we will reflect it in our love, not only for God but in love for one another. The two love commands cannot be separated. “If someone says, ‘I love God’ and hates his brother, he is a liar” (4:20). There are no ‘ifs’ or ‘buts’ or exceptions with John. We cannot say we love certain brothers or sisters and not others. God has one family and one only. This is one body called the church and Jesus is the head.

Back in chapter 2 John said that hating a brother means walking in darkness (2:11). He later said that those who hate a brother are children of Satan and abide in death (3:10). Now he uses even stronger language, calling such people ‘liars’ because we cannot love and hate at the same time. James speaks of the impossibility of getting fresh and salt water from the same tap (James 3:11). In the same way, we cannot get love and hate from the same heart. If we think we can love God, or say we love God, while hating or failing to love others, we are lying to ourselves, to others, and to God.

John reminds us of what he said in verse 12 about not seeing God. We might think it is easier to love God who is unseen than to love fellow believers whom we see- often ‘warts and all’, as we say. But John says this is not possible: ‘Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen’ (4:20 NIV). You may have heard people say they would go to church if it wasn’t for the people who are there. They say the people in church are hypocrites, but they are actually calling themselves liars, according to John. Calvin succinctly writes, ‘It is a false boast when anyone says he loves God but neglects His image which is before his eyes’. Moreover, if I fail to love even an objectionable brother or sister it means I have forgotten the love with which God first loved an objectionable person called ‘Me’.

In closing, John takes us to the love commandments given by Jesus, the place where we started. In giving these two love commandments, Jesus effectively summarised the Ten Commandments. John’s summary is even more succinct: ‘He who loves God must love his brother also’ (4:21). When it comes to loving God, there is not fear in love. We call God, ‘Abba, Father’ because of the Spirit of adoption within us (4:13, Rom 8:15). We are not slaves who fear a master; we are sons who love our Father (3:1, John 15:15).

As children of God we enjoy fellowship with Him, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and we also come into fellowship with one another (1:3). To reject this fellowship is to seriously misunderstand the fellowship we have with God. To say we love God but hate a brother or sister in Christ demonstrates complete and utter dishonesty. Perfected or complete love means love towards God, and love towards any and every brother or sister in Christ. We love because he first loved us.

**Born of God** Text: 1John 5:1-5

To the married people I ask, ‘How did life change when you got married?’ What did you stop doing, and what did you start doing? If you refused to change in any way I doubt that your marriage lasted long! Becoming a Christian means coming into a relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship that is more intimate even than marriage. Jesus speaks of the need to be born again in order to enter this relationship (John 3:3). John writes of the believer being ‘born of God’ (5:1,4). So, how has your life changed since you were born again, and entered into a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ? Some people think they don’t have to change at all when they become a Christian. To them Christianity is a religion they have inherited or adopted rather than a matter of being born again and living a transformed life in Christ. Actually, the believer’s new relationship is more like that of a father and child than of husband and wife.

The apostle John was contending with false teachers in the church at Ephesus. These men knew a lot about religion but nothing about being in a relationship with Christ. He began this letter testifying to the humanity of Christ, and the reality of a relationship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1:3). If for you Christianity is just a religion, you will see no need for a change of heart- in fact you will not be able to change your heart. You will not see your sin. You will say, ‘I have not sinned’- or words to this effect (1:10). You may like the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount and some of the commandments but will interpret and apply these as you decide. You will decide, for instance, who your neighbour is. You will make no commitment to keeping the commandments of the Bible.

The apostle John gave the church three basic tests they could apply to false teachers, and to themselves, regarding a true or authentic Christian. Those who claim to believe in God and love God must love Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, must love fellow believers, and must obey the commandments of God. We have called these doctrinal, social and moral tests. Here in chapter 5, John begins to summarise and draw conclusions from what he has been teaching. He returns to teaching about the new birth or being born of God (cf. 3:9). It is John who tells us about Jesus and Nicodemus, and being born again in John 3. In this letter he writes, ‘Whoever has been born of God does not sin’ (3:9).

It is the Spirit of God that gives new birth because our ‘flesh-birth’ left us dead in trespasses and sin (Eph 2:1). God gives us his Spirit (3:24), and the first work of the Spirit is our regeneration or new birth (John 3:8). The indwelling Spirit produces many fruits in our life (Gal 5:22), but these come after we have become a new creation in Christ Jesus (2Cor 5:17). So when John writes, ‘Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God’ (5:1), the ‘born of God comes first as a completed action and the believing follows as an ongoing action- we know this from the tenses of the Greek verbs. ‘Faith is the consequence not the cause of new birth’. The object of our faith is not faith itself but Christ, and the source of our faith is also Christ or the Spirit of Christ.

Belief or faith is not just what we feel in our hearts; it is what is seen in our lives. ‘Faith without works is dead’ said James (James 2:20). John says that love must be seen in our deeds, as well as our words, if we are born-again Christians (3:18). The verses before us are book-ended by this confession or belief in Jesus Christ the Son of God (5:1, 5). Between the book-ends John writes by way of reminder, and summary, of love, love for God and love for one another, of obedience to the commandments, and of faith that overcomes the world. The apostle Paul similarly highlighted love and faith (1Cor 13:13).

**1. Love**

A born-again person believes in Jesus Christ and seeks to live as Christ himself lived. Jesus’ life was one of love, love for his heavenly Father, and love for the children of God. Jesus showed love for his Father by obeying him. Jesus showed his love for the children of God by healing the sick, the deaf, the blind and the lepers, and by preaching the gospel to them (Mat 11:5). If we are born again of the Spirit of God and believe in Jesus we will do the works that he did (John 14:12). If we have the Spirit dwelling in our hearts we will demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit, the first of these being love (Gal 5:22). We will love fellow believers and help them as we have opportunity.

John continues emphasizing that we cannot say we love God while not loving those who, like us, have been born again of the Spirit of God. We are born again into the family of God, a family that includes fellow believers- you are not an only child! ‘One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all’ is how the apostle Paul puts it (Eph 4:5-6).

‘If God means little to you, people will become worthless to you, and love even for them will die out’ are the profound words of one commentator. People who truly love God are becoming increasingly hard to find in the world, and even in the church. Many talk about loving one another and think they are doing this, but the evidence is not there. Why are families breaking down, with domestic violence and child abuse reportedly on the increase? ‘We need tougher laws’ they say; ‘We need laws that demand love’. But can love be legislated? Love for one another is the outcome of love for God, and love for God is the outcome of God’s love for us. ‘God is love’; ‘if God so loved us we also ought to love one another’ (4:8-11). Or, as John puts it here in verse 2 of chapter 5. ‘By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep his commandments’. The ‘social gospel’ with its focus on material help, to the exclusion of preaching the gospel, is a false gospel. Paul denounced those who dared preach another gospel; any gospel that excludes love towards God and obedience to his commands is another gospel.

**2. Obedience to His commandments**

We are already talking about obedience, about obeying God’s commandments, because these things are so tightly knit together. John keeps talking of love and obedience in the same sentence (5:2, 3). He does so because Jesus did so. ‘If anyone loves me he will keep my word; and my Father will love him’ (John 14:23). John writes, ‘This is love for God: to obey his commands’ (5:3 NIV). How can we say we love God, or anyone for that matter, if we do not obey what they say? When you see children disobeying their parents do you say those children must really love their parents? The more love there is in the family the more obedience there will be, and the more obedience there is the more love there will be.

Some years ago theologians came up with the term ‘a new morality’- some Christians are always looking for something new. This new morality was no longer based on the commands of the Bible; it was based on the principle of love apart from the commandments. And so the guiding principle became, ‘Anything that flows from love is permissible as long as no one is hurt’. We know this new morality as the accepted morality of our day. So if you love another woman that is okay as long as your wife is not hurt. Our laws allow for no-fault divorce, and we tell ourselves that divorce need not hurt anyone.

If we love God and love the children of God we will obey his commands. Boice writes, ‘The life of God within makes obedience to his commands possible, and the love the Christian has for God and for other Christians makes this obedience desirable’. The God who made us and who showed us true love knows best, and we will be wise to obey his commands. Indeed, he demands that we obey his commands if we say we love him, otherwise we are guilty of lying (2:4). Disobedience demonstrates rebellion or hatred towards God, not love.

‘And his commands are not burdensome’ (5:3). What was that again? ‘Keeping God’s commands is a terrible burden’ you say. Young people in particular think that having to keep the commands of the Bible is terribly restrictive. ‘Mum and dad put these restrictions on me, while my friends are free to go and do as they like’. Sometimes children rebel against keeping the commands of Christ because sometimes parents or elders are more like the Pharisees that they are like Christ. We should be teaching our children that God is love and that Jesus loved them so much that he gave his life for their sins. And we should be praying for our children, or any family or friend, that God would send his Spirit that they might be born again.

When we are born again, love for the world is overtaken by love for God (2:15). If we no longer love the world and the lusts thereof, the commands of Jesus are not a burden but a delight. We will sing the chorus, ‘Things I used to say, I say them no more, things I used to do, I do them no more, places I used to go, I go there no more’. Jesus said, ‘My yoke is easy and my burden is light’ (Mat 11:30). It is the yoke of the world that is heavy and that gives us no rest, not the yoke of Jesus. If you are finding the commands of Jesus a burden, ask yourself if you truly are yoked to him. If you are being swept this way and that by the pulls and pressures of the world it may be because you are following Jesus at a distance.

**3. Faith that overcomes the world**

The last words of Jesus to his disciples in the upper room were, ‘These things I have spoken to you that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33). The Greek word for ‘overcome’ or ‘victory’ is *nike*, a word written on lots of running shoes these days. You may or may not get victory from wearing ‘Nike’ running shoes, but you will get victory through faith in Jesus Christ.

John has already spoken of being born again and believing in Jesus Christ, the Son of God (5:1). He now assures us that this new birth, and the gift of faith, give us ‘the victory that has overcome the world’ (5:4). Not ‘will overcome’ but ‘has overcome’. Nothing in this world can separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 8:39). Do you believe this? Do you believe that in Christ you have overcome the world, the flesh and the devil? Jesus was victorious over the devil at the cross, and we have victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1Cor 15:57).

The devil is behind all the evil in this world. The devil was behind the false teachers in the church at Ephesus, teachers whom the believers overcame because of the indwelling of God by his Spirit (4:4). The devil is behind the temptations you face- remember the devil tempting Jesus in the desert (Mat 4:5, 8). The devil is behind the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (2:16). The devil is behind the ridicule and persecution you experience as a believer- at least many of your brethren are experiencing.

When you are born again and the Spirit of God comes to dwell in your heart you have the power to say ‘no’ to temptation, and you have the strength to endure hardships for the sake of Christ (Phil 4:13). In other words, you have overcome the world, and by faith will continue to overcome until the world and all its lusts pass away, and only the kingdom of God remains.

**Testimonies to Jesus’ humanity and divinity**  Text: 1John 5:6-12

John probably wrote his gospel around 85AD and his letters shortly afterwards- by which time he would have been close to 90yrs old. When he wrote this letter false teachers were appearing in the church at Ephesus and elsewhere. These would have been second generation Christians who had not seen Jesus, as John had. John testifies as to what he saw at the beginning of this letter. But despite his testimony these false teachers did not believe that Jesus was fully human, that he was the Son of God come in the flesh (4:2). They did not hold to the truth of the incarnation. One false teacher called Cerinthus, taught that the divine Christ came upon the man Jesus at his baptism and left him before he was crucified.

When Jesus was ministering in this world no one denied his humanity but many questioned his claim to be the Son of God. John heard Pharisees saying to Jesus: ‘You bear witness of yourself; your witness is not valid’ (John 8:13NIV). Jesus had earlier spoken of four witnesses declaring the truth about him: John the Baptist, his works, the Father himself, and the Scriptures (John 5:31-40). Under Jewish law two or three witnesses were required (Deut 19:15), and self-witness was not one of these. John was not just dealing with Jews here in this letter; he was actually dealing with men claiming to be Christians. And he was dealing with denial of the humanity of Jesus more than denial of his divinity. But he follows the principle of establishing the truth by multiple witnesses, as he learned it from Jesus. ‘Three that testify’ is our first subheading; ‘Testimony of God’ and ‘Testimony of the heart’ are our subsequent subheadings.

**1. Three that testify**

‘Who is he that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God’ (5:5). We read and rejoiced in these words when looking at the previous verses in 1John 5. ‘Belief’ is the same word as ‘faith’ in Greek. Faith in Jesus is the gift of God, a gift that brings blessings of love, peace, hope and victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil. But what is the basis of this faith? Many see faith as a ‘leap in the dark’, as something that does not pass the test of reason or science. John disagrees.

John sets before you and the world ample evidence regarding the historical person of Jesus, the one who is the object of our faith. He sets before us evidence regarding the humanity and the divinity of Jesus Christ. If the Jesus we believe in does not have two natures; if Jesus was not God and without sin, and was not a man who could represent us, then our faith is futile. John was contending with false teachers in the church, men who questioned the full humanity of Jesus, as well as those who questioned his full divinity.

John takes these questions to court, as it were, and brings witnesses or testimony to support his teaching; both ‘witness’ and ‘testimony’ translate the one Greek word ‘*martureo*’. He initially cites three witnesses, the Spirit, the water and the blood (5:7, 8). He begins by declaring that Jesus Christ ‘came by water and blood’, and then adds the witness of the Spirit of truth (5:6). What does John mean by ‘water and blood’? This question has challenged scholars almost since the time John wrote. I say ‘almost’ because his first readers would have understood what he meant. Nothing in the Bible is designed to confuse us; it is just that with the passage of time we are no longer familiar with the original setting of this letter. We do our best to understand this setting; we know of the Gnostic heresy and the heretic called Cerinthus.

The words ‘water and blood’ are familiar to us from the crucifixion of Jesus, as recorded in John’s gospel. Seeing that Jesus was already dead, the soldiers did not break his legs, but John saw one of them thrust a spear in his side and ‘blood and water came out’ (John 19:34). John saw this as the fulfilment of Scripture: ‘They shall look on Him whom they pierced’. Augustine thought John was referring to this incident here in this letter, but the actually wording is different: here in this letter water and blood did not come out of Jesus, but ‘he came by water and blood’ (5:6). The Reformers thought John was referring to the two sacraments as the witnesses to water and blood, but John makes no mention of the sacraments.

Keeping in mind the context, and indeed the third element of this three-fold witness, namely the Holy Spirit, we see the reference to water and blood being to the baptism and death of Jesus respectively. John’s reference to Jesus’ baptism is brief but he records the witness of John the Baptist: ‘I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and He remained on Him’, and ‘I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God’ (John 1:32, 34). He did not see Jesus become the Son of God but the witness of the Holy Spirit that Jesus is the Son of God. Cerinthus was saying that Jesus the man became the Christ or became divine at this point, thereby denying the incarnation.

Equally serious in terms of our salvation was this heretic’s claim that the Spirit departed before Jesus died. Jesus repeatedly told his disciples, including John, that he must be crucified and rise again on the third day. His death was not that of a good but sinful man, as concluded in the theology of these heretics. His death was that of a flesh and blood man who was ‘yet without sin’ because he was born of a virgin. The sin for which he suffered and died was our imputed sin. This is the witness of the Spirit of truth or the Holy Spirit, witness at the baptism and at the death of Jesus. These three witnesses, John assures us, agree, thus fulfilling the requirements of the law for two or three witnesses. You may recall that the witnesses brought to testify against Jesus at his earthly trial did not agree.

Before going on I need to explain a difference you may have noticed in the various translations of verses 7-8. Our NKJV refers to another three witnesses, namely the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit (5:7). But these words are not found in any Greek MSS prior to the sixteenth century- ‘they contain great truth, but they are not original’. They first entered the Latin text and passed into the Vulgate. Erasmus was convinced to include them in his Greek text because of the Vulgate, and because of this reference in a very late Greek MSS. For this reason, we are reading verses 7- 8 as: ‘For there are three that bear witness: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and these three agree’.

**2. Testimony of God**

The law placed qualifications on the character of witnesses, as well as the number required. Thieves, violent men, and shepherds were not accepted as witnesses. The Pharisees rejected the testimony of tax-collectors and sinners. But they accepted the witness of men like themselves. We accept the word of other people all the time, especially when we accept credit payments or contracts. On this basis John asks why we don’t accept the testimony of God. In terms of character, the witness of God is much greater than that of any man. The sovereign God has no occasion to lie, and indeed cannot lie.

Jesus similarly bears true witness, and his judgment is true, but he did not rely on this as he defended himself against the Pharisees (John 9:14, 16). Jesus pointed them to the witness of God his Father: ‘The Father who sent me bears witness of me’ (John 9:18, 5:37). Where do we find the witness of God? John, like Peter, testified to hearing the voice of God on the Mount of Transfiguration. God spoke from heaven at Jesus’ baptism. He spoke through the darkness and other supernatural events at the death of Jesus, not to mention at the resurrection. God’s testimony to Jesus Christ as his Son is indeed great (5:9). It is written in the prophets and it is written in the eye-witness accounts of the apostles, including John.

**3. Testimony in the heart**

‘Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart’ (5:10 NIV). John has supplied three external witnesses, and then the witness of God himself, which is ample in any court- certainly in the court of God. Yet there are those who refuse to believe no matter how much evidence or how many witnesses are brought forward. Ultimately, the witness must come from one’s own heart. Belief and witness come together here in verse 10. Both are ‘heart matters’, and both are the work of the Holy Spirit, already referred to as the Spirit of truth (5:6).

God the Father is in heaven, but his words are with us in the Bible. God the Son is also in heaven but we have the undeniable, historic record of his life here on earth from at least four witnesses. God the Holy Spirit has been sent from heaven to dwell in the hearts of the elect of God. ‘The Spirit of God bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God’ (Rom 8:16). We can and we must know whom we have believed and be persuaded that he is able to keep us until the Day of Judgment (2Tim 1:12). In other words, we can and we must know that we have eternal life (5:11).

To reject the Spirit, whom God has sent to convict us of sin and give us eternal life, is to reject the truth revealed by all three witnesses. It is in effect saying that you cannot trust God and that God is a liar (5:10). In rejecting the call of God upon your heart and your life you do not think of yourself as calling God a liar but this is what you are doing; you are accusing God of lying. John has already told those who say they have no sin that they are making God a liar (1:10). Often it is the same person saying they are not a sinner, and doubting the truth of the gospel. I pray that person is not you!

I read an interesting story about a man in India who did not have assurance of salvation. The thing that troubled him above all else was that he had an idea that God had chosen an elect few that should be saved, and, as he had no evidence that he was among them, he could not know that he was saved. He went to a meeting where the preacher declared that a man was saved the moment he believed in Jesus, and that he possessed eternal life and could never perish. The man thought, ‘I would like to be sure of that’. When he got home he got down on his knees and prayed, ‘O God, if it is possible for a man to be sure he has eternal life, show it to me now from your word’. He turned to 1John 5 and read these verses. When he came to the verse, ‘He who does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of his Son’, he said, ‘I don’t want to make Him a liar but I don’t know what his testimony is’. He read in the next verse, ‘This is the testimony’. He put his thumb over the rest of the verse, shut his eyes and prayed, ‘O God, I have just been reading that if a man does not believe the testimony you have given of your Son, he makes you a liar’. He almost dreaded to lift his thumb, but finally he did and read, ‘And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son’. ‘Blessed be God!’ the man said, ‘So here and now I can know!’ And his faith was confirmed as he read, ‘He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son does not have life’.

In the Upper Room Jesus prayed, ‘And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent’ (John 17:3). John reminds us in this letter, ‘He who has the Son has life, and he who does not have the Son does not have life’ (5:12). Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’ and, ‘I am the resurrection and the life’ (John 14:6, 11:25). Life, eternal life, is only found in Jesus Christ our Lord. If you believe in Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord you have eternal life, a life that begins the moment you believe, and that never ends. If you do not believe you do not have life; the opposite of life is what? Stott writes, ‘The alternative is clear and uncompromising. We cannot escape its logic. Eternal life is in His Son and may be found nowhere else. It is as impossible to have life without having Christ as it is to have Christ without thereby having life also. This is because the Son is the life’. What do you say to all the witnesses to this truth?

**Approaching God in prayer**  Text: 1John 5:13-17

As the apostle John draws his letter to a close, he makes clear his reason for writing. ‘I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life’ (5:13 NIV). He writes to believers in the church, people who are in fellowship with God and with one another. For most of his letter he has been defending the humanity of Jesus, but he also defends his divinity, calling Jesus the Son of God. According to Mosaic Law, two or three witnesses were needed to establish the truth, so John supplies three witnesses, as well as the witness of God himself. Those who listen to these witnesses, and to the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, are assured of having eternal life in Jesus Christ. Such assurance brings peace and joy to our hearts (1:4).

A second reason for writing this letter was, ‘concerning those who try to deceive you’ (2:26). False teachers who had emerged within this church, and then left, were unsettling the church. Not only their doctrine but their lives were disturbing and dangerous. The immorality and selfishness that flowed from their heresy was bringing shame upon the church and upon the name of Christ. A similar ‘libertine’ doctrine seems to have entered the church at Corinth where ‘a man has his father’s wife’ (1Cor 5:1).

**1. Certain of eternal life**

John wrote this letter so that believers in the church ‘may know that you have eternal life’ (5:13). These words remind us of the closing words of John’s gospel: ‘These [words] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name’ (John 20:31). John wrote a ‘biography’ of the life of Jesus, not just for the sake of history but that those who read it might believe in Jesus Christ the Son of God and receive eternal life.

From personally seeing and hearing what Jesus did and said, and seeing him die and rise again, John believed in Jesus with all his being. He knew he had eternal life in Christ and he wanted you who are reading his words to similarly believe and have the assurance of eternal life. Are you satisfying the desire of the apostle John? Do you, like John, have assurance of being saved and of having a place in heaven? Do not listen to those who accuse you of being presumptuous. On the contrary, not to have assurance is to doubt the word of God. People call you presumptuous because they think that their good works contribute to their salvation, and are therefore uncertain if their good works will be good enough. This was the teaching of the church before the Reformation, and continues as the teaching of the Church of Rome, even though we read here in the Bible: ‘that you may know you have eternal life’ (5:13).

**2. Confidence in prayer**The fellowship we enjoy with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ is active and ongoing. As a disease pandemic sweeps the world and curtails our meeting together under one roof, we realise the importance of communication within our fellowship. We are using telephones and computers to communicate with one another and learn one another’s needs. But our fellowship with God has always been on the basis of not seeing God because he is in heaven- although John assures us that we will see Him one day (3:2). How do we communicate with our Father in heaven today? By prayer of course; by reading and listening to his word, and by prayer. Prayer is the life-line of the believer. No technology is required, just a believing heart focussed on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (Col 3:1).

It is no accident that John returns to the subject of prayer as he concludes this letter. He does not use the word prayer but writes of ‘asking anything according to His will’ (5:14). Is John asking the Father or Jesus? Jesus clearly taught his disciples to pray to, ‘Our Father in heaven’ (Mat 6:9), and he urged them to ask anything in his name (John 14:6). So we ask the Father in the name of Jesus who is our mediator, the only mediator between God and man (1Tim 2:5). We do not need a telephone for prayer but we do need a mediator; we need to pray in the name of Jesus.

John heard Jesus speak about prayer and believed him when he said, ’If you ask anything in my name I will do it’ (John 14:14). John heard Jesus pray in Gethsemane. ‘Father, if it is your will, take this cup away from me; nevertheless not my will but yours, be done’ (Luke 22:42). In this letter John has already referred to prayer, telling the believers they will receive whatever they ask for because they are keeping His commandments, in particular the commandment to love one another (3:22).

Prayer is not a ‘psychological crutch’ as pagans like to say, and as some Christians also think. Praying to the God and Father of Jesus Christ is not the same as praying to idols because John assures us that God hears our prayers- with certain provisos. Idols have ears but cannot hear (Ps 115:6, Isaiah 44:17). God may or may not have ears- Jesus certainly has ears- but the important thing is he hears us. Moreover, in praying to almighty God we know he has the power to give us what we ask for. He has power to supply all our needs, and he does (Phil 4:19) - it is our greeds that he may not supply. So let us not be delinquent in prayer but come before our heavenly Father with confidence that he hears us and is able to give us whatever we ask. Please remember that just as you consider it rude when someone interrupts your conversation, and we have rules about mobile phones, remember it is rude to interrupt prayer when the minister is praying; he is praying on your behalf so listen and then say ‘amen’.

**3. Conditions for prayer**
We come to our third point, ‘Conditions for prayer’. We have mentioned the matter of provisos or conditions that the Bible attaches to prayers that the Lord hears. We have already seen one of these back in chapter 3, that of keeping ‘His commandments’. John means the two summary commandments given by Jesus, which he refers to as, ‘Believe on the name of His [God’s] Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another’ (3:22, 23). We must come to God believing that he exists and rewards those who earnestly seek him (Heb 11:6). We must come to God without hatred or anger towards a fellow believer (Mat 5:24). Anyone who refuses to love a brother or sister in Christ does not know Christ, and their prayers will not be heard. Notice the prominence given to forgiveness in the Lord’s Prayer.

Another feature of the Lord’s Prayer is the petition, ‘Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’. John knew this prayer, and he also heard Jesus himself pray with the proviso, ‘Father, if it is your will’ (Luke 22:42 cf. James 4:15). So he now writes, ‘If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us’ (5:14). Too often our prayers are about ‘my will’ and about God making provision for ‘my will to be done’. Parents do not give their children everything they ask for because they know what is best for their children. As Jesus says, a father will not give his son a stone if he asks for bread, but if his son asks for a snake will he give him a snake? (Mat 7:9). So it is that God does not always give us what we want. He promises to supply our needs, not our greeds.

The closer we come to Christ the better we know his will for us, and the more our prayers will conform to the will of God. Paul says that we can, ‘prove what is the good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God’ (Rom 12:2). Not that Paul always prayed according to the will of God. He prayed for the Lord to remove his ‘thorn in the flesh’ and received the answer, ‘My grace is sufficient for you’, without being healed (2Cor 12:7-10). Healing is not always God’s will; nor is long life (Acts 12:2). Paul accepted God’s answer and stopped trying to convince the Lord that Paul’s will is best. Let us be persistent in prayer, and confident in coming to the Lord saying ‘not my will but yours be done’. We can be confident that God will always act according to his revealed will, as we find this in the Bible.

**4. Content of prayer**
Too often our prayers are about our will being done, as already mentioned. In fact, too often our prayers are only about us. I recall asking the Lord for a new bike, for a win in a cricket match, and help to pass my exam. Such prayers are not wrong but they are very self-centred; they were, and are, the prayers of a child. Moreover, these prayers concerned only the things of this world. The Lord knows that we need food, clothes, and shelter, and promises to supply our needs (Phil 4:19). When we ask for personal blessings, are we thinking how we might use God’s gifts to glorify his name? Man’s chief end is to glorify God not one’s self.

John indicates that we should be praying for one another, an outcome of loving one another. He is confident that it is God’s will for us to pray for a brother caught up in sin (5:16). All sin is rebellion against God and has the potential to destroy fellowship with God and the fellowship of God’s people. Christ loves his church and is jealous for his church (Eph 6:25). We should be similarly jealous and zealous for the church of God. This means praying for our church and for any members who fall into sin. We are of course, praying for our witness to unbelievers, but let us not forget that it is believers who are targeted by Satan. James urges prayer for a brother or sister who ‘wanders from the truth’ (James 5:19-20), as does the apostle Paul (Gal 6:1-2).

The closer we draw to God the better we will know his will, and the clearer we will see our lives in this world, or see things from God’s perspective. God is not as concerned about our pockets being filled with treasures as he is about our hearts being filled with his Spirit. He wants to give us treasure in heaven, but we keep asking for treasure on earth. So let us pray that God’s will be done in our lives and in the lives of our fellow believers, and let us also pray that God’s kingdom comes because, in the end, his is the only kingdom that matters.

On this note of praying for a brother ‘sinning a sin’, John categorises sin that does not lead to death and sin that leads to death (5:16). What is he talking about? Is he talking about venial or forgivable sins, and mortal sin or sin that leads to death, as set down in Roman Catholic teaching? The sin of murder is punishable by death (cf.3:12), as are other wilful or deliberate sins (Ps 19:13), but John is not here listing various sins. There is also debate as to whether John is referring to physical or spiritual death here in verse 16. Stott argues for spiritual death because John is talking about spiritual life, but then Stott gets caught up in the word ‘brother’ and argues it does not necessarily mean a believer- although John does not actually say the one sinning unto death is a brother.

Jesus spoke of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as unforgivable sin (Mat 12:31, 32). John refers to false teachers coming up in the church as having the spirit of the antichrist (4:3). ‘They went out from us because they were not of us’ (2:19). These men gave the appearance of being believers but were not. Moreover, they deliberately taught lies about God and were immoral in behaviour, potentially destroying the church and bringing shame to the name of God. Such men appeared in the early church and continue to appear in the church. Jesus faced the same situation with the ‘son of perdition’ among his disciples. Note that Jesus prayed for Peter who denied him (Luke 22:32), but not for Judas who betrayed him.

In conclusion we remember that there are believers and unbelievers in this world. It is not our position to be judging unbelievers, apart from preaching the gospel to them (1Cor 5:12-13). But it is given to the church to be praying for its members, especially members who fall into sin. And it is given to the church not to pray for but to condemn those who ‘sin unto death’. Pauls tells us to judge anyone ‘named a brother’ whose life and teaching bring shame to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (1Cor 5: 9-11). Recall Ananias and Sapphira who lied to the Holy Spirit, a sin that brought immediate physical death (Acts 5).

All sin is serious before God but most is not ‘unto death’. Within the fellowship of believers we pray for God to be merciful towards a sinning brother or sister, and for them to be restored for the sake of the fellowship, and the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Knowing the truth** Text: 1John 5:18-21

The world has changed a lot since Donald Trump became president of the USA. He coined the term ‘fake news’ as he exposed the disregard for truth among large sections of the media. ‘Why ruin a good story by a slavish regard for the truth’ they said. Not that Trump has any more regard for the truth than the press! With the rise of social media, and the decline of biblical teaching, truth has gone out the door, or, as the prophet said, ‘Truth is fallen in the street’ (Isa 54:19).

John records the Roman governor asking Jesus, ‘What is truth?’, thereby acknowledging he did not know ‘What is truth’. A similar ignorance pervades our society. Jesus was ready to answer this question- in fact, Jesus is the answer- but Pilate’s question was not genuine. He did not really care about truth. Such is the situation in our society. Hindus speak of this world as an illusion, and to some extent they are right. We might think this world is the only reality, but we would be wrong. This world is not an illusion but neither is it all that there is. Jesus is the truth, or if you like, the reality.

If you are genuinely asking, ‘What is truth’, then know that Jesus is the truth, as well as the life (John 14:6). Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17), so it is possible for you, and anyone in this world, to know the truth, and the freedom found only in the truth: ‘If the Son makes you free you shall be free indeed’ (John 8:32, 36). Tragically, many do not even know that they are slaves to sin and Satan.

The apostle John closes his letter with three ‘we know’ statements, three affirmations or assurances. In his gospel John quoted the blind man whose eyes were opened by Jesus as saying; ‘One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see’ (John 9:25). The Jewish leaders did all they could to deny this reality or truth. Still today many try to deny the truth of the Bible. They attack the Bible from historical, literary, scientific, and every other angle. Sadly, some Christians are intimidated and draw back from affirming the truths of the Bible. They take a softly, softly approach, and some even side with the world in attacking those who dare to quote the Bible.

The three assurances given by John sum up much of his teaching in this letter: Know that one born of God does not sin, know we belong to God not Satan, and, know Jesus has come and that we can know the true God.

**1. Know that one born of God does not sin**

John is not saying a believer cannot or does not sin because he has already said that anyone claiming they have not sinned makes God a liar (1:10). Besides, he has just urged prayer for a brother who is sinning (5:16). John dealt with this matter back in chapter 3, where we concluded that he was talking about continuing or habitual sin (3:6, 9). New birth means we are a new creation in Christ Jesus. Our new heart is focussed on obeying Christ’s commands and on pleasing our heavenly Father. Sin is by nature selfish, and as believers we have died to self and to the world, that we might live for God (Rom 6:11-14, Gal 2:20).

You, like me, will have noticed that this is not easy. We continue to experience the weakness of the flesh, and war within our hearts (Rom 7:23). Satan is always ready to fan into flame the desires of the flesh (Eph 6:12). But John assures us that the evil one cannot harm one who is born of God (5:18). Why not? Because, ‘He who is born of God keeps or guards himself’ (5:18). While it is true that we are to guard ourselves by putting on the armour of God (Eph 6, Jude 21), the best reading of this verse sees it as Christ guarding or protecting us (cf. Jude 24). John does not usually refer to Jesus as ‘born of God’ but he is ‘begotten of the Father’.

Jesus is fully human, and as such knows the weakness of our flesh. He resisted Satan’s attacks with absolute obedience to the Father. He died and rose again in victory over sin, death and the devil (Phil 4:7). Job suffered from attacks of Satan upon his family and his flesh but God was still guarding him from Satan’s ultimate weapon, death.

Many years ago I was hiking in the Himalayas with our son and his friends. We were up above the tree live and approaching the snowline. We came to the steep side of a mountain. I ended up on my hands and knees grabbing tufts of grass and searching for a rock foothold. On one occasion I looked around and the view some 2000m into the valley below was awesome, but I feared I would be down there sooner than I hoped! As I clung on, the thought came to me that not only was I clinging on but that the Lord was holding on to me. I will never forget that scary moment, and I hope you will never forget that, as a born-again Christian seeking to obey the commands of Christ, the Lord is upholding you, keeping you safe from the evil one.

We keep referring to the Lord’s Prayer as we study this letter. Last time we were reminded of the need to pray according to the will of God, and of praying for one another. We begin this prayer saying, ‘Our Father in heaven’ which reminds us of the relationship we have with God the Father through the grace of Jesus Christ. John keeps calling us ‘little children’ because we are the children of God (5:21). Today we are reminded of the petition, ‘Deliver us from evil’, or the ‘evil one’ (Mat 6:13). We should not be praying this prayer unless we believe, firstly, that there is an evil one called Satan, and secondly, that God is able to deliver us from him. Let us remember that, ‘He who is in you is greater that he who is in the world’ (4:4).

**2. Know we belong to God, not Satan**

‘We know that we are of God’ (5:19). This is the assurance we have when we understand the doctrines of grace, which tell us that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works (Eph 2:8-9). By his word and his Spirit, God draws us and gives us to Christ, who promises, ‘no one shall snatch them out of my hand’ (John 6:14, 10:28). If you are born again of the Spirit of God you will know that you are in his hand forever. You will not fear being taken away by Satan. You will be tempted by Satan but you will be able to resist temptation because again, ‘He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world’. ‘Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you’ (James 4:7-8). Is this your experience?

Some Christians wonder why the people of this world do not accept them. They do all they can to fit into this world but find themselves like the proverbial square peg in a round hole. If you find this world a comfortable place, be careful. Remember Lot in Sodom- and remember Lot’s wife (Luke 17:32). ‘Little children’, as John calls you, do not think it strange that the world does not accept you. Do not keep trying to fit into this world. Remember, ‘the whole world lies in the sway/power of the wicked one (5:19).

Again, in the Lord’s Prayer, as you pray, ‘Your kingdom come’ you are acknowledging that this world is not the kingdom of God. It is, in fact, the kingdom of Satan. Satan is the ruler of this world (John 14:30). He tempted Adam and Eve and they sinned. The blame-game started and they were cast out of the garden into a world of violence and murder, which is our world. Do you think John is wrong when he says that this world ‘lies under the sway’ or the control of the evil one? At the cross and the resurrection, Christ defeated Satan; he is a defeated enemy, but an enemy who is stronger than any human being who is not in Christ.

God does not see this world as we do. He does not see people of different genders or generations or religions or political parties or economic status. He sees people who belong to him and people who belong to Satan. If the whole world is under the control of Satan, then people who do not belong to God belong to Satan. John Stott writes, “Everyone belongs either to ‘us’ or to ‘the world’. Everyone is therefore either ‘of God’ or ‘of the evil one’. There is no third category”.

Many do not see this clear line of demarcation. When Jesus told Jews wanting to kill him that they belonged to the devil they were shocked (John 8:44). You and your unbelieving friends might also be shocked. For myself, I was shocked at the comment of James Montgomery Boice: ‘Most persons are what we might call free agents’. He thinks those referred to in John 8:44 were ‘an exceptional case’. Thankfully, and despite the contradiction, he then says, ‘once again John leaves no room for a third alternative, for either a person is of God or is in the power of the evil one’. This is your choice, dear friend. You are born in sin and into the kingdom of Satan, but you can be born again into the kingdom of God where Satan has no authority over you.

**3. Know Jesus has come, and we can know the true God**

We come to the third and final ‘we know’, which is double-barrelled with two ‘we knows’. In doing so we come to the heart of the gospel, which is, ‘the Son of God has come and has given us understanding’ (5:20). This is not new knowledge because John began his letter witnessing to God’s revelation in his Son, Jesus Christ. The central message of the gospel is Jesus Christ sent into this world by God to save us from the clutches of Satan, sin and death- a deadly trio! This gospel is to be preached in all the world, and all who listen and understand will be saved. ‘Understanding’, according to John, is something that is given; he is not speaking of intellectual approval but of experiential knowledge, of our hearts being moved by the Holy Spirit such that we confess our sin and believe in Jesus Christ.

We began this sermon talking about truth, about Jesus being the truth or the reality. John speaks of this understanding given by God as coming to ‘know Him who is true’ (5:20). There is only one true God and Jesus Christ is his Son. All other objects or beings that people call gods are not true gods. When people worship false gods, gods that are a lie, they live lives that are a lie. They live to themselves and without moral restraint. John is not so much thinking of pagans and their gods of wood and stone as of those who worship a ‘false Christ’, a Christ of their imagination rather than the Christ of the Bible.

The Gnostics spoke a lot about knowledge, secret knowledge rather than knowledge of the truth. And as we have seen, their lives were without moral restraint. Cerinthus made Christ into a phantom, divine one day but not the next. And so we have all manner of ‘Christ’s’ being set up and worshipped today. Some see him as a great teacher who met a tragic death; some make him into a stone or wooden idol to worship. What do you know and believe about Christ? Has God given you an understanding by which you know him as the only true God, and Jesus as his Son whom he sent into this world (cf. John 17:3)?

It is in knowing the true God and being in Christ that we have eternal life (5:20). Who is ‘Him who is true’ that John refers to in this verse- God or Jesus? Opinions vary. Initially it may be God, but when he writes, ‘we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ’ he seems to referring to Jesus (the NIV, ‘even in his Son’, gives this idea). John goes on, ‘This is the true God and eternal life’. Many modern scholars say that all three references to ‘Him who is true’ are to God. They acknowledge that if the reference is to Jesus then we have here, ‘the most powerful statement of the deity of Jesus in the NT’. John speaks of eternal life being ‘with the Father’ and being revealed in the Son (1:1, 2 cf. John 17:2). Moreover, this is how the church fathers and the Reformers understood this verse, and in fact used it to defend the deity of Christ.

John closes his letter with a simple greeting, ‘Little children’, and with a clear warning, ‘Keep yourselves from idols’ (5:21). The mention of idols seems out of place, but he is not necessarily referring to lumps of wood or stone, as plentiful as these would have been in Ephesus. He is referring to anything or anyone that people put before the true and living God, and Jesus Christ his Son. The false teachers condemned in this letter were guilty of idolatry. Jesus warned John not to be deceived by ‘false Christs’ (Mat 24:4-5), and John in turn warns us. False Christs are most likely to arise in the church. We must be alert, and we must decisively reject false teachers as idol worshippers.

**Truth and love** Text: 2John

The book of 2John consists of only thirteen verses, one less than 3John. These are the shortest books in the Bible. They are letters written in a format typical of the time, with the writer introducing himself as ‘The elder’ or *‘presbuteros’* in Greek. 2John is addressed to ‘the elect lady’ or ‘the chosen lady and her children’ (v1). I have just introduced you to two identities about whom many pages have been written, namely ‘the elder’ and ‘the elect lady’. We believe that the writer is John the apostle, who also wrote 1John. We previously referred to this second letter and this title because in 1John the writer does not identify himself.

‘The elder’ seems a strange title, given that there were a number of elders in each church in those days. The term refers to an office in the church but also indicates a man of advanced age. The apostle John would have been around 90yrs old when he wrote these letters and was probably widely known by this honorific title, ‘The elder’. Even so, some scholars think this is not the apostle but another man by the name of John. In any case, it is clear from the contents that these three letters are the work of one writer.

The contents or subject matter of 2John is that of truth and love, both of which are found in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6) and John believed him. Jesus also said, ‘the truth shall make you free’, and then in the next breath, ‘if the Son makes you free you will be free indeed’ (John 8:32, 36). John began his gospel declaring that grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:14, 17).

The other subject matter common to 1John and 2John is that of false teachers; John calls them deceivers and antichrists (v7, cf.1John 2:18, 22, 4:3). Gnostic teaching was entering the church, teaching that denied the full humanity of Jesus, and hence the centrality of the incarnation, and even the cross, to the gospel. Today we have those who deny the incarnation and the resurrection because they are ‘unscientific’, and the result is the same, namely a gospel that is powerless to save. John writes of these false teachers as having gone out of the church (v7, 1John 2:9), but clearly they were still operating under the guise of ‘gospel teachers’. Still today we have false teachers coming up in the church and leading faithful believers astray with their zealous but false teaching. Where do the Jehovah Witnesses and the Mormons get most of their followers?

As we listen to, and learn from, this letter of 2John, we will do so under three subheadings: ‘Lady elect’, ‘Live in truth and love’, and, ‘Look out for deceivers and antichrists’.

**1. Lady elect**

‘The elder’, the apostle John, wrote this letter to ‘the elect lady and her children’ (v1). Is this a real person, or is John personifying the church? The church is sometimes figuratively referred to as the bride of Christ (Eph 5:25, Rev 19:7, 21:2, 9), and Peter refers to Rome as ‘Babylon’ at the end of his first letter, but there is no apparent reason why John should be referring to the church figuratively in this letter. Indeed, his following letter is addressed to ‘the beloved Gaius’, a real person. There is a question about the plural pronouns found in verses 6,8,10, and 12, but John writes to ‘the elect lady and her children’.

This looks like a real lady with a large family who was prominent in a house church in Ephesus. If her sister was present with John at the time (v13), he had reason to write to her personally, and through her to the whole church that may have met in her house (Rom 16:5). To write, ‘whom I love in the truth’ is not inappropriate when addressing a woman and her children, certainly not when John adds, ‘but also all those who have known the truth’ (v1). Love here is *agape* or self-sacrificing love, love that is learned from Christ and love that is present in the hearts and lives of those who know Jesus Christ as the Son of God, who gave his life for theirs.

You will recall John speaking about the truth, as in God the Son, and his Spirit, abiding in those who believe and confess Jesus to be the Son of God. He also said, ‘he who abides in love abides in God and God in him’ (1John 4:15,16). ‘Abide’ can also be translated as ‘remain’. When truth enters our hearts by grace through faith in Jesus Christ it or ‘He’ remains there forever. The truth does not change and will not leave us, in contrast to false teachers who changed and ‘went out from us’ (v7, 1John 2:19). This does not mean true Christians cannot stumble. Paul writes, ‘let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall’ (1Cor 10:12). This letter is a warning to believers not to be unsettled or deceived by teaching that is not true. The ‘secret’, if you like, is found in Jude v 24: ‘Now unto Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and present you faultless before the presence of his glory with great joy’.

The introduction to this letter comes with a greeting that is not just empty words. We no longer write letters as such; our emails are sent with short greetings or none at all. When in India we wrote on ‘aerogrammes’, a piece of paper stamped and ready to fold before posting. I am reminded of these when I think of John writing on a piece of papyrus of a fixed size (v12). I used to begin, ‘Greetings in the Lord’ to people who knew the Lord.

John knew this ‘lady’ was a believer so his greeting was distinctly Christian. He writes, ‘Grace, mercy, and peace will be with you’ or with us (v3). Grace is favour toward guilty and undeserving sinners, mercy is pity towards those who are needy and helpless, and peace is what Jesus gives those who love him; ‘My peace I give to you’ (John 14:27). Grace, mercy and peace are gifts from God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son (v3). If you have these gifts you are a blessed person. John knew these gifts and wants you to know Jesus, and know these gifts also. His final word of greeting is ‘in truth and love’, the title of this sermon. Jesus is truth and God is love, as we previously noted; John further explains truth and love in the following verses.

**2. Live in truth and love**

John begins his short letter rejoicing that some of her children were ‘walking in truth’ (v4). He says he found this to be the case, maybe during a visit to her church. Again, truth or reality is Jesus Christ, as revealed in his gospel. John’s gospel is, of course, what he received from God. He saw and believed the truth, who gave ‘commandment from the Father’ (v4). The commandment Jesus gave, as written in his gospel (John 13:34), and in his first letter (1John 3:11), was to ‘love one another as I have loved you’ (v5).

This was not a new commandment but an abiding commandment because God is love and, ‘he who loves God must love his brother also’ (1John 4:21). Anyone who is born again knows God, and the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, but this love must be shown in our life. We must walk in the truth and walk in love. This is the commandment John urges the lady and her children, and us also, to obey (v6).

Some Christians think and even say that commandments and doctrine are not important. What is important, so they say, is love. They take hold of John’s words, ‘God is love’ and run with these in doing good works and caring for the creation. But is their running in the direction the Lord desires? Doctrine is not for them; these Christians want action, they want to change the world and make it a place of love. But how do we know what love is if we do not bother to look at Jesus? ‘This is how we know what love is, Jesus laid down his life for us’ (1John 3:16). And why did Jesus do this? Did he have to lay down his life for us? The more we learn about Jesus the more we learn about love, about truth and love. Doctrine is fundamental to living a life of love, which is the same as living in obedience to His commandments.

On the other hand there are Christians who study the Bible while locked away their ivory tower- before we all got locked away due to corona virus! We still come across legalists or Pharisees who may be walking in truth, as they see it, but not in love. But ‘faith without works is dead’ says James, and again, ‘I will show you my faith by my works’ (James 2:20, 18). Truth and love cannot be separated any more than faith and works. Truth is found in Jesus who is found in the Bible. Love is found in Jesus who is found in the Bible. There is no escaping the Bible, and no avoiding walking according to the commandments to ‘love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength’, and to ‘love one another’. Stott writes, ‘Our love grows soft if it is not strengthened by truth, and our truth grows hard if it is not softened by love’.

**3. Look out for deceivers and antichrists**

When loves ‘grows soft’, as Stott puts it, deceivers are able to enter in and undermine loosely held truth. Some churches overlook matters of truth as they strive for love and unity; they accept anyone who appears loving. On the other hand, churches in which truth has grown hard are also vulnerable; they accept anyone who speaks the language of orthodoxy. Truth and love must go together in our life, and in the teaching and life of the church. False teachers usually come up short in both attributes.

John reminds the ‘elect lady and her children’ that deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh’ (v7). His first letter was a warning about false teachers and so is this one. He gave the church three tests, doctrinal, moral and social, which they could apply to teachers who came to them. The Gnostic heresy was on the rise with people like Cerinthus saying deity came upon Jesus at his baptism and left him before the cross, thereby denying the truth of the incarnation, of Jesus Christ coming in the flesh. Jesus was more of a phantom than a man.

John warned this lady or this church of the danger of listening to these deceivers. To distract in any way from the gospel, especially the truth of the Trinity, would undermine the whole gospel and render it powerless to save souls from death. Salvation is not just about the sincerity with which someone believes. Salvation is first and foremost about what you believe, about truth, the truth about Jesus. Belief in the truth must of course, be sincere. John warns believers to be careful ‘not to lose those things we worked for’ lest they not ‘receive a full reward’; he is not referring to salvation which is a gift but of a heavenly reward for faithful service (v8).

In verse 9 the word ‘transgress’ means ‘run ahead’. False teachers were ‘progressive’ people. They had new teaching, ‘new revelations’ and ‘higher knowledge’. Evolution came along as ‘progressive’ teaching, as science which could not be disputed; that was until some teachers were caught lying. Same-sex marriage and legalising drugs are ‘progressive’ ideas that have entered some churches. If someone comes to you with a new or ‘progressive’ version of the gospel that is ‘acceptable to modern men’, have nothing to do with them. The only direction you can ‘progress’ if you do not have the truth of Jesus is away from God.

Thanks to roads built by the Romans, the apostle Paul and other evangelists could travel from to town to town preaching and teaching the gospel. When then needed a place to stay, local Christians would take them in (e.g. Jason in Acts 17:5 and Gaius in Acts 18:7). Christians were taught to be hospitable (Rom 12:13). Judaizers and false teachers travelled the same roads and expected the same hospitably. John told the ‘elect lady’ not to greet or take into her house any false teachers. To do so might ‘poison’ her faith or that of her children, and would also leave the ‘stain’ of tacit approval on her house; ‘he who greets him shares in his evil deeds’ (v11).

Does this denial of hospitality seem harsh to you? To many, especially those holding liberal doctrine, it does, and they try explain away what John writes, or simply say he is wrong (e.g. Dodd); some say it was just the church that was not to let them in to preach. But an evangelist I heard warning believers about the Jehovah Witnesses, referred to this verse as he told us not to welcome such people and not even to given them a cup of water. If anyone comes to you claiming to be a Christian but denying the Trinity, and denying the permanent union of the two natures in Christ, do not welcome them. You can welcome heathens of course, but not heretics. Hospitality, love, and unity are important but not at the expense of truth.

John closes by sharing a greeting from the children of the lady’s ‘elect sister’, and promising or hoping to share more things when he meets her face to face (v12, 13). He had come to the end of his sheet of papyrus! With typical grace, ‘the elder’ closes with the words, ‘that our joy may be full’ (1John 1:4). May your joy be full today and every day as we await the return of Jesus?

**Imitate what is good not evil** Text: 3John

In a society afflicted with coronavirus, hospitality in the sense of welcoming anyone to stay in your house is restricted by law. Even having someone come for a meal is difficult. But what was it like before this? Societies differ, and they change over time. Modern Australian families rarely have visitors stay with them; they are put up at a motel or ‘air bnb’. But in some societies even strangers are welcomed to stay. We have had strangers stay, as in the friend of a friend. In fact our neighbour took in a friend of ours who had come unannounced from India. We were away at the time and this neighbour saw him outside our place. He took him in, and the next day put him on a bus to Grafton where we were staying. Do you have rules about people staying at your place? Do your visitors or relatives sometimes outstay their welcome? Do you say one week free and after that make a contribution if you are able?

Hospitality was an important matter in the early church because evangelists were on the road preaching and teaching the gospel, and places offering accommodation were generally of ill repute. John writes his letters within this context. An extra-biblical document called the Didache, dating back to the second century, was discovered in Constantinople in 1875. It is a book of church order which includes rules about welcoming prophets and teachers. If the teacher ‘is perverse and teaches another doctrine’ he was not to welcomed. But if he taught the truth he was to be ‘received as the Lord’. He could stay one or two nights, but if three he was a false prophet! If he asked for money he was a false prophet. He was to be given only bread and sent on his way. There was provision for allowing him to stay longer if he was a craftsman who contributed towards his upkeep. You will recall the apostle Paul and his tent making. A true teacher who settled among them was ‘worthy of his food’ or maintenance.

John’s second letter was a warning to the church not to welcome or receive anyone who came along teaching heresy regarding the Trinity, particularly the permanent union of two natures in Christ. His third letter gives us further insight into the practice of hosting itinerant preachers in the church. The apostles were the first to hit the road as it were, with the message of the gospel. They went out with apostolic authority, having been with Jesus for three years and having witnessed his resurrection. John was probably the last living apostle, but they had mentored men to continue evangelism and ministry of the word.

John’s third letter expresses dismay that a man who exercised undue power within a church was refusing to welcome evangelists sent by John, and was also stopping others from showing the expected hospitality. He did this not because of their doctrine but because he was a bully. Churches need strong leaders but not bullies like this man called Diotrephes. Unfortunately, men like Diotrephes are all too common in the church, and many, if not most, church splits are about ego, not doctrine or church practice.

John refers to three men in this letter so our subjects will be these men, and a fourth who is John himself. Our sermon title directs us to consider which of these men we should imitate. The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth saying, ‘Imitate me as I also imitate Christ’ (1Cor 11:1). We are to imitate Christ or God (Eph 5:1) but it is natural for us to imitate people around us. In doing this however, we must be discerning. ‘Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good’ (v 11). This imitating extends to how we react to people around us. If evil is done to us, do we react in like manner? Not if we are listening to what Jesus says about turning the other cheek (Mat 5:39, Rom 12:17), and not if we are imitating the apostle John and his fellow servant in the gospel, Demetrius.

**1. John**

John and his brother James were fishermen who followed Jesus and whom Jesus appointed his apostles. Mark tells us that Jesus called them ‘Sons of thunder’. On one occasion they wanted to call down fire from heaven on a village that rejected Jesus, but Jesus rebuked them (Luke 9:54). Thankfully, John was not about to call down fire from heaven on this man Diotrephes who rejected him or his emissaries. John firmly denounced men preaching ‘another gospel’ calling them deceivers and antichrists (2John 7), but he did not denounce Diotrephes in the same way. It was his conduct that was in question because it was not that of a man walking in the truth; his creed and conduct were not consistent, assuming his creed was ‘in the truth’ as John would say.

While not referring directly to this bully in the church, John does state that ‘he who does evil has not seen God’ (v 11). Creed and conduct must be in accord. As Jesus said, ‘out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, false witness and blasphemies’ (Mat 15:19). John would question the heart of this man rejecting brothers in Christ and removing believers from the church. He would do so gently but firmly. There is no mention of him using his apostolic authority because it was not a matter of doctrine but of living according to accepted doctrine. John, who called himself ‘the elder’, would come and hopefully lead this man to repentance; in the words of the apostle Paul, ‘that he may come to his senses and escape the snare of the devil’ (2Tim 2:24-26). Today we have church courts to deal with matters of discipline like this (Mat 18:17).

**2. Gaius**

John’s letter is addressed to Gaius, presumably a member of this particular church. Gaius was a common Roman name so there is no point in trying to link this man with others of the same name at Corinth or Macedonia or Derbe (Acts 18:7,19:29,20:4). Gaius was a man John could confide in regarding the troublesome character, Diotrephes. John expresses brotherly love towards Gaius, even fatherly love; he may have led Gaius to the Lord (v1, 4). Pastors are concerned for all believers, for all in their flock, but especially for those whom they have seen come to believe in Jesus. Brothers who came to John reported of the truth that was in Gaius and was being displayed in his life (v 3). The truth is Jesus Christ, so Jesus was abiding in the heart of Gaius, and he was obeying the commands of Christ, including the command to ‘love one another’ (2John 5).

John’s greeting includes a prayer that Gaius ‘may prosper in all things and be in health’ (v 2). This is the only place that we find the word ‘health’ in the NT; yet today we see this word emblazoned on billboards everywhere. Growing up I never saw or heard of a gym but now they more common than churches. Health and the physical body have become the new god. That said, God gave us a physical body and we are to care for it with good food and exercise (Eph 5:28). John wanted Gaius to be fit and healthy as a servant of the Lord. At the same time he wanted his soul to prosper; he wanted him to prosper in body and soul. We are not just a body like animals but are made with a body and a soul. This is where the evolutionists have failed us, and left a generation filled with problems of the soul. Sellers of mind, body and soul therapies have sprung up, but the problem continues. Let us pray for healthy bodies and healthy souls.

Gaius was welcoming brethren and even strangers into his house; he had an open home (v 5). This does not mean he welcomed self-confessed heretics, as in people who denied the humanity or divinity of Jesus (2John 7). Travelling evangelists often carried letters of commendation by which ‘strangers’ were welcomed (1Cor 16:3, 2Cor 3:1). We have welcomed unknown Christians but usually on the basis of another Christian’s recommendation. I recall our children asking, ‘Dad, who it the man staying at your place’, and answering, ‘I don’t really know, but so-and-so asked us to take him in’. I am also reminded of what is written in Hebrews 13: ‘Do not forget to entertain strangers, for in so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels’. And also of what Jesus said to the apostles when he sent them out: ‘He who receives you receives me’ (Mat 10:40, 25:40).

In welcoming missionaries, Gaius was joining in gospel ministry; he was becoming a fellow worker for the truth (v 8). The work of preaching and teaching is a shared ministry. Some have the gift of preaching and teaching, and others the gift of hospitality or giving. How shall they preach unless they are sent? (Rom 10:15). And when they are sent they need support. Gaius was to be discerning of heretics and ‘free- loaders’, what the Didache calls ‘Christmongers’, but evangelists whose creed and conduct were true and consistent were worthy of hospitality and support. Such men did not ask for or receive support from pagans but came to the church expecting support for ministry ‘for His names sake’ (v 7). As someone who has been on the receiving end of such support, let me urge you to support the work of true Christian mission as the Lord enables you.

The brothers Gaius welcomed told the church about his love (v 6). This was part of the testimony that was brought to John from the church where Gaius worshipped, part of his walking in the truth (v 3). Gaius stands beside Samuel, and Jesus himself, as one who enjoyed favour both with the Lord and with men (1Sam 2:26, Luke 2:52). Elders must have a good testimony among those outside as well as inside the church (1Tim 3:2, 7). In contrast to Diotrephes, Gaius was hospitable. And John urged him to complete the good work he had begun by taking in the servants of the Lord and by sending them on their way with his blessing. That blessing included food and supplies for the journey, and maybe a bus or train ticket!

**3. Diotrephes**

The next character we meet in this letter is the complete opposite of Gaius. If the truth was in him, he certainly was not walking in the truth as he lorded it over everyone in the church. Diotrephes was proud and arrogant, a man who ‘loves to have the pre-eminence’ (v 9) - they probably called him ‘Diotrephes the dictator’! His name was not common, maybe because it belonged to the nobility. In the church Christ must have the pre-eminence, but this man ‘loves to have the pre-eminence’ says John (v 9, Col 1:18).

It appears that John had written to the church but the carriers of his letter were not received by this seemingly self-appointed leader. He not only rejected John’s men but John himself, and his authority in the church. To add to this rejection he started gossiping maliciously about John and the brothers he sent. He was a man of many words with nothing to say. A friend told me that he was looking forward to a meeting on ‘zoom’ because he could mute a person who loves to prate. Diotrephes was more interested in politics and power than he was in imitating Christ and serving the Lord. He did not stop with rejecting believers and slandering the apostle, he bullied other members of the church into doing the same thing. Not content with refusing to welcome brothers himself, ‘he also stops those who want to do so, and puts them out of the church’ (10 NIV).

This man had a lot to answer for, if not to John and the church then certainly to the Lord. It is a wonder that anyone was left in the church! John was hoping to come and deal with this bully in the church. If he refused to repent he would no doubt be put out of the church himself. Sadly, such men continue to be found in the church. A promising young preacher in an American church refused to listen to the elders of the church- or anyone for that matter. Eventually the church had to sack him because of his arrogant behaviour. He was a bully just like Diotrephes. I see signs outside schools declaring, ‘No bullies here’ and your workplace does not tolerate bullies. The church should not tolerate bullies either!

**4. Demetrius**

If you imitate anyone in the church let it not be Diotrephes or his likeness. Imitate what is good not evil, says John. His final character, like Gaius, is the exact opposite of Diotrephes the dictator. All we are told about Demetrius is that he has ‘a good testimony from all and from the truth itself’ (v 12). That is all, but it is all we need to know. If pagans, and even Christians, cannot say a bad word about you then what is the Lord going to say? Demetrius had a good testimony from truth itself, meaning from the Lord himself.

Demetrius may have been the brother rejected by Diotrephes when he came with John’s first letter, which we do not have (v 9). If so, he acted with grace, refusing to enter in the power game that Diotrephes was focussed on. John testified to the faith and character of Demetrius and knew that Gaius would agree with him; Demetrius was probably carrying this second letter from John to Gaius and the church that was suffering at the hands of this arrogant and malicious bully.

This letter is brief, like that of 2John, because John wanted to come and speak face to face with Gaius, and with Diotrephes- and his sheet of papyrus was finished. John sends greetings from his friends to the friends of Gaius whom John knew but had no space to write their names (v 14). He closes with words he heard from the risen Jesus: ‘Peace to you’ (John 20:19, 21, and 26). And I shall close with the same words: ‘Peace to you’.

**Contend for the faith** Text: Jude v1-3

Years ago while living in India we were driving to town in a jeep. An evangelist was staying with us at the time and he was sitting in the back with our children. After many long trips our children had become used to listening to stories, so they asked this man to tell them a story. ‘I will tell you a Bible story’ he said. In unison they replied, ‘Not another Bible story. We know all the Bible stories’. Their missionary parents kept silent with embarrassment. Those children are now grown up and telling their own children Bible stories, but many grow up thinking they know everything there is to know about God and about Jesus after a few years in Sunday school.

It is said that a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, and this is often true when it comes to the Bible. Ignorance of the Bible is widespread today, even in the church. In Africa it is said that the church is a mile wide and an inch deep; and so we hear of the church executing witches and the like. In the west we see mainline churches supporting homosexual marriage. We also see individual churches popping up with a focus on some particular doctrine or practice such that they lose sight of the gospel itself. If they themselves do not drift from the truth they become vulnerable to being led into error.

In looking at the NT letters, letters written by the apostle Paul, Peter or John, and even this letter by Jude, notice that most of them are directed at error or false teaching entering the church. We find Paul urging Timothy to ‘fight the good fight of faith’ as he confronted men who wanted to argue about anything and everything, men whose only aim was to get rich, and men who wanted to throw of all moral restraint (1Tim 6:12, 2Tim 6). Peter similarly warned the elect of God against false teachers who were ruled by the lust of the flesh, men who even denied the Lord (2Peter 2:1, 14). The used, or misused, the gospel of grace as a licence for immorality.

We will notice considerable overlap between Peter and Jude as we look at this short but powerful letter penned by Jude. It is a letter that is somewhat neglected in churches today; when was the last time you read or heard read this letter? The beautiful benediction, of course, is well known and recited. As we look at the opening words of this letter today, we will do under four subheadings: author, audience, greeting, and goal.

**1. Author**

Letters written in the first century adhere to a certain structure in which the writer first identifies himself and then identifies his audience. Jude identifies himself as Jude, or Judas, or in Hebrew ‘Judah’. Being one of Jacob’s twelve sons, Judah was a popular name- that was until a man called Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus and went and hanged himself. I do not know anyone called Judas, although I have met a Ben Hur and a Hitler Singh! There was a second apostle called Judas or Thaddaeus (Luke 6:16, Mat 10:3 Acts 1:13). But there was also a Jude or Judas among the half-brothers of Jesus; James being another half-brother (Mark 6:3). These brothers did not follow Jesus until after his death and resurrection (Acts 1:14). James became an elder and leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 17:13, Gal 1:19). His prominence could be the reason Jude refers to James as his brother (v 1) - his father Joseph had long since died.

But before identifying himself as the brother of James he identifies as ‘a bondservant of Jesus Christ’ (v 1). Even though Jesus was his half-brother he knew him a Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He was first and foremost a bondservant of Jesus Christ, like the apostle Peter (2Peter 1:1). It is true that Jesus called his disciples ‘friends’ (John 15:15), and as believers we are in Christ as adopted children of God, but let us remember how Jude refers to Jesus even when he was his biological half-brother. We are to call ourselves servants not brothers of Christ.

**2. Audience**

Letters are written with an audience in mind and are sent to that person or persons or church. Paul wrote to Timothy, and John to Gaius; Paul also wrote to churches. Some letters it seems were intended for circulation among churches in a region. This letter penned by Jude, like that of 2Peter, seems to be written with a wide audience in mind, and audience of all God’s elect. If you are one of the elect then this letter is for you, even if you are living two thousand years after it was written. You belong to the church that is a continuation of the NT church. Our doctrines are the same and the problems and challenges we face today are essentially the same.

With regard to the dating of writing, the parallels between this letter and that of 2Peter suggest a time around 65AD. This is significant in that the false teaching was not really Gnosticism or a denial of the Trinity that John was countering in his much later written letters. Some Gnostics revelled in immorality but not necessarily for the same reason as these earlier heretics. Church goers who are not true believers will find a way to satisfy the lusts of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1John 2:16).

Jude, as we will discover, liked the number three. He describes his audience in three ways, and later greets them with three words. His audience are ‘called’, ‘sanctified’ or set apart by God the Father, and ‘preserved’ or kept by Jesus Christ (v 1). Anyone who believes in Jesus does so because they have been called by God (John 6:44). By his Spirit, God quickens our dead hearts, making us alive in Christ. Those whom he predestines he calls, and these he justifies (Rom 8:28). Charles Spurgeon, in his book, ‘Lectures to my Students’ wrote: ‘I believe in the doctrine of election, because I am quite sure that if God had not chosen me I should never have chosen him; and I am sure he chose me before I was born, or else he never would have chosen me afterwards. And he must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I could not find any reason in myself why he should have looked upon me with special love’. How tragic that some think they are saved by their good works, and others that by their own free will they turned to God and exercised the faith necessary to be saved.

Jude assures us that we are called, that we are set apart and loved by God, and that we are preserved or kept in Jesus Christ. He does not mention the Holy Spirit, but God calls us by his Spirit, so all three persons of the Trinity are referred to in these three wonderful truths of salvation. The third of these truths, being kept in Christ or by Christ, is a great comfort is it not? It is a truth we know as the doctrine of assurance, which follows from the doctrine of election. It was a truth uppermost in the thoughts of Jesus when he prayed for his disciples saying, ‘I kept them in your name. Those whom you gave me I have kept and none of them is lost, except the son of perdition’ (John 17:11, 12). No one is able to snatch us out of the hands of our all-powerful Saviour and Lord. We are saved by the grace and power of God and we stay saved or are kept by his grace and power.

Jude’s benediction that we referred to, is wonderfully comforting because he speaks of ‘Him who is able to keep you from stumbling’ (v 24). As believers we continue to live in this fallen world. We face trails and temptations almost every day. Like the disciples on the lake, we will encounter storms that threaten to drown us but, in the words of a chorus I once heard, ‘With Christ in the vessel we can smile at the storm, as we go sailing home’.

**3. Greeting**

‘Mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you’ writes Jude as he greets his audience (v 2). Paul and Peter wrote, ‘Grace and peace’ (1Peter 1:2, 2Peter 1:2) while John wrote, ‘Grace, mercy, and peace’ (2John v3). We expected Jude to have three elements in his greeting! Peace is common to all these greetings because Jesus promised peace to all his disciples (John 15:27). Peace is a most precious gift that we receive for the Lord when we believe, peace with God and peace with one another. By greeting believers in this way, we remind them of this peace. Mercy and/or grace are also common to these greetings. Mercy refers to the Lord’s compassion, even pity, upon us as lost and hopeless sinners. Mercy rules out merit. None of these greetings refer to the achievements or works of fellow believers. Paul was ready give thanks to God for the life and ministry of those he wrote to, but that is all.

Love, the third element of this greeting, is unique to Jude. Even the apostle who writes, ‘God is love’ and, ‘Beloved, if God so loved us we also ought to love one another’, does not actually greet anyone with ‘love’, although he does speak of truth and love (1John 4:8, 11, 2John v3). Love, like peace, is a gift of God, something we receive in our hearts by His Spirit (1John 3:16, Gal 5:22). Jude’s greeting is that these gifts ‘be multiplied to you’. He is praying for the Lord to bless anyone who reads his letter with ever increasing knowledge of the mercy, love, and peace that is found in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**4. Contend for the faith**

Jude begins his letter proper in verse 3 with, ‘Beloved’. He started out with the intention of writing ‘concerning our common salvation’. He was going to share truths of the gospel in Jesus Christ. Like most in the early church, he first heard the gospel from the apostles (v 17). Although Jude, as a half-brother of Jesus, watched Jesus grow up, saw his mighty works and heard his wonderful words, he did not believe until joining the apostles after the resurrection (Acts 1:14), at the same time as his brother James. And the things that he learned he was eager to pass on to others. He wanted to remind them of the wonderful doctrines of grace, of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. He wanted to encourage them in living according to the commands of Christ. If he was in contact with the apostle Peter, as seems to have been the case, he would have been eager to share things being taught by the apostle.

But his initial intention for writing suddenly changed. Jude ‘found it necessary’ to urge them to ‘contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints’ (v 3). He must have encountered or heard of false teachers entering churches, undermining the gospel and unsettling faithful believers. If he was in Rome or any other place in the Empire he would have faced threats or persecution from pagans, but an even greater threat was posed by false teachers creeping into the church unnoticed, judging from the Jude’s urgent call to contend or strive for the faith- the Greek word sounds like the word ‘agonise’. Both Jude and the apostle Peter condemn false teachers in no uncertain terms.

Church history, including the Reformation of the sixteenth century, teaches us that the greatest threats to the church of Jesus Christ come from within. The church is threatened when the authority of the Bible is undermined, or when it is relegated to second place behind the teaching or traditions of men. When the doctrines of grace are not believed or taught, Christ’s commands are not obeyed, lives become immoral, and worship is corrupted. We continue to face the threat of liberal theology that entered the church almost two hundred years ago. We see it in churches that accept Darwinian evolution, pluralism, and progressive politics, including homosexual marriage. So let us listen to this bondservant of Jesus Christ called Jude and ‘contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints’.

**Ungodly men in the church** Text: Jude v4-10

Jude ‘found it necessary’ to write this letter urging believers in the church to ‘contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints’ because certain men were creeping into the church promoting unorthodox teaching and immoral conduct (v 3, 4). Jude’s assessment of such men is frank and uncompromising. He speaks in a way today’s liberals and post-modernists find offensive; he calls them ungodly men, ‘long ago marked out for this condemnation’ (v 4).

The apostle Paul denounced Judaizers for ‘preaching a different gospel’, and perverting the wonderful gospel of grace (Gal 1:6). They were demanding that all believers be circumcised, provoking Paul to say, ‘I could wish that they go the whole way and emasculate themselves’ (Gal 5:12 NIV). The men Jude condemns were not Judaizers but libertines or antinomians. They were turning the grace of God into a licence for immorality as they ‘denied Jesus Christ, our only Lord and Master’ (v 4 ESV). They were saying, ‘let us sin that grace may abound’, and, ‘if we are saved by grace alone and are not under the law then we are free to sin with impunity’ (Rom 6:1, 15). Such men may have been in the church at Corinth where ‘a man had his father’s wife!’ (1Cor 6:1).

When the authority of the Bible is undermined, the gospel itself is threatened. When preachers ‘reject authority’ and ‘defile the flesh’ they have departed from the gospel to preach words that have no power to change sinful hearts, or contain evil behaviour. Such preachers might be praised by men, but they are condemned by God. They think they are being modern and progressive but there is nothing new under the sun. ‘They wilfully forget, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth’, and that the earth was flooded because of wickedness, and that this present world is reserved for fire (2Peter 3:5-7). The gospel will always be offensive to those who prefer lies to the truth, and who love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil (John 3:19).

Anyone who thinks that God will not judge ungodly people, people who fail to fear God and who disobey the commands of Christ, need to think again. Jude reminds them of the Scriptures they once knew but have since departed from in unbelief. He reminds us of the Scriptures that we might identify and reject these ‘dreamers’ and deceivers. He reminds us of three famous, or infamous, cases of divine judgment in the Bible, namely, Israel’s rebellion in the desert, angels who left their own abode, and immorality in Sodom and Gomorrah. ‘Authority not respected’ is our fourth subheading.

**1. Israel’s rebellion in the desert**

Enshrined in the history of Israel is the exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, the giving of the Law on Mt Sinai, the forty years in the wilderness, and entry into Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. Every Israelite knew this history, except when they turned away from the Lord to worship idols. Every person in our society once knew this story also, but as people have turned away from the Lord to worship idols biblical ignorance has reached epidemic proportions.

This said, you may not know exactly why the people spent forty years in the desert. It was because of the rebellion led by ten of the twelve tribal leaders sent to spy out Canaan, as recorded in Numbers 13 and 14, and Deuteronomy 1. They did not believe the Lord’s promise to give them the land of Canaan. A whole generation was overtaken by an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God (Heb 3:12). As punishment for rebellion, the Lord declared that every man twenty years old and above would perish in the desert. Having saved his chosen people out of Egypt, the Lord ‘afterward destroyed those who did not believe’ (v 5). The apostle Paul similarly reminded the Corinthian church of God’s punishment of his covenant people in the desert (1Cor 10:1-5). Like Jude, he urged the church to remember this story because it is an example of God’s righteous anger and his power to punish those who harden their heart in unbelief.

**2. Angels who left their own abode**

Like Peter, Jude writes of angels, who did not keep their proper place in the created order, as being ‘reserved … for the judgment of the great day’ (v 6, cf. 2Peter 2:4). Peter was warning believers of false teachers secretly bringing destructive heresies into the church, heresies that ‘denied the Lord who bought them’; these teachers also promoted the lusts of the flesh (2Peter 2:1, 14). Jude, as we see here, was also warning believers of men creeping into the church who denied Jesus as Lord and Master, and promoted sensuality.

Angels do not belong to the realm of human beings, unless sent by God for a specific purpose. So what is the story or incident that Jude is referring to here in verse 6? He is referring to the Bible, to a passage in the OT that we struggle to understand in Genesis 6; the account of Sodom and Gomorrah is just a few chapters later in Genesis 19. We understand the ‘sons of God’ in Genesis 6:2 to refer to angels (cf. Job 1:6). Angels are ‘ministering spirits’ created by God (Heb 1:14). They were not created with bodies like ours but can take on human form to communicate with men or women. But for angels to lust after women and marry them was not part of God’s design (Gen 6:2).

The reason why Jude refers to these angels who sinned is that God punished them. He reserved them in everlasting chains and in darkness for judgment on the great day (v 6, 2Peter 2:4). If God judged angels who sinned by despising divine authority, how much more will he judge human beings who sin by rejecting the authoritative word of the living God (Heb 10:31). God’s authoritative word is found in the Scriptures, and in the gospel of Jesus Christ, ‘the faith once for all delivered to the saints’ (v 3).

**3. Immorality in Sodom and Gomorrah**

The most widely used example of divine judgment is that of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The prophets used this example, as did Jesus and the apostles (e.g. Isa 13:19, Jer 50:40, Mat 11:24, Luke 17:29). After referring to the judgment of angels who sinned, and to the people of Noah’s day, the apostle Peter added this example: ‘And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction’ (2Peter 2:6). Jude writes of these cities, ‘They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire’ (v 7).

These two cities were on the plain of Jordan. Abraham’s nephew Lot chose to go and live on this plain and pitched his tent near Sodom (Gen 13:12). The people living in these cities had ‘given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh’ (v 7), meaning they were involved in perverted sexual practices and shameless homosexuality (Gen 19:5). The ‘certain men’ corrupting the gospel of grace and the authority of the Bible may well have been caught up in such perverted sexual practices (v 4). The men of Sodom came to Lot’s house wanting to rape his male visitors (Gen 19:5). He was ‘oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked’ (2Peter 2:7).

God turned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes, totally and permanently destroying all people and places in these cities. Jude speaks of ‘eternal fire’, which is how Jesus refers to the destiny of the wicked: ‘Everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels’ (Mat 25:41). Everlasting fire and punishment is the opposite of everlasting life. Like the angels who sinned, people who sin and fail to repent are reserved for judgment on the day of the Lord, and eternity in hell. The sin of Sodom continues today. Our society and our laws might say what was happening in Sodom was not sinful but the facts of history remain- Sodom was turned to ashes; and the God who condemned Sodom is the same yesterday, today and forever.

**4. Authority not respected**

Jude reminds men and women who were called, justified, and sanctified by the grace of God, of the history of God’s dealing with those who rebel and reject God and his commands. This was not an academic exercise but a solemn warning to anyone who rejects God and his commands today. Such men were creeping into the church back then, and they continue to creep in today. Modernists started criticism of the Bible in the late nineteenth century. They started rejecting the authority of the Bible, calling it an old book that need updating on the basis of modern, rational thought, and science (evolution). Anything supernatural was explained away or denied; angels, and Satan were no longer real. Jesus was only a man, a good man and a good teacher but only man whose murder was tragic.

Modernists replaced the authority of the Bible with the authority of scholars and scientists; the Church of Rome had long since replaced the authority of the Bible with church tradition. The doctrine of the verbal, plenary, inspiration of the Bible is denied by modernists. This is why I declare this truth every time I read the Bible- the holy, inspired and infallible word of God. Modernists hate these words. When the authority of the Bible is rejected, what authority do people have to direct them in how they are to live (Shorter Catechism Q2)? All they have are natural instincts, instincts directed by a sinful nature. Even these are rejected by some as they engage in perverted behaviour.

Jude was warning believers of ungodly men who denied our only Lord and Master, and turned the grace of God into a licence for immoral living (v 4). After reminding them of the angels who lusted after the daughters of men, the men in Sodom who lusted after ‘strange flesh’, and the Israelites who rebelled in the desert, Jude says, ‘In the same way these dreamers defile the flesh, reject authority and speak evil of dignitaries’ (v 8). Why ‘dreamers’? Maybe they believed in dreams and visions more than the words of the Bible; there is no lack of such people today. More likely however, they were out of touch with truth and reality; there is no lack of people like this either! Dreams are not reality. There are spiritual realities of course. God is a spirit. Angels are spiritual beings. Things that are not seen are as real as the things we see. ‘If these men had begun in the spirit as normal Christians, they end up in the flesh’ writes Matthew Henry.

The ‘certain men’ that Jude has in mind become ‘these dreamers’ and then simply ‘these’ in verse 10. These ungodly men ‘reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries’ or glorious ones (v 8). ‘Their fault is not in their understanding but in depraved wills and their disordered appetites and affections’ writes Henry. Their lives are marked by rebellion against human authorities and even the authority of God. They are determined to be autonomous, to live by their own rules and do what they like- ‘no one is going to tell me what to do!’ ‘To hell with you and your Bible’ they will say.

People speak like this, and worse, because they deny the reality of hell- most like the idea of heaven! They speak evil of spiritual realities and persons, using the name of almighty God and Jesus Christ in their frequent cursing. Jude, like Peter, says that even angels do not bring a ‘reviling accusation’ against adversaries in the heavenly realms (v 9, 2Peter 2:11). In the book of Job we read about a council in heaven to which the sons of God (angels?) came, and Satan also (Job 1:6). It may have been a setting like this at which the archangel Michael disputed with the devil about the body of Moses.

Where did Jude get such a story? From an apocryphal book called, ‘The Assumption of Moses’? The Lord buried Moses in a place unknown to men (Deut 34:6). This may have started speculation among the Jews, which ended up in this book. Jude is not entering into the speculation but merely using this story to illustrate his point; namely, that even the archangel did not start cursing and screaming against the devil but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you’!’ (v 9).

Arrogance, combined with ignorance, makes for men Jude describes as ‘brute beasts’ (v 10). ‘These speak evil of whatever they do not know’ (v 10, 2Peter 2:12). Men who have nothing to say are often the loudest and most stirring speakers. ‘Professing to be wise they became fools’ says Paul (Rom 1:22). If you tell a lie often enough, and with passion, you will get some to believe you. In time you may get many to believe you, and declare your lie to be truth. We see this so often- Islam, evolution, man-made climate change?

Men claimed to be knowledgeable, and even to speak with special knowledge (Gnostics), but they were as ignorant as animals. Ironically, todays ‘experts’ actually claim to be cousins to the chimpanzee. Modern-day deniers of biblical authority look to animals for wisdom about how to live. ‘Are monkeys monogamous’ they ask? If not they say we can also be polygamous. If they find a homosexual gorilla these men claim to right to be homosexual. Brute breasts are ruled by instincts, and so are ungodly men creeping into the church. And like brute beasts they will be trapped, often in their own words or behaviour, and destroyed.

As believers we must reject anyone who creeps into the church believing another gospel and engaging in immoral behaviour. We must reject anyone who rejects the authority of the Bible because this is where Jesus Christ is revealed as Saviour, Master and Lord. We must reject anyone who uses, or misuses, the grace of God to indulge the flesh. We must avoid being hypocrites of course, and walk in the truth of the gospel ‘once for all delivered to the saints’.

**Woe to them** Text: Jude v 11-16

Jude wanted to write to believers in the church about ‘our common salvation’, about the wonderful doctrines of grace found in the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord (v 3), but he ended up writing a very different letter. Why? Because he was concerned about ungodly men who had infiltrated the church. They were undermining the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, denying the sovereignty and lordship of Jesus and turning the grace of God into a licence to live by the lusts of the flesh. Like the apostles, he condemns these false teachers in the strongest of terms. There are false teachers in the church today, men and women who deny divine creation, who call the stories of the OT myths, who deny the virgin birth, and reject the resurrection of Jesus on the third day. There are also those who promote homosexuality, drink and drugs. How can such people be called Christians? They are, but not by us! We must hold fast to the gospel handed down to us in the pages of the Bible.

The term ‘Woe’ sounds ominous, and it is, at least in Scripture, where it is found over a hundred times. It is like pronouncing a curse on something or someone. The prophets had cause to use this term as they denounced ungodly people in Israel (Isa 5), and in Babylon (Hab 2). But it is Jesus who uses this word the most, pronouncing eight woes upon the Pharisees in one speech (Mat 23). Seven times he calls them hypocrites, and five time calls them blind or blind guides. He concluded this speech saying, ‘Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell! (Mat 23:33). The apostles and Jude echo such words when they condemn false teachers found in the NT church. ‘Woe to them!’ writes Jude.

Jude has already reminded the church of three instances of divine judgment upon sin as recorded in the OT: angels who left their proper domain and await ‘the judgment of the great day’, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah who were destroyed after giving themselves to sexual perversions including homosexuality, and the people of the exodus who rebelled against Moses and against God and perished in the desert. These people sinned against God, against his revelation in the creation or his spoken commands. The false teachers were similarly rejecting the authority of God, or his appointed representatives, and would face divine judgment.

Jude obviously knew the Scriptures, as in the OT, and so must we. He was a Jew, and so were many in the church, but the OT is not just for Jews, it is for all Christians, for all believers. I have recently reminded you of the stories recounted by Jude in case you had forgotten them, especially stories from the Book of Numbers. From three examples of God’s judgment upon ancient peoples or angels, Jude turns to three examples of judgment upon individuals from ancient times, namely, Cain, Balaam and Korah. If we view verses 11-16 as a sermon, or the second part of a sermon begun in verse 5, we can identify an exposition of Scripture, an application, an illustration, and another application.

**1. An exposition of Scripture**

All sermons should, by definition, include an exposition of Scripture. Even inspired writers like Peter and Jude, and Jesus himself, teach from the Scriptures. Peter writes of prophecy as men, ‘who spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit’ (2Peter 1:21 NIV). If we deny the inspiration and authority of Scripture we are, of course, left with no foundation for a sermon. Jude believed the stories of Cain in Genesis 4, of Balaam in Numbers 22, and of Korah in Numbers 16, to be historical not myths. These were historical persons, men who sinned, who refused to repent, and who were judged by God.

Firstly, Cain. Cain was the firstborn son of Adam and Eve, born after his parents sinned and were thrown out of the Garden of Eden. Cain the farmer brought an offering of fruit to the Lord but the Lord did not respect Cain and his offering (Gen 4:5). An offering must come from a sincere, God-fearing heart. Cain got angry, and rather than ‘doing well’ as the Lord told him, he let anger rule in his heart. That anger was directed towards his brother Abel whom he murdered in cold blood. The way of Cain is the way of self-rule and jealousy, of rejecting divine advice and authority.

Secondly, Jude refers to Balaam, describing his error or sin as greed, as lusting after money. His greed led him to reject repeated warnings from the Lord not to curse the people of God; Balak was offering him lots of money to do so. Peter reminds us that on one occasion even his own donkey warned Balaam, but still the prophet’s madness was not constrained (2Peter 2:15-16). In the end Balaam advised Balak to use Moabite women to seduce the men of Israel into sexual sin and idolatry (Num 25, 31:16). Remember what Jesus said when pronouncing ‘woes’ upon the Pharisees? Blind, blind guides! Cain was blinded by jealous anger, and Balaam by glittering gold. What was it that blinded Korah? Is there anything that is blinding you to the truth and authority of God’s word?

The third person of Jude’s ‘woe’ is Korah. Korah belonged to the congregation of God’s people. He was a Levite, given the duty of carrying the Ark of the Covenant. But he was not satisfied with this duty. He lusted after power and authority; he wanted to be a priest like Moses and Aaron (Num 16:10). And so he gathered some two hundred and fifty men and rebelled against Moses, the Lord’s anointed prophet, priest, and ruler. Jude reminds us of Korah’s sudden end; he perished when a huge hole opened in the earth and devoured him. Korah was blinded by a lust for power and authority, a lust which meant rejecting the authority of God. Ironically, his blindness led him to a literal place of total darkness.

**2. An application of Scripture**

Jude reminded the church of these ungodly men of the past because men like them had crept into the church. ‘They have gone the way of Cain’, been greedy for gain like Balaam, and rebelled against authority like Korah; most likely these false teachers rejected the leadership of the apostles and elders in the church. ‘Judgment will fall on any pastor or teacher who loves freedom or money or sex or power more than fidelity to God’s word’.

Jude describes these men as ‘blemishes at your love feasts’, feasting without any fear of God and concerned about no one but themselves (v 12, 2Peter 2:13). Love feasts were associated with the Lord’s Supper in the early church. The apostle Paul had to condemn greediness and drunkenness at such feasts in the church at Corinth (1Cor 11:20-22). In a second metaphor or picture of faithlessness he describes them as feeding themselves rather than the sheep. Metaphors continue pouring from the mouth of Jude like words of a poet. We could contrast his poem of faithlessness with Habakkuk’s poem of faithfulness (Hab 3:17-18). These ungodly men could only rejoice in things of the flesh, having denied the Lord Jesus Christ.

In a third metaphor Jude describes these men as clouds without water (v 12). Peter calls them ‘wells without water’, as well as clouds (2Peter 2:17). They promise life-giving water but never deliver because Jesus is the only life-giving water. Next, Jude calls them ‘trees without fruit’. Towards the end of last summer my fig tree suddenly produced heaps of buds. I threw a net over the tree to protect the fruit that I expected but nothing came of the fruit. The tiny figs are drying and dropping. Jesus said that you will know men, and especially teachers, by their fruit (Mat 7:16). The men Jude condemns produced no fruit, being twice dead or completely dead, and pulled up by the roots (v 12). No hungry souls would be nourished by these men, who talk about God but in truth are godless.

In his fifth metaphor Jude likens them to waves of the sea, foaming up to their own shame (v 13). Waves make a lot of noise as they crash on the rocks but all that is left is a lot of foam that soon disappears. These men boasted of liberty but were leading God’s people back into bondage to sin (2Peter 2:19). His sixth and final metaphor describing false teaches is of wandering stars, stars that give no help to navigators, stars that shine for a moment and then disappear forever into black holes in the universe. A similar end is reserved for men and women who deny the truth and authority of the Bible, and fail to walk in obedience to the commands of Christ.

**3. An illustration**

Preachers use illustrations from various courses. My commentary on Jude quotes at length from a poem by T.S. Elliot. We may find magazine or newspaper articles that illustrate biblical teaching. The apostle Paul quotes from poets a couple of times (Acts 17:28, Titus 1:12). Jude has already referred to a story about Moses from an apocryphal book (v 9). Now he refers to another apocryphal book that was popular among the Jews, the Book of Enoch (v 14). It was supposedly written by Enoch, the man who ‘walked with God; and was not, for God took him’ (Gen 5:24).

Jude does not see the Book of Enoch as the inspired word of God but the passage he refers to is consistent with the Bible. He refers to a prophecy about the Lord coming ‘with ten thousand of his saints’, or angels, ‘to execute judgment on all’ (v 14, 15), all the ungodly. The words ‘all’ and ‘ungodly’ dominate Enoch’s description of God’s judgment; all ungodly people, for all their ungodly deeds, deeds done in an ungodly way, and all harsh and ungodly words spoken against God (v 15). God sees and hears everything everyone does, including you and me, and he will judge all works and words that dishonour his glorious name.

Only a fool says there is no God (Ps 14:1), and only a fool dares to defy the power and authority of almighty God. False teachers in the church were denying the sovereignty and saving power of Christ. They were rejecting authority in the church, and the authority of God himself. They were probably saying that God loves everyone and will not judge or condemn anyone to hell. On the basis of this popular Book of Enoch, and more so on the basis of the Bible itself, Jude assures his readers that no one, especially not ungodly sinners, will escape the judgment of God.

**4. Another application**

In the final verse of our passage, the final words of Jude’s sermon, he once again attacks the creed and credibility of these libertine false teachers. They had crept into the church without any authority, and they recognised no authority in the church. They were ungodly men, marked out for condemnation, as he said back in verse 4. They are characterised as grumblers and complainers (v 16). They wanted to change everything in the church, both doctrine and practice. Like the complainers in the desert, they lusted after the leeks and garlic of Egypt. Their focus was on food and drink, on sensuality and sex, on money and prestige.

These men were great talkers, men who promised a lot but delivered little, nothing except misery and death. They flattered people in order to gain influence and power for themselves (v 16). False teachers quickly recognise the people who hold power and influence in the church and set out to influence them- they may not be the elected elders of the church. Jude’s urgent message to the church is to examine, expose, and expel false teachers, and ‘contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints’.

**Growing in faith and love** Text: Jude v 17-21

We are living in the last days with the day of the Lord fast approaching. My friend in India wrote of the many signs we are seeing that remind us of this truth. He wrote of the coronavirus pandemic striking the whole world, of locust plagues in Africa and India, of earthquakes in and around Delhi, and of cyclones. As I read his letter I heard of soldiers being killed in a fight with China. This friend writes, ‘many are driven to fear as there is no hope’. In our own country we have people whose only hope or desire is to undo or tear up the past. Anything or anyone associated with past evils, like slavery, are being targeted for destruction and removal from history.

I took the opportunity to watch a movie about William Wilberforce called, ‘Amazing Grace’. Slavery was not stopped by violent protest or revolution but by a man of God working within the democratic political system. I deliberately refer to a democratic political system because not all political systems are democratic. We must be thankful for our democracy and for true Christians like Wilberforce. We must pray and work to maintain our democracy, and above all engage in evangelism and pray for revival in the church.

Reminders of slavery might be torn down but what about reminders of sin? It is sin, the sin of economic greed that led to slavery and to many other evils that continue in our society. If we really want to get rid of racial discrimination, gender discrimination, or religious discrimination, not to mention the evils of abortion and euthanasia, we must go back further than the last three centuries. We must go back to the very beginning, to Adam and Eve and the entry of sin into human hearts. We can then move forward, not denying sin and its effects, but seeing how sin was conquered in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. All the evils of the world today can be conquered in and through the cross of Christ. In the kingdom which he inaugurated there is no sin and hence no evil. Have you entered this kingdom? If you repent of your sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ you will receive the Holy Spirit, the mark of belonging to Christ and his kingdom.

I said ‘inaugurated’ because Christ’s kingdom has not yet come in its fullness. The church is the body of Christ here on earth. Being on earth it is attacked by Satan and impacted by sin. The church will prevail because the Lord has assured us it will (Mat 16:18), but we in the church are called by God to be diligent in keeping the faith and building up the church, lest we find ourselves out of both. The church came under attack from the time it was established by the apostles of Jesus Christ. Judaizers followed the apostle Paul demanding all believers be circumcised in the flesh according to the Law of Moses, law that was fulfilled and superseded in the cross of Jesus Christ. Paul struggled to make known and understood the doctrines of grace, as did all the apostles. Sinful hearts are proud hearts, hearts which cling to at least an element of works in salvation. Proud hearts are selfish hearts, and selfishness leads to division. Selfish hearts are also sensual, focussed on the flesh rather than the spirit.

Jude helps us identify false teachers in the church on the basis of these characteristics. After reminding us of God’s judgment of ungodly men and angels in the past, Jude turns towards believers in the church with teaching about how they must ‘earnestly contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints’ (v 3). He addresses them as ‘Beloved’ (v 17, 20). He firstly calls upon them to remember words spoken by the apostles, and secondly to keep on growing in the faith. His words are, of course, applicable for believers today, to us as we continue in this faith taught in the Bible and applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We are not looking for new revelation or new teaching in the church today. The only new revelation we await is the second coming of Jesus, his coming in judgment upon this sick and sinful world.

**1. Beloved, remember apostolic teaching**

False teachers in the church do not defer to apostolic teaching but to teachers and scholars who are like them. They are more likely to quote a professor than a prophet or apostle. Jude urged fellow believers to ‘remember the words spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (v 17). Words are important. It is words that are recorded in the Bible. We must read and seek to understand the message being communicated through these words. It is not our task to guess at what the apostles might have meant, and certainly not to be critical of what they write. All Scripture is inspired by God- verbally inspired: ‘Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit’ (2Peter 1:21).

In particular, Jude wants us to remember what the apostles said about false teachers in the church, that there would be mockers or scoffers in the last time (v 18). Who said this? The apostle Paul warned the church at Ephesus of ‘savage wolves… not sparing the flock’ (Acts 20:29), of ‘men speaking lies in hypocrisy… forbidding to marry’ and dictating what can and cannot be eaten (1Tim 4:1, 2Tim 3:1). The apostle Peter warned of ‘scoffers in the last days’ (2Peter 3:3). So do not be surprised when false teachers show up and start leading the congregation astray.

Knowing that false teachers may infiltrate the church, what can believers do? They must firstly identify such men or women. Jude gives us four markers to look for. Firstly, they are mockers or scoffers. They breeze into the church advocating change to make the gospel acceptable to modern men and women. ‘Society has changed, and the church must change if it is to remain relevant’ they say. In doing this they will ridicule old teaching and old ways. While the church must always be examining itself and reforming, mockery and ridicule have no place in that reform, certainly not mockery of the word of God. My ears prick up when I hear someone speak of the prophets, of Moses or David, not knowing all that we do about Christ, and even more so when they speak of the apostles as not knowing science or medicine; some say Jesus was not dead but in a coma when he was buried.

Secondly, these apostates, ‘walk according to their own ungodly lusts’ (v 18). Jude, like Peter, notes that false teachers live by the lusts of the flesh (2Peter 2:13-14). If they are not greedy for money, they are greedy for food or sex; they are sensual, as Jude says in verse 19. Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology, taught that human beings are ruled by the desires of the flesh or natural instincts. Many agree with him, including some teachers in the church. False teachers give no place for spiritual things, to matters of the soul. They show no concern for spiritual things because, as Jude says in his next point, they do not have the Spirit (v 19).

The Holy Spirit dwells in the heart of every true believer. The Holy Spirit touches our sinful hearts leading us to confess our sin and believe in Jesus. He then abides in our heart as our counsellor or comforter. ‘If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ he does not belong to Christ’ (Rom 8:9 NIV). This is not taught in many churches today, certainly not in those teaching a second baptism, and the importance of speaking in tongues. Members who speak in tongues and receive a second baptism often join a ‘special group’ in the church.

Jude’s fourth marker of these men is that they cause divisions in the church (v 19). He does not specify the nature of these divisions, and it does not really matter because the teaching of the apostles is for unity in the church (Gal 3:28). False teachers divide in order to rule. They divide on the basis of ethnicity, of gender, or of age, just like politicians. They also divide on the basis of personalities; ‘I am of Paul, or I am of Apollos, or I am of Cephas’ (1Cor 1:12). Or they divide on the basis of ‘special knowledge’ like the Gnostics. Those with ‘special knowledge’ might cast the commands of Christ aside as they indulge the flesh, or they might become legalists, forbidding members to marry or eat certain foods (Col 2:16, 1Tim 4:3). Because ungodly people continue to show up to teach in the church, we must continue to check leaders, and even members, according to the criteria given here by Jude.

**3. Beloved, keep on growing in the faith**

Despite some Christian’s view of themselves and their ministry, there is no gift or office in the church designated ‘policeman of the faith’! While it is important to remember that ungodly men and women will infiltrate the church in these last days, and to know how to identify such people, Jude reminds us that we must also keep watch on our own lives. I once heard about a man who thought it his duty to reprimand people in the church whenever they stepped out of line. One day someone spoke to him about stepping out of line, and he left the church! If we keep a watch on our own life no one will have cause to correct us, not even the Lord.

Jude calls us to be building ourselves up or to growing in the faith (v 20). Policemen and soldiers have to keep fit if they are to apprehend enemies. They have to undergo strict training, increasing in knowledge and fitness; as believers we must do the same. We must keep spiritually fit if we are to defend ourselves against attacks of Satan. Satan may attack us personally, but he also attacks through false teachers in the church. Jude gives us a lesson of four points with regard to keeping fit in the faith. All of us are concerned about our diet and our physical fitness, but are we concerned about our spiritual diet and spiritual fitness?

From the day we are born again of the Spirit until the day we die, spiritual growth continues- or it should! ‘Build yourselves up in your most holy faith’ says Jude (v 20). In India many houses have weldmesh rods sticking out the roof. One day I asked why the house was never finished. I was told that when the house is finished the owner will have to pay tax! No matter how long it is since you first believed, you are still growing as a believer- or should be!

‘Faith comes from God and is toward God’. Growth in faith involves growth in knowledge of the object of your faith, the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; all of whom are referred to by Jude in this passage. I hope no one of thinks they know all there is to know about God! Growth in the faith also means growth in conduct, such that we conform more and more to the likeness of Christ. Do not make your neighbour or fellow believer your measure- Christ is your measure. Spiritual growth means becoming more and more like Christ. Paul speaks of his desire ‘to know Him’, to know Jesus and ‘being conformed to his death’ (Phil 3:10). ‘I am not perfected’ he said, and nor are we. Is your greatest desire to know more of Christ and become like him, or is it to know more of this world and be like someone famous? Let us focus on growing up into Christ who is the head’, today and every day (Eph 4:15).

Secondly, we must pray in the Holy Spirit (v 20, Eph 6:18). Prayer is essential to Christian growth. ‘Read your Bible, pray every day’ is part of a chorus the children know. Ask them what the next line is! Praying in the Holy Spirit means praying according to the word and the will of God. By all means pray the Lord’s Prayer but go on confessing specific sins and making specific requests. The Spirit helps us when we feel weak and find it difficult to pray (Rom 8:26). You do not need a human mediator, but you do need a heavenly mediator, and you have one in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thirdly, ‘keep yourselves in the love of God’ (v 21). The apostle John tells us that God is love. He tells us that we see God’s love in him sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for us (1John 4:10). Keeping ourselves means never forgetting that we owe our life, our eternal life, to Him. We have the sacrament to help us remember, so do not neglect this memorial meal. Keeping ourselves in the love of God means remembering that, ‘nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Rom 8:39).

Finally, we wait, with assurance, the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, knowing he will bring salvation and eternal life as his gift for all whom he has called, and kept in the faith handed down to us in the Scriptures, to all who have endured to the end (v 21). He will reward you if you have ‘contended earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints’ to the end.

**Duties and doxology** Text: Jude v 22-25

Jude set out to write to believers about ‘our common salvation’ (v 3). But he felt compelled to first warn them about false teachers, ungodly men creeping into the church, undermining the doctrines of grace and the way of living based on these truths. In assuring them of God’s condemnation of such men, he reminded them of past judgments upon angels, upon cities like Sodom and Gomorrah, and upon the people God brought out of Egypt. Teaching that denies salvation from sin in the precious blood of Christ and perverts the grace of God into sensuality must be condemned. Make no mistake, the Lord will execute judgment on ungodly people, people who live ungodly lives even if, and especially if, they are in the church. ‘For the time has come for judgment to begin in the house of God; and if it begins with us first what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel?’ (1Peter 4:17).

As Jude comes to the end of this letter he returns to his original purpose of writing about our common salvation (v 3). He does so in an outburst of praise that we call a doxology. His doxology is one of the best known in the Bible, and certainly the best known portion of this letter. It not only contains words of exalted praise towards God but words of blessed assurance and hope for us as believers as we press on to the end, the salvation of our souls.

But before we come to this doxology we find a closing word about the duties of ‘beloved’ believers. Jude told us to remember what the apostles said about mockers and sensual people coming into the church, and how we must keep ourselves in the love of God through prayer and other means of grace, and must focus on the coming of Jesus Christ our Lord. As we do so we will reach out to those around us, not only those who are lost, without God and without hope in this world, but to those being led astray by false teaching, by the lusts of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, or the pride of life (1John 2:16).

**1. Duties**

In my sermon on the previous verses of Jude I said that there is no gift or office in the church called ‘policeman’. Jude is writing to believers, reminding us to watch out for false teachers, and to build ourselves up in our most holy faith (v 20). That said, we do have elected elders in the church, under-shepherds to feed and lead the flock of God, and protect us from ‘savage wolves’ (Acts 20:28, 29). And that said, I might also revisit what I said about policemen. Policemen have the duty of apprehending law breakers, but along with firemen and paramedics they also have the duty of saving lives, of rescuing us from burning homes, floodwaters or other dangers.

Members in the church may be led astray, as we have said, and we who are strong are duty bound to help them as we are able. We do so humbly and with mercy, listening to the words of the apostle Paul, ‘Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall’ (1Cor 10:12, cf. Gal 6:1-3). Paul says this while reminding us, as Jude does, of various rebellions against Moses (and Christ) in the desert, ‘examples for our instruction’ (1Cor 10:11). Jude writes of three types of people entering dangerous waters, as it were - ‘backsliding’ is the theological term. It is important to discern the type of backsliding we are dealing with, although not always easy to do so. Of course, no help should be offered until we have sought the Lord’s help in prayer (Eph 6:18).

Firstly, there are believers who fall victim to doubt (v 22). Listening to false teachers will lead to doubt, but ultimately it is Satan who sows the seeds of doubt and he can attack at any time. A minister shared how on one occasion he was overcome with doubt as he stepped into the pulpit; he found himself asking if he was about to preach was true. Young people or young believers are most vulnerable to doubts because they are bombarded by all sorts of messages as they make decisions about what to believe and how to live. Doubters must be treated with compassion, with loving words spoken at the right time (v 22, Eph 4:15). Being compassionate means being ready to listen, being patient and humble in dealing with doubts as they are expressed.

Secondly, there are people who have to be ‘snatched from the fire’ as Jude says (v 23, cf. Zech 3:2). They are in imminent danger losing their life, be it physical or spiritual. Some years ago a young man hiking in the Himalayas was trapped in a rock fall. His arm was pinned under a heavy rock which he couldn’t move. After some time he realised his food and water would run out, and with no sign of help arriving, he would perish. So he took his pocket knife and cut off his arm, thereby rescuing himself. Jesus spoke of something similar when he said, ‘If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish than for your whole body to be cast into hell’ (Mat 5:30). When it comes to life and death, even in, and especially in the spiritual realm, drastic measures need to be adopted. ‘Snatch others from the fire and save them’ (v 23).

A child getting into bad company school was taken out by her parents and sent to another school. If a child has books or materials they should not be viewing explain the dangers and remove the offending material. Adult believers must be similarly warned of the dangers of pornography or drugs, and urged to get rid of such things. Years ago I was walking around Amsterdam and suddenly found myself in the red-light district; I turned around and got out as quickly as I could. Anyone listening to door-knockers from a sect must stop listening to such people. These days you will find lots of false teachers on the internet, so take care. If a brother or sister is in a burning house snatch them out before they perish.

Thirdly, when someone is deep into immorality we must take care not to get burned ourselves. Jude writes of hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh (v 23 NIV). ‘The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak’ said Jesus (Mat 26:41). He was not referring weakness in relation to immorality but the flesh is weak when it comes to food, drink or sex. We teach young people not to touch drugs but do we teach them to keep sex for marriage? One commentator writes of the city where he lives as having ‘temptations of the flesh all around’; it was Chicago not Amsterdam! He writes of William Gladstone, a Christian prime minister of England confessing to being caught unawares by the secret sin of pornographic reading. Gladstone also started a mercy work among prostitutes but in seeking to rescues prostitutes put himself in danger of being stained himself. In rescuing someone we must be careful not to be dragged in and drowned ourselves. Paul says that in seeking to restore a man overtaken by a sin ‘consider yourself lest you also be tempted’ (Gal 6:1). Jesus advises taking one or two believers with you (Mat 18:16).

Prayer and discernment must be exercised in rescuing members of the church who are backsliding for whatever reason. Every effort must be made to save them from the fires of hell, yet some are so hardened, so gripped by Satan, we are forced to wait for the merciful and powerful hand of the Lord to recuse them- or not. Jesus once said to his disciples, ‘This kind [of demon] does not go out except by prayer’ (Mat 17:21). Never forget that the Lord took away the filthy garment of our sin, and clothed us with his robe of righteousness. ‘See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes’ (Zech 3:4). The apostle Paul said, ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief’ (1Tim 1:15).

**2. Doxology**

Although warning us about ungodly men entering the church with another gospel, and ungodly conduct, Jude’s final words are of assurance, and giving praise and glory to God our Saviour. The apostle Paul, while dealing with the tragic situation of disobedient Israel, burst into a doxology: ‘O the depth of the riches both of wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out’ (Rom 11:33). Jude begins his doxology, ‘Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling’ (v 24). God is powerful to keep us every step of the way on our spiritual journey no matter how rough or tough the going gets. John Bunyan pictures this journey in his book ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’. The word ‘stumbling’ is better than ‘falling’ in translating verse 24 because it presumes we are moving along the path.

Jude previously spoke of us keeping ourselves in the love of God; now it is the Lord keeping us. When we see obstacles we must take care to avoid them; we do so in the strength the Lord gives us. Sometimes the obstacles are hidden or huge, but God knows every trial and temptation we will face and is able to keep us from stumbling (Prov 4:12, 24:16, Ps 37:24) and make the way of escape (1Cor 10:13).

Our journey, the journey called ‘life’, has a purpose and it has an end. God is preparing us for the day we will enter his presence, the presence of his glory (v 24). No unclean thing can enter the presence of the Lord. Only animals without blemish were acceptable for sacrifice in the temple; this is the background of the word ‘faultless’ or ‘blameless’ here in verse 24. Being cleansed in the blood of Christ and clothed in his righteousness, we will be welcomed with great joy into the presence of the Lord. There was joy in heaven when we repented and believed (Luke 15:7), and there will be even greater joy and rejoicing when we finish our journey and enter the presence of the Lord for eternity.

The focus will not be on us of course, but on the Lord and his glory, upon our great God and Saviour, on the Father and the Son seated upon the throne in heaven (v 25). We will join the assembly of saints from all generations, from all nations, tribes and languages, praising Him who sits on the throne. George Whitefield spoke of this assembly in heaven: ‘Hark! Methinks I hear them chanting their everlasting hallelujahs and spending an eternal day in echoing triumphant songs of joy. And do you long, my brethren, to join this heavenly choir?’

When Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a donkey the crowds shouted, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest’ (Mat 21:9). Jesus was going to die on the cross, going to die in our place for our sin. After rising from the dead, he returned to heaven and the glory he had with the Father in the beginning. In heaven we will sing, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honour and glory and blessing’ (Rev 5:12).

Jude gives us similar words with which to praise the only God our Saviour today and every day as we wait to be ushered into his presence for eternity: ‘To him be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen’ (v 25). God’s power and authority are seen in the world he created for us to live in, a world that is now fallen and cannot bear the full revelation of God’s glory. Only in a new heaven and new earth will the glory of the Lord shine forth in its fullness, and only when we receive our new, heavenly bodies will we be able to gaze on this glory. Paul writes of the ‘King of kings and Lord of lords dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honour and everlasting power. Amen’ (1Tim 6:16).