

1 John Chapter 1

Commentaries on books of the bible usually begin with discussions about who wrote it. There seems to be little problem with this first epistle of John. In chapter 1 alone, we are reminded of a number of words that appear at the start of John's gospel. Hence we find such words in common as "beginning", "the Word", "life", "light", and "eternal life". In chapter 4 we read such expressions as "God so loved" and "No man hath seen God at any time". All point to the fact that the writer of the gospel of John is also the writer of this first epistle that bears the same name.

The chapter begins, "That which was from the beginning". The gospel begins with, "In the beginning". In John's gospel chapter 1:1, the definite article is omitted before "beginning", so really the expression is "in beginning". John, like us, has difficulty in explaining eternity but he is attempting to explain the origins of the Word. It was not Nazareth or Bethlehem but eternity. In I John chapter 1, we read of that which was from the beginning. "From" is APO, meaning "away from". The thought is that the One who has inhabited eternity is now moving onward and outward. He is now being revealed, so much so that He was heard, and seen, and looked upon, and handled. He came into touch with humanity. "Looked upon" is a far more intent gaze than simply "seen", which is a mere physical glance at.

Verse 1 ends with the object of this look. It is the "The Word of Life". This is yet another title of the Lord Jesus. In the gospel, we read about "the Word". What did that mean? We answer that by asking a more basic question. Words, whether spoken or written, convey our thoughts and feelings to others. Without words, these thoughts and feelings would forever remain a secret. "In beginning" there was God – a God who was unseen and unknown. When God wanted to reveal Himself, He used not just spoken or written words but the living Word. "The Word" is the outward expression of the thoughts and feelings of God. This "Word" is the Lord Jesus. Now in John's epistle, we have another title of the Lord Jesus. He is the "Word of Life". This means that He is the very expression of what life is. If we want to see how life should be lived, then the Lord Jesus is the perfect example of it. Here was a life that was devoted to God. He spoke the Father's words, did the Father's works, kept the Father's will. Where the first man Adam failed, the Lord succeeded. In Gen 1:14, we read how that Adam was made in the image and likeness of God. Much of this was lost in the Fall. The Lord Jesus came as the image of the invisible (the unseen) God. Note that the Lord is never said to be in the likeness of God. He was made in the likeness of men (Phil 2), even in the likeness of sinful flesh. But He was not simply in the likeness of God, for He ever and always is God.

John, in verses 2 to 4, is going to share his experiences with us. "The life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us". In John chapter 1, the Word is said to be the source of all life. "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men". He is the source of all life. Every living thing owes its very existence to Him. He is also the source of eternal life. John 10 states, "I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish". In John 17, we learn why we have eternal life. Says the Lord, "That they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent". Eternal life is more than simply life for evermore, for the lost shall live for evermore in hell. Eternal life is really divine life, hence the Lord Jesus here in I John 1:2 is described as "that eternal life". He is the eternal One. John is quick to underline in this epistle the humanity of the Lord Jesus (our hands have handled), and also the deity of the Lord Jesus, "that eternal life". The humanity and the deity of the Lord Jesus were both being questioned by the time that John wrote this epistle, some 60 years after the Lord's death.

Another interesting expression in verse 2 is "with the Father". "With" is the AV translation of the Greek preposition PROS, which means literally "towards". The eternal life was "towards the Father". John 1:1 begins in the same way. Verse 1 states, "the Word was

towards God". This doesn't sound right to our English speaking ears, but we can perhaps understand it better when we turn to the parable of the Pharisee and the publican as found in Luke chapter 18. Verse 11 says, "The Pharisee prayed thus with himself. "With" is PROS, towards, for he was really telling himself how good he was. "I am not as other men are. I fast twice in the week. I give tithes....". He was praying to himself, for all his thoughts and feelings were self-centred. The Word in John 1:1 was towards God. All the thoughts and feelings of the Word were towards God. Here in I John 1, He is towards the Father. We shall see in I John 2:1, we have an "Advocate towards the Father". He is just what we need, one who can bring us back into fellowship with the Father.

If verses 1 and 2 start with the One who was with the Father, then was seen by the apostles, in verse 3, He is now made known to us by these self same apostles, "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you". Luke, in Acts 1:1, describes his gospel as a record of "all that Jesus began both to do and teach. Now in his epistle, John is wanting us to share in the experience of himself and his fellow apostles. "That ye also may have fellowship with us". Fellowship is koinonia, which has the sense of sharing. John wants his readers to share his experience of Christ. Indeed, he continues, true Christian experience is a sharing, a fellowship, with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. Without this fellowship with divine persons, Christianity is nothing more than a social club, a gathering together of like minds, or of good moral upright people. What distinguishes us from all other groups of humanity is that our fellowship is with the Father and the Son. Every believer is part of this fellowship. I Corinthians 1:9 says, "God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord".

This fellowship ought to produce in us what John adds in verse 4, "And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full". If we are in fellowship with divine persons, then our joy should be the same as that which fills the heart of the Father and the Son. This was part of the Lord's statement in John 15:11, "These things have I spoken unto you that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full". The Lord Jesus was the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, so what joy could He Have had in His lifetime? In Luke chapter 10, we read, "In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit and said, "I thank Thee Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father, for it was well pleasing in Thy sight". God delights to make His ways known to us. In Ephesians chapter 1, He has made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He hath purposed in Himself". No-one asked God to do this – it was His pleasure so to do. That is why we have the Spirit of truth within. That is why we have been given eternal life. That is why we have pastors and teachers in Ephesians. This is one joy of deity. How much of this joy do we know?

Another source of divine joy is in salvation. In Luke chapter 15, we read the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. When the lost coin and the lost sheep are found, we read that likewise there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth. God delights in salvation. Do we still have this joy today, many years perhaps after the day we got saved?

Then the Lord also rejoiced in His service for God. In Hebrews chapter 10:7, He said, "Lo, I come, in the volume of the book it is written of Me, to do Thy will o God". If we can enter into fellowship with the Father and the Son, we can know the joy of divine persons and our joy can be full.

Paul knew something of this joy in Philippi. In Acts 16, we read of how he and Silas had been beaten and then thrown into prison. But at midnight, we read, "Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises unto God". Paul is in prison again when he writes his letter to the Philippians, but it is a letter not of despair but of joy. No less than 17 times in this brief epistle do we read of joy or rejoicing.

In verse 5, John sums up the experiences that he and his fellow apostles had during these three and a half years in which they kept company with the Lord. What would one have expected John to say, especially in a brief epistle of just over 100 verses in which love is mentioned 46 times? Surely, one would have imagined, that the summary would be, "God

is love". We do find this expression in this epistle, but not until chapter 4. But in his summary in chapter 1, John says, "This is the message... God is light and in Him is no darkness at all". This is perhaps not as surprising as one might think. In his gospel, John mentions light no less than 6 times within the first 9 verses of chapter 1. "That was the true Light, that lighteth every man, coming into the world". God must reveal Himself as light, before He can reveal Himself as love. Light would expose our sin before the holy character of God. God must first deal with our sin, before He can fully reveal His heart of love. Hence, in John's epistle, light comes before love. As the apostles kept company with the Lord Jesus, they gained an appreciation of the holy character of God. Jesus came not only in grace, but in grace and truth. They came together in perfect balance in Him. Indeed, I understand that in Mr Darby's New Translation, he points out that the verb "came" is in fact singular, showing that these two virtues acted together as one, in the person of the Lord Jesus.

Now, in verse 6, we have the first of those "acid tests" which are found throughout this epistle. While love is indeed mentioned 46 times, this epistle is by no means a devotional or sentimental treatise on the subject. Rather our love and our obedience are brought out to test the reality of our profession of faith. "If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth". John is not concerned with what we say but rather, with what we do. Paul is a living example of this. He can write not only of what he has taught, but also of "those things which ye have seen in me". He lived out the life which he taught.

Verse 7 gives us the positive side of John's argument. "But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin". We can look at each phrase in turn. Our profession is here stated, "If we walk in the light". That is what we claim, that we are walking in the light. What kind of light is this? - "As He is in the light". The Lord Jesus today is in heaven, in the light of the presence of God. There is no sin present there for the light of that glory would expose and banish any sin. We might have expected John simply to continue, "We have fellowship with Him". But first he turns that light upon the fellowship we have with one another. It is only in the light of the divine presence that we can truly have fellowship with one another. As Christians, do we hide things even from one another? Do we keep hidden certain things in our lives? If we do, we are not enjoying true Christian fellowship. We are shielding ourselves from the light. John is telling us that our lives should be transparent. That is the basis of our fellowship with one another.

There is another advantage in walking in the light with our fellow believers. When we enter difficult times, we bring those trials before God in prayer. We would seek the peace of God as Paul speaks of it in Philippians chapter 4. "Be anxious for nothing, but in every thing by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God". But we have another resource available to us - the prayers of the saints on our behalf. If our life however is a closed book, we deprive ourselves of this great resource. It is even more wonderful to know that two divine persons are also praying for us - the Lord Jesus as we learn in Hebrews 7 and the Holy Spirit as revealed in Romans chapter 8. This is part of our Christian fellowship.

But what about walking before God in this same light? We might be able to conceal things from our brethren, but we can hide nothing from the light of God's presence. Hebrews chapter 4 tells us that, "All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do". How can we stand the glare of this all-searching light? We thank God for the answer - "The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin". God therefore looks, not upon us, for He would see there nothing but failure, but He looks upon the blood of His Son. God desires to keep us in fellowship with Himself. How do we know? It is maintained by the blood of His Son. God gave His Son, His beloved, only begotten Son, to bring us into this fellowship, and it is the same blood of His Son that keeps us there. It is this blood that keeps us in fellowship with God, and we are able to walk in the light of God's presence.

The mention of sin might cause some to respond, "But we have no sin". We are used to the self-righteous man today being repelled by the suggestion that he is a sinner. But I don't think that is the issue here. There were some perhaps who were claiming sinless perfection – that they had risen above the propensity to sin. John, we must remember, is writing sixty years after Calvary, time enough for profession and doctrinal error to enter in. This is one of the first of the errors in this epistle that need to be corrected. What if we say, "We have no sin". John replies, "We deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us". Paul says in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God". There are no exceptions to this rule. So, we not only have to acknowledge our sin, in verse 9, we have to confess our sins. While it is true that God has forgiven us our sins, it does not mean that we can ignore our sins. Sins destroy our Christian lives, destroy our fellowship with God, destroy our relationship with fellow believers. Matthew 18 would teach us that we have to put things right with fellow believers, but we also have to remember that all sin is against God. David sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah, but he later confessed to God, "Against Thee, and Thee only, have I sinned". On his way home from the far country, the prodigal was saying, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight" (Luke 15:18).

So, while the blood of Jesus Christ covers my sins, I must still confess it. But will the Father respond to my confession? "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. How do we know that He will forgive us? We have two reasons – firstly, that He is faithful. God is trustworthy – if He says He will do something, we can absolutely depend on it being fulfilled. He is also just or righteous to forgive. When God first saved us from our sins as sinners, He did it on a righteous basis. In the epistle to the Romans, we read of four things that were required to make us righteous.

Chapter 3 – being justified freely by His grace. Only by divine grace could we be justified.

Chapter 4 – raised again for our justification. His present position in the presence of God proves that the great sin bearer has put away our sin, for even He could not sit in God's presence if He were still bearing our sins. That is why His resurrection is an essential part of Paul's gospel in I Corinthians chapter 15.

Chapter 5 – being justified by faith. This is the only thing out of the four that God requires of us. He provides the other three.

Chapter 5 – being justified by His blood. The blood that cleansed us as sinners is the same blood that God looks upon when He forgives us as saints.

Verse 10 is a repetition almost of verse 8. "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us". We are not just deceiving ourselves, we are making God a liar, for it is God who has said through Paul, "All have sinned".

So, God has dealt with the penalty of sin and we must confess our sins. Is there anything that the Lord Jesus can do for us? Chapter 2:1 gives us the answer. "My little children, these things I write unto you that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous". It is lovely now to see how John addresses his readers. They are his "little children". He uses this expression no less than 9 times in this brief epistle. In 2:12;2:13;2:18;2:29;3:7;3:18;4:4;5:21 as well as this verse here. It is an obvious term of endearment, the same as that used by the Lord, especially during that last evening as they meet in the upper room and particularly as described by John. John in this epistle looks upon the saints as belonging to the family of God. John is not making it easier for us to sin. We cannot simply rely on the blood and the Father's forgiveness. John's desire is "That ye sin not". Paul asks the question also. "How can we that are dead to sin live any longer therein?" (Romans 6:2) But even if we do sin, God has given us a remedy. Notice though the language used. It is not, "If ye sin" or "If a brother sins". He writes, "If any man sin". We are not to assume that a believer will fall into sin. Paul has the same thought in Galatians 6:1. "If a man be overtaken in a fault...". Notice also how John continues, "We have an advocate with the Father". One might have expected the

words, "He has". It demonstrates the fact that our Advocate does not begin to work for us only when we sin. He is always there for us. It is not therefore like an advocate in the law courts today. We would not need an advocate, a QC, unless we had fallen foul of the law. But what does the word "advocate" mean in John's epistle? It is not a legal term at all. It is used of the Holy Spirit in John's gospel when He is called a Comforter. Comforter and Advocate are translations of the Greek word Paraklete. It has the sense of someone who is called alongside to help us. Thus we have two divine persons helping us. Within each one of us, we have a Comforter, the Holy Spirit, and He is with us on earth. But also in heaven, we have another Comforter, the Lord Jesus, and He is there to represent us before the Father. And what is the name of our Advocate? He is Jesus Christ the righteous. Because He Himself is righteous, He knows the standards of heaven and can intervene on our behalf. As our Great High Priest, He is described as Jesus the Son of God. He is able to deal with our infirmities because He once was a man here on earth but He is also the Son of God.

In chapter 1 of this epistle, we noticed that He is with the Father or better, that He is "toward" the Father. Here in chapter 2, we have an Advocate "towards" the Father. Our sin would be causing us to take a backward step away from the Father. He is working to bring us back "towards" the Father.

Can we find an example in scripture of how our Advocate works? We can surely see it worked out perfectly by the way in which the Lord worked to restore failing Peter. The fall of Peter is dramatic. From swearing undying allegiance in the upper room when he is ready to die for the Lord, we see him soon afterwards quivering before a servant maid by the fire – the warmth and comfort of compromise with the world. He is keeping company with the servants and the soldiers and before long, he begins to speak like them. Matthew records the downward steps of Peter. We read that he denied, then that he denied with an oath, and finally that Peter began to curse and to swear. He soon began to speak like the men he was keeping company with. If we had been with Peter on that occasion, we would have said that Peter was not a believer at all. Surely no real believer could speak in such a way?

But worse is to follow in Peter's downfall. In John 18, he comes face to face with a man who has just come from Gethsemane. "Did not I see thee in the garden with Him?" This man was not only an eye witness to the events that took place, he had a very important reason for taking careful note of Peter. He was a kinsman of Malchus, whom Peter had attacked with a sword and cut off his right ear. Peter surely cannot back out of this. Yet he denies again, "I know not the man". It was a barefaced lie.

We might have thought that there was no way back now for Peter, that his testimony was ruined. But Peter had an advocate to bring him back to the Father. Peter's recovery did not happen immediately or in one single step. It came about after a series of steps undertaken by the Lord on Peter's behalf. One can illustrate this point by looking at the details given by John regarding the washing by the Lord of the disciples' feet. John gives us lots of little details, most of which are introduced by the conjunction "and". This has a twofold effect. "And" not only joins the steps together, it also shows that each step was of equal importance and was an essential part of a sequence. Each event was linked to the one before and to the one after it. So too with the Lord's recovery of Peter.

The Lord prayed for Peter (Luke 22: 31-32)

Even before Peter fell, the Lord said to Peter, "I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not. And when thou art converted (restored), strengthen thy brethren". It shows that the Lord not only knew about Peter's fall, but was also looking towards when Peter would be restored. The Lord will seek to warn Peter in advance, but does not intervene to stop it happening. It shows that we are not robots moving at a master's behest. We have a free will, although the Lord will give direction and guidance in the way that we should go. So even before Peter fell, the Lord has prayed for his recovery.

The feet washing (John 13: 1-15)

It is surely significant that Peter is prominent in this incident described for us only by John, as recorded in chapter 13. The feet-washing is more than just an illustration of the Lord's humility. It was that, of course, but there is more to it. We learn what it means by following the dialogue between the Lord and Peter. When the Lord stoops before Peter to wash his feet, Peter firstly poses a question, "Dost Thou wash my feet?" Both the "Thou" and "my" are emphatic. Peter is thinking, "This is too humble a task for my Lord to be doing to me". But the Lord, who of course knew not only what Peter said, but why he said it, replies, "What I do, thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter". In other words, the Lord is saying as it were to Peter, "It's not what you think Peter. There is another lesson to be learned which you will learn later. Peter is not put off by this, for his question then turns to a point blank refusal. "Thou shalt never wash my feet. "Never" is again a most emphatic word." The Lord replies again, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me". Unless the feet were washed, fellowship with Christ would be lost. It is a picture of the work of our Advocate. Because of contact with the world, our feet become soiled, and we need the Lord to remove the sin.

The sign given (Mark 14:30)

Peter is given a very specific sign by the Lord. In Mark's gospel, the Lord tells Peter, "Before the cock crows twice, thou shalt deny me thrice". Peter has been warned !!

The sign fulfilled (Mark 14: 66-72)

Mark records in verse 68 of this section how that Peter denied the first time, and the cock crew. This should have been a real wake-up call for Peter. Had he taken heed to the Lord's words, he should have stopped short there and then. But Peter continued to make two more denials before the cock crowed the second time. It is easy for us to criticise Peter but how often have we embarked on a course of action which we knew was contrary to the mind of Christ yet we went ahead anyhow.

The Lord's look (Luke 22: 61-62)

Luke records how that, when Peter denied for the third time, "The Lord turned and looked upon Peter". The look reminded Peter of the Lord's words about his denials. This melted Peter's heart, and Luke records the fact that "Peter went out and wept bitterly". It tells us that the Lord, despite being surrounded by men who were yelling and spitting in His face, was the listener of that conversation that was taking place at the door between Peter and the servants, and He turned to look at Peter when He heard the third denial,

A word to Peter from the tomb (Mark 16:7)

The angel at the tomb sends the women away with a message aimed at the disciples. "Go tell his disciples and Peter,...". Peter's name is mentioned specifically by the angel. When the message was delivered by the women, just think of the impact that it would have upon Peter. He would still be feeling absolutely wretched. He would be feeling ashamed of himself for he had let the Lord down. But now comes this message which includes the words "And Peter". Perhaps the Lord had not disowned Peter after all.

The private interview (Luk2e 24: 34)

When the two return from Emmaus to give the disciples their news that they have met the risen Lord, they receive some news from the disciples also. "The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon". A veil is drawn over this meeting. It would be a painful re-union for Peter, having to face the Lord whom he has failed so miserably. Perhaps that is why in John chapter 20, we read that that other disciple did outrun Peter and arrived first at the sepulchre. Was there a reluctance on Peter's part to reach the tomb? What if it were true, that the Lord was risen? What would He have to say to His fallen disciple? Well, in Luke 24, the risen Lord did meet Peter but we are not told further details. Hence, before Peter could be restored publicly, he had to be restored privately. There is surely a lesson for us today in this order.

The public recovery (John 21)

The Lord meets Peter again in John chapter 21 by the sea-side, standing beside a fire of coals. By the sea-side, one would have expected a fire to be made from driftwood washed up by the sea. But John tells us precisely that it was a fire of coals. It was beside such a fire that Peter had stood in the palace of Caiaphas, and it was there that he had denied His Lord. Peter denied three times, now the Lord has three questions to put to Peter.

"Lovest thou Me more than these?"

"Lovest thou Me?"

"Are you fond of Me?"

Peter is therefore restored, and recovered for useful service again. He is able some 50 days later to stand in the temple and to those who had seen the miracle of the lame man being healed, he says the following, "Ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you" (Acts 3:14). Peter is here laying an accusation against the nation of Israel but he is not speaking out of hypocrisy. He is fully restored to the work of the Lord.

These eight points above illustrate for us the work of our Advocate. We may not fail as drastically as Peter but we can be sure that the Lord is working on our behalf to restore us to the Father. Like Peter, this may be a process rather than a single event and the Lord may bring in circumstances to our lives that will bring about our full recovery.

Of course, whom the Lord restores, we must restore also. The Lord tells us this in John 13. "If I then your Lord and Master have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet". The man put away by the saints at Corinth also had to be brought back into the company after his repentance and recovery.