

“He Appeared to Take Away Sins”

The Sixth in a Series of Sermons on John’s Epistles

Texts: 1 John 2:28-3:10; Isaiah 52:13-53:12

The Apostle John makes a direct connection between Jesus as God manifest in the flesh and the fact that Jesus died to take away the guilt of our sins. But there were some, John says, “who went out from us, but who were not of us” and who were doing everything in their power to deny this essential connection. As John has set out in the opening chapters of this epistle, those who are Christ’s will live in the blessedness of the knowledge that their sins are forgiven. Those who are Christ’s have the benefit of knowing that Jesus Christ is presently in heaven interceding for them as their advocate before the Father. And those who are Christ’s, will not be characterized by sin—something John describes as “practicing sin.” Why? Because God’s people walk in the light. Those who walk in the light wage war upon their sins as well as strive to mirror that righteousness which is found in Christ. The behavior of God’s children stands in sharp contrast to those whom John will now characterize as children of the Devil, who practice “sinning.”

As we continue our series on the Epistles of John, we now make our way into the third chapter of John’s first epistle, which includes the second main section of this letter.¹ Throughout this portion of his epistle, John will repeat—for the sake of emphasis—a number of themes he’s already set out in chapter two. In 1 John 2:28-3:10, John once again addresses the importance of obeying the commandments of the Lord (our topic this morning). As John will put it, Christians are people who are characterized by the “practice of righteousness” and not by the “practice of sin.” Then, in verses 11-18, John reminds his readers of the necessity of loving their brothers and sisters in Christ, while in verses 19-24, John speaks of the assurance of our salvation in light of our own sinful hearts. And then in the first six verses of chapter 4, John returns to the theme of discerning truth from error. Although in many ways this section of 1 John is a repetition of the first section—something which was often done in letters of this period—John now tweaks each of these points to emphasize their importance in light of the challenges then facing the churches to which John is writing.

Throughout our time in these epistles, we have seen that historical context is everything. If we don’t understand why John writes these letters as well as have knowledge of the errors he is refuting, we’ll make a mess of things—as many have done, especially with the section we are covering this morning. The Apostle John writes these three epistles at some point toward the end of the first century. While at many points in these epistles John alludes to his gospel—likely written a short time earlier—John is writing to both state and defend the doctrine that Jesus Christ is God manifest in the flesh. The incarnation of Christ—that Jesus is fully God and fully man—is the very foundation of the Christian faith. To deny the incarnation is to deny Christianity. To deny the incarnation is to embrace the spirit of antichrist.

The critical importance of understanding that Jesus is the word of life manifest in the flesh can be seen when John opens this epistle by making an emphatic truth claim grounded in John’s own encounter with Jesus earlier in his life. John had seen Jesus perform miracles with his own eyes. John had heard Jesus preach with his own ears. John had even touched Jesus with his own hands. Therefore, Jesus is a flesh and blood Savior, and Christianity is necessarily grounded in history. As B. B. Warfield once pointed

¹ See the discussion of this in Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 139-140.

out, our most important doctrines are also historical facts. Either Jesus was God in the flesh, or he wasn't. Since John saw Jesus, heard Jesus and touched Jesus, John sees Jesus as the truth incarnate, as well as that light of the world who has come to cast out the darkness of sin and false teaching.

The reason John must state and defend this basic point of Christian theology is that in and around the city of Ephesus (where John was living as an elderly man) a form of early Gnosticism had appeared in which it was held that reality consisted of a dualism between spirit (good) and matter (evil). According to this primitive Gnosticism, God was pure spirit, but since matter was evil, it was supposedly impossible for God to take to himself a true human nature, since matter was intrinsically evil. This meant the incarnation of Jesus Christ was an impossibility. But how then do we account for physical appearances of Jesus throughout the gospels? Well, these proto-Gnostics were arguing that while Jesus was fully God he only appeared (or took the form) of a man. Jesus was fully God, but took human form as a phantom or apparition. This is known as the heresy of docetism, which John directly associates with the spirit of antichrist. As we saw last time, John warns the churches that many of these docetic antichrists had already come. In fact, says John, anyone who denies that Jesus is God in human flesh has denied both the Father and the Son. This is no small error with no small consequences.

So, as we work our way through this second section of this letter when John returns to the basic themes he set out earlier, we must keep in mind John's reason for writing. 1). To remind his readers that Jesus is a flesh and blood Savior who offered up himself as a propitiation for our sins, turning aside God's wrath and anger toward us, and is that same flesh and blood Savior who is now in heaven as our advocate before the Father. 2). John has reminded his readers that those who walk in the light strive to obey the commandments of God, while those who are interested in the secret "knowledge" about Jesus taught by these false teachers have little interest in God's law. Those who are Christ's walk in the light, while those who have been taken in by those who have departed from the faith, actually prefer the darkness and their esoteric secrets. The contrast between the two (Christians and apostates) is contrast between light and darkness. John's point is that it is very easy to tell who is who.

Having made these points previously, John now returns to them in the second section of this letter, (our text, 1 John 2:28-3:10).

Again, we need to consider what John has already said earlier so as to understand his point here. John's starting point is that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh. Since Jesus is both the word of life (the content of the gospel) as well as the light of God who has come into the world, John sees a direct connection between what we believe about Jesus and how we live. If Jesus is light, then Christians should walk in the light which Jesus came to reveal. For John, this is not some secret teaching which only a few enlightened followers are able to master. No, all Christians must strive to obey God's commandments *because* Jesus is the very embodiment of those commandments.

Recall that in the opening verses of chapter two, John has already told us that Jesus has died (as a propitiation for our sins) for all of those times we have failed to keep these commandments. Jesus is presently in heaven pleading our cause ensuring that we continue to believe (and persevere to the end of our lives in faith). John has carefully distinguished the indicative (what Jesus has done for us) from the imperative (what we must do because we are Christ's). Those for whom Jesus has died and for whom he intercedes *will* strive to obey God's law. Why? Because they walk in the light their conduct will reflect the light of God's word. Therefore what we believe, works itself out in our lives (or at least it should).

With that in mind, we come to verse 28, in which John speaks as the last living apostle, referring to his

readers as “beloved children,” a term which conveys a grand-fatherly authority as well as affection for his readers. “*And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.*” We have heard this theme before—we must abide (or remain) in Christ, which is something we *will* do because Jesus has chosen us to abide and bear fruit (John 15:16). Having been chosen by the Father, Jesus has died for us, and we will remain in Christ, because Jesus is currently our advocate before the Father in heaven, ensuring that our faith does not fail.

But here John adds a new element—Christ’s appearing. This adds an important point of emphasis. Believers are to abide in Christ so that when Jesus appears at the end of the age, they will be confident and not ashamed by their conduct. John’s reference to Christ’s second coming is important on several accounts. First, when John speaks of Christ’s parousia (“appearing”) he uses a word which is used in connection with the visit of a king or emperor. The Lord who is absent from us on earth (yet presently in heaven interceding for us) will return in a visible and dramatic way.² Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and he will return with great glory.³

John’s second point is that when Christ returns, people will react in one of two ways. One group will be confident (or assured), while the other will be ashamed (and afraid). Those who abide in Christ, and who walk in the light should be confident when the Lord returns. But those who prefer darkness should be afraid because Christ’s coming will expose their sins, and reveal for all to see the depth of their error in denying that Jesus is God in human flesh. The supposed “phantom” Jesus will demonstrate that he has flesh, blood, and bones—much to the chagrin of the proto-Gnostics. Therefore, Christians wait in anticipation and awe for the Lord’s return, while non-Christians dread it, dismiss it, and (as Peter says) mock it. “*Scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, ‘Where is the promise of his coming (2 Peter 3:3)?’*”

A couple of important qualifications are in order here. For many of us who were raised with the “be careful little hands what you do” theology, the return of Christ was something we learned to fear. We were told that if we have unconfessed sins we would not go in the Rapture and be left behind to the face the antichrist. But John, on the other hand, exhorts Christians not to dread the Lord’s return, but to be confident about that day when Jesus appears. While Christians will be in awe of Christ when he returns (given the fact that this is a revelation of his glory), we will not be afraid of Christ. Jesus himself will assure struggling sinners that they are his. Jesus himself will ease our fears, and wipe the tears from our eyes. For believers, the second coming of Christ is pure gospel, that blessed day when we receive everything God has promised to his people. But for non-Christians, the second coming of Christ is pure law. It is a day they should dread. It is that time when all the lights come on—so to speak—exposing all the sinful and shameful things done in darkness.

In verse 29, John unpacks this a bit more fully. “*If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.*” Here again, it is vital to keep the indicative and the imperative moods in mind. Christ is righteous (indicative/gospel). Jesus was perfectly obedient to God’s commandments, and Christians know that to be true from the gospel accounts. So, if we know that Christ is righteous (and as Paul tells us, that same righteousness which Jesus has earned has been

² Stott, The Epistles of John, 121.

³ Smalley points out that John uses a chiasmic structure here: Parousia (v. 28), new birth (v. 29), new birth (v. 1), parousia (v. 2). Cf. Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 140.

imputed to us through the means of faith), then those who are Christ's will practice righteousness. Those who are born of Christ (which is the same as John's reference to being "born again" in John 3—the indicative), will practice (or do) righteousness (the imperative/command). Therefore, John's point is really quite simple. "A person's righteousness is thus the evidence of his new birth, not the cause or condition of it."⁴ Those who are born again will strive to obey God's commandments. There is a cause (new birth) and effect (obedience) relationship here.

Since it is highly likely that the proto-Gnostics were equating the new birth (being born again) with the acquisition of secret knowledge, John's response to them is to affirm that it is righteousness of conduct, not secret knowledge, which is the evidence of being "born of him."⁵ This righteous conduct can be easily observed, while adherence to Gnostic and docetic secrets inevitably manifests itself in indifference to the commandments.

The mention of regeneration in this context moves the Apostle to consider God's love for sinners. As we read in verse 1 of chapter three, "*See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.*" When we consider what it means to be born of God—God has raised us from the dead when we were unable and unwilling to come to faith in Christ, and when we all deserve to face God's wrath because of our sins—we cannot help but see in this the love of God. We, who deserve his wrath, instead receive his favor. Once we were dead in sin, now we are God's children. And all of this is because God is love, not because we deserve his love.

John goes on to say, "*The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.*" If the reason why we are children of God is because of God's love for us when we did not deserve it, then the reason why the world does not know us (i.e., know us to be God's children) stems from the fact that the world does "not know" that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh. Notice the irony here: The world which claims to have "knowledge," cannot recognize either Christ or his people. While the false teachers claim to possess some sort of secret insights into the real meaning of the gospel, the reality is that they do not know the very thing which counts most—that Jesus Christ is God manifest in the flesh. And because they do not know who Jesus is, they cannot recognize God's people (those loved by the Father) even though they are ones who walk in the light and who strive to obey God's commandments. The true irony here is that those who claim to possess secret knowledge know nothing whatsoever about the Father, and are so blind to the truth they wouldn't know if it . . .

Again, John speaks to his audience in the most intimate of terms. "*Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.*" At this point John returns to the importance of the Lord's second coming as an important focus of the Christian life. Because of God's love for us, we are (presently) his children. But Jesus will return (appear) at the end of the age. And when he does, John says, on that day we will be like him, and finally, we shall see him as he is.

No doubt, there is a strong echo here from Job 19:25-27: "*For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.*" Likewise, John believes

⁴ Stott, The Epistles of John, 122.

⁵ Stott, The Epistles of John, 122.

that when Jesus returns, we will be raised from the dead and that we will possess the same kind of resurrection body Jesus did (Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 15). On that day we will be like him (in his resurrection) and we will see him as he is (because as raised from the dead, only then can we behold Jesus' post-resurrection glory without being consumed). Throughout the history of the church, this vision of Christ in all his glory has been known as the "Beatific Vision." But this we cannot see, until we die or our Lord returns, whichever comes first.

In verse 3, John is also clear about the fact that those who long for the Lord's return will live in the light of this blessed hope. "*And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.*" The knowledge that the Lord will return and that we will meet him with confidence (John speaks of this in terms of "hope") becomes the motivation for Christians to continue to purify themselves from their sin and its consequences. As Jesus is pure, so should we be pure. Notice that John does not cast this in terms of fear—"Jesus is pure, therefore you should be, lest you be ashamed at his coming." To do this is to confuse law and gospel and the indicative and the imperative. The indicative (gospel) is that the Lord (who is pure) will return for those for whom he has died and for whom he makes intercession. The imperative (law) is because this is true, be confident and express that confidence by preparing for his return, i.e., purifying yourself. People who live in fear of the Lord's return will often times attempt to hide their sin (something John has told us we cannot do), rather than dealing with our sin (which we cannot hide from God). We see the wisdom of our fathers in the faith, when they spoke of gratitude for what Christ has done for us as the best motivation to do the works God requires of his people.

In verses 4-10, John shifts his focus from that hope associated with Christ's return, to the righteousness which Jesus established when he appeared in the flesh in his messianic mission. Again, a word of caution before we proceed. Many have read these verses as though John were teaching us about the possibility of victory over all sin in the context of sanctification. Many, such as Wesley, saw in these verses an exhortation to move beyond defeat to a state of Christian perfection, because in Christ, sin's power over us is broken. But John is not talking about the question of whether or not a Christian can rise above sin—John has been quite plain about this, if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the father in our defense (2:2). Rather, John is drawing a contrast between the conduct of those who walk in the light (those who know that Jesus is the word made flesh), and those who claim to have "knowledge" yet foolishly believe that Jesus is not a "flesh and blood" Savior. Those interested in "secret knowledge" are not interested in obeying God's commandments. This is John's point—how those who walk in the light are not characterized by sinful behavior. They still sin, but sin is a contradiction of who they are in Christ. Sin is not their characteristic, as it is of those who walk in darkness.

So, in verse 4, John set up this contrast as follows. "*Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.*" Everyone sins and sin is defined as "lawlessness," which simply means that they do not obey God's commandments. We either do not do what God commands, or else we do what God commands us not to do. John understands that everyone—even Christians—will sin. But those who "practice sin" (note the ESV's translation in contrast to the NIV "everyone who sins") is making the point that those who practice sin also practice lawlessness. The issue here is "what is it that characterizes someone who walks in the light?" Indifference to sin? Or a struggle with sin? The former is true of those who walk in darkness—they just plain don't care about these matters. While those who walk in the light cannot live in indifference to their sin—they struggle with their sin.

John returns to the indicative here: "*You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.*" Jesus offered himself as a propitiation for our sins. This why he came in the flesh. There is an echo here from the famous "suffering servant" prophecy in Isaiah 52-53 (our Old Testament lesson this

morning). In the song of the suffering servant Isaiah speaks of Jesus in these terms. *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.”* With Isaiah’s prophecy certainly in the background,⁶ John now speaks of the fact that not only did Jesus die for our sins, but that he himself was without sin.

John refers to both Christ’s active and passive obedience. In his active obedience, Jesus fulfilled all righteousness so that we might be counted as righteous when his righteousness is imputed to us through faith. And Jesus was God manifest in the flesh so that he might take away the guilt of our sins when he offered himself up as the propitiation for our sins (his “passive” obedience). Christians “know” this! It is the gospel. It is the message that gave us life in the first place. This is the message, John says, in which we must abide.

Notice the contrast set out in verse 6 between those for whom Christ has died, and those who have imbibed from the Gnostic heresy. *“No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.”* John is not telling us that when we become Christians we cease from sinning. He is stating that those who walk in the light, and who know that Jesus is without sin, cannot commit sin and remain indifferent to it, or make no effort to obey God’s commandments without showing some concern for righteousness. Those whom John is warning us about are not concerned with their sin. They are only concerned with gaining “secret knowledge” which tells them they stopped sinning long ago. People who sin without remorse show themselves not to be Christians.

The indicatives are now framed in the form of a series of contrasts verses 7-10. *“Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.”* Those who practice righteousness, demonstrate themselves to be God’s children. Those who practice sinning, demonstrate that they are deceived by Satan (therefore, his “children”). Yet, Jesus appeared to destroy the work of Satan whose ways these people want to emulate.

No one who is born again practices sin (with indifference), thereby demonstrating that they are Christ’s. Their conduct, will in some sense, mirror that of Jesus himself. Furthermore, Christians will strive to love their brothers and sisters in Christ. But those who are children of the Devil (who walk in darkness), are characterized by an indifference to sin and lack of interest in the commandments of God. They walk in darkness. John’s point is that we should be able to tell rather quickly who belongs to Christ and who doesn’t by whether or not they struggle with sin—not necessarily by their victory over sin, but by the struggle with sin.

⁶ Stott, The Letters of John, 127.

John's point then is to set out a clear contrast between those who believe that Jesus is the word manifest in the flesh, and those who do not. When Wesley read this section of 1 John through the lens of Christian Perfectionism and taught that this passage implies that Christians can reach a point where they can cease from sinning, Wesley not only badly misreads 1 John, he so confuses the indicative and the imperative (the law and the gospel) that he places an impossible yoke on the backs of Christians which the Apostle John never intended. This does tremendous damage to countless tender consciences and bruised reeds. John is both comforting God's "dear children" as well as reminding them that because they are born of God, they will walk in the light and not practice sin.

What then, should we take with us from this passage in terms of application?

Simply put, John is contrasting those who believe that Jesus is the word manifest in the flesh, who appeared to take away sins, with those who have embraced the phantom docetic Jesus of the Gnostics. Whereas before, John put the contrast in terms of the differences between darkness and light, here he contrasts the children of God who practice righteousness, and the children of the Devil who practice sin. As John sees it, those who are born of God, long for the Lord's appearing. We grow confident—not in our own righteousness, but in the grace and mercy of the Savior, who appeared to take away sin and adopt us as children of the Father.

Because God has chosen us, Christ has died for us, and because he intercedes for us, let us practice righteousness and walk in the light. Because he appeared to take away sins, we confidently await his glorious appearing at the end of the age. For on that day, we shall be like him, and we will see him as he is. And in that day, we shall bask in Christ's victory over sin!