

The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul

Psalm 19 is divided into two parts which deal with two different ways in which God reveals himself to us:

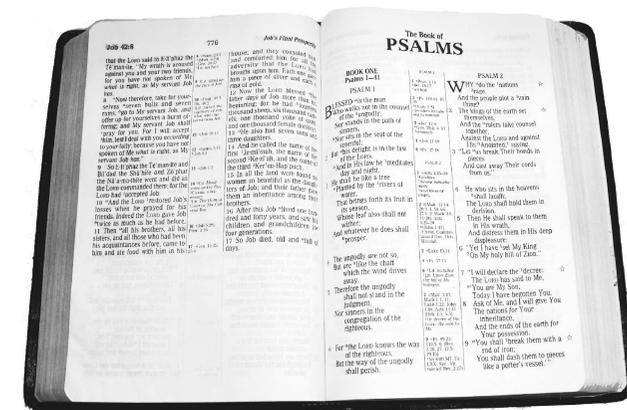
- Natural Revelation, by which God reveals himself in creation nature – in the works of God (1–6). The universe and the earth with their beauty and wonders reveal to man that there is a God who designed and created them. Modern discoveries reveal the intricacies of a human cell with its DNA coding unique to each person There is no excuse for atheism which is folly (Psalm 14:1), nor for agnosticism which insists that we cannot know whether or not there is a God. *The heavens declare the glory of God* (1; cp. Romans 1:20). They do not give a spoken word, but God’s handiwork is there for all to see; it is a universal language which even the most primitive man can understand (3–4).
- Special Revelation: God reveals himself through the Bible which is his Word (7–14). The world around us tells us that there is a Creator, that there is a God, but it cannot tell us how to get right with God or how we can know God. The Lord has not left us to grope in ignorance, however. He has given us the Bible which is described as ‘*the law of the LORD ... the testimony of the LORD, etc.*’ (7–9). It is through God’s Word that the soul is converted, is made wise, is enlightened (7–8). God’s Word is *perfect ... sure ... right ... pure ... clean ... true and righteous*. God’s Word is more precious than pure gold (10). How much do you desire to know it and to obey it?

The Bible reveals to us the sin in our lives, sending rays of light into the darkest recesses of our hearts. It will lead us to pray, *Cleanse me from secret faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins* (12–13). As we begin the day, let us meditate upon this lovely psalm and rejoice in its truths.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength
and my Redeemer* (14).

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God’s holy Word simply explained and applied



July 2020

Bible readings from 1,2 and 3 John,
Psalm 19

Diotrephes, who loves to have the pre-eminence

John refers to Diotrephes who was causing problems in the church to which Gaius belonged. This man was a bullying self-seeker who loved *to have the pre-eminence*. He rejected the authority of John, talking wicked nonsense against him and his fellow church leaders. He ordered church members not to give hospitality to visiting brethren and those who dared to disobey him were put out of the church. John said that he would deal with him if he visited them (9–10). False teaching severely damages churches, but so do petty tyrants who love *to have the pre-eminence*. Many a faithful Christian has been grieved and hurt by a 21st century ‘Diotrephes’ in their church. We must always be careful to recognise that godly leaders also love us and are eager to serve us rather than to boost their own self-image.

John urged Gaius. ‘*Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good*’ (11). John commends Demetrius who may have been one of the visiting brothers who needed hospitality but had been slandered by Diotrephes. John testified that he had ‘*a good testimony from all*’ and he was faithful to the truth (12). What kind of testimony do you have at home, at work and in your church?

John closed his third letter by expressing his desire to come to visit Gaius and to speak with him face to face (13–14; see also the end of his second letter). Ian Hamilton comments, ‘Meaningful friendship and fellowship requires personal contact. Smiles and sighs convey a wealth of meaning that the written word cannot express’ (LET’S STUDY THE LETTERS OF JOHN, page 117). This has been keenly felt through the restrictions imposed by the Covid19 plague.

In his closing greetings John writes, ‘*Peace to you*’ (14). The apostle was mindful of the difficult circumstances surrounding his beloved friend. **He knew that we can know God’s peace in the most trying circumstances.** Are you under pressure? Is your faith being sorely tried by the antics of someone who professes to know Christ? May the God of peace grant you the grace to persevere and give you his peace.

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You do faithfully whatever you do

Gaius had shown the love of Christ in giving hospitality to visiting brethren and strangers who had testified of his love *before the church* (5–6). John encouraged Gaius whom he again addresses as ‘*beloved*’ to ‘*send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God*’. Hospitality is a vital ministry (Matthew 10:40–42; Hebrews 13:2) which encourages visitors, the lonely, and those who may be seeking to know the Lord. Are you able to give hospitality?

John gave Gaius two reasons why we should care for visiting brothers:

1. *Because they went forth for his name’s sake* (7). They work for the sake of the Lord Jesus. Missionaries go from our churches and often leave behind parents and other loved ones for the sake of the gospel. They need our prayers, encouragement and support *in a manner worthy of God* (6).
2. We are to support missionaries and other Christian workers that *we may become fellow workers for the truth* (8). We share in their ministry by praying for them and supporting them. *

Despite all the difficulties in the church John could commend Gaius, ‘*Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers*’ (5). What an example! We should always remember to do everything ‘*as to the Lord*’ so that we will honour him (Ephesians 6:7). Are you an eager worker in the church, *doing faithfully whatever you do*? Will the Lord Jesus say to you when you give account to him, ‘*Well done, good and faithful servant... Enter into the joy of your Lord*’ (Matthew 25:21)? **Only our best is good enough for God.**

*Give me a faithful heart, likeness to thee,
That each departing day henceforth may see
Some work of love begun, some deed of kindness done,
Some wanderer sought and won, something for thee.*

(Sylvanus O, Phelps)

* We should be cautious about encouraging and supporting those who have not been commissioned by any church and who are answerable to no one (though they would insist that they are answerable to the Lord).

1, 2 & 3 JOHN

John outlived the other apostles, and his letters may have been written as late as AD 90. His second and third letters are the shortest books of the New Testament. John wrote his Gospel to lead its readers to a life-giving faith in Christ (John 20:31). *These 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). He wrote his letters to strengthen believers in their assurance that they possessed eternal life and to show the evidence of true faith. *These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life* (1 John 5:13).

John’s first readers had been deeply disturbed and unsettled in their faith by teachers of false doctrine. Some of these false teachers had once been in the church (2:19) and had undermined the assurance of some of those who were faithful, seeking to entice them away from the church (2:18,26). They are described as ‘*antichrists*’ (2:18) and ‘*false prophets*’ (4:1). They claimed to have a superior knowledge of God, but they were heretical in their beliefs about Christ’s Person and they were ungodly in their behaviour. They denied that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (2:22; cp. 4:15; 5:5,10), who had come in the flesh to be the Saviour of the world (4:2,14). They claimed to love God but showed no love for believers (4:20). They claimed to be sinless but they did not keep Christ’s commandments (1:8,10; 2:4). These false teachers had probably embraced some form of gnostic teaching, one of the heresies that troubled the early church.

The Gnostics taught that matter is evil and spirit is good; thus the body is evil. By a special knowledge (Greek word for ‘knowledge’ = ‘gnōsis’), only known to them, the human spirit could be released from its material prison and rise to God. They claimed that the Lord Jesus Christ would not have taken human flesh, because flesh is evil.

The Greek verbs (‘ginōskō’ and ‘oida’) translated ‘*know*’ are found 35 times in 1 John, chapters 2 to 5. How can we know that we are genuine

Christians? John gives us three tests:

1. The theological test – that we believe that Jesus is God who came in human flesh.
2. The moral test – that we keep God’s commandments.
3. The social test – that we love our fellow Christians.

John makes two great statements concerning God:

- ‘*God is light*’ (1:5).
- ‘*God is love*’ (4:8,16).

Key words: ‘*love*’ (37 times); ‘*life*’ (11 times) and ‘*light*’ (5 times).

Outline of 1 John

1. Introduction – 1:1–4
2. The basis of fellowship with God – 1:5–10
3. Conduct of those who have fellowship with God 2:1–18
4. Beware of Antichrists – 2:19–27
5. Children of God and children of the devil – 2:28 to 3:13
6. Grounds for Christian assurance – 3:14–24
7. The Spirit of truth and the spirit of error – 4:1–6
8. The love of God – 4:7–21
9. Love, faith and victory – 5:1–5
10. Witnesses to the deity of Christ – 5:6–13
11. The Christian’s confidence – 5:14–21

Iain Hamilton observes, ‘Throughout the Letter, John writes with warmth, seriousness and urgency’ (LET’S STUDY THE LETTERS OF JOHN, page xiv).

Recommended commentary on 1, 2 and 3 John:

Ian Hamilton: Let’s Study the Letters of John (Banner of Truth Trust).

28 JULY

3 John, verses 1 to 4

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth

John wrote this letter to encourage his beloved friend Gaius (1). He again describes himself as ‘*the elder*’ (cp. 2 John 1). Gaius was a godly man who stands in sharp contrast to Diotrephes who was causing trouble in the church (9–10). Difficulties in the church did not hinder the growth of his soul but may have strengthened him as he proved the help of the Lord in such a trying situation. John prayed that Gaius would *prosper in all things and be in health* just as his soul prospered (2). **Would it be safe to pray such a prayer for you?** If your physical health were a reflection of your spiritual condition, in what kind of state would your body find itself? Do you give too much attention to your physical well-being, but neglect the prospering of your soul?

John rejoiced greatly to hear that Gaius walked in the truth (3; cp. 2 John, verse 4). He went on to remark, ‘*I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth*’ (4). When John heard that his children (probably those converted through his ministry) were standing firm against error and living out the truth, he was much encouraged. Those who have little concern to know the Word of God and its teaching are not biblical Christians; they leave themselves open to deception from false teachers.

Ian Hamilton writes, ‘Once again we see how important and central “the truth” was to Christ’s apostles. It mattered profoundly to them what a person believed and how they lived. Paul similarly commanded Timothy to “follow the pattern of sound words that you heard from me”, and “guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Timothy 1:13–14). The truth is, essentially, what God has revealed concerning his Son, Jesus Christ’ (LET’S STUDY THE LETTERS OF JOHN, page 109).

Look to yourselves

It is essential to walk in truth because *many deceivers have gone out into the world* who refuse to accept that Jesus is God's promised Messiah who came in the flesh. They are antichrists and there are many of them (7; 1 John 4:1–3). We must be on our guard and watch: '*Look to yourselves that we do not lose those things we worked for.*' False teaching will spoil our life and witness if we allow it any entrance into our churches. If we remain faithful, we will *receive a full reward* (8).

The Greek verb translated '*transgresses*' (9) means 'to go on ahead' or 'to go beyond'. Many false teachers have gone far beyond the teaching of the Bible and they no longer remain in the doctrine of Christ (cp. 1 John 2:19). When they use Scripture, they refuse to accept the obvious meaning of its teaching and have perverse ways of re-interpreting what the Bible says.

False teachers may appear to be sincere but they are antichrists (7). The apostle Paul describes them as '*savage wolves*' (Acts 20:29). We must not entertain them in our homes or give them a hearing in our churches. If we do so, we identify with them in their evil deeds (10–11). These verses have been misused by some Christians to shun all contact with non-Christian relatives or friends. We must seek to win the lost to Christ and we will not do so by isolating ourselves from those who are lost. Our homes can be greatly used in winning people to Christ. We must not, however, entertain those who are seeking to undermine our faith. Never invite Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons or other false teachers into your home for Bible studies. If they appear to be keen to know the truth, involve your pastor or a mature, godly, well-taught Christian to meet them with you.

John recognised that paper and ink are a poor substitute for face to face fellowship and he was hoping to visit his first readers so that their joy would *be full* ('complete'; 12). The '*elect sister*' (13) was probably the church where John was then based.

Our fellowship

John opens his Gospel and his first letter by pointing us to the Lord Jesus Christ who is '*the Word of life*' (1; cp. John 1:1,14). The Lord Jesus has always existed: *He was from the beginning*. He became a man when he came into the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15) but he was still God (John 1:1–2,14). John had been with Jesus during his ministry on earth so he could write about someone he had seen, touched, heard and known (1–3). Jesus has ascended to heaven, but this does not prevent us from having fellowship with him. '*Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ*' (3).

To have '*fellowship*' (Greek noun 'koinōnia') is to have things in common, to share. What does it mean to have fellowship with God and with his Son? It is expressed in our prayer life when we come aside to be alone with him, sharing our joys and our sorrows with him, trusting in him as we bring our requests. It is to worship and praise him; It means to have peace with him and to know his love filling our lives; it is to enjoy his presence with us and to know his smile on us as he leads us and cares for us. To have fellowship with God means obeying him and living to please him, it is to rejoice in his goodness to us. The people who enjoy fellowship with God are described in Scripture as those who walk with him (cp. Genesis 5:24; 6:9). Fellowship with God is a fellowship that we share with other Christians (3; '*that you also may have fellowship with us*') and this has very practical consequences, as we shall be seeing throughout John's letter. Without this fellowship our joy is not full or complete (4).

The world may despise us or even hate us, but *our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ*. The apostle Paul wrote that he and his fellow workers were as filth in the eyes of the world, *the offscouring of all things* (1 Corinthians 4:13). God sees things differently. We are precious in his sight, his own special people (1 Peter 2:8). What more could we want? It does not matter that the world hates us or treats us with contempt. **Christians are the most privileged people in all the world. How is your fellowship with God?**

If we say that we have fellowship with him

John deals with three claims made by false teachers which are not true. Referring to these claims, he begins with the words, ‘*If we say ...*’ (6,8,10).

The message which John and his fellow apostles had received from the Lord Jesus Christ was that *God is light and in him is no darkness at all* (5; cp. Psalm 27:1; John 1:4–9). Why is God called ‘*light*’? Light speaks of the purity and splendour of God, of his holiness and his moral perfection. Though *God is love* (4:8,16), we must also remember that he is *light*. The love of God is a glorious theme, but it must always be taught alongside the holiness of God.

If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practise the truth (6). We cannot possibly have a sinful lifestyle (‘*walk in darkness*’) and have fellowship with God. This should be obvious, but there are many professing Christians who are not concerned about sin in their lives. They are careless and vainly assume that because they once made a ‘decision for Christ’ they will go to heaven. We are to pursue holiness, *without which no one will see the Lord* (Hebrews 12:14). The practice of sin will blight our lives.

If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin (7). Christians do sin and we must seek continual cleansing through the blood of Christ if we are to have meaningful fellowship with God and with each other. There is no sin which the blood of Jesus is unable to cleanse; his blood *cleanses us from all sin*. If we cling to any sins, they will destroy our fellowship with God and with other Christians. This fellowship is very precious and we should always strive to maintain it and encourage it. We have important things in common with other believers: our love for the Lord and our fellowship with him, our desire for his glory and for the extension of his kingdom, our faith, our hope and our destiny. **Are you walking in darkness or in the light?**

Walking in truth

The second and third letters of John are the shortest books of the New Testament. John describes himself as ‘*the elder*’; this probably refers to his office as an *overseer* in the church rather than his age. We cannot be sure whether ‘*the elect lady*’ (1) is a specific individual or whether she is a church. Verse 13 may indicate that the ‘*elect sister*’ is a sister church (cp. 1 Peter 5:13). John repeats the emphases found in his first letter: the necessity of correct views of Christ, that he is the Son of God who came in the flesh (7), love for fellow Christians, and keeping God’s commandments (5–6).

Truth is important! The word ‘*truth*’ is found in each of the first four verses of this letter. John’s phrase *love in truth* (1) reminds us that it is truth which binds Christians together in love. *Truth and love* (3) are inseparable and are vital in our lives if we are to please God. Truth is not tolerant of error; it is too important and too precious to compromise (cp. Proverbs 23:23). We must resist pressures to water down the truths of the gospel or to follow those who have drifted from God’s Word.

John’s greeting (3) appears to be similar to those of Paul (eg. Titus 1:4) but there is a difference (not apparent in the Authorised Version). The Greek has the future tense. *Grace, mercy, and peace will be with you, etc.* John is saying that when truth binds our hearts together, grace, mercy and peace will always be our portion. John rejoiced greatly that he had found some who were *walking in truth* (4). The phrase ‘*your children*’ may refer to members in their church. ‘*Walking in truth*’ is more than believing the truth; it is living out the truth in our lives.

The apostle reminds us of the new commandment given by the Lord Jesus, *that we love one another* (5; John 13:34). If we truly love the Lord, we will seek to please him by walking *according to his commandments* and this also involves walking in love (6). *Walking in truth*, walking *according to his commandments*, walking in love. **How are you walking?**

Little children, keep yourselves from idols

John brings his letter to a close by again drawing our attention to three great certainties of the Christian life, introducing each with the words ‘we know’:

1. *We know that whoever is born of God does not sin* (18). He will not remain in sin, he keeps himself from sinning. The Christian does sin (see 1:8–9) but he is no longer under the dominion of sin (Romans 6:14). Some commentators believe that the words ‘keeps himself’ in the second part of the verse should be ‘keeps him’ as rendered in some manuscripts. Seen this way, it means that Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, keeps us. This is true whether or not their interpretation of this verse is correct. He keeps us from *the wicked one* who will trouble us throughout our lives but cannot part us from God.
2. *We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one* (Satan; 19) but we are secure in Christ. The world may hate us and persecute us but God loves us. If God loves us and is for us (Romans 8:31,37), what have we to fear?
3. *We know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding* (20). Thank God for spiritual enlightenment that has brought us to *know him who is true* (genuine). The most intelligent people do not have this understanding unless they are saved. God the Father is the true God through whom we have eternal life (cp. John 17:3). The gods of other religions are false.

Idols are false gods even though they are not always represented by images of wood, stone or metal. **Satan dangles all kinds of idols before us to draw us away from the true God.** There are the idols of false religions, of materialism or of seeking worldly advancement and the praise of men. Ian Hamilton writes, ‘Idols are anything and anyone that would replace the Lord God as the chief delight of our hearts’ (LET’S STUDY THE LETTERS OF JOHN, page 86). *Little children, keep yourselves from idols* (21).

If we say that we have no sin

The heretics who troubled John’s first readers probably held a form of gnostic belief. The Gnostics (Greek ‘gnōsis’ = ‘knowledge’) claimed that salvation is obtained through a special knowledge only revealed to themselves. This so-called knowledge was used as a cloak for all kinds of wicked behaviour which they did not regard as sin. If we have no sin we do not need a Saviour. John is quite emphatic in his rejection of gnostic heresies. *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us* (8). We all sin because we all have a sinful nature which remains with us until we go to heaven. If we believe that we no longer sin as Christians, *we deceive ourselves*.

If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (10; cp. Matthew 15:18–20; Romans 3:10,23; 5:12). Some people believe that they have not sinned because they do not understand that sin is falling short of God’s standards and breaking his holy law. They believe that their good works make them acceptable in the sight of God. It is only when we realise that we are sinful that we see our need of a Saviour.

if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (9). **When did you last name and confess a specific sin or failure in your life and ask the Lord to cleanse you through the blood of Christ?** God faithfully keeps his promises to forgive us (Jeremiah 31:34) and he is ‘just’ (or ‘righteous’) to remove all condemnation from us because Jesus was punished for our sins when he died on the cross. What a wonderful message! What a wonderful Saviour! Let us rejoice in him.

*Because the sinless Saviour died,
My sinful soul is counted free;
For God, the Just, is satisfied
To look on him, and pardon me.*

(Charitie Lees Bancroft)

If anyone sins

John writes out of great pastoral concern for those early Christians whom he affectionately addresses as *'my little children'*. He wants them to overcome sin in their lives: *'My little children, these things I write to you, that you may not sin'* (1). We are painfully aware that we do sin after we are saved but God is *'faithful and just to forgive us our sins'* (1:9), We have seen however, that though sin no longer reigns over us, we still have the remains of sin within us. This leads us to Christ's present work in heaven on our behalf. *If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous* (1). As our Advocate (the same Greek word, *'paraklētos'*, is used of the Holy Spirit as *'Comforter'* or *'Helper'* – John 14:16,26), and great High Priest, the Lord Jesus pleads our cause at the Father's right hand (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 1:3; 7:25; 8:1).

*Before the throne of God above
I have a strong, a perfect plea;
A great High Priest, whose name is Love,
Who ever lives and pleads for me.*

(Charitie Lees Bancroft)

Some who claim to be Christians, reject the plain teaching of the Bible concerning the wrath of God. God is angry with sinners (Romans 1:18) and his holy wrath abides on all who do not trust in Christ (John 3:36). The sacrifice of Jesus is *the propitiation for our sins* (2). The meaning of *'propitiation'* is the removal of wrath by the offering of a gift. Christ's sacrifice at Calvary is the propitiation which turns God's holy and righteous anger away from us so that we receive mercy. Jesus is *the propitiation ... also for the whole world*; this does not mean that everyone will be saved, but that Jew, Gentile and every race may be reached by God's mercy. God's anger is only turned away from those who belong to him, who are *'in Christ'*.

Christian, think of all that the Lord Jesus has done for you and praise him with all your heart.

The confidence we have in him

John is encouraging Christians whose faith had been unsettled by the teaching of *'many false prophets'* (4:1). He writes, *'These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life'* (13). The expression *'we know'* is repeated several times in this chapter (2,15,18–20). Satan wants to undermine our faith in Christ but we can have assurance and know that we have eternal life.

The Greek word translated *'confidence'* (14; 2:28; 3:21) carries the idea of *'boldness in speech'* (it is translated *'boldness'* in 4:17). *Now this is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us* (14–15). This promise is truly amazing but it does not mean that we can be like spoiled children, getting from God all that we want. We must ask according to his will. **We are more likely to pray in line with God's will if we love and obey him and if we love our fellow Christians.** When we sin, it hinders our prayers (Psalm 66:18).

John gives an example of prayer in the case of *those who commit sin not leading to death* (16–17). John does not tell us what sin it is that leads to death but he may be referring to the sin of the *'many false prophets'* who denied that Jesus came in the flesh and died to save sinners (4:1–2). These people also denied the witness of the Holy Spirit (John 15:26) and the time would come when he would no longer convict them of their sin or give them an opportunity to repent. The true believer cannot be finally lost, though he may backslide.

All unrighteousness is sin (17). We must never deceive ourselves into thinking that *'little sins'* do not matter. All sin grieves the Holy Spirit and spoils our Christian testimony. These verses encourage us to pray for backsliders. If we bring them to God in prayer, he will give us life for them (if their profession of faith was real). Think about the backsliders known to you and now bring them to God in prayer.

The witness of God

Jesus Christ came *not only by water, but by water and blood* (6). Water is the symbol of his baptism and blood points to his sacrificial death for sinners. Some false teachers accepted that Jesus was baptised (coming by water) but they denied that God's Messiah died. Such heresy carried with it a denial of Christ's death as an atonement for sin. Many unbelieving religious teachers today teach that Jesus was only a man and they deny that his death was a substitutionary sacrifice for sinners.

God has given a threefold witness (testimony) that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (6–8): *

- The Holy Spirit. Jesus told his disciples that the Spirit of truth would testify of him (John 15:26).
- The water. At his baptism when God the Father said, *'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'* (Matthew 3:16–17).
- The blood which speaks of the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross to save sinners.

The witness of God is greater than the witness of men (9). The Father declared Jesus to be his Son at his baptism (Matthew 3:17); the Holy Spirit declared him *to be the Son of God* by his resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4). If we reject this witness concerning Christ, we accuse God of being a liar (10). The Christian also has the witness within himself (10). We know that Jesus is the Son of God who died and rose from the dead to save sinners. **Do you have this witness within you?**

God has testified that Jesus is his Son and that eternal life is to be found only in him (9,11; John 3:16). What is this eternal life? It speaks of our fellowship with God and our glorious future with the Lord in heaven. Death does not have the last word for the believer (Revelation 20:4).

* Verses 7 and 8 read as follows in early Greek manuscripts: *'For there are three that bear witness: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one'* (see the English Standard Version). The remaining words first appeared in a Latin manuscript hundreds of years after the death of John.

By this we know that we know him

False teachers had unsettled the readers of John's letter in their faith, suggesting that they did not really know God. He writes to reassure them that they were genuine believers by emphasising certain tests that reveal the evidence of true faith (5:13). He highlights one of these tests in these verses and reassures them with two statements containing the words *'by this'*:

- ***By this we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He who says, 'I know him,' and does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him*** (3–4). Here is the 'moral test' which we must apply to our lives. Some Christians rightly emphasise that salvation is through faith alone in Christ and his sacrifice but they make the mistake of rejecting the need of a righteous life as an evidence of saving faith. They may lead God-honouring lives, but they believe that looking for holy living as an evidence of salvation is legalism and seeking salvation by works. It is also possible to attend church services regularly and to convince ourselves that we know the Lord, and yet have little concern to obey the teaching of the Bible. If this is the case, we deceive ourselves, and like those who claim that they have no sin, we are liars (cp. 1:8). Those who know the Lord Jesus love him and gladly obey his commandments.

- ***But whoever keeps his word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in him*** (5). His great love *is perfected* in us (achieves its design) when we keep his Word (4–5). The New Testament describes Christians as being *'in him'* or *'in Christ'* (2 Corinthians 5:17). Keeping God's Word means walking as Jesus walked in glad obedience to the will of God the Father (6; cp. John 6:38; Hebrews 10:7). Matthew Henry comments, 'They who profess to be on his side, and to abide with him, must walk with him, after his pattern and example.' **A Christlike life is an evidence of salvation.**

A new commandment

The Lord Jesus told his disciples at the Last Supper that the cup represented his *blood of the new covenant shed which is for many for the remission of sins* (Matthew 26:28). He also gave the disciples a new commandment at that time: *‘A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another’* (John 13:34). The apostle reminds us of this in verse 8. This commandment is also ‘old’ in the sense that they had received it from the time they followed Christ, *‘from the beginning’* (7).

The *new commandment* was perfectly shown in the life and death of the Lord Jesus; brotherly love was also seen in the lives of John’s first readers (*‘in you’*; 8). Whatever false teachers said to undermine their Christian assurance, their love for their fellow Christians was another evidence of true faith in Christ; this is the ‘social test’ or the ‘fellowship test’.

If we have any hatred in our heart for other believers we must question our salvation. If we hate a brother or sister in Christ, we are guilty of murder in the sight of God (3:12–15). Such hatred will cause us to grope in darkness, it will keep us from walking in the light and joy of Christ, causing ourselves and others to stumble (9–11). Only those who walk in the light can enjoy fellowship with God and with each other (cp. 1:7). Christian love is more than not hating others. We shall see in chapter 3, verses 16–18 that Christian love is practical and must be seen in action.

Ian Hamilton writes, ‘Hating the people we say are our brothers, our fellow believers, exposes the emptiness and self-delusion of our Christian profession ... The absence of brotherly love is telling evidence of an unrenewed, unsaved life. When we handle something, our fingerprints mark it. When God savingly touches a life, he leaves his “fingerprints” all over it’ (LET’S STUDY THE LETTERS OF JOHN, page 17). **Are his ‘fingerprints’ on your life?**

Whatever is born of God overcomes the world

The Lord Jesus condemned the Pharisees who overlaid the Scriptures with their man-made rules and regulations, He said, *‘They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders’* (Matthew 23:4). Knowing God and loving him makes all the difference to us. We then delight to obey him and find that *his commandments are not burdensome* (3). God’s commandments are good and bring great blessing to those who keep them (Psalm 19:7–11). Ian Hamilton points out that ‘God’s commands are no more burdensome to a Christian than wings are burdensome to a bird’ (LET’S STUDY THE LETTERS OF JOHN, page 72). John’s first readers were not troubled so much by those who made keeping God’s commands burdensome, but by those who disregarded them and led lawless lives. If we love Christ, we will gladly keep his commandments, including his command to love one another (John 13:34–35; 14:15).

The world may hate us (3:13), but it also seeks to seduce us and to mould us into its godless way of thinking (cp. Romans 12:2). The seduction faced by 21st century Christians is far more sophisticated and subtle than that of the 1st century. The internet has not only given us access to an immense store of knowledge, it is also an instrument which has ensnared many into pornography and sexual sins; for many it has also become a time-waster. Are we as enthusiastic to set time aside for prayer and to study God’s precious Word as we are to sit in front of a computer or to engage in social networking?

The phrase *‘overcomes the world’* is repeated three times in verses 4 and 5. Three different reasons are given for our victory over the world:

1. Our new birth. *Whatever is born of God overcomes the world* (4).
2. Our faith. We trust in a great God who will never fail us (4).
3. Our belief *that Jesus is the Son of God* (5).

The child of God has many battles with the world and all its attractions, but we must not allow it to intimidate us or seduce us. Our victory over the world and its ruler is assured (cp. 2:13–14).

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God

The three tests of Christian profession are again set out in these verses: our belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God; our love for the children of God, and our obedience to his commandments.

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. The Word of God again insists that unless we believe that Jesus, who came in the flesh, is the promised Messiah, the Son of God, we cannot know God, we are not *born of God* (1). This problem was not confined to the early church. There are many today who claim that Jesus was no more than a man, albeit a great man. We cannot have fellowship with churches or individuals who teach this heresy (cp. Galatians 1:6–9). It is not enough, however, to say that we believe that ‘Jesus is the Son of God’. Demons acknowledge this great truth (cp. Matthew 8:7–8).

God brings us to new birth in Christ and it should be obvious that if we love him, we should also love our fellow Christians who have also been *begotten* of God (1). The same Greek word is translated ‘*whoever*’ and ‘*everyone*’ in verse 1. We belong to the same spiritual family as other believers (Ephesians 3:15).

All Christians have the same heavenly Father, we rejoice in the Lord Jesus who died to save all God’s children, and the Holy Spirit dwells in us all. Our love must extend to those believers who differ from us concerning church government, baptism or spiritual gifts. We must speak the truth in love to each other (Ephesians 4:15) and help one another when needs arise. **How can we not love one another?**

*Gracious Spirit, dwell with me!
I myself would gracious be,
And with words that help and heal
Would thy life in mine reveal;
And with actions bold and meek
Would for Christ, my Saviour, speak.*

(Thomas T. Lynch)

Your sins are forgiven ... you have known the Father

John now addresses three groups of Christians in different stages of the Christian life:

- *Little children.* Those who are new believers, who are ‘babes’ in Christ. They are young in the faith and vulnerable to the wiles of the devil and to seduction by false teachers.
- *Fathers.* Those who are advanced and mature in the faith, having years of Christian experience behind them.
- *Young men.* Those who have grown in grace and in the knowledge of God and are strong in him.

John addresses all his readers as ‘*Little children*’ (1,28; 3:7,18; 4:4; 5:21). The Greek word ‘*teknion*’ is a diminutive of the noun ‘*teknos*’; it is used as an expression of affection. The words ‘*little children*’ in verses 13 and 18, are translated from the Greek noun ‘*paidia*’, plural of *paidion* which means ‘a young child’ or ‘infant’. John is addressing those who are young in the faith. Their experience is that of all who come to faith in Christ. They know the forgiveness of their sins and they have been brought into a personal relationship with God (‘*you have known the Father*’).

If you are a new Christian, think about these two wonderful privileges:

- ‘*Your sins are forgiven you for his name’s sake*’. Your sins which alienated you from God are now forgiven and you are no longer under divine condemnation. You were once lost and without hope, but all is now changed (Ephesians 2:1–13). ‘*Your sins are forgiven*’ and you have eternal life (John 3:16; Romans 5:1; 8:1; Ephesians 1:7).
- ‘*You have known the Father*’. Perhaps you once knew about almighty God but now you know him. You may not be able to pray like those who have been Christians for many years but you too can pray to God knowing that he will listen to you. You may feel frustrated because you have so much to learn from the Bible and you may struggle in your new Christian life but be encouraged. **You now know God as your heavenly Father. He lovingly watches over you and cares for you. He will never fail you!**

You are strong, and the word of God abides in you

Those described as ‘*fathers*’ (13,14) are men and women who are mature in the faith, having years of Christian experience behind them. They had *known him who is from the beginning* (the Lord Jesus Christ; cp. 1:1). The false teachers troubling them denied that Jesus had come from heaven to become a man (4:1–2). Mature, godly men and women have proved the Lord Jesus to be very precious and faithful to them over many years. Some may no longer have the physical capacity to serve as once they did but their prayers, example, and counsel are a great blessing to their local church. **Honour and respect those who are true spiritual ‘fathers’ and follow their godly example.**

When John writes to ‘*young men*’ (13,14) he is referring to both males and females. They have grown in grace and in the knowledge of God and are strong in him. Such believers have known much spiritual conflict but they *have overcome the wicked one* (Satan) in the strength of Christ. John said of them, ‘*You are strong, and the word of God abides in you.*’

There are many weak Christians in our churches who ought to be strong. They have professed to be followers of Christ for years, yet they are weak and immature (cp. Hebrews 5:12–14); they have never really known what it is to *overcome the wicked one*. Though they acknowledge the vital importance of prayer, they hardly pray and do not bother to go to the prayer meetings of their church. They are worldly-minded and forget that they will be called to account when the Lord Jesus comes again (1 Corinthians 3:11–15).

The Bible commands us, ‘*Be strong*’ (1 Corinthians 16:13; Ephesians 6:10). We must know the Word of God thoroughly and be biblical in our thinking if we are to have spiritual strength and overcome Satan. We must trust in the Lord at all times and obey his holy will. How is it with you? **Are you frequently defeated in the Christian warfare, or are you overcoming the wicked one?**

Perfect love casts out fear

John writes of God’s love being *perfected in us* when we love one another (12, 17; cp. 2:5). What does John mean by this? The Greek word translated ‘*perfected*’ means ‘*completed*’ or ‘*fulfilled*’. God’s love is fulfilled in us when we love each other and this brings two great blessings into our lives:

- *We may have boldness in the day of judgment* (17). *The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit* (Romans 5:5). When we experience the love of God and reflect the image of Christ in our lives, we do not fear the day of judgment. The almighty Judge is also our Saviour who suffered to save us from sin and the condemnation that it brings (1 Peter 3:18; Romans 8:34).
- Fear is driven out of our lives because *perfect love casts out fear* (18). *Fear involves torment*; it saps our strength, it causes sleepless nights, it robs us of our peace and joy. *God is love* (16) and when his love is perfected in us we will not allow anxious thoughts to blight our lives. The Lord Jesus loves us and cares for us and he will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5–6). We may be called to suffer for him, but nothing can separate us from his love (Romans 8:35–39).

Why are to show the love of Christ in our lives *because he first loved us* (19).

*How helpless and hopeless we sinners had been,
If he never had loved us till cleansed from our sin!*

(Arthur T. Pierson)

Love for our fellow Christians is commanded by the Lord Jesus Christ: *And this is the commandment we have from him, that he who loves God, must love his brother also* (21). **We are liars if we say that we love God but hate our brother (19–21).**

Amy Carmichael wrote, ‘If I can write an unkind letter, speak an unkind word, think an unkind thought without grief and shame, then I know nothing of Calvary love’ (IF, page 45, published by CLC).

God is love

These verses again remind us to the command of the Lord Jesus to love one another (cp. 2:7–11; 3:11–18). Love is at the head of the list of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22), and when love for God and for each other is seen in our lives, it is an evidence that we have been born of God. *Love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God* (7).

God is love (8,16). This wonderful truth is often misunderstood. It does not mean that he will not punish sinners. If God ignored human wickedness, we could not possibly trust in him because his justice would always be in doubt. God has *manifested* (shown) his love by sending his only begotten Son into the world to be our Saviour, *to be the propitiation for our sins*, turning his wrath away from us (9–10,14).

Those who are born of God love the Lord and his people. *He who does not love does not know God, for God is love* (8,16). We are to love one another because *God so loved us* (11). If we are harsh and unloving we deny our profession of love for the Lord and our faith in him. *No one has seen God at any time* but the evidence that he lives in us can be seen when we love each other (12–13). John again stresses the need for correct belief in Christ, that he *is the Son of God* (15).

God lovingly watches over us and nothing can separate us from his love (Romans 8:35–39). **Let us think about the love of God and come to him with heartfelt gratitude and praise. Let us ask him to give us grace to show his love in our lives today.**

*O love of God, how deep and great,
Far deeper than man's deepest hate;
Self-fed, self-kindled like the light,
Changeless, eternal, infinite!*

*O love of God, our shield and stay
Through all the perils of our way;
Eternal love, in thee we rest,
For ever safe, for ever blest.* (Horatius Bonar)

Do not love the world or the things in the world

John gives us a very solemn warning against worldliness: *'Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him'* (15). You may wonder how this fits in with God's loving the world (John 3:16). God's love is not for the wicked ways of the world but for people of all races. His love is not self-seeking but self-sacrificing; because God loved, he gave his only begotten Son to die for sinners. Ian Hamilton comments that the 'world' we are not to love has a darker, more sinister meaning. 'It stands for an organized system that hates and openly defies God and his Son (see John 15:18–25)' – (LET'S STUDY THE LETTERS OF JOHN page 21). We are now seeing this more than ever in the western world.

We often find it far easier to love the world than to love our Christian brothers and sisters. Love for others requires self-denial while love of the world panders to self-indulgence. Worldliness is an attitude of the heart which is driven along by (16):

- *The lust of the flesh* – the desires of our old, sinful nature.
 - *The lust of the eyes* – coveting things that we do not have.
 - *The pride of life* – The Greek means boasting in our possessions.
- Jesus warns us against this (Luke 12:15; cp. Matthew 6:19–21).

What are we to do when tempted by worldly desires? We must remember how much the Lord Jesus loves us and that he laid down his life to save us from our sins. We must not allow the world and its ways to fashion our thinking (Romans 12:2).

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

*It was the sight of thy dear cross
First weaned my soul from earthly things;
And taught me to esteem as dross
The mirth of fools and pomp of kings.* (William Cowper)

He who does the will of God abides for ever

We live in a time of enormous challenge and when Christians are despised and persecuted. At the same time false sects and religions are deceiving millions of people. The witness of many small churches is maintained by faithful and often elderly believers. There are, however, many professing Christians who are content to drift along with little commitment to Christ. Their time and money are devoted to pleasure rather than to the interests of God's kingdom. They cannot stir themselves to be at both services each Lord's Day and they rarely attend the prayer meeting. They hardly read their Bible or pray; they are not walking with the Lord. They are not motivated by love for the Lord but by love for the world. **Does this describe you? Do you take John's solemn warning to heart? If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him (15).**

Worldliness is a greater enemy to the church than persecution; it saps spiritual strength and leads to lukewarmness in the Christian life. We must never think that we are immune from the temptations of the world. The Greek noun 'aiōn' ('age') is often translated 'world' in the New Testament, having a similar meaning to 'world' in John's letter. Demas, one of Paul's closest companions, forsook the apostle, *having loved this present world* ('age'; 2 Timothy 4:10).

God has made us for himself to really know him, love him, worship and serve him. He alone can satisfy our deepest needs which are spiritual. Once we have known God, we will never be satisfied with the pleasures of this world; there is an aching void which the world can never fill (Ecclesiastes 2:11). This world, with all its lusts, is passing away. It will soon disappear, *but he who does the will of God abides for ever*, having the promise of eternal life and heaven (17,25).

*Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show.
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.*

(John Newton)

Test the spirits

Many Christians have been deceived by friendly, smooth-tongued, false teachers. Make no mistake about it, these people are agents of the devil (cp. 2 Corinthians 11:13–15). They may be religious but *they are of the world* (5). We must always keep the warnings of God's Word fixed in our minds, especially when anyone comes to us with some new or strange teaching. *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God* (1). Ian Hamilton reminds us that 'the test is not whether the preacher is impressive and his message attractive, but whether what he says is true' (LET'S STUDY THE LETTERS OF JOHN, page 54).

Any religion (such as Gnosticism that troubled the early church) which denies that Jesus is God the Son, who came to earth in the flesh, is false and *is the spirit of the Antichrist* (2–3). We cannot have fellowship with those who embrace false teaching concerning the Lord Jesus or reject the authority of Scripture, nor can we take part in multi-faith religious services. Many heretical cults deny the deity of the Lord Jesus and that the Holy Spirit is a Person of the Godhead. When shown Scriptures which plainly teach these truths, they are so enslaved in their deception that they refuse to listen. *He who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error* (6).

Some popular charismatic tele-evangelists deceive many people though they are in great error concerning their teaching about the Lord Jesus. They make great claims for themselves but we must not be deceived by them. Some Christians refuse to test their teaching and practices because they are afraid of questioning what is claimed to be a work of the Holy Spirit. They are understandably cautious of saying or doing anything that would grieve the Spirit. However, it is just as bad to receive any false doctrine or practice as it is to question a genuine manifestation of the Spirit. We must reject any teaching that is not taught in the Bible. Do not be deceived *but test the spirits. To do this, we need to know the Word of God and to be biblical in our thinking.*

If our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God

When we lack assurance of salvation, we generally lose confidence in prayer; we do not pray with faith nor do we expect God to answer our prayers. John writes ‘*If our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God*’ (22). Ian Hamilton observes, ‘This is as far removed from pride-filled presumption as light is from darkness. Our confidence is not based on anything we are or have done, but on God’s gracious acceptance of us in Christ’ (LET’S STUDY THE LETTERS OF JOHN, page 50).

When we seek to please the Lord, our heart will not condemn us and we will have the assurance that God will answer our prayers: *And whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do those things that are pleasing in his sight* (21–22). **What a marvellous promise we have here! Think about it and be encouraged as you come to God in prayer.** We must remember, however, that as children of God, we must not ask him for anything that is displeasing to him. We should seek the glory of God and the good of his people in our petitions, praying according to his will (5:14–15).

Verses 23 and 24 have the three tests of true Christian profession – keeping his commandments (moral), believing on the name of Christ (theological) and loving one another (social).

*Come, my soul, thy suit prepare,
Jesus loves to answer prayer;
He himself has bid thee pray;
Therefore will not say thee nay.*

*Thou art coming to a King;
Large petitions with thee bring:
For his grace and power are such,
None can ever ask too much.*

(John Newton)

The Antichrist is coming

John warns us that *the Antichrist is coming* (18). ‘*The last hour*’ does not refer to the period immediately before Christ’s return, but to the whole of the gospel age. The Antichrist is also described as ‘*the man of sin ... the son of perdition ... the lawless one*’ (2 Thessalonians 2:3,8). He will be the leader behind the great deception and lawlessness which shall precede the return of Christ. Who is he? We cannot be sure. The Reformers believed that the pope was the Antichrist (The 1689 Baptist Confession and The Westminster Confession of Faith also take this view). The pope is an antichrist but there have been many popes. It is likely that the final Antichrist will be a religious leader who will deny the deity of the Lord Jesus (22–23; 4:1–3).

We should not spend time in speculating about the identity of the Antichrist because *even now many antichrists have come* (18). False teachers still cause havoc in the church. Those known to John once belonged to the church but they were agents of Satan (19; cp. Acts 20:30). They appeared to be Christians but they eventually showed their true colours. How can we recognise such antichrists today? They deny the Bible teaching concerning the Holy Trinity. They are found within the professing church and among sects such as Jehovah’s Witnesses or Christadelphians. Others who troubled the early church taught that Jesus was born a man and that he died a man. They said that he was anointed as the Christ at his baptism and that the anointing left him before he went to the cross.

The theological test of genuine Christian faith is rooted in the belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (22–23). Every Christian has the gift (‘*an anointing*’) of the Holy Spirit (20) who guides us into all truth (John 16:13). False teachers are often very plausible and pleasant in their manner, but we must not allow ourselves to be deceived by them. **Those who teach that there are many ways to God and that other religions are just as valid as Christianity in the sight of God are also antichrists. Let us beware of them.**

This is the promise that he has promised us — eternal life

John's first readers knew the truth (21) and he now urges, 'Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning' (24). The Greek verb translated 'to abide' means 'to continue' or 'to remain' (eg.14). We must abide (continue) in the truths of God's Word if we are to abide (continue) in the Son and in the Father. Error has a bewitching fascination and many people begin well but later depart from the truth (cp. Galatians 3:1). The Christian church has been troubled by false teachers throughout its history and most of the books in the New Testament contain warnings against them. These people try to deceive us and to turn us away from the truths of the gospel (26).

Why do some Christians fall into error? If we are not living in obedience to the Lord, we grieve the Holy Spirit (cp. Ephesians 4:25–30), and we lose his blessing upon our lives. If we fail to walk with the Lord, we make ourselves vulnerable to deception and other attacks from Satan. Why listen to false teachers, who often make empty promises as they peddle their errors? God, who cannot lie, has given us many wonderful promises. *This is the promise that he has promised us — eternal life* (25). What more can we desire, than to live forever with our Lord in heaven, seeing him, enjoying him and serving him?

John states, 'You do not need that anyone should teach you' (27). He does not mean that we have no need of instruction from godly pastors and teachers whom the risen, ascended Lord has given to the church to equip us for work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11–12). Ian Hamilton writes, 'true believers, indwelt by God's Spirit of truth do not need anyone to tell them how wrong false teaching is; they know that "no lie is of the truth" (verse 21b). Thus the indwelling Holy Spirit sensitizes the child of God to spiritual truth and gives him an ability to discern error when it poses as truth' (LET'S STUDY THE LETTERS OF JOHN, page 29). **We have the anointing of the Holy Spirit who will lead us into all truth as we prayerfully read the Word of God, hear it preached, and obey it.**

'Tis a point I long to know,
Oft it causes anxious thought;
Do I love the Lord or no?
Am I his, or am I not?

If I love, why am I thus?
Why this dull, this lifeless frame?
Hardly, sure, can they be worse,
Who have never heard his name!

Could my heart so hard remain,
Prayer a task and burden prove;
Every trifle give me pain,
If I knew a Saviour's love?

When I turn my eyes within,
All is dark, and vain, and wild:
Filled with unbelief and sin,
Can I deem myself a child?

If I pray, or hear, or read,
Sin is mixed with all I do;
You that love the Lord indeed,
Tell me, is it thus with you?

Yet I mourn my stubborn will,
Find my sin a grief and thrall;
Should I grieve for what I feel,
If I did not love at all?

Could I joy his saints to meet,
Choose the ways I once abhorred,
Find, at times, the promise sweet,
If I did not love the Lord?

Lord, decide the doubtful case!
Thou who art thy people's sun,
Shine upon thy work of grace,
If it be indeed begun.

Let me love thee more and more,
If I love at all, I pray;
If I have not loved before,
Help me to begin today.

If our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart

Many Christians lack assurance of salvation and struggle with doubts which weaken and hinder them in their work for the Lord. If you are lacking in assurance, you are not alone. Many great men and women of God have struggled as you struggle but the Lord has brought them through and they have been strengthened in their faith. The converted slave-trader and Christian hymn-writer John Newton wrote some verses which reflect this problem (see next page).

We may lack assurance if we are not walking with the Lord, if we neglect personal prayer, if we do not feed ourselves upon the Word of God, or if we love the world. We have no right to assurance if we do not love our fellow Christians. If we are not concerned about pleasing the Lord and obeying his Word, we are in peril because we may have false assurance. Our hearts should condemn us if these things are true of us! John points out that if we show practical Christian love in our lives we shall know that *we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him* (18–19).

Christian assurance is the birthright of every child of God but Satan is always busy, seeking to undermine that assurance. He whispers doubts into our minds and is quick to condemn us (often when we have not sinned) and seeks to drive us to despair. How can we tell the difference between the convicting work of the Holy Spirit and the condemning accusations of Satan, who is *the accuser of our brethren* (Revelation 12:10)? The Holy Spirit points us to Christ and his atoning death for our sins. He urges us to repent and to renew our fellowship with the Lord.

If our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things (20). **We must never rely on the feelings of our heart, but trust in our great God who is gracious and merciful to all who come to him. He knows our hearts and sees our love for him and his people, however imperfect and weak this love may be.**

Children of God

John appeals to us that we should abide, continue in Christ, so that *we may have confidence and not be ashamed* when he comes again (28). We have a glorious hope as children of God, but this should never make us complacent in the Christian life. The apostle reminds us of the moral test; the Lord Jesus is righteous and the practice of a righteous life is an evidence that we are born of God and belong to him (29).

We have already seen that the first readers of John's letter were being troubled by false teachers who were undermining the Christian assurance of some. John encourages us with the wonderful truth that when God saves us, he brings us into his family: *'Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!'* (1). We are children of God because of his great love which he has lavished so freely upon us. To know God is a priceless privilege. We have fellowship with him and he is with us wherever we go (1:3; Hebrews 13:5–6). He hears and answers our prayers (5:14–15) and has given us eternal life (2:25).

We know that we shall be like the Lord Jesus when he returns, *for we shall see him as he is* (2). We will at last be perfect and will sin no more. We will have a body like his resurrection body (Philippians 3:21). There will be no more death, sorrow, crying or pain (Revelation 21:4). The truth of Christ's second coming is a great incentive to holy living. *Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure* (3; cp. 2 Peter 3:11). Notice that **'everyone'** without exception, who has this hope within him, keeps himself from the pollution of the sinful ways of this world and leads a godly life such as that described in Colossians 3:1–17.

Christian, when you feel discouraged, when you feel lonely among ungodly people at home, work or college, remember your status in Christ. **You are a child of God and you know his smile upon you. He is with you and he will not forsake you. Be determined to shine as a light in this dark world** (Matthew 5:14–16; Ephesians 5:8).

Whoever has been born of God does not sin

These verses give two reasons why the Lord Jesus came into the world (*was manifested*):

- *To take away our sins* (5). He died to save us from the power of sin and from the condemnation that it brings (John 8:34–36; Romans 6:6,14; 8:1).
- *That he might destroy the works of the devil* (8). Sin is the work of the devil who *has sinned from the beginning*. It is *lawlessness*, being rebellious against God's holy law (4). Satan's power over a man or woman is broken when Christ saves them. We are able to resist the devil and overcome his efforts to make us sin (James 4:7).

The Christian will not be entirely free from sin before reaching heaven, but there is no excuse for leading a sinful lifestyle. How can anyone, therefore, who *abides* (continues) in the Lord Jesus Christ continue in sin. He practises righteousness (5–7)?

Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for his seed remains in him; and he cannot sin (9). This does not mean that we never sin or that we are incapable of sin. To teach such a thing is heresy (cp. 1:9). If Christians were sinless, much of the teaching found in the New Testament would be unnecessary (cp. 1 Corinthians 5:1–5; 10:12; Galatians 6:1). If you are a Christian, you have been born again *of incorruptible seed through the word of God* (9, 1 Peter 1:23; cp. James 1:18). God has implanted spiritual life within you and you are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17); you must not behave as a person who is not saved. These words mean that the Christian 'cannot continue in the course and practice of sin' (Matthew Henry's Commentary).

How can you distinguish between the children of God and the children of the devil? The children of God practise righteousness but the children of the devil practise sin. *He who sins* ('makes a practice of sinning' – ESV) *is of the devil* (8,10) **How is your life and practice? To whom do you belong?**

Let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth

The moral and social tests of genuine Christianity are found in verse 10: *Whoever does not practise righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother*. The Word of God is quite clear. If we do not practise righteousness or love our fellow Christians, we have no reason to suppose that we are the children of God. If we hate another Christian, we are like Cain who was a child of the devil. He hated and murdered his brother Abel whose righteous works were a rebuke to his own evil lifestyle (11–12).

Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you (13; 2 Timothy 3:12). The hostility of the world towards us may show itself in a number of ways such as mocking our Christian testimony, ignoring us, treating us unfairly or even by physical attack. We need to continually encourage each other, showing Christian love and warmth, praying for each other as we face trial in this hostile, spiteful, hateful world.

The social test of true Christianity is again repeated: *We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death* (14). Hatred for a fellow Christian is murder and no murderer possesses eternal life (15).

The Lord Jesus is our great example of brotherly love and he laid down his life to save us. We must show the same self-sacrificing love for our Christian brothers and sisters, being prepared to lay down our lives for them (16). Priscilla and Aquila had such love for the apostle Paul that they *risked their own necks* for him (Romans 16:3–4).

If our lives are filled with the love of God we cannot possibly be hard-hearted. If we have the means to help a brother or sister in need and refuse to help them, how can the love of God abide in us? (17). **We may agree that the words we have read are true and necessary but how are these things working out in our own Christian lives? Let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth** (18).