

SLOW JOHN: THINKING THROUGH JOHN'S LETTERS

These three documents are similar to each other and to the Fourth Gospel in style and language; although they do not bear the name of John the apostle and brother of James, they have traditionally been ascribed to him and were probably written in the last decade of the first century to combat false teaching about Christ and this-world-centred attitudes. Though John takes no part in the story of the early church after Acts 8:14, he is mentioned as meeting Paul at Jerusalem (Gal 2:9), and is very probably the John named as the author of the book of Revelation (1:1 etc). He is recorded as having lived and ministered at Ephesus in Asia Minor (western Turkey), where he died in the early days of Trajan's reign (AD/CE 98-117).

His first letter is more a tract than a personal letter, and is full of pastoral concern for Christians whom he calls his 'little children'. The second and third letters are much shorter, but punch above their weight; 2 John is apparently to a 'lady' which may be a cover name for a church, while 3 John is to 'Gaius' who seems to be an actual individual. John's sequence of thought is sometimes difficult to follow as he seems to be recapitulating one moment and changing track abruptly at the next. However, he transmits mainstream Christian teaching and 1 John in particular has always been found devotionally stimulating. For the issues involved in authorship, dating and purpose, see commentaries such as: John Stott *The Epistles of John* (Tyndale/IVP 1964, 2nd ed 2009); David Jackman *The Message of John's Letters* (BST/IVP 1988, 2nd ed 1992); Tom Wright *Early Christian Letters for Everyone* (SPCK 2011).

I John

1:1-2 ¹*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.* ²*The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.*

Living Word

[1:1] Life with a capital 'L'. It's always been there. Nobody created it, caused it to happen or commanded its appearance. It is its own self-expression, never silent, never out-of-date, eternally here and everywhere. Speaking with a voice that brings things, and people, into being; not just existing, but living, responsive persons. Us.

I can't get over this. We – Peter, James, Mary, I myself John and all the others – have listened to the human voice of this living Word. We've seen his human form with these natural eyes. Not only have we watched him getting on with his everyday business, we've bumped into him in the way you do, we've hugged him for dear life, everything you'd expect, if it wasn't for the fact that he was there before it all started, and now he's here, telling us homely stories about ... Life with a capital 'L'.

[1:2] Telling us about himself and his Father. We couldn't possibly have known if he hadn't shown it to us. You can fail to see something, or you can see it and not understand it, but here we were seeing and hearing and understanding what has always been the truth. To live, really to be alive, is to join the life of the Father and Son which has never stopped being there, however far back you go in time or before time. Yes, we've seen this in our own personal experience, and now we're passing it on to you, the word about The Word, an absolutely certain and rock-solid message straight from the Living One himself.

1:3-4 ³*We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.* ⁴*We write this to make our joy complete.*

Part of our company

[1:3] I'm so excited about this that you'll have to forgive me for repeating myself occasionally. It isn't as if we apostles are passing on something we happened to hear at second hand. Even if I'm the last surviving first-hand witness, what I'm telling you is as valid as if I saw Jesus and listened to his characteristic Galilean burr only yesterday. So, you may be asking, does that mean that you apostles have had privileged access to Jesus' companionship, and now you're pretty well all gone the rest of us who came along later will have to make to do with a few stories we've got to take on trust? Well, here's

the glorious secret: as we share our experiences with you, you become part of our company! You see things through our eyes, you hear the words of the Lord in your own language, you sit at the same table with us. Even better, you join the original family circle that (as I've already explained) has existed from eternity, Father and Son together in the unity of perfect love. Just as we became full members of that family circle by believing what Jesus said to us from his Father, so you become equally full members of the same circle by taking on trust what you hear from us. The Fellowship of the Living Word. Constantly expanding to take in more and more people. [1:4] That's what gives the Father and the Son greatest delight; and it's what gives us similar delight, as we see you being drawn in and sharing the intimacy of God himself. The single stone dropped into the pool, and the ripples widening till they reach the far bank. It's a very precious thing, this expanding circle of life – I know no joy like it. And if the others were here, they'd say the same. Just don't let the message stop with you.

1:5-7 ⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. ⁷ 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, purifies us from all sin.

Living a lie

[1:5] What is this message? Where do I start? Where the word of God itself starts, perhaps: the separation of light from darkness. Only with God the light was there first, because his nature, his being, is all light. Darkness has no part in it. I'm talking, of course, of good and evil. There is absolutely no evil in God – he is all blazing goodness, total purity. [1:6] Then along we come and, as I hope we've all done, we hear the good news, put our trust in Christ and start identifying ourselves as members of God's heavenly family. Do we realise fully what this involves? Suppose there is still some compromise with evil in our lives, some shadow cast by a persistent intention to have our own way and not God's? Then we're living a lie. We've received the Spirit of truth into our lives but we're denying him in what we allow ourselves to do.

[1:7] You can walk in the shadows of your deliberate self-life, or you can walk in the sunlight where Jesus is. It's a no-brainer. For one thing, you won't be able to relate totally to the other Christians in your group if you're always making excuses and trying to live two parallel lives; they're not idiots and sooner or later they're going to suspect you're not really with them in spirit. And here's another thing: Jesus died to wash you through and through from any taint of sin and to make you into a saint of his. Why else did God allow his Son to hang bleeding on that cross? It was so that you and evil could part company from that moment on. The precious secret is that as we consciously invite Jesus to be our Companion and Guide on our journey, we find that same Master humbly washing any grime off our feet in the wayside spring whose source is Calvary.

1:8-10 ⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

No sin unforgiven

[1:8] Then suppose we start saying, Oh, I'm full of the Spirit, and my flesh life has melted away, so I haven't got any need for forgiveness that I'm aware of. Not so fast! You could be fooling yourself. Our old nature has a deep-seated need for self-justification, which won't allow us to think that we're in the wrong, either with God or with our fellow-humans. Am I quite sure that pride in my own goodness, the devil's old lie, hasn't quietly taken the place of God's true assessment of my spiritual state? [1:9] But the moment we drop our defences and come humbly back to him, accepting his estimate of us and admitting that our conscience was right all along, then the miracle happens. God honours his word to us. He has told us loud and clear that if we trust Christ to pay the penalty for us, he will absolve us

entirely. That's the arrangement he's satisfied with, and he's sticking to it. No sin remains unforgiven, no blemish stays on the record. Incredible but true!

[1:10] You may still be insisting that, deep as you are into potential trouble, you haven't actually broken any of the standard rules (yet). Not only are you fooling yourself, you are wilfully contesting his estimate of your heart condition. You may claim you're reading the Bible regularly, but you aren't allowing it to do its life-changing work in you. You're telling the Spirit of truth that he's a liar. Well, who's the liar?

2:1-2 ¹ *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* ² *He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*

Someone to plead our cause

[2:1] Please don't get me wrong: I'm not trying to scare the life out of you, I'm your spiritual father who has your best interests at heart. I want you to walk in the centre of God's will, doing what pleases him. But there may be times when we know we've disregarded God's will and gone our own way, and we need to be brought back to him. We can't do this on our own, we need someone who is completely in the clear with God to do it for us. That someone is Jesus, who has promised to act on our behalf and represent us before his Father and ours. [2:2] When our relationship with our Creator has broken down, we can't simply wander into his presence as if nothing had happened – we need someone to plead our cause and take action to blot out our offences. Well, Jesus has achieved this for us in his own Person by dying on the cross, where he bore not only all our sins but the sins of every single man and woman who has ever lived or will live on this earth. Jesus is our way back to God, our escort into the holiest place, our intercessor at the throne. We can't atone for the wrong in our lives; but he can, and he has.

2:3-6 ³ *We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands.* ⁴ *Whoever says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person.* ⁵ *But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him:* ⁶ *whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.*

Determined to obey

[2:3] I've been talking about having a relationship with God the Father through Jesus his Son, entering the family circle of the One who has always been there, knowing him by faith as intimately as one friend knows another by sight, sound and touch. But you can't remain someone's friend if you don't take the slightest notice of what they say. How can I be sure I've got this relationship with God if I disregard his clear instructions? [2:4] Let me say as plainly and as forcefully as I can: if you profess to know and love the Lord Jesus Christ, and you consistently disobey his explicit commands, you are a hypocrite and a deceiver, and your profession is utterly hollow. You are simply not the genuine article. [2:5] Equally, if you seek out his will for you in Scripture, and listen out for his voice as a regular practice, utterly determined to subordinate your wishes to his Lordship, then falsehood has no place in you: the Spirit of truth has free run in your heart, and you can embark on the adventure of discovering how very much the Lord loves and has loved you, and of loving him in return. Out of this will flow a genuine love of those around you. It is the perfect love-match that God always intended should happen.

This unity with the Lord, this being one in heart and mind with him, isn't some hopeless ideal we shall never attain in this life. I sometimes catch myself wondering whether I really am a Christian at all; but there's a simple test I apply which stops me being too introspective: [2:6] are my eyes fixed on the Lord Jesus Christ today? Being a disciple doesn't mean trotting out a form of words or feeling specially pious, it means making my daily life available to him, for him to walk around in the streets and lanes and the

home where I find myself, the same way he once walked around Nazareth or Jerusalem.. Taking Jesus with me, knowing he's there.

2:7-8 ⁷ *Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard.* ⁸ *Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and in you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.*

Old and new command

[2:7] Believe me, my friends, I have your best interests at heart, and so does the Lord. I'm not trying to spring a new kind of teaching on you that you've never heard before. It's the old familiar stuff you had right at the start of your Christian lives. In fact the double commandment about loving God and your neighbour heart and soul has always been there in the Law. [2:8] So why does Jesus himself call it a 'new' commandment? Because, as the 'new covenant' always promised, the old law has now become part of us, not external any more but internal. It's become a present reality, demonstrated supremely in the life and self-giving of Jesus while he was on earth, but also, thanks to the Holy Spirit within us, being demonstrated in your life and mine. It's solid evidence that the darkness of hatred and selfishness has lost its old power, it's on the way out because the Light of the World is now shining steadily, and that's the light of truth we've all been waiting for.

2:9-11 ⁹ *Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness.* ¹⁰ *Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble.* ¹¹ *But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.*

In the shadowlands

[2:9] So why do I need to remind you about this command to love? Because some of us still don't get it. There are some professing Christians who make all the right noises about 'walking in the light' and trusting Christ for their salvation, and yet you find they're engaged in a full-out hate campaign against a fellow-believer and saying the most frightful things about them or even to their face. Let me tell you frankly, that kind of person is skulking around in the shadowlands; they're still on the side of the enemy because they've never let Christ convict them of the wrong direction of their hearts. [2:10] How different from true Christian love which is always more concerned with others' needs than with their own, which lets itself be irradiated by the love of God and which consequently would never put another in harm's way. [2:11] You see, once you allow yourself to be possessed by a spirit of resentment against a fellow-disciple, you're like someone going for a walk at night: no matter how well you know the territory, everything's unfamiliar, you lose your sense of direction and you end up completely lost. It's as though you really had gone totally blind. Jesus experienced this kind of hatred from the Pharisees who wanted to string him up, and he told them frankly that even though they thought they were seeing straight, they had in fact lost the power of vision. Such is the tragedy of unbelief.

2:12-14 ¹² *I am writing to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.* ¹³ *I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.* ¹⁴ *I write to you, dear children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.*

Different stages in the journey

[2:12] 'Hold on a moment, John – why are you writing this letter? Is it to beat us up for not being more perfect than we are? Some of us haven't been Christians for very long, while others have been faithfully serving Christ for decades. Yet you seem to be condemning us all for being loveless hypocrites.' Yes,

good point, I need to remember that we're all at different stages in our journey with the Lord. Let's each be grateful for where we are. You may be a relatively young disciple who has come to Christ because you realise your life isn't right in the sight of God. You've heard the message of the cross and the offer of forgiveness, and you've eagerly closed with that offer. Don't believe anyone who tells you you're deluded or arrogant. You really are forgiven, justified, washed clean through what Jesus has done for you. His very name ('Jesus' means 'God saves') guarantees your spiritual authenticity.

[2:13a] Similarly, you wonderful people of maturer years who put your trust in Christ all those years ago: was it all an empty dream? Has your youthful enthusiasm evaporated? Just be reassured that God's known you far longer than you have known him. He has loved you before the foundation of the world. You've stayed with him through thick and thin, and you're still here. Fantastic!

[2:13b] And now for the spiritual 'teenagers', who made a profession some years ago and are serving Christ in the church or out in society – have you given up yet? Not at all. You're still fighting the enemy with everything you've got, and you've seen a good measure of victory; you just need to stand firm in the face of fresh temptations, and remember that it isn't you who wins the battle, it's the Lord Jesus.

[2:14] Yes, you say, thanks, but however long I'm supposed to have been a Christian, frankly I feel a bit of a failure, and everything you've said so far has reinforced that feeling, particularly when it comes to loving other people. I really wonder whether I'm making the grade. Well, we're going to come back to the love theme a little later, but let me underline what I've just been saying. Don't let anyone fool you. You spiritual infants with all your teething pains, by trusting Christ you really have come to know the Father (which means eternal life). You spiritual veterans, who think 'I've seen it all before,' you really have connected with the God who has loved you since eternity. You spiritual teenagers, with your ups and downs, you really are unstoppable, because the word of God has become part of your thinking and yes, as I see again and again, you've sent the devil flying from the field.

2:15-17 ¹⁵ Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. ¹⁶ For everything in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷ The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives for ever.

God as number one

[2:15] I just don't want you to lose these precious characteristics by abandoning your first love for something else. I'm talking about what people tend to call 'the real world' with its attractions and philosophies and its insistent demands. It can so easily replace Christ in your heart. You can't keep God as number one in your affections if at the same time you are putting other things on a kind of divine pedestal. [2:16] If you ask me what I'm talking about, let's go back to the first ever temptation in the garden, when Eve was looking at the forbidden fruit and wondering whether to eat it or stick with the explicit command of God. First and foremost it appealed to her physical appetites: it was fleshy and tasty and she kind of just had to have it *now*. Combined with that, it looked really nice, it glowed with a beauty that got to her and whispered to her aesthetic longings. But probably most potent of all, it connected with what one might call her sense of self-worth: it would give her status, people would come to her for wise advice, she would become someone to be reckoned with in her own right, without her having to depend on the Lord God the whole time.

She didn't ask whether this was OK with God. This is what always happens: God and the world have diametrically opposite ideas – or to put it another way, they can't both occupy the number one spot.

[2:17] The problem is, which is going to outlast the other? The world of our physical senses and human ideas seems so immediate and compulsive, but it's not going to be around for ever, in fact it's going to let you down sooner rather than later. The fruit of the other tree stood for something greater and more

permanent than instant personal satisfaction: hang in there with what God has said he wants, and you'll outlast the universe, you'll stay connected with the Life that never dies.

2:18-23 ¹⁸ Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. ¹⁹ They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us. ²⁰ But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. ²¹ I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. ²² Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist – denying the Father and the Son. ²³ No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

Mr Pseudo-God

[2:18] The other source of confusion I'm warning you about – I feel like a parent lecturing my children! – is deceptive teaching. You know that ever since Pentecost we have been living in the final age of this old earth. There's not long to go now; Jesus could come back at any time. But meanwhile there's intense opposition to his kingdom. This will ultimately crystallise into one figure, Mr Pseudo-God himself (you've been warned often enough about him); but his agents are already at work all over the place, as the Lord told us they would be, not only false Messiahs but highly charismatic teachers whose one aim is to detach you from the true Christ. If you exclaim, 'I know what you're talking about,' then you won't need me to tell you that we really are living in the dying days of the present age.

[2:19] These teachers usually emerge from perfectly sound Christian churches. Sad, but true. In the end they quietly or noisily distance themselves from any fellowship with us; but actually they never were truly in fellowship with us – if they had been spiritually kosher, they might have engaged in lively debate about what constitutes apostolic doctrine, but they would have stayed around as members of the team. The fact that they've upped and gone suggests strongly that they never truly belonged. This isn't the case with everyone who leaves a church, of course; but it's a useful rule of thumb.

On-board navigator

[2:20] The fact is, if you're worried about being able to spot these people, don't forget the Holy Spirit who lives in your midst. He is God's gift to you in the new dispensation, every Christian's on-board navigator making sure we don't lose our way and hit the rocks. [2:21] If I thought you were confused about what exactly is the gospel, I'd have written a rather different kind of letter; the fact is, you know perfectly well what God has done in Christ, so you're able to detect the slightest variation from the core element, no matter who's spinning the alternative line or what language they dress it up in.

[2:22] I'm not saying we shouldn't use up-to-date expression in our preaching and teaching, or that we don't need to make sure everyone hears in their own native tongue the wonderful facts of what God has done – of course we should – what I'm getting at is that distortions of the truth arise from the failure to acknowledge Jesus as God's chosen Messiah and King. At the heart of the movement to displace Christ from his rightful Lordship is a refusal to bow the knee to him as God's one true Son – which in turn strikes at the very fatherhood of God. [2:23] If Jesus isn't the Son of God, as these people are basically teaching, then God isn't the kind of Father to whom we can give the adoration of our hearts. If however we accept Jesus as having the full authority of unique Sonship, we gain the full assurance that God his Father is our Father too. Can't you see where these lies come from?

2:24-27 ²⁴ As for you, see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵ And this is what he promised us – eternal life. ²⁶ I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. ²⁷ As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in

you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in him.

Original message

[2:24] ‘But surely new truths about God continue to be revealed – otherwise what’s all this about Jesus bringing a fresh revelation of God?’ This is exactly what I’m talking about: it’s an ever-so-subtle distortion of God’s word. The message you heard right from the start wasn’t that Jesus is a new revelation of God, it was that Jesus is the final expression of God in human flesh. Get that into the centre of your thinking, and make sure it stays there! Trust the original message of the gospel to be right. Then you’ll have a faith that is securely anchored in the full Fatherhood of the Father and the full Sonship of the Son. [2:25] Otherwise you miss out on the precious offer Jesus was always going on about, how coming to him means you start a new life that goes on literally for ever.

[2:26] I wouldn’t have sat down and fired off this letter to you if there weren’t people around whose business is to mislead ordinary Christians. Charming, confident, authoritative figures, levering away at the foundations of your faith. Religious rogues. [2:27] How can we possibly see through them, you ask? Well, I was talking just now about the precious gift of the Holy Spirit. He is God’s permanent installation in you, Christ on the inside helping you to understand things. He’s your personal oil well that never runs dry, continually feeding the lamp of God’s truth in the temple of your heart. In that sense you don’t actually need external mentors at all (though you may need my letter to remind you of this!). Just as Moses told us all those years ago, we are to be a holy priesthood, drawing our ministry and our inspiration from the Divine mentor indwelling all of us together and each of us individually. Let me say it as simply and as clearly as I can: the truth isn’t a set of abstract concepts or philosophical ideas, it is a Person who will never mislead you or let you down. He’s been your Teacher from Year One, so why not stick with him now?

2:28-29 ²⁸ *And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.* ²⁹ *If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.*

Coming back soon

[2:28] Now listen, my dear children. There’s another reason why you need to keep close to our Lord Jesus Christ and stay utterly dependent on him. He’s coming back soon to gather us all to himself. You don’t want to be skulking away in the shadows hoping he won’t notice you. On that Day of all days you want to be able to run into his arms and enjoy the full glory of his wonderful presence. [2:29] My question is, are you leading the kind of life he would recognise as being like his? He has never compromised with evil in the slightest degree. If you claim to have been born again into God’s family, the evidence should be a life of solid goodness and practical holiness. I’m sure you are fully aware of this.

3:1-3 ¹ *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.* ² *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.* ³ *All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.*

True-born heirs

[3:1] I never cease to be amazed and humbled at the quite extraordinary love our heavenly Father has shown us in making us members of his Divine family. He has personally signed our (second) birth certificates! He has even given us new secret names which will be revealed in due course. This is something the unbelieving world around us simply cannot understand – why would we want to waste

our whole lives worshipping and following a God whose very existence most people think is highly debatable? If only they would open their eyes to what he is really like! [3:2] Oh my deeply-loved and precious fellow-Christians, our true home isn't on this earth, it's in heaven; and this is not only true for the endless future, it's true now. We are already true-born heirs of everything our Father has in store for us, even if we don't know in detail what shape the new creation is going to take or what kind of creatures we are going to become. All we know is that one day soon we're not going to have to walk by faith any longer, we're going to see him face to face, not a different Jesus but the one who has been there all along. The veil will quite simply be pulled aside and never replaced. And now listen to this: what happens to those who are born into a particular family? Why, they bear the family likeness, which may get more pronounced as they grow older. In the same way, we shall find that we have grown into the likeness of Jesus himself. That's what being a Christian means: growing into a Jesus person, while remaining ever more purely oneself.

[3:3] Yes, that's the challenge: purity. Each of us has got to clean up his or her own act. If we're going to get a sparkling new set of heavenly clothes, we can't go about in our dirty old clothes any longer. God's original command is, 'Be holy – why? – because I'm holy. Non-negotiable, sorry.' You can't assume that just because you've put your trust in Christ, and laid hold on his promise of eternal life, he's going to wave a magic wand over your life and suddenly make you perfect. You and I have an active part to play in our own saint-making. This will undoubtedly mean that we have to revise our casual attitude towards sin and self-indulgence.

3:4-6 ⁴ Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. ⁵ But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. ⁶ No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.

No compromise with evil

[3:4] You'll hear people telling you that what we call 'sin' is nothing to worry about, in fact it's just a mistake we all make, or it's even (they say) part of what makes us fully human. Utter rubbish. To sin deliberately and willingly is to go counter to God's intentions and to break his universal moral law. A definition of sin could well be 'wilful disobedience to God's declared will'. [3:5] You don't need me to remind you that the number one reason why Christ Jesus turned up on this planet of ours was to deal with the whole sin question – to draw its sting, to break its power, to cancel the huge debt hanging over mankind by paying it himself. If you want any clearer demonstration that sin has never been God's plan for humanity, look at the life of Jesus. He fought evil and falsehood, he met temptation head-on and never gave way for a moment – and yet he still remained fully human. [3:6] If you count yourself a loyal follower of his, your attitude will be the same as his: no compromise with any form of evil. If on the other hand you consistently choose a form of behaviour that the word of God and your conscience tell you is wrong, isn't this evidence that you've never set the Lord Jesus in the centre of your vision – in fact, that you've never come to know him personally at all?

3:7-10 ⁷ Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. ⁸ The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. ⁹ No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God. ¹⁰ This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.

The new Christ-nature

[3:7] Look, I wouldn't be fulfilling my deep sense of pastoral responsibility towards you if I didn't warn you emphatically about this alternative teaching currently going the rounds of our church fellowships.

Just get this straight: the 'righteous' person in the Old Testament scriptures is commended, not because he or she professes to be godly, but because they actually are. They do good to others without thinking of their own self-interest, just as Jesus did. That's the nature of God. [3:8] The old enemy would love us to think that God created man and woman just for his own self-satisfaction, as a kind of Divine ego trip; in fact that's what he has tried to make us believe right from the start – but he's wrong. He's always been wrong, twisting things for his own advantage, dead set against the good and holy will of God. That's why the Lord Jesus appeared on earth: to undo this evil unleashed by the devil, with all its multiple consequences, even if he had to go to the cross to achieve it. And he won't stop until he's finished the job he came to do. [3:9] There's a remorseless logic about all this. If you're reborn as a child of God, as I take it you are, then the new Christ-nature he has put in you is incapable of behaving in a consistently disobedient way. You have been recreated with a heavenly genetic code which makes wrongdoing anathema to you. I'm not saying you're impervious to temptation, just as Christ himself wasn't; nor am I saying that you won't need to confess your abject spiritual failures, as I've already pointed out. But the same Holy Spirit who breathed new life into you is now a permanent part of your character make-up: you may long (as far as your old self is concerned) to do what you know to be wrong, but you'll find a strong counter urge within you to give up all that stuff. [3:10] The difference between Spirit-born children of God and flesh-born children of the prince of this world is perfectly obvious: if you're not leading a constructively good and unselfish life, then I don't mind who you are or what you claim to have done for the Lord, you aren't showing a God family likeness, and you're clearly not one of his people. This particularly applies in the key matter of whether or not you show real sacrificial love for your Christian fellow-disciples. We're now going to consider this at some length.

3:11-15 ¹¹ For this is the message you heard from the beginning: we should love one another. ¹² Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. ¹³ Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. ¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. ¹⁵ Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.

God's unconditional love

[3:11] So, all this about love, what are we talking about? It's not just world peace, or everyone getting on with each other. It's something the Jewish nation had hammered into its consciousness from the very start, that if God loved us enough to rescue us so miraculously from slavery in Egypt, the least we could do would be to model that kind of Divine love among ourselves, and so be a nation with a difference. [3:12] There were the old cautionary tales, of course: how the evil unleashed in Eden coiled itself round one of Adam's sons, and we find Cain beating his brother Abel senseless and lifeless for no better reason than that God had rejected his efforts at sacrifice, while accepting Abel's offering. Hadn't he shown the Lord he was grateful for the fruits of the earth? And he had contributed the sweat of his labour, while his slovenly brother had simply hauled a new-born lamb out of the sheepfold and presented it as his passport to God's favour. [3:13] Have you ever wondered why people the world over show such animosity towards us? Jealousy, pure and simple. Why should God favouritise people who've done nothing to merit it? They can't see that this is the heart of the Divine nature, to forgive the utterly undeserving. [3:14] It's a powerful sign of God's ability to bring new life out of spiritual deadness, when you find a group of people who are prepared to accept each other for no better reason than that they've been shown unconditional love themselves. I would go even further, and say that the absence of such mutual love and tolerance is evidence that there's no spiritual life in a fellowship. Death reigns supreme – and what a tragedy that is! [3:15] Our Lord and Master, who knew what he was talking about, said that anger and hatred among his disciples was the equivalent of a murder scene. It's as though you wanted the other person permanently out of the way. Ever felt like that? So it stands to reason: how could

anyone who hates another human being actively enough to want to terminate them actually be in living touch with the One True God who is the source of eternal life? You can't go around with murder in your heart and preach a gospel of forgiveness and grace. Ask Saul of Tarsus.

3:16-18 ¹⁶ *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.* ¹⁷ *If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?* ¹⁸ *Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

Proactive compassion

[3:16] Real love, Divine love, is radical and sacrificial. It's not just a distant ideal, it has happened in our very midst. We saw it with our own eyes at Calvary. The King of love voluntarily walking the one-way road to a painful and shameful death so that we worthless humans, whether time-serving disciples, arrogant Pharisees or murderous bandits, could find the Paradise we never deserved. That cross of Christ has replaced our cold and dutiful morality with a model of proactive compassion. He has paid our debt of judgment so that we can henceforth repay our debt of grateful self-abandonment. If someone is my brother or my sister, I lay my life on the line for them without thought of personal advantage or security. Do we have any alternative? We're family! [3:17] I used the word 'compassion' just now. This means that your guts hurt so much when you see a member of the family in acute personal need that you *have* to do something about it, like the Samaritan Jesus memorably portrayed, and not like the elder brother of the prodigal son. Instead of going, 'I'm so glad I'm not like that poor fellow, God help him (or her),' we should find ourselves saying, 'God's given me enough to live on in this unequal world, surely I can use some of it to reach out a hand to someone worse off than me.' Otherwise, how much of your self-life has your conversion really affected? Does the love of God in Christ mean so little to you that you can suppress those fellow-feelings that the Spirit is generating within you? [3:18] I do love you all very dearly, but when people who wear Christian badges indulge in pious talk about loving their neighbour and helping those in need, then do absolutely nothing about cases of acute poverty within their very fellowship, quite frankly it makes me sick.

3:19-22 ¹⁹ *This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence:* ²⁰ *if our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.* ²¹ *Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God* ²² *and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him.*

Reassurance

[3:19] 'John, you've given me a massive conscience by saying what you've just said. You've really laid my heart bare before God. How can I possibly claim to be a disciple of Christ when I'm so unloving towards people he's redeemed the same as me?' Look, I'm just as convicted as you are, because it's not John who is writing this, it's the Holy Spirit. It's the same Spirit who brings us the reassurance that we really are children of the One True God. Don't ever try to placate your conscience by producing evidence of what a saint you are. [3:20] Let it do the work God intends it to do, which is to keep us on the highway of holiness and warn us whenever we stray towards the edge. We don't know everything about ourselves, but God does. He knows we want to please him above all else. His forgiveness in Christ is bigger than all the accusations that can quite legitimately be made against us. [3:21] But oh my friends, it's worth having a clear conscience, don't you think? How wonderful it is to be able to go straight into God's presence, and tell him everything that's on our hearts in complete confidence that his love and grace can deal with absolutely anything! [3:22] There is no genuine prayer that he's ever going to reject or ignore. All he needs to know, and I'm sure he does in your case, is that we haven't flung his commandments to the four winds, but that we're trying to bring a smile to his face by serving him faithfully. Our Father may be difficult to satisfy, but he's dead easy to please.

3:23-24 ²³ *And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.* ²⁴ *The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us.*

Simple health check

[3:23] So, if you want a simple spiritual health check you can carry out every day, here it is:

- Am I trusting in Christ?
- Is there any Christian brother or sister I can't get along with?

I'll have to refer you to another book I've written if you want a full account of the instructions our Lord Jesus gave us the night before he was crucified. But they boil down to these two points: (1) Are you prepared to trust my love for you? (2) Are you willing to show love to your fellow-Christians through thick and thin? We'll come back to the second question in a moment, because there's a lot to say about it.

[3:24] But let's think about that first question, about trusting him. The Master said that the way to stay close to him is to depend on him for guidance and to do what he tells us. Travelling with Christ isn't a matter of how we happen to feel at any given moment, it's telling him we couldn't do without him and thanking him for the Holy Spirit. He said quite a lot about the Spirit too, if you remember. Let's see how that applies to you and me in the world we live in.

4:1-3 ¹ *Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.* ² *This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,* ³ *but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.*

Anti-God spirit

[4:1] So let's think a bit about the Holy Spirit. Note the definite article ('the') – there is one Divine Spirit, not lots of them. Oh yes, there are plenty of (small 's') 'spirits' out there, clamouring for our attention, setting up their stalls, seducing us by sight and sound, scent and touch. But it's up to us whether we fall for them. They can't *make* us follow them. We are to use our rational faculty to check them out, see whether they ring true. 'Is this God himself speaking to me?' What do I mean, then, by 'spirits'? My dear friends, I'm referring to the plausible and misleading purveyors of theologies, philosophies, ideologies and what not, wave after wave of them throughout history, who seek to detach you from faith in the Living God. [4:2] There's a simple test you can apply, to determine whether this or that interesting idea is directly inspired by God's Holy Spirit: are they (these teachers) fully and one hundred-per-cent in agreement that Jesus wasn't just a man, but is God arriving on this earth in human flesh? Do they, in a word, acknowledge Christ as their rightful Lord and Master? If they do, then pay full attention, because it's God speaking to you. [4:3] By the same token, if they don't really accept that Jesus is the Son of God – if they say 'Yes, but,' and try to dodge the issue – no matter how strong their credentials and how attractive their presentation, you don't need to take a blind bit of notice of what they say. [4:4] That's what I meant earlier when I was talking about Mr Pseudo-God, the Leader of the Opposition, the revolutionary figure who can't stand God and wants to replace him with – himself. His arrival at the end of the age is standard apostolic teaching, of course. But what I'm saying is that we don't have to wait for him or it, because this anti-God spirit is here at the present time (so in that sense it really is the end of the age) – it's all around us and infiltrating our minds and hearts as we speak – so I'm asking, are you ready for it? Are you going to be able to unmask it and see it in its true colours?

4:4-6 ⁴ *You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.* ⁵ *They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the*

world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognise the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

Members of another kingdom

[4:4] Even so, with all these incredibly clever people trying to undermine your faith, what reassurance can I as your spiritual father give you? It's very simple. You have been reborn through the Holy Spirit. You are children of the Living God himself. They haven't a chance against you. The One who lives among you and within you, the Spirit of Christ Jesus, is far bigger than any spirit manipulating the world around you. Jesus has won the decisive battle and he's now conducting the mopping-up operations. [4:5] These teachers aren't sent by God, they're products of the world-spirit that spun those first untruths in Eden and has gone on doing so ever since. Oh yes, they gain a ready audience from their contemporaries who have like them been taken in by these lies about God. [4:6] But we know where they're coming from, because we aren't products of that world-kingdom; we are as I've said, and as Jesus himself taught us, God-born members of another kingdom entirely. We talk a language which is immediately understood by our fellow kingdom members, because we all share the same inbuilt knowledge of the One True God. This language is a complete mystery to anyone outside the fellowship of Christ. They switch off when we start talking, because they can't understand a word we are saying. So I hope this little excursus helps you to appreciate the vital role the Spirit plays in helping you to discern truth from error. You're not just crossing intellectual swords with these people; you and we are engaged in a life-or-death struggle on the spiritual level, and it's terribly important that we get it right.

4:7-8 ⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

The Divine character

[4:7] Now I promised you a lot more about love, so let's get back to that. The bottom line is that we have been shown unconditional love, and we should operate the same principle in our dealings with one another. But where can we get that kind of love from? Do we have to work it up in ourselves? Isn't this an impossible ideal? Well, no it isn't, because God is the source of all love. So if we've been born into God's family, we're going to grow up with his likeness, we're going to become familiar with the Divine character, we're going to model ourselves on the One we've come to know and depend on. [4:8] If you come across a thoroughly selfish person who couldn't care a bit for anyone else, it's a fair bet that they've never actually encountered the One whose whole nature is outgoing unselfishness. Whatever creed or philosophy they might profess, they haven't the kind of knowledge of God that is capable of transforming their lives.

4:9-10 ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Love has been here

[4:9] Love isn't some theoretical ideal which we spend our whole lives trying to attain, only to find it's still way out of reach. It has come down to where we are. It has turned up in our village, walked about in our streets, grown up as one of us. Only once, admittedly – but that once was and is enough. Jesus has been here. Who was he and is he? He is so much part of God, so intimately bound up with the central source of all Divinity, that the best we can do is to call him the Father's Son. But, and this is the crucial point, he's a Son on a mission. He hasn't just dropped in for a quick visit, or more worrying still, on a royal tour of inspection. He's come to raise the dead. Us. He is the way we can come alive, and stay alive. [4:10] You see, we've got it wrong about this love thing. We've always thought that it was up to us to generate God-love by ourselves; after all, he made us, so we probably ought to do the decent thing

and show him a bit of gratitude and respect, even if we privately think he's not very interested in us, because if he was, he'd be a bit more friendly than, apparently, he is. Wrong. You have only to look at the cross of Christ to realise that God's proactive concern for us has gone to the very limits. He really has done something about our dreadful situation. I'm not talking about material poverty or failing health, I'm talking about our eternal destiny. We were meant to inherit Life with a capital L, with never a shadow across our relationship with our Divine Lover. However, we – and I'm talking about every single one of us – have chalked up a huge 'No!' against our future prospects. We've rejected God, and have become rejects ourselves. So what has his response been to that? To throw us out? Instead, he did the totally unexpected and costly thing, which was to hang himself out, in the person of Jesus his Son, and become a reject in our place. That's mercy for you. That's unbelievable generosity. That's the Divine pity.

4:11-12 ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

The way of mercy

[4:11] So do you see the basis of Christian friendship? Unconditional acceptance. The Father runs to hug the unspeakably awful younger son. The elder brother stands by with implacably folded arms. Which do you choose to be? Where do you reckon your obligation lies? Or have you never really looked at the cross? [4:12] Don't wait until you've got an unclouded vision of God, because no-one's ever got close to that in this life. Let God live out his impossible ambition through you. Choose the way of mercy, welcome the fellow-Christians he has given you (especially if you're married to one of them), and the miracle happens: Christ walks the earth again, Eden's harmony is restored.

4:13-16a ¹³ This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. ¹⁵ If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. ¹⁶ And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

Trusting the apostolic word

[4:13] 'But, John, how can I be sure that I've got God living in me? Most of the time I feel I'm anything but a vehicle for the Divine love.' Feelings are never a reliable guide. Go on his word. Jesus leaves us in no doubt: first he tells us that the Spirit will be given to us direct from the Father; then he says he (Jesus) is going to be sharing our life and we're going to be sharing his; then he talks of his words lodging in our hearts. It's the same thing! I've been saying it over and over again in this letter. He's here and he's speaking to you – stay around and listen. That's all. [4:14] Trust the apostolic word; we've seen him, we've heard him, and we're simply passing it on. Don't be surprised if we keep talking about the cross. We can't get over the fact that God the Father has actually and personally mounted a rescue operation to save us. He's got himself incarnated and crucified to give the whole world a second chance and a new future.

[4:15] It's so simple: all you have to do to get God sharing your life, calling you his friend, growing his love inside you as it were, is to say 'Yes' to Jesus. Thomas had doubts just as you have, but he came out with the classic statement: 'My Lord and my God!' [4:16a] OK, he saw and heard the risen Christ; but Jesus immediately looked down the years and saw generations who wouldn't have that experience, but who could still affirm their trust in God's love and presence among us in Christ. Faith, saving faith. That's God's plan for everyone. Perfectly adapted to our needs.

4:16b-18 ^{16b} God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷ This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: in this world we are like Jesus. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

Love and fear

[4:16b] Don't let anyone fool you into thinking God is a sadist, or some kind of evil scientist experimenting with his creatures to see how much pain they can stand. No, he is so full of sheer, undiluted goodness and compassion that there's no room in him for anything else. Don't ever give up loving, because that's where God is operating, you're at the centre of his will and he's doing his loving through you. [4:17] People say to me, 'I'm terrified of death, because my whole life is going to come up for examination and there's no way I can pass.' Let me ask you this: have you asked Jesus to come and live in you? If you have, then perfect love has been going wherever you've gone. Don't you recall the Christmas promise, 'God is born in our midst'? Or his goodbye message, 'Just remember I'm with all of you 24/7'? You can go into that solemn judgment hall with a broad grin on your face, because it isn't you who are going to be assessed, it's the Jesus who's been walking around touching people through you. 'I've touched no-one for Jesus,' you lament. Well, wait and see! If he worked miracles when he was here, don't you think he's probably been doing it ever since? Or are you the one person he can't operate through?

[4:18] When your fears come along and start their usual bullying tactics, just tell them, 'I'm sorry, but I've got the Lord of love living here with me, so he can deal with you.' When fear knocks, let perfect Love open the door. Fear doesn't stand a chance when he's around. Here are you being reduced to a nervous wreck, when all the time the God of love and compassion has been working out his perfect plan which includes not only you but a lot of people you see every day. Trust love to win.

4:19 ¹⁹ *We love because he first loved us.*

God first

[4:19] 'I'm afraid I still find the whole thing terribly complicated. I can see that love is the key to everything; but if I get you right, you're saying that I've got to show love for God by obeying his command, which is to love others, and if I don't love others it's pretty clear I don't love God. That's the law right from the beginning, and if I'm a good Jew, I agree wholeheartedly. But you also make it quite clear that it's not our love for God which saves us, but his love for us in sending Jesus to die in our place. That's the gospel, which I have also embraced wholeheartedly. So which is more important, God's love for me or my love for God?'

If I've said or implied, 'You've got to love God in order for him to love you,' then I apologise for giving totally the wrong impression. I just wonder if you've missed the glory of the whole thing? You seem to think it's all about justifying yourself in God's eyes by keeping his commands. It isn't. It's about God sending Jesus to die for us. Only when we've seen this can we truly begin to love God and others. Only when you fix your eyes firmly on the One who never thought of himself at all, but lived, died and rose again purely and wholly for the sake of others, can we stop thinking about ourselves and start living for God and others. Do you see? Any love we find ourselves showing for God and other people is a response to the proactive love of God.

The message of Scripture can be summed up in one short phrase: 'God first.' God's love (in creating, redeeming and saint-making) always takes the initiative. In turn it generates love in his creatures (wonder, worship and service). Expand that phrase into a short sentence: 'It's only because God has loved us so much, and sent his Son to save us, that we in our turn can respond in love to him and to our fellow-humans.' I hope that helps. I can't put it any more clearly.

4:20-21 ²⁰ *Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.* ²¹ *And he has given us this command: anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.*

Radical selflessness

[4:20] ‘Ah,’ you hear some people say, ‘I agree that love of my neighbour must flow out of my love for God. God first, then my neighbour.’ All very well in its way, but are you piously waiting till your love for God has reached a certain quality level before you can actually start loving that person you can’t stand the sight of? The two must go together, otherwise your Christian profession is frankly a sham. I made the point just now that no-one has ever set eyes on God in his fulness of beauty and glory. If we really saw him as he is, our self-life would melt away in total adoration. Seeing someone as they are calls forth our heartfelt response. Well then, here’s this fellow-Christian whose need (whether for material, moral or spiritual improvement) you can see quite clearly. Should it not call forth your compassion and prayerful concern? The farther they are (apparently) from Christ’s likeness, the more work the Holy Spirit is going to have to do to transform them – and he’s going to find it even harder if your attitude is so critical and unforgiving!

If you find it easier to love the invisible God than the visible brother or sister, you’re being thoroughly inconsistent, if not actually Pharisaical. [4:21] The bottom line is the command that Christ gave us at that final supper he had with us, which we remember every time we celebrate together: ‘love one another as I have loved you’. ‘God first’ includes and entails ‘neighbour first’. If God is your non-negotiable priority, then your neighbour has to be too. That is the unity of the Spirit Christ was praying for. That’s the radical selflessness that will convince the unbelieving world of the sheer goodness of God.

5:1-5 ¹ Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. ² This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. ³ In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, ⁴ for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. ⁵ Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

Sham profession

[5:1] Your Christian faith should hang together. Don’t let anyone drive a wedge between your love for God and your love for each other. Being a committed follower of Jesus Christ – and for the Jew, this means accepting Jesus as the Messiah – isn’t just a question of signing a doctrinal statement. If you’ve genuinely asked Christ into your life, you’ve got yourself born into God’s family; you’ve started a new and endless life with God not only as your Creator but also as your Father. Now I know some families are dysfunctional and don’t get on together, but this one works properly. It’s normal on the human level for siblings to cling together and to have a powerful family bond, because if you adore your parents who brought you into this world, then quite naturally you’re going to extend that same fierce loyalty towards your brothers and sisters. Otherwise jealousy and squabbling takes over, and the family breaks up. That’s not how it’s meant to be! [5:2] If you’re lukewarm towards your fellow-believers, it’s probably because you don’t care much for God who is their Father, so you disregard his instructions for your life. That’s the history of Israel in a nutshell! If we want to experience real closeness to our fellow-Christians, we need to put our lives on the line for God the Father and make his will an absolute priority. Otherwise our Christian profession is a sham.

On the winning side

[5:3] People may tell you that loving God is a matter of having strong mystical feelings and sensing his presence in a tangible way. I have to say that this isn’t the Christian norm. Loving God requires the daily, dogged discipline of obedience. Doing what the Lord says because he’s said it. Sorry – that makes it sound as if his commands are tedious and tiresome, whereas the opposite is the case: following the leading of the Spirit through Scripture and everyday faith is an adventure. It frees you from conforming to the unbelieving society in which you find yourself. [5:4] The majority of people around you don’t

know God (sad but true) so they expect you to behave exactly like them, which is at best enlightened selfishness, and at worst ruthless lust and cruelty. But you've escaped their clutches, because you've been newborn into another family, modelled on Jesus. Remember how Jesus said he had overcome the world? He wants us to share his victory, and this happens as we trust him through thick and thin. [5:5] If you want to be on the winning side in the cosmic battle between good and evil, just hold on to the bottom line of your faith, which is that Jesus is God coming among us in the person of his Son. That's the classic Messianic position. That's resurrection reasoning.

5:6-9 ⁶ *This is the one who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.* ⁷ *For there are three that testify:* ⁸ *the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.* ⁹ *We accept human testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son.*

Threefold testimony

[5:6] You may hear teaching that tries to separate 'Jesus' from 'the Christ': the idea is that 'Jesus' was born and died as nothing more than a man, but when he was baptised, the Divine Spirit got substituted for him and performed his ministry up to but not including the cross; thus he wasn't fully God when he was born and died, nor was he fully man when he performed his amazing works of ministry. This is nonsense. Jesus is God coming to the earth in human flesh. At the baptism he isn't turned into a divine Person he wasn't before – he is confirmed as being the Son of God he always was. And at the cross, far from being simply a man dying in lonely abandonment, he is the unique Son of God bearing the sins of the world. This is what the Holy Spirit has consistently taught his church; we accept it, not because human beings assert it, but because the Spirit of truth, whom Jesus promised to us, continually bears witness to it.

[5:7-8] We have a threefold testimony to Jesus' full Divinity and humanity, and thus to the certainty of our faith. The Spirit was present at his baptism, declaring him to be God's eternal Son – and the Spirit is present at our baptism, giving us new birth as children of God. The Spirit was also present at his death upon the cross, confirming his complete sinlessness and fitness to be a perfect sacrifice – so too the Spirit declares our full forgiveness through the blood he shed for us. Spirit, baptism and blood unite to assure us of the full Sonship of Jesus Christ, and of our full acceptance by the Father through him. Don't let anyone cut a single strand of this threefold rope, which safeguards our faith.

5:10-12 ¹⁰ *Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony (NRSV those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts). Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son.* ¹¹ *And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.* ¹² *Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.*

God's intentional gift

[5:10] Belief is a funny thing. You may spend years resisting the truth about Christ, then when you finally give way and admit you're wrong, you find you've known it all the time. It makes sense to you now because it always did. God's been trying to get through to you for ages. If you continue to resist him, and refuse to accept the overwhelming testimony of the Spirit, then you reach a position where you are saying 'I'm right and God is wrong.' You are rejecting the plain witness of God about his Son Jesus, just as the people who had him crucified were rejecting God's own Messiah and King.

[5:11] So what is God trying to tell us about Jesus? What exactly is 'the gospel'? In a word, 'Life'. Eternal life with God, life that goes on for ever, life that never gets cut off by death. This life is God's gift to us, which means that he intends everyone to have it. It is symbolised by the tree of life in the paradise of Eden. However, we lost the way to the tree of life by making the wrong choice – 'not what God gives me, but what I can get for myself.' This virus of sin infects the whole human race, so that we are all born

into this world spiritually dead. But God has not withdrawn his intentional gift of eternal life, so he sends his Son Jesus Christ to be the way back to the tree of life. He and he alone is the true way to life. [5:12] So as we preach this marvellous and wonderful good news, we offer people a choice. You can have life by receiving and accepting Jesus. Or you can refuse to have life by not accepting or receiving him. A simple, stark choice. One or the other.

5:13-15 ¹³ *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.* ¹⁴ *This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.* ¹⁵ *And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him.*

Unwarranted presumption?

[5:13] So can we be quite sure that we're going to live with God for ever (sometimes called 'going to heaven')? There will be those who say this is arrogance or unwarranted presumption – how dare we think we're good enough? I've written this letter precisely to counter this kind of attitude. It isn't a question of our own goodness, it's whether we believe that Jesus is our Lord and Saviour. If we've come to him telling him that our eternal destiny depends utterly and completely on his work on the cross, and that we are simply relying on the apostolic testimony to him (how else would we know about it?), then he won't tell us to get lost. [5:14] Or you hear those who say we shouldn't go to God and present him with a whole shopping-list of requests, because all he wants is our silent adoration. Sorry, but if Jesus taught one thing again and again, it was that God is our loving and generous heavenly Father and we can be as outrageous as we like when we go before him. There's only one condition he sets on it, which is that it's something he's likely to approve. Otherwise we know he's listening, however crazy our prayers may sound to us or anyone else. [5:15] I'm going to lay myself on the line here, because Jesus laid himself on the line, here and everywhere else. God's promised to listen to our prayers, OK? Has he or has he not promised to do something when we ask him? Right then, he's going to do what we ask. He's going to give us that impossible thing. You say you've asked for something and you didn't get it? Tell him that too. Accuse him of not being faithful to his promise. Then watch out for his blessing. It's not great faith in God we need, but faith in a great God.

5:16-17 ¹⁶ *If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will give them life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that.* ¹⁷ *All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.*

Help where we can

[5:16] Prayer can even rescue someone from spiritual deadness. What I'm talking about is the choking of a converted person's faith life by the weeds of unbelief or deliberate sin. Supposing you discover, or even see at first hand, a Christian brother or sister giving in to some temptation or other. If they continue in this course, they won't lose their salvation, but they'll do serious damage to themselves and/or others. Don't just sit around tut-tutting, get down to some serious prayer, and see if God doesn't answer with a powerful work of the Holy Spirit. Our Lord Jesus of course modelled this approach when Simon Peter was heading for his spectacular fall from grace. But there are some people this kind of prayer won't work for, as Jesus also warned us. He had to deal with Pharisaic self-justification, which manifests itself in a particularly lethal hardness of heart. Someone can be so blind and deaf to the obvious will of God and the presence of his Spirit, that they are convinced it's the work of the devil; in addition, they are so sure they're right that they resist any attempt to offer them forgiveness. Don't waste your time and spiritual energy in praying for that kind of case. (There can of course be exceptions, such as when Stephen prayed for Saul's forgiveness and the answer was given on the road to Damascus.) [5:17] It's not for us to judge how deadly someone's sin is: the basic principle is that any breaking of God's commandments is an offence against the will of God, and quite enough Christians get into that danger

for us to have full-time prayer on our hands, without worrying about whether they've committed the unforgivable sin.

5:18-19 ¹⁸ *We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them.* ¹⁹ *We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.*

Seeing things differently

[5:18] 'So, John, you admit the possibility of a Christian committing serious sin?' Well, of course none of us is immune to temptation; but all of us are under Divine protection. When you've genuinely been born into the Lord's ransomed family, regenerated by the Spirit, you see things completely differently: sin appears in its true colours, as a shabby and petulant resistance to the loving will of a wise Father. The new nature implanted in you is simply incapable of the old egocentric behaviour. It's as though you've got the Lord Jesus himself, the eternal Son of God who has always been the Holy One, right there with you standing guard against the enemies of the soul. Yes, the enemy will try to get you, but he won't succeed. Doesn't experience bear this out? You can quote cases where the opposite seems to have happened, but the bottom line is that God knows who really belongs to him, and there is to be no truce with evil for the Christian. [5:19] Let's get this perfectly clear: we are God's new creation, children of the world to come, not of this old perishable creation. At the same time we are solidly members of this fallen world, which has capitulated totally to an evil will and operates under his power, passive and largely unaware. The odds may seem stacked against us; but we're going to win! Sin's power was broken at the cross. Had you forgotten?

5:20-21 ²⁰ *We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.* ²¹ *Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.*

God's competitors

[5:20-21] Of course, none of this will be new to you. But can I share one final concern with you: the air we breathe is thick with idol worship. Not just the visible temples and shrines of pagan deities such as Venus, Mars, Vesta and that lot, but the invisible gods of power, money, pleasure, status, all competing with the One True God for our heart's allegiance. The only way to counter the insidious pull of the world is to found our lives and attitudes foursquare on the rock of Christ. Take your stand on what you know to be true: Jesus is the Son of the Eternal Father, God made manifest in human flesh. He has poured out upon us his own generous Holy Spirit, to transform our thinking by giving us direct access to the mind of God. This God is faithful to his word and will never let us down. By entrusting our lives and destinies to Jesus his one and only Son, we centre ourselves upon the Ultimate Reality who has always been there. Jesus is our God and we're going on for ever with him. What rivals could he possibly have? But we're such children, and so easily fooled. Don't let them get away with it!

2 John

1-3 ¹ *The elder, To the lady chosen by God and to her children, whom I love in the truth – and not I only, but also all who know the truth –* ² *because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us for ever:* ³ *Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love.*

Truth is Someone

[1] Hallo honoured lady – this is a little letter from a very senior Christian (I'm known as 'The Elder'), addressed to someone who has been lovingly marked out by God from all eternity and called to belong to him out of this present world – to you and to your family, greetings! You are people whom I really and truly love (I'm not just saying this for form's sake) – indeed, you are appreciated by everyone whose

eyes have been opened to the truth which sets us all free. [2] This truth isn't a something, it's a Someone who is alive and dwelling in the midst of us, and who isn't going to leave us to sink or swim, but who has promised to stay with us to the end of time and beyond.

[3] Trust him. Trust the God who is our heavenly Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ who is his accredited Son. Deal direct with him. Do you need 'grace' today, strength to serve him, adequacy where you feel utterly inadequate? Go to the One whose resources are boundless. Do you need 'mercy' today, cleansing for your conscience, restoration after a bad fall? Cling to the One who settled your account on the cross and left every sin in the grave. Do you need 'peace' today, all fretfulness banished and lightness in your step? He holds your future, takes your strain. The world is hungry for truth instead of lies, love rather than hatred and cruelty. Be his means of reaching out to their need.

4-6 ⁴It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us. ⁵And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. ⁶And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.

Proactive love

[4] Yes, truth and love. This is why I am so very happy to have met members of your family who are shaping their lives by the gospel and not by the half-truths of human society or the plausible theories of false teachers. This is how Jesus told us to conduct ourselves, by the teaching he gave us straight from his Father God. It's so refreshing when one finds the Spirit of truth guiding those one has tried to bring up in the faith. [5] So let me come to the point of this letter. Dear honoured lady, I surely shouldn't have to remind you of teaching we've had from the very beginning and which is part of our spiritual and cultural bloodstream. What am I talking about? The old, old command to drop our differences and preferences, and not just tolerate one another but actually lay our lives on the line for our fellow-believers.

[6] This is what's meant by Divine love: not merely dutiful respect, but a sacrificial attitude which goes the second mile and proactively seeks what is best for our neighbour. That's what Jesus taught us to do. That's the Father's perfect will: transformed lives, thinking not as the world thinks but seeking to be moulded after the image of his Son. This kind of love isn't theoretical, or something you do a Bible study on then forget about – yes, trace it through the Scriptures, it's all there; but having done that, act upon it, weave it into your life-pattern. Carry Christ's love around with you wherever you go.

7-9 ⁷I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. ⁸Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. ⁹Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

False trails

[7] What do you really believe about Jesus Christ? Whose teaching, whose example are you actually following? There are plenty of false trails out there, hundreds of plausible 'experts', who will breezily assure you that you needn't take this Jesus thing so seriously, it's just a cult like any other, he wasn't really God in human flesh. He may have been a pretty wonderful person, but as for being Lord of us all, does that make any kind of sense? Spot the serpent trail, the original deceiver, Mr Pseudo-God behind it all; he or it has only one agenda, and that is to dethrone both the Son and the Father. [8] Don't trust yourselves for one moment, post watchmen on your walls, continually check yourselves for the traitor within. You could be drifting off the track even today, your precious possessions dribbling out of your pack as you stumble along, everything we've worked for so hard together thrown to the winds. I'm not begrudging the labour and sweat we apostles have put in (I'm talking to all the churches, of course) –

what we're absolutely committed to is getting you to the finishing line, and seeing you receive the crown of glory from the Lord Jesus himself.

[9] That's why this 'Biblical teaching' thing is so crucially important. There are plenty of 'original thinkers' and 'leading scholars' who are quite prepared to jettison the apostolic gospel and substitute their own superior ideas and theories for the lifesaving framework of doctrine that the Lord died for us to have. I'm going to put it as strongly as possible: once you cease to teach and commit yourself personally to the full Divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, you can say goodbye to the knowledge of God. Do you want that to happen? Or will you determine to cling on to the centrality of Christ and his Lordship over all heaven and earth? If you do, you will not only experience the reality of God the Father, but you will have your life transformed into the image of God the Son who is Jesus. You are true-born members of the family – don't throw away your inheritance.

10-13 ¹⁰ *If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them.* ¹¹ *Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work.* ¹² *I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.* ¹³ *The children of your sister, who is chosen by God, send their greetings.*

Radical measures

[10] Radical measures are needed to preserve the purity of the faith. Let me get to the point. If a travelling teacher or cult figure turns up wanting to 'give an introductory talk to your group,' show him the door (it's usually a him, but not always). The acid test is, does he hold firmly to the apostolic teaching of Christ? If not, you should not only refuse him a platform, but not give him traditional hospitality or even offer him a handshake. [11] As soon as you give this sort of person a brotherly hug, you open the door to his pernicious ideas and present him with a base for spreading his particular brand of questionable theology or even morality.

[12] There's plenty more I could say about these people, but the courier service isn't immune to being tampered with, and rather than using pen, paper and ink I'd prefer to turn up in person and have a good face-to-face chat with you; in fact, I'm already making plans to do just that, as it would set both our minds at rest and I'm sure would give us all great delight. [13] Meanwhile I send you greetings from your sister and her family, who like you (I think you get the point) have heard God's call and are among Christ's chosen and faithful people.

3 John

1-4 ¹ *The elder, To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.* ² *Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, just as you are progressing spiritually.* ³ *It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling how you continue to walk in it.* ⁴ *I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*

Putting the gospel into practice

[1] Here's a mature Christian (I'm known as 'The Elder') writing to my very special friend Gaius. You know I would do anything for you; we enjoy such a deep relationship, cemented by our common Christian faith. [2] First of all, old friend, I pray for you regularly, that your life's journey may be going ahead prosperously, and that you may be in good health physically; and I thank God that your spiritual life in Christ is flourishing and healthy. [3] How can I know this? Well, I was so delighted the other day when some Christians we both know turned up, and I asked after you, and they produced first-hand evidence of your sound grasp of Biblical truth; not only that, but you are clearly putting the gospel into practice in your everyday life and witness. [4] This is what makes me happiest of all – getting the news

that my spiritual children, those I've been responsible for nurturing and training in the faith, are demonstrating the truth of what they believe in the midst of all the pressures of modern society.

5-8 ⁵ *Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you.* ⁶ *They have told the church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honours God.* ⁷ *It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans.* ⁸ *We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.*

Pulling together

[5] Now in the light of our friendship, I've got an appeal to make to you. You've acted in a way that is utterly true to Christ in what you've done so far for these travelling missionaries, even though they were complete strangers to you and you had no bonds of obligation towards them. [6] When they came here and stood up before the gathered church, it was you they singled out as having particularly shown Christian love towards them. What I'm asking is that when they come back and stop off with you on their journey, could you please do the decent thing and send them on their way with generous arrangements for their support, because that would be what God would want and what would be honouring to him. [7] The fact is, they set off on their preaching tour simply in order to spread the knowledge of Jesus' love; they received no financial help from any of the secular authorities, nor would they expect to have done. [8] It's therefore up to us as Christians to support and help people like this; it's all part and parcel of the mission of the church, which is to bring the good news of Christ to as many people as possible – and that means that we all pull together in a practical way to make sure the missionaries' needs are supplied.

9-10 ⁹ *I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us.* ¹⁰ *So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us. Not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.*

Refusal to help

[9] I have issued a short communiqué to the church concerned, but I may as well tell you where the problem lies. It's all about a gentleman named Diotrephes, who clearly thinks he's terribly important, and who won't yield an inch to people like me whom he thinks are interfering busybodies. [10] I really think it's incumbent upon me to turn up in person and let everyone know how obstructive he is being. He has twisted the facts and denounced me and my colleagues in quite crude language, and far from being content with vilifying us, he has resolutely refused to help these travelling workers or to offer them traditional hospitality. Worse still, he has actively discouraged anyone who is generous enough to do so, and he has even banned such would-be supporters from church meetings!

11-12 ¹¹ *Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.* ¹² *Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone – and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.*

True nobility

[11] This is where you come in. I needn't tell you, my dear friend, that each of us at every stage of our journey is confronted by a choice between the noblest course and the less worthy one. The Lord Jesus himself exemplified the finest human life of all – it was clear from his consistent care for others that in a unique way he really was the visible face of God on earth. So it is, on a lesser plane, with all of us. By the same token, someone who chooses to follow a selfish and ignoble way of life is blind to the things of God and has no idea of what heavenly love really is like. [12] One person whose character is totally different from Diotrephes is Demetrius, the bearer of this letter, whom I commend to you. Ask anyone what they think of him and you'll get the same testimonial: he's a fine Christian man whose whole life

rings utterly true. I have a very high personal regard for him – and I hope you know that I'm not easily taken for a ride.

13-14 ¹³ *I have much to write to you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink.* ¹⁴ *I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face. Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.*

Enough for now

[13-14] I could go on at some length, but I think you can read between the lines well enough, and rather than committing my thoughts to pen and ink where prying eyes might see them, I'm hoping and planning to come and see you myself very soon, so that we can look one another in the eye and speak without fear or favour. [15] May the peace of the Lord be with you. Your friends here want their warmest wishes sent on to you. Please greet each of my friends by name for me – you know who they are. That's enough from me for now.

CROSS-REFERENCES

There are very few, if any, unambiguous quotations of the Old Testament in John's letters. At the same time there are unmistakable resonances with the Fourth Gospel. We therefore dispense with the normal asterisks and underlinings, and just suggest similar lines of thought.

1 John

1:1-2 *Always been there* Jn 1:1. *Here and everywhere* Jer 23:23-24. *Into being* Ps 33:9. *Living Word* Jn 1:14. *Natural eyes* Acts 4:20. *Bumped into him* Acts 4:13b. *Hugged him* Jn 20:17. *Always been the truth* Jn 15:27. *Before time* Heb 1:12. *Passing it on* Mt 28:19.

1:3-4 *At second hand* 2 Pet 1:16. *Sit at the same table* Rev 3:20. *Unity of perfect love* Jn 14:23. *More and more people* Acts 5:14. *Far bank* Mark 13:10.

1:5-7 *Light from darkness* Gen 1:3. *All light* 1 Tim 6:16. *Total purity* Jas 1:13, 17. *Spirit of truth* Jn 14:16-17. *Off our feet* Jn 13:10.

1:8-10 *Fooling yourself* Rom 7:11. *Self-justification* Rom 10:3. *My own goodness* Lk 18:11. *True assessment* Rom 3:23. *Humbly back to him* Ps 30:8 BCP. *Estimate of us* Ps 32:3-5. *His word to us* Jer 31:34. *Absolve us entirely* Rom 3:24-25. *Standard rules* Mt 5:27-28. *Heart condition* Mk 7:21-23. *Life-changing work* Jas 1:22-25.

2:1-2 *Gone our own way* Isa 53:6. *To do it for us* 1 Tim 2:5. *His Father and ours* Jn 20:17b. *Blot out our offences* Ps 51:1. *Live on this earth* Jn 12:32. *Intercessor* Rom 8:34.

2:3-6 *Sight sound and touch* 1 Jn 1:1-3. *Explicit commands* Prov 1:24-25. *Listen out for his voice* Prov 8:34. *In return* 1 Jn 4:19. *Always intended* Mt 5:48. *Walked around* 1 Jn 4:17.

2:7-8 *In the Law* Dt 6:5, Lev 19:18. *New commandment* Jn 13:34. *Always promised* Jer 31:33. *Shining steadily* Jn 1:9.

2:9-11 *On the side of the enemy* Col 1:13. *Wrong direction* Eph 5:8. *Love of God* Jude 21. *Harm's way* Rom 14:13. *String him up* Jn 15:24. *Power of vision* Jn 9:41. *Tragedy of unbelief* Jn 12:40.

2:12-14 *Where we are* Phil 2:16. *God saves* Mt 1:21. *Far longer* Isa 44:1-8. *Foundation of the world* Mt 25:34. *Stand firm* Eph 6:13. *Wins the battle* Rev 12:11. *Eternal life* Jn 17:3. *Since eternity* Jer 31:3.

2:15-17 *First love* Rev 2:4. *Explicit command* Gen 2:6. *The other tree* Gen 2:9, 3:22.

2:18-23 *Final age* Acts 2:17. *Intense opposition* Lk 19:14, Jn 1:11. *Warned often enough* Dan 7:25, 8:25, 11:36, 2 Th 2:3ff. *Told us* Mk 13:6. *Stayed around* Acts 18:24-28. *New dispensation* Jer 31:34, Ezek 36:27. *Alternative line* Gal 1:6-9. *Native tongue* Acts 2:8, 22:2. *Unique sonship* Jn 8:19. *Our Father too* Rom 8:15-16. *Where these lies come from* Jn 8:44.

2:24-27 *The final expression* Jn 1:14, Heb 1:1-3, 1 Jn 4:2. *Precious offer* Jn 5:40, 6:35. *Just now* 1 Jn 2:20. *To understand* Jn 14:16-17. *Feeding the lamp* Lev 24:2. *Moses told us* Exod 19:6. *Holy priesthood* 1 Pet 2:9.

2:28-29 *Born again* Jn 1:12-13, Jas 1:16-18.

3:1-3 *Secret names* Rev 2:17, 3:12. *Really like* Rom 1:19-21. *Heirs of everything* Lk 15:31. *Going to become* 1 Cor 15:43-44. *Walk by faith* 2 Cor 5:6-9. *Face to face* 1 Cor 13:12, Rev 22:4. *All along* Isa 33:17, Job 19:26-27. *Likeness of Jesus* 1 Cor 15:49, Phil 3:21, 2 Cor 3:18, Rom 8:29. *Dirty clothes* Col 3:9-10. *Be holy* Lev 11:45. *I'm holy* 1 Pet 1:15-16.

3:4-6 *Paying it himself* Isa 53:11. *Never gave way* 1 Pet 2:22. *Any form of evil* 1 Th 5:22.

3:7-10 *Own self-interest* Phil 2:20-21. *From the start* Gen 3:1ff. *Go to the cross* 1 Jn 3:5. *Finished the job* 1 Cor 15:24. *Abject failures* 1 Jn 1:8-2:1. *Counter urge* Gal 5:16-17. *Claim to have done* Mt 7:21-23. *One of his people* 2 Tim 2:19.

3:11-15 *Cain ... Abel* Gen 4:1ff. *Animosity* Jn 15:18. *Murder scene* Mt 5:21-24. *Forgiveness and grace* Jas 3:10-12. *Saul of Tarsus* 1 Tim 1:12-14.

3:16-18 *Self-abandonment* 2 Cor 5:15. *Guts hurt* Mt 9:36. *Samaritan* Lk 10:33. *Elder brother* Lk 15:30. *Makes me sick* Jas 2:15-16, Rev 3:16-17.

3:19-22 *Reassurance* Rom 8:15-16. *Highway of holiness* Isa 30:21, 35:8. *Accusations* Zech 3:1,4. *Clear conscience* 1 Tim 1:19. *Into God's presence* Heb 10:19, 22. *Absolutely anything* Heb 4:16.

3:23-24 *Full account* Jn 13-16. *Trust my love* Jn 13:7, 14:1, 23, 15:9, 16:27. *Fellow-Christians* 13:15, 34, 15:13. *The way to stay close to him* Jn 15:1-17. *About the Spirit* Jn 14:16-18, 26, 15:26, 16:7-11, 13-15.

4:1-3 *In human flesh* Jn 1:14, 14:9. *Mr Pseudo-God* 1 Jn 2:18, 22. *Apostolic teaching* 2 Th 2:3ff.

4:4-6 *Against you* Rom 8:31. *The Spirit of Christ Jesus* Rom 8:9. *Decisive battle* Jn 14:30, 16:33. *Mopping-up operations* 1 Cor 15:24-25. *Another kingdom* Jn 3:3-6. *Inbuilt knowledge* Jer 31:34. *Can't understand* 1 Cor 2:14.

4:7-8 *I promised you* 1 Jn 3:23.

4:9-10 *One of us* Phil 2:7. *Father's Son* Jn 3:16. *Future prospects* Ps 130:3. *Mercy for you* Ps 130:4. *Divine pity* Dan 9:9.

4:11-12 *Runs to hug* Lk 15:20. *Ever got close* Exod 33:20, 1 Tim 6:16. *Impossible ambition* Jn 17:23. *Fellow-Christians* 1 Jn 2:5-6.

4:13-16a *Direct from the Father* Jn 14:16ff. *Sharing his* Jn 15:4ff. *In our hearts* Jn 15:7. *In this letter* 1 Jn 2:24, 3:24. *His friend* Jn 15:15. *Classic statement* Jn 20:28.

4:16b-18 *Give up loving* 1 Cor 13:7. *In our midst* Mt 1:23. *With all of you* Mt 28:20.

4:19 *Obedying his command* 1 Jn 2:5. *Law right from the beginning* Mt 22:37-38. *Our love for God* 1 Jn 4:10. *To die for us* 1 Jn 3:16, 4:10. *God and others* 2 Cor 5:15.

4:20-21 *Point just now* 1 Jn 4:12. *As I have loved you* Jn 13:34, 15:12. *Neighbour first* Gal 6:2. *Praying for* Jn 17:23, Eph 4:2-3.

5:1-5 *In a nutshell* Rom 1:28-31. *Lust and cruelty* 2 Tim 3:2-4. *Escaped their clutches* 2 Pet 1:4. *Overcome the world* Jn 16:33. *Share his victory* Rev 2:7b, 2:11b etc. *Messianic position* Ps 18:50, Isa 9:6-7. *Resurrection reasoning* 1 Cor 15:57.

5:6-9 *May hear teaching* John may be countering the Docetic teaching of Cerinthus; a modern attempt to split 'Jesus' from 'Christ' is Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*. *Spirit of truth* Jn 16:13. *At his baptism* Mk 1:11, Ps 2:7. *Children of God* Jn 3:5. *Upon the cross* Heb 9:14.

5:10-12 *Intends everyone to have it* 1 Tim 2:4, 2 Pet 3:9. *Tree of life* Gen 2:9, Rev 2:7, 22:2. *Wrong choice* Gen 3:24. *For myself* Isa 53:6a. *Whole human race* Rom 5:12. *Spiritually dead* Ps 51:5. *True way to life* Jn 14:6. *Accepting Jesus* Jn 1:12. *Or receiving him* Jn 1:11.

5:13-15 *Get lost* Jn 6:37. *Generous heavenly Father* Lk 11:1-11. *As outrageous as we like* Mk 11:22-23. *Before him* Jn 15:7. *Likely to approve* Ps 66:18, Isa 1:15, Mt 6:10. *Promised to listen* 1 Pet 3:12. *When we ask him* Jer 29:12ff. *Faith in a great God* Mk 9:22-23.

5:16-17 *Weeds* Lk 8:14. *Work of the Holy Spirit* Jas 5:15, 20. *Modelled this approach* Lk 22:31-32. *Hardness of heart* Mk 3:5. *Work of the devil* Mt 12:31-32. *Stephen prayed* Acts 7:60.

5:18-19 *Immune to temptation* 1 Cor 10:12. *Regenerated by the Spirit* Tit 3:5. *Try to get you* 1 Pet 5:8. *Won't succeed* Jn 10:28, Jn 17:12. *No truce with evil* 2 Tim 2:19. *God's new creation* 2 Cor 5:17. *Perishable creation* Jn 17:16. *Going to win* 1 Jn 4:4, 5:4. *Broken at the cross* Gal 1:4, Col 1:14-15.

5:20-21 *Pagan deities* Acts 17:29. *Such children* 1 Cor 3:1.

2 John

1-3 *From all eternity* Eph 1:4. *Sets us all free* Jn 8:32. *In the midst of us* Jn 14:17. *End of time and beyond* Mt 28:20. *Resources are boundless* 2 Cor 9:8. *On the cross* 1 Pet 2:24-25. *Takes your strain* 2 Th 3:16.

4-6 *Truth and love* Eph 4:15. *From his Father God* Jn 6:45. *Best for our neighbour* Phil 2:4. *Taught us to do* Jn 15:12-13. *Moulded* Rom 12:1-2. *Wherever you go* 1 Jn 4:17b.

7-9 *Original deceiver* Gen 3:1. *Mr Pseudo-God* 1 Jn 2:22. *Behind it all* Jn 8:44. *Labour and sweat* Col 1:29. *Crown of glory* 1 Th 2:19. *Centrality of Christ* Col 1:15-20. *All heaven and earth* Mt 28:18.

10-13 *But not always* Rev 2:20. *Even morality* Tit 1:15-16. *Apostolic teaching* Rom 16:17. *Chosen and faithful* Rev 17:14.

3 John

1-4 *Pressures of modern society* Phil 2:15-16.

5-8 *Complete strangers* Heb 13:2. *For their support* Gal 6:10. *Needs are supplied* 1 Cor 9:14.

9-14 *Visible face of God* Jn 14:9. *Less worthy one* Ps 37:27.

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