

# “If We Walk in the Light”

## The Second in a Series of Sermons on John’s Epistles

*Texts: 1 John 1:5-2:2; Psalm 32:1-11*

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Imagine stumbling through life in complete darkness, not knowing where you are going, and unable to avoid danger or disaster. For the apostle John, walking in darkness is a powerful metaphor depicting the fate of those apart from Christ—forced to live as slaves to sin, in complete ignorance to the things of God, and at the mercy of false teachers who claimed to be “enlightened,” but who are completely in the dark about the things of the Lord. As John opens this epistle, he reminds us that God is light, and because we have eternal life, we walk in the light of God’s revelation of himself in the person of Jesus Christ, the word of life made manifest in the flesh.

We return to our series on the Epistles of John. As we saw last time, the three epistles we know as 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> John were written by the Apostle John, who is also the author of the Gospel bearing his name. We know this to be the case based upon the grammar and style of these epistles, which repeatedly allude to, or are dependent upon, the gospel of John. As I mentioned last time, it is highly probably that these epistles were written after John had completed his gospel. Christian tradition tells us that John had fled Jerusalem at some point before the destruction of the city in 70 A.D., eventually relocating to Ephesus, where it is believed that he lived well into old age, dying during the reign of the Roman emperor Trajan. Since I spent a fair amount of time on background material last time, I would ask you to consider the previous sermon so as to understand the situation in which these epistles were written.

Since we are covering new ground, it is important to briefly recap John’s purpose in writing before we work through our text. Based upon the content of these epistles it is reasonable to conclude that they were written for the purpose of explaining and elaborating upon themes within John’s gospel, as well as to correct the errors of various false teachers who were distorting things John had stated earlier. This will become clear shortly when we come to verses 6-2:1, in which John responds to a series of errors being taught by those who departed from the faith.

Like the Book of James, John’s first epistle is probably a sermon of sorts in which John proclaims to us that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh, who came to earth to bring the word of life. At many points, John simply sets out the truth regarding the person and work of Christ in full confidence that the truth will cast out all error. At the heart of this truth is the fact that Jesus is God manifest in human flesh who came to save us from our sins. This is the light of the gospel, and those who know and understand Christ’s person and work will walk in that light. Walking in the light means repenting of our sins, loving our brothers and sisters, and living confidently in the hope of eternal life.

But John also must deal with those whom he says “went out from us” (1 John 2:19), men who were now denying what John had taught them—that Jesus was God manifest in the flesh. Thus in 1 John 4:1-3, the apostle warns his reader, “*beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.*” Not only have false prophets gone out (from the church, having become apostates), but their message is very straight-forward. They deny that Jesus is God in the flesh—an error with catastrophic consequences. Believers are therefore to test everyone’s teaching in light of John’s

revelation that Jesus Christ is God come to earth in human flesh. To deny the incarnation of Christ, is to embrace the spirit of antichrist.

Given the presence of what is known as the “docetic” heresy in which Jesus’ true humanity is rejected, it should not surprise us then that the city of Ephesus was a hot-bed of an early form of Gnosticism. Gnostic systems set up a dualism between spirit (the good) and matter (which is evil). If pure spirit is good and matter is evil, then Christ’s incarnation is an impossibility. How can God (who is pure spirit) take to himself a true human nature (which is evil because it was material)? People who think this way, are going to have a real problem with Christianity. This is why false religions are inevitably forced to reduce Jesus to a mere enlightened teacher or prophet, because their world-view God in human flesh (an incarnation) is an impossibility. Yet the incarnation is a fundamental doctrine of Christianity.

An additional characteristic of Gnosticism is the stress upon secret knowledge, in the form of esoteric truths known only to a few who have gained enlightenment. As we go through the body of this epistle, we will see John repeatedly emphasize that his readers already know and understand certain things because they have been revealed, publically, in and through the ministry of Jesus. The gospel is public. It is grounded in specific facts—Jesus’ incarnation, death and resurrection. This means that Jesus is a flesh and blood savior. And this is why John’s gospel is tied to things Jesus said, did, and taught in history. This is why John opens this epistle by stressing what he heard, what he saw, and whom he touched. John has already proclaimed these facts in his gospel, hence those to whom he is now writing should already know and understand. They do not need any additional enlightenment from those who deny what John has already taught them about the word becoming flesh. What remains, yet to be revealed, that God has not deemed fit to tell us in his word and through the person of his Son?

In order to explain Jesus’ visible appearance in the gospels, many of these proto-gnostic groups argued that while Jesus was true God, he only “appeared” in human form. In other words, Jesus was fully divine, but was not in any sense truly human. This is known as docetism, one of the earliest heresies in church history. This docetic understanding of Jesus not only denies the incarnation (that God took to himself a true human nature), but John attributes this teaching to the “spirit of antichrist.” This is why John so emphatically stresses that he has heard Jesus with his own ears, that he has seen Jesus with his own eyes, that he has even touched Jesus with his own hands. A docetic Jesus cannot shed the blood which redeems us. A docetic Jesus cannot fulfill the righteous requirements of the law. That Jesus whom John has already proclaimed to his reader is the word of life manifest in the flesh, and who suffered and died for our sins. A docetic (phantom) Jesus can do nothing to save flesh and blood sinners.

Last time we dealt with the prologue of John’s epistle (the first four verses). We now move into the first major section of John’s epistle which runs through to the end of chapter two (1:5-2:29). In this section, John describes the Christian life in terms of living in the light of God’s revelation in Christ. In verses 5-7 John speaks of God himself as light (in vv. 5-7), and then in verses 1:8-2:2 John informs us that to walk in the light, we must confess our sins with the confidence that God has forgiven our sins in Christ, who is our advocate, and who gave himself as a propitiation for our sins. This is our topic this morning. But dealing with sin is only the first of four conditions given by John in this section, and we will take up the other three conditions in the coming weeks. According to John, we must obey the commandments of God (vv. 3-11), we must reject worldliness (12-17), and we must keep the faith in the face of antichrist and false teachers (vv 18-29). The next major section of John—which contains conditions for living as

God's children—will take us through chapters 3-5 and bring us to the end of this epistle.<sup>1</sup>

**A**s we turn to our text, we find a number of important themes, which re-appear throughout this epistle. The first of these is a declaration that God is light.

In verse 5, John grounds everything which follows in what was revealed to John by Christ himself—that one whom John himself heard preach. *“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”* The opening phrase in this sentence tells us that what follows is a sermon of sorts containing a particular message—the gospel.<sup>2</sup> The message which John is proclaiming is not something the apostle has made up, it is not some sort of esoteric religious knowledge that only a few enlightened ones can understand. John's message is grounded in what John has heard from none other than Jesus himself. And what he has heard, he now proclaims. This is why the gospel is called good news. It is the proclamation of what God has done to save us from our sins.

While gnostic teachers were fond of the light/darkness metaphor, John uses this of Jesus because this found in the Old Testament. In Psalm 119:130 we read of light in connection to truth, *“the unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple,”* while in Isaiah 5:20, the prophet says *“woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!”* In the prologue to his gospel (John 1:7-9), John speaks of Jesus as follows. *“He [John the Baptist] came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”* In several passages in the Old Testament, light/darkness is used in terms of the contrast between good and evil, righteousness and unrighteousness, while in the opening of his gospel, when John speaks of Jesus as the light coming into the world. John does this to demonstrate that Jesus is the very embodiment of truth, love, and righteousness.

In the opening verses of this epistle, when John says “God is light” he is reminding us that since God is light, all darkness is therefore excluded. This metaphor sets the stage for what comes in the following verses. If God is light, and Christ is the true light come to earth, then all those whom have been given life will walk in light (truth, love, and righteousness) now revealed when Jesus was manifest in the flesh. Those who have been given eternal life will be characterized by a life which corresponds to these things. They will manifest light, and not be characterized by darkness. This is an important point for John to establish, since it is likely that some sort of antinomianism was being taught by the false teachers. This antinomianism takes two forms. The first is that there is no need to obey the commandments because of the coming of Jesus did way with them, while the second entails a denial of the sinful nature because enlightened people live above sin, hence have no need of a Savior.

In verses 1:6-2:1, John sets up a series of sharp contrasts to expose the error of those who either denied the presence of sin, or else were indifferent to sin. The contrasts (v. 7, 9, 2:1) which John sets up in response to the error (6, 8, 10) resound with echoes from Psalm 32 (our Old Testament lesson), especially the opening verses of the Psalm which describe the blessings of forgiveness: *“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, xxxiii-xxxiv.

<sup>2</sup> Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 19.

In verse 6, John sets forth the error present in the churches, which he refutes in verse 7: *“If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”* Notice that we cannot have fellowship with God while living in darkness, because God is light. And so in verse 7, John reminds us of the truth resulting from Jesus being the manifestation of light. *“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”* Not only must we walk in the light to have fellowship with God, but to walk in the light means understanding that the blood of Jesus was shed to cleanse us from our sins. Jesus’ death avails for all those who live in the light—i.e., those who were given eternal life by the word made flesh.

A strong indication that the false teachers denied the presence (or existence) of sin, becomes clear in verse 8. *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”* Despite the claim to be enlightened to the point of having risen above sin, or in the case of those who are now indifferent to sin, John reminds them in no uncertain terms that to claim we have no sin is to be self-deceived. At the very least, this implies a willful rejection of the truth. Again, John exposes the foolishness of this self-deception in verse 9. *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* Not only is sin a reality, but the whole point of the word becoming flesh and then suffering and dying upon the cross is so that our sins are forgiven, and so that we are cleansed from all of sin’s guilt and liberated from its power. There is another loud echo here from verse 5 of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Psalm where the Psalmist declares—*“I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.”*

Notice the stress in John’s contrast falls upon God’s faithfulness. The apostle uses language drawn from the Old Testament in reference to God’s faithfulness to the covenant promises, even when God’s sinful people disobey the terms of the covenant. The reality of the history of Israel is that God’s people sin. But despite their sinfulness, God remains ever faithful. Given that God knows everything, attempting to hide our sin from him is foolishness. In confessing our sins to God, we see that God is just. The guilt of our sins is reckoned to Christ—it is not as though God just conveniently forgets about them. Because God is holy, the debt we owe to God must be satisfied. And it is Jesus—God manifest in the flesh—who suffered and died to pay for the guilt of our sins. Notice that forgiveness is closely tied to cleansing—the blood of Jesus washes away our sin, and our unrighteousness. We are forgiven only because the guilt of our sin is removed. And this requires God’s covenant faithfulness in the face of our disobedience.

The futility of denying human sin while claiming to have risen above it, or to be indifferent about human sinfulness, can be seen in the third contrast, v.10 with 2:1. In verse 10, John speaks of the sin of denying that we are sinful. Let me say that again—it is a sin to deny that we are sinful. *“If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”* To deny that we are sinful to say that God’s declaration about us is not true—that we are born in sin (Psalm 51; 58) or that every inclination of our hearts is sinful even from birth (Genesis 6:5). Making God out to be a liar is a sin. In this case, darkness has no right to speak in judgment upon the light. And so John can say by way of contrast in verse 1 of chapter 2, *“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”*

The apostle John is not an antinomian! He never implies anything like “Look, since Jesus’ death pays for our sin, go ahead and sin all you want.” But John is a realist. He knows that despite the fact that the word has given us eternal life, and despite the fact that Jesus has died for our many sins, purifying us and forgiving us, we remain sinful. Even those who walk in the light will still sin. But this is not a reason to despair. Why? Because we are God’s precious children who have an advocate with the father, none other than Jesus Christ himself. Not only is Jesus “righteous” because he alone is without sin, but he also

shares our human nature with us. If Jesus only “appeared” in the form of a man (as the docetists were teaching) then we would still be in our sins. How wonderful it is to know that the one who is our advocate, also knows what it means to be human. Our Savior understands our suffering and weakness.

The key term in verse 1 of the second chapter of John is “advocate,” (*paraklatos*) which is a term unique to John and literally refers to someone who comes alongside to help.<sup>3</sup> The term as used by John conveys the idea of an advocate or counselor (a lawyer), someone who pleads for the guilty.<sup>4</sup> In this case, we have an innocent intercessor (Jesus) pleading our case before the heavenly court (when we are anything but innocent). As Augustine so aptly put it, “if you should have a case to be tried before a judge and should procure an advocate [lawyer], you would be accepted by the lawyer and he would plead your case to the best of his ability. If, before, he was finished with his plea, you should hear that he is the judge, how you would rejoice, because he could be your judge who shortly before was your lawyer.”<sup>5</sup> The reason why we are to be comforted (as dear children) whenever we sin, is because the same one who died for us, is now in heaven, pleading our case before the father. Jesus is our advocate in the heavenly court.

The very thought of this is intended to do two things. The first is that Jesus’ role as advocate means that even now he is in heaven pleading our case, praying for us. This gives us great confidence that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Can Jesus intercede for us before the father, only to be turned away and have his prayers not answered? This will never happen. This is why Reformed Christians believe in the so-called “perseverance of the saints.” We will persevere unto the end in faith, because Christ preserves us through his present intercession for us. The second reason John writes this is so that we will not sin. Perhaps the best motivation to keep struggling against sin is simply to consider the cost that Jesus paid to free us from those sins, especially in light of the fact that Jesus is now presently interceding for us in heaven. His blood was once shed, but his priestly work is ongoing.

Verse 2 is one of those important verses which not only reveals to us something about the nature of Christ’s redemptive work, but the interpretation of this verse has a long and controversial history within the Reformed tradition. It is often cited as one of the “Arminian” verses which supposedly refutes the Calvinistic or Reformed understanding of the atonement as being “limited” to the elect. Let me just say before we look at the verse that not only does John not “refute” the Reformed understanding of the atonement, John actually gives us another proof-text for particular redemption. John writes, “*He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*”

The first matter is the meaning of “propitiation,” which is a very important theological term referring to the offering of a sacrifice which turns aside God’s wrath. Those who think that God has one chief attribute (love) to which all other attributes must be made subservient, believe the very idea that the death of Jesus is a sacrifice which turns aside God’s wrath is morally repugnant. So, it should come as no surprise that the whole of idea of substitutionary atonement has come under a full assault recently, even from many in evangelical circles (especially those in the “emergent movement” like Brian McLaren).

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<sup>3</sup> Smalley, 1, 2, 3, John, 36

<sup>4</sup> See the discussion in; Brown, The Epistles of John, 215-217.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in; Gerald Bray, James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, Vol XI (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 176.

Echoing the Protestant liberals of the 1920's, the image of Jesus dying in the place of sinners, supposedly bearing the father's anger in his own flesh, is now mocked as a form of "cosmic child abuse" which, it is argued, opens the door to all kinds of domestic violence—if God punished his son, why can't I hit my wife?—is the way this is framed by critics of the biblical doctrine. As one so-called evangelical writer recently put it, "the fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful Father, punishing his son for an offence that he has not committed."<sup>6</sup> I beg to differ. John expressly states in this verse that Jesus was a propitiation for our sins.<sup>7</sup> The word John uses (*hilasterion*) clearly means that Jesus suffered and died, bearing God's wrath and anger toward our sins. This is what the word propitiation means.

Why did God do this? Because he is love, and because there was no other way to save us from our sins. Never forget that while God is love, he also hates sin. We can't pit God's attributes against each other, nor can we make love God's chief attribute. Yes, God is love—therefore Jesus is the word manifest in the flesh. But God is also holy—the word was manifest in the flesh so that he might be punished for our sins. If any were to be saved, Jesus must bear in his own flesh the penalty due us for our sins—or else we must be personally and eternally punished for our sins. Either Christ bears the wrath of God for us, or we will face that wrath on the day of judgment. And this point—if true, leads directly to the Reformed understanding of the atonement as limited by God's design to the elect only. If Jesus dies in the place of a sinner, and actually turns aside God's wrath and anger toward that particular sinner, how then can the sinner then be punished eternally now that God's anger toward them has been turned aside? They can't. If Christ paid for the person's sin, on what basis can God send them to hell? If you say it is because they didn't believe, now you've made unbelief the one sin for which Jesus didn't die. You've just limited the atonement, (not to its extent as the Reformed do), but as to its efficacy (as all those who hold to a universal atonement must do).

At the end of the day, there's not a hint here that Jesus' death was designed to make everybody savable if only they would believe. No, John says that the death of Jesus *is* the propitiation for our sins—meaning that the death of Jesus actually accomplishes its purpose, which is to turn aside God's wrath toward those for whom he is dying (and for whom Jesus actually intercedes as our advocate). Do we really want to say that Jesus dies for everyone, as well as intercedes for them, only to have multitudes of those for whom he dies, and for whom he intercedes, perish eternally? Of course not. If you believe that sinners will be punished eternally, then you must limit the atonement as to its design (to save the elect) or as to its efficacy (Christ dies for people whom he cannot save, and for whom his intercessory prayers are not answered). It seems to me that the Reformed view of this makes the best sense of the passage.

But what about John's emphasis upon the fact that Jesus was the propitiation for our sins *and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world*. Doesn't this mean that Jesus died for everyone, without exception? Not necessarily. For one thing, John speaks of the "whole world" elsewhere in this same epistle, and there it **cannot** refer to all people without exception. In 1 John 5:19, John writes, "*We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.*" Can the phrase the "whole world" in this verse mean each and every person who has ever lived? No. The phrase "whole world" does not mean "all" inclusive, but the majority or many. In 1 John 2:2, I would take John to be stating that Christ died not only for those of us in Asia Minor, but even for Christians throughout the whole

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<sup>6</sup> Steve Chalke, The Lost Message of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Leon Morris, The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 144-213.

world. And this interpretation is not the invention of John Calvin, but has been held by many throughout the history of the church, even among the church fathers.<sup>8</sup>

**W**hat then, do we say by application?

The fact that Jesus is the word come in the flesh is not some sort of religious curiosity. John does not stress the fact that he heard Jesus preach, saw him perform miracles, and that he touched him, so as to impress his readers. The word became flesh to give himself up as a propitiation for our sins. Because Jesus bore God's wrath and anger in his own flesh, we know that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and he will forgive us of our sins. Not only did Jesus die for our sins, but he is now in heaven is our friend and advocate, pleading our case and interceding for us. Therefore if we sin, we know that we are not cast away, and that when we confess our sins, we know our advocate comes to our defense.

Since this is the case, how can anyone who walks in the light say to themselves, "since Jesus died for my sins, I'll just sin without any regard to the price Jesus paid to redeem me, or without regard to the fact that Jesus is presently interceding for me in heaven." But this is John's purpose in writing. "*My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.*" The best way to wage war on sin is to keep in mind those things which Jesus did to redeem us from our sin, as well as keeping in mind that Jesus is our advocate in heaven. This is what it means to walk in the light.

Finally, in all of this we see the futility of denying that we are sinful. Can you hide your sins from God? To even claim that we are without sin is to commit the sin of calling God a liar. To think like this, John says, is to walk in darkness. Be we don't walk in darkness, we walk in the light. And if we walk in the light, "*we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*"

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<sup>8</sup> Take the early church, for example, i.e., Hilary of Arles, Bede. Cited in Bray, [Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture](#), 177-178.