

B. Walking in the Light (1:5-10)

In his prologue John emphasized that his witness to Jesus was according to what he'd personally experienced, not only as one of Jesus' inner circle during the time of His earthly ministry, but also after His resurrection. John had personally seen, heard and handled the resurrected Messiah as well as the incarnate one. That extended physical encounter, not some mystical experience or mythical notion, was the substance of his proclamation (and that of the other eyewitnesses).

John reaffirmed his experience of "the Christ" in this epistle, not simply to refute the Gnostic notions infiltrating the churches, but to solidify and nurture the true knowledge, faith and faithful practice of the community of believers with whom he was involved. Toward that end, John began with one of the most fundamental truths concerning God – the God who has fully disclosed Himself in Jesus and whom Jesus Himself proclaimed. That truth is that *God is light* (1:5). He then followed this affirmation with a series of five conditional sentences expressing important implications of this truth (1:6-10).

A conditional sentence is a grammatical form that consists of an "if" statement followed by a "then" statement. Koine (New Testament) Greek has four such forms, with each form expressing a different relation between the "if" clause (called the *protasis*) and the "then" clause (called the *apodosis*). In each case, the idea is that the apodosis follows from the protasis, which is to say, the truth or reality of the apodosis is grounded in the truth or reality of the protasis. In the present passage, all five of the conditional sentences share the same grammatical form as *conditions of the third class*. This third-class form expresses the idea of *probability*: If the condition expressed by the protasis is realized, there is some probability that the condition expressed by the apodosis will also be realized. The context determines the degree of probability. Conditional sentences are common in this epistle and it's easy to see why. They pose a situation or condition and then provide the implication or outcome. In this way they are a perfect vehicle for conveying John's intent: His goal in writing was to reassert to his readers what is true and what the truth implies and required of them.

These five conditional sentences are arranged in two sections (1:6-7, 8-10). Both sections contain two corresponding statements set in antithesis (*if/then, but if/then*), but the second one has a third statement that punctuates the point made by the other two (v. 10). In this way that fifth and final conditional sentence (v. 10) brings the passage to its climax. It's also important to note that both sections share the same underlying concern, *namely the obligation Christians have to live out their union with God in Christ faithfully and authentically*. But they approach it in two different ways: The first section speaks metaphorically using the concepts of light and darkness while the second one speaks directly using plain language.

1. Again, John introduced this passage with a fundamental premise which underlies the subsequent conditional sentences and provides the lens through which they are to be understood. That premise is that *God is light*, which implies the corollary premise that He has no connection with darkness. This corollary derives from the fact that light and darkness as physical entities are mutually exclusive: Where the one is present, the other is absent; each precludes the other. So it follows that, if *God is light* (whatever that means), then darkness cannot be associated with Him in any form or manner.

The place to begin is to understand the scriptural image of light and how it pertains to God. The first mention of light in the Scripture occurs in the creation account. There, God introduced light as the first aspect of His process of ordering and filling the empty and chaotic creation (Genesis 1:3-4). While the text associates light with God's *command* and not His person, it implies that light derives from God and isn't inherent in the creation. In and of itself, the creation is characterized by darkness – the “darkness” of disorder and emptiness (Genesis 1:2).

From that point on, the Scripture always sets light and darkness alongside each other as antithetical principles. In particular, light speaks to God's activity in the world which counteracts and dispels its darkness – especially in connection with His restorative work in His Messiah-Servant (ref. Isaiah 9:1-7, 30:26, 42:1-16, 49:1-13, 51:1-5, 60:1-22). In relation to God's person, light signifies the qualities of knowledge and understanding, truth and integrity, purity, power and transcendence (cf. Psalm 19:8 43:3, 104:1-2, 119:105; Isaiah 10:17; Ezekiel 1; etc.). God is truthful because He is the substance and source of all truth. And because He cannot deny Himself, God is free of every form and manifestation of *untruth*, whether in his understanding, will, motives, words or deeds; thus John is absolute in declaring that “*in Him there is no darkness at all.*”

The duality of light and darkness was a common theme in the ancient world, often conceived in terms of two opposing powers always striving for dominance in the world. In this way of thinking, light and darkness represent the two fundamental dimensions of reality. Gnosticism embraced this dualism, associating *light* with the divine and man's participation in it through *gnosis* (transcendent knowledge) and *darkness* with the material world and man in his natural state. Gnostics – and Gnostic “Christians” – affirmed the spiritual principle that light opposes and dispels darkness, but their understanding of it was very different from John's and his fellow eye-witnesses to Jesus the Messiah. They defined the relationship between light and darkness differently because they defined the spiritual concepts of light and darkness differently.

2. All people recognize that physical light and darkness are mutually exclusive; they cannot both be present at the same place and time. Light drives out darkness, not because it is the greater among two opposing powers, but because darkness is *privation*; darkness is merely the absence of light. Light expresses presence, darkness expresses absence. Thus God's presence brought light into the privation of the initial disordered, empty creation. So it is with the new creation: By His light in His Messiah, God is interjecting the light of life into the empty lifelessness of His creation which exists in the darkness of alienation (cf. Isaiah 45:18-22 with John 1:3-13, 3:1-21, 8:12, 12:31-46; also 2 Corinthians 4:1-6).

Where God's light is present, darkness is driven out. This is the principle behind John's argument in his first two conditional sentences (1:6-7).

- a. The first thing to note is John's meaning in using the term *fellowship*. Again, fellowship isn't cordial interaction or the sharing of mutual interests; it is the relational intimacy that results from one's union with God in Christ. It is the fellowship of person-to-person communion through the shared Spirit.

Secondly, it's important to understand John's expression, "*walking in the darkness.*" This is a common biblical idea that speaks to a pattern of life at odds with God's truth and mind (Psalm 82:5; Proverbs 2:11-13; Ecclesiastes 2:14; cf. also John 8:12). It is human existence in the absence of fellowship with God (as defined above) and so is the manner of life experienced by every human being in his natural state – the manner of life of those separated from the life of the God who is light (cf. Psalm 18:28, 74:16-20, 107:1-14; Isaiah 9:1-2, 42:1-6, 49:1-9, 59:1-14, 60:1-5; also Ephesians 4:17-19).

This explains why John saw fellowship with God and a life lived in darkness as mutually exclusive: The one who has this fellowship shares in God's life and God is light. The implication, then, is that this person is *himself* defined by light. But light cannot coexist with darkness, so that the presence of darkness in the one claiming fellowship indicates the presence of a lie: *either the lie of fellowship with God or the lie of contradicting that fellowship.* In this instance, John seems to have been referring to the latter: The Christian who walks in the darkness is failing to live out ("practice") the truth. Several things point in this direction:

- First, John treated this situation universally: "*If we say that we have fellowship with Him...*" This is not the "we" of the prologue which pertained to eyewitnesses to Jesus' life and resurrection, but the "we" of all who might profess fellowship with God. Thus John included himself.
- Secondly, John spoke of *practicing* the truth. This verb refers to one's practical activities and conduct – what one *does* as a matter of practice, indicating that John's concern was practical conformity to the truth of one's fellowship with God, not the actual reality of that fellowship. This interpretation is reinforced by John's inclusion of himself; he, too, could find himself failing to live out in his daily practice the truth of his fellowship with God (note again v. 3).
- Finally, John's grammar also suggests this meaning. Again, John used a third-class condition which expresses the idea of *expectation* (probability). He wanted to convey to his readers his confidence that there are individuals who believe they have fellowship with God while yet living lives characterized (at least somewhat) by darkness. Thus they were guilty of not "*doing* the truth" – in their minds, if not in their words and deeds.

This is an important observation, especially if John was indeed addressing Gnostic influences infiltrating the churches. For the Gnostic Christians regarded themselves as faithful disciples of God's "Christ" and they very likely were living disciplined lives consistent with their profession. But if they were being led astray to a false Messiah, they were no longer "practicing the truth" even if their behavior was devout. Following after a pseudo-Christ, they were lying against the truth of their fellowship with God which was bound up in the true Messiah.

- b. On the other hand, those who “walk in the light” demonstrate (prove out) their fellowship with God (1:7a). Those who “walk in darkness” lie against the truth of their fellowship with God, whereas those who “walk in the light” are truth-tellers for all the world to see. Their practice, as much as their words, bears witness to the Messiah and what the living God has accomplished in Him. Their daily lives, radiating light into the dark world, testify that fellowship with Him consists, not in esoteric knowledge, piety or self-discipline, but in *new creation* – in becoming “light in the Lord” (Ephesians 5:8). Fellowship with God is the intimacy of *person-in-person* union and communion; it consists in the new human existence that is life hidden with Jesus the Messiah in the living God (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17 with Romans 6:1-11, 8:1-11; Ephesians 2:11-22; Colossians 3:1-4).

John’s logic, then, is very simple and straightforward: God is light and inhabits the light (1 Timothy 6:13-16); so fellowship with Him involves sharing in His life and likeness by His indwelling and renewing Spirit. Fellowship, then, involves sharing in the nature of the God who is light and inhabiting the realm of light He inhabits as those raised up in Christ and seated in the “heavenlies” (cf. Ephesians 2:1-6; Philippians 3:17-21; Colossians 3:1-4). God’s radiant glory no longer fills the Holy of Holies, but His new human sanctuary built on the cornerstone of His Son (cf. John 1:14-18, 2:13-21, 4:19-24 with 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:19; Ephesians 2:11-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5). God’s light is now present in the world in His living sanctuary – the children of light who aren’t concealed behind a veil, removed from the sight of men, but luminaries who shine openly in the midst of the world’s darkness (Philippians 2:1-16; Ephesians 5:1-17).

All who “walk in the light as He is in the light” live out the truth of their fellowship with God and mature in it. But so it is with their fellowship with one another; *the children of light who walk in the light walk together*. The converse is also true: Failing to practice the truth impedes and compromises one’s fellowship with God and it has the same effect on the fellowship among God’s children. *Two cannot walk together except they be together* (Amos 3:3) – not as a matter of proximity, but of genuine unity; they must share one mind and purpose. So John’s phrase, “*fellowship with one another*,” seems to suggest both arenas of fellowship: It looks backward to the *individual* Christian’s walk with God in the light and forward to the *mutuality* of shared cleansing.

This fellowship dynamic underlies John’s summary assertion about *cleansing from sin* (1:7b) and it is crucial to discerning his meaning. John wasn’t identifying a cause/effect relationship between obedience and cleansing from sin; much less was he suggesting that obedience renders Jesus’ atonement effectual. So also John wasn’t referring to the “washing of regeneration,” but *ongoing* cleansing that accompanies “walking in the light.” Furthermore, this cleansing is from *sin*, which term has the basic sense of falling short of what is right or fitting. Such “sin” is perpetual in the Christian’s life, even when he is “walking” faithfully with the Lord. John was affirming the reassuring truth that God desires fellowship with His children, not perfection; if we’ll pursue the former, He’ll address the latter.