

F.B. Hole

**Comments on  
the 1<sup>st</sup> Epistle of John**

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By F.B. Hole

## Table of Contents

|                   |    |
|-------------------|----|
| Introduction..... | 2  |
| Chapter 1.....    | 3  |
| Chapter 2.....    | 14 |
| Chapter 3.....    | 40 |
| Chapter 4.....    | 63 |
| Chapter 5.....    | 84 |

## Introduction

THE MOST CURSORY reading of the first Epistle of John is enough to show us that it bears a very strong likeness to the Gospel of John. The same themes are prominent in both. In the Gospel they are set forth, mainly but not exclusively, in the Lord's own words, and as illustrated in His life. In the Epistle they are still enforced, but the main point now is that they are to be demonstrated in the lives of the children of God. The Gospel shows us things that are true in Him. But the Epistle speaks of "a new commandment ... which thing is true in Him and in you" (1 John 2:8). This brief sentence furnishes us with a key to the whole epistle.

This epistle was amongst the last to be written. There were already "antichrists" about, as the second chapter states. These men laid claim to superior knowledge. They claimed that their teachings were a moving forward, an improvement on what had gone before. But under pretence of moving forward they moved clean away from the foundation which had been laid in Christ, and from the life which from the beginning had been manifested in Him, when He came amongst us in flesh. Hence the first thing needful was to make very plain that there had

been a real, true, objective manifestation of the eternal life in Christ.

## **Chapter 1**

WE MUST NOT confound "from the beginning" with the words, "In the beginning," with which the Gospel opens. There, the eternal existence and deity of the Word is stated, and we travel back to the beginning, and even beyond the beginning, of all things that can be said to have had a beginning. Here, we are concerned with the fact that all Christian truth begins with the revelation which reached us in Christ incarnate. That was the beginning of the true manifestation of God and of life eternal. That was the basis of all apostolic teaching. The anti-christs pushed their seductive teachings which merely originated from their own foolish minds. The apostles declared that which was from the beginning, and not something which had been introduced since.

In verses 1 and 2 the Lord Jesus is not mentioned personally, for the point is rather that which was presented to us in Him. He was "the Word of life." In John 1, He is "the Word," and being such He creates, so that creation may express something at

least of God. Also He becomes flesh and dwells amongst us that He may express God fully to us. Here the thought is similar, but more limited. Life is the point: He was "that eternal life which was with the Father" and in Him it has been manifested to us. We are to have the life in having Him; but the first thing is to see the full character of the life as it came out in Him.

The life was eternal life, but it also was "with the Father." This statement, we are told, gives the character of the life; so that it is not merely a statement of the fact that it was with the Father, but rather that it was such a life as that. It was with the Father inasmuch as He, who is the Fountain Head of that life, was with the Father, and in Him it has been manifested to us. He became flesh that it might be manifested.

By the fact of His becoming flesh He placed Himself within the reach of three out of the five senses or faculties with which man is endowed. He could be heard, seen and felt. Hearing comes first, for in our fallen condition it is to that faculty that God specially addresses Himself. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). And so in the first

place the apostles heard the Word of life, and thus were able to apprehend Him.

But then they also saw Him with their eyes, and even "looked upon," or "contemplated" Him. There had been in earlier days fleeting manifestations of this great Person as "the Angel of the Lord," only then it was impossible to contemplate Him for He was seen but for a moment. Now, come in flesh, all was different. The apostles spent years with Him, and could scrutinize Him with attention. They gazed at Him long and earnestly, even though they did not properly understand all that they observed until they had received the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Also they came into physical contact with Him. Their hands actually handled Him. This guaranteed that He was no mere Spirit manifestation. He was amongst them in a real human body of flesh and blood. After His resurrection He sojourned among them in His risen body of flesh and bones, and we may remember how He specifically enjoined them to handle Him and see He was not a Spirit after His resurrection.

All this establishes then beyond a doubt that there had been this real manifestation of eternal life before them. John 1 shows

that in Him the Father was declared (ver. 18); Colossians 1, that God was perfectly represented in Him as His Image (ver. 15); Hebrews 1, that as the Son He is the Word, and that He is the expression and outshining of God's Being and glory (vers. 2, 3). Here we find that He furnished the only true, objective manifestation of eternal life. It is remarkable that, just as we have four Gospels setting forth His life from differing aspects so we have these four passages which set forth from differing aspects all that which came into revelation in Him.

The reason why John laboured this point in his opening verses was that the anti-christian teachers belittled it, or even denied it altogether. They were called "Gnostics," because they claimed to be "the knowing ones." They preferred their own subjective impressions and philosophic speculations to the objective facts established in Christ. Now everything for the apostles and for us begins with well established facts. The faith once delivered to the saints is rooted and established on facts. We cannot be too clear and emphatic as to this. That which is (as we shall see) subjectively produced in the saints is strictly in keeping with that which has been objectively manifested in Him.

The manifestation was made in the first place to the apostles. They were the "we." But then, "that which we have seen and heard declare we to you." The "you" were the saints generally. The manifestation made before the apostles brought them into "fellowship ... with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ." They have made known to us that which was manifested, that we might be brought into the same wonderful fellowship. The Father and the Son are made known to us. The eternal life connected with the Father and the Son has been manifested to us through them. The things of the Father and the Son have been revealed. Nothing could be more wonderful than this: nothing more absorbing, if once by the Holy Spirit we begin to lay hold of it. Nothing more calculated to fill our hearts with abiding gladness. No wonder the Apostle adds, "These things write we to you, that your joy may be full."

Verse 4 makes it quite clear that the communication of these things to us by the apostles is through the Scriptures. "These things write we ..." The apostles heard, saw and handled. We must read. Thank God for the Holy Writings which bring the knowledge of these things to us for our joy.

In verse 5 John begins his message. Where does he start? With this great fact that "God is light" and not, as we might have expected, with the fact that God is love. All the emphasis would no doubt have been on His love had the manifestation been made in regions of unsullied purity and light. As however the manifestation has been made in this world, so filthy with sin and full of darkness, the first emphasis must be laid on light.

As to light — who can define it? Men have formulated theories to account for the light of creation, but they cannot really explain it. Who then shall explain the uncreated Light? We know that light is necessary if life is to exist in any but its lowest forms. We know that it is healthful, that it illuminates and exposes all things, and that if it enters darkness flees. In God there is no darkness at all, for darkness stands for that which is removed from the action of light, that which is hidden and sinful.

Not only is God Himself light but, as verse 7 tells us, He is "in the light." Once the Lord had said, "that He would dwell in the thick darkness" (2 Chron. 6:1); and the fact that Solomon built Him an house did not alter it, for His presence was still found in the Holy of Holies, where all was dark. This was altered by

the coming of the Lord Jesus, for God stepped into the light in Him. The God who is light is now in the light.

This fact is used as a test in verse 6. We have in this verse the first of many tests which are propounded. The presence of many false teachers with their varied and boastful claims made these tests necessary; and we shall notice that none of them are based upon elaborate or far-fetched considerations. They are all of the simplest sort and based upon the fundamental nature of things. Here, for instance, the fact that God is light, and that He is in the light, tests any claim that is made of being in fellowship with Him. Such an one cannot possibly be walking in darkness, for as we read elsewhere, "What communion has light with darkness?" There is no communion (or fellowship) at all between the two. They are diametrically opposed.

The point here is not whether we always walk according to the light that we have received. We are all found offenders as to this at some time or other, as we know to our sorrow. To "walk in darkness" is to walk in ignorance of the light that has shone in Christ. A reference to Isaiah 50:10-11, at this point may be helpful. The one who "walks in darkness and has no light" is to "trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God." How-

ever, even in Isaiah's day there were those who preferred to "kindle a fire" and walk in the light of the fire and the sparks that they kindled. It was just like this in John's day, and still is so in our own. There are all too many false teachers who prefer the sparks of their own kindling to the light of God's revelation. Consequently they and their followers are in darkness in spite of all their pretensions, and they have no fellowship with Him.

The true believer walks in the light of God fully revealed. The light has searched him of course. It could not be otherwise. But he walks happily in the light because he has learned in that light that "the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin." Every spot of defilement exposed by the light is removed by the Blood.

The word is "cleanses" — the present tense. From this some have deduced that the blood is to be continually applied. But the present tense is also used to denote the nature or character of anything; just as we say, "Cork floats." "Fire burns." "Soap washes." Such are their respective natures. Those properties belong to them. So it is the nature of the blood of Christ to cleanse from all sin. That blessed property is inherent in it. The idea that the Blood has to be continually or repeatedly applied

contravenes the teaching of Hebrews 9:23 - 10:14. We are "ONCE PURGED" by the "one offering," so as to have "no more conscience of sins."

Not only were men found who professed to have fellowship with God while yet walking in darkness, but there also were found some who went so far as to say, "We have no sin." No test is propounded in regard to this wicked pretension. None was needed since they must of necessity soon be found out. They were deceiving themselves, and John tells them so plainly. They would hardly deceive anyone else; and if for a moment they did, the deception would soon be dispelled by sin being manifested in them all too plainly. If any indulge in such high and unfounded claims they do not show that sin is not in them. They only make it very manifest that the truth is not in them.

It is very difficult to imagine true believers deceiving themselves in this way, save for a very brief time. The only true and honest attitude for us is that of confessing our sins, and doing so at once. It is true of course that the only honest thing for the unbeliever, when conviction reaches him, is to confess his sins; then forgiveness, full and eternal will be his. The believer is in

question here however. It is, "If we confess ..." The sin of a believer does not compromise or upset the eternal forgiveness which reached him, when as a sinner he turned to God in repentance. It does nevertheless compromise his communion with God, of which we have just been reading. That communion will be suspended until he confesses the sin that has broken in upon it.

When we confess, God is faithful and just to all that Christ is, and has done, and the sin is forgiven so that fellowship may be restored. This is what we may call paternal forgiveness, to distinguish it from the eternal forgiveness which reached us as sinners.

Not only does He forgive, but He also cleanses from all unrighteousness. The honest confession of sin by the saint not only ensures forgiveness but it also has a cleansing effect. Confession of sin means the judgment in our own hearts and minds of what we confess. And that means cleansing from its influence and deliverance from its power.

A third pretension comes before us in verse 10. Some may be so far deluded as to say that they "have not sinned." A test is

propounded in regard to this; namely, the Word of God. To make such a preposterous statement is to place ourselves in opposition to the Word of God and to make Him a liar. He plainly states that we have sinned, which ends the matter. We cannot contradict His Word, and yet have His Word abiding in us.

As surely as we are in the light, shall we know that we have sinned and that sin is still in us. Yet we shall also know the value of the blood of Christ and its cleansing power, as also the restoration that reaches us upon honest confession. Thus communion in the light with the Father and His Son is established for us, and also maintained. We are enabled to know and rejoice in the life which has been manifested, and in all that from the beginning has been set forth in the blessed Son of God.

Our joy being full in such things as these, we shall not feel inclined to run after the men who would entice us with their professed improvements and enlargements of "that which was from the beginning." The sparks they display before us may be quite pretty, but they are only of their own kindling, and they die out into darkness.

## Chapter 2

THE CLOSING VERSES of chapter 1 have shown us that we cannot say that we have no sin, nor that we have not sinned. The opening words of chapter 2 act as a counter-balance, lest we should rush to the conclusion that we can excuse ourselves for sinning by assuming that we can hardly help it, that it is practically inevitable. It is nothing of the kind. John wrote these things that we might not sin. Other scriptures speak of special provision made to keep us from falling: the point here is that, if we enter into the holy fellowship of which 1 John 1:3 speaks, we shall be preserved. The enjoyment of that fellowship excludes sin; just as sin excludes from the enjoyment of that fellowship, until it is confessed.

There is ample provision made for us that we may not sin, even though sin is still in us. We ought not to sin. There is no excuse for us if we do sin; but there is, thank God! "an Advocate with the Father" for us in that case. The word translated, Advocate, here is the same as is translated, Comforter, in John 14 — a word meaning literally, "One called alongside to help." The risen One, Jesus Christ the righteous, has been called alongside the Father in glory for the help of His saints, if and when they

sin. The Holy Spirit has been called along to our side here below for our help.

It is "the Father," you notice. That is because the Advocate appears for those who are already the children of God. The first words of the chapter are, "My children" (N. Trans.) — the word used is not the one meaning "babes," but one for "children" in a more general way. In this loving way the aged Apostle embraced as his own all the true children of God. We have been introduced into this blessed relationship by the Saviour, as John 1:12 tells us. Being in the relationship, we need the services of the Advocate when we sin.

The righteousness of our Advocate is stressed. We might have expected that His kindness and mercy would be: yet we find elsewhere that emphasis is laid on righteousness when sin is in question, and so it is here. The One who takes up our case in the Father's presence when we sin, will see to it that righteousness shall prevail. The Father's glory shall not be tarnished by our sin, on the one hand. And, on the other hand, He will deal with us righteously, so that we may come to a proper and righteous judgment of our sin, be brought to confession, and be forgiven and cleansed.

He who is our Advocate on high is also "the propitiation for our sins." This fact brings us back to the rock foundation upon which all rests. By His propitiatory sacrifice every claim of God against us has been met, and He takes up His advocacy with the Father upon that righteous basis. His propitiation has settled for us as sinners the eternal questions which our sins have raised. His advocacy now settles the paternal questions which are raised. when as children of God we sin.

Propitiation is what we may call the Godward side of the death of Christ. It is concerned with the most fundamental matter of all; the meeting of the Divine claims against sin. The meeting of the sinner's need must be secondary to that. Hence when we have the Gospel unfolded by Paul in the epistle to the Romans, we find that the first mention of the death of Christ is "a propitiation through faith in His blood" (Romans 3:25). We do not get substitution clearly stated until reaching Romans 4:25, we read of Him as "delivered for our offences."

Being the Godward aspect of His death the widest possible circle is in view — "the whole world." When the substitutionary side is stated believers only are in view: it is "our offences," or, "the sins of many." But though only believers stand in the

realized benefits of the death of Christ, God needs to be propitiated in regard to every sin that ever has been committed by men, in regard to the whole great outrage which sin has wrought. He has been thus propitiated in the death of Christ, and because of this He can freely offer forgiveness to men without compromising in the smallest degree one feature of His nature and character.

Propitiation is a word which often rouses to much wrath and scorn! fulness many opponents of the Gospel. They assume that it means what it does among the heathen — the pacifying by much blood-shedding of some angry, antagonistic and blood-thirsty power. But in the Scriptures the word is lifted on to an altogether higher plane. It still carries the general sense of appeasing or rendering favourable by sacrifice, but there is no ground for regarding God as antagonistic or blood-thirsty. He is infinitely holy. He is righteous in all His ways. He is of eternal majesty. His very nature, all His attributes must receive their due, and be magnified in the exaction of the appropriate penalty: yet He is not against man but for him, for what righteousness has demanded love has supplied. As we read presently in our epistle, "He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propiti-

ation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). God Himself provided the propitiation. His own Son, who was God, became it. Propitiation, rightly understood, is not a degrading idea but uplifting and ennobling. The only thing degrading is the idea of the matter falsely entertained by those who oppose. They attempt to foist their degraded idea into the Gospel, but the Word of God refutes their idea.

We now pass to the consideration of another claim that was being made falsely on occasions — "I know Him." It is indeed possible for the believer to say with great gladness that he knows God, inasmuch as "fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" is granted to us, and there can be no fellowship without knowledge. Still, again a test is needed lest such a claim be mere pretension. The test is that of obedience to the commandments which He has given to us. The knowledge of Him is inseparably connected with obedience to Him.

In keeping His commandments we know that we have come to know Him. Apart from this obedience there cannot be this knowledge, and the claim, if made, would only reveal that the truth is not in the claimant. Compare verse 4 with 1 John 1:8. The truth is not in the one who claims to have no sin, any more

than it is in the one who claims to have the knowledge of God, and yet is not obedient to His commandments.

Let us clearly grasp the fact that there are commandments in Christianity, though they are not of a legal order: and by that we mean, not given to us in order that we may thereby either establish or maintain our footing before God. Every definite expression of God's will has the force of a command, and we shall find this epistle has a great deal to say to us about His commandments, and they "are not grievous" (v. 3). The law of Christ is a law of liberty, inasmuch as we are brought into His life and nature.

From keeping His commandments we pass, in verse 5, to keeping His word. This is a further thing. His word covers all that He has revealed to us of His mind and will, including of course His commandments, but going beyond them. A man might give his sons many definite instructions — his commandments. But beyond these his sons have gleaned an intimate knowledge of his mind from the daily communications and intercourse of years, and with filial devotion they carefully observe his word even when they have no definite instructions. So it should be with the children of God. And, when it is so, the love of God is

"perfected" in such, for it has produced in them its proper effect and answer.

Moreover, by such obedience we know "that we are in Him." Our being "in Him" involves our participation in His life and nature. There is of course a very intimate connection between knowing "that we know Him," (ver. 3) and knowing "that we are in Him," (ver. 5). The second introduces us to a deeper thing. Angels know Him, and obey His commands. We are to know Him, as those who are in Him, and hence the slightest intimation of His thought or desire should be understood by us, and incite us to glad obedience.

Being in Him, we are to "abide in Him;" which means, as we understand it, abide in the consciousness and power of being in Him. Now it is easy for any of us to say, "I abide in Him," but if so we must produce that which proves the claim to be real. Such an one "ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked." If we are in His life, and also in the power and enjoyment of it, that life is bound to express itself in our ways and activities just as it did in Him. The grace and power of our walk, compared with His, will be poor and feeble; yet it will be

walk of the same order. The difference will not be in kind but only in degree.

What extraordinary elevation then is to characterize our walk! How far beyond the standard that was accepted in Old Testament times! When John wrote these words a good many may have felt inclined to protest that he was setting too high a standard and introducing what was entirely new. Hence in verse 7 he assures them that what he was saying was not new — in the way that the teachings of the antichrists were new — but rather an old commandment. At the same time it was in another sense a new commandment. There is no contradiction here, though there is a paradox. It was an old commandment, for it had been from the beginning set forth in Christ, as being God's holy will and pleasure for man: and so there was nothing about it which resembled the new notions of the Gnostics. Still it was a new commandment, for now it was to be set forth in those that were Christ's, and hence came as a new thing for them. The thing, said John, "is true in Him and in you." The life which was manifested in Christ, and which at the first was exclusively in Him, is now to be found in believers, who are in

Him. As they abide in Him the life will express itself in them in the same way, and bring forth similar fruits.

And so we read, "the true light now shines." There is the closest possible connection between life and light. If the true life was manifested in Christ, the true light equally shone in Him. If we have part in that true life, the true light will also shine in us. "The darkness is passing," is what the Apostle wrote, and not, "is past." We must wait for the world to come to say it is past: yet clearly it is passing away, for the true light has begun to shine in Christ and in those that are His. When God acts in judgment and the false life and light of this world are put out, then the darkness will be past indeed. At present we can rejoice in the assurance that it is passing, and that the true light is shining. The more we walk as He walked, the more effectively the light will shine through us.

But further, if the light is now going to shine in and through us, we ourselves must be in the light. Do we claim to be in the light? Well, there is a simple test by which it may be known if that claim is a genuine one. If any one says he is in the light and yet he hates his brother his claim is false, and he is in darkness; that is, he does not really know God — he is not in the

light of God revealed in Christ. No one can be in the light of God who is not in the life of God, which is love. Hence a little later in the epistle we read, "He that loves not his brother abides in death" (1 John 3:14). So now we discover that life, light and love all go together; and in the very nature of things they act as tests, the one upon the other. The one who loves his brother manifests the life, according to 1 John 3. Here the point is that he abides in the light.

John adds the remark, "there is none occasion of stumbling in him." This is in contrast to what follows in verse 11, where the one who hates his brother is described as being in darkness, walking in darkness, and not knowing where he is going. We have no light in ourselves, just as the moon only has light when it is in the light of the sun. So the one who hates his brother, being in darkness, is all dark himself, and consequently becomes an occasion of stumbling to others. He stumbles himself and acts as a stumbling-block. Such were the antichrists and their followers. The one who loves, as the fruit of having the divine life, walks in the light, and neither stumbles nor is a stumbling-block.

The loving of one's brother is of course the loving of each and all who equally with ourselves are begotten of God. It is the love of the divine nature, extended to each who has entered the divine family, — loving children of God as children of God, apart from all human likes or dislikes.

A fresh paragraph begins with verse 12. In 1 John 1:4, John indicated the themes as to which he wrote. Now we have the basis on which he wrote. All those whom he addressed stood in the wonderful grace of sins forgiven, and all were in the children's place. The word translated "little children" is the one for children rather than babes. It includes all the children of God without distinction. The forgiveness which is ours has reached us solely for His Name's sake. The virtue, the merit is wholly His. As forgiven, and brought into divinely formed relationship, we are addressed.

On the other hand, there are distinctions in the family of God, and they are brought before us in verse 13. There are "fathers," "young men," and "little children," or "babes." In this way John indicated the differing stages of spiritual growth. We all must of necessity begin as babes in the divine life. Normally we

should develop into young men, and finally become fathers. Each of the three classes is characterized by certain things.

Verse 13, then, states the characteristic features of those to whom he writes, not the themes concerning which he writes, nor the basis on which he writes. The fathers are characterized by the knowledge of Him that is from the beginning; that is, they were matured in the knowledge of Christ, that "Word of life," in whom the eternal life had been manifested. They really knew the One in whom had been revealed all that is to be known of God. All other knowledge shrinks into insignificance compared with this knowledge. The fathers had it.

The young men were characterized by having overcome the wicked one. Later verses in the chapter show more exactly the force of this. They had overcome the subtle snares of the devil through antichristian teachings, by having been built up in the Word of God. In our earlier years as believers, before we have had time to be well grounded in the teachings of the Word, we are much more likely to be led away by subtle teachings contrary to the Word, and thus overcome by the wicked one.

This is the danger to which the babes are exposed, as we shall see. Yet they have a beautiful feature characterizing them — they know the Father. The human babe soon manifests the instinct which enables it to recognize its parents; and so it is with the children of God. They have His nature, so they know Him. There are many things for them still to learn about the Father, yet they know the Father. As the children of God let us be exercised that we do not remain babes. There we must begin, but let us aim at that acquaintance with the Word of God which will develop our spiritual growth, and lead us to become young men and even fathers in due season.

Having given, in verse 13, the features which characterize respectively the fathers, young men and little children, the Apostle begins, in verse 14, his special message to each of the three. He commences again with the fathers.

His message to them is marked by the utmost brevity; moreover it is expressed in exactly the same words as those used in the previous verse, when he described their characteristic feature. This is remarkable, and we may well inquire what is the reason for it. The reason we believe to be that when we come to the knowledge of "Him that is from the beginning" we

reach the knowledge of God in a fulness which is infinite and eternal, beyond which there is nothing. He who is "Son," and "the Word," the "Word of life," manifested amongst us, is the One that is from the beginning. In Him God is known to us, and there is nothing beyond this knowledge of such infinite profundity.

Now the fathers knew Him in this deep and wonderful way. The God who is love had become the home of their souls and dwelling in love they dwelt in God and God in them. They had but to go on deepening in this blessed knowledge. Nothing needed to be said to them beyond this.

The young men had not as yet grown up to this, but they were on the way to it. They were characterized by having overcome the wicked one, as verse 13 told us. We now learn how this overcoming had been brought to pass. They had been made strong by the Word of God abiding in them.

We all enter upon the Christian life as little children, but if healthy growth marks us we advance to be young men. Now the knowledge of the Word of God must come first. We cannot abide in that of which we are ignorant. Here then we are

brought face to face with the reason why so many true believers of many years standing have remained little children — just stunted babes. They have never become really acquainted with the Word of God. The great adversary of the work of God knows the need of this right well, and it is easy to see the skill of his deeply laid designs in the light of this fact.

Romanism takes the Scriptures out of the hands of its votaries on the ground that, being God's Word, it is far above the layman and only fit to be in the hands of the doctors of the church, who alone can interpret it. Modernism is prevalent in the Protestant world. In its full-blown form it denies the Word of God entirely: the Bible is to them only a collection of doubtful legends interspersed with obsolete religious reflections. In its diluted form — which often seduces real Christians, and therefore is the more mischievous as regards ourselves — it weakens the authority of the Word, and therefore dooms its followers to perpetual spiritual babyhood. And where these evils are absent, so frequently people are content to take their knowledge of the Word from the texts upon which their minister may happen to preach. They do not read, and mark and learn and in-

wardly digest the Word for themselves. Hence their growth also is stunted.

But the Word is not merely to be known, it is to abide in us. It is to dwell in our thoughts and in our affections; in this way it will control us, governing the whole of our lives. If that point is reached by any of us, then it can be said that we are strong, for our lives will be founded upon the impregnable rock of Holy Scripture. Even so however, strength is not everything, for we have yet to be conducted to that knowledge of Him that is from the beginning, which characterizes the fathers.

The young men are faced by a danger which, if it prevails, will hinder them advancing still further into this blessed knowledge. That danger is the world, and the love of it: not merely of the world as an abstract conception, but of the concrete, material things that are in the world. We use a great many of these things, and occasionally at least we enjoy them, but we are not to love them. That which we love dominates us, and we are not to be dominated by the world but by the Father. The love of the world and the love of the Father are mutually exclusive. We cannot be possessed by both. It must be one or the other. Which possesses us?

If the love of the Father possesses us, we shall see the world in its true light. We shall possess a spiritual faculty which acts after the fashion of the much prized X-rays. We shall get down beneath the surface of things to the skeleton framework on which all is built. That skeleton is revealed to us in verse 16 as, "The lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life;" all of which spring not from the Father but are wholly of the world.

The lust of the flesh is the desire of having — the desire to possess oneself of those things that minister to the flesh. The lust of the eyes is the desire of seeing, whether with the eyes of the head or with those of the mind, all the things that minister to one's pleasures. It would cover man's restless intellectual cravings as well as his continual hunt for spectacular pleasures. The pride of life is the desire of being — the yearning to be somebody, or something that ministers to pride of heart. This is the most deep-seated evil of the three, and often the least-suspected.

Here then we have exposed for us the framework on which the world system is built; every item of it totally opposed to the Father, and to that world which is to come, when the present

world order is displaced. "The world passes away," we are told, and so does the lust of it. We are not surprised to hear it. What a mercy that it does, for what greater calamity could there be than that the world and its lusts should be perpetuated for ever! The world will disappear; the Father and His world will abide. We shall indeed be foolish if we are filled with love for that which vanishes away instead of love for Him who abides.

How striking the contrast in verse 17! We might have expected the end of the verse to have been, "but the Father abides." That however is so obvious as hardly to need stating. "He that does the will of God abides for ever;" that is the wonderful fact. It is the world that passes away. When believers die we remark that So-and-so has "passed away." The world gets on very well without them and seems perfectly stable. The Apostle John views things from the Divine side, and helps us to do the same. Then we see the world about to pass away, and the doer of the will of God, though he be withdrawn from earthly scenes, is the one who abides for ever. He serves the will of God. The will of God is fixed and abiding. The servant of that will is abiding too.

From verse 18, onwards to verse 27, the "little children," or "babes," are addressed. Without any preface the Apostle plunges into a warning against the anti-christian teachers which were beginning to abound. "Antichrist" is a sinister personage, whose appearance in the last days is predicted. He is not yet come, yet many lesser men, who bear his evil character in greater or smaller degree, have long been on the scene. This shows us that we are in the last time; that is, the epoch immediately preceding the time when evil will come to a head and meet with summary judgment.

Now the antichrists, who had appeared when John wrote, had once taken their place amongst the believers, as verse 19 shows. By this time however they had severed their connection and gone out from their midst. By this act they made it manifest that they never really belonged to the family of God — they were not "of us." The true believer is characterized by holding fast the faith. They had forsaken it and gone out from the Christian company, thereby revealing that they had no vital connection with the children of God. The real child of God has an Unction from the Holy One, and this was just what the antichrists had never possessed.

The "Unction" of verse 20 is the same as the "Anointing" of verse 27, and the reference in each case is to the Holy Spirit. Indwelling the children of God, He becomes the Source whence proceeds their spiritual understanding. Now the simplest babe in the Divine family has received the Anointing, and so may be said to "know all things." The word for know is the one meaning inward, conscious knowledge. If it be a question of acquired knowledge, there are ten thousand details of which at present the babe is ignorant, but the Anointing gives him that inward capacity which brings all things within his reach. He knows all things potentially, though not yet in detail.

Hence even the babe may be said to "know the truth," and he possesses the ability to differentiate between it and what is a lie. He may at the moment only know the Gospel in its simplest elements; yet in the Gospel he has truth undiluted — foundation truth out of which all subsequent truth springs — and every lie of the devil can be detected if it be placed by way of contrast against the bright background of the Gospel.

Every lie of the devil is in some way aimed at the truth concerning the Christ of God. He is no mean marksman, and even when he appears to be directing his shots at the outer rings of

the target he is calculating on a rebound action which will ultimately land them fairly on to the bulls-eye. In the Apostle's day he aimed at the centre openly. The antichrists boldly denied that Jesus was the Christ: they denied the Father and the Son. In our day some of them are still doing this. Many more however hardly do this; they introduce teachings of a more subtle kind, not so harmful on the surface but ultimately leading to just the same denials, whereby the centre of the target is hit.

The Antichrist, when he appears, will be the full and perfect denial of the Father and the Son. He will "magnify himself above every god, and shall speak marvellous things against the God of gods." (Dan. 11:36), and this prediction is amplified in 2 Thessalonians 2:4. The "many antichrists" who have preceded him all run on similar lines. Their denials relate more particularly to the Son who has been manifested on earth, and they may profess that they have nothing to say as to the Father or against Him. Such a profession is unavailing. To deny the Son is to deny the Father. To confess the Son is to have the Father also. Though distinct in person They are one in the God-head, and he who has the Anointing (the Holy Spirit), who also

is one with Them in the Godhead, knows this right well, and is not likely to be deceived on the point.

The whole drift of the Old Testament is that Jesus is the Christ, as is shown by Acts 17:2-3. The truth as to the Father and the Son is disclosed in the New Testament. It is not that just then the relationship of the Father and the Son began to be; but that this eternally existing relationship in the Godhead was then for the first time fully disclosed. The fellowship into which we are brought is with the Father and the Son, as we were told in the opening of the epistle; and therefore the denial of this truth must be destructive of our fellowship.

It is worthy of note that error most frequently takes the form of denying truth. Denials are dangerous: they should be issued with care, based upon wide knowledge. Usually more knowledge is needed to deny than to assert. For instance, I may assert that a certain thing is in the Bible, and I need know but one verse in the Book, where it is stated, in order to prove what I say. If I deny that it is in the Bible, I shall need to know the Bible from beginning to end, before I am sure I cannot be successfully contradicted.

From the beginning then Jesus had been manifested as the Christ, and as Son He had revealed the Father. To this knowledge even the babes had come and it was to abide in them, as also it is to abide in us. Jesus is the Christ, that is, the Anointed One: we have received the Anointing so that the truth may abide in us, and then as a consequence, we shall abide in the Son and in the Father.

The Apostle Paul instructs us that we are "in Christ" as the fruit of God's gracious work. The Apostle John instructs us as to the revelation of the Father and the Son, and as to the communion established in connection with that relationship, into which each child of God — even the youngest babe — is brought, so that we may continue "in the Son and in the Father." The Son comes first, since we can only continue in the Father as we continue in Him. To "continue" is to abide in the conscious knowledge and enjoyment of the Son and the Father, possible for us inasmuch as we are born of God and have received the Anointing.

This continuing in the Son and in the Father is eternal life. There was the promise of eternal life even "before the world began," as stated in Titus 1:2. The Lord Jesus spoke of eternal

life as, "that they might know Thee the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent" (John 17:3). Verse 25 of our chapter carries this a step further. He who abides in the Son and in the Father is abiding in the life which is eternal. The Eternal Life had been manifested and had been seen; but that had been the privilege of the Apostles only. Now we may possess that life and be in it; and this is for all of us, for these things were written to the babes in the family of God.

All this the Apostle had been saying in order to fortify the babes against the seducing teachers. In verse 27 he reverts again to the Anointing, for it was by the Spirit given to them that all these things were made available for them. What a comfort it is to know that the Anointing abides in us. There is no variation or failure there. Again the Anointing not only abides but teaches of all things. Instruction may reach us from without, but it is by the Holy Spirit that we have the capacity to take it in. We do not need that any man should teach us. This remark is not intended to discredit teachers whom the Lord may have raised up and gifted to do His work, otherwise we might use it to discredit the very epistle we are reading. It is in-

tended to make us realize that even gifted teachers are not absolutely indispensable, but the Anointing is.

The Anointing Himself is truth. This is repeated in slightly different words in chapter 5:6. Christ is the truth as an Object before us. The Spirit is truth, bringing it into our hearts by divine teaching. To these babes John could say, "even as it has taught you," for the Anointing was already theirs.

Thank God, the Anointing is ours also. Hence for us also the word is, "Ye shall abide in Him." We may be but babes; our knowledge may be small; but may nothing divert us from this life and communion in which we are set. It all centres in Him. Let us abide in Him.

The paragraph especially addressed to the babes, or "little children," which begins at verse 18, ends at verse 27. We have the words "little children" in verse 28, but the word there is not the one meaning "babes," but the word for "children" in a more general sense, the same word as is used in verses 1 and 12, and also in 1 John 3:7, 10 and 18.

With verse 28, then, the Apostle resumes his address to the whole family of God, to all those who are His children, irre-

spective of their spiritual growth or state. He had just assured the babes that the Anointing was theirs, and that consequently they might "abide in Him." Now he turns to the whole family of God and exhorts them to "abide in Him." What is good for the babes is good for all, and this abiding is the way of all spiritual fruitfulness and growth. When we are diverted from Him and our hearts' affections and interests abide in the things of the world, then we are feeble and unfruitful. The Apostle looked on to the manifestation of Christ, when all of us will stand revealed in our true character; and he desired that we all may have confidence in that day and not be ashamed.

He will be manifested, and we too shall be manifested at His coming; and there is evidently the possibility of the believer being put to shame in that solemn hour. It is very likely that in these words the Apostle indicated his own sense of responsibility toward them, and he wished them to do him credit — if we may so put it — in that day. But they also surely indicate that we each may be put to shame on our own account. Let us each so really abide in Him that we may be fruitful now and have confidence then; and so neither we may be put to shame nor

those who have laboured over us, whether as evangelists or shepherds.

## Chapter 3

VERSE 28 of Chapter 2 stands as a short paragraph by itself, and the second chapter would more fittingly have ended with it. Verse 29 begins another paragraph which extends to verse 3 of chapter 3. At this point someone might well have desired to enquire — But who are the children of God, and how exactly may they be distinguished from those who are not?

The answer given here is that those who are born of God are the children of God, and that they may be distinguished by the doing of righteousness. The doing is something habitual and characteristic. It is not that they do righteousness off and on, now and again; but that they practise it as the habit of their lives. They are far from being perfect in it — only One was that. Still, as born of God they necessarily have His nature. He is righteous: we know that right well. Then of necessity those born of Him are characterized by righteousness: it could not be otherwise. Therefore when we see anyone really practising

righteousness we are safe in assuming that such an one is a true child of God.

The practice of righteousness is a very big matter, going far beyond the paying of one-hundred pence in the pound. We have to begin with God and render to Him that which is His due, and then consider rendering to all others that which is their due. No unconverted man can be said to practise righteousness for such have never begun at the beginning. They do not practise what is right in regard to God.

We know God. He is righteous. Here is someone who practises righteousness. We are safe in regarding that one as born of God. He belongs to the Divine family. But then what amazing love this is! And it is bestowed upon us by the Father Himself!

The word that John uses here is "children" rather than "sons." It is a more intimate term. Angelic beings are spoken of in Scripture as "sons of God," and all things are of Him as creatures of His hand; but to be His children we must be "born of Him." This is something more profound as well as more intimate, and we may well marvel at the manner of the Father's love which has bestowed upon us such grace as this. Into this new relation

we have been brought by God's own act, wrought within us by the power of the Holy Ghost. It might have pleased Him, while saving us, to have brought us into a relation with Himself far inferior to this. But no; such has been the manner of His love.

But further, just as this act of His in begetting us has connected us with Him in this new relationship, so also it has disconnected us from the world, and that in a most fundamental way. When Christ was here the world knew and understood neither Him nor His Father. That was because in origin and character He was totally opposite to them. He said to them, "Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world." And again, when they claimed that God was their Father He said, "If God were your Father ye would love Me" (John 8:23, 42). The trouble with them was that they had not the nature which would enable them to know or understand Christ. Now we, thank God, have the nature which knows Him and loves Him; but for that very reason we also are not known and understood by the world. It must be so in the very nature of things.

The children's place is ours NOW. The love of the Father, which is proper to the relationship, is ours NOW. Yet there is

that for which we wait. What we shall be has not yet appeared; but it is going to appear when He appears. When He is manifested in His glory, we shall not only be with Him but like Him, for we are going to see Him as He is. The world will see Him in that day, arrayed in His majesty and His might. They will see Him in His official glories. We shall see Him in His more intimate personal glories. The kings of this world are seen by the populace in official trappings on state occasions: but by members of the royal families they are seen in private as they are.

Now we must be like Him to see Him as He is. Only as bearing the image of the Heavenly One can we tread the heavenly courts and gaze upon Him in this intimate way. We are actually going to be LIKE HIM. The children of God today are nothing much to look at. They are often a very poor and despised people. In the autumn we may see a number of dull, uninteresting caterpillars crawling upon the nettles. What they are going to be does not yet appear. Wait till next summer, when they will emerge as gorgeous butterflies! Even so we shall emerge in His likeness in the day of His manifestation. We shall be seen then in the estate which is proper to the children of God.

Such then is our hope in Christ. As we contemplate it we must surely be conscious of its elevating and purifying power. If this is our high and holy destiny we cannot possibly be content to accept the defilements of this world, whether they are within or without us. We must purify ourselves with such a hope in view. We might rest content with the defilement if these things were mere notions or theories to us, but not if they are a real hope. Burning as a hope within our hearts, we must purify ourselves, and this process will continue as long as we are here, for the standard of purity is "even as He is pure." We may make an application of Mark 9:3, which speaks of His raiment as "exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them." No fuller on earth can white us to that standard: we shall only reach it when like Him in glory.

Passing from verse 3 to verse 4 of our chapter, we are conscious of a very abrupt change. We have just been told how we may discern the true children of God by their practice of righteousness. We are now to see the complete contrast that exists between the children of God and the children of the devil. There are two distinct seeds in the earth from a moral and spiritual standpoint, diametrically opposed the one to the other.

They cannot be confused or mixed, though an individual may be transferred from one to the other by an act of God, by being begotten of Him.

But first of all the true nature of sin must be exposed. One of the few blemishes of our excellent Authorized Version occurs in verse 4, where the word for lawlessness is translated as "transgression of the law." "Every one that practises sin practises also lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness." (New Trans.). If sin really had been the transgression of the law, then there would have been no sin committed in the world between Adam and Moses, as Romans 5:13-14 says. But sin is something deeper than that, for lawlessness is the denial and repudiation of all law, and not merely the breaking of it when given. If the planets that encircle our sun were suddenly to repudiate all law, the solar system would be destroyed. Lawlessness amongst the intelligent creatures of God's hand is equally deadly, and destructive of His moral order and government.

Sin therefore is utterly abhorrent to God, and cannot be permitted to continue for ever. Hence Christ has been manifested — One in whom sin was entirely absent — that He might remove it. Verse 5 only goes as far as this, that He was manifested to

remove our sins, the sins of the children of God. Our sins are only a part of the whole, but they are the part in question here, for the point is that the children of God have been brought out of the lawlessness that once marked them and into obedience.

The One in whom is no sin has been manifested, and as a result He has taken away our sins, so that we may abide in Him and sin not. Verse 6 presents the contrast from an abstract point of view and must be read in connection with verse 4, so that "sins" has the special force of "practises lawlessness." The children of God are characterized by this: they abide in Him who has been manifested to take away our lawlessnesses, consequently as under His control they do not practise lawlessness. On the contrary, the one who does practise lawlessness has not seen nor known this blessed One.

The righteousness of verse 7 is in contrast with the lawlessness of verse 6. We are not to be deceived upon this point for the tree is known by its fruit. We may reason of course from the tree to its fruit, and say that he that is righteous does righteousness. Here however we reason from the fruit back to the tree, for John declares that he who practises righteousness is righteous, according to the righteousness of the One by whom he

has been begotten. This is apparent if we connect the verse with 1 John 2:29.

On the other hand, he who practises lawlessness is not of God at all. He is of the devil since he is displaying the exact character of the source from whence he springs. From the beginning the devil sins. He was committed to lawlessness from the outset; and the Son of God has been manifested that He might destroy his works. What the devil has done, leading men into lawlessness, the Son of God came to undo.

Verse 9 emphasizes what has just been said in verses 6 and 7, putting it in a still more emphatic way. No one that has been begotten of God practises lawlessness, and this for a very fundamental reason. The Divine seed remains in him, and hence as begotten of God he cannot sin. Here are dogmatic statements of great strength. No qualifying statements are allowed to enter and modify their positive force. Consequently they have presented a great deal of difficulty to a great many minds.

Two things help to clear up these difficulties. The first is a simple understanding of the force of abstract statements. When we speak abstractly we purposely eliminate in our minds and

utterances all qualifying considerations, in order that we may more clearly set forth the essential nature of the thing of which we speak. To take the simplest of illustrations: we say, cork floats, alcohol intoxicates, fire burns. Thereby we state the essential character or nature of these things, without committing ourselves to the consideration of what may look like contradictions in practice. The old lady in yonder cottage, for instance, might say that on this cold and windy day she only wished that her fire did burn. We all know that this unfortunate abnormality, occurring at certain times, does not alter the truth of the abstract statement — fire burns.

The second thing is that we read this passage in the light of verse 4, which acts as a preface to it. There is no mention of sin from 1 John 2:12 down to 1 John 3:4. But between verse 4 and verse 9 we have the word in different forms about ten times; and at the outset the exact meaning attaching to the word is given to us. The word is defined for us; hence the mistranslation of the definition is particularly unfortunate. The point all through is the practice of righteousness, which expresses itself in obedience, in contrast with the practice of lawlessness, which expresses itself in disobedience.

In verse 9 the one begotten of God is viewed in his abstract character. If viewed apart from his abstract character he is found with sin in him and with sins that have on occasion to be confessed and forgiven, according to earlier statements in this very epistle (1 John 1:8. — 2:1). Viewed abstractly he does not practise lawlessness, indeed he cannot be lawless just because he is begotten of God.

What a wonderful — perfectly wonderful — statement this is! Such is our nature as begotten of God. At present the fact is often obscured by reason of the flesh still being in us, and our giving place to it. But when we are with Him and like Him, seeing Him as He is, the flesh will have been eliminated for ever. There will be no qualification then. The fact will be absolute, and not only abstract. When we are glorified with Christ it will not only be that we do not sin but that absolutely we cannot sin. We can no more sin than He.

If any desire further help on this matter they may get it by contrasting our passage with Romans 8:7-8. There the flesh is viewed in its abstract nature, and it is the precise opposite of what we have here. It is essentially lawless, and completely opposed to God and His nature.

In verse 10 another feature that characterizes the true children of God is brought forward. They not only practise righteousness but they also are marked by love. Other scriptures show us that love must characterize our dealings with the world. Here we are told that we display it towards our brethren; that is, all others who with ourselves are begotten of God. So those who have their origin of God and those who have their origin of the devil are sharply differentiated by those two things. The one have righteousness and love: the other have neither.

Love and righteousness are closely connected yet distinct. Love is entirely a matter of nature. "God is love," we read, while we do not read that God is righteousness. Love is what He is in Himself. Righteousness expresses His relation to all outside Himself. We are begotten of Him: therefore we display His nature on the one hand, and act as He acts on the other.

In the child of God love must necessarily flow out to all others who are His children. It is the love of the Divine family. The instruction that we should love one another was not something new, rather it had been given from the beginning. From the outset love had been enjoined. See how fully the Lord enforced it in John 13:34-35.

In just the same way the hatred which marks the world — those who find their origin in the devil and his lie — is a very ancient thing. It also goes back to the beginning, the outset of the devil's activities amongst men. No sooner was there a man begotten in sin, and in that way morally the seed of the devil, than the feature was seen in him. Cain was that man, and the hatred that belongs to the seed of the devil came out in full force. He slew his brother. There was no love there but hatred. And why? Because there was no righteousness but lawlessness.

So the illustration is complete. Cain the seed of the devil, was a lawless man who as a result hated and slew his brother. As begotten of God we have love as our proper nature, and are left here to practise also righteousness. Loving our brother and practising righteousness, we make it plainly manifest that we are children of God.

May that fact be more and more plainly manifest in all of us.

Each created thing reproduces itself "after his kind." This fact is intimated ten times over in Genesis 1. In our chapter we find that the same law holds good in spiritual things. Those who are "begotten of God" are characterized by love and righteousness.

Those who are "children of the devil" are characterized by hatred and lawlessness, just because they are after his kind. The two seeds are clearly manifest in this: and they are wholly opposed the one to the other.

There is nothing surprising therefore if the believer is confronted by the hatred of this world. The "world" here is not the world-system — that cannot hate — but the people who are dominated by the world-system. The child of God does not hate them. How could he, when it is his very nature to love? The world hates him, for the same reason as he who does evil hates the light, for the same reason as Cain hated Abel. It must be confessed as a sad fact that very often we do marvel when we are hated, but it is very foolish of us. It is rather that which we should expect in the very nature of things.

The Christian does not hate, he loves. But in verse 14 it does not say by way of contrast that we love the world. If it did we should be in danger of a collision with verse 15 of the previous chapter. It is true that we should be characterized by love towards men generally, as shown in Romans 13:8-10, but what is said here is that we love the brethren; that is, all others who

have been begotten of God. Love is the very life of the family of God.

How do we pass from death to life? One answer to that question is given to us by John 5:24. It is by hearing Christ's word and believing on Him that sent Him. In the passage before us the answer evidently is, by being begotten of God — the context makes this clear. Putting the two scriptures together, we get, what we may call, our side of the matter on the one hand, and God's side of the matter on the other. To decide precisely how the two sides, the Divine and the human, combine is of course beyond us. The exact mode in which the Divine and the human are united must ever be beyond us, whether in Christ Himself, or in Holy Scripture, or anywhere else.

But the fact remains that we have passed from death to life, and the proof of it is that we love the brethren, for love is practically the very life of the family even as it is of the Father Himself. Here the Apostle John corroborates the sweeping statements made about love by the Apostle Paul in the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 13. He tells us that if any of us do not love our brother we abide in death, no matter what we may seem to be. Paul tells us that, no matter what we may seem to

have, if we have not love we are nothing — we simply do not count at all in God's reckoning.

Verse 15 puts the case even more strongly. The fact is that in this matter we cannot be neutral. If we do not love our brother we hate him; and he who hates is potentially a murderer. Cain was an actual murderer, but in Matthew 5:21-22 the Lord Jesus lays the emphasis not on the act but on the anger and hatred which prompted the act, and so does our scripture here. He who is possessed with a spirit of hatred is possessed with the spirit of murder, and no such person can be possessed of eternal life. As we have seen, eternal life is ours as continuing or abiding "in the Son and in the Father" (1 John 2:24-25). Abiding in Him, eternal life abides in us, and the essential nature of that life is love.

But though love is the simple breathing forth of the life that we possess, we none of us have it as though we were each a little self-sufficient fountain of it. The subjective display of love in us can never be disconnected from the objective display of it in God. Hence we ever need to look outside ourselves if we would really perceive love, as love really is in itself. "Hereby

we have known love, because He has laid down His life for us" (New Trans.). This was the supreme display of the real thing.

We have to ponder very deeply upon all the virtue and excellence and glory that is compressed into the "HE," and then contemplate the sin and wretchedness and misery that characterized the "us," if we desire in any adequate way to perceive the love. It is very important that we should do so, for only then can we possibly face the obligation which as a consequence is laid upon us. He manifested the love by laying down His life for us. As the fruit thereof we live in His life which is a life of love. A beautiful circuit is completed. He loved. He laid down His life for us. We live of His life. We love.

Now for the obligation. "We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." Love with us ought to go as far as that. Priscilla and Aquila went as far as that for Paul, since they "laid down their own necks" for his life. Would they have done so for some very lowly and utterly undistinguished saint, we wonder? Very likely they would, for they are placed at the very head of the long list of Christian worthies who are saluted in Romans 16. At any rate that is the length to which love of a divine sort goes.

If love goes to that length, it obviously will go to any point that falls short of it. There are many ways in which the child of God may lay down his or her life for the brethren which do not involve dying, or even facing actual death. The household of Stephanus, for instance — of whom we read in 1 Corinthians 16:15 — "addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints," or "devoted themselves to the saints for service." If they did not lay down, they at least laid out their lives for the brethren. They were serving Christ in His members, and displaying the love in very practical fashion.

The love of God was dwelling in them, and it is to dwell in us, as verse 17 shows. If it does it must necessarily find an outlet towards others who are children of God. God has no needs for us to meet. The cattle upon a thousand hills are His, if He needed them. It is the children of God who are afflicted and who have need in this world. The practical way of showing love to God is to care for His children, as we see them have need. If we have this world's substance, and yet we refuse compassion to our brother in need in order to eat our morsel alone, it is very certain that the love of God is not abiding in us.

At this point we may remark that one word which is very characteristic of this epistle has already been translated by four different words in English: — abide, continue, dwell, remain. The four words used are no doubt quite suitable and appropriate in their place, but it is as well that we should know this fact, for it helps us to preserve in our minds the continuity of the Apostle's thought. Dealing, as he does, with what is fundamental and essential in the Divine life and nature, he necessarily has to speak of things that abide.

Verse 18 is not addressed to the babes, but to all the children of God irrespective of their spiritual growth. We all have to remember that love is not mere sentiment, not a matter of endearing words uttered by the tongue. It is a matter of action and of reality. The love that we have perceived, according to verse 16, did not exist in mere words but came out in an act of supreme virtue. The love of God dwelt in Him and He laid down His life for us. If the love of God dwells in us, we shall express our love towards our brother in action and work, rather than in word alone.

If we love thus IN truth it will be manifest that we are OF the truth. We are, so to speak, begotten of the truth, and hence truth

expresses itself in our actions; and not only will other people be assured that we are of the truth, but we shall gain assurance for our own hearts as before God. A man may buy what is stated to be an apple tree of a certain variety, and to assure him he is handed a certificate signed by the horticulturist who raised the tree. That is good, but a mistake is possible. When in due season he picks from that tree apples of just that variety, he has as perfect an assurance as it is possible to have. When the love and the truth of God bear their fruit in the life and in deed, our hearts may well be assured.

"Alas! I am none too positive. This desirable fruit has often been lacking in me." That is what many of us would have to say. That is just what the Apostle anticipates in the next verse. Considering these things, our hearts condemn us. How solemn then is the fact that "God is greater than our heart, and knows all things." Solemn, and yet very blessed. For see how this great fact worked in the heart of Simon Peter, as recorded in John 21:17.

Peter who had so confidently boasted of his love to the Lord, had signally failed to show it in deed. He had instead thrice denied Him with oaths and curses. The Lord now thrice ques-

tions him on the point, letting down a probe into his conscience. Instead of having assurance, Peter's heart condemned him, though he knew that at bottom he did love the Lord. If Peter had some sense of his failure the Lord who knew all things saw the depth of it as Peter did not. And yet by that very fact He also knew that, in spite of the failure, genuine love was there. So Peter said, "Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee." He was glad to cast himself upon the fact that "God is greater than our hearts, and knows all things." So may we be, when in a like situation.

On the other hand there are times — God be thanked — when our heart does not condemn us; times when the life and love and truth of God in our souls has been in vigour, expressing themselves in practice. Then it is that we have confidence and boldness before God. We have liberty in His presence. We can make request of Him with the assurance of being answered, and receiving in due season that which we have desired.

The word "whatsoever" in verse 22 presents us with a blank cheque, leaving us to fill it in. But the "we," who are presented with it, are limited by what follows as well as by what precedes. They are those whose heart does not condemn them,

who keep His commandment, and do the things that are pleasing in His sight. Such individuals can be entrusted with the blank cheque. They are Christians who love in action and not merely in word, they are marked by that obedience which is so pleasing to God. He who is characterized by love and obedience will have his thoughts and desires brought into harmony with God's, so that he will ask according to His will, and consequently receive the things that he desires.

We keep His commandments; but there is one commandment which stands out in a very special way, and which divides into two heads — faith and love. We are to believe on the Name of Jesus Christ, God's Son, and then love one another as He commanded His disciples; notably in John 13:34-35, for instance. We recognize here the two things that are so often mentioned together in the epistles. Paul had not been to Colosse, but he gave thanks to God on their behalf having "heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints" (Colossians 1:4). These two familiar things are proof of true conversion, evidence of a genuine work of God.

What perhaps is not so familiar to us is both of them being treated as a commandment. It is worthy of careful note that of

all the apostles John is the one to write a great deal to Christians about the commandments given to us. He wrote when the other apostles had gone, and when the tendency to turn grace into license was becoming pronounced; hence this particular emphasis, we believe. They are not commandments of a legal sort, to be carried out in order that we may establish our righteousness in the presence of God, but they are commandments nevertheless. What John declares to us in this epistle is in order that we may be introduced into fellowship, or communion, with God. If we enter into the communion, we soon discover the commandments, and there is nothing incompatible between them. They are wholly in agreement, for only in obedience to the commandments is the communion enjoyed and maintained.

This is emphasized in verse 24, where we find that it is the saint walking in obedience that abides in Him. At the end of the previous chapter the children — all the family of God — were exhorted to abide in Him, for it is the way of proper Christian life and fruitfulness. Here we find that the abiding is contingent upon obedience. The two things go together, acting and reacting upon each other. He who abides obeys, but equally true it is, that he who obeys abides.

But obedience leads to His abiding in us, as well as our abiding in Him. If we abide in Him we necessarily draw from Him all the fresh springs of our spiritual life, and as our practical life is thus drawn from His, it is His life which comes into display in us, and He is seen to be abiding in us. Here, we believe John sets forth in principle what Paul states as his own experience in Galatians 2:20. It was as he "lived by the faith of the Son of God" that he could say, "Christ lives in me."

By the Spirit, who has been given to us, we know that Christ abides in us. The Spirit is the energy of the new life that we have in Christ, and other scriptures show us that He is "the Spirit of Christ." Other people may know that Christ abides in us by observing something at least of His character being displayed by us. We know it by His Spirit having been given to us.

The Holy Spirit has been alluded to in 1 John 2, as the Unction or Anointing, thus giving even to the little children a capacity which enables them to know the truth; but now we are thinking of Him as the Spirit by whom Christ abides in us so that we may manifest Him here. He was also dwelling here in order that He might give utterance to the Word of God. This He did at the beginning through the apostles and prophets whom He

inspired. He is the power by whom the Word of God is given, as well as the power by whom it is received.

This fact furnished the "antichrists" with a point of attack. These earliest "antichrists" were known as gnostics, a word which signified, the knowing ones. They too would speak by power that was obviously of a spirit. They claimed that they knew, and set up their ideas in opposition to that which had been revealed through the apostles. It was because of this that the Apostle digresses a little from his main theme in the opening verses of chapter 4.

The digression was important in that day, and it is no less important in ours, as we shall see.

## **Chapter 4**

AMONGST THE WILES of the devil imitation takes a foremost place. In the Old Testament, for instance, we find that when God wrought powerfully through Moses in the presence of Pharaoh, the Egyptian magicians imitated what was done as far as they could, in order to nullify the impressions made on the mind of the king. Again we find that when the sanctuary

had been established in Jerusalem with its ordinances of divine service, Jeroboam easily diverted the ten tribes from it by the simple device of establishing an imitation religion connected with Bethel and Dan. The early verses of chapter 4 indicate that very soon after the faith had been delivered to the saints through the chosen apostles, Satan commenced his deceptive imitations.

The Apostle John, the last of the apostolic band, lived long enough to see that, "many false prophets are gone out into the world." The Apostles whether by word of mouth or in writing, had communicated the inspired Word of God, manifestly moved and borne along by the Holy Spirit. Before long other men rose up. They too spoke as those borne along by the power of a spirit, and consequently their utterances also were inspired.

But what they said was very different from what the apostles had taught, though they claimed that their teachings were just an improvement and amplification of their words. It all sounded rather attractive, and hence was seductive. But was it true ? How could the matter be tested?

We have before remarked upon the way in which all pretension is tested in this epistle, and it is evident that the more we are faced by imitations the more necessary tests become. The question now is a supremely important one. How may we distinguish between "the Spirit of God" and the "spirit of Antichrist;" between "the spirit of truth and the spirit of error"? The spirits have to be tried: but what is the criterion by which we may try them?

In the first place, Christ Himself and the truth concerning Him is the test. Does the spirit confess Jesus Christ, come in flesh? If so, He is of God: if not so, he is not of God. This is a very simple test, and if we meditate thereon a little we shall see that it is a very profound one.

We cannot rightly speak of ourselves as having "come in flesh." Long ago the Lord had said, "My Spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh" (Gen. 6:3). We are flesh. And even apart from this consideration we should not speak of ourselves as coming in flesh, for we had no previous existence, and we had no option as to how we came. To be of the human race we must be found here in bodies of flesh and blood. Now it was otherwise with Jesus Christ. He had previ-

ous existence, and He might have come in other modes. Indeed we believe He did appear in other modes in Old Testament days; as "The Angel of the Lord," for instance.

The truth is that Jesus Christ — that Person, the eternal Son of God — came in flesh, so that He was a true Man amongst us. The antichristian teachers did not confess this. They were not sound as regards His Deity, as 1 John 2:22 showed us. They were not sound as to His Manhood, as this verse shows. History informs us that one of the first heresies to afflict the early church is that which John is meeting here. It is known as Docetism: the teaching being that, as matter was evil, Christ could not have had a true human body of flesh and blood; it must only have appeared to be such, being in reality a phantasy. Another form of error as to Christ's humanity also troubled the early church, when men arose who recognized that the seat of sin is found in the spiritual part of man rather than in his material body. These denied the spiritual part of His humanity, while emphasizing the reality of His flesh; but they rose up a century or two later and there is no reference to them here.

Jesus Christ came in flesh of a perfectly holy kind, and hence there was in Him that wonderful manifestation of eternal life,

of which the first verse of the epistle speaks. To deny His coming in flesh would mean the denial not only of the possibility of this clear manifestation amongst us, but also of there being in Him the Divine fulness to be manifested. But the matter is put here even more strongly. We need not wait for a flat denial for even non-confession of the truth betrays the spirit of antichrist.

In verse 4 we have the contrast between the saints (the word here is again that for the whole family of God, and not the babes merely) and these false prophets. The one "of God," the other "of the world." In 1 John 2 we saw how the Father and the world are wholly in contrast: here we find that there are two families springing respectively from these two sources; and they are as much in contrast as the sources whence they spring. Moreover there is in each an indwelling power, though the mode of indwelling is doubtless different. There is "He that is in you," and "he that is in the world." The children of God have the Anointing of the Spirit of God. As for the world it "lies in the wicked one," (1 John 5:19. New Trans.) — the wicked one is consequently in it.

What an immense encouragement it is to know that the Spirit of God is greater than all the power of the adversary. Herein

lies the secret of the marvel that the faith of Christ has survived. We have the best authority for the statement that, "the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light." We are not a wise folk judged by ordinary standards; and that, alas, does not exhaust the story: there has been much unfaithfulness. The greatest and heaviest blows against the faith have been given by those who have professed it. Yet the faith has survived all the blows against it struck by unfaithful believers, as well as all the blows aimed by the wicked one at faithful believers, by reason of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The point here however is that by Him we overcome the seductive teachings of the antichrists. In chapter 2 we saw that we overcome them by the Word of God abiding in us. But then of course it only does abide in us as we are governed by the Spirit of God. The Spirit and the Word go together.

The first five words of verse 5, "They are of the world," stand in sharp contrast not only with what goes before, "Ye are of God," but with what follows in the next verse, "We are of God." The "We" here evidently means the Apostles and Prophets of the New Testament, through whom the Word of God has reached us; since the contrast lies in the utterances of the one

and of the other. Those who are of the world speak of the world; that is, the world characterizes both their own origin and their utterances. Those who are of God speak as of God.

This fact presents us with another criterion by which we may test teachings that reach us. The false teachings are "of the world," for they proceed from worldly principles and bear a worldly stamp. As a result worldly folk enjoy them, understand them and receive them. They are flattered and confirmed in their worldliness, instead of being disturbed and dislodged from it.

The apostolic teaching was of another order altogether. They spoke of and from God, and the power and authority of their utterances was at once recognized by those who were of God and knew God, whilst those not of God did not hear them.

Here we have a third criterion. Do those who come to us as teachers of truth accept the authority of the Apostles, or do they not? If they do not "hear" them, we may safely assume they are not of God.

This test, you observe, is the same as that stated by the Lord as applying to Himself, in John 10 "My sheep hear My voice,"

whereas those who were not His sheep did not believe. When the Lord was on earth those who were of God were marked by hearing Him with the hearing of faith. When the Apostles were here those who were of God were marked by hearing them with the hearing of faith. And now that they are gone, we have the Apostolic writings, the inspired Scriptures; and those who are of God are marked by hearing them with the hearing of faith. The mode of communication may be different, but what is communicated is in each case of equal authority. An earthly king may speak in person, or he may speak through the lips of his duly accredited ministers, or they may commit the message to writing: there is difference as to the mode, but none as to the authority of the message.

It is well to be quite clear on this point for there are not wanting today those who discredit the Apostles and their inspired writings under the specious cry of "Back to Christ!" They begin by claiming that only His direct utterances must be quoted as having full authority; but they do not long stop there. There is no secure foothold in such a position, for every recorded utterance of His has been reported to us through apostolic or prophetic writings. Hence they soon reach the position of only "hear-

ing" so much of His reported teaching as they wish. They end therefore, by believing in their own powers of discrimination and selection, that is to say, in themselves. How exceedingly dull and commonplace is all this high-sounding modern infidelity when subjected to a little analysis.

We may indeed be thankful that God over-ruled the uprising of these early heresies to the giving us of these simple tests, which are still as valid as in the day they were first propounded. Hereby indeed we may know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. If we are wise, when confronted with doubtful teachings, we will at once apply these tests instead of leaning to our own understanding.

With verse 7 we come back again to the main line of the Apostle's thought. It is necessary now and again to digress in order to guard against evil, but we are mainly concerned with that which is good and of God. Now love is of God, and as children of God our first business is to love one another. Thereby we display the Divine nature, and make it evident that we are born of God and know Him. He who is born of God loves after this divine sort. He who loves after this divine sort is for a certainty born of God. Both statements are true; the

only difference being that in the former we reason from the source to the outflow, and in the latter back from the outflow to the source.

On the contrary, he who does not love after this divine sort does not know God; for the simple reason that God is love. At the outset of the epistle we heard that God is light. That fact lies at the very basis of all that has come to light in Christ. In our chapter we get twice over the companion fact that God is love. On the surface there may seem to be a clash between the two. Sin was introduced by the devil in order that there might be a clash between light and love in God. The whole of Scripture may be regarded as the working out of the answer of God to the challenge — the story of the wonderful way in which both light and love move harmoniously to the establishment of His glory and our blessing.

God is love. This is indeed a dogmatic statement; and if men seek confirmation of this dogma, in the sinful and disordered world that surrounds them, they will fail to find it. We must look in the right direction. There has been a perfect manifestation of God's love, but only in one direction, as verses 9 and 10 so plainly state. The sending of the Son, and all that was

therein involved, completely manifested it. The Son was sent into the world, where we lay under the weight of our sins spiritually dead. He came with the object that we might live through Him, and to this end He made propitiation for our sins. Life was the objective, but if we were to live propitiation was a necessity.

Life and propitiation — two immense things! When just converted the second mainly engages our thoughts. We have been convicted of our sins and know how we needed forgiveness; and how great has been the relief of discovering the propitiation wrought by the Son, who was sent into the world as the gift of God's love. Then presently we begin to realize that propitiation has opened the door to life for us, and that God's purpose is that we should live through His Sent One.

Here the great fact is stated in a general way: we live through Him, for He has brought it to pass. In the next chapter we find that the life we have is in Him: it is because we are in Him that we have it. In Galatians 2:20 we find that in a practical way our life is by Him, for He is the object of it. In 1 Thessalonians 5:10, we learn that our life is to be with Him for ever. We may well be filled with praise and thanksgiving that He came into

the world that we might live through Him; especially when we consider what His coming involved both to Him and to the God who sent Him. It was love indeed!

This marvellous love imposes upon us an obligation. The word which indicates obligation is, "ought." It is not that we may, or even that we do, but that we ought to love one another as having received such great love. Let us not shirk the thought of obligation. It is not legal obligation; something which must be, if we are to establish our standing before God.

It is an obligation based upon grace, and upon the nature which is ours as born of God. As children of God it is our nature to love, but that does not alter the fact that we ought to do it.

We ought to love one another because, as verse 12 says, the love of God is thereby perfected as regards us. The love has flowed forth upon us, and its end is completely, or perfectly, reached when it flows out through each saint to all the rest. Then indeed God dwells or abides in us — for He is love — and He can be seen as reflected in His children. This verse should be compared with John 1:18. Both verses begin in the same way. In the Gospel, God is declared in the Son. In the

Epistle, He is to be seen as dwelling in His children. That is clearly inferred in this verse.

If God dwells in us He will certainly be seen in us, but our knowledge of His dwelling is by the Spirit which He has given us. Compare verse 13 with the last verse of the previous chapter. There it was His abiding in us. Here it is our abiding in Him and He in us. But in both cases our knowing these great realities is said to be by the Spirit having been given to us. Being born of Him, we have His nature which is love; but in addition to this He has given us of His Spirit; and by this anointing we know that we abide in Him and He in us.

Moreover the Spirit is the power for testimony, and hence that which is the characteristic testimony of the children of God comes before us in verse 14. The "we" of this verse may again be, primarily at least, the Apostles. They had seen Him as the Saviour of the world in a way that the rest of us have not. But in a secondary sense we can all say it. We know that the Father sent the Son with no smaller design in view than that. It has often been pointed out how the Gospel of John leads our thoughts away from everything that was limited to the Jew to the larger designs connected with the world.

In John 1, for instance, He is announced not as the Deliverer of Israel, but as the One who "takes away the sin of the world." In John 4 the Samaritans hear Him for themselves and discover Him to be "the Christ, the Saviour of the world." Now, what they discovered we all have discovered and having made the discovery, it has become the theme of our testimony.

How wonderful is the sequence of all that we have been considering. God is love. His love was manifested in the sending of the Son. We live through Him. The Spirit is given to us. We dwell in God. God dwells in us. We love one another. God, who is invisible, is reflected by us before men. We testify to men that the Father has sent the Son as the Saviour of the world. All hinges upon love — Divine love — made known to us and now operative in us.

And the more love is operative in us, the more effective will be our testimony to the Saviour of the world.

When John wrote his epistle it was a matter of common knowledge that a man — Jesus of Nazareth — had appeared in the world and died on the cross. There was no particular need to testify as to that. The testimony that had to be rendered con-

cerned the truth as to who He really was and what He came to do. Hence we declare that He was the Son, sent of the Father, with the salvation of the world in view. All those who receive the Christian witness believe on Jesus as the Son of God, and confess Him as such. Now, whosoever does so confess Him, "God dwells in him, and he in God."

We have before remarked how this word — variously translated as, abide, dwell, remain, continue — characterizes the epistle. In 1 John 2, from verse 6 onwards, we have four references to our abiding in Him. There is a fifth reference to this in 1 John 3:6, and a sixth in 1 John 3:24. But in this sixth reference the corresponding fact of His abiding in us is introduced: and we know that He does abide in us by the Spirit who is given to us.

In chapter 4 this second thought of His abiding in us comes into prominence — verses 12, 13, 15, 16. It is not disconnected from our abiding in Him, but evidently it is the truth now emphasized. But the order observed is clear and instructive. We must first be established as to our abiding in Him, and then, as flowing out of that, He abides in us. In these four verses His abiding in us is connected with (1) our loving one another; (2)

the gift to us of His Spirit; (3) the confession of Jesus as Son of God; (4) our abiding in love, God Himself being love. He abides in us in order that His character, His love, His truth, may be manifested through us.

We may observe in passing how all this runs parallel with the teaching of the Apostle Paul. We read the opening chapters of the Epistle to the Ephesians, and find, "in Christ" to be that which characterizes everything. We are in Him. Turning to the Epistle to the Colossians, "Christ in you," is the theme. We are in Christ in order that Christ may be in us. There is this difference however: with Paul it is more a question of our standing and our state; with John it is more a question of life and nature.

Another thing worthy of note in our epistle is that when we read of "abiding in Him," the "Him" refers sometimes to Christ and sometimes to God. For instance, in 1 John 2:6, 1 John 2:28, 1 John 3:6, the reference pretty clearly is to Christ. In 1 John 3:24, 1 John 4:13, 15, 16, it is to God. In 1 John 2:24, it is abiding "in the Son and in the Father." In 1 John 2:27, it would be difficult to say which is in view. The whole treatment of this matter here is surely intended to teach us how truly the Son is one with the Father, so that we cannot be in the Son without be-

ing in the Father, and we can only be in the Father by being in the Son. For that reason the Son comes first in 1 John 2:24.

But in our verse it is God who is in question. We abide in Him, and He is to abide in us. In the Epistle to the Colossians we are seen as the body of Christ, and He is to be manifested in us. Here we are the children of God, forming His family, deriving from Him our life and nature, hence He who is Father is to abide in us, and be displayed. God is love, and he who dwells in love is dwelling in God, and the God who is love will be seen as abiding in him.

A wonderful thing this — to be abiding in love! Any kind of vessel, flung into the ocean, and remaining in the ocean, is full of ocean: so the child of God, immersed in the love of God, is filled with it. Depend upon it, this is the thing that is needed if our testimony as to the Father sending the Son is to be effectual. That we testify by word of mouth is necessary and good; but when in addition to this God, in the fulness of His love, is seen as abiding in His children, then the testimony is bound to have effect. A Christian full of the love of God wields a power, which though unconscious is most effective.

In verse 17, "our love" is literally "love with us" as the margin shows. Love has been perfected with us: that is to say, the love of God as regards ourselves has been carried to its full end and climax. And it has been perfected "herein," or "in this," referring no doubt to what has just been stated. He who dwells in God because dwelling in love, and in whom consequently God dwells, must of necessity have boldness in the day of judgment. Indeed he will have boldness as to the day of judgment before it arrives — at the present moment.

It is a most wonderful thing that the love of God should shine upon us at all: but that we should be brought to dwell in it, so that God, who is love, should dwell in us, carries us to the very climax of the story. It means this, that "as He is so are we in this world." This short statement composed of nine monosyllables is very profound in its meaning. It is perfectly true if we read it in connection with our standing and acceptance before God. But that is an application of it, and not the interpretation of it in its context. When the Son became incarnate, there was found the perfect Man, who dwelt in God and in whom God dwelt, whether in His sojourn here, or in His present glory above. And now again we have to say, "Which thing is true in

Him and in you" (1 John 2:8). Here are the children of God, and 1 John dwell in God and God in them. They are as He is, and they are that now.

Very marvellous, this climax of love! If we apprehend it, though only in a very small degree, we shall certainly have boldness in the day of judgment. Though that day means the terror of the Lord to those that know not God, it can have no terror for the heart of the one who at the present moment and in this world is dwelling in God, and God dwelling in Him.

This is what verse 18 tells us. There is in truth "no fear in love." This perfect love on God's side — for all proceeds from Him — must of necessity cast out fear with all its torment. It is contemplated however, that there may be found some who entertain fears, whether in regard to the day of judgment or anything else. Such are not made perfect in love. On God's side love has been perfected in regard to us: on our side we may not be made perfect in regard to it. We may quite believe that God loves us, and yet not be so consciously abiding in love that fear finds no place in our hearts.

The love of God, known and enjoyed by us, not only casts all fear out of our hearts but also produces love by way of a response to itself. We have no capacity for love of a divine sort apart from the inflow of the love of God. In this matter we are only like tiny cisterns. He is the ever-flowing Fountain. Brought into connection with the Fountain it is possible for love to flow forth from us.

We are warned by John, in verse 20, that we must be practical in this matter. A man may say, "I love God," a general sort of way. He may even say it in a highly elaborated style: he may address God as though in the spirit of worship, expressing beautiful thoughts and using endearing words. Still, it must all be tested; for God is unseen, and to some active minds beautiful thoughts and words come easily and cheaply. What will test the genuineness of such a profession as this?

Why, there is the brother who can be seen! If I myself am born of God, every other who is also born of God is a brother to me. The God whom I cannot see is presented to me in the one who is begotten of Him, this brother whom I can see. That being so, the test propounded by John's question is quite irresistible — "He that loves not his brother whom he has seen, how can he

love God whom he has not seen?" The same test is stated in a positive and dogmatic way in the first verse of the next chapter, "Every one that loves Him that begat loves him also that is begotten of Him."

This is the third time in this comparatively short epistle that this matter of the believer's attitude towards his brother has come up. In 1 John 2:9-11 were occupied with it; in 1 John 3:10-23. So it is evidently a matter of very great importance. We deduce this not only from the amount of space that is given to it, but from the fact that again in verse 21 of our chapter it is spoken of as a commandment. That we should love one another as brethren is not only the message "that ye heard from the beginning," (1 John 3:11), but "His [God's] commandment, ... as He [His Son Jesus Christ] gave us commandment," (1 John 3:23). It is the commandment of the Lord Jesus ratified and endorsed by God. A commandment therefore of the utmost solemnity.

The sad history of the church shows how much it has been needed. Far more dishonour to the Name of God, and disaster to the saints, has been brought about by dissension, and even hatred, within the Christian circle than by all the opposition,

and even persecution, from the world without. Had love been in active exercise with us, we should not have escaped difficulties but we should have met them in a different spirit, and instead of being defeated by them we should have prevailed. Are we not told elsewhere that "Love never fails"?

## Chapter 5

WHEN WE CONTEMPLATE the responsibilities which are ours in connection with our brethren, we are always apt, if the flesh prevails with us, to fall back upon Cain's question, asking, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Not exactly his keeper perhaps, but we certainly are to be his helper in the spirit of love. We are also apt to fall back upon a question similar to the one asked by the lawyer in Luke 10. Wishing to justify himself, he asked, "And who is my neighbour?" We may ask, "And who is my brother?" The answer to this question is given to us in very direct fashion in the opening words of chapter 5. "Whosoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." So then we have to recognize as our brother every one that believes in Jesus as the Christ, whoever he may be. There can be no picking and choosing.

Many of these believers, who are born of God, may not appeal to us in the slightest degree upon a natural basis. By upbringing and habits we may have very little in common; moreover we may not see eye to eye in many matters connected with the things of God. Now these are just the ones to put us to the test. Are we at liberty to disclaim all interest in them, and pass by on the other side? We are not. If I love the brother who is nice and agreeable to me I am only doing what anybody might do. "If ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?" (Matt. 5:46). If I love my brother because he is begotten of God, even though he be not nice and agreeable to me, I am displaying the love which is the nature of God Himself. And nothing is greater than that.

Verse 2 seems to sum the matter up in telling us that we know that we love the children of God when we love God and walk in obedience. The love of God moves us to love His children, and the commandment of God enjoins us to love His children. Then for a certainty when we do love God and keep His commandments, we do love His children. Moreover love and obedience go together, as we have previously seen in this epistle, so

that it is impossible to love Him without being obedient to Him.

Perhaps we have seen before now a child full of apparent love for the mother — "Oh, mother I do love you!" followed by many hugs and kisses. And yet within five minutes mother has given the child directions which slightly cross its wishes, and what an outburst of anger and disobedience has ensued! The onlookers know how to appraise the "love" that was so loudly protested a few minutes before. It is worth exactly — nothing. Well, let us remember that "this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments."

The child may have found its mother's demand to be grievous in some small degree, as keeping it from its play. If we stray into ways of disobedience we have not even that excuse, for, "His commandments are not grievous." What He enjoins is in exact keeping with love, which is the Divine nature. And we possess that nature, if indeed we are begotten of God.

It would indeed be grievous if we were commanded that which is totally opposed to our natures — just as it would be for a dog to eat hay, or a horse to eat meat. The law of Moses brought

"heavy burdens and grievous to be borne," but that was because it was given to men in the flesh. We have received commandments, but we have also received a new nature which delights in the things commanded; and this makes all the difference. John's word here is corroborated by Paul when he says, "God ... works in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). James also corroborates in speaking of "the perfect law of liberty" (Jas. 1:25).

We gladly recognize every true believer as our brother, inasmuch as he is begotten of God. Now, in verse 4 we discover that another feature marks him — he overcomes the world. Moreover, this victory over the world is connected with our faith. "Faith" here, we believe, is not merely that spiritual faculty in us which sees and receives the truth, but also the truth which we receive — the Christian faith. The very essence of that faith is that Jesus is the Son of God, as verse 5 shows us.

Now, see the point at which we have arrived. We have had before us the Christian circle, the family of God, composed of those who have been begotten of Him. God is love, and hence those begotten of Him share His nature, and dwell in His love. Abiding in Him, He abides in them, and they love one another

and thus keep His commandments. But also they overcome the world, instead of being overcome by the world. Though they pass through the world, the family of God are separated from the world and superior to it.

The secret of the overcoming is twofold. First, the Divine work wrought in the saints. Second, the faith of Jesus as the Son of God, presented as an Object to us, and to be received by us in faith.

In 1 John 2:14, we found that overcoming "the wicked one" was possible for those born of God. In 1 John 3:9, that the one born of God "doth not commit sin." Now we have it that the one born of God overcomes the world. So the fact really is that this Divine begetting ensures victory over the devil, the flesh and the world.

But another element enters into the question. Not what is done in us, but what is set before us in the Gospel. Jesus is the Son of God. He was not merely the greatest of the prophets, to bring in an order of things on this earth to which the prophets had looked forward. He was the Son in the bosom of the Father, and He made known heavenly things lying far outside

and above this world. Let faith once lay hold of that, and the world loses its attraction, and can be laid aside as a very little thing. He who is born of God, and lives in the faith of Jesus as the Son of God, cannot be captured by the world. He overcomes it.

Of course in all this we are still viewing things abstractly. We are looking at things according to their fundamental nature, and for the moment eliminating from our minds other considerations connected with our present state down here, which would introduce qualifying clauses. It is of great value to view things in this abstract way, for thereby we are instructed in the true nature of things, and see things as God sees them. Moreover we are seeing things as they will be displayed in the day to come when God has finished His work with us, for He "will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

If it be a question of our realized state today, how far are we from what we have been considering! How little do we dwell in love, and consequently dwell in God, and God in us! Let us be honest and acknowledge it; while at the same time we maintain the standard, and judge ourselves by it. This will contribute to our spiritual health and fruitfulness.

The faith that Jesus is the Son of God lies at the very heart of everything Jesus Christ — that historic Personage — has been in this world. No one can successfully deny that fact. But who is He? — that is the question. Our faith — the Christian faith — is that He is the Son of God.

That being settled, another question arises. How, and in what manner, did He come? The answer to this lies in verse 6: He came "by water and blood."

This is another of those brief statements which occur so frequently in John's writings; very simple as to form, though rather obscure as to meaning, and yet yielding to devout meditation a rich harvest of instruction. The reference clearly is to that which happened when one of the Roman soldiers with a spear pierced the side of the dead Christ, as recorded in John 19:34. No other of the Evangelists records this event, and John lays very special emphasis on it in recording it, saying, "He that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knows that he saith true, that ye might believe." John wrote his Gospel that we might "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). So evidently this episode of the blood and the

water bears witness to the fact that He is both Christ and the Son; and these two points are before us in our passage.

In the first place, the water and the blood witness to His true Manhood. The Son of God has come amongst us in flesh and blood; a real and true Man, and not a phantom, an apparition. This fact was never more clearly established than when, His side being pierced, forthwith there came out blood and water.

Water and blood each have their own significance. The water signifies cleansing, and the blood, expiation. We may further say therefore that the coming of Jesus Christ was characterized by cleansing and expiation.

These two things were absolute necessities if men were to be blessed: they must be cleansed from the filth in which they lay, and their sins must be expiated, if they were to be brought to God. The one settles the moral question, the other the judicial; and both are equally necessary. Neither a moral renovation without a judicial clearance, nor a judicial clearance without a moral renovation, would have met our case.

Here then is another witness to the fact that Jesus is the Son of God. He was indeed a true Man, but no mere man could come

in the power of cleansing and expiation. For that He must indeed be the Son, who was the Word of Life.

In the Gospel it is "blood and water," in the Epistle it is "water and blood." The Gospel gives us, what we may call, the historic order: first our need of forgiveness, second our need of cleansing. But in the Epistle the great point is that which is wrought in us, inasmuch as we are born of God; and the holy and blessed characteristics of our new life, a life so essentially holy ("he cannot sin, because he is born of God") that a wonderful cleansing has thereby reached us. Very appropriately therefore does water come first; and it is linked in our thoughts with the death of Christ, for we must never separate in our minds the work wrought in us and the work accomplished for us.

But though the water is mentioned first, it is specially emphasized in verse 6 that His coming was not by water only, but by "water and blood." His coming into the world was not only for moral cleansing but also for atonement. This is a peculiarly important word for us today, for one of the pet ideas of modern religious unbelief is that we can discard all idea of atonement while holding that Christ came as a reformer to set a wonderful example to us all, and to cleanse men's morals by the force of

it. They hold that He did come by water only. His death, as the supreme example of heroic self-sacrifice, is to exorcise the spirit of selfishness from all our breasts. His death, as an atonement by blood for human guilt, they will not have at any price.

Those who deny the blood, while admitting the water, will have ultimately to reckon with the Spirit of God, whose witness they deny. The Spirit who bears the witness is truth, therefore His witness is truth; and they will be exposed as liars in the day that is coming, if not before. In the Gospel, where the historic fact is related, the Evangelist is content to take the place of bearing witness himself, as we have seen. By the time he wrote the Epistle however men had arisen who were challenging all that was true, so John steps back, as it were, from himself the human channel of witness, to the Spirit who is the Divine and all-important witness-bearer, and points out that He who is truth has spoken. His witness establishes who it is that came, and what His coming really signified.

The larger part of verse 7 and the opening of verse 8 have to be omitted, as having no real authority in the ancient manuscripts. The Revised, and other later versions show this. It simply is, "For there are three that bear record, the Spirit, and the water,

and the blood: and these three agree in one." The Spirit of God is the living active Witness. The water and the blood are silent witnesses, but all three converge on one point. The point on which they converge is found in verses 11 and 12. Verses 9 and 10 are parenthetical.

We are to realize that the witness, whether rendered by the Spirit or the water and the blood, is the witness of GOD; and it demands that it be treated as such. We certainly do receive the witness of men: we are bound to do so practically every day of our lives. We do so in spite of the fact that it is frequently marred by inaccuracy, even when there is no wish to deceive. The witness of God is far greater in its theme and in its character. The Son is the theme, and absolute truth its character. When the Son was on earth He bore witness to God. Now the Spirit is here, and the witness of God is borne to the Son. Very remarkable, is it not?

Moreover, he who believes on the Son of God now has the witness in himself, inasmuch as the Spirit who is the Witness has been given to indwell us. We begin, of course, by believing the witness to the Son of God that is borne to us, and then "by the Spirit which He has given us" we have the witness in ourselves.

No unbeliever can have this witness within, for, believing not the witness which God gave of His Son, he has in effect "made Him [God] a liar." A very terrible thing to do.

The witness of God is concerning His Son: but in particular it is that God has given to us believers eternal life, and that this life is in His Son. The Spirit of God is the living and abiding witness of this. He is spoken of elsewhere by the Apostle Paul as "the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus." To this also the water and the blood bear witness, only in a more negative way. When we see the life of the Son of God poured forth in death on behalf of those whose lives were forfeit, we know it means that there was no life in them. The Apostle Paul again corroborates this in saying, that if He "died for all, then were all dead." That is it: all were dead, and hence the Son of God yielded up His life in death. The water and the blood testify that there is no life in men — the first Adam and his race — but only in the One who yielded up His life and took it again in resurrection.

The witness then is that eternal life is ours. It has been given to us of God; and it is "in His Son." He who has the Son has the life, and he who has not the Son of God has not the life. The issue is perfectly clear. No one could "have" the Son who denied

the Son, as these antichristian teachers did. In 1 John 2:22-23, we saw that no one could "have" the Father who denied the Son. Here we see that they cannot "have" the Son, and consequently cannot have life.

Verse 13 indicates the significance of the word "have" used in this way. The better attested reading here is as the R.V., "These things have I written to you, that ye may know that ye have eternal life, even to you that believe on the name of the Son of God." We might have expected John to say, "These things have I written to you that have the Son;" instead of which he inserted what is involved in having the Son — believing "on the name of the Son of God." It is the believer on the Son of God who has the Son, and has eternal life; and John was led to write these things that we who believe might know it.

No doubt, when John wrote these things he had in view the help and assurance of simple believers who might be overawed and shaken by the pretentious claims of the antichrists. They came with their advanced philosophies and their new light; and the simple believer who pinned his faith to "that which was from the beginning," would be treated by them as quite outside the high intellectual "life" that they enjoyed. After all however

it was just the believer on the name of the Son of God, who had the Son, and the life; and the life he had was the eternal life — the only life that counts.

And there the verse stands, with all its happy applications for trembling believers today. The Apostle John has given us the characteristic marks of the life in what he has written; and we may know that the life is ours, not only because of what God has said, but also because the marks of the life come out into display. Happy feelings, which some people think so much about, are not the great characteristic of the life: love and righteousness are.

Verse 14 seems to present us with an abrupt and complete change of thought. The Apostle picks up a thread, which he pursued for a few verses in 1 John 3, dropping it at verse 22. If we compare the two passages we shall find that the change is not so complete as it appears. There the point was that if we love in deed and in truth our hearts will have assurance before God, and hence have boldness in prayer. Here the sequence of thought seems similar. As the fruit of what John has written to us we have happy knowledge — conscious knowledge — that we have eternal life. Hence we have confidence (or, boldness)

in Him, to the effect that "if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us." And if He hear us, our petitions are certain to be granted.

As having the life, His will becomes our will. How simply and happily then can we ask according to His will. This is the normal thing for the believer, resulting in answered prayer. Alas, that so often our actual experience should be the thing that is abnormal — because we walk according to the flesh — rather than normal.

Verse 16 assumes that we are not selfish in our prayers but concerned about others. We pray in an intercessory way for our brethren. The boldness that we have before God extends to this, and is not confined to merely personal matters. But it also makes it plain that, though we have boldness, there are certain things which we may not and cannot request. The government of God in regard to His children is a very real thing and cannot be waived at our request. The death spoken of here is the death of the body, such as we see, for instance, in the case of Ananias and Sapphira.

We may ask life — and doubtless anything short of that also — for any whose sin is not to death; and all unrighteousness is sin, so that we have a very large field that may be covered. But if the sin is to death our lips are sealed. It is possible that in writing this the Apostle had some definite sin in his mind, connected with the antichristian deceptions which were abroad, but he does not specify; so we are left to take heed of the broad principle. We know that hypocrisy and false pretence was the sin to death in the case of Ananias, and gross disorder and irreverence at the Lord's Supper was the sin to death among the Corinthians.

In verses 16 and 17 we have things looked at practically as they exist amongst the saints, for the one who may sin a sin to death is a "brother." In verse 18 we come back to the abstract view of things. The one begotten of God does not sin, if we consider him according to his essential nature. This we have seen earlier in the epistle. Moreover, that being so, such are enabled to keep themselves so that the wicked one does not touch them. This last remark rather supports the thought that the sin to death, which John has in view, is something connected with the wiles of the devil through antichristian teaching. Viewed abstractly,

the one born of God is proof against the wicked one. Viewed practically, since the flesh is still in believers though they have been born of God, the brother may be seduced by the wicked one and bring himself under the discipline of God, even to death.

We have now reached the closing words of the Epistle and things are summed up for us in a very remarkable way. Abiding in that which was from the beginning, there are certain things that we know. We know the true nature of those who are born of God, according to verse 18. But then we know that we — who are of the true family of God — are of God; and thereby wholly differentiated from the world, which lies in "wickedness," or, "the wicked one." There was no such clear differentiation before the time of Christ. Then the line was rather drawn between Israel as a nation owned of God, and the Gentiles not owned of God, though doubtless faith could always discern that not all Israel were the true Israel of God.

Now the line is drawn altogether apart from national considerations. It is simply a question of who are born of God and who are not, no matter what nation they may have belonged to. The

family of God are wholly and fundamentally separated from the world.

Further we know what has brought all this to pass. The Son of God is come. That Person has arrived on the scene, and the life has been manifested in Him. Here we are brought back to the point at which the Epistle started, only with an added fact brought to light. At the outset our thoughts had to be concentrated on what was brought to light by His coming. But what has been subsequently unfolded in the Epistle has brought us to this, that as the fruit of His coming we have been given an understanding, so that we may know and appreciate and respond to the One who has been revealed. It is easy to see that if the understanding be lacking the most perfect revelation before us would be in vain.

Thank God, the understanding is ours. We have been begotten of God, and He has given us of His Spirit, as the Epistle has shown us, and we could never have been possessed of that Anointing if the Son of God had not come. Now we know "Him that is true," for the Father has been made known in the Son. Yet the next words tell us that we are "in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ." So, "Him that is true," is an ex-

pression that covers both the Son and the Father, and we pass almost insensibly from the One to the Other. Another witness to the fact that the Son and the Father are one in Essence, though distinct in Person.

Then, having thus brought us to "His Son Jesus Christ," John says very pointedly, "This [or, He] is the true God, and eternal life." No stronger affirmation of His Deity could we have. Also He is the eternal life, and, as we have seen, the Source of it for us.

What a marvellous summary of the Epistle is this brief verse! The life has been manifested, and Him that is true made known in the coming of the Son of God. As the fruit of His coming we have received an understanding, so that we may be able to appreciate and receive all that has come to light. But then not only is "Him that is true" revealed, and we rendered capable of knowing Him, but we are in Him, by being in the One who has revealed Him. Apart from this we might have been merely wondering onlookers, without vital connection with God. But, thank God, that vital connection exists. And the One, in whom we are, is the true God and eternal life.

How apposite then the closing words, "Children [the word meaning all the family of God] keep yourselves from idols." An idol is anything which usurps in our hearts that supreme place which belongs to God alone. If we live in the reality and power of verse 20, we shall certainly say like Ephraim, "What have I to do any more with idols?" (Hosea 14:8).

Once let the Son of God, and all that He has done and brought, fill our hearts, and the idols, that charmed us once, will charm us no more.

