



# **Beckenham Baptist Church**

A CARING CHRISTIAN CHURCH AT THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY

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# **Bible Reading Notes** **February 2009**



**[LOOKING AT THE  
MESSAGE OF 1 JOHN]**

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# **ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE**

## **[Looking at the message of 1 John]**

*All You Need Is Love* is a song written by John Lennon and credited to Lennon/McCartney. It was first performed by The Beatles on *Our World*, the first live global television link. Watched by 400 million in 26 countries, the programme was broadcast via satellite on 25 June 1967. The BBC had commissioned the Beatles to write a song for the UK's contribution—a song containing a simple message to be understood by all nationalities. According to Brian Epstein, 'It was an inspired song and they really wanted to give the world a message ... that ...cannot be misinterpreted. It is a clear message saying that love is everything.' Lennon was fascinated by the power of slogans to unite people and never afraid to create art out of propaganda. When asked in 1971 whether songs like *Give Peace a Chance* and *Power to the People* were propaganda songs, Lennon answered: 'Sure. So was *All You Need Is Love*. I'm a revolutionary artist. My art is dedicated to change. Lennon also boldly stated (in an interview for the London *Evening Standard* on 4 March 1966 with Maureen Cleave) that 'Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink... We're more popular than Jesus now—I don't know which will go first, rock and roll or Christianity.' For all his undoubted talent John Lennon was clearly wrong on both counts.

The two most difficult things to get straight in life are love and God. More often than not, the mess people make of their lives can be traced to failure or stupidity or meanness in one or both of these areas. The basic biblical conviction is that these two subjects are intricately related. If we want to engage with God in the right way we have to learn to love in the right way. If we want to love in the right way we have to engage with God in the right way—God and love can't be separated. John's First Letter provides wonderfully explicit direction as to how this works. In Jesus God and love are linked intricately and indissolubly.

*Jim Binney*

*January 2010*

Monday 1st February 2010

# CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

## 1 John 1:1-4

Fellowship or 'togetherness' was a marked feature of the Christian Church from the very day of its birth. We can therefore with justice speak of fellowship as a 'birth mark' of the Church. John's opening words serve as an introduction and present us, as C H Dodd once wrote, with a 'grammatical tangle', which has been well disguised by the NIV. Phrases pile up on one another as John attempts to compress a number of complex ideas (that he will return to later) into a single paragraph. Any careful reader of the New Testament will immediately note echoes of the prologue to John's Gospel. In each prologue (the Gospel and 1 John) the Word of God, Jesus, is central, and yet the two paragraphs are complimentary not identical. In the Gospel we see the history and work of the Word in creation, his incarnation into the world, his rejection, and the eternal life he offered. Here John takes up two themes: the reality of this incarnation—*that ... which we have heard ... seen ... looked at and ... touched [v.1a]* and its vital importance regarding our salvation—*this we proclaim concerning the Word of life [v.1b]*. John emphasises the centrality of the incarnation as if controversy swirled around the subject, as if some were disputing whether or not the Word of God has actually become human flesh in Jesus Christ. As we shall see, right thinking about Jesus Christ is the fulcrum on which right theology is balanced.

Whilst this hunch about theological controversy will be borne out in later verses [*1 John 4:2,3*] we can see here in vs.3,4 that John's emphasis is entirely pastoral and practical. His mind is on the fabric of the Christian community and how its fellowship and joy are being affected by disposition concerning Jesus. He assumes that intimate fellowship in the Christian community is only possible when there is consensus about the identity and presence of Jesus. In his commentary on 1 John, Gary Burge suggests John's first words to the churches to whom he is writing, force us to ask penetrating questions about our own Christian identity: 1) What does it mean to hold to 'the scandal of the Incarnation'? 2) Should theological distinctives be set aside for the unity of the church? 3) What does it mean to see/touch/hear Jesus today? Take some time to think about these.

**Prayer: Lord, may we enjoy today true fellowship with you and with our brothers and sisters in Christ.**

Tuesday 2nd February 2010

# PERFECTION & REALISM

## 1 John 1:5-2:2

Some years ago I knew a lady who had fallen foul of Christian Perfectionism—a very driven movement deriving from Wesleyan Methodism—that taught that it was possible for Christians to live perfect, sinless lives this side of Heaven. Sadly her attempts to live this way eventually drove her to a nervous breakdown. Fortunately she was helped by other Christians to see the error of this kind of teaching and made a full recovery.

As we have seen, the prologue to John's First Letter [vs.1-4] serves as a springboard to launch the twin themes of the Letter—right thinking about God and right living within the community. On the one hand, right thinking about God—*God is light* [v.5] is a necessary prerequisite for life in the Christian community and is the subject of the first section of John's Letter [1:5-3:10]. On the other hand, right living within the community—*God is love* [4:16], living honestly and in love, is also on John's mind and is the subject of the second section of this Letter [3:11-5:12].

The original context of these particular verses [1:5-2:2] is governed by the theological controversies that troubled the early church. Here we detect that certain people were claiming to have intimate fellowship with God and were arguing that that they had achieved some sort of Christian perfection [see vs.8-10]. They claimed to be the enlightened ones. John is faced with the difficult pastoral task of telling them that they are in darkness, not in light. His words seem somewhat harsh when he refers to their life as a *lie* [v.6] and that *the truth is not in (them)* [v.8]. We need to keep an eye, however, on the larger setting beyond the scope of these few verses to see the problem more clearly. These people were denying the essential ideas within the Christian faith—ideas that have consequences for both belief and living. Whilst we should always strive to live a perfect life, the reality is that even the best of us will fail in this godly aim. This is not the end of the story, however. John goes on to say *that if we confess our sins God will forgive us* [v.9] and that if we do sin *we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One (who) is the atoning sacrifice for our sins* [2:1,2].

**Prayer: Lord, help me today to aim for perfection even though I know I won't achieve it and, if and when I fail, recognise that in Jesus you have already covered my sin.**

**Wednesday 3rd February 2010**  
**LIVING AS JESUS LIVED**  
**1 John 2:3-6**

I once asked a group of young people to define the word 'Christian'. One of the best definitions someone came up with was, 'A Christian is someone who makes it easier for others to believe in Jesus'. The word Christian literally means 'Christ's one' or 'someone like Christ' and, lets face it, the only way we are going to be effective witnesses for Jesus is if people see that we ourselves are seeking to live like Jesus himself lived! If John's first exhortation [1:8-2:2] had in mind people who were making false theological claims about themselves and God, this second exhortation [2:3-11] is aimed primarily at Christians who, despite their protestations to belong to the Lord, failed to live as Jesus lived. These Christians used all the right lingo—*I know him [v.4], I live in him [v.6], I am in the light [v.9]*—but spectacularly failed to live out their profession of faith.

For John, everything he says here in vs.4-11 hinges on his opening thesis, namely that we know *we have come to know him (Jesus) if we keep his commandments [v.3]*. Spiritual maturity [vs.3-5], living the Christ-like life [vs.6-8], living a life of godly love [vs.9-11] are all dependent on how we live in obedience to God's word! Jesus himself said '*Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me ... and I too will love them and show myself to them*' [John 15:21]. Although the Bible is to be understood as a book of stories—rather than a book of rules or laws—there is a danger that in understanding Scripture in this way we adopt a *laissez faire* approach to the Bible instead of seeking to *live according to Scripture [1 Corinthians 4:6 RSV]*. We live in a postmodernist age in which everyone seems to want to do *what is right in their own eyes [Judges 17:6;21:5]*. Sadly even some Christians have bought into this so that Paul's wonderful statement that *we are not under the law but under grace [Romans 6:15]* is interpreted to mean that we are not to be governed by the teaching of the Bible but rather by the Spirit of Christ. Thus any Scripture teaching that conflicts with how we want to live our lives is immediately dismissed on grounds of old fashioned legalism. Nevertheless *whoever claims to live in (God) must live as Jesus lived [v.6]* and Jesus lived in obedience to the word of his Father [John 14:31].

**Prayer: Lord, help me to submit myself to the teaching of Scripture in a way that enables me to live a Christ-like life.**

Thursday 4th February 2010

# OLD, BUT EVER NEW

1 John 2:7-11

In his little book, *The Four Loves*, C S Lewis discusses the different Greek words translated as 'love' in the English language. When Scripture describes God's love for us, and the love God wants us to have for others, it often uses the Greek word *agape*. *Agape* love is found everywhere in the New Testament. When Jesus said, '*Love your enemies*' [Matthew 5:44] Matthew in his Gospel uses the word *agape*. When Jesus said we were to '*love one another*' [John 13:34,35] John used the word *agape*. When Jesus said '*Love your neighbour*' [Mark 12 :31] Mark used the word *agape*. And here in this Letter, when Scripture says '*God is love*' [1 John 4:16] the word is *agape*. The New Bible Dictionary defines *agape* love in Greek as 'that highest and noblest form of love which sees something infinitely precious in its object'.

As we have seen John suggests that one of the tests of authenticity of genuine spiritual vigour and life has to do with living as Jesus lived [v.6]. Here [vs.7-11] John suggests another test for spiritual reality. If in the first test, obedience was the natural outgrowth of an intimate life with God, then the second test of such a life is a love that bears the quality of Christ's love. Clearly the 'command' that John refers to here—a command that is both, at one and the same time, very old and yet ever new is that which Jesus reinforced when he told his disciples '*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*' [John 13:34,35]. But just how is the command to love both very old and ever new? On the one hand it has been around since the beginning [v.7, see Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 19:19], i.e. from the Old Testament times, and thus even Jesus appealed to it directly [Mark 12:28-34]. But in another sense it is also *from the beginning*, i.e. the events surrounding Jesus' life and ministry. The ancient command has taken on a new form since the coming of Christ. Initially Jesus himself exemplified this love by demonstrating his self-giving love for us. He fulfilled the law of love in a way never before seen, and enabled this love to be realised among his followers [vs.9-11].

**Prayer: Lord, help us to love one another, to love others, with the same kind of love you have shown to us.**

Friday 5th February 2010

# REASONS FOR WRITING

## 1 John 2:12-14

A Pastor wrote a letter to a friend who was going through a hard time. When he had sealed the letter he thought of something else he wanted to say so he wrote on the back of the envelope 'Be encouraged—cast all your care upon God because he cares for you [1 Peter 5:7]'. When the letter arrived at its destination his friend saw the comment on the back ... and stamped over it with a very official looking stamp was 'Contrary to Postal Regulations'. Well its never against the rules, as far as I'm concerned, to write something encouraging to someone. Here [vs.12-14] John tells us to whom he is writing and why he is writing this Letter.

Firstly, John is writing to his *dear children* [vs.12,14a] by which he means everyone in the church who has come to put their trust in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. The words John uses here for *children* are indicative of a parent/child relationship. It was commonplace among early Christians to address one another with family terms—brother or sister being an obvious example. Here John writes as a Father in the Faith to reassure them firstly, that their *sins have been forgiven* [v.12] because of what Jesus has already done for them on the cross, and secondly, that they have come to *know (God as) Father* [v.14a]. Freed from sin they have been given a new consciousness of God's intimate fatherhood over them.

Secondly, John is writing to mature Christians—by addressing these people as *fathers* [v.13a] John does not mean merely men or even Elders, but those who are mature in the faith. He writes to encourage those whose spiritual maturity and experience reaches back over many years to see—you know him who is from the beginning [v.13a]— to recognise that they have a knowledge of God that is anchored securely, a seasoned wisdom that makes for steadfast faith in the present circumstances.

Finally, John is writing to *young people* [vs.13b,14b] by which he means those new to faith. He writes to encourage them to see that already they have *overcome the evil one* i.e. their status before God and in life has been changed for the better, and that in God they are both *strong* and knowledgeable—the word of God lives in you! Facts that fuel zeal!

**Prayer: Lord, may we truly know who we are in God, and be both zealous for you and encouraging to others.**

**Saturday 6th February 2010**

# **IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF THE WORLD**

## **1 John 2:15-17**

A boat is meant to be in the sea—trouble comes when the sea gets in the boat! In just the same way the Christian is to be in the world—as a witness to others concerning Jesus Christ and his claims upon our lives—but we are in trouble when we allow the world—the spirit of this age which stands in opposition to Jesus Christ and the ways of God—to get into us. This essentially is what John is saying to Christian people here in this section of his Letter [vs. 15-17].

When John tells us here, *Do not love the world or anything in the world* [v. 15], he is not thinking of the created world (although that is the Greek word he uses here) but the dominant spirit of the age which is anti-Christ and the things of God. When John uses the word *world* (Greek *kosmos*) he can mean either the created material universe, which is good [2:2; 3:17; see *John* 1:10], or the world of sin that stands in aggressive opposition to God [4:3-5; 5:19]. It is this latter idea that John has in mind here. The *world* John is speaking of here, and warning Christians to avoid getting entangled with, is the unredeemed world, a world under the control of Satan [5:19; *John* 12:31; 14:30]; it lives in darkness [*John* 1:5; 12:46] and lies under God's judgment [*John* 9:39]. For John, the material world is good and will find renewal someday. Yet there are those within it—people and forces—who follow evil impulses and reject God. Aggressively opposed to God and Christ such people and forces actively seek to undermine the work of the Gospel and lead Christians astray.

John's concern here is that some of the Christians to whom he was writing were being led astray and were compromising their faith and witness for Jesus. They were succumbing to the pull of the world, the flesh, and the devil—the *cravings of the old sinful nature, the lust of the eyes, and pride in themselves* [vs. 16a]. In this way they were damaging themselves and doing despite to the cause of Christ. For John two choices face everyone—even in the church: either we love God or we love the world. Affirmations for God's people [vs. 12-14] now become warnings that they do not fall away into spiritual duplicity—parading spiritual things while the heart is possessed by the world.

**Prayer: Lord, help me to love you so much that all the negative and unhelpful things in my life are displaced by you.**

**Sunday 7th February 2010**

# **ANTICHRISTS EVERYWHERE YOU LOOK**

## **1 John 2:18,19**

For as long as I can remember—and I have been a Christian for 50 years now—there has been a belief that the Last Days will see a personification of evil invested in one particular person (who despite being evil will be attractive to the majority of people), and speculation as to who that person will be. Over the years there have been a variety of suggestions—everything from various Roman Emperors and Popes to Prince Charles, Henry Kissinger, and Tony Blair. The reality, however, is that these Last Days will probably not see a particular personification of evil invested in one person—the Antichrist—but rather a host of persons and movements that embody the spirit of antichrist. As Eugene Peterson translates John's words in *The Message*—*Children, time is just about up. You heard that Antichrist is coming. Well, they're all over the place, antichrists everywhere you look. That's how we know that we're close to the end [v.18].*

For John we are already living in the Last Days—*Dear children this is the last hour [v.18a]!* Two things signal to John the arrival of this hour. Firstly, the appearance of *many antichrists [v.18b]* by which he means anyone and anything that displays a focussed hostility towards the things of Christ—a denial of his Sonship and the truth of the Gospel. Secondly, the dissolution of the church, seen in the departure of some Christians *[v.19]* is indicative that the powers of evil are laying intensive siege to the church. John is speaking theologically rather than chronologically. He is reminding his readers that the concentration of evil they are now experiencing fits perfectly the formula announced by Jesus and the apostles for the end of time, namely that the end times and the Second Coming of Christ can happen at any moment. As J H Newman suggests, history has changed direction. It runs 'not towards the end, but along it, and on the brink of it; and it is at all times near that great event, which, did it run towards it, it would at once run into. Christ then is ever at our doors.' Since the coming of Jesus, history has a new urgency, a sense that its end is at hand and the powers of the future are impinging upon it!

**Prayer: Lord, help us to recognise that we are already living in the last days. Help us to be aware of the seductive subtlety of the spirit of antichrist, and remain faithful to you.**

Monday 8th February 2010

# AN ANOINTING FROM THE HOLY ONE

1 John 2:20-25

How are we to stand against the powerful pull of our old sinful nature, the attractiveness of so much of the world's lustful ways, our proud reliance on ourselves, the subtle temptations of the spirit of antichrist? Having given us a fresh start in Jesus has God left us on our own in the vain hope that we will do better this time round? Is it simply a question of 'Try harder!' or 'Pull yourself up by your boot laces!' Thankfully John, having warned us of the above dangers, goes on here [vs.20-25] to tell us that God, in Jesus, has provided us with the power to live the godly life he has called us to—*But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth [v.20]!*

John wants every Christian to be equipped to deal with the temptations that face us from within and without—to know that *anointing from the Holy One* that he speaks of here. There is a play on words here in Greek. If certain people and forces in the world represent the spirit of *antichrist* (Greek: *antichristos*), Christians have an *anointing* (Greek: *chrisma*) that can aid and protect them. *Antichristos* and *chrisma* originate from the same Greek verb *chrío* which means 'to anoint'. But what is this anointing? The Greek word simply means 'what is rubbed on' whether it is ointment or paint or medicine. In the New Testament (as in Judaism) it took on a specialised use, referring to the gift of the Holy Spirit that would be the hallmark of the reign of a king [2 Samuel 2:7], the authority of a prophet [Isaiah 6:1] and the Messiah [Isaiah 11:1]. Thus when John speaks here of the Christian's *anointing* he is most probably thinking of that endowment with the Holy Spirit that the disciples received at Pentecost [Acts 2:1-4] and which Peter tells us is the birthright of every Christian [Acts 2:38,39]—a gift that is able to give all knowledge to those who possess it. For John those who truly turned to Christ received the Holy Spirit and through this mystical experience gained a new knowledge of life. Thus they received both the power to overcome the various temptations that came their way and the knowledge to see through the subtlety of those temptations [vs.21-23]. The key to living a victorious Christian life, however, is to live close to Christ—to abide in Christ [vs.24,25].

**Prayer:** Lord, thank you for gift of your Holy Spirit who gives us the power to live victoriously and the knowledge to see through the most subtle of temptations.

Tuesday 9th February 2010

# THE REAL & THE COUNTERFEIT

1 John 2:26,27

Some years ago I was given a counterfeit £10 note. It looked the genuine article but when exposed to the right kind of light (in the bank) its counterfeit nature was revealed. Here John is trying to help Christians to discern the difference between the real and the counterfeit—not in financial terms but spiritually. Faced with the attraction all kinds of unhelpful things in the world around us that seek to pull us away from Christ, undermined from within by our own inherent sinful nature and wilfulness, vulnerable to the subtle temptations of the anti-Christian spirit of the age, how can we tell what is genuine and what is counterfeit? If we are truly to go on with God it is essential to be able to discern what is going to be good and helpful to us in our journey and what will be damaging.

Having told us previously that God has not left us to our own devices but has given us *an anointing from the Holy One [v.20]*, namely the gift of the Holy Spirit, John unpacks just how the Holy Spirit helps us to tell the difference between the real and the counterfeit [*vs.26,27*]. In particular John warns us that we need to be careful about the influence certain people have on us—*I am writing these things about those who are trying to lead you astray [v.26]*. Judging by his later comments about ‘teachers’ [*v.27*] John obviously has in mind certain prominent people in the churches—false teachers with charismatic authority who are leading the people into error. John is not denying the importance of the genuine teaching office in the church! He is not setting aside the authority of Pastors trying to instruct their congregations. Rather John is invalidating the authority of false teachers. Erroneous teaching has always existed. Many of the Sects such as Unitarianism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormonism, and Christian Science have their roots in the Christian Church. It is not simply false teaching that is dangerous however—anyone who exerts influence over us can be dangerous if that influence leads us away from faithfully following Jesus into ungodly behaviour! But, says John, God has given us an *anointing [v.27]*, the gift of God’s Spirit. We don’t need to blindly follow false teachers or influential friends [*v.27a*]. The Holy Spirit enables us to discern between what is *real* and what is *counterfeit [v.27b]*! For the Holy Spirit to do this however, we need to abide or *remain in him [v.27c]*!

**Prayer: Lord, help us to be sensitive to your Holy Spirit’s leading.**

Wednesday 10th February 2010  
**CONFIDENT CHRISTIANS**  
**1 John 2:29-30**

Every Pastor or Christian Leader wants to strengthen the spiritual stamina of the members of his or her congregation. This is especially true when, as with the Christian congregations John is writing to, 'opponents are at the door or in the pews' (Gary Burge)! But how do we best reinforce Christian discipleship? How do we produce confident Christians able to stand sure and certain in their faith? This is all the more important, says John, given the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ—*And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming [v.28].*

Two phrases are used to describe the Second Coming of Christ here. The first is *when he appears [v.28a]* where the verb actually means 'to reveal' something or someone. It is used for Christ's Advent in the Incarnation [1:2 see 3:5,8] and it is used here for Christ's Second Coming where John is thinking of the coming of Christ as a time when the Lord will be unveiled visibly before the entire world. The other expression is *at his coming [v.28b]* where the Greek word is *parousia*, which was originally used for the arrival of a ruler or celebrity, accompanied by great interest and celebration. John sees the Second Coming of Christ as a time when Jesus will return—not to be born in a manger or die on a cross, but as King of kings and Lord of lords—an appearing that will at once dramatically set right the present circumstances and identify those who have been allied to him. Christ's appearance will produce two reactions: some will display *confidence* while others will display *shame [v.28]!* Literally, the latter group will 'shrink from him' while the former will enjoy confidence and assurance, even poise!

For John it is important to prepare for that day—to discover a confidence, and assurance in God right now, so that we can take that Day in our stride when it comes. And what is the key to finding such confidence? Firstly, we must *continue (or abide) in him [v.28a]*, i.e. remain true to him day after day, and secondly, *knowing that God is righteous [v.29a]* we must *do what is right ourselves [v.29b]* i.e. exhibit God's righteous character in our own lives.

**Prayer: Lord, help us to remain constantly true to you and exhibit your righteous character in our lives day by day.**

**Thursday 11th February 2010**

# **CHILDREN OF GOD**

## **1 John 3:1-3**

There is a popular misconception that we are all God's children, and that everyone is going to Heaven when they die. But are we all God's children? Are only Christians children of God? What about the Jews and other people of faith? The Bible is clear that all people are God's creation [*Colossians 1:16*], and that God loves the entire world [*John 3:16*], but John suggests here that it is only those who have been *born of God* [*2:29*] who are truly children of God. Indeed in the next section of this Letter [*vs.3-10*] he draws a clear distinction between *the children of God* and *the children of the devil* [*v.10*]!

Mention of spiritual rebirth [*2:29*] inspires John to reflect in praise on the splendour of God's love for us. The TNIV fails to translate the exclamation that bursts out of John as he contemplates this—***Behold! How great is the love the Father has lavished on us!*** [*v.1*]. John expresses his wonder at this by using an unusual word to describe the utterly foreign nature of this love. Literally John ponders *what manner of love is this* [*v.1a*] where the Greek word *potapen* means 'of what country' and implies that God's love is so unusual, so foreign, so unique to our experience, that we can barely grasp the fact *that we should be called the children of God* [*v.1b*]! And yet, says John, *that is (exactly) what we are* [*v.1c*]! By some amazing miracle we have now become children of God! I H Marshall points out that this is an act of legitimisation in which a father names his child and thereby makes a permanent claim to identity and ownership. Thus the child's legal identity is not in the child's hands but entirely in the Father's hands so that the child's security is assured.

Again and again John repeats that *now* we are God's children. It is an established fact that God's love controls. In *v.2* John reflects on how this fact will have consequences in the future. If now we have a glimpse of what it means to have the presence of God within us, when Christ comes again there will be yet more overwhelming experiences for us. He will appear, we will appear just like him, and then we shall see him exactly as he is. Such a vision drives us on to make the best of ourselves [*v.3*]!

**Prayer: Lord, thank you that through spiritual rebirth we are right now, right here, your children. Thank you that nothing can change that. Help us to live as your children.**

**Friday 12th February 2010**

# **FAMILY LIKENESS**

**1 John 3:4-10**

One of the first questions we ask when we hear of the birth of a baby is, 'Who does he or she look like?' Features such as physical appearance, including the colour of hair and eyes, facial characteristics, the shape of the mouth or nose, height and build, are given at birth. Later on, as the child grows and begins to reflect its parents' habits of action, speech or attitude, we may speak of a child as 'a chip of the old block.' Although not all children are simply smaller versions of their parents, it is unusual if there is not something in the physical emotional or moral makeup of the child that reflects its birth or upbringing.

Here [vs.3-10] John develops at greater length the responsibility that falls on the children of God. Quite clearly he expects that the children of God will bear an undeniable resemblance to the one they claim as their spiritual parent. That resemblance is seen primarily in the sphere of conduct, in the way the child lives out the responsibility summarised in the descriptive phrase *does what is right* [v.7]. In particular John makes the emphatic point that *no one who lives in [God] keeps on sinning* [v.6] *indeed they cannot go on sinning because they have been born of God* [v.9]! What exactly does John mean by this? Does he mean that the true Christian no longer sins? Or does he mean something else?

Clearly no Christian is perfect and every Christian fails from time to time. There is, however, a big difference between failing from time to time (and hating ourselves for failing and endeavouring to do better) and taking a *laissez faire* approach to sin. For John, the true Christian finds it difficult to treat sin lightly, indeed they develop an intense hatred of sin, they understand the 'exceeding sinfulness of sin' (Jeremiah Burroughs), they run from sin, because the new nature implanted within them by the Holy Spirit through the new birth reacts against sin—*those who are born of God will not continue to sin because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning because they have been born of God* [v.9]. We have a part to play in this, however. John tells us that we must avoid the kind of environment and company that would *lead us astray* [v.7] and walk the way of love—love for God and love for others [v.10].

**Prayer: Lord, help me to see what sin did to you, and help me to develop a real hatred of sin and genuine love for you.**

**Saturday 13th February 2010**  
**SURPRISE! SURPRISE!**  
**1 John 3:11-15**

One of the things that really surprised me when I became a Christian 50 years ago, and continues to astound me in some ways, is the way in which some people react negatively towards Christians and the Gospel. One would have thought that people would have welcomed the change for the better in the lives of Christians and see the Gospel message as bringing hope to the hopeless? Here [3:11-15] John uses an archetypal story in the Old Testament to explain why we should *not be surprised if the world hates us* [v.13].

Genesis 4:1-16 has always been a potent story to show the destructive impulses that accompany envy. Since Satan has always been the destroyer of life [John 8:44] it makes sense that in some fashion Cain was working under his inspiration even though this is not mentioned in Genesis. In Christian literature the Cain and Abel story is generously used, particularly as a foreshadowing of the martyrdom of Christians. Abel's sacrifice was pleasing to God, Cain's was not. In the Christian Church, the envy and revenge harboured by Cain were compared to the feelings of the opponents of Christians, whose sacrificial lives were pleasing to God. In v.13 John makes this comparison. The passions that fuelled Cain's jealousy and hatred are now fuelling those opposed to Christians. Although God had clearly indicated what he expected from both Cain and Abel, Cain rejected this and simply did his own thing. Rather than accept that he was in the wrong Cain violently reacted against God and his brother. In much the same way there will always be those in our society who, instead of seeing the grace of God at work in Christians and responding to God's gracious invitation to salvation in the Gospel, react violently against God and Christians.

How are we to respond to this? Are we to fight fire with fire? An eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth? No! Quite the contrary in fact! *This is the message you heard from the beginning*, says John, *we should love one another* [v.11]. *Do not be like Cain* [v.12]. *We know that we have passed from death to life because we love each other* [v.14]!

**Prayer: Lord, help us never to fight fire with fire, never to react negatively to those who act negatively towards us, but always to respond with genuine love towards all.**

**Sunday 14th February 2010**

# **HOW WE KNOW WHAT LOVE IS**

**1 John 3:16-18**

There are various opinions as to the origin of Valentine's Day. Some experts suggest that it originated from St. Valentine, a Roman who was martyred for refusing to give up Christianity. He died on 14 February 269 A.D. the same day that had been devoted to love lotteries. Legend also says that St. Valentine left a farewell note for the jailer's daughter, who had become his friend, and signed it 'From Your Valentine'. Others say that St. Valentine served as a priest at the temple during the reign of Emperor Claudius. Claudius then had Valentine jailed for defying him. In 496 A.D. Pope Gelasius set aside 14 February to honour St. Valentine. Gradually, 14 February became the date for exchanging love messages and St. Valentine became the patron saint of lovers. The date was marked by sending poems and simple gifts such as flowers.

Over the years our understanding of what love is all about has largely deteriorated to a somewhat sickly, sentimental, over romanticised version. There is nothing wrong with romantic love but real love is so much deeper than this. This is why John tells us here, *this is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us [v.16a]*. What we have here is a love reality check that brings us up with a jolt. If want to know what real love is about we only have to contemplate what Jesus did for us, for humanity, for the whole of creation, on the cross at Calvary!

For John, however, love does not stop there! He goes on to say *And we ought to lay down our lives for one another [v.16b]*. If we claim to be disciples of Christ, to be those born again of his Spirit, those who are the recipients of Calvary love, then we will demonstrate this by being loving ourselves. Moreover we will do this in practical ways. Laying down our lives may not actually involve literally dying for others—as Jesus did for us—but it will mean things like demonstrating practical pity by using our material possessions to help and bless those less well off than ourselves. John tells us here, *If any one of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you? [v.17]*. Words are never enough if actions or truth are what are required [v.18]!

**Prayer: Lord, help us to understand what real love is truly all about, and demonstrate that love in the way we live.**

Monday 15th February 2010

# CONFIDENCE BEFORE GOD

1 John 3:19-24

It was Ulrich Zwingli, the founder of Swiss Protestantism, who suggested that 'Our confidence in Christ does not make us lazy, negligent, or careless, but on the contrary it awakens us, urges us on, and makes us active in living righteous lives and doing good. There is no self-confidence to compare with this.' Many people today have only a negative fear of God—indeed some religions, and even Christian denominations, appear to encourage this—how much better to have the kind of confidence to stand before God that the Writer to the Hebrews speaks of when he tells us that we can *approach God's throne of grace with confidence* knowing that we will *receive mercy and find grace to help us* [Hebrews 4:16]. It is this confidence before God that John is writing about here [vs.19-24].

To begin with John recognises our natural tendency to fear the worst when he speaks of the need to *set our hearts at rest in [God's] presence* [v.19], especially when *our hearts condemn us* [v.20a]. For John, confidence before God springs from our relationship with God, and that kind of confidence is as John tells us here, that we have assurance that *we belong to the truth* [v.19a], because it is evidenced by our deeds of love [vs.16-18]. The argument he presents is that when, previously, we have tried to change for the better we failed because we tried to change in our own strength—but now, having experienced spiritual rebirth, we find that we do change for the better because this time we are utilising God's strength to change not simply our own. But John also recognises that even so there may be times when we feel we have not lived this out and our hearts incriminate and condemn us. In those times, he reminds us, we are to remember that *God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything* [v.20]. For John, the human heart is not the final standard of judgment or mercy—God is!

John's advice to us, if we wish to have assurance, confidence before God [v.21] is simply to keep prayerful—we receive from [God] anything we ask [v.22a]; *keep [God's] commands and do what pleases him* [v.22]; keep believing—*believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ* [v.23a]; and keep *loving one another* [v.23b]. If we keep doing these things—looking up and out instead of in and down—we will know the Holy Spirit bearing witness with our spirits that we truly are God's children [v.24]!

**Prayer: Lord, inspire confidence in our hearts by your Spirit.**

Tuesday 16th February

# TESTING THE SPIRITS

1 John 4:1-3

From our bedroom window we have a wonderful view of the Church Garden, and the amazing variety of birds that visit it on a daily basis. On the windowsill we have a pair of binoculars and a field guide with pictures and descriptions of various British birds and their chief identifying characteristics, including size, colour, etc. With a little practice one can become adept at identifying scores of birds. What this passage [4:1-3] gives us is in its own way a 'field guide' to identifying or discerning various 'spirits' that are at work in our world and exercise an influence over us.

John begins by warning us, *do not to believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God [v.1]*. Essentially there are three sorts of 'spirit' at work in our world today and we need to be able to recognise which of these is the source behind the various ideas, philosophies, values, opinions, directions that confront us from day to day. Some ideas, philosophies, and so on, simply come from the **human spirit**—in other words they are just our ideas, opinions etc. These may be well meant, they may be motivated by love. At worst they can be motivated by pride, or prejudice, or even anger. But bottom line is they are just our opinions! Some ideas, opinions, etc. stem from **evil spirits**. The Bible is explicit in warning us of evil forces or influences that are at work in our world [see *Ephesians 6:10-12*]. It is these Satanically inspired forces that are behind much of the violence, corruption, exploitation, and immorality that are at work in our world today. Finally, there is the **Holy Spirit**—the third member of the Trinity who inspires us to truly good and godly things.

How do we recognise which of these three 'spirits' is behind the various ideas, philosophies, values, opinions, directions that confront us from day to day? Just what is the motivating force behind the people who expound them? For John it essentially revolves around the place accorded to Jesus Christ—*this is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God [v.2]*! What exactly does he mean by this? Firstly there is a theological dimension—does the person concerned truly believe that Jesus is fully God and fully man? Secondly there is the spiritual dimension—does what is being propounded truly reflect the character of Christ?

**Prayer: Lord, help us to wisely discern the root of things.**

Wednesday 17th February 2010

# OVERCOMING EVIL

1 John 4:4-6

The Apostle Paul exhorts us in *Romans 6:11* to '*reckon yourselves dead to sin and alive to God*'. 'Reckon' is a mathematical word. Paul is encouraging us to get our sums right. It was Mr Micawber (in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*) who said, 'Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pound ought and six, result misery.' Paul is applying the same philosophy to the Christian life here in *Romans 6:11*. He is saying to every Christian 'Do your sums right—dead to sin and alive in Christ Jesus—result happiness! John is on a similar track here [vs.4-6] where he is saying that it is possible for every Christian to overcome the powers of evil that confront us from without and within!

Speaking of *the spirit of antichrist* [v.3] that is already at work in the world—evil forces that stand in opposition to Christ and his way, and constantly seek to undermine us in our Christian journey—John tells us that we can overcome them *because the one in you is greater than the one who is in the world* [v.4]. Christians can overcome the temptations of Satan, the pull of the world, and the lusts of the flesh—not through our own strength—but by the power of the One who lives within us by the Spirit, the Lord Jesus Christ himself! We too can say with Paul, '*I can do all things through him who strengthens me*' [Philippians 4:13]!

If this wonderful truth is to become a reality for us, however, we need to do two things John tells us here. Firstly, we need to stop listening to the wrong voices. Speaking of those who have no allegiance to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, John tells us *they are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world* [v.5a]. In Greek mythology, the Sirens were three dangerous bird-women who lived on an island surrounded by cliffs and rocks. Sailors who sailed near were compelled by the Sirens' enchanting music and voices to shipwreck on the rocky coast. If we are to avoid making shipwreck of our Christian lives, says John, we need to stop listening to the subtle but deadly voices of worldly people. Secondly, we need to listen to God and to those godly people, apostles or 'sent ones' like John, that God has raised up to lead his Church [v.6]

**Prayer: Lord, help us to listen to right voices that will build us up in the faith, not wrong voices who will pull us away from you.**

**Thursday 18th February 2010**

# **LOVE ONE ANOTHER**

**1 John 4:7-12**

Dr Sherwood Wirt suggests that 'there is no point in talking about strong churches and weak churches, big churches and little churches, warm churches and cold churches—such categories are unrealistic and beside the point—there is only a loving church and an unloving church.' Essentially John is saying much the same here in this section of his Letter [4:7-12] as we see right from the start when he says, *Dear Friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love [vs.7,8].*

At first glance this would appear to be open to abuse because it is quite possible to genuinely love others whilst at the same time have no real faith in God. Many humanists for example are very compassionate towards other humans but have no time for God at all. In addition, on a number of occasions I have been told by people that they expect to go to Heaven, not because they believe in Jesus but, because they done many good works—and oftentimes they have. This is why John immediately qualifies what he has said about loving others by defining exactly what he means by loving others! The *love* John is peaking about here—the love God expects us to demonstrate and be characterised by—is the very love with which God loves us! John is speaking here of *agape* love—Calvary love, sacrificial love—the love that took Jesus to the manger and the cross for sinful people like us. John goes on to say, *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world ... as an atoning sacrifice for our sins [vs.9.10].* This puts the kind of love John is speaking of here on a different scale entirely to the norm! As Jesus once pointed out it is comparatively easy for wealthy people to give large amounts of money—they still have plenty left—but it another thing for us to give all that we have [see *Mark 12:41-44*]! Of course, in reality, it is completely impossible, even for the best of us, to love others in this way—unless we have God's help. This is why John goes on to say later in this chapter that *we love because God first loved us [v.19]* or as Paul puts it *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us [Romans 5:5]!*

**Prayer: Lord, fill our hearts and lives with your love so that we may love others even as you love us.**

Friday 19th February 2010

# THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

1 John 4:13-16a

After John Wesley had been preaching for some time, some one said to him, 'Are you sure, Mr. Wesley, of your salvation?' 'Well,' he answered, 'Jesus Christ died for the whole world.' 'Yes, we all believe that; but are you sure that you are saved?' Wesley replied that he was sure that provision had been made for his salvation. 'But are you sure, Wesley, that you are saved?' It went like an arrow to his heart, and he had no rest or power until that question was settled. Many men and women go on month after month, and year after year, without power, because they do not know their standing in Christ; they are not sure of their own footing for eternity. Hugh Latimer wrote to Nicholas Ridley once and told him that when he was settled and steadfast about his own salvation he was as bold as a lion, but if that hope became eclipsed he was fearful and afraid and was disqualified for service. Many disqualified themselves for service because they are continually doubting their own salvation. But how do we know that we truly belong to the Lord? Is it possible to have an assurance of our salvation?

John tells us here, *This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit [v.13]*. What John is alluding to here is the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit in salvation—the same experience Paul speaks of in his Letter to the Romans where he tells us that when we come to Christ *the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children [Romans 8:16]*. This is not the only ground for the assurance of our salvation—there is also the testimony of Scripture [*see John 20:31*] and (as we have already seen) the evidence of a changed life [*1 John 3:18-20*]—but it is a significant one. The inner witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives is experiential—as the disciples discovered at Pentecost—but it is more than simply a feeling. As a result of this indwelling presence of God's Spirit within us we have a new ability to testify to others [*v.14*], a new certainty that God lives in us and we in God [*v.15*], and a new knowledge and confidence in the fact that God loves us [*v.16*]!

**Prayer: Lord, thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit who comes to us in salvation, and for the fruit of such an experience: a new zeal to witness to others, a new sense of your presence, and a new confidence in your love for us.**

**Saturday 20th February 2010**

# **PERFECT LOVE**

**1 John 4:16b-18**

Some years ago, when our attitude to mental illness changed and the government were in the process of demolishing the old so-called 'Mental Hospitals', the following poem was found written on the wall of one of the 'cells' where a so-called 'lunatic' had been incarcerated:

*Were the whole world of parchment made,  
And ink the seas should fill,  
And every man a scribe by trade,  
And every blade a quill,  
To tell the love of God above  
Would drain the oceans dry;  
Nor would a scroll contain the whole,  
Though stretched from earth to sky!*

Now if the person who wrote these wonderful words was indeed mad (and many people who were incarcerated in this way were far from mad), I would like to be as mad as he or she was.

John echoes this here when he says simply but profoundly, *God is love* [v.16b]. He does not say that 'love is God' but '*God is love*' and the word he uses for 'love' is *agape*—the Greek word for the highest form of love conceivable to human beings! Indeed John goes on to say that God's love is *perfect love* [v.18] the kind of love that inspires *confidence* in God [v.17] rather than a negative *fear* of God [v.18]. The word *perfect* here signifies 'having reached its end, being complete' and is used of both people—being fully grown, mature—and of things! This affirms the idea of God's love being the best possible kind of love that exists—way above any human conception of what love is. To experience such love being *poured into our hearts* by the Spirit of God [see *Romans 5:5*] is to be filled with *confidence* in God—the assurance that *nothing*, not even the Day of Judgment, *can separate us from his love* [see *Romans 8:38,39*—and delivered from the negative fear, dread, sheer terror of God that grips many people. A right *awe of God* [Acts 2:43] is a good thing, but this is not the same as the negative, destructive fear of God John alludes to here. Indeed if we fear God in this way we have not yet grasped the complete picture of what God has done for us in Christ [v.18c]! Rather *whoever lives in* [this kind of] *love lives in God and God lives in them* [v.16c].

**Prayer: Lord, thank you for your perfect love revealed in Jesus.**

**Sunday 21st February 2010**

# **BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US**

**1 John 4:19-21**

A certain medieval monk announced he would be preaching the following Sunday evening on 'The Love of God.' As the shadows fell and the light ceased to come in through the cathedral windows, the congregation gathered. In the darkness the monk lit a candle and carried it to the crucifix. First of all, he illumined the crown of thorns, next, the two wounded hands, then the marks of the spear wound. In the hush that fell, he blew out the candle and left the chancel. There was nothing else to say.

There is some debate as to the object in the first part of opening sentence in this section of John's Letter. Should the text read *we love him* (i.e. God) as in the KJV, or simply *we love* (i.e. God and everybody else for that matter) as in the TNIV? I want to return to this debate in a moment, but for now we need to concentrate on the amazing truth expounded in the latter part of this opening sentence—*we love* (God and/or God and others) *because he first loved us* [v.19]. This is most amazing—God set his love upon us when we have done absolutely nothing to deserve God's love! As Paul tells the Roman Christians God set his love upon us not when we first loved him, or even had any inclination toward him, but when we were helpless sinners in rebellion against God [*Romans 5:6-10*].

Whilst the weight of evidence is against the addition of an object to the verb—*we love him or God*—and favours the *TNIV* translation—simply *we love ...* we should not pass over this idea too quickly. Would we ever have loved God if he had not taken the initiative with us, especially in the sending of Jesus to the manger and the cross? I sincerely doubt it.

But God's *perfect love* [v.18] does not stop simply with the idea of us—either us receiving God's love, or responding to God's love by loving him in return. The *TNIV* translation of the text broadens the idea of *we love* [v.19] to include not only God but others. In other words we are recipients of God's *perfect love* in order to be channels of that love both back to God and, as the rest of this section of the Letter [vs.20,21] affirms, to others, summed up in the closing statement—*those who love God must also love one another* [v.21]

**Prayer: Lord, help us to respond to your perfect love for us by truly loving you with all that we have, and loving others as we would love ourselves.**

**Monday 22nd February 2010**

# **LOVE & FAITH**

**1 John 5:1-5**

Writing about marriage, C S Lewis suggests that love, in and of itself, is not enough. Love needs to be reinforced by grace—‘Being in love is a good thing, but it is not the best thing ... Love ... is a deep unity maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habits reinforced by the grace which both partners ask and receive from God ... on this love the engine of marriage is run; being in love was the explosion that started it.’ Here, in this section of this Letter [vs.1-5], John is saying something similar—love reinforces faith, and faith (the key to knowing grace) reinforces love. In reality the two are inseparable.

John begins this section by linking saving faith with spiritual rebirth and *agape* love—*Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah is born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves his child as well [v.1].* What we have here are two parallel statements which both begin with *everyone who ...* One points to the importance of faith in Jesus, the other to the importance of loving each other. These are not two separate commands that one must keep in order to become a child of God—rather they are two expressions of what the child of God does. Faith and love are each expressions of the work of God in a person’s life. In reality there is something cyclical going on here—the love of God made manifest in Jesus draws us to faith in Christ as Saviour which in turn brings us into an experience of the grace of God in our hearts and releases the love of God into our lives ... Paul puts it this way—*Since we have been justified through faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand ... God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us [Romans 5:1,2,5].*

Here, in the remaining verses of this section of his Letter, John simply affirms this link between faith and love, whilst at the same time revealing that genuine love for God must manifest itself in love for others [vs.2,3] and genuine faith in God enables us to *overcome the world [vs.4,5]*. For John, endeavouring to live this kind of life is not *burdensome [v.3]* because we are drawing on the spiritual resources God has made available.

**Prayer: Lord, help us to be men and women of faith and love—those who draw on your resources not just our own.**

**Tuesday 23rd February 2010**

# **THREE WITNESSES**

**1 John 5:6-12**

The biblical scholar Alfred Plummer suggests that this passage is ‘the most perplexing passage’ in the Letter, indeed ‘one of the most perplexing in the New Testament’ and it is easy to see why. John begins by telling us *This is the One who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood [v.6]*. What on earth does this mean? There have been three principal suggestions about the meaning of *water and blood*.

Some (including Luther and Calvin) suggest that what we have here is reference to the two sacraments—water stands for baptism, and blood for the Lord’s Supper. Although it is possible to describe Jesus as *coming* through the sacraments—the ‘real presence’ of Christ in bread and wine—it is difficult to see how it could be said that he *came* (past tense) through them. The verb clearly indicates not some present activity of Jesus but his past historical coming.

Others (such as Augustine) link the passage with the spear thrust and issue of *blood and water* from the side of Jesus recorded in *John 19:34,35*. Certainly both passages are Johannine, and both are associated with testimony, and the flow of blood and water was a past historical event. Even if we take this to be a veiled reference to the Gospel—the reality of Christ’s death together with its saving efficacy—this would be somewhat forced, especially since the water and blood came from Christ’s side rather than Christ coming from water and blood.

The most probable interpretation (held by Tertullian and others) suggests that the *water* refers to the baptism of Jesus—where he was declared Son of God and commissioned for his work [*Matthew 3:16,17*—and the *blood* refers to his death on Calvary—in which his work was declared *finished* [*John 19:30*]. Add to this the testimony of the Spirit—*the Spirit who testifies because the Spirit is truth [v.6b]*—who visibly came upon Jesus (in the form of a dove) at his baptism and empowered him for his ministry and we have the three witnesses, John alludes to here, who affirm Jesus as *Son of God* and giver of abundant *life [vs.7-12]*!

**Prayer: Lord, thank you for leaving the glory of Heaven and coming to earth to save undeserving sinners like us.**

Wednesday 24th February 2010

# ANSWERED PRAYER

1 John 5:13-15

There is a story of a prayerful Christian man who was told by a work colleague that his many answers to prayer were simply 'coincidences'. The prayerful man replied, 'Well, all I know is that when I stop praying the coincidences stop happening!' Perhaps your response to this little story is 'O to have a prayer life like that man!'. Well, here [vs. 13-15] John unlocks for us some of the mysteries of how to get our prayers answered.

John begins this section of his Letter by telling us that his reason for writing to his readers at this time is to give them assurance—*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life [v. 13]*. If he wrote the Gospel in order that people may believe that *Jesus is the Messiah and by believing have life in his name [John 20:31]* John wrote this Letter so that believers might know and have assurance of their salvation [v. 13].

For John, there was nothing quite like knowing that your prayers are being heard and answered to give a person assurance of their salvation—*This is the confidence that we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him [vs. 14, 15]*. Here, in just a few words, John provides us with one of the key secrets of having our prayers answered—ask God to do what he wants to do in the first place! By this John doesn't mean relinquishing all responsibility to pray, but rather invites us to radically change our way of praying. Rather than bring a great list of requests to God and tell him what we want him to do about them John, in effect, suggests that like Hezekiah of old we lay our concerns before the Lord [*2 Kings 19:14-19*] and then wait on him to reveal to us what he thinks about them. This involves, of course, time spent waiting upon God in prayer—listening to him—and not just talking to him all the time. When God reveals his will to us—by his Spirit, through Scripture or the preached word, through a friend or circumstance and so on—then we can *ask according to his will* knowing that *he hears us [v. 14]*. Both God's revelation to us in prayer, and his response to our prayers when we know what to ask him, may involve patient waiting on our part—but we can be assured God will answer [v. 15].

**Prayer: Lord, teach us how to wait prayerfully upon you.**

Thursday 25th February 2010

# UNFORGIVABLE SIN?

1 John 5:16,17

Is there such a thing as an unforgivable sin? John says here that whilst the majority of sins can be forgiven there is a particular sin that cannot be forgiven—a *sin that leads to death* [v.16]! What are we to make of this?

Having written generally of answered prayer [vs.14,15] John now gives a specific illustration and limitation [vs.16,17]. The assurance of eternal life [v.13] should not lead us into pre-occupation with ourselves to the neglect of others. On the contrary it should inspire us to care for a brother or sister in need, whether the need is material [3:17,18] or, as here, spiritual—if you see a brother or sister commit a sin ... you should pray (for them) [v.16]. So far, so good. Praying for one another causes us no problem ... other than actually getting round to doing it, that is. It is John's qualification here that causes all the problems—I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying you should pray about that [v.16b]. What then is this sin that leads to death?

Some have suggested that John had a specific sin in mind. In the Mosaic Law certain sins were listed as capital offences punishable by death [see Leviticus 20:1-27] and certain Christian fathers carried this over into the Gospel age. Clement and Origin, for example, both accepted that a line could be drawn between forgivable and unforgivable sins. Tertullian listed certain sins (including murder, adultery, blasphemy) as beyond pardon.

A second suggestion (favoured by some modern commentators) is that the *sin that leads to death* is neither a specific sin, nor even backsliding, but total apostasy—the denial of Christ and the renunciation of the faith. Those who hold this view usually link these verses with such passages as Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-29; 12:16,17.

Most probably, however, the *sin that leads to death* is the *sin against the Holy Spirit* that Jesus warns of in the Synoptic Gospels [Matthew 12:30-32; Mark 3:28-30; Luke 12:8-10]. In the context of these sayings this was the sin committed by the Pharisees—a deliberate, open-eyed rejection of the truth as it is revealed in Jesus. They ascribed the mighty works of Jesus, done in the power of the Holy Spirit, to Beelzebul. Such sin, says Jesus, can never be forgiven either in this age or the age to come!

**Prayer: Lord, help us never to grieve, leave alone quench, your Spirit, and keep us faithful in prayer for others.**

**Friday 26th February 2010**  
**CONFIDENT GOD WILL KEEP US SAFE**  
**1 John 5:18**

A recent survey, carried out by Durham's Codec research centre, on the subject of preaching has thrown up a number of interesting facts about sermons. While many Anglicans want less than ten minutes, some Baptists wanted to sit through at least an hour and a quarter. Catholics, by contrast, wanted their homilies to be completed within ten minutes. Let me say straight away that here is one Baptist Christian who believes 20-25 minutes is the maximum people can listen to (even if it is good preaching). Fifty years ago when I began preaching I was told that in preaching the preacher should 'tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you've told them'! No wonder some Baptist preachers go on for an hour and a quarter! Perhaps the advice began with the Apostle John because here, in his closing comments, John aptly summarises what has been said throughout the Letter.

John closes his Letter with three statements of assurance, each beginning *we know* ... Each statement points to a truth that John affirms as well as to a reality that his readers have experienced. As he has done so throughout the Letter John concludes by telling his readers not only what they are to believe, but what belongs to them as children of God. Here, in this opening statement John encourages us to have confidence in God's keeping power—*We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them [v.18]*. The Christian is described here as one who, literally, *has been begotten of God*, and the perfect participle indicates that the new birth, far from being a transient phase of religious experience, has a continuing result. The one who has been *born of God* remains God's child with permanent privileges and obligations. One of these privileges is that the *One born of God (i.e. Jesus) keeps [us] safe*. Our salvation is secure. *No one can snatch us out of God's hand [John 10:27,29]*. One of the obligations is that the believer *does not continue to sin*. This does not mean that we can never slip into acts of sin, but rather that we do not persist in it habitually or live in sin. New birth results in new behaviour. Sin and the child of God are incompatible—they may occasionally meet but they cannot live together in harmony! Learn to heed the voice of conscience and go with the flow of the Holy Spirit.

**Prayer: Lord, thank you for saving us, and keeping us!**

**Saturday 27th February 2010**

# **CONFIDENT WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN**

**1 John 5:19**

Rudyard Kipling once wrote about families, 'All of us are we—and everyone else is they'. Here, John is writing about the confidence that comes from knowing that we are God's children, part of God's family, and he switches from writing in the third person singular to the first person plural—*We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one [v.19].*

For John it is definitely an 'us and them' situation—we are *the children of God* ... they are *under the control of the evil one!* *We know that we*—the apostle associates himself with his readers and all Christian people—*are children of God*. Having been *born of God [v.18]*, God remains the source of our spiritual life and being. But, in dreadful contrast, *the whole world is under the control of the evil one*. The world according to John here is not 'of' the evil one as we are literally 'of God' but rather *under his control*—literally 'in' him, in his grip. Moreover, again literally, it simply 'lies' there. It is not pictured as struggling vigorously to be free but as quietly lying, perhaps even unconsciously asleep, in the embrace of Satan. The evil one does not 'touch' the Christian but the rest of the world is helplessly in his grasp. As David Smith succinctly puts it—'On the child of God the evil one does not so much lay his hand [but] the world lies in his arms.'

John doesn't waste any words here. He doesn't blur any issues. The uncompromising alternatives are baldly stated. Everyone belongs either to 'us' or to 'them'—either to Christ or to the world. Everyone is therefore either *of God* or *under the control of the evil one*. There is no third category. Nowadays, when the line of demarcation between church and world is confused, it is important to learn again that all but those who have had a heavenly birth are under the authority and rule of *the powers of this dark world [Ephesians 6:12]* and of their master, the god and prince of this world. We need to remember, however, that although the *whole world* lies in the power of the evil one, it is also for *the sins of the whole world* (the only other time that this expression is used in this Letter) that *Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice [2:2]!*

**Prayer: Lord, thank you that in Jesus you have made us part of your family; keep us close to you, separate from the world, and aware of the subtleties of the evil one.**

**Sunday 28th February 2010**  
**CONFIDENT CHRIST HAS COME**  
**1 John 5:20,21**

John Newton was a rough, dirty sailor with a foul mouth and an appetite for rotten living. He hated life and life hated him. He was captain of a slave ship. Then someone placed in his hands a copy of Thomas a Kempis' book, *The Imitation of Christ*. He also had the gift of a good mother who told him about Jesus when he was young. He was gloriously saved from a life of sin and shame, became ordained, and went all over England sharing his faith. Well past 'retirement' age he had to have an assistant stand in the pulpit with him on Sundays. He was nearly blind and spoke in whispers, but nothing could keep him from preaching while he still had breath. One Sunday, while delivering his message he repeated the sentence: 'Jesus Christ is precious.' His helper whispered to him: 'But you have already said that twice.' Newton turned to his helper and said loudly, 'Yes, I've said it twice, and I'm going to say it again.' The stones in the ancient sanctuary fairly shook as the grand old preacher said again: 'Jesus Christ is precious!' And this is the note John ends this Letter on—*We know that the Son of God has come [v.20a]!*

This third affirmation is the most fundamental of the three. It concerns the Son of God through whom alone we can be rescued from the evil one and delivered from the world. Both revelation and redemption are his gracious work. Without him we could neither know God nor overcome sin. These are possible for us today only because the *Son of God has come* and, having come, *has given us understanding [v.20]*. *Understanding* here means 'the power or capacity of knowing' but it is not simply head knowledge that John is speaking of here. The kind of understanding John is speaking of here is essentially the ability to discern the true from the false—particularly to recognise Jesus as *him who is true ... the true God [v.20]*. This word *true* here is a favourite of John's and means 'real' (as against false). Moreover, what we have here is another example of John's emphasis that the Christian religion is both historical and experimental. Our understanding of the truth about Jesus leads us to an experience of him as Saviour and Lord! John's final sentence—*Dear children, keep yourselves from idols [v.21]*—is a terse reminder that nothing is comparable with the knowledge of the true God we find in Jesus Christ!

**Prayer: Lord, thank you for your self-revelation to us in Jesus—understanding that leads to real experience of you.**