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This commentary on 1–3 John continues the deeply theological yet intensely practical teaching on the foundational nature of truth and love in the context of the local church. This commentary on 1–3 John continues the deeply theological yet intensely practical teaching on the foundational nature of truth and love in the context of the local church. For Crossway, including the best-selling Disciplines of a Godly Man, the single best resource for faithful Biblical exposition available today. A great boon for genuine reformation!

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“The work of Jesus on the cross
The work of the Spirit
Spiritual rebirth
The divinity of Christ
The Doctrine of Christ
The danger of false teachers
The work of the Spirit

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“This is a pleasure to commend this series of homiletical commentaries. They offer helpful insights into the Christian life as well as important themes such as:

- The doctrine of Christ
- Spiritual rebirth
- The work of Jesus on the cross
- Our responsibility to forsake sin and keep God’s commandments
- The work of the Spirit
- The danger of false teachers

Hermeneutically sound, Christ-centered, and remarkably practical, this study opens up John’s letters anew and lays out the path for us to walk in light of God’s truth and love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID L. ALLEN (PhD, University of Texas) is professor of preaching, director of the Southwest Center for Expository Preaching, George W. Truett Chair of Ministry, and dean of the school of theology at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He served as the senior pastor of two churches for 25 years and has been a teacher of preachers for more than 25 years.

ABOUT THE SERIES EDITOR

R. KENT HUGHES (DMin, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is senior pastor emeritus of College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, where he served as pastor for 27 years. He has authored numerous books for Crossway, including the best-selling Disciplines of a Godly Man. Pastor Hughes is also a trustee of the Charles Stimson Trust, which conducts expository preaching conferences throughout North America and worldwide. Hughes now lives on the West Coast with his wife, Barbara, and is the father of four and grandfather of an ever-increasing number of grandchildren.

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D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

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“A rich resource covering one of the New Testament’s most profound sections of Scripture, pastors and theologians of all persuasions will benefit from the thorough treatment Dr. Allen gives to these letters. This commentary, like John’s letters, is brimming with gospel hope.”

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Gregg R. Allison, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Jesus spoke of the man who brought ‘out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’ David L. Allen does exactly that with these 22 well-researched expositions. Drawing on preachers and scholars from all ages of the church, he opens up John’s epistles with admirable clarity and force. In every chapter, you will encounter the truth of the text, the heart of the preacher, and the direction of the Lord regarding how you should respond. Readable, illuminating, and convicting, this book deserves wide circulation among individuals and Bible study groups. Pastors will find here a refresher course in how to preach John’s letters.”

Robert W. Yarbrough, Professor of New Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

“The sermons in this book (Allen describes them as ‘sermontaries—more than a sermon but less than a commentary’) are undergirded by solid scholarship, supported by references to great preachers of the past, and enhanced by Allen’s own wisdom and applications for today’s believers. A fine resource that I am very pleased to commend to all serious preachers of Scripture.”

Colin G. Kruse, Senior Lecturer in New Testament, Melbourne School of Theology
PREACHING THE WORD
Edited by R. Kent Hughes

Genesis: Beginning and Blessing
Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory
Leviticus: Holy God, Holy People
Numbers: God’s Presence in the Wilderness
Deuteronomy: Loving Obedience to a Loving God
1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader
Proverbs: Wisdom That Works
Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters
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1–2 Peter and Jude: Sharing Christ’s Sufferings
Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches
The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom

Unless otherwise indicated, all volumes are by R. Kent Hughes
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There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases, and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of logos, ethos, and pathos.

The first reason for his smile is the logos—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his logos. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is ethos—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never perfectly embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward
affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s ethos backs up his logos, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is pathos—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but he does.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of logos (the Word), ethos (what you are), and pathos (your passion). As you preach the Word may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

R. Kent Hughes
Author’s Preface

During the twenty-one years I served as a senior pastor of two churches, I preached through many books of the Bible. First John was the initial New Testament letter I worked through early in my first pastorate. It lays out for believers the foundational nature of truth and love within the context of the local church. Like all the letters of the New Testament, 1 John is theological and practical. In one sense all of the New Testament letters are essentially sermons to local congregations of believers. (Hebrews is, in fact, a written sermon!) What the New Testament authors wrote is what they would have preached had they been present in the churches to which they wrote.

I believe not only in the inerrancy of Scripture but also in the sufficiency of Scripture. When it comes to the spiritual needs of believers gathered together in the fellowship of local churches, God has designed that the preaching and teaching of his Word is the primary means of developing mature believers. The Scriptures are sufficient to accomplish this goal. I am committed to expositional preaching for theological reasons. I have nothing to say to God’s people that is superior to what God himself has said to them in his Word. Since the Bible is not only the Word of God but is also the very words of God (verbal, plenary inspiration), then text-driven preaching becomes all the more vital, even mandated theologically as far as I’m concerned.

As one who has studied preaching now for many years, I have observed how often preachers take a very short text of only two or three verses from the New Testament letters that is usually only a part of a paragraph unit. When a verse or two is wrenched from its paragraph context (except when the paragraph consists of only a verse or two), meaning is misplaced, distorted, or lost. The superficial character of many modern sermons derives from the exclusive use of a short text. Additionally, when we preach only on short texts, we face the temptation of filling in the time with extra-Biblical material. I believe in preaching through paragraph units of meaning when preaching through the letters of the New Testament. The field of linguistics teaches us that meaning resides not only in the words, phrases, clauses, and sentences of discourse but in the paragraphs as well.1 The whole is more than the sum of its parts.

In determining the paragraph and divisional structure of 1 John, I have relied heavily upon the work of Grace Sherman and John Tuggy, A Semantic and Structural Analysis of the Johannine Epistles (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1994). They justify their paragraph divisions linguistically. In
accordance with their linguistic analysis, I have chosen to construct a sermon on each paragraph unit of 1 John. This means that on four occasions (2:1, 2; 2:26, 27; 2:28, 29; 5:21), I have written a sermon on paragraphs that are no more than two verses in length, and with respect to 5:21 only one verse. Sometimes there is a difference of opinion as to where paragraph breaks occur in 1 John. For example, In addition to being viewed as a paragraph itself, 2:1, 2 can be seen as the conclusion of the paragraph that begins at 1:5 or it can be viewed as the beginning of a new paragraph that concludes at 2:6. I have made the decision to write one sermon on 2:1, 2 because of the potent doctrinal word “propitiation,” which needs careful explanation, and because verse 2 is one of the key verses in the New Testament dealing with the subject of the extent of the atonement, an important and often misunderstood doctrine today. Some interpreters consider 2:29 to begin a new paragraph that concludes with 3:10. Others think that verse 29 goes with verse 28 and that a new paragraph begins with 3:1. I have chosen the latter option for the same linguistic reasons given by Sherman and Tuggy. Second and 3 John, though composed of multiple paragraphs, are best treated as a whole for preaching purposes in my judgment since each of these letters is so short.

There are now countless sermon websites on the Internet available to preachers. Some of the sermons one finds on these sites are worthy of reading. Others, frankly, are a waste of time. In preparing the sermons in this volume, I have taken C. S. Lewis’s advice to heart: “If [one] must read only the new or only the old, I would advise him to read only the old. . . . It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between.” The Scottish preacher Arthur Gossip’s maxim from page 86 of his book In His Stead has stood me in good stead now for many years: “The greatest natural genius cannot subsist on its own stock: he who resolves never to ransack any brain but his own will soon be reduced, from mere barrenness, to the poorest of all imitations.” For years I have collected sermon books and have been cataloguing the sermons by text in a database for my own research purposes. A computer printout of sermons catalogued on 1 John alone is dozens of pages in length. In scouring through these sermons, I have found golden nuggets in the form of exposition, illustrations, turns of phrase, doctrinal insight, application, etc, that are priceless. The reader will notice from the footnotes that I have consulted a number of sources on 1 John, old and new, including a number of published sermons from well-known preachers such as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Edwards, and Spurgeon, along with a host of lesser-known preachers from church history. Even when I have not quoted material directly from
these sources, I have tried to footnote each time I have gleaned from them so the reader will have the opportunity to find and read some great sermons, and other works, that are sometimes off the beaten path. Thus the sermons in this volume are what you might call “sermontaries”—more than a sermon but less than a commentary. I hope the reader finds this helpful.

A good sermon should have several qualities. It should first and foremost be Biblical, both in truth and content. A good sermon should be hermeneutically sound. A good sermon should be Christ-centered. A good sermon should be practical, containing pertinent and textually warranted application. A good sermon should be delivered with passion, a missing ingredient in some preachers today. A good sermon should be motivational, challenging, and encouraging. A good sermon should be clear. Clarity must be crafted. Finally, a good sermon should be interesting. There should be nothing dull, boring, or pedestrian in good expository preaching. I have attempted to write these sermons as nearly as I would preach them. Written sermons simply cannot maintain the oral luster one experiences in listening to a sermon. I have used shorter sentences, contractions, and other modes of communication common to oral/aural discourse. There is certainly no contradiction between attention to style in sermons and attention to theology. In fact, theology usually impacts style.

I wish to express my deepest appreciation to Ted Griffin, editor for Crossway, whose keen eye and careful hand has made this volume much better than it would have been without his diligent attention.

Finally, I wish to thank my friend Kent Hughes for his kind invitation to participate in this series. I met Kent personally when I was teaching homiletics at the Criswell College in Dallas, Texas. I had been so impressed with his work in the Preaching the Word series that I invited him to be the speaker at one of our preaching workshops. He graciously consented, and I found my heart knit together with his on the subject of expository preaching. When I arrived at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and became director of the Center for Expository Preaching, I immediately made plans to have Kent come and speak. Again he graciously consented and did a marvelous job. For years I have been recommending Kent’s books to my students and fellow pastors, never dreaming that one day I would have the opportunity to write for this series. We preachers are always looking for word pictures to turn the ear into an eye. It is an honor to be a Chihuahua barking on the heels of a Great Dane like Kent Hughes!

David L. Allen
Dean, School of Theology
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Fort Worth, Texas
1 JOHN
That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we 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. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

1 JOHN 1:1–4
Meet Jesus: 
God in Human Flesh!

TUCKED AWAY AT THE BACK of your Bible is a little letter called 1 John. John the Apostle, one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus, wrote it.¹ At the time of writing, John was probably the only surviving member of the Twelve, and the only one who did not die a martyr’s death. He wrote five books in the New Testament: the Gospel of John, which looks back to the past and presents the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; 1, 2, 3 John, which concern the present and teaches us how we should live now; and Revelation, which looks to the future and shows us how God will consummate history in the return of Jesus to this earth. Second and 3 John are very short letters, only one chapter each. We know John spent his later years in and around Ephesus. He wrote this letter to the churches of Asia Minor probably between A.D. 80 and 85. The church was now composed of second- and third-generation Christians. For some Christians this was a time of persecution. For others perhaps the thrill was gone and the flame of devotion to Christ was flickering. False teachers were infiltrating some of the churches, and some Christians were becoming lax in their Christian standards. Into these circumstances steps John with his letter.

John wrote with at least four purposes in mind. First, to combat false teachers who were beginning to infiltrate the churches. He exposes false doctrine and promotes spiritual truth. John was not afraid to engage the culture where first-century Christians lived. Second, John had an ethical purpose in writing. Specifically, he deals with attitudes toward sin and the necessity of love for other Christians. Third, John has a pastoral purpose in writing. His pastoral heart beats for the health of the church, for the strengthening of Christians in the faith, and for genuine fellowship among believers and
with Christ. His frequent references to his readers as “children” and “little children” reflect the pastoral tone of the letter. As one who was at least probably an octogenarian himself, John could tenderly refer to all in the churches, young and old, as “children.” Fourth, John had a personal purpose for writing: “so that our joy may be complete” (1:4).

Verses 1–4 of chapter 1 constitute the prologue to the letter. Its unusual structure can be confusing. What exactly is John trying to say here? The secret to understanding 1:1–4 lies somewhat behind the scenes, as we shall see. In these verses, “The greatest majesty is combined with the greatest simplicity.” John begins, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.” Notice after verse 1 there is a dash in the ESV translation, followed by another dash at the end of verse 2. Verse 2 is a parenthetical statement: “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.” Verse 3 reverts back to the thought at the end of verse 1: “that which we have seen and heard.” This is followed by the main verb in the paragraph: “we proclaim also to you.” This is the most important semantic information John is conveying in verses 1–3. Maybe it will be easier to understand what John is saying if you read it like this: “We proclaim to you that which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen, that which we have looked at, that which we have touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life.” Let’s unpack these statements.

John’s Declaration of Jesus the Word of Life (vv. 1–3a)

When John says “that which was from the beginning,” the antecedent of “that” is “the word of life.” Although John does not name Jesus until the latter part of verse 3, “the word of life” clearly refers to Jesus. One of John’s favorite descriptors for Jesus is “Word.” John began his Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Here is an “unbeginning beginning.” When John says that Jesus was from the beginning, the question is, which beginning? Is this the beginning of Jesus’ earthly life or perhaps the beginning of creation? Jesus’ existence did not begin when he was born in Bethlehem. Likewise, Jesus was not a created being like angels before the creation of the heavens and the earth. Before history heard the starting gun, Jesus was there. John’s “beginning” goes all the way back to eternity past. This is a statement about the eternal preexistence and deity of Jesus. R. G. Lee, the great pastor of yesteryear at Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, often described it this way: “Jesus was the
Meet Jesus: God in Human Flesh!

only man who had a heavenly Father, but no heavenly mother; who had an earthly mother but no earthly father; who was older than his mother and who was as old as his Father.” Jesus is fully God and thus eternal.

It seems peculiar for John to tell us that he and the apostles heard, saw, touched, looked at, and handled Jesus. Why would John make such odd statements, employing so many verbs of perception? One answer to this question may have to do with a new philosophy beginning to gain ground at the end of the first century called Gnosticism. The word Gnosticism comes from the Greek word gnōsis, which means “knowledge.” It was a combination of pagan mysticism and Greek philosophy, predicated on two primary principles. First, Gnosticism taught that the way of salvation was through secret, superior knowledge granted to the initiated. Second, Gnostics considered all matter to be evil, but spirit to be good. Therefore the Gnostics taught that your physical body is evil, but your soul is good. Some of the false teachers John is combating in this letter had begun to infiltrate the church with incipient forms of this Gnostic teaching. The first error was a practical error, teaching Christians wrong ways to live. Imbibing this error, Christians went to one of two extremes. The first extreme we call asceticism, where you begin to punish your body. Why would anyone do this? To free the spirit. Remember, matter is evil, but spirit is good. The other extreme is licentiousness, a word that means to live any way you want. After all, if your body is evil and spirit is good, then it does not matter what you do with the body. Rules don’t matter. You can get on drugs all you want, have all the sex outside of marriage you want. Why? Because the body is evil. It does not matter much what you do with your body. Do we have any Gnostics in our society today? Of course! Most of them just don’t know that’s what they are. Why is John harping on that? He is fighting the effects of incipient Gnosticism that had already begun to creep into the churches. First John was a general letter that was sent to all of the churches in Asia Minor to warn them of the practical dangers of Gnosticism.

Gnosticism also led to doctrinal error. Gnosticism generated two doctrinal errors concerning the person of Jesus Christ. The first one is called the docetic error. Docetic comes from a Greek word dokeō, which means “to seem” or “to appear.” If the body is evil, then God, who is a Spirit being, cannot have any contact with the body. What would such a false belief do to the doctrine of the incarnation of Jesus? You can’t have an incarnation if docetic Gnosticism is true. You could not have God becoming man. Thus the Docetic Gnostics taught that Jesus did not have a literal human body. They denied the real humanity of Jesus. They said Jesus was from God, but they denied he was God in human flesh. They said his spirit was from God, but
when Jesus was on the earth that wasn’t really Jesus in human form. That was just what he appeared to be. He did not have a literal physical body like you and I do. So when people saw Jesus they were seeing something like a ghost or a phantom. If you were to walk over and touch Jesus, he would have no physical body to touch. You couldn’t shake hands with Jesus because he had no literal hand to shake. When Jesus walked on soft soil, he left no footprints. Docetic Gnosticism denied the incarnation of Jesus. Now we understand why, first rattle out of the box, John speaks about seeing, hearing, and touching Jesus. What John is saying is something like this: “Those Docetic Gnostics who slipped into your church are teaching you something that is entirely false. They deny the incarnation of Jesus. What they deny, I experienced personally. I was there with Jesus during his earthly ministry. I saw him with my own eyes, heard him speak with my own ears, and touched him with my own hands. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that his body was real.”

The second Gnostic error is called Cerinthian Gnosticism. Cerinthus was a contemporary of John and taught that because matter is evil, therefore the body is evil, but the spirit is good. Cerinthus taught that Jesus had a real human body (just the opposite of the Docetics), but he was just an ordinary man, and not God in human flesh. Joseph was his real father, Mary was his real mother, and he had a real human body. At Jesus’ baptism the Holy Spirit came on him, and that’s when the man Jesus became “the Christ.” The Holy Spirit remained with Jesus for his three-year public ministry. However, when Jesus died on the cross, the Holy Spirit couldn’t be associated with suffering and death according to Cerinthus, so the Spirit departed from him before he died. When the Spirit left him, that’s why Jesus cried on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Thus Cerinthian Gnosticism taught that Jesus was born as an ordinary man, the Spirit came upon him for three years but then left him, and he died a mere man just like you and me. Imagine what such a teaching does to the doctrine of the atonement! If Jesus is a mere man just like you and me, how can he die for our sins? These two Gnostic errors lead to two serious doctrinal denials in the churches to which John is writing: the denial of the incarnation and the denial of the substitutionary atonement of Christ on the cross.

Gnosticism is not dead; it is only disguised today in new garb. There has been a rising interest in the Gnostic writings in recent years, brought on in part by the popularity of novels and movies such as *The DaVinci Code*. Teachings that deny the incarnation and substitutionary atonement of Jesus are very much alive and well today.

Look again at verse 1. John says: “we have heard . . . we have seen.” Who
does John intend to include in his use of “we”? He refers to himself and other eyewitnesses of Jesus’ earthly ministry, which would include at least the other apostles. Notice also that the first two verbs are perfect tense verbs in Greek. The next two verbs in verse 1 (“looked upon” and “touched”) are aorist tense verbs in Greek. Whether there is any semantic distinction intended by John here is difficult to say. The change may be purely stylistic. If John intends a distinction, it would be a change of focus from the continuing effect of what was heard and seen to a focus on the historical event in the verbs “which we looked upon and have touched.” If this is the case, what John is saying is something like this: “What I heard from Jesus many years ago is still ringing in my ears as clear as a bell today as when I first heard it! What I saw many years ago when Jesus was on the earth is as clear and vivid to me today as it was then. We looked upon Jesus and touched him with our hands in specific times and specific incidents in the past.” John is emphasizing the historical reality of what he is saying and maybe also the impact of it all that continues to inform his life. To add to all of this, John uses two different Greek words for “seeing” in verse 1. Though it is possible this is merely a stylistic difference, it seems more likely that John intends a distinction. The second verb, “we looked upon,” may suggest seeing with careful attention and examination, implying something unusual in what is seen. Finally, John stresses that he and other eyewitnesses had “touched [Jesus] with our hands.” This is John’s way of stressing the reality of the physical body of Jesus and may be another jab at false proto-Gnostic teaching. It is also John’s way of stressing his authority as an eyewitness of the life and death of Jesus. John would swear in court that Jesus was the genuine article: God in human flesh.

Think back to seven days after the first Easter Sunday. In an upper room at night Jesus’ disciples had gathered. Suddenly Jesus appeared in their midst! What did Jesus do and say? He showed them his hands, his side, and his feet. He told them to touch him and see (Luke 24:39). Maybe John was thinking back to that night, now fifty or sixty years earlier, when he was there in that upper room and suddenly Jesus appeared. John saw him, hugged him, rejoiced with him, and talked to him. “We... touched with our hands, concerning the word of life,” the word of resurrection life! John calls Jesus “the Word” in John 1:1 and again in Revelation 19:13. John calls Jesus “the life” in John 11:25 in the context of Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus is the Word of Life because he gives life. He alone can save us from our sins and give us eternal life.

John stresses the historical reality of the incarnation of Jesus in verse 1. All other issues that he will speak to in the letter hinge on this crucial truth:
God has become man in the person of Jesus Christ. This fact is the impregnable fortress from which John will defend the church against those false teachers who denied that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (4:2).  

In verse 2 John makes an extended parenthetical comment about “the word of life.” This life “was made manifest.” The word “made manifest” means “made to be visible; made to be seen and understood.” How was this “word of life” made visible and understandable? When the phrase is taken to refer to Jesus, this occurred in history at the incarnation and through his earthly life. If we understand John to refer to the spiritual life possessed by Jesus and imparted by him to others, then the meaning is that this spiritual life became known, understandable, and available when Jesus appeared on the earth. God revealed his Son Jesus to the world.

As one of the apostles, John testifies to the reality and truth of Jesus and his gospel message of salvation and eternal life. He makes three statements in verse 2: “we have seen it [the word of life, Jesus], and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life.” John does not use the name Jesus until verse 3 but describes Jesus with two further statements in verse 2: “[He] was with the Father and was made manifest to us.” The little phrase “with the Father” is the same phrase John used in John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.” That little preposition “with” in the Greek text of John 1:1 conveys the idea of being face-to-face with someone. John is emphasizing the two things by that phrase there and here in 1 John 1:2. First, he is equating Jesus with God in terms of deity. As Luther said, “Where the Son of God is, there Christ is; where Christ is, there the Father is.” Second, he is not conflating them into one person but is emphasizing that though there is one divine nature, God and Jesus are distinct divine persons. To deny the distinct personhood of the Father and of the Son is to fall into the doctrinal error called modalism, which teaches there is one God who appears in three different ways: Father, Son, and Spirit. That is heresy because it denies the three distinct persons of the Trinity.

The final statement in verse 2 is a repetition of the beginning statement in the verse: “made manifest to us.” John is emphasizing the fact of the incarnation, which is how Jesus and his salvation was made known so people could understand that eternal life is wrapped up in the person and work of Christ. John is simply saying in verse 2 that Jesus was made clearly known.

Every discourse taught by Jesus, every miracle performed by Jesus, every act of grace, every tender touch, every word of wisdom, formed a part of God’s gracious manifestation of Christ to us in words and actions we could all understand. John’s shorthand reporting in verses 1, 2 is his way of saying
to his readers and us, “Behind every one of these tactile statements are three plus years of personal experience with the God of this universe who became man in the person of Jesus Christ. I am an eyewitness. I listened to him, gazed on him, and touched him to such an extent that I virtually memorized him! I testify to the reality of Jesus. Through him I have found eternal life. I have been preaching this life now for more than fifty years, and in this letter I am preaching this good news of Jesus to you also.” Just as John himself heard (overheard?) Jesus praying to the Father in heaven, “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3),” John now reexpresses the truth of that prayer as Jesus’ messenger boy to the church.

John is now testifying and proclaiming that Jesus brings forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Eternal life is not just life in terms of length of life, but is also a Greek term that means quality of life. It is not just that you will live eternally when you die, but right now you have eternal life if you’re a Christian. God’s life dwells in you. Here in Jesus Christ is the solution to the problem of how sinful people can ever know God and be rightly related to him. The yawning chasm between God’s holiness and my sinfulness is bridged by the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ! John no doubt preached numerous sermons, but he is really only preaching one sermon: Salvation and eternal life are available through Christ! This is John’s proclamation. Certain key words characterize the writings of the New Testament authors. For Paul, it is “faith”; for James, it is “works”; for Peter, it is “hope”; and for John it is “life.” When I was a teenaged preacher back in the early seventies, I was part of a group of about thirty students from our church that would travel to other churches leading in youth revivals. We named our group Real Life from John’s focus on Jesus as real life in the prologue of 1 John.

John’s Purpose in Writing: Fellowship and Joy (vv. 3b, 4)
In verse 3 John writes, “that which we have seen and heard, we proclaim also to you.” Here John returns to his thought from verse 1. John has been proclaiming Jesus through his preaching and now does so through his writing. John is simply saying, “The Jesus I saw and heard many years ago is the Jesus I have been proclaiming and continue to proclaim.” John was both an eyewitness and an ear-witness. Verse 3 provides the reason why John is proclaiming Jesus to his readers and to us: “so that you too may have fellowship with us.” Several times in John’s Gospel you read the word “fellowship.” This word, like an old coin, sometimes wears thin in our Christian vocabulary, especially when the word conjures up images of drinking coffee in paper
cups while nibbling on a donut before or after the morning worship service. Fellowship means far more than that. The root meaning is a deep sharing of things in common. As used by the New Testament writers, “fellowship” means that which all Christians share and celebrate in common. What is it that believers share in common? Jesus Christ and salvation! Belief in Jesus brings about salvation that places us in fellowship with all other believers everywhere who also know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Only believers in Christ can have this kind of fellowship. We may have friendships in the world, but only Christians share and celebrate genuine fellowship with each other. Some of the New Testament things Christians are said to share together are the fellowship of giving, loving, serving, and suffering.

The word “fellowship” has two foci—horizontal and vertical. John teaches us that our fellowship is not only with other believers (the horizontal aspect) but is also “with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (the vertical aspect). From the beginning of history, humanity has pulled every trick out of the bag of philosophy and religion in an attempt to bridge the seemingly infinite chasm between man and God. Now that chasm has been bridged by Jesus Christ. John implies here in this statement, and will make clear later in the letter, that fellowship with God is not possible apart from fellowship with Jesus. You cannot be in fellowship with God but not in fellowship with his Son Jesus and vice versa. Think of fellowship as genuine spiritual connection with God and other believers.

The great preacher G. Campbell Morgan has an interesting sermon on 1 John 1:3 entitled “Fellowship with God.” In it he suggests that the word “fellowship” is a “rich and spacious word, full of suggestiveness, almost impossible of full and final translation.” Communion” and “partnership” are the two key concepts Morgan develops as he describes what it means for Christians to have fellowship with God. As to privilege, fellowship with God is communion with him. By this Morgan has in mind deep friendship. This is an appropriate picture, is it not, in light of what Jesus said in John 15:12–15: “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. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.” Here Jesus expresses his attitude toward the disciples in his final days before his crucifixion. Notice the conjunction here of commandment, love, friendship, and making known truth from the Father. All of these concepts are found in 1 John. The command to love one another will
become a crucial focus of John in 1 John 2:7–11 and in other places in the letter. Knowledge of the truth will also be a key theme in the letter (2:20, 21, for example). As Jesus uses the word “friend” for the disciples, he is intimating a close relationship with them that the term “fellowship” also expresses. John has learned from Jesus that fellowship with God and Christ is a matter of a deep sharing of things in common, which is what friends do. As to privilege, fellowship with God is communion with God.

Morgan further develops the concept of fellowship with God as to responsibility. Here fellowship with God is partnership with him. “. . . fellowship with God means we have gone into business with God, that His enterprises are to be our enterprises.”

Fellowship with God means we share mutual interests, devotion, and activity. As Christians in close fellowship with God, his heartbeat becomes our heartbeat, his mission becomes our mission, his goals and plans become our goals and plans. We love what he loves, desire what he desires, hate what he hates, and will what he wills. The Christian life should be an ever-deepening fellowship with God that creates and reproduces within us the mind of Christ.

Think about it. Here is the answer to life’s meaning and purpose. Only God through Christ can unlock the meaning and purpose of life. “Our heart is restless until it rests in you,” said Augustine. Here is the answer to life’s peace. Jesus said: “my peace I give to you” (John 14:27). Here is the answer to life’s loneliness. Fellowship with God and Jesus solves the problem of our spiritual loneliness. Even when you think you are alone, you are not alone. Jesus has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). You may feel alone sometimes, but you are never alone. Fellowship with God and Christ takes care of life’s spiritual loneliness. God’s second answer to life’s loneliness is fellowship with other Christians through a local church. Christians have more in common with other Christians than they do with unsaved members of their own family. That’s why Jesus talked about leaving father and mother and following him. There is a fellowship among those who know Christ that is sweeter and closer than even that of blood relatives. That’s the nature of Christian fellowship. One of the things that John is going to emphasize in this book is the nature of our fellowship with one another and with God. From several different angles in this letter, John will address the issue of our fellowship with God and other Christians, its conditions, practice, and results.

In 1 John 1:1–3 John has affirmed the reality of Christ eternally, historically, and experientially. All three are vital for Christianity and for all Christians. Jesus is more than a man; he is God in human flesh, the second
member of the Trinity. As such, he is eternal. Were he less than God, he could never have been our Savior. Jesus is fully God, but he is also fully man by virtue of the incarnation. Jesus came to earth as one of us in history. As such, he is historically real. Because Jesus as the God-man is a real person, he can experience fellowship with other Christians and they with him, through the Holy Spirit. If Christianity is anything, it is a personal relationship with the God who made us through his Son who became one of us and paid the price for our sins on the cross.

Finally, John gives us another purpose for writing in verse 4: “so that our joy may be complete.” Who is included in “our”? This could be an exclusive “our,” whereby John includes himself and perhaps other church leaders and believers but excludes his readers. More likely this is an inclusive “our,” referring to John’s readers and probably beyond them to all believers everywhere. John’s joy would be complete when he shares mutual fellowship with his readers/hearers. The phrase “may be complete” means “permanently full; permanently filled.” John says in essence, “When we have fellowship with you, our joy is full.” John speaks of joy in all three of his letters (1 John 1:4; 2 John 12; 3 John 4). Interestingly, Jesus speaks of joy in relationship to his disciples three times in his farewell discourse and prayer in John’s Gospel (15:11; 16:24; 17:13). In all three examples, Jesus is concerned that the disciples’ joy might be “full” or “fulfilled.” In two of these three references, Jesus speaks of “my joy” remaining in the disciples and that “my joy” might be “fulfilled” in the disciples. John is concerned that his joy and that of his readers/hearers may not only be sustained but may increase to fullness, in fulfillment of Jesus’ words. When Christ’s joy is fulfilled in us, then will our joy be full!

Christian joy is far removed from what is commonly construed as happiness, which is dependent upon outward circumstances. It can certainly include such, but Christian joy is much deeper and richer in meaning. Joy is the presence of Jesus in our lives by means of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Joy describes a reality in life of genuine satisfaction intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. Joy is a spirit of exultation regardless of circumstances. Joy is a sense of supernatural strength that can only come from the Lord: “the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10). I have seen the joyless eyes of miserable people in many cities around the world. I have observed the joyless faces of people in Third World countries, clawing and scratching to eke out an existence for themselves and their families. Even those fortunate enough to be in decent economic shape along with those who have anything and everything money can buy might sometimes experience happiness, but
without God through Christ they can never experience genuine joy. The wisest and richest man who ever lived found that out when he sailed the high seas of life in an effort to find fulfillment. The man on whom the world exhausted itself and for whom the world was not enough discovered the bitter truth that at the end of every paycheck, the bottom of every bottle, and the morning after every one-night stand there was no joy in Mudville. So he tells us in his personal memoirs known as Ecclesiastes. Mighty Solomon had struck out. Only God can grant joy to the human soul. “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11). The crown of joy can only be worn by those who have been adopted into God’s royal family through his Son, King Jesus. The banner of joy will only fly over the castle of your life when the King is in residence there. Joy is the response of the soul that is rightly related to God through the knowledge of Christ as our Savior and Lord.

In one four-verse prologue the “Son of Thunder,” as Jesus once called him, summarizes God’s revelation of Christ and in so doing takes on the world of philosophy in his day and wrestles it to the mat. From the Platonic world comes the “Word,” ideal and abstract; from John comes Jesus “the Word,” divine and personal, the Word made flesh; from the Philonic world comes the “Word,” the idea of God in creation; from John comes Jesus, who was from the beginning, the creative First Cause of all creation; from the Gnostic world comes the “Word,” created and temporal; from John comes Jesus, uncreated and eternal. Philosophies had always dreamed of a Savior, but what philosophy could only dream about and aspire to, God has given to the world in the person of Christ Jesus. Joy to the world, the Lord has come!
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. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 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. 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.

1 JOHN 1:5–10
THE GREAT ACTOR and film director Woody Allen claims to be an atheist. On one occasion he was asked the question, “If there is a God, and if that God should speak to you, what would you most want to hear him say?” Woody Allen’s answer speaks for all people. He said, “If there is a God who should speak to me, I would most want to hear him say three words, ‘You are forgiven.’”

John says the only way you will ever hear from God the words “you are forgiven” is if you speak the words “I have sinned.” J. B. Phillips said there are nearly as many wrong ideas about sin as there are false ideas about God. As a Christian, what do you do when you sin? What should you do when you sin? Sometimes, even for Christians, sin is something we do and then deny. We love to rationalize it, and we love to refine it. Sometimes we just don’t take seriously the reality and consequences of our sin. We claim closeness with God but then defy his will and live contrary to his character! What scandal! Even for Christians, sometimes the three hardest words to say when they ought to be said and like they ought to be said are “I have sinned.”

But when we utter those words in sincerity, God’s response is always “You are forgiven.”

Sin in our lives should be the aberration, not the norm. We should be sensitive to the Lord and his Word such that the moment we become aware of sin in our life, we immediately confess and forsake it. The more you grow in awareness of personal sin, you should become like Paul and shift from saying you are “the very least of all the saints” (Ephesians 3:8) to saying you are “the foremost” of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). When you become mature spiritually, your sense of sin matures as well. You not only see it as the breaking God’s of laws, which it surely is, but as wounding God’s love. If you keep God at arm’s length, you will always have a hazy view of sin in your own life.

But when you do sin, you have one of two choices. You can choose to
cover your sin. You can hide it, deny it, and lie to God, others, and yourself about it. Proverb 28:13 is a pungent verse to remember when you choose to cover your sin: “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.” Your second option is to confess your sin. Admit it to God and come clean before him and with yourself. Confession is the order of the day for a believer who sins.

John talks about this very thing in 1 John 1:5–10. For us as Christians, sin does indeed break our fellowship with God. Be very careful here. When a Christian sins, our sonship, the fact that we are in the family of God, is not changed. God does not take his sinning children out of his family when they sin any more than you disown your children when they disobey. Aren’t you glad that the forgiveness of God given to us by grace through the atoning work of Christ is permanent? We need to understand the reality that sin doesn’t break our sonship, but it does break our fellowship with God. Sin grieves God; it breaks his heart. It puts a barrier between us and God in terms of fellowship.

The structure of this paragraph is interesting. Verse 5 functions as the basis for two appeals that John makes in verses 6–10. The basis of the appeals is the character and nature of God as light, meaning God’s complete purity and holiness. The two appeals are not made with direct commands but rather are mitigated by John. The first appeal is semantically expressed in verses 6, 7: Christians should live according to God’s pure nature; that is, they should not sin. The second appeal is semantically expressed in verses 8–10: When we do not live according to God’s pure nature, that is, when we do sin, we should confess our sin to God and experience his forgiveness.

God Is Light (v. 5)

In verse 5 John makes a statement about the origin of his message: “This is the message we have heard from him.” John’s apostolic authority derives from what he learned from Jesus. There are no apostles today, but preachers who are called by God to preach the Word derive their authority not from themselves but from God, just like the apostles did. John says, “we . . . proclaim” this message to you. This is the only time in the letter that this specific Greek word translated “proclaim” occurs. It differs by only one letter in Greek from the word used in the previous paragraph translated in the ESV as “proclaim.”

What is the significance of John’s use of these two very similar words in Greek? The word used in verses 2, 3 stress the source of the message, while the word used in verse 5 stresses the receptor of the message. The word means “to herald important news” and was sometimes used for the declaration of a king. The king’s herald would walk the streets of the city announcing the
king’s message. All the subjects of the kingdom were intently interested in
the word of the king. When your television show is interrupted by the network
with an important news bulletin, what do you do? Do you get up, go to the
kitchen to get a snack, and leisurely return later? No, you intently listen to
what is being said because the news might affect you personally. John says he
has a message to announce to his readers, and it is a vital, crucially important,
life-changing message.

Did you notice that before John ever talks about us, he talks about God?
The Christian life begins with God, not us. The substance of the message is
stated in the latter part of verse 5: “God is light.” John makes a statement
about the character of God three times in his writings. In John 4:24 God is a
Spirit. In 1 John 4:7, 8 God is love. Here John tells us he is announcing what
he heard from Jesus, namely, “God is light.” This statement, “God is light,”
is not recorded in the Gospels, but John 3:19 does state concerning Jesus,
“The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than
the light.” Two possibilities exist here. Jesus may have said it and it was not
recorded. Many of the things Jesus did and taught during his public ministry
are not recorded in the Gospels. John says in John 21:25, “Now there are also
many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I sup-
pose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”
A second possibility may be that John is simply summing up Jesus’ teaching
about God with respect to his nature.

This statement, “God is light,” has been interpreted in different ways. First, it could be a description of the visible manifestation of God’s glory. Second, some have seen in this statement a reference to God’s self-revelation to man. Light enables us to see. Though these first two options are true, contextually this does not seem to be what John has in mind. Most likely this is a phrase that refers to the moral perfection of God. There is not one blemish, stain, mark, or sin on the character of God. God is absolute perfection. Even
the sun has its spots of darkness, but not God. He is absolute holiness and
purity. This interpretation is further supported by two things. First, there is no
article before “light” in the Greek text, which stresses character and nature.
God is, as to his character and nature, morally pure and holy. Second, the
following negative restatement, “in him is no darkness at all,” supports this
meaning.

An interesting feature of John’s style of writing is to state something posi-
tively, then turn it around and put it in the negative. Notice that is exactly what
he does here: “and in him is no darkness at all.” Literally in Greek, this state-
ment reads, “there is no darkness in him, none.” John employs a double nega-
tive, poor grammar in English, but both good grammar and good theology in Greek. Grammatically this is the strongest way to express emphatic negation. Not only is God light, but there is absolutely no darkness, not one scintilla of darkness (moral imperfection) in him. In him is no shade, speck, or stain of moral imperfection. In him is no fault, failure, or falsehood. In him is no deceit, deviation, or dishonesty. Physical darkness is a terrible thing. “There is no distance in darkness. Darkness is limitation, darkness is imprisonment; there is no jail with walls so thick and impenetrable as darkness.”9 Darkness is an apt metaphor to describe sin. Unlike my heart and your heart where the light of the gospel shines, but where sometimes there may be pockets of sin that we allow to go unchecked, God in his character and nature possesses no moral imperfection whatsoever.

John’s statement seems to us to be the plainest truth that hardly needs mentionning! But it was not so plain when John wrote it! His world was full of idols and gods who were sometimes no less evil than the men who worshipped them. The moral perfection of God was a new message in those days. It is a new message for many today still! Think of what kind of God most sinners desire: a God who is indulgent to his sin, who will shut his eyes to disobedience, who will always reward and never punish, who will always receive whether we come in truth or pretense, who is blind and willing to be taken in and imposed upon, who will put up with all excuses and bear all hypocrisy. But nonbelievers are not the only ones who need to be reminded that “God is light.” How often do we as Christians sin, hoping that God will not think so severely of our sin as the Bible says he does? How often do we flatter ourselves with excuses for our sin such as “God is merciful, he won’t be that hard on me! Surely he does not expect me to always be holy and self-denying”? I’m afraid we sometimes rationalize and delude ourselves into thinking that God can be bargained with, bribed, and otherwise bought off concerning our sin. John’s forthright statement, “God is light” is a clear and needed reminder that God is who and what he is, however and whatever we may think or act.10

The basis of our fellowship with God is the character and nature of God. Sin radically affects our fellowship with God. In 1 John 1:1–4 our fellowship with God and other believers is a key theme. John continues this theme in verses 6–10. These verses contain a series of six conditional sentences in three pairs of negative falsehoods (1:6, 8, 10), each followed by positive truths (1:7, 9; 2:1). Three times John expresses a statement of what someone could say about their sin, expressed as “if we say.”11 When you look carefully at the three, you discover an unusual progression of thought. Each of these three statements is a shot across the bow of every Christian for whom the
word “sin” was beginning to lose its meaning. Have you met a Christian lately who does not take sin seriously enough, someone whose walk does not match his or her talk? Talk and walk go together in the Christian life, like the two wings of an airplane. If my life does not match my words, something is amiss in my Christian life. There is a huge gap between cheap talk and an authentic walk.

Walk in the Light (vv. 6, 7)

If someone claims to be in fellowship with God and yet the way he lives is characterized by sinful behavior, he is lying through his toothy grin and not practicing the truth (v. 6). It may be that some of the false teachers in John’s day were claiming to have fellowship with God. It may be that some genuine believers in the church were under the delusion that their sinful lifestyle was somehow not incompatible with fellowship with God. More on this in a moment.

One of the common New Testament metaphors to describe conduct is the word “walk.” The word “walk” expresses the notion of “behavior, conduct, and lifestyle.” To “walk in darkness” is the opposite of walking in the light. The tense of the verb “walk” is present and conveys habitual lifestyle. You cannot “walk” in darkness and be practicing the truth at the same time. Notice here that the truth is not only something to be believed, but is something to be lived out. This is a vital concept that John will develop in the rest of the letter. Spurgeon was right when he said there may be all the difference in the world “between saying and being, between saying and doing.”

How does “we lie” differ from “not practic[ing] the truth?” Some identify the word “lie” with spoken falsehood and the phrase “not practic[ing] the truth” with actions contrary to what is spoken. Others say both refer to deliberate falseness in word and deed. Some interpret the word “lie” to mean “self-deceit.” When our words don’t match our life, we are not putting the truth of what we say we believe into action; hence, we in essence lie. What does John mean by “truth”?

When John speaks of truth in his letters, he uses the word in two primary senses: 1) true teaching, that is, the true message; and 2) actions consonant with the true message. In this context, John is using “truth” to refer to the true message/doctrine.

A big question concerns whether John intends us to understand his statement to apply to Christians or unbelievers. The letter is written to believers. The issue is whether a true believer can “walk in darkness.” Without going too far afield, we need to be reminded of two truths. First, if someone within the
church lives contrary to the gospel on a regular basis, there is good reason to question the genuineness of his or her conversion. Second, it is possible for Christians to sin, live in periods of carnality, and yet be truly saved. The Bible affirms both of these realities. Though verse 6 could easily be referencing someone who is not a Christian, contextually it could also refer to someone who is a Christian. Notice that John says “we lie.” About what? About being in fellowship with God while walking in darkness. Furthermore, we are not practicing the truth. He does not say we do not know the truth. Imagine someone who is a member of a health club and attends all the club nutrition meetings. But when he is not at the health club, he binges on the worst kind of foods you can imagine. He goes back to the health club meetings and says, “Today I ate three cranberries and half of a pear” when he actually consumed a Big Mac and a supersized order of fries! It is a sad spectacle when a Christian claims the moral high ground, but from God’s perspective he actually languishes in the pit. If we say we have fellowship with God, yet our life is lived in the darkness of sin and not in the light of truth, we are liars and are not “doing” the truth. It is interesting that in John 3:21 John records Jesus speaking of the one who “does what is true.” Jesus says such a person “comes to the light.” John picks up on both concepts of “light” and “doing the truth” from Jesus and uses them here in his letter.

John speaks about a practical lie. The person who lies in this way is not only speaking a lie, but is acting a lie! His life is a practical falsehood! Walking in darkness is itself the lie, an acted untruth. Light and darkness are mutually exclusive. They cannot coexist. At night when the lights go out, darkness comes. When the light comes on, the darkness is dispelled. Walking in darkness is the equivalent of walking in sin. You have to be careful about walking in the darkness because you can easily get hurt. One morning about 3:00 A.M., I awakened. Not wanting to wake my wife, I got up without turning on the light. I figured I knew my house pretty well and could maneuver without bumping into anything. But when I attempted to walk through a doorpost, I sustained quite a cut on my forehead. It does not pay to walk in darkness. Walking in darkness can mean committing any sin great or small. Shrouding oneself with cover of night and wielding an assassin’s knife, a would-be murderer stalks his victim. Or it might involve hatching a nefarious plot against the just to attempt to bring them down or tarnish their reputation, gloating over financial gains of avarice, nursing in your imagination an unchecked passion or lust, sitting in front of your computer under cover of late night to satisfy an addiction to Internet pornography, cheating on a test, lying to the IRS, hating your neighbor, defrauding your employer, wasting...
precious time given to you by God, neglecting spiritual disciplines such as Bible reading and prayer, or a thousand other sins of omission and commission, great and small, in thought, word, or deed. All of this is walking in darkness. Walking in darkness can begin when we fall into the trap of renaming sins so they do not appear so bad. Political correctness abounds in our society. A person is not lazy, he is merely “motivationally dispossessed”; a shoplifter is not a thief, he is “a cost of living adjustment specialist”; a prostitute is not a prostitute, she is a “sex care provider.” Sin does not lose its sinfulness by giving it a less offensive name. A skunk by any other name still stinks.

In verse 7 John presents the opposite scenario. If we conduct our lives in the light, that is, if we live godly lives and behave as Christians should behave because that is how God conducts himself, then “we have fellowship with one another.” We are to walk in the light as God is in the light. “Walking” and “light” are two metaphors that speak of living in the sphere of truth and holiness. Verse 5 says, “God is light”; now verse 7 says God is “in the light.” Is there any difference between these two statements? It is difficult to say, but it seems likely that John intends to say that since God “is” the light in terms of nature and essence, everything he does is “in” the light in terms of total purity and holiness. For us to walk in the light as God is in the light indicates likeness, but not degree. The light of God’s nature is pristine holiness, untainted by sin. We can never walk in the light to that degree, but we can walk in the likeness of that light. Spurgeon mentions Trapp’s memorable comment on this verse as to “how we are to be in the light as God is in the light for quality, but not for equality.” We can walk in the light in this sense, however limpingly, because Christ the Light is our Savior.

How do we “walk in the light”? The Scripture says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105). The Bible teaches us how to live day by day in a way that pleases God and avoids sin. When I read and study the Bible, I discover where my life contradicts Scripture, and I can make the proper spiritual adjustment. Furthermore, our ultimate reason for obeying the Word of God is love for Jesus. Jesus said, “if you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

If we walk in the light, two things result. First, “we have fellowship with one another.” Stop right there and ask yourself, what is odd about that statement? The expected consequence is “we have fellowship with God,” not “we have fellowship with one another.” Why does John not say anything about fellowship with God here and yet speaks of fellowship with one another? The answer is that fellowship with God is already assumed to be true since John says “we walk in the light,” and fellowship among Christians is a sign they
have fellowship with God already. Now let’s unpack that word “fellowship” for a moment. The word “fellowship” means more than just association. It means more than just friendship. It means more than just having a good conversation over a cup of coffee. “Fellowship” is a word that means a deep sharing of things in common via association and participation. To be in fellowship with God means more than just having an association or friendship with God. It means having a relationship with God. To have fellowship with one another is not just a matter of being in the same room at church, but it means having a relationship with each based on our relationship with Christ that causes us to participate together around a common bond. What is it that all Christians share in common? It is our common relationship with Jesus. What is it that binds all of us together? Ultimately what binds people together is the Lord Jesus Christ himself, through their mutual love for him and one another.

No one realizes his deepening need of heart-cleansing as much as the one who walks in the increasing light of fellowship with Jesus. When we walk in the light hidden, unsuspected sins are revealed. The terrible thing about sin is that it not only breaks fellowship with God but with other Christians as well. We cannot be in fellowship with one another when we have sin in our lives. Therefore, when I sin, it hurts you even if you don’t know about it. When you sin, it hurts your fellow Christians even if they don’t know about it. But when we “walk in the light . . . we have fellowship with one another.”

The second thing we have when we walk in the light is cleansing from sin. Here is the first use of the word “sin” in the letter. Sin is that ugly word that describes the condition of us all.

Sin is the skull set amidst life’s banquet, the desert breath that drinks every dew—a madness in the brain, a poison in the heart, an opiate in the will, a frenzy in the imagination. Sin, the disease of the soul, the instrument of everlasting ruin, the midnight blackness that invests man’s whole moral being, subverted the constitutional order of man’s nature. Sin, promising velvet and giving a shroud, promising liberty and giving slavery, promising nectar and giving gall . . . promising perfumed handkerchiefs and giving foul rags, promising silk and giving sackcloth.

Today’s culture has changed the label on the bottle called “sin” and falsely assumed that it has changed the contents of the bottle. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. But sin by any other name still stinks to high heaven. We have banned sin from our vocabulary but not from our veins. Bulletproof windows, twelve-inch steel doors in banks, jails, police cars, and your key ring bear mute testimony to the fact that people are sinners. You
lock your house, car, office, locker, and luggage because some people have forgotten the Eighth Commandment: “You shall not steal.”

The criminal justice system is a harsh reminder that people are sinners. John assumes his readers know the concept of sin, but he will further describe its nature later on in the letter.

This cleansing in verse 7 is the daily cleansing from sin in the life of a believer. The ground of fellowship John spoke about is, “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” Reference to “the blood of Jesus” is another way of speaking of the death of Christ on the cross as an atoning sacrifice. We tend to think about the death of Jesus on the cross as being what takes away our sin when we come to him for salvation initially. It is the death of Jesus on the cross that makes it possible for God to save us. That is certainly true. But many of us don’t stop to reflect on the fact of the ongoing benefits of the death of Christ for us. The abiding effects of that work continue into our lives day by day. That’s why John writes this in the present tense. The blood of Christ goes on cleansing us day by day from our sin. It is capable of cleansing us every time we sin as believers. But this does not refer just what he did on the cross in terms of justification; it is rather also what he does continually in our lives in what we call, in theological terms, progressive sanctification. Progressive sanctification simply means this—the process whereby every day God is working in our lives to make us more like Jesus. The root word in Hebrew and Greek for “sanctification” is the word “holy.” God is light, God is holy, God wants you and me to be holy, and he works within us, forgiving us our sins on the basis of the cross. Further, the Holy Spirit applies the merits of salvation to forgive us and to cleanse us daily and to progressively work within our lives, so that we become what God wants us to be. When John says Jesus’ blood purifies us from sin, he refers to both the forgiveness of sin and the removing of guilt that sin incurs.

The phrase “cleanses us from all sin” is a metaphor whose primary reference is to cleaning something that is dirty. Sin causes the Christian to be spiritually soiled, and cleansing is needed to rid him of the consequences of sin—namely, guilt. In Judaism the person who sinned became unfit for worship and service; hence the need for cleansing. The notion of cleansing indicates that John is not here viewing sin as a principle or as a power, but rather as an act that defiles and needs to be cleansed from the Christian life. Notice it is not rites and rituals, not sacraments or ceremonies, not knowledge or experience plus the blood of Jesus that cleanses us of sin. No! As the old hymn put it, “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.” The author of Hebrews made it clear: “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and
goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4). Only the blood of Jesus can do that. Such is the exclusivity of the cleansing; only the blood of Jesus can accomplish it! Such is the completeness of it. All our sins, sins in thought, word, and deed, are all gone. Sins where my heart has been cold toward him, sins against the Holy Spirit—all are gone! Sins of commission, sins of omission, big sins and little sins—they are all gone. Sins of breaking his law and despising his Word, profaning his name, failing to love him truly—all are gone! Sins of presumption, sins of ignorance, willful sins and unknown sins—all are cleansed by the blood of Jesus! Such is the certainty of it!29

Verse 7 is the first mitigated command in the letter. Semantically, what John is really saying in this verse is: Christians should behave according to God’s pure moral nature and not sin.30 In verses 5–7 John lays down for us the basis of our fellowship with God. Now we turn our attention to verses 8–10, where he continues the subject of Christian fellowship and explains that our fellowship with God continues on the basis of our willingness to confess our sin. When John says in verse 8, “if we say we have no sin,” he is referring to committing sinful acts. This is consistent with the plural “sins” in verse 9 and the equivalent concept in verse 10.

Don’t Deny Sin, Confess It (vv. 8–10)

Verse 8 begins with another conditional statement: “If we say we have no sin . . .”31 It seems impossible to us that anyone would make such a claim. Surely everyone admits to being a sinner!

Spurgeon said, “He who cannot find water in the sea is not more foolish than the man who cannot perceive sin in his members.” Some people do indeed seem to think of sin as nonexistent, seeing sin as merely the dream of fusty theologians to keep everybody from having fun. Others are quick to rationalize or make excuses for their sin. The great Scottish preacher George Morrison said, “To wrap yourself up in excuses is to be naked before the great white throne.”32 Sometimes even Christians make excuses for their sins that they are quick to condemn in others.

Here it is helpful to consider briefly the Biblical doctrine of sin. Every human being enters this world at birth with a sin nature. What does it mean to have a sin nature? It means we have a bent, a propensity to sin. When you are old enough to discern right from wrong, you will choose to sin. You cannot stop yourself from sinning. You have a nature to sin. In one sense you are not a sinner because you sin; you sin because you are a sinner. You inherited your sin nature from your parents. Ultimately our sin nature goes back to the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3.
I have four children and three grandchildren. When each of my children was born, I had such pride in them. They were, of course, beautiful. They were perfect. But it did not take me long to discover that babies grow into young children and begin to display their sin nature. Picture two children, around three years of age, playing in the same room. One child sees the other child playing with a toy. He toddles over and like lightning snatches the toy away from the child and says, “Mine.” What does the robbed child do? He says to the little thief, “You go right ahead and play with my toy; that’s fine with me. I’ll wait until you’re through with it and then I’ll play with it again.” Is that how it works? Not on your life! The robbed child will cry and at some point try to get the toy back. A tussle begins followed by weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. If an adult does not step in, World War III might start. Suddenly it becomes apparent to all that these two precious children have a selfish nature. Where did those children acquire it? Do parents have to teach their children to be selfish? If you are a parent of a small child, do you have to teach your child how to get mad when another child takes your child’s toy? “Now, darling, when someone takes your toy, you go and take that toy away from them and say ‘my toy.’” You don’t have to teach your children to be selfish, to lie, or to cheat. They do so naturally. In fact, you have to teach them not to do those things. Why? Because they have a sin nature.

People often ask, “Are some sins worse than other sins?” That is a good question. One of the best answers I’ve heard to that question is from Alvin Plantinga: “All sin is equally wrong, but not all sin is equally bad. Acts are either right or wrong, either consonant with God’s will or not. But among good acts some are better than others, and among wrong acts some are worse than others.” This can be easily demonstrated. I would much prefer you hate me than to act out your hate and murder me. Even though hate is murder in the heart, the consequences of your heart hate alone are far less drastic for me personally than if you were to put your hate into action and take my life.

Satan is crafty when it comes to sin. Luther stated that when a Christian sins, the devil always alarms his heart and makes him tremble. “Look at you!” he scowls, “Now you’ve blown it!” Satan wants you to sink into the sin of despair. On the other hand, Luther said, Satan “lets some live smugly without temptation in order that they may think and believe that they are holy. And when somewhere he tears the Word out of one’s heart, then he has conquered. This is his cunning. He wants to make saints sinners, and confident sinners saints.”

John teaches that if we say we have no sin, two things result. First, we are self-deceived. In what way? By choosing to ignore the evidence of sin in our
life. Imagine a man whose doctor tells him he is terminally ill and has only a few weeks to live. But the man refuses to believe it. How foolish, even tragic, would that be. How much more foolish would it be for a man to deny the fact that he has cancer of the soul. The language John uses here implies our own responsibility for our deception. We ourselves become the deceivers, and we are responsible for leading ourselves astray.\textsuperscript{35} You could translate this, “We lead ourselves astray.” The ostrich, when pursued, thrusts its head in the sand and imagines because it has closed its eyes, it is safe from its predators. The only thing more humorously pitiful than this is the person who attempts to hide his sin from God.

The second result is, “the truth is not in us.” This refers to the truth of the gospel. What does John mean? Is it an unsaved person or a Christian who is making this claim? If we take 1 John 5:13 seriously, John is writing to believers. It seems best to take this statement as coming from a Christian. In other words, if a Christian says he no longer has the capacity to sin, then he is self-deceived and the truth that he can indeed sin as a Christian is not in him. The truth is not controlling his thinking and living. Some in Christian history have taught a doctrine called sinless perfectionism. Sinless perfectionism is the supposed state a believer achieves in which he does not sin anymore. Verse 8 speaks against such an idea. Experience as a Christian makes it evident to each of us that somewhere along the line you are going to sin in word, thought, or deed. The possibility of sin in your life is a real danger. You are capable of sinning as a Christian. You should not sin, but you sometimes do. As John says in verse 8, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.” Notice how the word “sin” here is singular, not plural. The reference here may be to our sin nature. John is stating, “If we say we have no sin nature, then the truth is not in us.” Christians still have a sin nature. It is not eradicated. It will be eradicated when we get to Heaven, but here on earth we are all capable of sin. A dog is not a dog because it barks; it barks because it’s a dog. A sinner is not a sinner because he sins; he sins because he is a sinner. The bottom line of verse 8 is this: a Christian who thinks he is no longer capable of sinning is self-deceived and is not living according to the truth of the gospel. On rare occasions in my ministry I have run across people who have told me they have reached a state of sinless perfection. Whenever you encounter such people, mark it down in your little black book that you are dealing with someone who is spiritually a dozen fries short of a Happy Meal!

Now look at verse 9. Remember what you can do with your sin. You can either cover it up or confess it. First John 1:9 is a vital verse for every Christian to understand. Sin is a fact of life, but fortunately it does not prevent our fel-
lowship with God if it is confessed. Confession should always be the natural response the moment we become cognizant of personal sin. But human nature being what it is, we often tend to minimize the seriousness of our own sin. I recently read about a newspaper that asked candidates running for office to write a short piece on the subject “something I did wrong in my life and what I learned from it.” Nobody confessed anything of any significance. It was always minor things like “I got a ticket for speeding for going five miles over the speed limit.” Each respondent minimized anything he did wrong and did not want to magnify it for fear that it might hurt him with voters. Sadly, we Christians often act the same way about our own sin. Some people live by the eleventh commandment they have added to the Lord’s ten that reads, “Don’t get caught.” What if you can’t think of any sins to confess? When a longtime church member came to her pastor after his sermon on 1 John 1:9 and said, “Preacher, I can’t think of any sins to confess!,” the pastor suggested to her, “Try guessing at it and you will hit on something!”

What does it mean to confess your sin? The word “confess” means “to say the same thing as.” When you confess your sin, you are agreeing with God that what he says about your sin is true. It is an admission of guilt. To confess your sin is not just saying, “I got caught. I’m sorry, but if I can get away with it, I’ll do it again.” That’s not confession of sin. Confession of sin is coming to the place where you honestly agree with God about your sin. Confession means genuine contrition for our sin and a genuine seeking of forgiveness. To whom do we confess? We confess our sin to God. Our sin is first and foremost against him, as David acknowledged in his prayer of confession in Psalm 51 when he said “against you, you only, have I sinned” (v. 4). Should we confess to the church as well in a public setting? The answer to that question depends on the nature of the sin and the extent to which it is known by other people. As a pastor, I always operated on the general principle that private sin should be confessed privately and public sin should be confessed publicly.

Verse 9 says, “if we confess our sins,” plural. Why the change from the singular “sin” to the plural “sins”? John has in mind confession of our specific acts of sin. It’s hard to confess sin in the abstract! A lady under conviction about the sin of gossip once responded to a public altar call to confess her sin. Bud Robinson, the preacher, received her at the front. “I want to lay my tongue on the altar,” she said. Bud responded, “The altar is only sixteen feet long, but lay her on!” I’m not too sure about the pastoral sensitivity in that situation, but the lady under conviction about the specific sin of gossip had the right idea: specific confession of her sin.

When you confess your sins, God acts. He forgives your sin, and he
cleanses you from all unrighteousness. How can he be both “faithful and just” to forgive sin in the life of the Christian? The answer is in verse 7: “The blood of Jesus Christ continues to cleanse us from all sin” (literal translation). When John says in verse 9 that God is “faithful and just,” he is presenting the grounds for why God will forgive our sin. This gets a little complicated, but stay with me for a moment. In the Greek text John uses a subordinating conjunction (hina) that functions to introduce the consequence (God forgives our sins) of the preceding conditional clause (“if we confess our sins”). John’s meaning is this: “If we confess our sins, since God is faithful and just, he therefore will forgive our sins.”

Think about those two words “faithful” and “just” for a moment. “[God] is faithful” means he is faithful to his promises concerning his willingness to forgive sin. For example, Jeremiah 31:34, the famous passage about the new covenant, is an important Old Testament promise concerning God’s willingness to forgive sins: “For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” Micah 7:18–20 also speaks of God’s willingness to pardon sin. But God is also “just” when he forgives our confessed sin. The word in Greek means “righteous.” God as to his nature always does what is just and right. His righteousness requires that he keep his promise to forgive all who confess their sin. If he were to fail to do this, he would no longer be just and righteous. Since Christ’s death has atoned for sin and made forgiveness possible, God can be just when he forgives confessed sin.

The death of Jesus on the cross actually covers all your sins—past, present, and future. When you sin as a Christian, you’re not out of the family, but you do break fellowship. Sin breaks the heart of God. Sin takes you out of fellowship with God. It takes you out of fellowship with fellow believers. But when you come to the place where you confess that sin, when you admit it for what it is, then at that point you call it what God calls it, and God says, “My forgiveness is extended to you on the basis of what Christ did on the cross.” You are restored to fellowship with God, and you are restored to fellowship with other people. He is faithful because he has made promises in both the Old Testament and New Testament that he will forgive our sin if we confess it and ask him to do so. He is righteous and just to do it because he has already punished sin when it was placed on Jesus at the cross. The bottom line is this: God will do what he said he would do (he is faithful) and what is perfectly right (he is just).

But notice that verse 9 does not end there. Sin brings guilt. If we can sin and not have the Holy Spirit convict us of that sin, then we are not God’s children. If we are true believers, sooner or later that moral consciousness is going
to catch up with us and we’re going to sense what is called good guilt. The Holy Spirit in our own moral consciousness brings us to a place of guilt, and we sense that. And when we confess that sin, God says, “I have taken care of the sin; now I’m going to take care of your guilt. You are right with me again, and our relationship is restored.” But God says something else: “Furthermore, I’m going to cleanse you from all unrighteousness. Not only am I going to take care of your guilt; I’m going to wash away the stain as well.” That’s what God does for us when we sin. He forgives our sin and purifies our character. Notice that John uses the word “sins” and “unrighteousness.” The two words are basically synonymous, but John uses the second word for a reason. The Greek word translated “just” is δικαίος, and the word translated “unrighteousness” is ἁδικαιός. The only difference is the addition of the Greek letter alpha. What John is saying with something of a play on words is, “God is ‘righteous’ to forgive and cleanse our ‘unrighteousness.’”

In 1993 Alice Metzinger, wife, mother, and restaurant owner, could stand the guilt no longer. She turned herself in to authorities. Alice Metzinger was actually Katherine Power, who as a college student at Brandeis University in 1970 drove one of two getaway cars after a bank robbery went awry. Katherine disappeared. In the late 1970s she moved to Oregon and started a new life as Alice Metzinger. She was on the FBI’s most-wanted list for years. Tormented by guilt, she did the only thing that could end her agony. You cannot ultimately hide from guilt. When a believer sins, both the Holy Spirit and our conscience convicts us. Confession is the only way to forgiveness and cleansing.

Picture this Sunday morning scene. A mother says to her little boy, “We are getting ready to go to church, so do not go out and play because it rained last night and the ground is muddy.” But the little boy slips outside when his mom’s back is turned to get a little play time in before they go to church. He slips and falls in a mud puddle while wearing his Sunday best and gets mud all over him. He comes into the house crying and says, “Mom, I’m sorry. I fell, and I got mud all over my clothes. I’m sorry.” At that point what does his mother say? She says, “I forgive you.” That takes care of his guilt. Her child is still her son. But then what does his mother do? Does she send him to church wearing the stained clothes? No, she cleans him up and changes his clothes. That is what God is saying to you. God will take care of your guilt, and God will take care of your stain.

When we confess our sins, God is faithful: he will forgive; and he is just: he can forgive on the basis of Christ’s shed blood. The penalty is paid, and the guilt is taken away. Restoration and renewal follow, since God also cleanses
us from all unrighteousness. I have to have a shower every morning. I can’t function during the day if I don’t feel clean and fresh. Sin dirties our Christian life. We lose the joy and peace in our life. Confession is like a good shower.

We need to consider the fact that although our sin is forgiven and our guilt is removed, the consequences of our sinful choices are not necessarily taken away and in fact may be severe and permanent. The egg cannot be unscrambled. But verse 9 is a bright light at the end of sin’s tunnel telling us that when we sin and then confess our sin, we need not despair because God is faithful to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. “Let neither a relapse into sin deter you from coming thus to Christ; nor the most spotless continuance in holiness render such a mode of coming to him unnecessary in your eyes. This is the way in which you may come, however aggravated may have been your guilt; and this is the way in which you must come, however eminent your attainments.”

Some Christians create their own unnecessary consequences once their sin is forgiven by either taking past sin too lightly or going to the opposite extreme and doubting whether God has really forgiven them. They struggle with simply taking God at his word when he says what he says in 1 John 1:9. So they pull out their past sin, polish it up, and mumble something about whether God has really forgiven them or not. They live in constant defeat and discouragement. Such an attitude fails to take God at his word that he can and will forgive sin. Don’t dredge up your forgiven past sins. If God has buried them in the deepest sea as the Scripture says, that means he has put up a no fishing sign over them. Live your life looking to the future, not the past.

First John 1:9 is the second mitigated exhortation in this paragraph (1:7 was the first). The conditional clause “if we confess our sins” carries the force of a mitigated command: “we should confess our sins.” Instead of a direct imperative telling us to confess our sins, John chooses a less direct method of pressing on us the necessity of confession of sin to God when we as Christians sin.

In verse 10 we find the third “if we say” statement. Here John addresses the concept of committing individual acts of sin. John writes, “If we say we have not sinned . . .” Notice that the word “sinned” is a verb whose tense (perfect) expresses the notion “we do not commit acts of sin.” It is human nature to deny our sin. We don’t want to face the reality of our sin. We are quick to shift the blame on someone else. That’s what Adam and Eve did back in Genesis 3. If we make this claim, two things result. First, “we make [God] a liar.” How is that true? Romans 3:23 is the answer: “for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” God’s verdict upon humanity is that all have
sinned. When a person denies he has committed acts of sin, he is in essence saying, “God, you are a liar.”

What is sin? Sin is missing the mark. That is the root meaning for the word in the New Testament. I was never any good at archery. I was lucky if my arrow even hit the target, much less the bull’s-eye. That is a description of what sin is: falling short of God’s standard. Sin is also transgression and disobedience. It is stepping over the line. It is disobeying the Law. There is something of a progression in these verses. In verse 6 you become a liar; in verse 8 you deceive yourself; and in verse 10 you make God out to be a liar. Notice also how verse 10 functions as a summary to verses 6–10 and how John semantically parallels three concepts in verses 6 and 10: “If we say—If we say;” “We lie—we make him a liar;” “and do not practice the truth”—“and his word is not in us.”

John concludes by saying, “his word is not in us.” “His word” is a general reference that is inclusive of Scripture, the gospel, sound doctrine, etc. To say that his word is not “in us” means it has not affected our belief and conduct. Notice the similar statement at the conclusion of verse 8 where we read that the “truth is not in us.” Though these statements are similar, there is a different focus to each one. The sense of the statement in verse 8 is refusing to behave according to God’s true message. The sense of verse 10 is refusing to accept that God says we do commit acts of sin. The difference is in what is being refused—the message about the true way of living (v. 8) or the message that people do sin (v. 10).42

Persson provides a good paraphrase of what John is saying in verses 5–10.

But the message which Jesus told us and which we are proclaiming to you is this: God is light (sinless and pure), there is nothing at all darkness about him. If we were to claim to have fellowship with God, while living in the darkness of sin, what we are saying is untrue, and our behavior shows that we have rejected the truth God has revealed. But if we live in the light (do right things) just as God always acts rightly in accord with his pure nature, then we truly have fellowship with one another, and the atoning death of Christ makes us clean in God’s sight and is removing all our sin from us. If we were to say that we never sin, then what we are saying is deceiving us, and we do not know the truth which God has revealed at all. But if instead we openly confess to God that we have sinned, then he will forgive us and remove all our wrong deeds from us and make us clean in his sight, because he has said he will forgive us and because he only does what is right. If we were to say that we had never sinned (done anything wrong), then by those words we are saying that God is a liar since he has said that all people have sinned, and that shows that we have not accepted his word so as to let what he says affect our lives.43
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· The work of the Spirit
· The divinity of Christ
· The work of Jesus on the cross
· Our responsibility to forsake sin and keep God’s commandments
· The danger of false teachers
· Homosexually named, Christ-centered, and remarkably practical, this study upends John’s letters anew and lays out the path for us to walk in light of Christ’s truth and love.

What does it look like to “walk in the light, as he is in the light,” to truly live as a follower of Christ? This all-important question finds its answer in three letters from the apostle John. Marked by their timeless, devotional fervor, and emphasis on obedience to God’s commands, 1, 2, and 3 John lovingly teach us how to follow Jesus in our daily lives, as we walk in the light of God’s truth and love.