



JOHN'S EPISTLES

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# LIVING WITH ASSURANCE

JANUARY BIBLE STUDY 2021

**LEADER GUIDE**

LifeWay

# FROM THE EDITOR

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The January Bible Study 2021 Leader Guide is intended to help those who will teach JBS. Included in this guide are:

**TEACHING PLANS**—The teaching plans, beginning on page 3, are designed for seven sessions using the 2021 January Bible Study Personal Study Guide, *John's Epistles: Living with Assurance*. The table of contents shows how the chapters in the Personal Study Guide are addressed in this Leader Guide.

The Personal Study Guide (PSG) has been designed as a teaching resource. Each adult will need his or her own PSG. Each teaching plan suggests ways a teacher can use the PSG during the session.

A variety of questions and learning activities in the PSG will help readers understand and apply the Scriptures to their lives. An alternate plan for teaching this study could consist of short lectures combined with small- or large-group discussion of the questions and learning activities.

**EXPOSITORY NOTES**—The expository notes, beginning on page 23, provide in-depth commentary for a teacher's use.

**PREACHING GUIDE**—The preaching guide, beginning on page 75, provides sermon outlines and ideas for the pastor who wishes to emphasize the theme of JBS 2021 from the pulpit.

**SUPPORT DOWNLOAD**—The support download includes everything in this Leader Guide as well as additional teaching helps such as teaching items, PowerPoint® backgrounds, clip art, *Biblical Illustrator* articles, and planning and promotion ideas. See the inside back cover for information about securing these files.

Do you ever wonder what to do with all this material when January Bible Study is over? Here are some suggestions: Conduct a weekly Bible study for business people or stay-at-home mothers. Conduct a weeknight study for apartment dwellers, mobile home residents, or language or ethnic groups. Or conduct a weekend retreat for singles, students, or an Adult Sunday School class.

Whatever you do in JBS, we pray that these materials will enhance this study and that lives will be changed as a result.

# CONTENTS

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**HOW TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN: LIFE BY DESIGN** ..... 2

**MEET THE WRITERS**..... 2

## **TEACHING PLANS**

Session 1: Fellowship with God ..... 4

Session 2: Remaining with God..... 7

Session 3: Living as God’s Children ..... 10

Session 4: Living with Love ..... 13

Session 5: Living as Conquerors..... 16

Session 6: Faithful to Truth..... 18

Session 7: Hospitable in Truth ..... 20

## **EXPOSITORY NOTES**

Introduction to John’s Epistles..... 24

Fellowship with God—1 John 1:1–2:2..... 26

Remaining with God—1 John 2:3-27 ..... 33

Living as God’s Children—1 John 2:28–3:10; 4:1-6 ..... 40

Living with Love—1 John 3:11-24; 4:7-21 ..... 47

Living as Conquerors—1 John 5:1-21..... 54

Faithful to Truth—2 John..... 61

Hospitable in Truth—3 John..... 68

**PREACHING GUIDE** ..... 75



# LIFE BY DESIGN

We live in a broken world. This brokenness is seen in suffering, violence, poverty, pain, and death around us. Brokenness leads us to search for a way to make life work.

The Bible tells us that God originally planned a world that worked perfectly—where everything and everyone fit together in harmony. God made each of us with a purpose—to worship Him and walk with Him (Gen. 1:31 and Ps. 19:1).

Life doesn't work when we ignore God and His original design for our lives. We selfishly insist on doing things our own way. The Bible calls this sin. Sin leads to a place of brokenness. The consequence of our sin is separation from God—in this life and for all of eternity (Rom. 3:23 and Rom. 6:23).

We need a remedy—some good news. Because of His love, God did not leave us in our brokenness. Jesus, God in human flesh, came to us and lived perfectly according to God's design. Jesus came to rescue us—to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He took our sin and shame to the cross, paying the penalty of our sin by His death. Jesus was then raised from the

dead—to provide the only way for us to be rescued and restored to a relationship with God (John 3:16; Col. 2:14; and 1 Cor. 15:3-4).

We cannot escape this brokenness on our own. We need to be rescued. We must ask God to forgive us—turning from sin to trust in Jesus. This is what it means to repent and believe. Believing, we receive new life through Jesus. God turns our lives in a new direction (Mark 1:15; Eph. 2:8-9; and Rom. 10:9).

When God restores our relationship to Him, we begin to discover meaning and purpose in a broken world. Now we can pursue God's design in all areas of our lives. God's Spirit empowers us to recover His design and assures us of His presence in this life and for all of eternity (Phil. 2:13 and Eph. 2:10).

Now that you have heard this good news, God wants you to respond to Him. You can talk to Him using words like these: My life is broken—I recognize it's because of my sin. I believe Christ came to live, die, and was raised from the dead—to rescue me from my sin. Forgive me. I turn from my selfish ways and put my trust in You. I know that Jesus is Lord of all, and I will follow Him.

## MEET THE WRITERS

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# TEACHING PLAN





YOUR NOTES

# FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

## Before the Session:

- a. Read the Introduction and Chapter 1 of both the Personal Study Guide (PSG, pp. 4-22) and the Expository Notes in this Leader Guide (LG, pp. 24-32).
- b. Label a large piece of paper *Fellowship*. Leave room to add *With God* in Step 1.
- c. Make copies of **Teaching Item 1: The Word** and **Teaching Item 2: Light in 1 John**.
- d. Have Personal Study Guides, extra Bibles, and writing instruments available.
- e. Bring a flashlight and an item that glows in the dark.

## Leading the Session:

1. As learners arrive, ask a few volunteers to provide their own answer to the question: “What is fellowship?” Write the answers around the edges of your “Fellowship” chart. Dig deeper by asking: **What is the root of fellowship? What role does fellowship play in our day-to-day lives? What are some aspects of healthy fellowship? Write *With* to the right of “Fellowship.” Ask: **With whom do we choose to have fellowship? Why? How does our society encourage—or discourage—fellowship with others? Add *God* to the paper. Ask: **How does the definition of fellowship change when it is fellowship with******

**God?** Call for a volunteer to read the first two sentences of the second paragraph of the PSG chapter 1 (p. 10).

Explain that the same John who wrote the Gospel of John also wrote the Epistles of John, which we will study over the coming seven sessions. Remind learners of John’s life, what he observed in Christ, and his role in the early church. Give each learner a copy of **Teaching Item 1: The Word**. Quickly discuss the descriptions from John 1, encouraging learners to keep these in mind throughout the session. In your own notes, be sure to mark each description and point them out during the study. Say: **As we come across more descriptions of the Word or Jesus in today’s passage, add those to the list on the right.**

Using the information in the PSG Introduction (p. 4), give an overview of why John wrote these letters and how they can and should impact our lives today.

2. Read the opening three sentences of *Personal Testimony (1 John 1:1-4)* (PSG, pp. 10-12). Instruct learners to complete **My Testimony** (PSG, p 13). Invite a few volunteers to share one or two of their answers. Say: **Just as we have our own stories about Jesus’ entering, changing, and directing our lives, John had his own testimony. He used it as the foundation for his letter.**

Invite a volunteer to read 1 John 1:1-4. Using the information in the Expository Notes (LG, p 26), show the relationship between the opening verses of John’s Gospel and John’s Epistle. Explain how John took

the Genesis 1:1 truth and expounded upon the presence and power of Jesus in creation using the first full paragraph on the PSG page 12.

Using the pattern set in the last paragraph on the PSG page 12, share an example of how something repetitive in your life became seared into your mind and heart. Say: **The descriptions John gave of Jesus in these verses may not be new to us, but in studying them again we are writing them even more deeply and solidly in our minds and hearts.**

Use the information in the Expository Notes (LG, p. 27) for 1 John 1:1 to expand on the word **life** and that the life of Jesus was witnessed by being heard, seen, observed, and touched. Consider something you have experienced that others likely have not. (Ideas include the Grand Canyon, meeting a celebrity, seeing the Northern Lights, or some other once-in-a-lifetime experience.) As best you can, describe it with as many sensory descriptions as possible. Say: **You can read about something all you want, but experiencing it is altogether different. John had come into contact with Jesus; that's why he was so aware of this Word, so full of power and life.**

3. Following the example of the first paragraph of **Fellowship in the Light** (PSG, p. 14), describe how a relationship in your own life is affected by your fellowship with that person. (Since the PSG example is between a husband and wife, consider choosing a different relationship, such as a sibling, parent, child, etc.) Engage learners in discussing how communication—both conveying and receiving information—impacts fellowship. Read the following from the last sentence of that paragraph: “If we are going to have fellowship with

God it must begin by listening to His words through Scripture.”

Invite a volunteer to read 1 John 1:5. Point out that the text does not say God *has* light or *gives* light; He **is** light. Reveal the difference in these descriptions with a flashlight and a glow-in-the-dark item. Hold up the flashlight and say: **This gives light.** Hold up the glow-in-the-dark item and say: **This has light.** Ask: **What does “God is light” mean?** Engage learners in looking at the idea of Jesus being light in John 1, adding those insights to the image of God as light in 1 John 1:5. Use the first two paragraphs of **God is Light** in the Expository Notes (LG, p. 29) to reveal the common theme of light versus darkness and how even John’s opponents might have twisted or misused the imagery.

Give each learner a copy of **Teaching Item 2: Light in 1 John**. Explain: **We will be using this sheet both today and as we study the next chapter, so please keep it with you.** Engage learners at looking at the Scriptures from 1 John containing the word *light*. Ask: **Looking at these verses alone, what can we observe about the light according to John’s epistles?** Instruct learners to highlight, underline, or circle the word *light* in each verse. They may choose to mark differently those occasions that identify what is light and those that describe the light. As a group, discuss the fact that God is light, we are to be light, and how we should live because of the light we have.

4. Following the example of the first paragraph in **The Truth About Sin** (PSG, p. 15), share a time when you or someone close to you was choosing to live in darkness. Read this sentence from that paragraph: **We might be able to hide some things about who we really are from**

**other people, but we cannot hide anything from the all-knowing God.**

Invite a volunteer to read 1 John 1:6-10. Explain that the Gnostics, against whose teachings John wrote his letters, believed they had superior knowledge about God, believed they could live perfectly, and believed others with their “superior” knowledge also could live sinless after coming to faith in Jesus. Direct learners to **If We Say** (PSG, p. 19). Provide time for learners to complete the activity, then invite a few volunteers to share how they related to some of the statements. Use PSG information (pp. 16-20) to provide insight into what John was teaching and how we should apply the passages to our own faith. Drive home that John was explaining that walking in the light dealt not only with our relationship with God but also our relationships with others. Read the following statement from the PSG (p. 20): **These three “if we say” statements ought to serve as a checklist against a false understanding of our sin and God’s grace towards us as sinners.**

In order to point learners to the grace of Jesus in the midst of these convicting passages, read the John Owen quote (PSG, p. 18), found in the paragraph that begins, “One of the dangers ....” Using Expository Notes information (LG, pp. 30-31), reveal how confession of our sin reflects who God is: faithful and righteous. Help learners understand that confession of sin is an integral aspect of walking in the light.

Draw learners’ attentions to verse 9: Jesus cleanses us because **he is faithful and righteous**. Use the explanation from the PSG paragraph (pp. 18-20) that begins, “Let’s examine ...” to explain God’s forgiveness.

5. Say: **If I addressed you as, “My little children,” you would probably understand immediately that I have something to say to you as a loving, compassionate elder believer; a parental or mentoring figure. John was doing this very thing with the next couple of verses.** Challenge learners to consider John’s compassion and lovingkindness as he penned the last two verses examined in this session.

Invite a volunteer to read 1 John 2:1-2. Use the information in the Expository Notes (LG, p. 31-32) and the PSG (p. 20) to explain that John was not excusing sin, but pointing to Jesus as our advocate.

Direct learners to the phrase **atonement sacrifice** in verse 2. Say: **You may have seen this Greek word translated, “propitiation.” Does anyone know what that means?** Invite a volunteer to read **A Closer Look** on *propitiation* from the PSG (p. 21) and engage learners in discussing how they might explain the concept to a new believer or a child.

To conclude the session, direct attention back to the What Is Fellowship With God chart with which you began the session. Encourage learners to reflect on what it means to “fellowship with God.” Engage learners to recall the items that reveal a healthy fellowship with God found in today’s passage (joy, walking in light, blood of Jesus, fellowship with others, confession, forgiveness, cleansing, faithfulness, righteousness, Jesus as advocate, and others). Add to the perimeter of the chart any of those words not already there. Consider leaving the chart up as a reminder of the elements of a healthy relationship with God and others.

Dismiss with prayer, thanking God for the opportunity He has provided us to have fellowship with Him.





# EXPOSITORY NOTES



# INTRODUCTION TO JOHN'S EPISTLES

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## Authorship

**S**cholars generally agree that all three Letters of 1–3 John hang together in time of composition, historical setting, and content. They all seem to have arisen out of a common situation. Common Greek style, vocabulary, and topics suggest common authorship. While 1 John has no specified author, both 2–3 John designate an elder as author, though this designation admittedly is somewhat vague (at least to a later audience). Substance, language, and style also suggest close connection to the Gospel of John, most obviously in the openings of 1 John and the Gospel. The letters give testimony to a distinctive Johannine strand of Christianity that from the beginning stood apart from other traditions. Johannine tradition produced the most known and memorized Bible verse in the world (John 3:16). Behind this tradition likely is the apostle John, never once named in his own Gospel, though many other disciples are. If the letters are dated later in the first century, John still may have composed them, since church tradition indicates the apostle John lived and ministered in Ephesus in Asia long after the First Jewish War (AD 66–73). Further, use of “elder” in the address of both 2 John and 3 John, while ambiguous to the modern reader, suggests an actual person well known to the group. The author, then, strictly speaking is unknown, but to the extent we trust church tradition, the author likely was the apostle John.

## Literature Type

Calling a piece of literature a “letter” is an attempt to identify its form. Form is important to how we read, and how we read is important to interpretation. Whether 1 John really is a “letter,” however, is unclear: 1 John neither begins nor ends like a letter. One can contrast the opening of 1 John, for example, with that of 2–3 John. Both 2–3 John show the form of a letter, as their opening lines immediately identify the author and intended recipients, just as expected in a first-century letter. In contrast, 1 John is missing these major, expected parts of a letter.

Yet, 1 John does have some recognizable letter elements, such as occasions of direct address, references to the actual process of writing, and so forth. In the end, 1 John has enough distinctiveness in form to make us wonder whether John wrote it as a letter, a homily or sermon, a treatise, or some other literature type. For example, perhaps 1 John was a circular for general distribution against the secessionists—those who split off from the main Johannine group (1 John 2:19). If so, John's goal may have been to stymie the apparent notable success of the false teachers' preaching and teaching (“and the world listens to them,” 4:5). Or, again, perhaps 1 John was a summation of an original homily that sharply defined the core issues with which the community struggled. Sermons, for example, also

have occasions of direct address, and, when written down later, might refer to the process of writing to engage the broader target audience beyond the original hearers.

### Date and Setting

Unfortunately, the letters themselves give no indication of geography or time. No region, territory, city, ruler, governor, or other known, famous person is mentioned. No previous or current historical event is mentioned. Compare this dearth of data with how Luke situated the birth of Jesus for a sense of the striking difference (Luke 2:1-4). We know that a devastating schism shook the community to its core (1 John 2:19). We also know a few specific names, such as Gaius, Diotrophes, and Demetrius (3 John 1,9,12). We can surmise community meetings took place in private homes (2 John 10). We can gather that competing emissaries representing both the schismatics and the elder appear to have moved from congregation to congregation (or even city to city) seeking to assert their own teaching authority (2 John 10-11; 3 John 5-8). All such internal pieces of information, however, do nothing to help situate the external time and place of these documents. All that is left for contextualization is church tradition.

In church tradition, John was a Judean war refugee who took up residence in Ephesus of Asia Minor after AD 70 for an extended time. Assuming such tradition, one could attempt to make close observations from certain elements of the Gospel and the letters to speculate that a Johannine community developed in Ephesus due to John's ministry there. John's message over time perhaps even spread to satellite locations around this metropolis. After John's eventual death, the network of churches he inspired continued to maintain his teaching traditions and to attempt to assert his authority on his behalf. Such a "history" of the churches, however, while informed from close reading of the texts involved, is invented. We simply do not know. One could suspect that something along these lines is what actually happened. Expressions such as "Johannine" or "community," then, would represent the hunch that such a framing of the literature is not too far off from historical developments.

On the basis of church tradition about the apostle John, the letters could be assumed as late first century, perhaps even 80s or 90s. In other words, this literature is our springboard directly into the period of the Apostolic Fathers of the early second century. That realization is important for exegesis, because from the writings and concerns of the Apostolic Fathers and later second century we can work the historical trajectory backwards only a decade or two earlier to suggest a possible context that helps situate the claims and counterclaims expressed in the Letters of 1–3 John. For exegesis, then, understanding the second-century Gnostic movement in Christianity will be crucial.

### Structure

The outlines of 2 John and 3 John follow the standard first-century letter, having most of the six easily identifiable parts: author, addressee, greeting, thanksgiving, body, conclusion. First John, however, has no structure upon which scholars can agree. It seems to be circular, as in a homily that repeats core thoughts for emphasis. While lack of proper letter parts suggests not calling 1 John a "letter," the tradition of doing so is too entrenched (probably because the three always are grouped together, and the last two definitely are letters).



## YOUR NOTES

# FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

**H**allmark cards have developed idealized holiday scenes of families gathered around a full table, attempting to portray the very best of good food, close ties, and a spicy dash of nostalgia. Commercial companies film commercials without the product name until the very end, combining vignettes of a complete life cycle from birth, to childhood, to high school prom, to college graduation, to marriage, and birth once again to complete the cycle into the senior years. Such endeavors illustrate how we all want family and a deep sense of belonging.

Almost universally ignored in these cards and commercials, however, is the truth that God is essential to fulfilling relationships. Human beings are built for relationship with God. Since relationship with God comes only through Jesus, no human relationship can be what that relationship could be without Jesus Christ. Fellowship, then, is not a religious word but the fabric of human society. Breaking fellowship is a sin of the highest order, disrupting God's creative designs for full and meaningful human lives. The key is in God's eternal Word, revealed so transparently in the incarnate Christ that even a child can follow, but a scholar cannot fathom.

## THE WORD OF LIFE (1 JOHN 1:1-4)

### The Eternal Word (1 John 1:1)

John opened by claiming the Word **was from the beginning**. This opening echoes the Gospel of John with its repeated "in the beginning" (John 1:1-2). This doubled "in the beginning" phrase in the Gospel immediately flows into a statement on creation in the very next verse. John made an astounding claim about Jesus: Jesus' own creative power was *essential* to the creation event in every detail ("and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created," v. 3). In his Gospel, John claimed the creative power of God that brought the universe into existence, the fundamental confession of Jewish belief, actually worked through God's Son, Jesus Christ. Thus, John asserted, "In him was life" (v. 4). The Word that said "Let there be" in the original Jewish account of creation (Gen. 1:3) now is revealed in Christian proclamation to be the Word of Jesus. In 1 John 1:1, John merged the two ideas of "Word" and "life" into **the word of life**. The Gospel prologue concludes with the incarnation, "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14). To teach that the Word was not really "in the flesh" not only was faulty Christology, that teaching would render the cross meaningless.

Thus, in John's theology, "the beginning" takes us all the way back to creation. Affirming that God is one and also Creator of all says everything fundamental to human existence and accountability in both Jewish and Christian thought.<sup>1</sup> The reality of the one God and His creation is an essential place to start any sound biblical theology. John's radical addition to the Jewish account of creation, though, is his christological focus on the person of Jesus. The fundamentals of Christian faith depend on an adequate Christology.

Creation doctrine means this material world and all that is within is good, not evil. The material world is integral to God's creative purposes and plan. Second-century Gnosticism was based on a dualistic philosophy of matter versus spirit that claimed the material world was evil, and the creator of this evil, material world was a demiurge, a sub-power who was not the highest God. John's opponents seem to represent the early stages of this type of Gnosticism we see clearly by the second century. As we shall see, John's incarnational teaching was being rejected by the false teachers he opposed. Hammering creation truth in this very first verse of 1 John was hammering his opponents before John even got started. He was reframing what he said at the beginning of his Gospel specifically to respond to false teachers' perversion of that teaching.

### The Incarnate Word (1 John 1:1)

John's opening verse presents a complex combination of four relative pronoun clauses that are direct objects—but we have no subject or verb as yet to govern these direct objects. John's subsequent reference to **the word of life** caused him immediately to expand on this important concept. The life of which he wrote is deeper than human biology. This life is divine and crucial to what makes Jesus so different than any other religious figure in human history. However, John's expansion of the idea of "life" delays giving the required subject and verb for his opening direct objects. The construction of the first verse grammatically is "broken," signaled by translators who put dashes at the end of verses 1 and 2, so verse 2 functions like a parenthesis to expand the meaning of "life."

While John's opening sentence structure is broken with a parenthesis, his thought is clear. John was building on the opening prologue of his Gospel (John 1:1–14). Not only did John claim in his first verse of 1 John that the Word was eternal, as in the Gospel (John 1:1), John also claimed in 1 John the Word was incarnate, just as he did in the Gospel (John 1:14). John thereby reiterated that the incarnation is absolutely core to Christian theology, without which not even the resurrection makes sense. In this opening salvo, John wasted absolutely no time in emphasizing the incarnation. Not one, not two, not three, but four consecutive sensory verbs drive home the reality of the incarnation (**heard, seen, observed, touched**). In this first verse he already was dismantling the core teaching of the secessionists that Jesus did not really come in the flesh (see 1 John 4:2–3).

### The Life-Giving Word (1 John 1:2)

Verse 2 provides expansion on the concept of this "word of life." Everyone wants a wonderful life, a life worth living. The plot of the classic Jimmy Stewart movie, "It's a Wonderful Life," always a staple at Christmas time, is built on this theme. Stewart plays George Bailey who has to have an angel reveal to him how wonderful his life really is. Some realities have to be revealed before we can know them, which is what John means by **that life was revealed**. So, this revealed knowledge is not simply accidental head knowledge or incidental philosophical speculation. Had God not revealed this life, humans would not have known this life. John emphasized **we have seen**. John raised the stakes by insisting on his own personal experience of this incarnational truth. Could his opponents say the same? John concluded, **we testify and declare**. This was the basic function of the apostles: witness and proclamation. Further, if you get good news, you cannot help but declare good news,



like George Bailey running down the streets of Bedford Falls shouting his merry Christmas to anyone and everyone.

The life that was revealed is **eternal**. Be sure to clarify that the essence of what John meant by “eternal” is not time. Eternal in John’s thought world is the *quality* of the life. This quality derives from a relationship lived **with the Father**. Relationship with this Father is relationship with the very God of creation. If you want a wonderful life, look no further. Jesus has been revealed and has become the singular source of this true life for humans who come into saving relationship with Him. Indeed, such a life of necessity **was revealed to us**. We have no other access.

John made clear eternal life’s radical nature. This Life has broken into human history and thereby changed everything for all humans for all time—*that* life, made clear by the parenthetical verse 2. Now that John had made clear the radical nature of this “Word of life,” he was ready to pick back up again with his unfinished opening thought. To do so, he had to repeat his opening relative pronoun construction.

### The Declared Word (1 John 1:3)

John renewed his thought from verse 1 with one relative pronoun clause that repeats but condenses the four verbs of verse 1 down to two for brevity, **what we have seen and heard**. The focus on incarnation and personal experience is renewed. The tense of the verbs emphasizes the on-going consequences of the past action of incarnation. Incarnation has impacted not only the past but the future of humanity. With his **we also declare to you**, John emphasized his authority. He countered his opponents’ false claims to authoritative teaching. John was an eyewitness. What he heard, saw, observed, and touched, he was authorized and empowered by Jesus to declare (see John 20:21,31).

“We ... declare” raises a question: What words in this life are to be believed? Words inundate our minds every day. Sometimes we sorely are challenged to distinguish truth. The truth of the word depends on the truth of the source. One is reminded that even Paul had worried the Ephesians would face savage wolves who would not spare the flock (Acts 20:29). Since Jesus spoke a judgment oracle to this Ephesian church in Revelation 2:1–7, the danger of false teachers besetting churches in Asia Minor was not idle speculation for Paul. John’s beloved congregation indeed had been ravaged by wolves, as Paul had warned and Jesus later condemned.

John proclaimed that the source of truth was in the teaching of the apostles. The apostles generated communities in fellowship with God and others through Jesus: **so that you may also have fellowship with us**. Jesus’ prayer for His disciples in John 17 is the spiritual foundation for John’s “fellowship with us” in his letter. In John 17, this fellowship is: (1) divine in its origin, (2) supernatural in its character, and (3) available only in Jesus. In 1 John, the Son of God imparts this godly fellowship into human experience, or, in John’s terms: **our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ**. Here is eternal life that has the quality of God Himself, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). This eternal life happened in history. The apostles were transformed by this Word of life in the incarnation and then gave witness to this Word of life in world mission. Whatever claims the secessionists were making were false because they destroyed the fellowship for which Jesus earnestly prayed

and painfully died (17:23). John taught that secessionist teachings were not truth. Believers should realize this because the heretics broke fellowship (1 John 2:19).

### The Written Word (1 John 1:4)

**We are writing these things** is the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in action. The spoken Word of life becomes the written Word of life. The purpose for the inspired Word is **so that our joy may be complete**. Greek manuscripts here vary in the pronoun “our” or “your.” While “your” is logical and speaks to the joy of believers in community, “our” has the best Greek manuscript support and puts the focus on the foundation fundamental to all communities that claim to be in Christ—the teaching of the apostles.

## GOD IS LIGHT (1 JOHN 1:5-10)

### God Is Light (1 John 1:5)

The polarity of light and darkness is common to many religions, ancient and modern, because the language as metaphor is flexible and useful. Gnostic teachers of the second century were fond of Johannine thought for this reason. They could twist his metaphorical imagery to their own religious designs. In fact, the very first commentary on the Gospel of John of which we are aware was by the Gnostic teacher, Basilides, who taught in Alexandria, Egypt, in the first half of the second century. If we go back to John’s Gospel, we see that he used the light/darkness polarity to describe two ways of living. Light is living a life in fellowship with God and doing God’s will, darkness is living a life without God and opposing God’s will (John 1:4-5,9). John here picked up this metaphorical language again in 1 John.

Apparently, John’s light and darkness language had been twisted by his opponents (1 John 1:5). John clarified his light/darkness language. John affirmed that **God is light** but qualified that darkness simply does not exist in Him in any form (1 John 1:5). John then set up a series of “if we say” claims that identify the teaching of his opponents (1 John 1:6,8,10) to show how they claimed to be in the light but lived in darkness.

### The First “If We Say” (1 John 1:6-7)

**If we say, “We have fellowship with him”** is the first false claim of the secessionists (1 John 1:6). The Greek indicates the probability someone is making such a claim. The claim is false, because the one making the claim in fact is walking **in darkness**. John used the traditional Jewish way of expressing a person’s lifestyle with the idea of “walking.” In Jewish thought, how one walks is how one lives. To **walk in darkness** is to live a lie, which is what John meant by **not practicing the truth**. Claiming fellowship while breaking fellowship is living a lie. Notice that truth for John was something that was to be lived, not simply an abstract proposition to which one gives mental assent. What was the lie that was being lived out by John’s opponents? You cannot shatter the unity of the community built on the teaching of the apostles and claim to be teaching apostolic truth (see. 1 John 2:19). To **walk in the light** is to join hand in hand harmoniously in the community following the apostles’ teaching (1:7). Walking in the light issues in **fellowship with one another**.

That fellowship is built on **the blood of Jesus**. This blood is Jesus' sacrificial offering by dying on the cross.

Jesus' blood cleanses from **all sin**. The adjective "all" in Greek actually is *singular* ("every"), not plural ("all"). John literally wrote "every sin." What might be the significance of the singular? The adjective's number reveals the writer's thinking pattern. John was not thinking in generic or global categories such as "all" suggests. John was not thinking like "imagine any possible sin you can conceive and lump all these sins together into one big blob," thus, "all." Rather, John's focus was on the singular, every individual sin, so he was thinking *specific* sins. In this context, one specific sin would be a particularly egregious sin within the Johannine network of churches.

Probably John was reflecting directly on what Jesus prayed in John 17: "I pray ... they all be one" (John 17:20-21). The prayer continues: "May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me." *For John, the unity of the churches was crucial to proving that God sent Jesus*. Breaking fellowship destroys gospel witness to the world. In short, John here with his singular adjective "every sin" probably alluded *specifically* to the devastating church split that had destroyed the unity of the fellowship. The secessionists caused this split (1 John 2:19). This split fundamentally had jeopardized the essential witness of the Johannine network of churches to the world. The stakes of unity could not be higher. Noting the singular adjective here gives clearer definition to the second "if we say" to follow.

### The Second "If We Say" (1 John 1:8-9)

**If we say, "We have no sin"** is the second false claim of the secessionists (1 John 1:8). Again, the Greek indicates the probability someone was making such a claim. This statement can be read as a claim to perfectionism. Some Christian groups claim that once saved, a person lives in the power of the Spirit and never sins. Reading John's words as addressing religious perfectionism is grammatical possible. The fact that John did not specifically indicate a doctrine of perfectionism is key to this false claim.

However, this statement also can be read as John's addressing an early Gnosticism that taught a dualistic philosophy claiming the material world is evil. This dualistic philosophy inspires morality extremes. One can fight to subdue the evil flesh (asceticism), or one can capitulate to the evil flesh by claiming one's spirit is unaffected (libertinism). Reading John's words as addressing a libertine Gnostic ethic is a possibility.

Another suggestion needs to be considered. The first clue to John's meaning is **we are deceiving ourselves**. Self-delusion is the context. Self-delusion is blatantly ignoring the evidence, so we cannot admit the truth, hence, **the truth is not in us**. The second clue is to note that the second "if we say" builds on the first. What idea links the two? The common topic of "sin" links both claims. The third clue is that "all sin" really should be translated "every sin." The secessionists denied they had committed any sin by breaking fellowship, and that was not true. Could God forgive even a secessionist for such an egregious sin?

John boldly declared the power of God's grace. Even *this sin* of the secessionists could be forgiven by God, but the requirement is confession: **If we confess our sins** (v. 9). Confessing means "agreeing with." A person who confesses agrees with God's evaluation that a given behavior is sinful, thus deserves God's just demand for punishment.

While God's justice demands that truth be told concerning sinful behavior, He always responds to a penitent heart. On the basis of true confession, **he is faithful and righteous**. God is faithful not to give up on even a secessionist. God is righteous because His judgment is through the righteous blood of His only begotten Son (John 3:16). Through this blood, God can **forgive us our sins**—every single one, even *this* one that had devastated the community (“every sin,” 1:7).

To bring the point home to the secessionists, John expanded the general statement of forgiveness with a specific statement of cleansing: **and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness**. Once again, we note that the adjective “all” is *singular*, not plural. A more literal translation is “every [act of] unrighteousness.” John said God through Jesus would forgive even the sin of the secessionists, a particularly egregious act of unrighteousness.

### The Third “If We Say” (1 John 1:10)

If we say, “**We have not sinned**” repeats the second claim but expands it by considering the opposite response of an unrepentant heart. The Greek again indicates the probability someone is making such a claim. By claiming that rupturing the unity of the Johannine network of churches was not a sin, the secessionists **make him a liar**, that is, more correctly, *they treat God as if He were a liar*, because they assert that God is wrong to condemn their sinful behavior. Insisting the secession was not sinful behavior clearly means **his word is not in us**. This “word” in the context likely could be the words of Jesus’ prayer for all believers community (John 17:21).

### PERSONAL APPLICATION (1 JOHN 2:1-2)

Some still might be tempted to follow the secessionists. John’s address, **My little children** (1 John 2:1), gets personal and reveals a pastoral concern for his congregation. John worried some still might be considering the claims of the secessionists and be led astray by them. He gave his purpose for writing, **so that you may not sin**. Likely this sin is not a vague abstraction, but the sin of succession, breaking fellowship. John reiterated that God is willing to forgive. He acknowledged the possibility of sin: **But if anyone does sin** (which suggests the ethics in discussion is not perfectionism). Some still might heed the secessionists and follow their path. Even in this dire situation, John immediately offered a solution. Regardless the sin, always **we have an advocate with the Father**. “Advocate” derives from a forensic setting, as if in a courtroom. Jesus is public defender number one. He never abandons us, even when we stand God’s just courtroom without a shred of an alibi. John named the advocate lawyer—**Jesus Christ the righteous one**. That Jesus is righteous is good news, since righteousness is the only characteristic that counts in God’s court. The righteousness we need Jesus provides.

Jesus is righteous, so His own sacrifice is efficacious: **He himself is the atoning sacrifice for our sins** (v. 2). “Atoning sacrifice” translates a Greek word often rendered “propitiation” or “expiation.” Propitiation in the ancient world was the appeasement of a god or goddess who was believed to be angry or offended by one’s words or deeds through an acceptable ritual properly performed. The result would be removal of a threat to life.

Propitiation was a well-known concept in the polytheistic environment of early Christianity. Christian writers borrowed this term not to develop a proposition about God's character—as if He were analogous to a petty Greek god prideful and easily offended—but rather to describe *the results of the cross: the threat to life is removed*. The theological question raised is whether emphasis is on means or result. Propitiation emphasizes result, the appeasement achieved. Atoning sacrifice emphasizes means, the instrument for accomplishing appeasement. Either way, the problem of human sin is solved. Jesus is the answer. The bottom line is Jesus provides all the sinner practically needs to be saved. No public defender ever offered so much for so underserving a client. John pastored his congregation in this community crisis through his letter assuring of God's forgiveness. He continued to offer even the secessionist the truth of God's amazing grace: **and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world**. Once again, the focus is on those listening and following the secessionists, because this arena of "the whole world" is precisely where the secessionists currently operated after separating from the believing community ("and the world listens to them," 1 John 4:5). Such a grace is nothing but amazing!

1. John's teaching affirms the premier Jewish doctrine that God is the only God (Deut. 6:4; Jas. 2:19), and this only God is the sole Creator of all that is ("In the beginning God created," Gen. 1:1). God gives humans the breath of life (2:7). God also created fellowship to give human existence fullness of meaning ("Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone,' " v. 18). So, the first order of business for any human being who takes in God's breath of life is to know this only God, give allegiance to Him only (Ex. 20:2-6), and walk in fellowship with Him to find the fullest blessing intended in creation (the inference of the "sound of the LORD God walking in the garden," Gen. 3:8).