

OpenTheo

1 John: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

February 18, 2022



Alastair Roberts

CONTENTS

00:00:00 - 1 John 1.1—2.6: Walking in the Light

00:11:39 - 1 John 2.7-29: Do Not Love the World

00:24:17 - 1 John 3.1-10: We Are God's Children

00:34:48 - 1 John 3.11—4.6: Knowing that We are of the Truth

00:49:35 - 1 John 4.7-21: God is Love

00:57:26 - 1 John 5: Overcoming the World

If you have enjoyed my videos and podcasts, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

The Book of 1 John lacks certain of the features that we might usually associate with an epistle. Some scholars have suggested that it might have been an encyclical. However, it does seem to be directed to a specific situation and to its issues.

It was most likely written by John, the brother of James, and the author of the Gospel and of Revelation. This has been disputed by many, but when we look at the resemblances

between the works, the traditional identification of the author would seem to be supported. When reading such a work, as we do not have intact writings of the people to whom John is responding, we have to engage in a sort of shadow reading.

We must try to deduce the arguments of John's opponents, inferring their position from John's arguments against them. Many scholars have argued that what we have here is an argument against a sort of proto-Gnosticism. The opponents of John are arguing that Christ did not come in the flesh, and denying that Jesus was the Son of God.

They also seem to be arising from within the church itself. It is very difficult to define Gnosticism, which was a very broad and variegated movement. Most represent it as a sort of dualism, dividing spirit, which is good and divine, and matter, which is created and evil.

This obviously creates problems for the claim that Jesus came in the flesh. A man named Corinthus in the second half of the first century is often seen as a key exponent, representative of the sort of position that John might have been responding to. I. Howard Marshall quotes Irenaeus, the early church father, on Corinthus.

After his baptism, Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove, from the power that is over all things. And then he proclaimed the unknown Father and accomplished miracles. But at the end, Christ separated again from Jesus, and Jesus suffered and was raised again.

But Christ remained impassable, since he was pneumatic. In his commentary on the book, Peter Lighthouse pays a special attention to chapter 2, verse 22, and its description of Antichrist. For Lighthouse, the suggestion that the opponents were denying that Jesus is the Christ, or the Messiah, is a key piece of information.

It suggests that they were operating within a primarily Jewish framework. And we see, in the early church, a mix between Gnostic and Jewish positions at a number of points. I John chapter 1 does not begin as a typical epistle might, with the sender and with greetings.

It seems more like a written sermon or address. However, it does seem to be directed at an audience that is known to the writer. It begins with the incarnation.

Christ, the Word of Life, was from the beginning, and they experienced him first-hand with their senses. They heard him, they saw him, they looked upon him, they touched him with their hands. The Word of Life is both the message and the person.

By opening the epistle with a reference to the one who was from the beginning, John might recall the beginning of his gospel. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. As eyewitnesses of this life, they testify concerning it.

The life was with the Father, and made manifest to the eyewitnesses of Christ. Christ is the ultimate source of life. In John 5, verse 26, For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.

In chapter 14, verse 6 of the Gospel of John, Jesus said to him, I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. The eyewitnesses, in their turn, pass on what they heard and saw and touched, proclaiming it to others in their words.

Christ is not just an individual, but the bearer of a life that is shared with his people in fellowship with the gift of the Spirit. John speaks of the communion that they enjoy with the Father and with the Son. They proclaim what they have seen and what they have heard, so that others would share fellowship with them, that they too would know participation in the life of Christ, and in that fulfill and share in the joy of the apostles themselves.

In verse 5, he moves from life and fellowship to light. The message received from Christ is that God is light and without darkness. The light-darkness contrast recalls creation.

The creation of light is the first act of the original creation. Creation moves from darkness to light. This is a common theme in the New Testament.

In 2 Corinthians 4, verse 6, For God who said, Let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Ephesians 5, verses 8-14 For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light, for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true.

And try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret.

But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible. For anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

In Christ the light of the long-awaited day of the Lord has dawned. God dwells in inapproachable light, without any darkness at all. And as the light of Christ dawns, we are called to step into the light, to become people of the light and the day that has come upon us.

Fellowship with the God who is light requires that we walk in that light. This is not merely the sight of fellowship with God, but of fellowship with each other as well. Darkness separates us from God, and it separates us from each other.

In the darkness of sin, we shrink back from the exposure of the light. We hide ourselves from others, and we hide ourselves also from God. As we walk into the light, we can give ourselves both to God and to our neighbours.

Mere verbal affirmation of Christ is not enough. To know fellowship with the one who is light and life, we must walk in the light. Our walking in the light is proof of fellowship.

The light is scary because it exposes things, most particularly our sins. However, the blood of Jesus can cleanse us from all sin. Denying that we have sin is not only self-deception, but presenting God himself to be a liar.

The blood of Christ is for those who walk in the light. Those who refuse to expose their sins to the light cannot truly be forgiven them. You can only know forgiveness for what you have confessed.

Receiving the forgiveness that God offers requires that we acknowledge our sin. And that first step into the light, confessing our sins, exposing them to the truth of God, is the most scary step of all. Walking in the light necessitates a transformed manner of relating to sin.

The darkness is a realm of hiding from the light that exposes sin. It is also sin's home turf and its breeding ground. As guilt makes us shrink back from the light, we find that sin will grow, it will spread, and it will develop.

Shrinking back from the light that exposes sins for forgiveness condemns us to walk in a realm where sin holds sway. John wishes his readers to avoid sin, that way of life that belongs to the darkness. However, as fallen people we will sin.

Fallen human beings cannot live sinless lives. When that happens, John wants us to be assured that we have both an advocate and a sacrifice for our sins. It is confidence in this that enables us to step out into the exposure of the light.

Jesus speaks on our behalf before the Father. He's an advocate for us. He also deals with our sins as an atoning sacrifice.

These are very prominent themes in the book of Hebrews, for instance. Jesus' death covers our sins, like the covering of the ark from which the Word is taken. Perhaps we could think of this as a sort of heat shield that enables us to approach the consuming, fiery holiness of God without being burnt up.

In this capacity, Jesus covers the whole creation. He saves all of humanity from

destruction. The world is still here because Jesus died, and his death covers the earth, preserving it from God's judgment.

However, while Christ's sacrifice saves all in this sense, and he is the saviour and the Lord of all, he is the saviour of those who believe in a special sense. The judgment of the wicked has been delayed by the death of Christ, but they will be destroyed. However, the righteous will finally be redeemed.

John moves on to the question of how we know that we know Christ. The answer is by keeping his commandments. Reading this, we might be tempted to think that we know that we know Christ by knowing that we keep his commandments.

We look at the works that we have done and we measure them up relative to God's law, and if they seem to be pretty good relative to God's law, we know that we're in the right with God. But experience would teach that that doesn't give much comfort much to the time. When we do compare our works to God's law, we find that they fall so far short.

Perhaps the knowledge is not an abstract knowledge, nor is the assurance found in knowing something about our works, but in the practice of our works. How do you know that you have come into a loving relationship with your spouse, for instance? Do you stand back and look at all the works that you have done and measure them up next to the standard of the perfect husband or wife? No, the best way to know that you are in a loving relationship with your spouse is by actually living in fellowship with them. As you live in a way that honours and seeks to please your spouse, you will almost certainly find that that is where the love of your spouse is most clearly known and where the strongest assurance of the truth of your relationship is to be discovered.

It is the same with our relationship with God. If you want to be assured of your relationship with God, seek His face, ask His forgiveness, obey His commandments, live in His presence, seek His good pleasure. As you abide in the love of God in such a way, you will be able to enjoy a much greater assurance of the fact that you have come to know Him.

On the other hand, how do you know that someone has not come to a knowledge of God? Look at the fruits that they produce. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, Then will I declare to them, I never knew you, depart from me, you workers of lawlessness. The person who has truly come to know Christ will live in a manner that manifests that truth.

He will keep the word of Christ, and in him the love of God will be perfected. If then we say that we abide in Christ, we must live our lives in fellowship with Him and in a way that follows the pattern of His own life. Considering 1 John and other passages in the New Testament, how can we further fill out the picture of what it means to live in the light? In 1 John 2, John moves into a discussion of a new commandment.

The language of commandment isn't that common in the New Testament, apart from references to aspects of the Mosaic Law. Here John speaks about the message of Christ in terms of the language of commandment, and this might strike us as very strange. However, in both his Gospel and in his Epistles, John uses the language of commandment on several occasions in such a manner.

In John 13, verse 34, This is both an old and a new commandment. It is the same commandment that was given to Israel at Sinai. The Law was always summed up in the commandment to love God and one's neighbour as oneself.

Jesus teaches this in places such as Matthew 22, verses 35-40. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law? And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

This is the great and first commandment, and a second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.

The multitude of the commandments were always refractions of this single great principle of love for God and neighbour. However, something changes with the coming of Christ. In Christ, the fulfilment of the Law in love is made manifest.

In Christ, we discover what love really means. God's love is seen, heard, touched, and people bear witness to it. And what is more, the Christ-shaped reality of love is worked out in our lives by the Spirit of Christ that He has given to us.

This new commandment is the fulfilment of the Law. It is also the writing of the Law upon the heart that was promised long ago as the fulfilment of the new covenant. This new covenant is not merely an external commandment.

It is something that is true in Christ and true in us. It is a commandment that is being fulfilled in the love of Christ that is at work in our lives by His Spirit. All of this is a manifestation of the passing away of the darkness of the old age and the rising of the true light of Christ in the world.

Where do we stand relative to this rising light? The test, once again, is that of love. Do we love our brothers? Hatred and hostility are the way of darkness. The darkness is a realm of blindness where people constantly bite and devour each other.

However, the light is a realm of illumination and love. Those who dwell in it will be marked out by their love. As Jesus says in John chapter 13 verse 35, By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

In verses 12 to 14 of this chapter, John addresses three different groups within the

church in succession, twice in a row in the same order, little children the first time, next time as children, fathers and young men. This is a perplexing passage in many ways. Why does John interrupt the flow to address these groups and to explain his reasons for writing? Why these groups in particular? Who are the groups in question? Are these different ways of speaking about the same people or distinct categories of persons? Why does he repeat himself within it? How do we account for the structure and the order? Why, for instance, is there a threefold reason for writing to the young men at the conclusion of the second cycle? The children, the word used of them changes in the second cycle, are associated with forgiveness and knowledge of the Father.

The father is with knowledge of the one who is from the beginning, and the young men with strength and overcoming. As those begotten by God, the children have had their sins forgiven, and as those in the family of God, they enjoy access to the Father through Jesus. By speaking of children, John is probably speaking of all Christians, but especially of young converts.

The fathers are likely the more mature believers, and the elders and overseers of the congregation. He writes to them on account of their knowledge of him who is from the beginning, presumably a reference to Christ, perhaps looking back to chapter 1 verse 1. He may be suggesting that they enjoy a deeper and longer-standing knowledge and experience, but the expression itself doesn't seem to make this clear. By repeating it in both cycles, he underlines it, tightens the connection between the two cycles more generally, and invites us to reflect upon the difference between it and the other two categories.

The young men are likely the younger, but not the new believers. The church is a family with different levels of maturity and experience. A rounded church needs the sense of dependence and free welcome enjoyed by children in the faith, the vigour and the fervour of the young men, and the maturity and the wisdom of the fathers.

Where one or two of these are lacking, churches will tend to be stunted in various ways. Churches ought to be intergenerational bodies, informed by each of these generational constituencies in the faith. Opposed to the love that characterises those dwelling in the light is the love of the world and the things in the world.

There is an antithesis between the people of God and the world, which is discussed at various points in John's Gospel. In John chapter 15 verses 18-19, for instance, If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you are of the world, the world will love you as its own.

But because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. John chapter 17 verses 14-16 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil

one.

They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. By the term world here, John is referring not so much to material objects, but to a system of life in all of its constitutive aspects. Peter Lighthouse expresses this very well in the following passage.

Probably drawing on the temptation of Eve in Genesis chapter 3, John details the law of the world under three headings. First, the world revolves around the desire of the flesh, which might include sexual and sensual desire, but also might include the desires that lead to the works of the flesh. Second, the world operates by spectacle and show, arousing the desire of the eyes.

Finally, the world operates according to the pride of life. Life here, as in chapter 3 verse 17, probably refers to wealth, and includes the status that often accompanies wealth. Loving the world means idolizing mammon, and striving for celebrity and fame.

The relationship between the world and desire is complex. Verse 16 indicates that desires and boastfulness make up the contents of the world. The desire of flesh, eyes, and boastfulness of life constitute the all that is in the world.

The end of verse 16, however, suggests that the world is the source of desires and boasts. The desire of flesh, desire of eyes, and boastfulness of life are from the world. Desires thus make up the world.

Yet the world is also distinguished from the desires, such that the world produces, evokes, and provokes desires and boastfulness. Verse 17 distinguishes the world from its desires, as if the desires are accompaniments of the world. To put it more sociologically, sinful human culture, its institutions, practices, products, are all embodiments of evil desire or boastfulness.

John hints that we should evaluate the world, not only on the basis of what's done, or what things it contains, but on the basis of desire. And desire has a multiple relationship with culture. Desires are the contents of culture.

Culture is made up of embodied dreams, aspirations, lusts. On the other hand, the world is the source of desire, evoking certain kinds of desire. As Lighthouse recognises then, for John, the world is a vainglorious complex of unruly desires and drives.

It's a realm that provokes us to think and to act and to love and to desire and to imagine, in particular ways, rather than others. It excites our appetites. It calls us to consume.

It tells us what we should want and how we should want it. And it is very hard not to become deeply entangled and enmeshed within such a realm. However, this world is transitory, it's passing away, whereas those who do the will of God will endure.

The Apostle Paul makes similar points about how we have to loosen our grip upon the world, upon its desires, its treasures, and its relationships, as those looking for the reign of Christ in 1 Corinthians 7, verses 29-31. This is what I mean, brothers. The appointed time has grown very short.

From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus had warned his disciples of false teachers and messiahs arising at the end of the age.

The fact that many such persons had already arisen was proof that it was the last hour, and that the coming of Christ was imminent. Within a few years, Christ would come in judgment on Jerusalem, and the whole Old Covenant order would collapse with its temple. The Antichrist, as he goes on to explain, is the one who denies that Jesus is the Messiah, the person who denies both Father and Son.

The false teachers with whom he is dealing seemingly went out from the apostolic group on teaching missions. However, they were not truly of the apostolic group, which was demonstrated by the fact that they all went in their own ways, departing from the apostolic teaching. This made their true character plain.

People will generally reveal their character if you give them time and watch them closely, and these false teachers were no exception to that rule. Christians have been anointed by Christ, who is the Anointed One. John might allude here, perhaps, to the promise of the New Covenant in places such as Jeremiah 31, 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor, and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

In declaring that they have all knowledge, and later on that they have no need that anyone should teach them, we should see some reference to the work of the Spirit in the congregation. In John 16, verses 13-15 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, but he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

All that the Father has is mine, therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. The anointing that has been received is the gift of the Spirit then, in the Spirit the Church has been given all knowledge, it has been given the fullness of this knowledge in principle in the once for all gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. It is given this knowledge in the opening of our spiritual perception to recognize God's truth, by his Spirit within them.

The sheep of Christ hear their Master's voice, they answer to his voice, but they do not answer to the voice of a stranger. This knowledge is also given in the ministries of teaching within the body, the people of God have all that they need to recognize and grow in the truth of God, in what they have been given in the Spirit, and they must abide and grow in the truth that they have been given. They must do this so that when Christ comes they can stand before him without any shame.

We prepare for the full advent of the light by walking in the light at the moment, by living as people of the day, by being people that do not shrink back from the exposure and the judgment that comes in the light, but rather receiving the forgiveness of Christ, walking in the light, so that when he comes we will rejoice at his advent. Once again, people are known by their fruits. If God is righteous, and he is righteous, then we can be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of God, the sons and the daughters of God will share the character of their father.

A question to consider, how might John's analysis of the world, his understanding of the world in terms of pride, lust and desire, and other such things, help us to understand our own societies and their systems better? In the first half of 1 John chapter 3, John explores the righteousness and avoidance of sin that will characterize the true children of God. We are the children of God and account for remarkable love shown towards us by the Father. The love of God is astounding, not merely in its character and in its extent, but also for the conditions under which it is given.

In Romans chapter 5 verses 7-8, For one will scarcely die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die. But God shows his love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. As Christians we are born again, becoming children of God, members of a new family.

John chapter 3 verses 3-8 speak about this. Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, You must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. The fact that we have been born again, that God is our Father, is an expression of the extent of God's love. John 3.16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

However, as children of God, there is hostility between the world and us, and also a

fundamental failure on the world's part to recognize or understand us. John 15.18-19 If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own.

But because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. We are currently children of God, but we are awaiting in great anticipation to discover what this will mean in all of its fullness. We are like very young children, imagining what it will be like to be grown-ups, except that we are considering something that is so much more of a far-reaching transformation.

We do have some intimation, however, of what it will be like. We see this in Christ himself. As children of God, we are predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son, as we see in Romans 8.29, and when we see him, we will be like him.

The logic of this statement is that our transformation will occur through a transforming vision of his glory. Paul makes a similar claim in 2 Corinthians 3.18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another. For Paul, this transforming vision is already occurring as we witness the glory of Christ.

However, our limited current vision will one day be greatly exceeded by a fuller revelation. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13.12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

The Christian tradition has spoken of the beatific vision, of what it will mean when we behold God. This shouldn't be thought of as a sort of looking with material eyes, but as the opening up of our spiritual perception to God's goodness and beauty, so that flooded with the light of his glory, we finally enjoy true blessedness and joy in gazing upon him. When people witness something truly beautiful, their faces can open up in awe and astonishment.

A transfiguring beauty can wash over their countenance as their faces shine in response to what they have seen or heard. Beauty and goodness can transform our physical appearances for a brief time, but seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ will, according to John, produce a lasting change in us. We will never be the same again.

Recognising this promise of seeing Jesus as he truly is, of having our eyes eternally open to the radiance of his glory, goodness and beauty, will change the way that we live now. We will be longing for that sight and preparing ourselves for it. In the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, verse 8, our Lord assures his hearers, Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Those who live according to this hope will seek to purify themselves. We are very much at the earliest beginnings of the reality of Christian experience. We are looking forward

to something yet to be realised in its fullness.

The glory that belongs to us lies in the future, and the Christian life is in large measure animated by reflection upon the hope of this. It keeps us moving forward. And as a flip side of our awaiting this glorious transformation, there is the need to deal radically with sin.

The children of God and the children of the Devil are distinguished by their patterns of behaviour. The person who sins practices lawlessness. Lawlessness isn't synonymous with law-breaking.

It is more fundamental than that. Lawlessness is a far more basic posture of rebelliousness, a refusal to recognise and resistance to God's authority. It produces law-breaking, but it lies far deeper than it.

John wants his hearers to be under no illusion. Sin at its root is not just isolated acts of naughtiness. It is a posture of rebellion towards the living God.

It's something that cannot but be more comprehensive in its character. A rebellious posture towards the living God is not the sort of thing that can be compartmentalised as some people think of their sins. Not only is this the case, Christ undertook his work precisely in order to take away sins, not merely in their guilt, but also in their power and their practice.

He is the sinless one, the lamb without blemish. Sin has neither presence in nor purchase upon him. And this has direct implications for us as Christians.

It is impossible to abide in Christ and also sin. The one who sins betrays the fact that he has neither seen nor known Christ. The language here is taken by most commentators to refer to continuing in or persisting in sin, although John's language suggests something more absolute, which will probably retain some of its force in our interpretation.

John clearly teaches that genuine Christians can and do and will sin. In chapter 1 verses 8-10 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. The idea that, provided that they don't make a practice of it, the Christian can have a little sin as a treat, is clearly antithetical to John's way of thinking, as would be the idea that a few slip-ups are to be expected and shouldn't be taken that seriously. No, sin is the polar opposite of all that Christ is and stands for, and the idea that sin and Christ can coexist, provided that the sin is in minimal doses, is quite mistaken.

To abide in Christ is to turn our backs on sin. To the extent that we sin, we are not

abiding in Christ. Likewise, to the extent that we sin, we betray our falling short of the transforming vision that we await and long for, suggesting that we have a limited perception of who Christ is, if any at all.

Some people might think that people can be righteous while continuing in sin. God has justified me apart from my works, so my works are irrelevant. John makes plain that this cannot be the case.

The people who are righteous are manifested to be so by their works. They produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which evidences his work in their lives, producing in them a character that conforms to the justifying judgment that God made concerning them in his free forgiveness of their sins. No one should be under any illusion that there is any such thing as a righteousness before God that is not evidenced in transformed behaviour.

John presses his point even further. He has argued that sin is fundamentally rebelliousness. He has argued that it is incompatible with and the polar opposite of Christ.

And now he makes the logical next step in the argument. The person who sins is of the devil himself. They share his character.

Jesus makes a similar point concerning his opponents in John 8.44 This is how intense the opposition is. There are no shades of grey here. It is a case of belonging to the light or the darkness, to God or the devil, to righteousness and love or to sin.

The cause of the righteous person's manner of life is found in the fact that he has been born of God. God's seed, the word of God operating by the spirit of God, abides in the righteous person, just as they abide in Christ. And sin and God's seed cannot coexist.

Either sin is doomed to extinction in us by God's presence and work in our lives, or our continuing in sin manifests that we are not his at all. John sums up his essential message. The distinction between the children of God and the children of the devil is plain.

The person who does not produce the fruit of righteousness in their lives is evidently not of God. Likewise, the person who does not love his brother. A question to consider.

What more might we learn about the beatific vision in this passage and in the rest of scripture? To this point in 1 John 3, John has been characterizing the righteous, setting them over against those given to sin, rebelliousness and those who belong to the devil. Now he continues, expressing the opposition between the righteous and the wicked in terms of the contrast between Cain and Abel. Verse 11 connects with what has gone beforehand, with its reference to lack of love for one's brother, as a sign of being a child of the devil.

Once again, as he has done at several points already in the epistle, he recalls the teaching of Christ concerning love for the brethren. In John 13, verses 34-35, A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. And John 15, verse 12, This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you. In the contrast between Cain and Abel that he proceeds to draw, John is continuing to draw upon the teaching of Jesus recorded in his gospel.

John 8, verse 44, You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

The devil was a murderer from the beginning, and Cain was of him. The motivation for Cain's murder of Abel was the fundamental hostility between the righteous and the wicked. Cain's deeds were evil, and Abel's were righteous.

Abel's sacrifice was accepted, while Cain's was rejected. Cain was angry to be rejected, seemingly regarding his sacrifice as a means of getting his way with God, rather than as a genuine offering. The wicked hate the righteous because the deeds of the righteous reveal the true character of their deeds and their character.

The wicked don't merely kill the righteous because they are spurred by their own wickedness, but because they are implacably hostile to those who do good. By contrasting love for each other with murdering our brothers, we might perhaps think that John is grossly exaggerating for rhetorical impact. However, we should here recall Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5, verses 21-24.

So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Just as Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount, John traces murder back to its roots in the heart, showing that it springs up from hatred towards one's brother.

God does the same thing in Genesis chapter 4, when he challenges Cain before his anger, envy and hatred towards Abel has borne the fruit of his act of murder. In verses 6 and 7 of that chapter, the Lord said to Cain, Why are you angry? and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.

Recognising the deep hostility that the wicked feel towards the righteous, John's hearers should not be at all surprised that they are experiencing the hatred of the world. The

example of Cain and Abel serve to suggest that the enmity of the wicked towards the righteous has been there from the very beginning. This is not a new thing and Christians should not be surprised to face it.

When they experience it, they should know that they stand in the long history of enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. None of us start off in the realm of life. We must pass out of death into life and assurance that this has occurred is experienced as we live and act in love towards the brothers.

This love is the fruit of the transition and it is also in this practice that we are assured that the transition has taken place. The assurance is not necessarily known as we stand back and look at our works, but rather as we live in love towards God and our brothers. We can often think of assurance as if it were strong knowledge of an objective truth rather than as knowledge of a relational reality which is not caught in the objective-subjective opposition that many approaches to assurance are.

You do not know that you have a loving relationship with someone generally by standing back and scrutinising your heart, nor by abstracting yourself from the relationship and examining its objective character in a detached manner. Rather you best know that you have a loving and healthy relationship with them as you live in loving communion with them. The same is true of our relationship with God.

Assurance is a knowledge that is largely gained indirectly as we live in love towards God and our neighbour. The person who does not love has not made the transition from life to death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer.

He may not yet have killed his brother, but the sin of murder, the seed of his father the devil, has taken deep root in his heart. The true pattern of love is provided by Christ himself. As Jesus teaches his disciples in John chapter 15 verse 12, this is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. Paul spoke of Christ's love as the fullest expression of love back in Romans chapter 5 verses 6 to 8 For while we were still weak at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die.

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. We must follow this pattern of love in the way that we treat our brothers. The contrast here is a pronounced one.

On the one hand there is the taking of the life of our brother, whether in the ultimate act of murder or in all the little multiple lesser ways that we assault them, undermining their relationships, their property, their reputations or the way in which we live in envy

towards them. On the other hand there is laying down our life for our brother, whether in the ultimate sacrifice or in the many ways in which in love we privilege their concerns over our own. True love is necessarily evidenced in deeds.

For instance if we see our brother in need and we have what he requires for his assistance but we still do nothing we lack any evidence for the love of God dwelling in us. Like James John wants his heroes to be in no doubt that love is not merely a matter of fine words. It must be embodied in deeds of love.

When we have assurance we will be able to approach God with confidence in prayer. There will however be times when we feel our hearts condemn us and John wants us to know how to respond well when this occurs. Particularly for those who suffer with scrupulosity, with an obsessive conscience that constantly accuses them of various infractions, it is very important to find some way to set their hearts and their minds at rest.

We have limited knowledge of our own hearts and we should be wary of placing too much weight on their judgments. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 3 to 5 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact I do not even judge myself for I am not aware of anything against myself but I am not thereby acquitted.

It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

We should not allow the accusations of our weak consciences to prevent us from approaching God. Rather we should seek the forgiveness that he has promised and commit ourselves to the way of love, finding assurance as we are taken out of ourselves and into relationship with the God who is so much greater than our accusing hearts, a God to whom we can confidently entrust ourselves. Where we do have confidence before God we will find that our prayers will be much more effective as we are conformed to the character of Christ our prayers will also be conformed to God's will and we will receive surprising answers.

If we constantly hesitate in approaching God with the accusations of conscience we will be stunted in our growth and John wants us to avoid this. But if we press our accusing consciences notwithstanding into ever more committed appeal to God our Father, the more we do this the more our hearts will be set at rest and the more that our prayers will be effective. In his farewell discourse in John's Gospel Jesus had taught his disciples about love for each other as his commandment to them.

This commandment is the one new commandment personally embodied in Christ himself

which sums up all of the other commandments. Keeping this one command not only sums up but also includes all of the other commandments. In keeping this commandment we will keep all of the others.

In verse 24 he moves from the singular commandment to the plural commandments perhaps to underline this relationship between plurality and singularity. This is how we are to abide in Christ. Once again this is reminiscent of John chapter 15 verses 9 to 14.

As the Father has loved me so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this that someone lay down his life for his friends.

You are my friends if you do what I command you. How do we know that God abides in us? By the spirit that he has given us. The spirit that Jesus promised to his disciples in the farewell discourse.

Once again we should not presume this to mean that we know that he abides in us by being able to point directly to the spirit in our lives and say there God dwells in me. No the spirit blows where he wishes although we see his effects. The assurance comes through the spirit's work within us.

The spirit will lead us to call out to God as Father. The spirit will lead us to love our brothers. The spirit will produce in us a spirit of prayer.

The spirit will lead us to long for God's promised future. We almost certainly won't be able to point to the spirit doing this in our lives. But the effect in our lives will be such that we will be assured of our fellowship with God.

As he works in us this confidence will be a result. Love, assurance and discernment have all been important themes in John's epistle to this point and the theme of discernment previously discussed in chapter 2 verses 18 to 27 reappears in chapter 4 verses 1 to 6. The spirit grants us love but the spirit also grants us discernment. In chapter 2 verses 20 to 21 But you have been anointed by the Holy One and you all have knowledge.

I write to you not because you do not know the truth but because you know it and because no lie is of the truth. And in verses 26 and 27 of that chapter I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you but the anointing that you receive from him abides in you and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything and is true and is no lie just as it has taught you abide in him.

Love and discernment belong together. Looking back at John's teaching about love it should be clear that it is also teaching about discernment about recognising what belongs to the truth and to God through the criterion of love as that in which all the commandments in their particularity are consummated. Jesus had warned his disciples about false prophets back in the Olivet Discourse in Matthew chapter 24 verses 9 to 13 Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake and then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another and many false prophets will arise and lead many astray and because lawlessness will be increased the love of many will grow cold but the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Just as there had been false prophets in the last days of Judah so there would be false prophets in the days before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The faithful needed to be prepared and to be able to discern between what was true and what was false. Lying spirits had gone forth people were sent strong delusion and were believing lies because they hated the truth.

A key test would be found in the knowledge that the true spirit of God bore witness to Christ. As Jesus had taught in John chapter 15 verse 26 But when the Helper comes whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth who proceeds from the Father he will bear witness about me. The truth of Christ as the incarnate Son and Messiah was a powerful touchstone for testing and identifying spirits and recognizing the true spirit of God.

False spirits do not bear witness to Christ but to some other thing that will usurp his place. If we want to be able to discern the true spirit of God testimony to Christ is the watermark. In contrast to the true spirit's testimony the testimony of false prophets was inspired by the world and heard by the world.

The true people of God however would be known in the fact that they hear their Lord's word as he had taught in John chapter 10 verses 2 to 5 But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gate keeper opens. The sheep hear his voice and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

When he has brought out all his own he goes before them and the sheep follow him for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow but they will flee from him for they do not know the voice of strangers. A question to consider.

What are some of the ways in which the fact that the spirit bears witness to Christ enables us to discern what is truly of the spirit of God and what is counterfeit? John has already argued that love for each other necessarily accompanies being born of God. Now in the latter half of 1 John chapter 4 he will make another argument for the importance of love from a somewhat different angle of approach. He now focuses upon the fact that love is from God and that God is love.

Love is not merely some secondary created reality. It finds its source in God himself. If the devil is the father of lies and a murderer from the beginning, one who seeks to destroy, God is the one from whom love comes.

Hence it manifests the spiritual paternity of all who love in truth as they act in a way that reflects God's own character. Anyone who does not love cannot have been born of God because they bear no resemblance to his character. Love is a theological reality.

John has previously affirmed in chapter 1 verse 5 that God is light. Now he affirms that God is love. God doesn't possess qualities in the way that we do as created beings.

God is identical to his attributes. God doesn't just happen to be loving. He is love.

This is an important theological statement. This should not be reversed to say that love is God, as our society is often inclined to do. Nor should we think that love is whatever we feel love to be.

By declaring that love is rooted in God, John challenges our belief that love is a human measure by which all things can be assessed according to us. Rather, if we want to know what love really is, we shouldn't look in our own hearts, which are deceitful and twisted, but should look to God instead. By declaring that God is love, we discover that in its home country, as it were, love is neither a feeling nor an abstraction.

Love is God's very personal nature and existence. We will learn what love is as we learn who God is. There is no true understanding of love for which the love of God is not the North Star.

And what love is has been manifested to us because God has revealed his love to us in Christ. The revelation of love isn't found in our love for God, but in God's astounding love for us, in his sending of his own Son to be the propitiation for our sins. This theologically grounded love should spur us to love each other.

No one has seen God, and this is a point that John also makes in John's Gospel, chapter 1, verse 18. No one has ever seen God, the only God who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. The eternal Word of God, Jesus Christ, has manifested God to us in his incarnation.

However, God is also known to us in the outworking of the love that he has placed within us in our love for others. In our loving of others, we come to know his love in us. John once again turns here to the issue of assurance.

We know that we abide in God, and that he abides in us because he has communicated his love to us by his Spirit that he has given to us. As we walk in the love of the Spirit, we will be assured of sonship, knowing assurance through our experience. And as the Spirit bears witness to the Son, so the Spirit, in addition to leading us in the way of God's love,

in which we know assurance of sonship, leads us to confess Jesus as the Son of God, the one that the Father sent to be the Saviour of the world.

The Spirit causes us both to look outside of ourselves to Christ, and gives us an assurance within as we look to God's revelation of love in his Son, and walk in his footsteps. God's love shouldn't just be an abstract thing in our understanding. It is a love for us, and we should know it as such.

Love is a two-way, mutual thing. It is God's love for us, and it's our answering love that he has produced in us by his Spirit. Our love feeds upon the knowledge of his love, and this is the way by which love is perfected.

This gives us assurance and confidence as we face judgment. We know that we do not belong to the world, but that we are sons of God in Christ, those who are being conformed to his character by the Holy Spirit which he has given to us. Here we might recall Jesus' High Priestly Prayer in John chapter 17 verses 14 to 26.

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

And for their sake I consecrate myself that they also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me, I have given to them, that they may be one, even as we are one, I in them, and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me, and love them, even as you loved me.

Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I am made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

In these statements from Jesus' high priestly prayer in John chapter 17, we see something of the meaning of the words, as he is, so also are we in the world, being unpacked. The perfection of love in us, as it develops from our assurance of God's own love for us, casts out fear, and the terror and apprehension with which we might

otherwise relate to God. We know God as a loving Father, and so are no longer afraid of Him in the way that those who do not know His love are.

Fear cowers before the threat of punishment, but as we grow in love we fulfil the great commandment of God, the commandment that sums up all other commandments, and our hearts are set at rest. True love finds its starting point in God. God's love comes first, before our love for Him.

Our love is an answering love, a love that is learnt through the experience of God's love for us. However, love for God has, as its necessary companion, love for neighbour. The person who hates his neighbour lies when he claims to love God.

Indeed, it is our love for the brothers, that our love for God can be most powerfully seen in. In the Gospels, Jesus declares that the law can be summed up in two commandments, in Matthew chapter 22 verses 35-40, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

This is the great and first commandment, and a second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.

In 1 John chapter 4 verse 21, we see that these two commandments are inseparable, and that the second follows naturally from the first. And this commandment we have from him, Whoever loves God must also love his brother. The first commandment and the second commandment are two sides of the same coin.

A question to consider, what other statements in scripture of the form God is love can you think of? What do such statements teach us about God? In 1 John chapter 5, the concluding chapter of the epistle, we see further developments of the central themes of the book. Love for God and each other, being born of God, obedience to the commands of God, and belief in Jesus as the Christ. This leads to a somewhat surprising conclusion.

A further sign of having been born of God is belief in Jesus as the Messiah. We might here recall John chapter 1 verses 12 to 13 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. Once again, John connects our love for the Father with our love for our brothers and sisters.

Those who love the Father love those born of him. John has already explored the logical connection between these two forms of love at the end of the preceding chapter. This logic, however, can move in both directions, as we see in verse 2. There is a circularity to this, but it's not an illogical one.

Love for our brothers and sisters will entail love for the Father, and love for the Father will entail love for our brothers and sisters. We can easily presume that our love for others is self-evident, but here John teaches us that we need to test this love to see whether it is genuine, by examining whether we love God and obey his commandments. A supposed love for the children of God that does not proceed from love for God and keeping of his commandments is not real love at all.

Here John punctures some of the common misunderstandings that one often sees in arguments about the centrality of love. Such arguments take a supposedly self-evident human love as the measure of all things, and supposedly the only thing that really matters when it comes to Christian religion. But this is not at all what John teaches.

Rather, John stresses the importance of the alignment of a number of key factors by which we can discern the genuine character of our identity as children of God. Richard Yarborough, in his commentary, observes the simultaneity of three components of reborn Christian experience: the pistis, faith, the ethical, obedience to commandments, and the relational, or agapic, love for God and others. The law was always summed up in love in a way that provided an alignment between obedience to the commandments and love that tested both.

True obedience to the commandments could only be rendered in love, and love was necessarily obedient to the commandments. The two couldn't be divorced, which meant both that love could never become an antinomian reality, bound only to feelings and affections and existing altogether apart from the law, but nor could obedience to the law be reduced to slavish and legalistic observance. It was always to be fulfilled in love.

We see this in key passages such as Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 1 to 5. Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over to possess it, that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly as the Lord, the God of your fathers has promised you, in the land flowing with milk and honey. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

In Deuteronomy chapter 11 verse 1: You shall therefore love the Lord your God and keep his charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments always. This is a point that Jesus also argued in his teaching in John chapter 14 verse 15: If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And in verse 21 of that chapter, Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me, and he who loves me will be loved by my Father and I will love him and manifest myself to him.

Against the notions held by many, the commandments of God are not burdensome. This doesn't mean that we don't recoil at them in our sinfulness or resist them in fear of coming into the light. However, when we actually obey the commandments of God, we discover that far from weighing us down with a heavy load, the yoke of Christ is easy and his burden is light.

His commandments set us free. Those who have been born of God overcome the world, the complex system of lusts, seductive pleasures, and vainglorious pride that holds so many of us in its thrall. This victory, a victory manifested in our keeping of God's commandments, is achieved through our faith.

The person who overcomes the world is the person who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. In verse 1, it was belief in Jesus as the Christ that evidenced that someone was born of God. Here it is the belief that Jesus is the Son of God that evidences this.

The two terms, Christ and Son of God, are largely synonymous, although the second accents the relationship between the Son and the Father. There are, however, people who deny this identification of Jesus as the Son of God. Some might see the man Jesus as if he were only possessed by the person of the Eternal Word for a period of time who departed from him before his sufferings.

This was the position of early church heretics such as Corinthus. Against such teachers, John insists that Jesus Christ was the incarnate Son. He came by water and blood, not by the water only, but by the water and the blood.

This seems like a very strange and obscure statement to us, but it opposes those who believe that the Word descended upon the man Jesus at the point of his baptism and then left him before his sufferings of the cross. John will not compromise with such a position. Jesus' earthly ministry did not just involve baptism, it also involved the cross.

The water is Christ's baptism in the Jordan, and the blood is the baptism of his death and the cross at Calvary. Contrary to those who argue that the baptism of Jesus was the time that he received the descending Christ, John claims that the Spirit who descended at Christ's baptism in the form of a dove, testifying to him as the Son of God, is the one who testifies more generally, as Jesus taught in John chapter 15 verse 26, but when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. Some translations have a different reading of verse 7, the King James Version for instance, for there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one.

This might be a handy proof text for Trinitarian doctrine if this were a genuine reading. However, the evidence weighs very strongly against it, suggesting that it was something that was likely accidentally incorporated into the text at a later point from a marginal note. It is found in none of the early Greek manuscripts and is absent in the arguments

of the early church theologians who would have leapt at such a strong proof text for the doctrine of the Trinity.

What John does speak of is a three-fold witness of the Spirit, the water and the blood, united in their testimony. The Spirit bears witness to the truth of Christ, in his work in the body of Christ, in his work within the hearts and lives of individual Christians, in his inspiration of the testimony of Scripture. The Spirit points to Christ and testifies concerning him.

The water of Jesus' baptism continues to bear witness to the truth of Christ, as we see in the baptism of Christ, a Trinitarian testimony to Jesus Christ's identity as the Beloved Son. The blood of Jesus' crucifixion bears testimony to his identity, to the pouring out of his life until death. And these three bear an enduring witness.

The Spirit that descended upon Jesus in his baptism descended upon the Church in Pentecost and has borne witness to Christ throughout the history of the Church. The water of Jesus' baptism is applied to us in our baptisms, baptising us into him, testifying to his identity in the historical event, in the Church's performance of baptism upon new converts, and in the confession by which we receive the waters of baptism. The blood of Jesus' cross likewise bears an enduring testimony, by the blood that testified to the pouring out of his life, Jesus entered into the heavenly places, and by that blood, applied to us, has opened a new and living way for us as his people, assuring us of access to God.

Whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper, this testimony of the blood of Christ is borne to us once again. We may receive the testimony of trustworthy human beings, but the testimony of God is so much greater, and God has borne testimony to his Son by his Spirit, and in the testimony of the water and the blood. What's more, this testimony is not just an external testimony, like regular human testimony.

It is a testimony that the Spirit bears within all of those who believe in Jesus as the Son of God. Not receiving this testimony is to make God a liar, but receiving it is to receive eternal life in the Son to whom the testimony bears witness. The choice of paths with which we are left is a stark one.

Either we have the Son, through belief in the testimony of God by his Spirit, and have life in him, or we reject the testimony of God and do not have life. John has written this epistle to people who do believe in the name of the Son of God, to the end that they might enjoy eternal life. Here we might remember John's explanation for his reasons for writing the Gospel in John chapter 20 verses 30-31.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. Here John seems to have a

further concern. He doesn't just want his heroes to have eternal life, but he wants them to know that they have eternal life, a knowledge that might be threatened by erroneous claims about Jesus that might unsettle them in their faith.

This knowledge is so important as it produces the confidence that fuels our prayer life. Where this firm knowledge in the identity of Christ is, the sure confidence of faith that corresponds to it can be there too, which leads in natural progression to an assured prayer life. John's concern here is not primarily answers to prayer, but rather the communion of prayer, the fact that we know that when we bring our concerns and needs to God, he listens to us and he cares about us as his beloved children, and that he will, as a loving father, give us whatever we need as we bring our concerns to him.

John moves to the question here of how to deal with sin among our brothers. He describes two different types of sin, a sin not leading to death and a sin that does lead to death. There are some people who sin, but then bring themselves into the light to expose their sin and to seek forgiveness.

They do not cover it up or disguise it. They are honest about what they have done and they seek to be restored. There are others who sin in a way that is a fundamental rejection of the path of Christ.

They reject the light, they live from a fundamental rebellion against God and hatred of their brothers, and in such cases no hope is held out. Unless there is a fundamental change of direction, they will forfeit eternal life entirely. Sin of any kind is still sin.

It remains deadly, even if it won't always prove fatal for the one who sins. The one who has been born of God does not sin. It is antithetical to the sort of people that the children of God are.

God protects those born of him so that they are not overpowered by Satan. Sin is alien to who we are in Christ, to what we will be finally revealed to be when our identity as the children of God is fully revealed. So we must firmly reject it and repent of it now.

If we do not, we have chosen a path that will lead to our death and final destruction. We will forfeit eternal life if we willfully and persistently cling on to sin. If we walk in the darkness, if we hate our brothers and rebel against God, we reveal ourselves not to be of God and there is no hope for us.

But yet, if we sin and we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, to restore us, to bring us into the light and into fellowship and communion with him. Humanity is divided into two groups. Those who belong to the world, the realm of sinful rebellion under the sway of the evil one, and those who belong to God as his children.

Our state as those who belong to God is not something that we enjoy by natural birth or by nature. It results from the illumination brought by Jesus Christ as the Son of God. It

brings us into a knowledge of the truth.

Indeed, we are brought into the one who is true, into the Father, as we are brought into his Son, Jesus Christ. To be in the Son is to be in the Father, as the Father and the Son are one. John concludes in a way that will not leave his hearers in the slightest shadow of a doubt.

Jesus Christ is not just the one who brings knowledge of the true God and of the way to eternal life. He himself is the true God and eternal life. The identification of Jesus with eternal life was present at the beginning of the epistle in chapter 1 verses 1 to 3. That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life, the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father, and was made manifest to us.

That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us. And indeed, our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. However, here at the end, John goes even further.

As in his statement about the word being God at the beginning of his gospel, he ends his first epistle by identifying Jesus Christ as no one less than the true God himself, come to us in human flesh. John's first epistle ends on a very surprising note. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

His point, however, clearly follows from all that has preceded it. True life, confidence with God in prayer, deliverance from sin, and love for God and others, is found in the true knowledge of God. And this knowledge is found in believing Jesus to be the Christ and the Son of God, receiving the testimony borne by God concerning his Son in the Spirit, the water, and the blood.

Anything less than the genuine article, anything less than Jesus Christ in his true and full identity cannot offer or provide these things. Consequently, at all costs and above all else, we must keep ourselves from idols, from any counterfeit that, falsely purporting to be the real Christ, would adulterate the testimony that God has borne, leaving us with something other than the eternal word of life himself. A question to consider, how might John's emphasis upon idolatry at the close of his letter help us better to understand the importance of the knowledge of God in Christ more generally in our lives as Christians?