

The New Testament, Book 23

I John

I John is the first, and by far the longest and richest, of three apostolic epistles written by John, “the apostle of love.” This epistle may be thought of as a family letter, from the Heavenly Father to his spiritual children. The word, “father,” is used 13 times, and the appellation, “little children,” appears 11 times. Although this letter is addressed to no individual or specific group, its style is very personal, frequently using “I” and “you.”

As implied by the resurrected Jesus, John long outlived the other 10 original apostles¹. It is generally believed that he lived in his own home in Jerusalem, taking care of Mary, the Lord’s mother, until her death; the time of her death is not known.

At some point after AD 63 (probably about AD 68-69, following the martyrdom of Paul and Peter) John is believed to have moved to Ephesus, where he spent the last 30 years of his life (with the exception of about a year of exile on the island of Patmos). It is almost certain that he wrote the Greek version of his gospel, his three epistles, and Revelation there². John was the only one of the original apostles who did not die a violent death as a martyr, and he lived to be about 100 years old. He was almost certainly the last person alive who had known and lived with Jesus, constantly, during his earthly ministry.

For more on John, the man (including the traditions concerning his supernatural survival of martyrdom, and the end of his life), see the introductory material in the study guide to his gospel.

Like Romans, Hebrews, James and II Peter, an indication of the richness of this epistle’s content is the large number of highlights that consist of only a single verse, or of two verses³. And, like II Peter, there is a sense of urgency in I John, for the teaching points come rapid-fire, like gunshots, hitting the basic truths hard, and repeating them. It is as if he wrote this letter to the Church thinking that it was his last opportunity to do so. II

¹ John 21:22. This number (11) of the original apostles does not include Judas, who committed suicide after Jesus was captured in the Garden.

² Some believe that he wrote Revelation during his year of imprisonment on Patmos. For a more thorough summary of John’s long tenure in Ephesus, including the rationale for his arrival there after AD 63 and his writing his Greek gospel and Revelation in Ephesus, see the introductory material in the study guides to John’s gospel and Revelation.

³ You may recall that, in Hebrews, some highlights consisted of only a part of one verse.

John and III John are more relaxed, more personal, and much smaller. They contain some of the basic points emphasized so strongly in I John, but not repeatedly; and, in both brief epistles, he states that he will write no more than he has, because he hopes to see the recipients soon. Yes, I John is very different from his other two epistles.

Although many commentators see it differently, it seems to me that this epistle should be included among the “general epistles”; its content definitely applies to the entire Church, the Family of God. Papias, a disciple of John, wrote that Matthew, in compiling his gospel, used “proofs” from I John⁴.

In writing his epistles, John definitely had three things on his mind: the heresy of Cerinthian Gnosticism; the importance of loving one another; and the end times, with the rise of antichrists. The word “antichrist(s)” occurs only four times in the entire Authorized Version: three times here in I John (two times singular and once plural), and once in II John; **it appears nowhere else in the Bible**. In each case the underlying Greek word is *antichristos*, simply meaning “against Christ,” a word definitely associated with the end times, although it appears nowhere in the book of Revelation, nor in Daniel or Ezekiel, the books with which we have become accustomed to associating with this word.

NOTES:

*a. Since very early times there has been a tendency to look upon these antichrists (false teachers, opposing the words and person of Christ) as forerunners of a single person to come--an evil individual. He is referred to, unnamed, by Daniel (Dan 11); he is called “that man of sin” and “son of perdition” by Paul (II Thess 2); and he is called “the beast” by John in Revelation (Rev 13f). For centuries Bible scholars, both critical and traditional, have almost universally applied the word “antichrist” as a proper noun, adding the definite article (the), capitalizing the “A” and calling this individual “the Antichrist.” For more on this extra-Scriptural naming of the individual, see the introductory material to the study guide to Revelation, and “Who or What Is ‘Antichrist’?” in “**Epilogue**” at the end of the study guide to Revelation.*

b. Jesus, Himself, warned us that “false Christs” would arise, claiming to be the Christ; but that is a very different matter⁵. In a sense, Jesus dealt with “antichrists” almost every day of his earthly ministry, i.e. people

⁴ ANF, Vol 1, Fragments of Papias, VI, p 155.

⁵ Matthew 24:24; Mk 13:22.

opposing Him and his words. The “false Christs,” about whom He warned us, would appear after his Ascension, back to Heaven. If another man arose, claiming to be the Christ, during the earthly ministry of Jesus, the gospels make no mention of it.

A. Author. The human author is John, one of the “inner circle” of Jesus, and perhaps the Lord’s dearest friend (the disciple “whom Jesus loved”)⁶. Although he doesn’t identify himself, unbroken Church tradition attributes this, as well as his two smaller letters, John’s Gospel, and Revelation, to John the elder, brother of James and son of Zebedee.

B. Place and Date. I John was probably written in Ephesus, along with II and III John, ca 80-90 AD. John’s gospel in Greek was probably also written in Ephesus, at about the same time as his epistles, translated from an original in Hebrew, written much earlier in Jerusalem, while living there with Mary, mother of Jesus. John’s Greek version is the source of the Greek versions we have today. Revelation was also written during the last years of John’s life, either on Patmos or, more probably, immediately after his return from Patmos to Ephesus.

C. Occasion. Heresies had arisen, and Christians were being led astray by them. The dominant heresy of that time was Gnosticism⁷. The name of this heresy is derived from the Greek noun *gnosis* (a seeking to know, or a search for knowledge). Gnosticism took several forms, but it was basically a form of dualism, i.e. that man is a creature of two parts: flesh and spirit. Flesh was bad, spirit was good, and the means of redemption was the acquiring of knowledge--not by exercising faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus and trusting Him for redemption.

The Gnostics taught that redemption applies only to the spirit, and that since our hopelessly evil bodies can’t be redeemed, it really doesn’t matter what we do with them (you can probably imagine the out-workings of that idea). In Ephesus a man named Cerinthus was the leader of this cult (thus the name, “Cerinthian Gnosticism”); he taught and practiced all forms of physical indulgence.

Almost everything about Gnosticism was wrong; but the fundamental error of this teaching among Christians was the **denial of the Incarnation**. Cerinthian gnosticism taught that Jesus came only in spirit, not flesh, thus denying His virgin birth, sinless humanity, substitutionary suffering and death, burial, and resurrection. Gnosticism exalted esoteric knowledge

⁶ John 13:23.

⁷ Heresies were such a problem in the early Church, that a great deal of the writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers are devoted to opposing various forms of heresy.

(hidden knowledge, obtainable only by an elite few), and proclaimed it to be the means of salvation. Thus salvation depended, not on what Jesus has done, but on our gaining secret knowledge. It was a system of self-salvation, and this salvation was only for the elite few.

In this letter, John went straight to the key issues: that Jesus came in the flesh, that redemption comes from knowing Jesus, and that it is for everyone who asks.

NOTE: *Gnosticism survives today in a variety of cults and false religious systems. The most familiar one is Freemasonry, which promises self-obtained redemption by gaining secret knowledge; this secret knowledge is available only to an elite few, and unavailable to what they call the “profane” masses. These profane masses are all of those who are not initiated into their secret knowledge. Most Freemasons are good men, many of them Christians, who have no idea that what they are doing is wrong. For information concerning Freemasonry, taken entirely from the most respected Masonic sources, see the author’s book, “33 Degrees of Deception,” Bridge-Logos, 2011.*

D. Theme. The theme of I John is two-fold: the centrality of the love of God (in Greek, *agape*); and our battle with sin and error. His closing statement in the epistle is, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”

E. Highlights. I John is another one of those books that is so rich that it is almost all highlights; however, selected ones include the following:

1. John is Writing as an Eyewitness that Jesus is Divine (1:1-3)

John opens his letter with a clear and emphatic declaration that he (along with the other apostles) was an **eyewitness** to the life and ministry of Jesus, and that Jesus was, and is, divine. In an example of the exceptional literary beauty of the AV, he declares that what he is writing is based upon “That which was from the beginning [Jesus the Christ and his earthly ministry], which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life.” He declares that “the life” (Jesus) which they have seen, heard and lived with, was eternally “with the Father [thus divine], and was manifested unto us⁸.”

2. Walking in the Light. (1:4-7)

Speaking not only for himself, but for all of the apostolic writers of Scripture, John says that their purpose in writing is that the believers may live in the full joy of the Lord. He then makes a foundational statement about God, one that he and the others learned from Him: it is that He is pure

⁸ See also John 1:14; II Pet 1:16-18; and I Jn 4:14.

light. By clear implication he declares that (spiritual) light is good and (spiritual) darkness is evil. If we say that we are rightly related to Him, but walk in spiritual darkness, he says, we are lying. But if, on the other hand, we walk in the spiritual light, that light in which He dwells, and which He Is, we can have unhindered fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son (not secret knowledge), cleanses us of all sin.

3. We Will Sin, But We Have the Solution. (1:8-10)

After we are redeemed, forgiven, and cleansed of all unrighteousness by the blood of Jesus, can we still commit sin? John not only says that we can, but he says it emphatically⁹! He says that if we claim to be incapable of sin we lie, and the truth is not in us. He even says that if we claim to be incapable of sin the Word of Christ is not in us and we make Him a liar--make his promises appear to be false! That is the bad news. However, he says, there is also good news: it is that when we sin there is a remedy. If, John says, we confess our sins, Jesus is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us (again) of all unrighteousness. Our own experience of living demonstrates the truth of the bad news; and this remedy, freely provided for us, is very definitely good news.

4. We Have the Perfect Advocate. (2:1-6)

John says that it is his desire that we do not commit sin. However, he says, when we do sin, we have the perfect advocate to defend us before the Father: Jesus Christ the righteous One. He, says John, is the perfect remedy for our sin. It is important to note that, in this passage, John is speaking of the occasional failure to live righteously, spoken of in the latter verses of Chapter 1¹⁰.

If we sin as a way of life, that is a very different matter. If we say that we know Him personally, but continuously break his commandments and violate his teachings, then we are liars, and the truth of the gospel is not in us. If we live in ongoing sin, we are false pretenders--not true children of God. If we are to declare ourselves to be believers, with our trust in Him, we should strive to live and walk as He lived and walked.

NOTE: *In v 2 there is a word that is unfamiliar to most of us; it is "propitiation." The Greek word is "hilasmos," and it is a theological term which is difficult to define without using other theological terms. To clarify it many of the modern versions render the word as "expiation," which is a*

⁹ And notice that John includes himself in this emphatic statement (vv 8-10).

¹⁰ And, we must remind ourselves from time to time that in the original manuscripts there were no chapter breaks at all. It seems to me that vv 1- 2 would be better placed at the end of Chapt 1, instead of at the beginning of Chapt 2.

synonym, but a word equally unfamiliar, and it isn't much help for most of us. For our purposes we may think of it as the means by which sin is remitted, atoned for, and forgiven as an act of mercy. By using this word John is saying that Jesus Christ is the remedy for our sins. We shall see this word again in 4:10; and now we will know what it means.

5. Hating One Another Blinds Us. (2:7-11)

John tells us in v 7 that he is **not** giving us a new commandment; yet in the very next verse he tells us that he **is** giving us a new commandment; and he goes on to explain that the new commandment is that we love one another. Furthermore, he says, if we hate one another, we are walking in darkness. He is speaking of relationships between Christians here, because he carefully uses the word, "brother." It seems that the darkness of which he speaks applies to us in two ways: the spiritual darkness of the unredeemed (1:5-7); and the darkness of the mind which comes with hating, which clouds and hinders clear thinking and reason. Since he is speaking of believers, it appears that he is speaking of this latter meaning. This hating blinds our eyes, causing us to stumble by saying and doing things we would not say or do otherwise.

But what do we do about the apparent contradiction concerning the "not new," (in verse 7) and the "new," (in verse 8) commandments? There is no help in the Greek, for John uses the very same Greek word both times: it is *kainos*, meaning "new."

Perhaps we can understand it this way. The commandment to love is old in the sense that it occurs in the Old Covenant; in fact we are given this commandment as early as the Exodus from Egypt¹¹. And yet it is also new in the sense that, in the New Covenant, it has been renewed and expressed, in its much fuller meaning, by the coming of Christ Jesus. He (and, later, his apostles) not only taught us what it means to love, but since the very essence of God is love, that Love was made flesh and dwelt among us, a walking, talking, illustration of the nature of God¹². We must walk in this newer and fuller understanding of what it means to love one another¹³.

6. The World System vs the Kingdom of God. (2:12-17)

Like James, John tells us very plainly that we are not to love the unredeemed world around us, the things of this world, or its values¹⁴. The values of the world around us are superficial and unsubstantial, driven by the

¹¹ Leviticus 19:18.

¹² John 1:14.

¹³ We will see the vital necessity of loving one another hammered home in

¹⁴ James 4:4. See also Rom 8:5-8.

carnal (fleshly, sinful) nature. The ungodly are driven by the lust of the fleshly nature, seeking sensual pleasures, lust of the eyes, desiring to possess all desirable things that we look upon (things which never satisfy because there is never enough--we always want more), and the pride of life, i.e. pride in how we look, what we can do, and what we have accomplished. All of these things are temporary. Physical beauty, physical strength, mental capacity, and material possessions all pass away and eventually fail us.

On the other hand, the things of God, what we are in Him, and what we accomplish for Him, and through Him, are not only immensely satisfying, but are eternal.

NOTE: *There is one aspect to “the lust of the eyes” that is worthy of additional thought: it is pornography, a deadly plague that ruins more lives, more marriages and more families every day. It is addictive poison and, as this is being written, it is everywhere around us. It creates and fuels unrealistic and ungodly desires that become compelling and demonic. It is what drives most sex crimes. And, sad to relate, it is a growing problem in the Church.*

Like all sin, it never satisfies, creating a compulsion to enter ever more deeply into it. The Bible warns us not to look upon such things--not at all--for one experience of it will create a desire for more, then still more, then more yet, etc. And, unless the individual thus ensnared in this deadly trap has this addiction broken by the power of the Holy Spirit, there is no stopping place. And, if the power of pornography is not broken in the life of the addict, it goes beyond thoughts, and leads to destructive decisions and evil deeds¹⁵.

7. Dealing with Antichrists. (2:18-25)

John warns us of heretics (“antichrists”) who will come, trying to seduce the believers away from the truth, teaching false doctrines. They will represent themselves as having come from a true church, and therefore are its valid representatives. These antichrist false teachers shall have come from valid churches, but are themselves false; they were never real Christians. But ye (believers), he says, have an unction--an anointing from the Holy One, i.e. the Holy Spirit--and we will be sensitive to the presence of error and evil. And, if one of these deceivers denies that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ of God, we will know that he is an antichrist enemy of truth. Anyone who denies either the Father or the Son is false; and anyone who rejects the Son cannot belong to the Father.

¹⁵ Psalm 101:3; Prov 4:23-27, 27:20; Ecc 1:8; II Cor 10:5.

NOTES:

a. One cannot have a right relationship with God the Father, apart from a right relationship with God the Son. This passage seems to plainly say that those (such as Unitarians) who deny the divinity and unique role of Jesus as redeemer, cannot know, or have a right relationship with, God the Father.

b. The second half of v 23 is all in italics. It is unusual for the translators to use italics to this extent, especially in making a doctrinal statement which is entirely in italics. The justification for this is to be seen in 5:12 to follow, and by the 9th and 10th verses of II John.

8. The Holy Spirit Will Help Us to Discern Heresy. (2:26-29)

As John continues in his warnings about false, antichrist, teachers, he seems to be remembering something Jesus had told him, and the other 10 apostles with him, on the night in which He was betrayed (Judas had left). Jesus had told them things that the Holy Spirit would do for them, after He left them¹⁶. Among these things, He said that the Spirit would “teach [them] all things.” And here John says that, “ye need not that any man teach you [to discern truth and error].” The believers have the indwelling Holy Spirit Who will reveal false things for what they are. They need only to abide in the Lord, and unrighteousness will be revealed for what it is by the Holy Spirit.

NOTE: In v 27, when John says that the believers don't need any man to teach them, he is not negating the need for the teaching ministry in the Church¹⁷; he is referring to the discerning of error when it appears, claiming to be the truth. This they can do themselves, remembering his guidance, and with the help of the Holy Spirit.

9. “We Shall Be Like Him”. (3:1-3)

In the 1st two verses of Chapter 3, John makes an amazing statement: he says that, because of his amazing, mind-staggering love, the Father has blessed us with a gift: we are called, and recognized as, the children of God! And, not only that, but he tells us an even more amazing thing: when Jesus returns, we shall see Him as He is, in his glorified form, and, because of this, **we shall be like Him!** That seems to mean that, from the time that we see Him as He is, clearly and completely, without having to look through a foggy glass, we will become perfectly righteous and free from the sin nature¹⁸. What a wonderful thought!

¹⁶ John 14:26.

¹⁷ I Corinthians 12:28-31; Eph 4:11.

¹⁸ I Corinthians 13:12.

Until that wonderful day, in light of this promise and this blessed hope, we should endeavor to lead a life that is pure and holy. It seems that we cannot yet live this way perfectly; but we should continue to try, keeping that unchanging standard, Jesus Christ the righteous, always before us (1:8-2:2).
10. True Christians Will Not Sin As a Way of Life. (3:4-9).

Having just told us about the transformation we shall undergo when Christ returns, becoming perfectly righteous, even as He is, John goes to some length to say that if we sin (now, before the return of Christ), then we are not true Christians. Does this mean that if (and when) we stumble, come short of the mark and commit a sin, we are unredeemed sinners? Of course not! In this passage the tense of the Greek verb “do” is the key; it is the continuous present tense, meaning to practice sin in an ongoing way, habitually, as a way of life.

However, we don’t need to have a mastery of Greek grammar to understand this passage. John has just told us, emphatically, that a Christian who says that he never sins is a liar, and the truth is not in him (and he includes himself in the statement)¹⁹. He would not, in this passage, completely contradict himself. Reason alone will tell us that, in this passage, John speaks of sinning habitually, as a deliberate choice, as a way of life.

***NOTE:** For another example of this: the adequacy of reason, but the greater clarity of the underlying Greek, see the study guide to Gal 6:2-5, and explanatory **NOTE a** following.*

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The Urgency in This Epistle. From this point onward the urgency in I John becomes obvious. In a way, it reads like the Book of Proverbs, for he makes teaching point after teaching point, often in a single verse, and often repeating himself. It is not as if he has forgotten what he has already written; rather, these points of essential truth are so important that he repeats them, hammering home the things that he knows to be extremely important for us to understand and remember. It reads as if it were his last chance to tell us these things²⁰. Over and over, he pounds home the basics: the nature of sin and the fact that we cannot practice sin as a way of life and be true

¹⁹ I John 1:8-2:2.

²⁰ In fact, it **was** his last chance to inform the entire Church of vital fundamentals; he wrote only two more, very brief, epistles; and both were written, as we shall see, to individuals. These two brief epistles contain some matter applicable to the entire Church; but they are not "general" epistles. Why? The riches in the five chapters of I Jn could not be squeezed into the 13 verses of II Jn or the 14 verses of III Jn.

Christians; how to recognize false, antichrist teachers; the fundamental fact that we cannot know the Father if we reject the Son; the necessity of loving one another, and living out the teachings and commandments of the Lord.

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11. We Must Love One Another. (3:10-15)

The fact that we must love one another has already been made in this epistle and elsewhere, but not with the intensity found in these six verses²¹.

The children of God are easy to recognize: they live righteous lives. Conversely, the children of Satan are easily recognized: they live unrighteous lives²².

In verse 13 John reminds us of an abiding truth: because we lead righteous lives, the unredeemed world will hate us. It seems that, by the simple fact that we don't join them in their sin, they are offended²³.

12. Love Not in Words (Only). (3:16-19)

In verse 18 of Chapter 3, John makes a startling statement which, if taken alone, would seem very wrong. He says, "My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue (only), but in deed and in truth." Throughout the Bible we are taught the importance of speaking words of love and encouragement; is he telling us that this is wrong? Of course not! Logic alone cries out against such an interpretation; but, in addition to logic we must consider the context. In this passage (in fact, throughout this entire epistle) John is saying that the love of God is an active thing--a "doing" thing--and it is a selfless thing. Because the Lord Jesus laid down his life for us, we should lay down our lives for our spiritual brothers and sisters. If we see a brother or sister in need, he asks, how can the love of God be within us if we don't care enough to do something to help? As James makes clear in his epistle, it is not enough just to say loving things to those in need; we should also do something about the problem²⁴.

13. The Inner Witness of the Spirit. (3:20-24)

The rest of Chapter 3 speaks of "our heart" and what it is saying to us. He says that something within us will tell us that what we are doing is right, or that it is wrong. And, thus guided by this inner witness, when we do what

²¹ See in this regard the study guide to Matthew 5:21-30, explanatory notes a., b. and c..

²² Those "children of the devil," living unrighteous, self-destructive lives, are not doomed. They can yet be convicted, forgiven, children of God, spiritually born into the Kingdom. In fact, the majority of the members of God's family, in the end, will probably be those who once rejected Him. For a shining example, consider Saul of Tarsus.

²³ See also in this regard Jn 16:33, 17:14; II Tim 3:12.

²⁴ James 2:15-16.

pleases God, He will hear and answer our prayers, because we keep his commandments. And the summation of his commandments is this: that we accept and believe on his Son, Jesus Christ as our redeemer and source, and that we love one another. He still hasn't made clear what it is within us that makes us uncomfortable when we do wrong, and comfortable when we do right; but in the last verse (verse 24) he makes it crystal clear. This presence within us, Who guides us through choices in life, is the indwelling Holy Spirit--"the Spirit which He hath given us."

14. Test the Spirits. (4:1-6)

Chapter 4 opens with an extremely important rule, and with the guidance for following that rule. Returning to the topic of false prophets and teachers, he reminds us that many are gone out into the World, and we will encounter them. Some will be persuasive and convincing, but we are commanded to test them. The acid test, he says, is whether or not they say that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. Every such spirit that denies that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not a child of God, nor a prophet of God; rather, by this we can know that he is of the spirit of "antichrist" (in Greek, literally, "against Christ"-- i.e. the enemy of Christ).

We are children of God, he says, and have overcome the lies of the world around us to find and know the truth of God. He that lives within us (the Spirit of God) is much greater than the spirit of the unredeemed world around us. We are the children of God, and others who know God will listen to us, our testimonies and teachings; but those of the world will not listen to us²⁵. In this way we can recognize the spirit of truth and the spirit of error in those around us.

***NOTE:** In writing this passage John definitely had Gnosticism on his mind, especially the form of this heresy prevalent in Ephesus and the surrounding territory at that time. This heresy declared that Jesus came only in spirit, and not in the flesh. But it is important to remember, as we have read in the introduction to this epistle, that to deny that Jesus came in the flesh includes the denial of a number of essential truths, including the virgin birth, his sinless earthly life, his atoning suffering and death, and his bodily resurrection. This test which, on its face, seems to apply only to one heresy, actually applies to many heresies.*

15. God Is Love. (4:7-16)

Old John, often called "the apostle of love" because of his heavy emphasis on love in his teaching and writing, is our only source for a fundamental fact

²⁵ I Corinthians 2:14.

of the Kingdom of God. This fundamental fact is that “God is love.” But what can this mean? Verse 8 of Chapter 4 is the flagship verse in this conversation, and the key to this mystery is the underlying Greek noun rendered, “love,” (and the verb form of the same word, “loveth”). The noun is *agape*, and it means the love of God, love that is unconditional, a love that is freely given--not earned. The word “loveth” is simply the verb form, *agapao*, of the same Greek word. This unconditional love cannot be known outside of a redeeming relationship with God, for it is the crown jewel of the characteristics and virtues of the Holy Spirit, Who indwells believers²⁶. This is the one characteristic that absolutely separates the redeemed from the unredeemed; only those born of the Spirit, in whom the Spirit wells, can love this way. In fact, it is the acid test of true redemption.²⁷ W.E. Vine calls *agape* “the characteristic word of Christianity²⁸.”

Now, let us deal with the statement that “God is love.” It is not adequate to say that God loves the world, both the wicked and the righteous, and thus sacrificed his only begotten Son. That is missing the point. John seems to be saying here that the very essence of the being of God is *agape* love, that all that God is, is the personification of this love. God has many virtues, but only love is identified as the equivalent to his identity. In his classic book on the subject, C.S. Lewis frequently refers to God as, “Love Himself.”

It is significant that there is no equivalent statement, anywhere in Scriptures, concerning any of his other virtues. Nowhere, for example, do they say that “God is patience,” or “God is kindness,” or “God is hope.” Only love has the distinction of being the virtue that personifies Him. **NOTE:** *In the Bible, the Greek word, “agape” is, in the AV/KJV, translated both as “love” and “charity.” In the vast majority of the appearances of “agape” it is rendered, “love.”; 28 times it is rendered “charity” by the translators, all in the epistles except for one appearance in Revelation. It also appears once, in Romans 14:15, in adverb form, as “charitably.” The modern versions overwhelmingly abandon “charity,” consistently rendering “agape” as “love” (or, as an adverb, “lovingly”).*

The word, “charity” has taken on additional meanings in recent times, but all of them are positive, and the underlying principle is caring and giving--unselfish giving. Why the AV translators chose to use “charity” at times rather than “love” is unknown (at least to me). For example, in I

²⁶ I Corinthians 13:1-3, 13.

²⁷ John 13:35; Gal 5:22-23; I Jn 3:14. See also “The Four Loves” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

²⁸ Vine, W.E.: “Expository Dictionary of New Testament words,” Vol. III, “Love,” A.1, p 20.

Corinthians 13 (the “love chapter”), “charity” is used exclusively; in fact, it is used 16 times in I Corinthians, while “love” is used only four times.

Can we infer from any of this that one rendering is automatically better than the other? Is either “charity” or “love” right or wrong? I think not. For one thing “charity” cannot be used in verb form; and, in some instances its use would create awkwardness of expression. Perhaps this at least partially explains the dual rendering of the same Greek word by the translators.

*Personally, I like the **selective** use of “charity” because “love” in modern English has so many meanings (and, at times, so little meaning, e.g. “I just love your chess pie!”). When making a point with the English rendering that what is being spoken of is the “agape” love of God, “Charity” is distinctive; this may be the reason for its exclusive use in I Corinthians 13. And, for whatever it may be worth, in his classic book on the subject, “The Four Loves,” C.S. Lewis carefully uses “charity” exclusively when making it clear that he is speaking of “agape,” the divine love of God.*

15. Perfect Love Casteth Out Fear. (4:17-18)

The following two verses are troubling to some, thinking that if they experience fear they are sinning in some way--perhaps even unredeemed. But to rightly interpret these two verses, we must consider the context, not just in these two verses, but in the context of all of John’s expansive treatment of the *agape* love of God. This small passage begins, in verse 17, by telling us that we may have boldness and confidence, in the knowledge that we will stand before God in the final judgment as dear children of God--not as his condemned enemies. As we walk in love, we are representing God (Who **is** Love) before the unredeemed world. When we are born of the Spirit of God and have his Spirit dwelling within us, and we grow in love as we mature spiritually, tormenting fear of falling and missing Heaven is progressively driven from our lives, replaced by confidence in our redeemed position before God.

Being afraid is not the unpardonable sin. Throughout the Bible we find believers experiencing fear; but never do we find it resulting in damnation. Even the mighty prophet Elijah, after his amazing triumph of faith and courage over the Baal priests on Mount Carmel, then fled for fear of a woman (Jezebel), hid himself in a wilderness, and was so downcast that he wanted to die²⁹. But as we grow and mature in the perfect love of God, tormenting fears of judgment and damnation are driven from our lives.

²⁹ I Kings 18:17-19:4.

16. Why Do We Love God? (4:19)

In verse 19, a single, brief verse, John makes a fundamental doctrinal statement, comparable to his single-verse doctrinal statement in verse 8. His statement is simply that we (believers) love God because He first loved us. This can be taken in more than one way; for example, it could mean that we, as believers, with the Holy Spirit living within us and motivating us, can't help loving God--it is natural. It could also mean that, had not God loved us while we were yet sinners, and provided for our redemption, we would not now be believers who now are spiritually alive and able to love Him. It can also mean (the usual interpretation) that, because of God's unearned love for us, bringing us to redemption, our gratitude manifests itself in our love for him. So what is the correct interpretation? I suggest that all three are correct; and there may be others. But of one thing we may be sure: His love for us, when we were yet sinners, made it possible for us, as believers, to love (*agapao*) Him.

***NOTE:** If you are using a modern version you will find that the word "Him" (or him) is missing from this extremely important verse. The modern versions will usually read something like, "We love because he first loved us." Paraphrases may read something like "We love each other because he loved us first," or "We are able to love each other because he first loved us." This is because the word "him" is not included in the Westcott-Hort Greek New Testament, and the modern Greek NTs in that tradition, upon which all modern translations are based. This resulting rendering is a valid statement; however, omission of "Him" leaves the meaning seriously incomplete; in fact, it changes the meaning.*

*The word "Him" ("him") is found in St. Jerome's Latin Vulgate Bible, the first complete Bible; it is found in Wycliffe's translation (the first Bible translated into English); and it is found the Authorized Version (KJV). Although her Amplified Bible is translated primarily from the modern Greek NTs, Mrs. Frances Siewert characteristically demonstrates her independence of thought, and her respect for the earlier translations, by rendering the verse, "We love Him because He first loved us," as does the AV/KJV. She translates the verse with "Him" in italics, because the word isn't there in her Greek NT; but she believed that it **should** be there.*

17. Love of God Requires Love of Brother. (4:20-21)

Because of our *agape* love for God, we should also have this same love for our spiritual brothers and sisters in the Church. If we don't, John says, we are false (he uses the word, "liars"). He asks rhetorically (assuming that we are Christians), if we hate a brother or sister whom we have seen and

known, how can we love God, Whom we have never seen? And then he reminds us that this commandment to love one another is not his idea; rather, he says, it comes straight from God the Son³⁰.

18. Overcoming the World. (5:1-5)

The opening verse of Chapter 5 is a re-statement, a paraphrase, of the last two verses of Chapter 4, to include a re-statement of the basic essential for true Christians: we must believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Christ of God. He then follows with something that Jesus had taught him personally: that if we love God we will keep his commandments³¹; and he adds that his commandments are not grievous, burdensome or oppressive. We can live victoriously, overcoming the challenges of living in this world, because we are children of God, and we live by faith, trusting in Him. Our faith is born of God; therefore, we can overcome the world's ungodly influences and trials by our faith.

NOTE: It is significant that John uses "whatsoever" in v 4 and not "whosoever." In this sense, it is not we that overcome the world by our faith; it is our faith that overcomes the world, for it is the creation of God.

19. The Three Witnesses. (5:6-8)

The following three verses are somewhat mysterious, but are among the most important verses in the Bible. They are also somewhat Pauline--like much of what Paul wrote--which Peter acknowledged to be sometimes difficult to understand. It seems to me that old John, like Paul, wrote from such a lofty vantage point and vision, because of what they were allowed to see and hear, that it was not always easy for them to express these things in ways that are readily understood by the rest of us³². And yet, for this very same reason, the things that they wrote are of unusual value to the rest of us, and we must seek to understand them as well as we can. Notice that the opening word, "For," with which verse 7 begins, ties it to verse 6. Likewise, verse 8 begins with the word, "And," tying it to verse 7. Thus, verses 6, 7, and 8 must be taken together.

a. Verse 6. Verse 6 tells us that Jesus the Christ "came by water and blood." But what can this mean? The key words, it seems to me, are "He came," referring to his coming to Earth, and the fulfilling of his atoning work as Messiah in these two ways. That He came "by water" may refer to his very natural birth, after his entirely supernatural conception³³. It may

³⁰ John 13:34.

³¹ John 14:15, 15:10-12.

³² I Corinthians 12:1-6. In John's case, this applies to the entire book of Revelation.

³³ Like all of the rest of us, his birth was preceded by the release of amniotic fluid ("water").

refer to his water baptism in the Jordan, signifying his coming death, burial and resurrection³⁴. It may also refer to the fact that, when Jesus was on the cross, and the Roman soldier thrust a spear into his side, there came forth both blood and water³⁵. And so, which of these is the valid interpretation? Perhaps all three are correct.

But what do we make of his coming by blood? This almost certainly refers to the blood He shed in the scourging, and on the cross, fulfilling the first part (death) of what was symbolized in his baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist.

b. Verse 7. Verse 7 is not only one of the most important verses in the Bible; it is also one of the most controversial. Its tremendous importance lies in the fact that **it is the only single verse in the entire Bible** which clearly states the triune nature of God, i.e. the Holy Trinity. The source of the controversy is the fact that it is omitted from the Westcott-Hort Greek New Testament, and all of the modern Greek NTs in the Westcott-Hort tradition that have followed it; thus, it is omitted from almost all of the modern versions of the Bible, because they are based upon the modern Greek New Testaments. The omission of this verse creates an awkward problem for the modern versions (as does the omission of many other verses) in the numbering of the verses. Some just omit the verse and its number, so that verse 6 is followed by verse 8. Others divide verse 8 into two verses, creating a verse 7 that makes little sense when standing alone.

So, is verse 7 a valid part of I John 5, or is it not? Critical scholars can wax emphatic concerning some of the things that they reject in the Authorized Version and its underlying Greek NT, the Textus Receptus; but, concerning I John 5:7, they can be particularly vehement. What has been written in attacking and defending this one verse would, literally, fill a small library. The conflict will definitely not be settled here; but a brief summary of the arguments, pro and con (perhaps I should say “con and pro,” because first I will summarize the reasons that it is rejected), follows.

(1) Opposing verse 7. Critics say that the verse is not found in what they call “the best” manuscripts, meaning primarily Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus (4th Century). They also point out (correctly) that it was not included in the oldest known manuscripts of Saint Jerome’s Latin

³⁴ One of the heresies that troubled the Church in the early centuries was that Jesus had no pre-existence in Heaven; rather, according to the heresy, He was not divine until his baptism in the Jordan, when the Spirit came down upon Him.

³⁵ John 19:34

Vulgate Bible (it is, however, included in all later manuscripts of the Vulgate).

(2) Supporting Verse 7. Tertullian, in his defense of the doctrine of the Trinity, quoted from verse 7 in 200 AD, 150-200 years earlier than the “best” manuscripts mentioned above³⁶. And, concerning the Vulgate, verse 7 was inserted in the edition of 800 AD, 400 years after Jerome’s death, based upon much older Latin manuscripts. In addition to this, with verse 7 removed, verse 8 is essentially a redundant repetition of verse 6; yet, with verse 7 in place, the three verses form a perfectly sequenced continuity of expression.

For more on the controversy concerning the validity of I John 5:7 see “The Case for I John 5:7” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

20. Without Jesus, We Are Lost. (5:12)

John has already made it clear that we cannot be rightly related to the Father if we deny the Son (2:22-24). Here, in the closing verses of his epistle, he makes it clear that, apart from Jesus, we cannot have life (spiritual life) and redemption. In verse 12 this basic fact of life is condensed into 19 simple words, simply and unmistakably.

I remember a store front church in Haiti which had, painted boldly and simply across the glass of its front: “Sans Jesus, vous ette perdi!” (Without Jesus, you are doomed!). I never met that Haitian preacher, but I have admired him since I first saw his storefront declaration. And it really is that simple

21. John Wants Us to Know (Not Hope). (5:13)

In the very next verse John again makes clear a vital fact of spiritual life: it is that we can know--not just hope--that we are redeemed and have the gift of eternal life in the presence of God. Here, the Greek word John uses for “eternal” (*aionios*) is the same word he used in John 3:16, rendered there “everlasting.” Many teach that we cannot know that we are redeemed and will be with the Lord when we die; they believe that we can only do our best and hope for a good outcome. This verse, and others (e.g. II Corinthians 5:8) would seem to declare them wrong, along with verses 18-20 at the end of this epistle where, three times in succession, the declaration, “and we know” is made, concerning our relationship with God and our eternal destiny.

22. The Mystery of the Sin Unto Death. (5:16-17)

³⁶ ANF, Vol 1, Against Praxeas, p 621.

Verses 16 and 17 are baffling to me--and to many others. Many commentators have strong opinions about the meaning of the “sin unto death”; but I think it is risky to be dogmatic in this matter, because there seems to be absolutely nothing else in all of Scripture, on this subject, to help us to understand it.

Perhaps the most common interpretation among evangelical believers is that the sin unto death is to refuse to accept Jesus as Redeemer, thus condemning one’s self to everlasting spiritual death, separated from God in Hell. But there is one large problem with this position: John clearly is speaking here to, and of, believers--those already redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. He says “If any man see **his brother [or sister]**” (emphasis mine) sin in such a way, we are to help him (or her) cease from it.

Others see this passage as a reference to what Jesus called the one unforgivable sin: to blaspheme the Holy Spirit³⁷. It is difficult for me to see this unforgivable sin as one that will keep us out of Heaven, because there are millions of sincere and devoted believers who have been taught that gifts or promptings of the Holy Spirit cannot happen today, and they call apparent miracles the works of Satan. I simply cannot believe that God would condemn multitudes of sincere believers to Hell, simply because they may only have misunderstood a doctrinal point, or have been wrongly taught; everything that I know about God and his Word cries out against that thought.

A third possibility is the sort of sin that can become addictive and, eventually, cause a believer to choose the sin over his relationship with God, turning his back on Jesus to serve the sin, and rejecting the One Who ransomed him. But this thought has clear implications concerning the Calvinist doctrine of eternal security, and I will not venture farther into that theological minefield. Unless there is some other explanation, I lean toward this third interpretation; but I will definitely leave the reader to ponder this matter for himself.

***NOTE:** For more on the unforgivable sin see “The Troubling Matter of the Unforgivable Sin” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).*

23. A Summation on Death, Life, Sin, and Righteousness. (5:18-20)

In closing, John the aged returns to the matter of death, life, sin, righteousness, and our eternal destination. With final words about sinning as a way of life, he reminds us that, although the world around us lies and wallows in wickedness, the Son of God has come to give us understanding

³⁷ Matthew 12:31-32; Mk 3:28-29; Lk 12:10.

that we may know Him, live free from the pig pen of sin, and have eternal life. Three times he begins a statement with the clause, “And we know...,” hammering home the fact that we need not live and die in uncertainty about our eternal destination. He wishes us to **know** that we are the redeemed children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, and are rightly related to Him. 24. John’s Final Advice for Us. (5:21)

Knowing that John’s closing statement was his last recorded statement to the Church at large, what he said in closing becomes particularly important. His last six words are simple and brief: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”

It is important to remind ourselves that, no matter what our age, knowledge, experience or wisdom, compared with the man who wrote these words we are all, spiritually, “little children.” He was writing as the last person alive who had known Jesus intimately. He was one of the Lord’s three closest friends, had lived with Him, learned from Him, performed miracles at his direction, and had, with Peter and James, seen Jesus transfigured, talking with Moses and Elijah. Yet his parting words to us are only, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols”--just six simple words; yet they must have enormous significance. So what did he mean?

On their face, these six simple words mean that we should not serve or worship pagan idols, a thing that most of us would not even think of doing anyway. I readily confess that I don’t know what else he meant by those precious six words, but I have a theory. Perhaps he was warning us that it is easy to allow someone, or some thing, to subtly become more important in our lives than our relationship with, and responsibility to, the Lord. The possibilities for such “idols” which may invade our lives: inordinate love for another person (even a spouse), pursuit of a profession, wealth, success, alcohol and other drugs, the pleasures of sin for a season, etc., are endless. Some idols can be good things, in and of themselves; but, if we allow them to crowd the Lord and his will for us out of first place in our lives, they can, I believe, become the idols of which John is speaking. And it can happen to us without our realizing it, until it becomes a compulsion.

And so, we must take care to keep Him and his will for us supreme in all that we do, avoiding idols that can, subtly or compellingly, move the Lord Jesus out of first place in our lives.

NOTE: *Actually, although this epistle is John's last **personal** message to the Church, his last recorded message to the Church is the book of Revelation, the final book of the Bible. In Revelation, however, he is only trying to repeat what he is told by the glorified Christ, and--like Ezekiel--to describe*

the indescribable things that he saw and heard. At the time that he faithfully wrote what he was told to write, and did his best to describe what he saw and heard, I doubt that he understood 5% of what he wrote.

But when he wrote here, as the summation of his last personal message to the Church, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols," he was summing up from his vast knowledge, wisdom, and the riches of his divine revelation. He knew exactly what he meant, it was his his last message to us (the Church at large), and we would do well to frame those six words, hang them on the wall, and seek to understand and follow them³⁸.

³⁸ Whether Revelation was written before, or after I John, is unknown; most students of the Bible, however, believe that Revelation was the very last book of the Bible to be written, perhaps 5 years after I Jn. My guess is that Revelation was the very last inspired document to be written; it is in its own, separate, category, and it gave the old apostle plenty to ponder in the closing years of his long and fruitful life.